NEET applies to minority colleges: SC

‘It doesn’t violate fundamental rights’

• The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) is mandatory for admission to medical colleges run by religious and linguistic minority communities, the Supreme Court held on Wednesday.

• A three-judge Bench led by Justice Arun Mishra held that admissions solely through NEET for graduate and postgraduate medical/dental courses does not violate any fundamental and religious rights of minorities. NEET would apply for both aided and unaided medical colleges run by minorities.

• The court dismissed arguments by the managements of several minority-run medical institutions, including the Christian Medical College Vellore Association, that bringing them uniformly under the ambit of NEET would be a violation of their fundamental right to “occupation, trade and business”.

• The colleges had argued that imposing NEET would violate their fundamental rights of religious freedom, to manage their religious affairs, to administer their institutions. They said the State was reneging on its obligation to act in the best interest of minorities.

• But Justice Mishra, who wrote the 108-page judgment, said it was time the field of education returned to the “realm of charity”, a character it had lost over the years. NEET was brought in to weed out malpractices in the field.

• The court held that the rights of trade, business and occupation or religious rights “do not come in the way of securing transparency and recognition of merits in admissions”.

Banks borrow ₹2,000 crore from RBI for mutual funds

Window of ₹50,000 cr. open till May 11; ‘crisis of confidence affecting sentiment’

• Commercial banks have borrowed ₹2,000 crore from the liquidity window that was offered by the Reserve Bank of India for mutual funds (MFs), so far, latest data released by the central bank showed. On Monday, the RBI had announced a special window of ₹50,000 crore for mutual funds in view of the redemption pressure that the fund houses are facing.

Exclusive for MFs

• Funds availed under this facility will be used by banks exclusively for meeting the liquidity requirements of MFs, RBI had said. The scheme was made available from April 27, 2020 till May 11, 2020 or up to utilisation of the allocated amount, whichever is earlier.

• “There are two issues currently — liquidity and crisis of confidence. The move to provide liquidity is fabulous but one needs to address the root cause as well,” Aashish Somaiya, managing director and chief executive officer, Motilal Oswal Asset Management.

• “Banks are risk averse and so will be selective on taking the papers on their books. There is stress that will lead to redemptions and hence a signal needs to be given out [by regulators, government] that no mutual fund or for that matter no NBFC is going down,” Mr. Somaiya added.

• The window was opened by RBI after Franklin Templeton Mutual Fund decided to wind up six debt funds that have combined assets under management of nearly ₹26,000 crore, on account of illiquid, low-rated instruments in their portfolio, last week.

• The fund house had said that it decided to wind up the schemes to preserve the value at least at the current levels, as it was getting eroded due to a combination of redemption pressures and mark-to-market losses. These stemmed from the lack of liquidity on account of the COVID-19 impact on the markets.

A greater impact on women

COVID-19 poses a threat to women’s livelihoods and increases their burden of work at home

• Early signs are that SARS-CoV-2 poses a greater direct health risk to men, and particularly older men. But the pandemic is exposing and exploiting inequalities of all kinds, including gender inequality. In the long term, its impact on women’s health, rights and freedoms could harm us all.

• Women are already suffering the deadly impact of lockdowns and quarantines. These restrictions are essential, but they increase the risk of violence towards women trapped with abusive partners. Recent
weeks have seen an alarming global surge in domestic violence; the largest support organisation in the U.K. reported a 700% increase in calls. At the same time, support services for women at risk face cuts and closures.

- This was the background to my recent appeal for peace in homes around the world. Since then, more than 143 governments have committed to supporting women and girls at risk of violence during the pandemic. Every country can take action by moving services online, expanding domestic violence shelters and designating them as essential, and increasing support to front line organisations. The United Nations’ partnership with the European Union, the Spotlight Initiative, is working with governments in more than 25 countries on these and similar measures, and stands ready to expand its support.

- But the threat to women’s rights and freedoms posed by COVID-19 goes far beyond physical violence. The deep economic downturn accompanying the pandemic is likely to have a distinctly female face.

