



The Limits of India's 'Soft Power' in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The latest round of US negotiations with the Taliban in Doha garnered considerable international attention, with the group's co-founder, Mullah Baradar, leading the insurgent team. As the search for an end to the long war in Afghanistan has intensified, prospects of a quick fix solution through peace negotiations by major powers like US and Russia has left India in a quandary. New Delhi's policy of unconditional support provided to the Afghan government is hitting a roadblock, as Kabul is being increasingly sidelined not only in these externally mediated peace negotiations, but also in the internal reconfiguration that is taking place in the light of the ongoing negotiations and impending presidential elections.

With possible delay of the presidential elections and talks of establishment of an interim arrangement to achieve progress in the negotiating efforts looming large, what are New Delhi's policy options? Will it reach out to the Taliban and other stakeholders? Or will it continue with its present policy of support to the Afghan government? More importantly, will the benefits of the last decade of soft power translate into tangible gains? These are serious questions that New Delhi will be confronted with in the summer of 2019 as the Taliban prepare for another round of bloody spring offensive to negotiate from a position of strength.

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Analysis

Contested Narratives

Amidst contested data on how much territory the Taliban actually controls, the violence levels peaked in 2018 in Afghanistan. Fatalities went up 11%¹ compared to 2017, with 3,804 civilians killed² in insurgency-related violence. It is generally assumed that the Taliban threatens more than 70%³ of the country's territory. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), in the words of President Ashraf Ghani, have lost more than 45,000 members since 2014.⁴ This amounts to 30 deaths per day,⁵ a staggering figure that makes the present security set up untenable in face of the insurgent onslaught. Violence is projected to escalate this spring as the insurgents demonstrate their strength amid the peace negotiations.

Afghanistan's instability has direct security implications for India. Over time, not only have Indian projects in Afghanistan come under attacks by armed groups, but some of the India-delivered projects have come under the arc of insurgent influence. Reports indicate that the Zaranj Delaram road that was built by India is now controlled by the Taliban.⁶ There are concerns that in case of the return of the Taliban to Kabul in some form, which is one of the two scenarios of the ongoing peace talks — the other being a breakdown of the process — the attention of extremist forces and their sponsors would invariably shift to India, especially to Kashmir. The recent attacks in Pulwama are indicative of how the situation might develop.

Soft Power

In the last 17 years, India has been a strong advocate for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. With more than \$3 billion pledged⁷ as development assistance to various infrastructure and capacity building projects, India aimed to accrue good will of the Afghans through its soft power while at the same time not raise the ante for Pakistan. The strategy worked until the announcement of drawdown in 2014 by the US and the setting in of uncertainty associated with the security vacuum. Since then, India's predicament continues to bring up new challenges with each passing year.

The debate in New Delhi has intensified of whether good will alone is a sufficient condition to protect India's interests. Although over the years opinions in favor of some degree of military involvement has been advocated by strategists, New Delhi has steered clear off that path. India has provided some security training and helicopters,⁸ which according to the Afghans by no means is a game changer. Moreover, Afghanistan's stability is not only challenged by the Taliban-led insurgency alone, but also internal power reconfiguration in the face of an impending presidential elections and the scramble among external powers to exit by using a hurried peace process formula. It appears in the shifting sands of internal and external power play, New Delhi remains a mere spectator.

¹ https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/afghan-civilian-deaths-increased-11-in-2018-119022400170_1.html

² <https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-deaths-afghan-conflict-2018-highest-recorded-level-%E2%80%93-un-report>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116>

⁴ <https://www.tolnews.com/afghanistan/ghani-reveals-new-figures-afghan-forces-deaths>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>

⁶ <http://canarytrap.in/2011/03/26/indian-built-zaranj-delaram-highway-under-taliban-control/>

⁷ <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/new-delhi-likely-to-back-ashraf-ghani-s-call-for-kabul-taliban-talks-1548874889665.html>

⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-gives-four-military-helicopters-to-afghanistan-before-key-meet/articleshow/55668974.cms>



New Delhi's policy of supporting the regime in Kabul and elite buy-in has demonstrated its inherent limitations. The credibility of the present National Unity Government (NUG) is at an all-time low. Although the bickering between the two camps in the NUG has led to governmental inertia, New Delhi has maintained its policy of non-interference while increasing the level of development assistance without any preconditions. Without improving the basic service delivery and helping extend the writ of the Afghan government, the aid-only policy will make no tangible difference on the ground.

New Delhi's stated policy of support for indigenous Afghan-led and Afghan led peace efforts is proving to a lip service when the Afghan government is kept out of such negotiations. New Delhi attempted to find a place on the negotiations table by sending two senior retired diplomats to the talks in Moscow. Yet the move was restricted by its curious distinction between official-nonofficial participation, with the Indian representatives participating unofficially in November 2018. It is perhaps indicative of the beginning of a policy change in New Delhi. However, India is yet to explore its leverage with the Taliban, particularly those who have accepted the utility of Indian projects and assistance in the provinces.

Need for Smart Power

The externally mediated peace talks face opposition from the Ashraf Ghani government and also a large chunk of the Afghan civil society groups who are concerned with the loss of the gains and freedoms achieved in last 17 years. A fractured Taliban and Pakistan's own problems in the neighborhood may slow down the process considerably. Therefore, New Delhi still has time to effect broad changes in its approach that will outlast any regime change in Kabul. It needs to be two-pronged.

Firstly, India needs to help build the credibility and extend the writ of the Afghan government by improving its governance potential. This can be done by increasing the number of small development projects (SDPs) with greater interface with Afghan ministries to deliver the basic services in remote provinces. In discussions with the locals in Afghanistan, it is evident that while the urban elite favor large-scale projects, people in the provinces prefer SDPs that provide basic health, education, agriculture and irrigation services. A shift from high visibility projects to small scale and sustainable projects with integrated business plan and some amount of accountability measures would be necessary.

Secondly, India needs to focus on institution building. As Afghanistan prepares for another round of presidential elections, allegations of fraud and misconduct are bound to resurface. There is a need to help Afghans in the conduct of free and fair elections. As witnessed in 2014, another messy election result will only add to the conflict dynamics with fissures that can further polarize the country. New Delhi cannot afford to only build symbolic structures like the country's current parliament without aiding in the establishment of democratic institutions, systems and processes. Moreover, the absence of institutions in conflict mediation and justice has led to people, particularly at the peripheries, turn toward the Taliban for instant justice. Strengthening the justice sector and supporting the indigenous High Peace Council will provide an institutional mechanism for any meaningful reintegration and reconciliation processes and help prevent subversion from within.

The fact that New Delhi maintains a wait-and-see policy has led to considerable disillusionment among a large proportion of Afghans. The traditional support base in the north is swinging away, while support among the Pashtuns remains ambivalent. The promises made during the signing of the Agreement of Strategic Partnership on October 4, 2011, the first to be signed by Afghanistan with any country, had led to heightened



expectations that are yet to be met. While the soft power approach has worked to a certain extent, New Delhi will need to shift to a smart-power approach to translate these short-term gains into long-term benefits.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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