

The deepening disconnect

If there were any doubts about a 'disconnect' between New Delhi and Washington in the past few months, the U.S.'s decision to put off the first '2+2' dialogue with India should put them to rest. The 2+2, as the enhanced engagement between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence is called, was an outcome of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump's first meeting last June in Washington. Exactly a year later, it is still to take off.

If the optics are bad, the messaging is worse. Since January, the U.S.'s Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act against those conducting business with Russia and Iran, as well as its decision to walk out of the Iran nuclear deal have come right up against India's interests. India has, in turn, tightened its engagement with Russia, China and Iran, with Prime Minister Modi advocating a course of "strategic autonomy". On bilateral trade, hardly a week goes by without the U.S. and India firing one salvo or another. And on their strategic relationship, upgraded to a 'major defence partnership' only recently, the two governments have failed to make progress on signing foundational agreements, which in turn has held up talks on defence procurement and technology transfers. Simply put, seldom in the past two decades since India and the U.S. rebooted ties have the two sides differed so publicly on so many fronts at the same time.

Unfortunately, one of the areas they had made good progress on, the U.S.'s South Asia policy, also appears to be in trouble. According to the policy announced about ten months ago, India was to be central to the U.S.'s efforts in Afghanistan while Pakistan would be 'put on notice' for its support to terror groups, including those that target India. The year began with Mr. Trump's tweet lashing out at Pakistan, followed by suspension of U.S. military aid. The U.S. also sought to "greylist" Pakistan at the Financial Action Task Force on terror financing. However, there are enough indications that Mr. Trump's South Asia policy is veering towards the U.S.'s Af-Pak policy of the past with the U.S. engaging Pakistan to help with Afghanistan, and India consigned a more supplementary role.

The first indicator of this shift is the increase in U.S.-Pakistan engagement, in conjunction with a rapid improvement in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties. In March, the then Pakistan Prime Minister, Shahid Abbasi, met U.S. Vice President Mike Pence in Washington, and a few weeks later Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Mr. Abbasi finalised the seven-point Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity. In June, Mr. Pence spoke with caretaker Prime Minister Nasirul Mulk. Next, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke with Pakistan Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa, who then travelled to Kabul just ahead of the surprise Eid ceasefire between Afghan forces and the Taliban. During his visit to Kabul, General Bajwa also met the U.S. Commander for the Resolute Support Mission, General John Nicholson.

None of these appear to be coincidental, and together point to coordinated contacts between Washington, Kabul and Islamabad-Rawalpindi. Admitting as much in Washington, Mr. Trump's point person for the region, Lisa Curtis, said that the U.S. had formally requested Pakistan to help facilitate the three-day Eid ceasefire. Concurrently, the U.S. administration's language on Pakistan with Afghanistan has softened, and Ms. Curtis said this month that the U.S. sought to "understand Pakistan's own core security concerns and ensure that its (Pakistan's) interests are taken into account in any peace process."

While the U.S. State Department has called for Pakistan to act against all groups operating in its territory, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), its own military actions have left many in Delhi bemused. To begin with, while the U.S. has carried out a number of drone strikes since Mr. Trump announced his new policy, the large bulk of them are on Afghan,

not Pakistani, territory. According to the U.S.-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which tracks all reported strikes, American forces carried out more than 100 air and drone strikes in Afghanistan in 2017, and more than 40 till date in 2018. The corresponding figures for strikes in Pakistan are five and one, respectively.

What's more, among the most prominent "kills" were leaders of groups that Pakistan had called on the U.S. to target, most prominent of them being Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan chief Mullah Fazlullah. His killing in June is believed to be a direct trade-off for Pakistan's assistance in bringing Afghan Taliban leaders to agree to the ceasefire, the first time they have done so. In an article in The New York Times on Wednesday, Mr. Ghani expressed his gratitude for the ceasefire, and the ensuing, albeit short-lived, peace that saw ordinary Afghans and Taliban fighters greeting each other. Extending another offer for talks, he wrote: "I will sit and negotiate with the Taliban's leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, anywhere he wants."

While the killing of terrorists anywhere as well as the cessation of hostilities must be welcomed by India, the contrast in terms of action it has demanded cannot be ignored. LeT chief Hafiz Saeed, the mastermind of the Mumbai 26/11 attacks, is now addressing political rallies in Lahore for parliamentary elections in which his son and son-in-law are candidates, and JeM chief Masood Azhar lives undisturbed in his Bahawalpur home. Last month, he issued threats against India during the Kashmir cease-ops.

Finally, there are India's regional concerns that stem from Mr. Trump's Iran policy, which has spurred new sanctions against all countries and companies doing business in Iran and imposed a November 4 deadline to reduce oil imports from Iran to "zero". Regardless of India's determination to go ahead with its dealings with Iran, the impact of American restrictions will be felt in Chabahar Port, once billed as India's gateway to Afghanistan, and a key component of its role in the U.S.'s South Asia policy. During the previous U.S. administration's sanctions regime, India was able to get a 'carve out' for its port project and the railway line to Afghanistan through Zahedan. But there is no indication that the Trump administration will offer any such exemptions. Besides, as India is made perforce to yield to the U.S. on cutting oil imports, the Iranian regime is likely to look with disfavour at India's engagement in Chabahar as well.

Clearly, none of these predicaments is new, and India has pulled the situation to its advantage in the past. The difference this time is that the India-U.S. dialogue is not as robust as before, while India's planned engagements with Russia Iran and China in the next few months may render bilateral ties yet more difficult. Rescheduling the 2+2 at the earliest opportunity, in the face of the high stakes involved for both New Delhi and Washington, is crucial.

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