Unfair, unequal treatment

- The unfair and unequal treatment of working women is one reason why I went into politics. In the late 1960s, as a student volunteer doing social work in poor areas of Lisbon, I saw women in very difficult situations, doing menial jobs and carrying the weight of their extended families. I knew this had to change – and I have seen important change in my lifetime. But decades later, COVID-19 threatens to bring back these conditions and worse, for many women around the world.

- Women are disproportionately represented in poorly paid jobs without benefits, as domestic workers, casual labourers, street vendors, and in small-scale services like hairdressing. The International Labour Organization estimates that nearly 200 million jobs will be lost in the next three months alone – many of them in exactly these sectors. And just as they are losing their paid employment, many women face a huge increase in care work due to school closures, overwhelmed health systems, and the increased needs of older people. And let’s not forget the girls who have had their education cut short. In some villages in Sierra Leone, school enrolment rates for teenage girls fell from 50% to 34% after the Ebola epidemic, with lifelong implications for their well-being and that of their communities and societies.

- Many men, too, are facing job losses and conflicting demands. But even at the best of times, women do three times as much domestic work as men. That means they are more likely to be called on to look after children if businesses open while schools remain closed, delaying their return to the paid labour force.

- Entrenched inequality also means that while women make up 70% of healthcare workers, they are vastly outnumbered by men in healthcare management, and comprise just one in every 10 political leaders worldwide – which harms us all. We need women at the table when decisions are taken on this pandemic, to prevent worst-case scenarios like a second spike in infections, labour shortages, and even social unrest.
• Women in insecure jobs urgently need basic social protections, from health insurance to paid sick leave, childcare, income protection and unemployment benefits. Looking ahead, measures to stimulate the economy, like cash transfers, credits, loans and bailouts, must be targeted at women – whether they are working full-time in the formal economy, as part-time or seasonal workers in the informal economy, or as entrepreneurs and business owners.

Inclusive economic models

• The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clearer than ever that women’s unpaid domestic labour is subsidising both public services and private profits. This work must be included in economic metrics and decision-making. We will all gain from working arrangements that recognise people’s caring responsibilities, and from inclusive economic models that value work at home.

• This pandemic is not only challenging global health systems, but our commitment to equality and human dignity. With women’s interests and rights front and centre, we can get through this pandemic faster, and build more equal and resilient communities and societies that benefit everyone.

By any calculus, India qualifies for UNSC permanent seat: Syed Akbaruddin

‘It’s a country of a billion-plus, it’s a country which is a democracy, perhaps the only example in history of a billion-plus people working together in a democratic framework’

• India’s Permanent Representative at the United Nations Syed Akbaruddin retires on April 30. In an interview to The Hindu, he spoke on a range of topics related to India at the U.N., from the country’s bid for permanent membership at the Security Council and Kashmir to the pandemic. Edited excerpts:

India is due for election to the temporary membership of the U.N. Security Council later this year, for the 2021-22 period. What do you think will be the priorities for India to work on?

• India in many ways is a sui generis country. It’s a country of a billion-plus, it’s a country which is a democracy, perhaps the only example in history of a billion-plus people working together in a democratic framework. We will bring to it those values and strengths of being able to work cohesively among disparate entities. That’s our USP, we try and work out solutions.

• One of the biggest issues that will confront all multilateral organisations and certainly the security council will be issues which are beyond borders. Issues of … the global commons, whether it is in cases of public health as we are now seeing in the current pandemic, but other issues, for example, cyber [issues]. There are no regulatory mechanisms or no rules on that, and that’s another.
• A third one is issues of high seas. Again, beyond your EEZ [exclusive economic zone], there is very limited understanding of what states can do and what states can’t do. Now, why should we focus on these broader thematic issues? It’s because you’ll see our experience has been: ungoverned spaces lead to opportunities for those who are inimical to global governance to breed, whether it is in states or it is beyond state boundaries, this has been the experience, and therefore, we as a country would like to focus on these things.

• Another area of interest would obviously be technology with a human touch. Increasingly, resilience of human beings is an important factor that all of us have been confronted with... Where there are disasters, can we have a more humane approach to these, etc., etc.

Has India gotten closer to permanent member status at the Security Council in the last four to five years?

