

Big vision, hazy detail: on India-US relations

Of the seven countries he visited last week, U.S. Secretary of State [Rex Tillerson chose to focus on India](#) while spelling out his strategic vision. Just before starting the tour, he gave a speech on India-U.S. ties that was as broad as it was deep, talking of the road ahead together for “the next 100 years”. He reserved his most ambitious words for the role of India in the U.S.’s plans in two spheres. In Afghanistan, as a part of President [Donald Trump’s new South Asia policy](#), and in the Indo-Pacific, as part of U.S. plans to counter China’s influence and contain North Korea. On both counts, Mr. Tillerson’s talks in New Delhi with External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Prime Minister Narendra Modi made progress in developing a common vision, but appear to have made little movement on the specifics. For instance, he is said to have “minced no words” when it came to tackling Pakistan’s support to terrorist safe havens. Yet, the groups he referred to are not those that directly threaten India, but Afghanistan and, by extension, the U.S. soldiers based there. As for Indian hopes of increasing trade and development [aid to Afghanistan through the Chabahar route](#), Mr. Tillerson’s assurance that Washington does not seek to bar legitimate trade is welcome. However, it remains to be seen whether India can significantly ramp up cooperation with Iran to further its interests in Afghanistan at a time when the U.S. maintains its policy of isolating the Iranian leadership.

Trump and the new world disorder

Finally, both Indian and U.S. officials spoke in detail, and in public statements, about building an alternative coalition to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative as well as its aggressive moves in the South China Sea — yet Mr. Tillerson did not add clarity on where the funding would come from. For its part, India desisted from any clear commitments on joint patrols to ensure freedom of navigation in the SCS, or even on the foundational agreements the Indian and U.S. militaries must conclude to deepen cooperation in the region. While India and the U.S. have taken great strides in aligning their vision and their hopes for future partnership, reality often trips up such lofty goals. One reason is geography — while American troops remain in Afghanistan, it is difficult for the U.S. to completely disengage from Pakistan. For India, while a maritime relationship with the U.S. is desirable, geographic proximity to China makes a very close alliance with the U.S. difficult. The other issue pertains to the strategic confusion within Washington and Mr. Trump’s withdrawal from U.S. commitments in Asia, Europe and at the UN, drawing questions about its reliability as a partner. Given this, it may have been too much to expect more than the warm handshake and the encouraging words of hope Mr. Tillerson delivered.

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