

New U.S. policy is a game-changer: Ghani

Convergence of ideas: Narendra Modi with Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani at Hyderabad House in New Delhi on Tuesday. Shanker Chakravarty/Shanker Chakravarty

India and Afghanistan discussed regional counter-terror efforts and enhancing New Delhi's defence assistance to Kabul during a day-long working visit by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to India. In contrast to previous bilateral summit meetings, no agreements were announced, but both sides expressed an appreciation for the U.S.'s new South Asia policy, even as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson continued his travels in the region, landing in New Delhi late on Tuesday.

Meets with Tillerson

On Monday, Mr. Tillerson held talks with President Ghani at the U.S.-controlled Bagram Base outside Kabul, while on Tuesday he met the Pakistani leadership in Islamabad.

Mr. Ghani's talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, held against the backdrop of those talks, included several bilateral issues, the security situation in Afghanistan, as well as the dialogue process with the Taliban.

"President Ghani exchanged thoughts with Prime Minister Modi following the new U.S. Strategy, agreeing that the strategy is an opportunity for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan & South Asia; expansion of cooperation between the countries and the region," the Afghanistan Presidential twitter handle said shortly after the leaders met, referring to Washington's new policy of encouraging greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan's development.

Defence support

According to the Ministry of External Affairs, Mr. Modi and Mr. Ghani spoke about India's security support as a strategic partner, including the training of Afghan personnel at Indian military academies.

"The Indian side agreed to extend further assistance depending on the needs of the Afghan defence and police forces," the MEA statement added, although officials told *The Hindu* no specific defence needs were discussed, Afghanistan has pending requests for ammunition and engineers to maintain aircraft and other hardware in Afghanistan as it transitions to newer acquisitions.

When asked at an interaction later about Afghanistan's expectations from India in defence areas, Mr. Ghani said the four Mi-25 Russian helicopters [gifted by India in 2015] were a "lifesaver". "More helicopters will be welcome," he added, with a smile.

In a speech at the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), a think-tank, in Delhi, Mr. Ghani also called the new U.S. strategy a "game-changer" aimed at ensuring a regional approach to fighting terrorism, including making Pakistan act against "state sponsorship of sanctuaries" along the border with Afghanistan.

END