• One of those aspirational goals was, is and will remain permanent membership of the Security Council, because we feel by any present day calculus, we would qualify. Now, the issue of the expansion and reform of the Security Council is not an India-centric issue. It is an issue which entails a whole host of teams, because, as I told you, everybody acknowledges that India is sui generic. A billion-plus people not being permanently in an organisation which starts with, ‘We the peoples of the United Nations’. You can’t have that dichotomy between an organisation, which says, “I’m ready, I work on behalf of the peoples of the world,” and keeps such a big country representing more than a billion people out.

• On India’s membership, there are very few discordant notes, but there are other issues. There are people who feel that matters relating to, for example, the veto are important factors. There are others who feel, ‘Should it be that every region expands or are there some regions that are already represented adequately (or not).’ There are a multiplicity of other issues which are fairly complex in nature.

What is India’s position on accepting permanent membership in case it doesn’t carry veto power? And what, if anything, will actually change China’s position on India becoming a permanent member?

• If you look at the voting pattern at that stage when the reform or the expansion from 11 to 15 happened by increasing four non-permanent members, none of those present there as permanent members right now voted in favour. There were some who opposed, there were others who abstained. The only representative at that stage who voted in favour of change was the Republic of China. Now, even with that sort of vote, in two years, everybody accepted the vote and ratified it...in diplomacy, there is no finality in these things of what people say, people evolve, situations change, global pressures will mount.

• The choice will have to be, do you want an organ which is moribund, which is not effective, which is not legitimate, which is not credible, or do you want, in the evolving situation, a body which is able to work — with its difficulties, but it’s able to work. Therefore, we bet on optimism and we bet that change will happen and people who may have reluctance today will join.
On the veto...

• Of course, there are many of us who feel that veto was the outcome of a situation in 1945 when the world was different. There are many who feel the need to be some restrictions on its use in some form or the other, that’s the global trend in these matters. Our view is that we do not oppose any approach that is non-discriminatory in nature. You are aware that on the issue of discrimination, we have a very strong historical record, whether it was going back to the NPT. At that stage, it was discriminating among those who had nuclear weapons before a certain date or later, similarly on the issue of veto. If there are restrictions, these need to be applicable to everyone. These are difficult calls and those discussions have not yet happened.

Would you agree that the issue of Jammu and Kashmir has been internationalised after the August 5 decision by the government, given how many times it’s been raised including by the Secretary-General and the Security Council after so many decades [last taken up in 1971]?

• [Mr. Akbaruddin said that the Secretary-General issues a list of all items that are/were discussed formally in the Security Council, including those that have not been discussed in decades but are listed at the behest of delegations. These include ‘The Hyderabad Question’ and ‘The India-Pakistan Question’ of 1948].

• I’m not contesting that it is on the agenda because the agenda, the way it works is that one country can put in anything on the agenda to continue, even if not discussed for... in the case of Hyderabad now, 70 years. Being on the agenda is not an issue of concern to anybody...

But it [Jammu and Kashmir] was discussed informally...

• Informal consultations by definition are not considered to be formal if in any nature. Yes, any country can raise anything on the agenda or outside the agenda in an informal setting. Like you and I when we sit and have a cup of tea, discuss anything under the agenda. Sure. We have not contested that this was informally raised, but you also are aware of those outcomes. No country, not even the informal outcome was shared with anybody, so you can see what the inclination of most members is. I can repeat it, I’ve done it many a time before, that there is no interest in addressing that issue in the council in any format. That’s why those who had raised it raised it three times, but look at the way each time they raised it, the returns have diminished.

So is it fair to say that you disagree that it’s been “internationalised”?

• In a globalised world, you can say anything is internationalised, but I don’t think there is any fear that if something is... States are sovereign, they can do what they want, but if you don’t have resonance, it’s a loss. The rest is their choice to me.

The U.N. is a product of Second World War. It’s a post-war institution. Is this pandemic that we’re going through currently going to significantly change the U.N.?
•I’m not a sage on the stage to articulate a view of the future and get it right. I am... a trench warrior fighting in the trenches, getting ready to leave from those trenches and down the line I may have a view, but at this stage I’m still in the trenches

On the performance of the World Health Organisation (WHO) during the pandemic, given the larger context of it being a U.N. organisation...

