

## U.S. policy shadows Afghan talks

Salahuddin Rabbani

Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani will arrive in Delhi on Sunday to attend the India-Afghanistan Partnership Council meeting that has been delayed for years. The Minister is also expected to discuss new avenues for cooperation within the India-U.S.-Afghanistan grouping.

However, officials said no new decisions on defence supplies or security cooperation were likely during the talks which will end with a joint statement on Monday.

### U.S. role

All eyes will be on talks to discuss the way forward weeks after U.S. President Trump unveiled his "new policy" for Afghanistan, where he proposed a larger role for India in development assistance to Afghanistan.

Later this month, Afghanistan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and a senior U.S. trade or commerce official will travel to India for the first India-U.S.-Afghanistan trade expo, funded by USAID.

"We are breaking new ground in working with another mission on this sort of project. Delhi is a natural market for Afghanistan, and we want to develop that," a U.S. official told *The Hindu*.

Senior Afghan diplomats said the emphasis of the Partnership Council talks would be on "capacity building" for Afghan security forces in training and enhancing existing cooperation as well as about 287 "small development projects (SDPs)" that India is committing funding for including small dams, road and highway construction, agriculture, education and health in the SDP-Phase III that were signed in 2012.

### Air corridor issues

The two sides will also discuss enhancing trade, especially the "air corridor" for freight that was inaugurated in June to circumvent Pakistan, and has faced teething troubles due to non-availability of cargo aircraft.

However, the Afghan government has recently engaged private airline Kam Airways to carry freight, and officials said they would like to connect more Indian and Afghan cities including Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Herat for trade in cotton, fruit and dry fruit from Afghanistan and medical and electrical equipment from India.

The air corridor agreement could be signed during Dr. Abdullah's visit.

In addition, Mr. Rabbani and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj will witness the signing of two agreements: the Motor Vehicles agreement, announced in 2014, and an agreement on Orbit Frequency Coordination for the South Asia satellite launched in May this year.

Mr. Rabbani will also raise the problems of Afghans travelling to India for medical care and students face in obtaining a visa as the process requires repeated visits to the Foreigners Regional Registration Offices (FRRO). The minister is likely to request longer duration visas for them.

According to the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed by President Hamid Karzai and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2011, the India-Afghanistan Partnership Council was supposed to meet annually. When asked about the reason for the delay in holding the Partnership Council, which last met in May 2012, an official said elections in India and Afghanistan, as well as Ms. Swaraj's ill-health had delayed the meeting.

The Afghan Foreign Minister will be accompanied by four deputy ministers who head joint working groups on Trade and Economic Cooperation, Capacity Development and Education, and Social, Cultural, Civil Society and people-to-people contacts, and will meet with Ms Swaraj for talks.

Mr. Rabbani is also the head of the Jamiat-e-Islami party that is part of the National Unity Government in Kabul, and officials said he would call on Mr. Modi and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi during his visit.

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