

The Tillerson tone

The two-day visit to India by the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, could mark the beginning of a new political conversation between India and the United States rooted in strategic realism and promises to narrow down long-standing regional differences on Pakistan and China. Few were willing to bet that the Trump Administration would move towards a potentially decisive break from US regional policy that was tilted traditionally in favour of Pakistan and China. But some of its many critics in Washington have begun to admit, if cautiously, that the Trump Administration has hit some right notes on its India policy.

Of course, it is a work in progress, and there will be hurdles - to begin with, Tillerson may not last long enough in the State Department and Trump could well change his mind on India. But for Delhi, there could be an opportunity at hand with the US to rework the geopolitics of the Subcontinent and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific.

It is true that Trump and his team have only built on the big ideas about India that have been around in Washington for nearly two decades. Their achievement, if the Tillerson tone is indeed taken forward, could lie in cutting through much of the clutter in American policy about southern Asia. Washington, for example, has long been aware that sanctuaries of terror in Pakistan are the principal source of destabilisation in the Subcontinent.

The US has also watched warily the growing assertion of Chinese power but seemed incapable of responding vigorously. In the last few weeks, the Trump Administration has come out swinging against Pakistan's support for terrorism and laid out a critique of China's regional policies. Delhi, which welcomed these statements from Washington, had an opportunity this week to hear first-hand from Tillerson on the Administration's approach to Pakistan and China - Tillerson seemed ready to walk the talk on Pakistan's support for terror and China's quest for regional hegemony. He also reaffirmed a strong commitment to back India's leading role in the Indo-Pacific.

On its part, Delhi has moved a long way from the intense suspicion that greeted President George Bush's offer to end India's nuclear isolation. During 2005-08, Delhi had torn itself debating if Bush's offer was an opportunity or a trap. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) may have contributed towards mainstreaming the idea that partnering America is in India's interest. Delhi is also comfortable enough to publicly express differences with America, for example on North Korea. This new self-assurance augurs well for taking forward India's engagement with America through the many inevitable twists and turns that they are likely to encounter in the coming years.

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