•Let me start with one general point and then I will come to this. The current situation lays bare to all of us that there are inadequacies in the systems and institutions that we have built is obvious. You don’t need to have a magnifying glass to see that the current systems are obviously not adequate...

•Now, your question of whether the WHO has shortcomings. Obviously, this needs to be addressed to the satisfaction of all of us, because all of us are impacted now. Gone are the days where you could pass off and say, “Well I did this or that.” If I’m impacted despite you doing it, maybe you’ve not done enough. So, I think there will be a time and an occasion to address these things.

How does plurilateralism — a concept India has backed — work during a pandemic? Wouldn’t multilateralism — which is, in many senses underattack right now — work better given the pandemic affects everyone?

•I don’t see a conflict between the two frameworks. There are multiple levels at which you can address the same issue and perhaps that’s the way to go about it. There is a national effort under way... That does not detract from a regional effort like we’ve tried in SAARC with our Health Ministers. The EU is trying in some way in the European Union countries, there are others trying elsewhere. However, at some stage, you will also have to address it multilaterally, beyond plurilaterally... A virus knows no borders, so there will always be a threat to us unless we address it across the board, and that’s the role of multilateralism.

India has achieved quite a bit in having its position on a global response to terrorism acknowledged. However, we haven’t been able to make headway on the proposal for a comprehensive convention on international terrorism, the CCIT. Which regions and countries have been the biggest hurdles?

•We need to look at the global context in which we made that submission and what is the situation today? We made the submission when I was a young First Secretary here in 1996. At that stage, terrorism was not even looked on as anything beyond a law and order issue. Today, we’ve come a long way on that. There are multiple elements... of what we put in there, which are now norms in the global discourse. They are now part of many security council resolutions, itself. The discourse has absorbed many elements from that. There still remain areas where we need to address them. Terrorism financing — there are security Council resolutions; terrorism nuclear issues — there is a separate convention. The norm that nothing justifies terrorism is now accepted globally. We’ve come a long way on that, of course. What are the issues holding up a convention?

And which countries?
Yes. The issues are in some ways philosophical in nature. There are some who believe that all of us are footnotes to Aristotle and Plato. By that I mean one is a realist and one is an idealist. Everything in the world fits into that framework of whether you address something as a realist and some you address not as a realist. There are some countries who still feel the issue of freedom fighter needs to be defined. There are others who piggyback on this and see that, ‘Okay, I have an option here, I will use that to stall the progress.’

We know of a country in our region, which is piggybacking on this thing in a bid to stall any progress on this, but they’ve lost the battle long ago. Look at the move globally on this, whether it is the FATF, whether it the Security Council, whether it is condemnation of terrorism in all its forms, etc., that battle is lost. Now all they have is a small little fig leaf, “The convention itself, we have been able to stop.” But that convention has become a norm, all these elements have become norms and we are moving beyond that also.

Which are the other countries apart from Pakistan?

Well, there may be countries who, for example, feel that the issue of Palestine is one of a freedom struggle and therefore the support for Palestine will be undermined in some manner if you accept this, so that’s a group of countries who may feel that way and they’ll have this principled position for years.

Limitations of online learning

Direct human engagement is a crucial component of education

India has been under lockdown in a desperate attempt to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Even when the lockdown gets lifted eventually, the government may not allow large congregations in restricted physical spaces, including campuses.

Universities and colleges were in the middle of the second semester of their academic year when the lockdown was enforced. There was anxiety, particularly about the graduating batches of students, lest the ongoing session should be declared a ‘zero semester’. This prompted a number of local initiatives. There were attempts from individual teachers to keep their students engaged. A few universities made arrangements for teachers to hold their classes virtually through video conferencing services such as Zoom. The transition to virtual modes was relatively less difficult for those institutions that had, even prior to the lockdown, adopted learning management system platforms. All the above were well-meaning attempts to keep the core educational processes going through this period.

Strategy to enhance enrolment?
• An April 13 report quoted the UGC Chairman as saying that to maintain social distancing, e-education was the only way out. This was clearly meant to prepare the higher education community for the exigencies of a protracted period of closure of campuses.

