

Afghan overture — On India's assistance

President Donald Trump's policy announcement on Afghanistan has clearly set the stage for diverse moves on the geopolitical chessboard. India's plans to expand its security assistance to Afghanistan by [training police officers in India](#) as part of a UNDP project must be assessed in this light. A welcome step in itself and one that could have a significant impact on the security situation in Afghanistan, it also sends out a loud geopolitical signal. The main part of this message is meant for Afghanistan, as it indicates a continued commitment to its stability. By training police officers and hundreds of army cadets and officers, India is taking an important role in capacity building for Afghan security. The country saw the highest civilian casualties last year since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. Increasingly, these casualties are coming not from Afghanistan's border areas but its cities and villages where only a professionally trained police force, and not armies, can maintain peace. India has also announced this month 116 smaller "new development projects" across Afghanistan, and police forces will be crucial in protecting irrigation, housing and school projects from the Taliban and other terror groups. The second message, to Pakistan and other countries in the region that deal with the Taliban, is that India will not be deterred from assisting Afghanistan for its security. This is a clear counter to Pakistan Prime Minister S.K. Abbasi's recent statement that India has "zero political and military role" in Afghanistan. This message is reinforced by New Delhi's decision to send Indian engineers to refurbish several non-functional Soviet-era planes and to repair the helicopters India donated to Afghanistan last year.

Third, there is a message to the U.S. and NATO forces, just ahead of an important visit by U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis to Delhi, that could not be clearer: India will play a part in putting Afghanistan back on its feet in India's own way and not necessarily, as the U.S. may prefer, with 'boots on the ground' or by sending large numbers of trainers into Afghanistan, where they would become marked targets. The decision to enhance security training comes coupled with an India-Afghanistan trade fair sponsored by USAID, that will welcome Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and other ministers to Delhi this week. Regardless of actual transactions made, the optics will be significant, demonstrating possibilities of India-Afghanistan business regardless of the obstacles in transit trade posed by Pakistan. An announcement by the government that the India-Afghanistan-Iran trilateral arrangement to circumvent the obstacles is on track was well-timed, and the commitment that the Chabahar port development project will be completed next year should reassure business on both sides about a sustainable trade route from South Asia to Central Asia. India and Afghanistan have lost too much time on each of these plans.

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