



## HISTORY (OPTIONAL) By Manikant Singh



# On Kabul, Delhi must wait

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**Strategic patience coupled with political empathy for Afghan people, and an active engagement will continue to keep Delhi relevant in Kabul's internal and external evolution.**

As the tragic chaos at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul continues, two interconnected political negotiations unfolding are likely to determine Afghanistan's immediate future. One is focussed on building a new political order within Afghanistan and the other is about gaining international recognition for the incipient Taliban-led government.

Notwithstanding the current triumphalism in Pakistan at "overthrowing" the US-backed order in Kabul and "pushing" India out of Afghanistan, Delhi can afford to step back and signal that it can wait. For one, Rawalpindi is some distance away from establishing a new political order dominated by the Taliban. Then there is the challenge of securing the international legitimacy of a Pakistan-backed order in Afghanistan and sustaining its future.

Neither of these tasks is easy. Pakistan's own experience points to the pitfalls. Consider the last time Rawalpindi celebrated its victory in Afghanistan. After Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the Kabul government led by Najibullah and backed by Moscow, resisted the full-scale offensive by the Mujahideen and Pakistan for three years before collapsing.

But Pakistan took another half-decade before gaining reasonable control over Afghanistan through the Taliban. But before Pakistan and the Taliban could translate their victory into long-term geopolitical gains, the world came down like a ton of bricks on Afghanistan after the 9/11

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terror attacks. The Taliban government melted away by the end of 2001, as quickly as the Ashraf Ghani government did this month.

The Pakistan army can surely pat itself on the back for its patient support of the Taliban over the last two decades and bringing it back into Kabul. But how is it faring on the two unfinished tasks in Afghanistan—constructing a credible government and securing international legitimacy for it?

More than a week after President Ghani fled Kabul, there is no government, let alone an inclusive and internationally acceptable one, in sight. Before Rawalpindi can get the Taliban to share power with other groups, it has to facilitate an acceptable accommodation between different factions of the Taliban.

Power-sharing and the distribution of the spoils of war are always difficult for any victorious coalition. It is likely to be harder among the fractious Pashtun tribes.

Then there is the problem of including the non-Taliban formations in the new government. There are some efforts in that direction by the Taliban but they remain inconclusive. Meanwhile, the Taliban is yet to convince the broader population of its good intentions. Thousands of Afghans are desperate to escape from a future with the Taliban. Some opponents are regrouping to organise military resistance.

The talk on “inclusive government” is easy; but getting there, if ever, will take much time. But for the Taliban and Pakistan, there is little time — they are eager for early recognition and legitimacy. That brings us to the international dimension of the current crisis in Afghanistan.

The international community has set some broad conditions for the recognition of the Taliban-led government. Besides an inclusive government at home, the world wants to see respect for human rights, especially women’s rights, ending support for international terrorism, and stopping opium production. The Taliban leaders have said all the right things on these issues, but the gap between their promises and performance on the ground is real.

While the international community appears united in its demands on the Taliban at this stage, Pakistan will hope to get some of its traditional friends like China and Turkey or new partners like Russia to break the current international consensus.

Pakistan and the Taliban, however, know Chinese and Russian support is welcome but not enough. They need an understanding of the US and its allies to gain political legitimacy as well as sustained international economic assistance. The US has already frozen Afghanistan’s financial assets — worth nearly \$10 billion — and some Western banks are blocking remittances into

Afghanistan. These pressures make the current dire economic situation in Afghanistan increasingly unbearable.

The West, too, needs the Taliban to facilitate the evacuation of its citizens from Kabul and, sooner rather than later, deliver humanitarian assistance, the demands for which are rising rapidly in the West. In other words, there will be much room for engagement between Kabul and the world and Pakistan sees itself as the critical interlocutor.

After decades of covert support to the Taliban, Pakistan has now come out into the open by carrying the Taliban on its political shoulders. Rawalpindi is telling the world that the Taliban has changed and means no harm to anyone. It has promised the Taliban goodies from the rest of the world quickly. Pakistan can surely reap many rewards if it can manage this high-wire act.

Like in all high-risk gambles, the potential for failure is large. If the Taliban does measure up to international demands, it would no longer be the political beast that we have known. For the Taliban, which is so deeply committed to a vigorous religious ideology, a significant internal and external reorientation will be wrenching and divisive. But the Pakistan army has never been shy of taking risks — its record of success, however, is poor.

Contrary to the widespread perception, India has never been in strategic competition with Pakistan in Afghanistan. India's lack of direct geographic access to Afghanistan has ensured that. Geography is also the reason Rawalpindi and Delhi pursue vastly different strategies towards Afghanistan.

Both their strategies have roots in the 19th-century policies of the Raj. The Pakistan Army's quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan harks back to the "forward policy" school that sought to actively control the territories beyond the Indus. Delhi, in contrast, stayed with a rival school in the Raj that called for "masterly inactivity" — a prudent approach to the badlands beyond the Indus.

"Masterly inactivity" is not a passive strategy. It recognises the futility of trying to control Afghanistan. It demands conserving one's scarce resources and deploying them at the most appropriate moment and location. It is about coping with the multiple contradictions within Afghanistan and focusing on subtle and indirect approaches.

Pakistan's forward policy seeks political dominance over Afghanistan in the name of a "friendly government" in Kabul. Delhi's strategy seeks to strengthen Kabul's autonomy vis-à-vis Rawalpindi and facilitate Afghanistan's economic modernisation. If Rawalpindi's quest for hegemony makes

Afghans resentful of Pakistan, Delhi's support for Afghan sovereignty makes India always welcome.

The Afghan values that India supports — nationalism, sovereignty, and autonomy — will endure in Kabul, irrespective of the nature of the regime. Strategic patience coupled with political empathy for Afghan people, and an active engagement will continue to keep Delhi relevant in Kabul's internal and external evolution.

In the 1990s, Pakistan and the Taliban had a free hand to shape Kabul's future as the world turned its back on Afghanistan after the Soviet troops withdrew, but they failed quickly and miserably. This time around, the world is deeply concerned with Afghanistan's internal and external policies under the Taliban. That gives Delhi far greater room than in the 1990s to deal with the current situation in Afghanistan.

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