

In a foreign policy haze: on India-US relations

In an ambitious statement ahead of his visit to India this week, [U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson set the course for India-U.S. relations](#) going ahead, mapping convergences in connectivity, trade and economics and counter-terrorism cooperation. He said the “most profound transformation” was their growing strategic convergence, and agreed that “the world’s two greatest democracies should have the two greatest militaries.”

His comments were welcomed in New Delhi, especially as they contained several broadsides on China’s actions in the [Indo-Pacific and on its Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#), which India has fiercely opposed. He also displayed a keen understanding of India’s strengths as a “diverse, dynamic, and pluralistic” democracy.

Despite Mr. Tillerson’s effusive words, however, it may be necessary to curb any enthusiasm until the U.S. policy compass itself is more settled, given that the policies of the Trump administration have thus far defied a clear reading. Worse, they have sent out confusing signals, with policy, public statements, and Twitter bursts often contradicting each other. A case in point was the Coleman hostage release story last week, that led to a slew of statements on the U.S.’s relationship with Pakistan.

Starting to develop much better relationship with Pakistan: Trump

Just days before U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford had told a Senate armed service committee that Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has proven links to terror groups and suggested the partnership with Pakistan was all but over. After the release, President Donald Trump tweeted that he was beginning to “develop a much better relationship with Pakistan and its leaders”. Shortly after, his Chief of Staff John Kelly referred to Pakistan as a “great partner”, while Mr. Tillerson said Pakistan was critical to regional stability.

Yet, reports that the raid by Pakistan had come not through intelligence cooperation but coercion — a team of Navy Seals had threatened to go in, Zero Dark Thirty-style, if Pakistani forces didn’t rescue the five-member Coleman family before they were transferred across the border with Afghanistan — called into question these fulsome words of praise.

Even more confusing were the actions. As U.S. forces resumed drone strikes in the Af-Pak region, their big kill was Omar Khalid Khorasani, the leader of the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, which targets Pakistan, not Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the U.S. rejoined the Pakistani-led Quadrilateral Coordination Group along with Afghanistan and China, that seeks to bring the Afghan Taliban to the table for talks, a group that’s carried out deadly attacks across Afghanistan just last week. As a result, it may seem that the U.S.’s South Asia policy has mixed up its carrots and sticks in the Af-Pak region.

For India, it is disappointing that Washington has not been similarly pro-active in condemning the Pakistan government’s decision to drop terrorism charges and paving the way for 26/11 [mastermind and Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Hafiz Saeed’s release from detention](#), while it is hoped that Mr. Tillerson will make those statements in Islamabad. Instead, Mr. Tillerson appears to be keen on brokering dialogue between India and Pakistan, saying that he hopes to “ease tensions along their border.”

Some of the confusion in public statements clearly stems from the ‘disconnect’ in Washington, with the White House, the U.S. military establishment, and the State Department on different pages. It

is no secret that Mr. Trump, Mr. Tillerson and other decision makers have often been at odds over policies on Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, Qatar, climate change, etc. In an interview last week Mr. Tillerson admitted to the differences, and even that he was often informed of presidential policy by tweet.

"I wake up the next morning, the President's got a tweet out there," Mr. Tillerson told *The New York Times*, a circumstance that saw the U.S. President praise Saudi Arabia for its moves to isolate Qatar, even as Mr. Tillerson travelled there to play the part of neutral mediator. Similarly, during American talks with North Korea, Mr. Trump all but scuttled Mr. Tillerson's efforts with a tweet that said he was "wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man".

Several American media outlets have confirmed that Mr. Tillerson wanted to resign in July, and called Mr. Trump a "moron", and even as he headed out to West Asia and South Asia, at least one national daily speculated that he would quit within the week. While the U.S.'s internal politics should not, normally, concern others, the fact is that this level of instability and incoherence in foreign policy is unprecedented.

Trump says he has 'total confidence' in Tillerson

The contradiction in U.S. policies is even more significant for India, as the two policies announced by Mr. Trump for the region, his South Asia policy for Afghanistan and his policy on Iran, are at odds with each other.

According to Mr. Trump's Iran strategy, announced on October 13, the [U.S. will increase sanctions on Iran to ensure it can no longer "finance terror"](#), while refusing to certify its nuclear programme as required. Theoretically, this may not mean much to India. Practically, it will have a three-fold effect. To begin with, trade with Iran, which is already constrained by previous U.S. sanctions and diktats, will be very hard to enlarge. At present only a couple of Indian banks and almost no European banks can be used for non-oil trade, and Mr. Trump's statement will ensure few others will venture to do so. Indian oil imports from Iran have also been decreasing, mainly due to American pressure.

Second, if Iran is unable to conduct more trade, it will have less incentive to focus on the new Chabahar port over the pre-existing trade through Bandar Abbas. This would certainly impact India's plans for connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

It also remains to be seen whether the Trump administration would countenance Indian investment in Chabahar, the development of the railways through to Zahedan, and regular trade through Iran in order to increase assistance to Afghanistan, as the U.S.'s South Asia policy encourages, given the tough language it has employed in its Iran strategy. What guarantees would there be that Mr. Trump, who is willing to overturn the Iran nuclear deal, would not expect friendly countries like India to follow suit in helping 'squeeze' Iran?

As Mr. Tillerson touches down in Delhi for his first visit to the region as Secretary of State, New Delhi must prepare for the challenges ahead with this wobbly compass in hand.

The government has a multi-fold challenge before it, to address its concerns on all these issues, while keeping the focus on the India-U.S. bilateral relationship, which is largely more beneficial for India. This will be yet more complicated as Delhi hosts Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on the same day that Mr. Tillerson arrives, and the talks could give the appearance of a trilateral. As Mr. Tillerson travels to Delhi from Islamabad, he will also carry the Pakistan perspective to his talks, a scenario of 'hyphenation' India had previously worked hard to avoid. In the absence of a clearer path ahead for the Trump administration, New Delhi should proceed with caution, before being

drawn into the larger strategic web that the U.S. wishes to weave, both in the Af-Pak and Indo-Pacific regions.

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