

All the roads that lead to Kabul

The optics could not have been more significant. Just a day after U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was in Kabul and on the day he landed in New Delhi, Afghan President [Ashraf Ghani was hosted by India](#). As Mr. Tillerson chided Pakistan for not doing enough against terrorists operating from its soil, Mr. Ghani in New Delhi was underlining that the time had come for Islamabad to make a choice between abandoning state sponsorship of terrorism and facing the consequences. It was as perfect a piece of diplomatic choreography as it could get, aimed at sending a message to Pakistan that regional equations are shifting in a direction which will only isolate Islamabad if immediate corrective measures are not taken.

A day in Delhi for Ghani and Tillerson

Mr. Ghani's visit came at a time when the Trump administration's South Asia policy has underscored India's centrality in the 'Af-Pak' theatre. As Washington plans to increase its military footprint in Afghanistan, it is tightening the screws on Pakistan for supporting terrorism as an instrument of state policy. Both Washington and Kabul now view New Delhi as a player with considerable leverage over the evolving regional dynamic.

A central feature of the [Trump administration's new Afghanistan policy](#) is an outreach to India. "We appreciate India's important contributions to stability in Afghanistan, but India makes billions of dollars in trade with the U.S. and we want them to help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development," Mr. Trump had said in August while outlining his new South Asia policy.

Indo-Afghan trade: Castles in the air?

Kabul has wholeheartedly embraced this strategy, with Mr. Ghani terming it a "game-changer" for the region as it "recommends multi-dimensional condition-based approach for the region." In Delhi, he was categorical in attacking Pakistan by suggesting that "sanctuaries are provided, logistics are provided, training is provided, ideological bases are provided." In a remarkable move, he went on to suggest that Afghanistan would restrict Pakistan's access to Central Asia if it is not given access to India through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. He referred to the Indo-Afghan air corridor as an effective response to Pakistan's attempt to deny India and Afghanistan any direct access. He also strongly rejected Islamabad's claims that India was using Afghanistan as a base to destabilise Pakistan. He made it clear that there were "no secret agreements" between Kabul and New Delhi.

Mr. Ghani also rejected "Pakistan-managed" efforts to broker peace in his country, and in line with this India too has emphasised that it believes peace efforts in Afghanistan should be "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-controlled". India continues to maintain that renunciation of violence and terror, and closure of state-sponsored safe havens and sanctuaries remain essential for any meaningful progress and lasting peace. Afghanistan had participated in the sixth Quadrilateral Coordination Group meeting along with the U.S., China and Pakistan in Muscat, Oman, on October 16 in an attempt to revive stalled peace talks with the Taliban. National Security Advisor Ajit Doval had gone to Kabul to assess these developments on the same day.

In recent years, India has not shied away from taking a high-profile role in Afghanistan. It remains one of the biggest donors of aid to Afghanistan, having committed \$3.1 billion since 2001. Recently, it announced that it will be working on 116 new development projects in more than 30 areas. India's agenda is to build the capacity of the Afghan state as well as of Afghan security forces, enabling them to fight their own battles more effectively. This is in line with the

requirements of the Afghan government as well as the international community.

New U.S. policy can boost Indo-Afghan security ties: Abdullah Abdullah

Expanding India's development role further and enhancing its security profile with greater military assistance to Afghanistan should be a priority as new strategic opportunities open up in Afghanistan. While the U.S. has its own priorities in the 'Af-Pak' theatre, India's should be able to leverage the present opening to further its interests and regional security. The recent bout of diplomatic activity in the region is a clear signal that India can no longer be treated as a marginal player in Afghanistan. Even Russia wants to keep India in the loop, as was underscored by Moscow's special envoy on Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov's visit to New Delhi for consultations in September.

Mr. Trump's South Asia policy is a remarkable turnaround for Washington which had wanted to keep India out of its 'Af-Pak' policy for long for fear of offending Rawalpindi. India was viewed as part of the problem and now the Trump administration is arguing that India should be viewed as part of a solution to the Afghan imbroglio. This is a welcome change and holds significant implications for India, Afghanistan and the wider region.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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