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The Big Picture - India's Afghan Policy

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The US President Donald Trump tweeted that he had cancelled meetings planned for 8th September, 2019 with Taliban leaders and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Afghanistan. The immediate reason he cited was a Taliban attack in Kabul that killed 12 people, including an American soldier.

Background

- Afghanistan has been ravaged by **war since 2001** when a US-led coalition overthrew the Taliban.
- Since October 2018, Taliban representatives and US officials have been meeting in Doha, Qatar trying to chalk out a peace treaty.

- The **negotiations focus on three elements:**
 - Withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.
 - To prevent Afghanistan from being used by international terrorist groups.
 - Permanent ceasefire between the Taliban and Afghanistan.
- Many security analysts in Afghanistan and elsewhere had criticised the US-Taliban talks as it had kept the Afghanistan government out. Many believe that the talks would legitimise the Taliban.
- The U.S. President Donald Trump had said that countries like India, Iran, Russia and Turkey would have to fight against terrorists in Afghanistan at some point of time, implying that the job against terrorism is being done only by the United States.
 - Trump also indicated that the **U.S. forces would not completely withdraw from Afghanistan** and America would have “somebody there” to make sure that the Taliban does not regain control.
 - Trump also said that the U.S. is fighting the terrorists in Afghanistan despite being 7,000 miles away, while India and Pakistan are not doing so even after being next door.

India’s Stand

- India’s position has always been that it **does not have any direct conversation with Taliban.**
 - However, in 2018, India sent two retired diplomats, at the non-official level to join negotiations with Taliban at Moscow.
 - Some experts argue that India should have an open contact with Taliban as Taliban are part of Afghanistan's political process.
 - Also, the **Taliban has never criticized India.** If they come into power, they would like India to continue with the development part. It also supports India’s strategic partnership with Afghanistan.
- India, being a good friend, is **helping the Afghan state in the rehabilitation process.** This has taken away the large number of youth in Afghanistan from the path of terrorism.

India has an investment of over 3 billion dollars in Afghanistan.
- India wants an **Afghan led, controlled, owned process** in which all stakeholders have a role to play.
- It stresses on the **legitimate democratically elected government** in Afghanistan.
- India is seen as a stabilizing force by Afghanistan which can keep a check on Pakistan.

Should India place its boots in Afghanistan?

If India does not send boots on the ground, then those terrorists can affect its national security through the Kashmir Valley. Hence, it makes more sense that instead of fighting them in their own territory, India should fight them in Afghanistan.

- However, putting boots on the ground is **not sustainable**. It leads to an **ever increasing troop commitment**.
- The limitations of resource options and negative image projection that such a step may carry are other issues in increasing the military presence in Afghanistan. Also, similar intervention by the US has not brought the desired results.

What India can do?

- If India wants to help Afghans militarily, it can provide **them with weapons and artilleries**.
- India also has an **option of supporting a brigade worth of commandos** in Afghanistan by training Afghan military.
- After the Wuhan process, the Prime Minister of India and the Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed on **China-India** plus one model in Afghanistan. Both started training the Afghan diplomats. On the same lines, both the countries **can come together for security cooperation in Afghanistan**.
- If invited, **India should not feel reluctant in participating in the peace discussions**.

Other Countries' Stand

United States: There is **two-track Presidency** within the US.

- The Pentagon (headquarters of the Department of Defense) wants a permanent projection in the region for strategic reasons.
- On the other hand, Trump and other populists are keen to face the domestic American electorate and maintain that the US has finally pulled out of all the costly and unwanted wars.

Russia: Russia has started talking with the Taliban for its own reasons.

- Moscow recognizes the Taliban's territorial gains and **prefers the group to ISIS**.
- In fact, an influential section of Russian policy makers have come to view the Taliban as a useful partner in its fight against the ISIS.

Pakistan: Pakistan has remained part of the US direct peace negotiations with Taliban insurgents.

- Pakistan realises that once the Taliban enters a power sharing agreement with the Afghan government as part of the US Peace Process, then it will not be as pliable as it was before.
- Pakistan have been providing support to the destabilising elements in Afghanistan, despite the US aid withdrawal.
- In such situations, China is one country that can influence and pressurise Pakistan
China has creditor rights over Pakistan due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
- More movements such as the **Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)** can reform Pakistan from within.
- However, some experts argue that Pakistan should not be allowed to interfere in matters related to Afghanistan.

Peace Deal and the Possible Consequences

- It is quite possible that the Peace Deal might take place soon.
The reason being that **Afghanistan depends on the USA and Europe for the finances** to maintain its troops vis-a-vis Taliban. The USA, thus, would pressurize the country.
- Taliban has an ultimate goal of imposing Sharia in their respective regions. This is **in conflict with what the people in Afghan want**. Afghanistan has got its own Constitution and people want to be governed as per the Constitution. This will make any peace deal that they would have, unsustainable.
- Taliban will hardly share power with the Afghan Government. Thus it is quite possible that even after the peace deal, the country will be back to civil war again.
- **Then**, the world will face **twin challenges** in Afghanistan: **ISIS and Taliban**.
 - ISIS is attacking directly people on secretarial grounds unlike the Taliban which made it sound more like a broader ethnic or a nationalist movement.
 - ISIS is more divisive and hitting soft targets like ordinary civilians much more than Taliban.
 - Also, there is apparently a link between so called Pakistani Taliban on the Pakistani side of the border and the ISIS factions.
- Afghanistan **will become hub of all terrorists activities** which is not good for any country. This will also lead to more problems in the Central Asia i.e. possibility of more attacks by Talibans in Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, etc.

Way Forward

- Talking only with Taliban is a short-sighted policy. **Dialogue needs to take place among all the stakeholders in Afghanistan.**

- To resolve conflict within Afghanistan, the battlefield needs to be isolated i.e. external support to the terrorist activities needs to be abandoned. Also, **the countries need to keep their respective interests aside, to build peace in the region.**

The US needs to make its policy vis-a-vis Afghanistan clear.

- India and Central Asian Republics can help in establishing peace in the region.
- More militancy is witnessed in the region where the state fails to deliver. **Thus, administrative reforms within Afghanistan is need of the hour.**