



DELHI POLICY GROUP

Panel Discussion on US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its regional impact: a reprise of the “Great Game”? 1730-1900 HRS. IST, JUNE 30, 2021

Concept Note

The regional security environment in South and Central Asia is likely to undergo a significant change following the unconditional withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by September this year. With the prospect of widespread conflict and even a Taliban takeover in Kabul looming large, the US is reviewing the need for retaining a counterterrorism and intelligence-gathering foothold in Afghanistan beyond the withdrawal timeline. US diplomats have been exploring options to restore access to bases in Central Asia and Pakistan.

While the Afghan scenario remains uncertain, the US withdrawal will certainly create space for other major powers, including China and Russia, to step in. China may secure "unfettered access" across Afghanistan to Iran and consolidate the geo-strategic influence of its BRI.

Without question, Afghanistan will remain a critical area where the interests of the US, Russia, China and India intersect. Shadows of the 19th century “Great Game” are reappearing in the Heart of Asia; the historical backdrop of mutual suspicion and rivalry remains, only the protagonists have changed.

Concerned about an unstable and conflict-ridden Afghanistan, China is mustering diplomatic efforts for a collective regional response, but it is unlikely to rush in until there is some predictability about the security situation. Beijing’s main priority will be to ensure there is no spillover to Central Asia/Xinjiang. With its military bases in the region, Russia is strategically better placed than China. However, its focus will also be on fortifying the southern borders of Central Asia.

These developments will present complex challenges for India, not least a renewed US acceptance of Pakistan playing a linchpin role in Afghanistan which comes with the significant risk of prompting ISI’s rogue behaviour. India must reorient its regional strategy to safeguard its interests.



This DPG panel discussion will consider the following aspects:

1. What are the realistic prospects of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled process for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan?
2. Can India be an independent and standalone player in this new great game? Who are our potential partners?
3. How must India respond to revived US-Pak efforts to control Afghan outcomes?
4. Is it time for India to directly engage with the Taliban and work pragmatically with the government in Kabul regardless of ideology?
5. Can India and China consider calibrated moves for co-existing in Afghanistan?
6. What role can the European powers play in securing Afghanistan's stable future?

Program and List of Participants

- 1730–1735:** **Welcome remarks by Amb. Hemant Krishan Singh**, *Director General, Delhi Policy Group*
- 1735–1740:** **Moderators Comments by Amb. Phunchok Stobdan**, *Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group*
- 1740–1820:** Opening remarks by Panellists
- Ambassador Vivek Katju**, *Former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan*
- Ambassador Hussain Haqqani**, *Director for South and Central Asia, Hudson Institute*
- Dr. Shalini Chawla**, *Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies*
- Mr. Malaiz Daud**, *Director of Project "Fostering Culture of Non-Violence in Afghanistan"*
- Dr. Raghav Sharma**, *Associate Professor and Director, Center for Afghanistan Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs*
- 1820–1900:** Discussion
- 1900:** **Vote of Thanks by Shreyas Deshmukh**, *Research Associate, DPG*