[**Engage the Taliban**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1674649/engage-the-taliban)

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ANYONE who consults archival material of the sorry phase in Afghanistan’s international exertions, prior to America’s war on the hapless country, would be struck by the then Taliban’s regime’s sincere and dogged efforts for a dialogue with officials of the US State Department. Formulae for dealing with Osama bin Laden were on the cards. They were rudely, repeatedly snubbed.

There is a different situation today. But the Taliban who returned to power in 2021 have the same yearning for diplomatic recognition and dialogue with the great powers and some significant others. Once again, they are being ignored if not snubbed.

Right now, Afghanistan faces calamity on a massive scale that is unknown even to our South Asian subcontinent, used as it is to the harrowing saga of sheer destitution. Large parts of the country face virtual famine. No words need to be wasted on insecurity of life in vast areas. The new Taliban regime would and could have been rendered amenable to persuasion if its requests for diplomatic relations were accepted. It has, of course, a lot to answer for; especially in the realm of human rights, and in particular, women’s rights. Not surprisingly the standard bearer of human rights, the United States of America has turned a Nelson’s eye on happenings in states that are rich in oil.

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The last century produced a hybrid animal in the realm of diplomacy — a diplomatic agent to conduct dialogue without formal recognition as an ambassador. He was a product of the First World War.

Pre-eminent among them was Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart. He described his ambiguities and turmoil later in his book Memoirs of a British Agent. That is just what he was dubbed — agent to the Czarist, Kerensky and Bolshevik regimes. He wrote: “…[T]he Foreign Office insisted on keeping my own position as vague as possible. If in the House of Commons some irate interventionist wished to know why in the name of decency the British Government maintained an official representative with a government of cut-throats, who boasted of their determination to destroy civilisation, Mr Balfour, the Foreign Secretary or his Under-Secretary would then reply quite truthfully that we had no official representative accredited to the Bolshevik Government.

“On the other hand, when some revolutionary-minded Liberal charged the British Government with the folly of not maintaining an accredited representative in Moscow in order to protect British interests and to assist the Bolsheviks in their struggle with German militarism, Mr Balfour would reply, with the same strict regard for the truth, that in Moscow we had a representative — an official with great experience of Russia — who was charged precisely with these duties.”

His task was to engage and report to London where sheer ignorance ruled the roost. “I could not share the general belief, stimulated by the opinion of nearly all the Russian experts in London that the Lenin regime could not last more than a few weeks and that then Russia would revert to Tsarism or a military dictatorship.

“Still less could I believe that the Russian peasant would return to the trenches. Russia was out of the war, Bolshevism would last — certainly as long as the war lasted. I deprecated as sheer folly our militarist propaganda, because it took no account of the war-weariness which had raised the Bolsheviks to the supreme power. In my opinion, we had to take the Bolshevik peace proposals seriously. Our policy should now aim at achieving an anti-German peace in Russia.

“Rather futilely I sought to combat the firmly rooted conviction that Lenin and Trotsky were Ger­man staff officers in disguise or at least service age­nts of German policy. I was more successful when I argued that it was madness not to establish some contact with the men who at that moment were controlling Russia’s destinies.”

This is an accurate description of almost all such situations as the American White Paper on relations with China reveals. Diplomats who spoke the truth then were dubbed fellow travellers by Senator McCarthy who dominated American’s political dialogue in those days. America and Chinese diplomats conducted long and very useful talks at Warsaw. In 1972, president Richard Nixon visited a country whose state and government his own government had not recognised. History has vindicated his bold step.

In the last century, a new form of dialogue came into being — secret diplomatic exchanges between spy chiefs of both sides with the advantage of deniability.

Afghanistan seeks an open dialogue with no peremptory demands on either side. The international community would gain and bring succour to Afghan lives by engaging with the Taliban. Both sides will profit thereby. And regional peace will be all the more secure for that.

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*Published in Dawn, February 12th, 2022*