

DELHI TO TEHRAN VIA US

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

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Two pillars of India's regional foreign policy are shaken today because of the American strategy in what Donald Trump calls the Middle East — the relationships with Iran and Afghanistan.

The delicate equation New Delhi had established with Tehran has not survived the new US sanctions. India could not resist the American pressures regarding oil imports from Iran: It stopped them in May in order to comply with the renewed American sanctions. It does not import oil from Venezuela either — increasing further its dependence from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iraq.

India has also come to the conclusion that Chabahar, in which the country has invested financially and geo-strategically, was bound to stagnate in the present context. In the budget, the government has decided to reduce its allocation to the deep-sea port by two-thirds: For years, it had allocated Rs 150 crore to Chabahar, this year, the allocation is down to Rs 45 crore. New Delhi has had to admit that there was no point to further develop it when shippers and cargo handlers were kept away by US sanctions.

Iran was an important partner for its regional policy. As “an extended neighbour” sharing cultural affinities, it could help India to encircle Pakistan and to get access to Central Asia. Pakistan was clearly worried about the Iran/India rapprochement. Now, we may see a new dialogue between Iran and Pakistan in the wake of [Imran Khan](#)'s visit to Tehran and Mashhad.

Afghanistan has become the second-largest recipient of Indian foreign aid over the last five years. India has become more and more popular in Afghanistan, not only because of its soft power, but also by setting up infrastructure, including hospitals, roads and dams, and contributing to the fabric of a democratic nation-state (through the training of civil servants, students in Indian universities and promotion of its elected governments — as evident from the support New Delhi gave to Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani). Delhi's support to Karzai and Ghani formed an insurance policy for all the primary investments made by India.

Like in Iran, these investments were not an end in themselves. India has invested in Afghanistan in order to reach out to other Central Asian countries, including the former Soviet Republics, in order to expand its trade and access to energy resources. Afghanistan appeared here as the missing link between these countries, and Iran, where India has developed the Chabahar Port, as an indirect route to avoid dealing with Pakistan and maintaining unhindered trade links with Afghanistan.

In fact, India had two priorities in Afghanistan: To prevent Pakistan from setting up a friendly government in Kabul again, like in 1996 with the Taliban of Mullah Omar and, secondly, to avoid

the return of jihadi groups, like al Qaeda, which could strike in India.

On both fronts, India is losing ground today, largely because of Trump's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. Trump promised to end the war in Afghanistan and get the US out. And he is doing it impatiently. As a result, the American administration has intensified negotiations with the Taliban, short-circuiting Ghani, in spite of his protests. The seventh round of talks between the US and Taliban in Qatar has brought fruit: The US is now prepared to withdraw troops in exchange for a Taliban commitment not to let Afghanistan be used as a base for international terrorism. Kabul argued that negotiating and trusting Taliban to not disrupt Afghan state machinery was not sensible. But the US promoted an intra-Afghan negotiation too: As the Taliban refused to talk to the Kabul government, Qatar hosted a delegation of 60 Afghan "citizens" who were supposed to represent the Afghan state and who issued with the Taliban a joint statement in which both sides pledged to "to respect and protect the dignity of the people, their life and property and to minimise the civilian casualties to zero".

In this process, Pakistan is playing a part with American blessings. During his unannounced visit to Kabul in May, Mike Pompeo declared: "Pakistan has a particular important role to play in this process and in the promotion of peace and stability in the region. Progress has been made..." On the following day, Ghani paid a visit to Islamabad where he praised Pakistan's peace efforts. That was a reflection of his realisation/belief that Pakistan could exert some influence over the Taliban. Indeed, Pakistan is now involved in the intra-Afghan dialogue and is welcoming delegations for talks with the support of Zalmay Khalilzad, Trump's Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation.

In Kabul, Pompeo also said he was hopeful for a peace deal by September 1. This date is related to another deadline: Afghan presidential elections have been rescheduled to September 28 and since the Taliban are asking for an interim government, it would be easier to form one before the election of a new President who will be less amenable to this kind of compromise.

While the seventh round of talks in Qatar marked the beginning of the end-game in Afghanistan, India looks relatively passive, even as no one seems to pay attention to its interests. New Delhi may now draw four conclusions: Its game plan in the Iran-Afghanistan region has been greatly damaged; to salvage what can be retained of the initial projects, Delhi should upgrade its channels of communication with the Taliban and try to persuade Iran that cooperation between both countries is still possible. India will probably reassess the friendliness of the US because with such a friend, there's no need of enemies — all the more so as the trade dispute is also hardening. And last but not least, to isolate Pakistan is easier said than done, not only because of US duplicity — and the China factor — but also because of the tyranny of geography. Indeed, if India-Afghanistan relations are so badly affected today, it's also because of Pakistan's airspace ban, which followed the [Balakot](#) strike: It now takes five hours to fly from Kabul to Delhi, instead of one-and-a-half.

The situation would have been different if India had sent troops to Afghanistan, as suggested by Trump, who asked at a press conference in January: "Why isn't Russia there? Why isn't India there? Why isn't Pakistan there?" Maybe India and Pakistan should have responded to his invitation together — maybe someone should have told him about 9/11.

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