

## Rex Tillerson goes long on India-US relationship

Rex Tillerson is currently on his first visit to India in his capacity as the US secretary of state. The stage for the visit, however, was set last week with Tillerson's speech on "Defining our relationship with India for the next century" at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a premier Washington, DC-based think tank. In an extremely warm speech, Tillerson highlighted a number of points of convergence between the two erstwhile "estranged democracies". India and the US, Tillerson noted, share not just common values but also a common vision for the future. The latter is very important: After all, the two countries did share democratic values even when the US imposed sanctions on India for the 1998 Pokhran nuclear tests. It was during the Jaswant Singh-Strobe Talbott talks that followed that the two countries formulated the need to work together in light of their common vision for Asia's future.

Tillerson's speech laid great emphasis on "a free and open Indo-Pacific" and the crucial role of India and the US in realizing this goal. While designating India and the US as "the two bookends of stability", Tillerson was quite forthright on the implications of China's rise. In fact, he was more critical of China than one could expect of any Indian official speaking on record. While China has risen, Tillerson said, it "has done so less responsibly" than India. China was also blamed for subverting the sovereignty of neighbouring countries, undermining the international rules-based order and pursuing "predatory economics".

This was also the first instance of the Donald Trump administration giving a glimpse of its evolving position on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While recognizing the need for infrastructure financing for a number of countries in the region, Tillerson expressed his concerns about the opaque financing structures used by China that saddle recipient countries with unsustainable levels of debt. This perfectly echoes the reasons stated by India when it decided to sit out the inaugural Belt and Road Forum in May. More importantly, the US has begun deliberating, Tillerson informed, along with other like-minded countries, on an alternative financing mechanism to counter the BRI.

On Afghanistan, Tillerson reiterated Trump's desire to involve India more in contributing to developmental assistance to the war-ravaged nation. He urged Pakistan to take decisive action against terrorist groups on its soil but also recognized Islamabad as an important partner in the region. Offering more clarity on the US' Pakistan policy, Tillerson said in Afghanistan on Monday that the US' relationship with Pakistan is "conditions-based", that is, based on whether Islamabad takes the action Washington feels is necessary.

The Tillerson speech, however, has failed to impress the sceptics. Some of the issues raised by them are important and should be acknowledged and, to the extent possible, addressed. One, they suggest that President Trump cannot be relied upon. After castigating Pakistan for harbouring terrorists in his August speech, Trump recently praised Pakistan for the help it provided in securing the release of an American woman and her family from the Haqqani network's captivity. But Trump's remarks and tweets were contextual to this case. Tillerson's remarks, on the other hand, lay out the contours of American policy.

Two, the sceptics point to reports in the American media on a rift between Tillerson and his President. It is being widely speculated that Tillerson will either resign—he apparently has already threatened to resign once—or will be shown the door anytime. But irrespective of his prospects in the state department, Tillerson was speaking for the Trump administration in his CSIS address. It seems unlikely that he could have said all that he did, especially on China and the BRI, without Trump being on the same page.

Three, it has long been understood that the US' inclination to involve India in East Asia is not matched by its desire to accommodate New Delhi in the Af-Pak region. The unstated aspect of US policy on South Asia has involved maintaining a balance between India and Pakistan and this has been so even in a period of significant bilateral progress over the last two decades. Trump's Afghanistan strategy is a marked departure on this count. But Tillerson's relative softness on Pakistan—calling it an important US partner in the region—his recent tweets and remarks, and chief of staff John Kelly referring to the Pakistanis as “great partners”, have raised suspicions about a reversion to the historical mean. Indian policymakers will watch the developments on this front closely.

And last, the sceptics are right in underscoring the contradictions in Trump's Afghanistan strategy and his rhetoric on Iran. US-Iran confrontation is unlikely to end well for India's Afghanistan ambitions. But one has to acknowledge at the same time that the US remains the pre-eminent power in Afghanistan and New Delhi can hardly achieve anything if it is on the wrong side of Washington.

These are early policy pronouncements from the Trump administration—execution remains the key. However, New Delhi's initial concerns over not having a familiar face in the Trump administration have now been allayed by Tillerson, defence secretary James Mattis and national security adviser H.R. McMaster. If Tillerson continues in his role, he has shown the promise to be India's Ashton Carter—the former defence secretary was a great friend of India—in the Trump administration.

*Will the Trump administration stick to the initial contours of the Asia policy that Tillerson has sketched out? Tell us at [views@livemint.com](mailto:views@livemint.com)*

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