

Finding common ground in Afghanistan

Instead of expecting or accusing Trump of not doing enough — our region will have to look inwards, take ownership of our issues and prepare a road map for peace in Afghanistan



Are there new developments in Afghanistan and the surrounding region which demand a new push, with Kabul as the pivot? Is there an Afghan common ground cutting across South and Central Asia today?

There have been numerous efforts and initiatives in recent years to find a common ground in Afghanistan – both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. The results, however, do not do justice to the multitude of reforms and initiatives on peace in Afghanistan. Perhaps, the issues and problems surrounding Afghanistan are more complex, or the initiatives to resolve them are not intensive or comprehensive enough.

A lack of success in these reforms does not suggest there is no scope of improvement. A conflict environment such as Afghanistan demands continuity in resolution processes and new attempts to bring actors to the negotiating table. States

have to keep trying; civil society, especially the academic community and media share a responsibility to project alternative and innovative ideas.

Five sets of recent developments call for a renewed approach to find a common ground in Afghanistan. First, increased violence within Afghanistan in recent weeks. While the Afghan security forces are attempting to cope with increased violence, it does affect the morale of the government. The protest in Kabul against the government in early June, following the disastrous attack in the diplomatic enclave highlights the growing frustration amidst the population.

Second, one is not sure how the Trump administration is likely to respond to Afghanistan in the near future. Clearly, Afghanistan is a work in progress and given the history of Afghanistan since the 1970s, stability cannot be achieved overnight. Besides domestic issues, there were substantial international interests in Afghanistan, interfering in the governance structure and further deepening the Afghan fault lines. It will not be easy for any democratic government in Afghanistan to achieve “success” in the immediate future.

Given Afghanistan’s history, one needs more time and support to stabilize Afghanistan. One is not sure whether Trump would have the patience to continue supporting Afghanistan – both at the military and economic levels. If the Trump administration decides to pull the plug, it would negatively Afghanistan’s move towards stability.

Third, the growing presence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. This is a clear and present danger not only for Afghanistan, but for the entire region. It is imperative that the region not allow another non-State actor. Fortunately, none of the state actors in the region supports the IS; unlike other non-State and militant groups, which are considered as someone’s proxy, the IS does not have a state mentor in the region.

Fourth, on the positive side, recent developments inside the SCO provide a new opportunity to the region on Afghanistan. Both India and Pakistan have become members of the SCO which already has Russia, China and the States of Central Asia as its members. Inclusion of India and Pakistan inside the SCO will make Afghanistan a centre and a bridge between South and Central Asia.

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In SAARC, Afghanistan found itself in the west corner, and in the SCO until recently, Afghanistan was in the southern corner. New inclusions in the SCO mean Afghanistan will now occupy a pivotal position, and this opens the door for the region to revitalise some of the energy projects that have already been discussed- such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) electricity corridor. On another positive note, Nawaz Sharif and Ashraf Ghani were able to break the deadlock during the recent SCO summit at Astana, and restart the bilateral process.

Fifth, the increased role of China and Russia in the region and the projects they have undertaken provide another opportunity for Afghanistan. Much has already been discussed about the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative led by China. Beijing's ambitious project is likely to bring substantial funds and projects, and also create a larger infrastructural network in the region. Similarly, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union is another major initiative.

Geographically, Afghanistan will become the gateway for South Asia into the Eurasian Economic Union. India and Iran have also been working on a North-South Corridor which will cut through Afghanistan. If the above three initiatives are plotted on a map, one can observe the network it would create across and along Afghanistan in Asia.

To answer the questions raised at the start – yes, there are new developments in the region within and around Afghanistan which call for a fresh initiative, with Kabul as the pivot. Instead of expecting or accusing Trump of not doing enough, the region will have to look inwards, take ownership and prepare a road map. There is enough power in the above mentioned Asian led projects to fire the Afghan engine.

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