

Pakistani Diplomacy Is on a Roll

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An Indian news website that is wired into Panjshir Valley [reported](#) this morning that Amrullah Saleh, former Afghan vice president and security tsar in the Ghani government has relocated to Tajikistan and that that he was given a safe passage by the Tajikistan government.

This comes within days of the “lengthy meeting” in Dushanbe on September 17 between Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan where they thrashed out the terms of a consensus approach towards the Taliban Govt in Kabul.

Imran Khan later hinted that he would be working on Rahmon’s preconditions for accepting the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Rahmon himself said in a major speech later in the presence of Imran Khan that he was “satisfied with the process of regular political contacts between our states, including at the highest level,” and expressed interest in connectivity with the ports of Karachi and Gwadar and in “joining regional corridors and transport projects”.

Rahmon stressed that “stabilising the situation in Afghanistan, as a country connecting regional and international transport networks, is especially important” for Dushanbe. He expressed the hope that peace and stability in Afghanistan “will be restored in the near future and the interests of all political and ethnic groups in Afghanistan will be taken into account. We support inclusive government in this country with the participation of all social groups.”

Importantly, Rahmon and Imran Khan agreed that the “speedy elimination of the conflict and tensions in the Panjshir province by declaring a ceasefire and opening roads for providing humanitarian assistance is one of the most important tasks today.” And the two leaders also “agreed to direct all efforts to achieve these goals.”

Rahmon concluded, “We agreed to facilitate negotiations between the Taliban and Tajiks in Dushanbe. [read more](#)

Dushanbe has finally accepted the Taliban as a reality. Imran Khan has won over Rahmon who has been an obdurate, seemingly recalcitrant critic of the Taliban.

It is entirely conceivable that Rahmon provided “safe passage” to Saleh so that the deck is clear for ending the strife in Panjshir Valley and reconciliation talks with the Taliban to begin.

Since then, a joint Russian-Chinese-Pakistani diplomatic [mission to Kabul](#) on September 21-22 has held talks with the acting Taliban Prime Minister Mohammad Hasan Akhund, acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, acting Finance Minister Hidayatullah Badri and other senior officials, aside former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and former Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has stated that “in-depth and constructive discussions” took place on the whole range of issues, “especially on inclusiveness, human rights, economic and humanitarian issues, friendly relations between Afghanistan and other countries, especially neighbouring countries, and the unity and territorial integrity” of the country. The Taliban leaders appreciated that the 3 countries “are playing a constructive and responsible role in consolidating peace and stability” in Afghanistan.

It appears that the inputs from the meeting in Kabul have gone into the meeting of the foreign ministers of the permanent members of the UN Security Council on Wednesday in New York chaired by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. In subsequent remarks to the media, Guterres [sounded optimistic](#).

Importantly, this P-5 meeting took place at the initiative of the UK, a day after Prime Minister Boris Johnson met President Biden on Tuesday at the White House.

A readout from 10 Downing Street later summed up that Johnson and Biden agreed that “the best way to honour all those who gave their lives to make Afghanistan a better place will be to use all the diplomatic and humanitarian tools at our disposal to prevent a humanitarian crisis and preserve the gains made in Afghanistan.”

The restrained language reflects the mellowed tone in Biden’s brief references in his UN GA speech on Tuesday where he en passe spoke of “closing this period of relentless war (in Afghanistan) and opening a new era of relentless diplomacy.” Biden made no threatening references to “out-of-the-horizon” military operations directed at Afghanistan and eschewed any demonising of the Taliban.

Interestingly, Biden did advocate the rights of women but “from Central America to the Middle East, to Africa, to Afghanistan — wherever it appears in the world.”

The bottom line is that the Pakistani line on the imperative need to engage with the Taliban government is steadily gaining traction. The Pakistani mantra is: “Be realistic. Show patience. Engage. And above all, don’t isolate.” — as a AP dispatch neatly summed up an exclusive interview with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi on Wednesday on the sidelines of the UN GA in New York. [read more](#)

On granting recognition to the Taliban government, Imran Khan told the BBC this week,

“We will collectively take a decision... We think that all the neighbours will get together, we will see how they [Taliban] progress, and whether to recognise them or not will be a collective decision.”

He underscored,

“There will not be any long-term sustainable peace in Afghanistan unless all the factions, all the ethnic groups are represented.”

Pakistan’s decision to work for and through a regional consensus, is a tactically prudent course, that raises the comfort level of Afghanistan’s neighbours. Imran Khan’s understanding with Rahmon becomes vital.

Imran Khan was at his persuasive best in the BBC interview, candidly discussing the international community’s anxieties over the rights of women under Taliban rule, etc. But his unspoken message is hard-hitting: What is the alternative to engaging with the Taliban government — nudging it, cajoling it, incentivising it?

Perhaps, it smacks of a poker game where Imran Khan knows Pakistan is holding a strong hand and doesn’t have to flaunt it while claiming victory. But Pakistan has learned from the experience of the 1990s — high risk of going out on a limb in a triumphalist frame of mind.

Today, the external environment is working favourably for Pakistani diplomacy. China’s readiness to salvage the Afghan economy is an altogether new factor. Again, with the Biden Administration disinclined to get into further entanglements in Afghanistan and Central Asia and big-power strategic competition accelerating elsewhere globally, the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan are becoming the main stakeholders — Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan — and their number one priority is the stability of Afghanistan.

The Turkmenistan president Berdimuhamedow probably spoke for the region when he said in his speech at the UNGA earlier this week:

“The situation there is not easy, the government and public institutions that are being formed are very fragile. This is why assessing the situation in the country requires ultimate consistency, prudence and responsibility — both in words and actions.

“The situation in Afghanistan has changed, and when forming an approach to it, one needs to abandon ideological preferences, old grudges, phobias and stereotypes, thinking first and foremost about Afghan people who are tired of wars and turbulences and dream of a peaceful and quiet life.

“Turkmenistan is deeply interested in a politically stable and safe Afghanistan. We call for normalising the situation in Afghanistan as soon as possible and expect that new government agencies will operate effectively in the interests of all Afghan people. Turkmenistan will continue to provide comprehensive economic support and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.”

Indeed, the mood in the region is radically changing. It is noticeable too that Afghanistan has become a much calmer place. Violence and bloodshed have ceased. The civil war conditions are receding.

The change of mood is reflected in a [recent interview by Karzai](#) to the Iranian media where he said that the Taliban are from Afghanistan and part of its people, they love their

homeland and want calm and a peaceful life.

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Featured image: Acting Prime Minister of Taliban Interim Government Mohammad Hasan Akhund and senior ministers met the special envoys of Russia, China and Pakistan in Kabul, Afghanistan, September 21, 2021 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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