Getting India back to the Afghan high table

By, Vivek Katju is a former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan

Introduction

India’s foreign and security policy planners must seek to establish open connections with all its political groups, including with those perceived to be in Pakistan’s pocket.

Instead, they continued to rigidly cling to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani even as his equities diminished with each passing month.

Cut to the quick

It took the Election commission 5 months to declare Mr. Ghani as President-elect, a result that was rejected by Mr. Ghani’s main rival, Abdullah Abdullah.

It led to two simultaneous swearing-ins; both Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah took oath as President. It is true that the international community ultimately supported Mr. Ghani but qualified it with an insistence that he enters into a real power-sharing agreement with Mr. Abdullah.

That agreement has just been reached. It will inevitably further weaken Mr. Ghani.

How has Mr. Ghani reciprocated India’s such unqualified backing?

His clear and public response came last month in a manner. It could only have been disappointing to Indian decision makers. The United Nations Secretariat organised a meeting on Afghanistan where it invited the six current physical neighbours of Afghanistan—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

In addition, invitations were extended to the United States, Russia and the Ghani government. Obviously, Mr. Ghani did not invite India.

He should have done so if only for the constructive role New Delhi has played in Afghanistan’s reconstruction since the Taliban were ousted from the country in 2001-2002 after 9/11. Also, for consistently supporting him.

Indeed, if all his fine words of India’s importance to Afghanistan were actually true, he would have lobbied and ensured India’s participation.

Point man’s blunt talk

So much for Mr. Ghani. What truly cut India more to the quick was the U.S. going along with India’s absence. So much for the personal chemistry of the leaders of the two countries.

The day after the meeting, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. point man on Afghanistan and the architect of the Taliban deal, spoke to India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to assuage hurt sentiments.
But the balm of good words cannot obscure the basic fact that the U.S. acts to promote its interests in Afghanistan. It obviously expects that if in doing so Indian interests are exposed, India will protect them as best as it can.

Zalmay Khalilzad said “India should talk directly to Taliban, discuss terror concerns directly,”. He noted that despite India’s contributions to Afghanistan’s economic development — and these are undeniably significant covering large parts of the country, and are popular — as well as its long history of contacts with that country, it does not have a place in international diplomacy on Afghanistan.

He patronisingly added that the U.S. wants India to have a more active role in the peace process.

Clearly, as the most significant power in the region, India should have ensured that it had a place on the table and should have devised ways to achieve that end. This is especially so because Afghanistan impacts on India’s interests, especially its security concerns.

The Taliban and Pakistan

Khalilzad believes that dialogue between India and the Taliban are important, and it would be important that issues of concerns like this [terrorism]. Taking Mr. Khalilzad’s views in their entirety, it is clear that he feels that by avoiding open contacts with the Taliban, India has reduced its role in international diplomatic efforts.

That the U.S. is currently crucially dependent on Pakistan for the successful implementation of its Taliban deal aimed at securing as orderly a withdrawal as possible from what is a major strategic reverse for the world’s pre-eminent power is not in doubt.

In such a situation, it was essential for India to have maintained its strong links with the Afghan government, built and supported its traditional Afghan allies — perhaps this was discreetly resumed — but also establish open lines of communication with the Taliban.

Echo from the past

It is sad that despite all that India has done in Afghanistan over the past 18 years since the Taliban were ousted from Kabul in 2001, it finds itself on the margins of international diplomacy on Afghanistan.

It is reminiscent of the time in the 1990s when, at Pakistan’s insistence, India was considered a problem and kept out of crucial global forums on Afghanistan.

It did not matter then because along with Iran and Russia, it kept the resistance to the Taliban going through Ahmed Shah Masood.

Mr. Ghani is no Masood and there are no countries on the horizon which are really opposed to the Taliban acquiring a major place in the Afghanistan’s formal power structures.

Way Ahead

India needs to take corrective diplomatic action even at this late stage, and even in the time of
COVID-19. It must begin openly talking to the Taliban and with all political groups in the country. It must realise that its Afghan policy needs changes.