

## Look beyond Af-Pak

Coming after an excellent address to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC on US-India relations, described by a DC think-tank official as a "love letter" to India, US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson's visit attracted greater attention. The sentiment in the Donald Trump administration about US-India relations has been generally positive and upbeat. The president had a very cordial meeting with Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) in June. His South Asia policy speech on August 21, coming three days after the Camp David deliberations with his cabinet colleagues, was full of statements that were music to Indian ears.

In that speech, President Trump came down heavily on Pakistan, warning that it has "much to gain" from partnering with the US in Afghanistan, but "much to lose by continuing to harbour criminals and terrorists". "We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars at the same time they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting. But that will have to change, and that will change immediately. No partnership can survive a country's harbouring of militants and terrorists who target US service members and officials. It is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilisation, order, and to peace", he thundered in his typical aggressive fashion.

In his CSIS address, Tillerson turned attention primarily to the Indo-Pacific region. It became clear from his address that the US wants India to play a significant role in the affairs of this region. "As we look to the next 100 years, it is vital that the Indo-Pacific, a region so central to our shared history, continued to be free and open", he said. "When our militaries conduct joint exercises, we send a powerful message as to our commitment to protecting the global commons and defending our people. This year's Malabar exercise was our most complex to date, the largest vessels from American, Indian and Japanese navies demonstrated their power together in the Indian Ocean for the first time, setting a clear example of the combined strength of the three Indo-Pacific democracies".

For India, the repeated use of the phrase "Indo-Pacific" by Tillerson marks a shift in the US position. Until now the phrase in vogue has been "Asia-Pacific". At some point, people like Admiral Harry B. Harris of the Pacific Command started using the phrase "Indo Asia Pacific". But things have changed after PM Modi's visit to Washington in June this year. The phrase "Indo-Pacific" found place in the joint statement issued by President Trump and PM Modi. Ever since, the phrase has been used in at least six US State Department briefings. It implies that the US acknowledges the centrality of the Indian Ocean to global peace and security.

India has great ambitions in the Indian Ocean region. It realises the potential that the Indian Ocean offers to it, economically and strategically. India's Act East policy involves strengthening its engagement in the Indian Ocean region. India enjoys certain advantages in the region because of its centuries-old civilisational and cultural linkages with a number of countries. The Indian Ocean Conference that is co-hosted by countries in the region like Sri Lanka, Singapore and India is steadily emerging as a forum for engagement of stakeholder countries. This forum can help restore balance in the region.

However, the US seems to be looking at India's role in the Indian Ocean region as a counter-balance to China. Tillerson, in his CSIS address, wanted India to be a "partner" with the US so that together they can be "standing firm in defence of a rules-based order to promote sovereign countries unhindered access to the planet's shared spaces, be they on land, at sea, or in cyberspace". He actually surpassed the conventional red line by directly accusing China of "less responsible" behaviour.

"China, while rising alongside India, has done so less responsibly, at times undermining the

international rules-based order, even as countries like India operate within a framework that protects other nations' sovereignty. China's provocative actions in the South China Sea directly challenge the international law and norms that the United States and India both stand for. The United States seeks constructive relations with China, but we will not shrink from China's challenges to the rules-based order and where China subverts the sovereignty of neighbouring countries and disadvantages the US and our friends". These are rather strong words coming from the Secretary of State.

For India, its regional role involves managing relations with all the countries, including China, while at the same time adhering to basic principles like rule of law and freedom of navigation etc. Its regional ambitions are propelled by its security concerns on one hand and its trade and commerce imperatives on the other. Essentially, under PM Modi, India has come out of its shell of reticence and is proactively engaging in regional and global affairs.

Of equal importance to India is the US's South Asia policy. India wishes to see greater consistency in action in the region. When President Trump spoke about South Asia in August, he had harsh things to say to Pakistan. Is that enough? In the last 15 years every American President has done so in varying degrees. Even a moderate like Obama described Pakistan as a "disastrously dysfunctional country". The Bush administration had threatened to bomb it "back to the stone age".

But rhetoric was not followed up with action. Pakistan got billions, not bombs. More importantly, the South Asia policy for the US leadership is actually only Af-Pak policy. This has to change. The South Asia policy needs to anchor around not just Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also India. India's views and sentiments need to amply reflect in it.

The State Department has a job in hand. US military divides Af-Pak and India into Centcom and Pacom respectively. The State Department has to bring both under one South Asia policy.

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