

POINT OF VIEW

# Great Game in Kabul, Redux

By Shyam Saran

The US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, who has been negotiating face to face with the Taliban over these past few weeks, has announced that a basic framework for an Afghan peace settlement has been reached. The Taliban have agreed to provide verifiable assurances that Al Qaeda and Islamic State elements will not be permitted to use Afghan territory to undertake hostile activity against the US. In return, the US agrees to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan within a specified time frame. The US has also demanded that there be a ceasefire between Taliban and Afghan security forces and talks held with the Afghan government concerning a political settlement. These additional conditions are still under consideration within the Taliban leadership.

The Taliban may agree to these conditions for two reasons. One, the proposed ceasefire will freeze the current domination of a large number of districts by the Taliban. The Afghan government controls only the main cities and arterial highways, but even these are under constant threat. Two, there is no longer an American insistence that the Taliban agree to participate in governance under the Afghan constitution and take part in elections like any other political party.

Khalilzad has said that how the Taliban will become part of the ruling dispensation will be determined in the government-Taliban talks. Given its control over large chunks of territory, the Taliban will demand and probably obtain control over key ministries and provinces as the price for a peace settlement. Given its military strength and support from Pakistan, the Taliban will inevitably use the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops to extend their power and eventually sideline other political forces. Having withdrawn its troops, the US is unlikely to return even if the Taliban violates the terms of a peace agreement.

For India, this is déjà vu. Once again, we have the prospect of a Pakistan-dominated fundamentalist government in Kabul that will threaten Indian interests. This is a real possibility and Delhi needs to decide on its

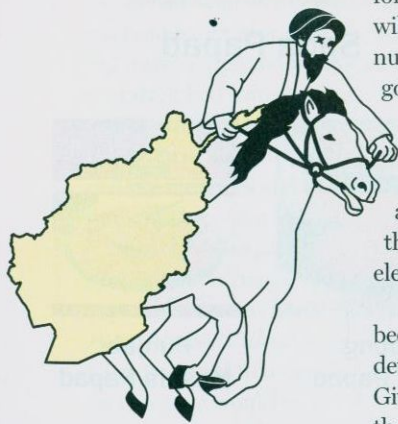
counter moves.

It has been argued that India should open its own channel of communications with the Taliban and that the Taliban being Afghan nationalists, will not necessarily follow Pakistan in carrying out hostile activities targeting India. This optimistic scenario is unlikely since Pakistan's nurturing of the Taliban through thick and thin has been driven by the India "threat". Having enabled the Taliban to come to power, Pakistan will pursue its agenda of diminishing the Indian presence in Afghanistan and using Afghan territory for terrorist operations against India. The US will not be overly concerned as long as its territory is safe. The Chinese and Russians will rely on Pakistani goodwill to safeguard their respective interests. The Iranians may be concerned over a fundamentalist Sunni regime entrenched next door. And so may other Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan. Is there room for India to consult with such potentially like-minded countries on a countervailing strategy?

Over the past decade-and-a-half, India has not only become a major economic partner for Afghanistan but has also earned a lot of popular goodwill thanks to several community-oriented and social welfare projects. It also has a network of political contacts among the erstwhile non-Pashtun Northern Alliance partners and also among influential Pashtun political figures. They are unlikely to be enthused by the prospect of a return to Taliban rule that will marginalise them. Could India help them coalesce into a more united and coherent political force to prevent a Taliban takeover?

India faces difficult and uncomfortable choices as another Great Game unfolds in Afghanistan. Sending boots on the ground to support Afghan government forces may not be wise, but military support short of that should certainly be expanded significantly. The bottom line is preventing a complete Taliban takeover in Kabul though a government including Taliban elements may have to be tolerated. ■

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**India should try and prevent a complete Taliban takeover in Kabul, but it may have to tolerate a government with Taliban elements in it**