News: In its first step towards engaging with the Taliban, India has decided to send its envoy to the signing of the peace pact between the US and Taliban in Doha.

Background

On February 21, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had said the US and Taliban would sign a peace agreement on February 29, at the end of a week-long period of reduction in violence in Afghanistan.

About the issue

- India received an “invitation” from Qatar, and after deliberations at the highest level, the government has decided to send India’s Ambassador to Qatar.

- This is the first time that an official representative will attend a ceremony where the Taliban representatives will be present. When Taliban was in power between 1996 and 2001, India did not recognise it diplomatically and officially.

- While the decision is not linked to US President Donald Trump’s recent visit to India, the signing of the pact will have strategic, security and political implications for India. The matter was discussed by PM Modi and Trump during their bilateral meetings.

India’s engagement with Taliban

- While India has never negotiated with the Taliban — except during the IC-814 hijack in 1999 — it was part of the Moscow-led talks with the
Taliban in November 2018, which two former Indian diplomats attended as “non-official representatives”.

- Though some within the strategic establishment have argued for engaging with the Taliban — who represent the new reality — the foreign policy establishment has so far shied away from doing so. With the new US-Taliban deal, India has recalibrated its position and taken the first step towards engaging with the Taliban.

**Joint statement related to Afghanistan during Trump’s visit**

- Significantly, India’s concerns on Afghanistan were “very well reflected” in the joint statement issued during Trump’s visit.

- The two sides agreed on a common language, which was identical to India’s traditional position, and even talked about India’s role in development and security assistance to Afghanistan. Interestingly, while the statement talks about Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, it does not mention Afghan-controlled — since the reality is that the process is controlled by other players, including the US.

- **India and the US share interest in a united, sovereign, democratic, inclusive, stable and prosperous Afghanistan.** They support an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process that results in a sustainable peace; cessation of violence; elimination of terrorist safe havens; and preservation of the gains of the last 18 years. President Trump welcomed India’s role in continuing to provide development and security assistance to help stabilise and provide connectivity in Afghanistan.

- The last joint statement, issued during Modi’s visit to the White House in 2017, had said that Trump welcomed further Indian contributions to promote Afghanistan’s democracy, stability, prosperity and security. Recognising the importance of their respective strategic partnerships with Afghanistan, the leaders committed to continue close consultations and cooperation in support of Afghanistan’s future.
Significance to US-Taliban deal for India

- For New Delhi, the US-Taliban deal holds significance given that the return of Taliban in Afghanistan has harsh memories from the 1990s, especially the IC-814 hijack, which led to the release of terrorist Masood Azhar. Azhar later founded the Jaish-e-Mohammed, responsible for several terrorist attacks, including the attack on Parliament in 2001 and the Pulwama attack in 2019.

- New Delhi has kept a close watch while the US and Taliban negotiators have been meeting for the last two years. It has been briefed by the US interlocutors, especially US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad who has travelled to India several times and met External Affairs Minister at the Munich Security Conference recently.

- Apart from the US, India has been in regular talks with other active players like all political forces in Afghanistan, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and China on the issue.

- While many western observers believe the agreement could represent a chance for peace in the country, New Delhi has been more cautious as it gives strength to Pakistan — a long-time benefactor of the Taliban.

- Though India has softened its position on engaging with the Taliban, it has always maintained that it has three red lines — which it spelt out when the US, Russia and China were conducting their negotiations with the Taliban last year.

1\textsuperscript{st} red line

- All initiatives and processes must include all sections of the Afghan society, including the legitimately elected government. This is important as, in the past, the Afghan government has often been sidelined by international interlocutors when they engaged with the Taliban. This also means that there is acceptability in Delhi about talking to the Taliban — since they represent a “section of the Afghan society”.
What happens to the Ashraf Ghani government — which just got re-elected — will be something that Delhi will watch. India, under Modi, has developed a close relationship with Ghani, and has been on the same side of the argument regarding Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

2nd red line

Any process should respect the constitutional legacy and political mandate. This means that the achievement of establishing democratic processes and human rights, including women’s rights, should be respected. Delhi will again monitor whether the “new Taliban” — as many Western interlocutors claim — will respect these achievements over the last two decades.

3rd red line

Any process should not lead to any ungoverned spaces where terrorist and their proxies can relocate. This is crucial for India, as it points out the threat from terrorist groups including the Haqqani network, Al Qaeda and Islamic State, which must not be allowed to operate there. Also, Pakistan-based terrorist groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Jaish-e-Mohammed must not be allowed to relocate.

These “red lines” are India’s mantras, even as it pushes for a national peace and reconciliation process which is Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled. In short, India’s approach has been to counter the Pakistan military establishment’s influence over Kabul.