

INDIA IS AIMING FOR THE LONG HAUL IN AFGHANISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

Less than a week after the inaugural 2+2 dialogue between New Delhi and Washington, India participated in a key meeting with Iran and Afghanistan in Kabul on Tuesday that focused on consolidating economic cooperation, counterterrorism and the Afghan peace and reconciliation process. The meeting, at which India was represented by foreign secretary, Vijay Gokhale, was held a day after the third meeting of the India-Afghanistan joint working group on political and security cooperation.

Both meetings were significant for a number of reasons. India has already signalled it intends to play a key role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan without putting any boots on the ground. It has pledged more than \$3 billion in aid since the ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001 and is implementing several development projects across Afghanistan that have earned it tremendous goodwill among ordinary Afghan citizens.

New Delhi has also overturned its policy of not supplying lethal military equipment to Kabul and has provided or underwritten deals for providing gunship helicopters. Clearly, India is in for the long haul in Afghanistan, as it needs to be, to keep an eye on and counter the machinations of Pakistan which eyes the war-torn nation as key to its flawed “strategic depth” policy.

Equally significant was the first tripartite meeting of India, Afghanistan and Iran, coming as it did in the immediate aftermath of the 2+2 talks, during which New Delhi and Washington discussed the American sanctions on Iranian oil imports that will kick in on November 4. Top US officials have said no decision has been made as yet by the Trump administration on India-specific waivers to these sanctions.

However, the tripartite meeting in Kabul, though scheduled much in advance, can be perceived as signalling by India and Afghanistan of the importance they attach to their ties with Iran, as well as the strategic significance of the Chabahar port. Iran is expected to hand over control of a part of Chabahar to India within a few weeks, following the resolution of certain technical issues, and the port is already playing a key role in India’s efforts to access Afghanistan by bypassing Pakistan.

If nothing else, these meetings indicate India is willing to forge an independent path in its relations with Afghanistan and Iran, even as it continues its engagement with the US, especially in defence and strategic matters. A closer embrace of the US does not necessarily mean India will align its foreign policy with the priorities of the Trump administration. That, ultimately, will best serve India’s interests.

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