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What Did the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan Accomplish?

The India-hosted meeting revealed the geopolitical fault lines that have prevented a unified pan-regional response to Afghanistan's multiple cascading crises.

By **Sreeram Chaulia**

November 12, 2021



Credit: [Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#)

The Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, hosted by India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval on November 10, brought together security czars of Russia, Iran, and the five Central Asian nations to brainstorm on the serious situation since the Taliban's takeover and find ways to stem instability from spilling across Afghanistan's borders.

The [“overwhelming response”](#) which host India said it received to the conference owed to the fact that while the United States and Europe cut their losses, exited from Afghanistan, and curtailed their interest in shaping its future, countries located around Afghanistan don't have the option of ignoring it due to the compulsions of geography and intertwined history. What happens in Afghanistan is of direct consequence to the regional players and the onus is squarely on them to contain the adverse fallout of the changes there.

Official accounts said the Delhi Dialogue [“exceeded India's expectations”](#) by generating “complete unanimity” of all eight attending countries on the way forward in Afghanistan. The hard-hitting [Delhi Declaration](#),

where the participants vowed to “combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations” and demanded “an open and truly inclusive government that represents the will of all the people of Afghanistan,” hinted at the formation of a regional front or coalition to apply pressure and incentives on the Taliban and other armed actors.

For India, convening the Delhi Dialogue was crucial to prove its relevance as a problem solver amid Afghanistan’s multidimensional crises. Having been written off for losing its 20-year-long perch in Afghanistan once the Pakistan-backed Taliban marched into Kabul, India wanted to demonstrate it still matters by virtue of being accepted by most of its neighbors and near neighbors as a legitimate coordinator of shared interests.

The Taliban, who were not invited by India to the Delhi Dialogue, nevertheless [commended the conference](#) as being “in the better interest of Afghanistan,” implying that getting India to recognize their government is key for the group to break out of international isolation and gain wider acceptance.

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A Region Divided

Yet it did not go unnoticed that China and Pakistan declined India’s invite to come to the Delhi Dialogue. Beijing cited [“scheduling difficulties,”](#) with the caveat that it was “open to meeting with India over Afghanistan bilaterally and multilaterally” in the future. Islamabad, which has been engaged in a longstanding competition with New Delhi to influence Afghanistan’s politics and security, [critiqued India](#) as “a spoiler” that “cannot be a

peacemaker” and openly refused to attend the Delhi Dialogue. Incidentally, China did send its special representative [to Islamabad on November 11](#) for the “Troika Plus” dialogue on Afghanistan involving China, Russia, Pakistan, and the United States.

The strategic Sino-Pakistani axis works in tandem with some attendees of the Delhi Dialogue and at cross-purposes with other attendees. There have always been clear geopolitical divisions and clashing visions among China and Pakistan on one side, and India on the other, about Afghanistan’s future. These fissures escalated since the Taliban routed the former Afghan regime and took power in Kabul. While no country has formally recognized the new Taliban government, Pakistan and China are informally a lot closer and supportive of it compared to other countries in the region.

Referring specifically to the spectacle of rival camps and parallel diplomatic endeavors, the secretary of Russia’s Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, [remarked during the Delhi Dialogue](#) that “such mechanisms should not complicate the work of each other but rather complement each other.”

Dialogue Without Action?

One of the refrains during the Delhi Dialogue was that such forums must lead to practical measures against terrorists. There has been no dearth of regional diplomatic conclaves on Afghanistan for years now. But in the context of the sudden collapse of the former Afghan republic in August 2021, which left most countries in the region shocked and rattled, these consultations have not been powerful in determining outcomes.

From a lay person's lens, it looks as if there has been a lot of diplomatic summitry but little action that concretely affected the situation in Afghanistan. The litmus test for initiatives like the "Moscow format" (hosted periodically by Russia) and the Delhi Dialogue is to develop a common framework to deliver regional public goods that can mitigate insecurity inside Afghanistan and halt it from seeping beyond its borders.

The dialogues can have a tangible impact only if they add up to producing regionally agreed governance conditionalities and modalities for humanitarian assistance, reporting and sharing information on the Taliban government's conduct and administration, and tracking activities of the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) and other terrorist fighters thriving on Afghan soil and across the porous border in Pakistan.

Apart from exchanging views and warnings about the presence and movement of radicalized jihadist extremists, it would be worthwhile if likeminded regional powers can establish joint intelligence and military observation missions and presence as close to Afghanistan's borders as possible. Situating a regional security task force in the Central Asian states, which directly border northern Afghanistan, could be geopolitically invaluable.

Owing to historical sensitivities, Iran will not permit the military presence of any foreign country on its territory. But in light of the existential dangers being faced by Shia minorities inside Afghanistan, who have been attacked relentlessly by ISK after the Taliban captured power, Tehran would not be averse to multilateral military coordination mechanisms to safeguard itself from the blowback of Sunni jihadist terrorism from western Afghanistan.

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If a regional coalition against extremism has even limited aerial and ground power projection capacities around Afghanistan, it will convey a warning to terrorist groups and their sponsors plotting attacks that they will face credible and timely retaliation. Creating innovative multimodal security agreements in the region will also open alternative supply routes to assist Afghan people as they cope with dire shortages of essentials.

The [Delhi Declaration's call](#) that humanitarian aid “should be provided in an unimpeded, direct and assured manner to Afghanistan” obliquely referenced the spat between India and Pakistan, with the former requesting overland passage of trucks carrying 50,000 metric tons of emergency wheat to Afghanistan and the latter stalling.

The United Nations has [rung alarm bells](#) that 1 million Afghan children could die from starvation this winter. In this grave context, the region should have been unanimous and come together to save lives. But given the acute geopolitical contestation, the only way of skirting around logjams is to look for alternative humanitarian rescue pathways that can be logistically secured and underwritten by a regional task force or “coalition of the willing.”

The Delhi Dialogue lucidly revealed the geopolitical fault lines that have prevented a unified pan-regional response to Afghanistan's multiple cascading crises. Yet, if such dialogues segue into actionable military efforts by likeminded countries in Afghanistan's surroundings to constrain terrorists and alleviate human suffering, there is hope for averting the worst-case scenarios.

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