• However, close on the heels of this, he was also quoted as saying that online education was likely to be adopted as a strategy to enhance the gross enrolment ratio in higher education. This prompts many questions about the appropriateness of what may be an effective contingency measure to tide over the pandemic crisis to be deployed as a longterm strategy for enhancing enrolment in higher education. One, how far will online education help support greater access to and success in higher education among those who are on the margins? Two, how equipped are digital forms of education to support the depth and diversity of learning in higher education? Three, is there an unstated political motivation for this shift in strategy?

• Higher education has an influx of students who are first-generation aspirants. They have no cultural capital to bank on while struggling their way through college. Access is not merely enrolment. It also includes effective participation in curricular processes, which includes negotiating through language and social barriers. These students are also from the other side of the digital divide which makes them vulnerable to a double disadvantage if digital modes become the mainstay of education. Unless they receive consistent hand-holding and backstopping, they tend to remain on the margins and eventually drop out or fail. It is therefore necessary to think deeply and gather research-based evidence on the extent to which online education can be deployed to help enhance the access and success rates.

What learning involves

• Acquisition of given knowledge that can be transmitted didactically by a teacher or a text constitutes only one minor segment of curricular content. It is this segment that is largely amenable to online and digital forms of transaction. But learning in higher education means much more than this. It involves development of analytical and other intellectual skills, the ability to critically deconstruct and evaluate given knowledge, and the creativity to make new connections and syntheses. It also means to acquire practical skills, inquire, seek solutions to complex problems, and learn to work in teams. All these assume direct human engagement – not just teacher-student interaction, but also peer interactions. Deconstructing given knowledge in relative isolation is never the same as doing it in a group. Arguably, some of this can, to some extent, be built on to a digital platform. But curricular knowledge has a tendency to adjust its own contours according to the mode of transaction and the focus of evaluation. It gets collapsed into largely information-based content when transacted through standard structures of teaching-learning and examination. While digital forms of learning have the potential to enable students to pursue independent learning, conventional and digital forms of education should not be considered mutually exclusive. Online learning needs to be understood as one strand in a complex tapestry of curricular communication that may still assign an important central role to direct human engagement and social learning.

• Institutions of open and distance learning (ODL), established during the mid-1960s to 1980s, were a consequence of explorations for less expensive models for provisioning access to higher education. ODL may also have been considered by governments at that time “as a safe strategy (in the light of
instances of campus turbulence) for managing mass aspirations for higher education without necessarily effecting large congregations on campuses” (Menon, 2016). One wonders whether there is a similar motivation behind the enthusiasm for online education.

Afghan peace and India’s elbow room

Though sidelined from regional discussions on Afghanistan, India must still pursue the ample chances in seeking peace

• Earlier this month, the United Nations Secretariat held a meeting of what it calls the “6+2+1” group on regional efforts to support peace in Afghanistan, a group that includes six neighbouring countries: China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; global players the United States and Russia, and Afghanistan itself. India was conspicuous by its absence from the meeting on April 16, given its historical and strategic ties with Afghanistan, but not for the first time.

Left out, but some recovery

• In December 2001, for example, the Indian team led by special envoy Satinder Lambah arrived in Germany’s Petersberg hotel near Bonn, where the famous Bonn agreement was negotiated, to find no reservations had been made for them at the official venue. In January 2010, India was invited to attend the “London Conference” on Afghanistan, but left out of the room during a crucial meeting that decided on opening talks with the Taliban.

• In 2020, the reason given for keeping India out of regional discussions on Afghanistan was ostensibly 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. In both 2001 and 2010, however, India fought back its exclusion successfully. At the Bonn agreement, Ambassador Lambah was widely credited for ensuring 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, and in 2011, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghanistan President Karzai signed the historic Strategic Partnership Agreement, which was Afghanistan’s first such agreement with any country.

