Afghan Peace Process and India

What is the issue?

- Recently, the UN Secretariat held a meeting of what it calls the “6+2+1” group on regional efforts to support peace in Afghanistan.
- Though sidelined from regional discussions, India must still pursue the ample chances in the peace process.

What is the “6+2+1” group?

- The group includes six neighbouring countries of Afghanistan namely China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
- The '2' indicates the two global players - the U.S. and Russia, and '1', Afghanistan itself.
- India's absence was evident, given its historical and strategic ties with Afghanistan.

Is this rejection for the first time?

- This is not the first time that India is kept out of the discussions concerning Afghanistan.
- In December 2001, the Indian team led by special envoy Satinder Lambah arrived in Germany’s Petersberg hotel near Bonn.
- [It was where the famous Bonn agreement on Afghanistan was negotiated.]
- They found no reservations being made for them at the official venue.
- In January 2010, India was invited to attend the “London Conference” on Afghanistan.
- But India was left out of the room during a crucial meeting that decided on opening talks with the Taliban.

How has India responded?

- In both 2001 and 2010, India fought back its exclusion successfully.
- At the Bonn agreement, Ambassador Lambah ensured that Northern Alliance leaders came to a consensus to accept Hamid Karzai as the Chairman of the interim arrangement that replaced the Taliban regime.
- After the 2010 conference, New Delhi redoubled its efforts with Kabul.
- In 2011, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghanistan President Karzai signed the historic Strategic Partnership Agreement.

- This was Afghanistan's first such agreement with any country.

What is India's present stance?

- In 2020, the reason given for keeping India out of the discussions was supposedly that it holds no "boundary" with Afghanistan.
- But in fact, it is because New Delhi has never announced its support for the U.S.-Taliban peace process.
- India's resistance to publicly talking to the Taliban has made it an awkward interlocutor at these discussions.
- India maintains that only an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled process can be allowed.
- This is a principled one, but has no takers.
- Kabul, or the Ashraf Ghani government, does not lead, own or control the reconciliation process today.
- The U.S.-Taliban peace deal only means that the Taliban will become more potent as the U.S. withdraws soldiers from the country.
- It will hold more sway in the inter-Afghan process as well, as the U.S. withdraws funding for the government in Kabul.

How has India's stance affected it?

- New Delhi's decision to find grounds for Ashraf Ghani government has had a two-fold effect:

1. its voice in the reconciliation process has been limited
2. it has weakened its position with other leaders of the deeply divided democratic setup in Kabul such as the former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah

- Meanwhile, India's presence inside Afghanistan, painstakingly built up since 2001, is being threatened anew by terror groups.
- These include the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), believed to be backed by Pakistan's establishment.
- The recent brutal attack that killed 25 at a gurudwara in Kabul was meant for the embassy in Kabul.
- Intelligence agencies had also warned of suicide car bomb threats to the consulates in Jalalabad and Herat in December 2019.
- The government has said that the novel coronavirus pandemic prompted its decision to clear out both consulates in April 2020.
- But the truth is that a full security reassessment is under way for them.
- Either way, India's diplomatic strength in Afghanistan should not appear to be in retreat just when it is needed the most.

What affects India's goodwill in Afghanistan?

- India must consider the damage done to the vast reservoir of goodwill India enjoys in Afghanistan because of recent events here in India.
- This especially includes the controversy over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.
- Afghanistan's majority-Muslim citizens, many of whom have treated India as a second home, have felt cut out of the move.
- The building blocks of that goodwill are India's assistance in infrastructure projects, health care, education, trade and food security.
- The reports of anti-Muslim rhetoric and incidents of violence in India have disturbed India's example as a pluralistic, inclusive democracy that inspired many.

What should India do?

- New Delhi must move swiftly to regain the upper hand in the narrative in Afghanistan.
- The following should assure India a leading position in Afghanistan's regional formulation:

i. India's assistance of more than $3 billion in projects
ii. trade of about $1 billion
iii. a $20 billion projected development expenditure of an alternate route through Chabahar
iv. India's support to the Afghan National Army, bureaucrats, doctors and other professionals for training

- Three major projects include the Afghan Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam (Salma dam).
- These and other hundreds of small development projects have cemented India's position there, regardless of Pakistan's attempts to undermine it.
- So, it would be a mistake, at this point, if India's support is only to Kabul or the Ghani government.
- The Indian government must strive to endure that its aid and assistance is broad-based, to centres outside the capital (Kabul) as well.
- This should be the case even if some lie in areas held by the Taliban.
- India must also pursue opportunities to fulfil its role in the peace efforts in Afghanistan, starting with efforts to bridge the Ghani-Abdullah divide.
- An understanding between Iran and the U.S. on Afghanistan is necessary for lasting peace as well, and India could play a mediatory part.

- India should also use the UN's call for a pause in conflicts during the novel coronavirus pandemic, to ensure a hold on hostilities with Pakistan.

- Above all, New Delhi must consider the appointment of a special envoy, as it has been done in the past, to deal with its efforts in Afghanistan.

Source: The Hindu

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