

The Tillerson turn

US President Donald Trump surprised India last August with a major departure from America's South Asia policy by asking Delhi to play a larger role in Afghanistan and demanding that Pakistan immediately shut down the terror sanctuaries on its soil. Last week, it was the turn of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who put India at the very heart of America's efforts to balance an increasingly assertive China. In a speech before his visit to the Subcontinent, Tillerson said America wants to be India's most "reliable partner" in an increasingly uncertain world. Looking beyond the bilateral, Tillerson affirmed that India and America "are two bookends of stability on either side of the globe" with shared political values and converging economic interests. As he lauded India's rise, Tillerson did not mince words about the challenges that Beijing poses to freedom of navigation, China's attempts to "subvert the sovereignty" of its neighbours, and its "predatory economic policies". Tillerson called for a more intensive regional collaboration between the US and Asian democracies - India, Japan and Australia - to ensure peace and promote prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

Delhi has been quick to welcome the Trump Administration's new approach to Pakistan and China - two factors that have long complicated India's relations with America. In facing up to India's concerns about Pakistan's use of terror as an instrument of foreign policy and China's quest for hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, Trump and Tillerson have certainly raised hopes for a closer regional alignment between Delhi and Washington. But there is no dearth of sceptics who caution India against premature celebration. The US foreign policy establishment that is appalled at the Trump Administration's incoherence and wild policy vacillations is barely saying two cheers to America's renewed enthusiasm for India. The traditionalists in the Indian strategic community have always questioned the potential for any basic shift away from US partnerships with Pakistan and China.

To be sure, Rawalpindi's critical role in stabilising Afghanistan and America's worries about Pakistan becoming a rogue nuclear state have tended to stop the US from dealing with the sources of terror there. America's extraordinary economic interdependence with China and Washington's need for Beijing's cooperation on a range of regional and global issues deter the US from an explicit balancing strategy. But India should resist the temptation for an endless debate on whether America can move away from China and Pakistan and be India's reliable partner. Delhi should focus, instead, on strengthening practical cooperation wherever possible with Trump's Washington. In the talks with Tillerson this week, Delhi must seek to stiffen America's resolve to confront the Pakistan Army's sponsorship of terror, encourage him to discard the residual bureaucratic hesitations in Washington about supporting India's rise and delineate the pathways for constructing a stable balance of power system in the Indo-Pacific.

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