New Delhi’s stand

• As planners in South Block now consider their next steps in Afghanistan, they must fight back against the idea that any lasting solution in Afghanistan can be discussed without India in the room, while also studying the reasons for such exclusions. To begin with, India’s resistance to publicly talking to the Taliban has made it an awkward interlocutor at any table. Its position that only an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled process can be allowed is a principled one, but has no takers. Kabul, or the Ashraf Ghani government does not lead, own or control the reconciliation process today, comprising the U.S.-Taliban negotiation for an American troops withdrawal, and intra-
Afghan talks on power sharing. The U.S.-Taliban peace deal means that the Taliban, which has not let up on violent attacks on the Afghan Army, will become more potent as the U.S. withdraws soldiers from the country, and will hold more sway in the inter-Afghan process as well, as the U.S. withdraws funding for the government in Kabul.

• New Delhi’s decision to put all its eggs in the Ghani basket has had a two-fold effect: its voice in the reconciliation process has been limited, and it has weakened India’s 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, which has been painstakingly built up since 2001, is being threatened anew by terror groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), believed to be backed by Pakistan’s establishment. Intercepts showed that the brutal attack, in March, that killed 25 at a gurudwara in Kabul was meant for the embassy in Kabul, and intelligence agencies had warned of suicide car bomb threats to the consulates in Jalalabad and Herat last December.

• While the government has said that the novel coronavirus pandemic prompted its decision to clear out both consulates this month, 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 dents India’s goodwill

• The government must also consider the damage done to the vast reservoir of goodwill India enjoys in Afghanistan because of recent events in the country, especially the controversy over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. The building blocks of that goodwill are India’s assistance in infrastructure projects, health care, education, trade and food security, and also in the liberal access to Afghans to study, train and work in India. Above all, it is India’s example as a pluralistic, inclusive democracy that inspires many. Afghanistan’s majority-Muslim citizens, many of whom have treated India as a second home, have felt cut out of the move to offer fast track citizenship to only Afghan minorities, as much as they have by reports of anti-Muslim rhetoric and incidents of violence in India.

• While many of these are problems of perception, New Delhi must move swiftly to regain the upper hand in the narrative in Afghanistan. India’s assistance of more than $3 billion in projects, trade of about $1 billion, a $20 billion projected development expenditure of an alternate route through Chabahar, as well as its support to the Afghan National Army, bureaucrats, doctors and other professionals for training in India should assure it a leading position in Afghanistan’s regional formulation.

• Three major projects: the Afghan Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam (Salma dam), along with hundreds of small development projects (of schools, hospitals and water projects) have cemented that position in Afghan hearts nationwide, regardless of Pakistan’s attempts to undermine that position, particularly in the South. As a result, it would be a mistake, at this point, to tie all India’s support in only to Kabul or the Ghani government; the government must strive to ensure that its aid and assistance is broad-based, particularly during the
The novel coronavirus pandemic has affected centres outside the capital, even if some lie in areas held by the Taliban.

**Making a leap**

- India must also pursue opportunities to fulfil its role in the peace efforts in Afghanistan, starting with efforts to bridge the Ghani-Abdullah divide, and bringing together other major leaders with whom India has built ties for decades. It would be an utter tragedy if the Taliban were to enter the government in Kabul as the U.S. deal envisages, to find the opposing front collapse as it did in 1996.

- The conversation India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had with the U.S.'s Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad last week, where they discussed India’s “engagement” in the peace process, appears to open a window in that direction.

- An understanding between Iran and the U.S. on Afghanistan is necessary for lasting peace as well, and India could play a mediatory part, as it did in order for the Chabahar project.

- Finally, New Delhi should use the United Nations’s call for a pause in conflicts during the novel coronavirus pandemic, to ensure a hold on hostilities with Pakistan. This will be even more difficult than it sounds, given the abyss that bilateral relations have fallen into in the past year over Kashmir and the rise in firepower exchanged at the Line of Control.

- However, if there is one lesson that the the U.S.-Taliban talks have imparted, it is that both have found it necessary to come to the table for talks on Afghanistan’s future. For India, given its abiding interest in Afghanistan’s success and traditional warmth for its people, making that leap should be a bit easier.

- Above all, the government must consider the appointment of a special envoy, as it has been done in the past, to deal with its efforts in Afghanistan, which need both diplomatic agility and a firmness of purpose at a watershed moment in that country’s history.