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Rex Tillerson in South Asia: An American Tilt towards India?

The recent visit by the United States (US) Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India appears to have enabled Washington to launch a regional approach that privileges its relations with India in a manner that was inconceivable until now. In confronting the sources of international terror in Pakistan, encouraging India to play a larger role in Afghanistan, contesting China's quest for regional hegemony and calling on India to play a leading role in constructing a new strategic equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific, the US is hoping to build a 100-year partnership with India. While many in New Delhi remain sceptical, and many imponderables cloud the future, an American tilt towards India and New Delhi's willingness to work with Washington in the region are likely to become important factors in shaping the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

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The United States (US) Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's swing through the South Asian subcontinent towards the end of October 2017 could mark the beginning of a structural shift in America's engagement with this region. That he spent barely a few hours in Pakistan and two nights in India was perhaps symbolic of the new desire in Washington to put India at the centre of its regional policy. Although no great announcements were made at the end of

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Tillerson's visit, New Delhi's visible political warmth towards America's top diplomat suggests that official India is no longer defensive about its relationship with the US. New Delhi is now willing to be seen, and to work, with Washington in the region. That there has been little negative reaction in India to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's warm embrace of US President Donald Trump's Administration indicates that India's prime minister may have successfully mainstreamed the idea that America is *indeed* India's special privileged partner.

New Delhi had every reason to warmly welcome Tillerson who had called for a 100-year partnership with India just before departing for the region.² If Trump had surprised India at the end of August 2017 in announcing a new policy towards South Asia that focused on countering terrorism in the region, Tillerson seemed to flatter New Delhi by putting India at the front and centre of Washington's effort to construct a rules-based order in the vast Indo-Pacific littoral amidst China's growing assertion of power in this space. This heralds an American effort to address India's immediate concerns about cross-border terrorism from Pakistan and the longer-term challenges from the rapid rise of China and the consequent rupture in the Asian balance of power system.

A Sweeping 'Shift'

In a major departure from America's South Asia policy, Trump had renewed the commitment to strengthen the government in Kabul, asked New Delhi to play a larger role in Afghanistan and demanded that Pakistan immediately shut down the terror sanctuaries on its soil. For New Delhi, long used to seeing the United States temporise issues relating to the sources of terror in Pakistan, the new line was quite welcome. However, many in New Delhi refused to uncross their fingers. They continue to hold on to their belief that nothing will ever change in the US-Pakistan relationship and that Washington would continue to indulge the Pakistan Army.

Many in Delhi also found Tillerson's thesis on India's central role in balancing China's rise somewhat intriguing. In his speech, Tillerson affirmed that India and America "are two book

² "Tillerson sets tone for 100-year India-US ties, chides China and Pakistan", *Business Standard*, 19 October 2017. http://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/tillerson-sets-tone-for-100-year-india-us-ties-chides-china-and-pakistan-117101900179_1.html. Accessed on 29 October 2017.

ends of stability on either side of the globe”³ with shared political values and converging economic interests. As he lauded India’s rise, Tillerson did not mince words about the challenges that Beijing poses to freedom of navigation and China’s attempts to “subvert the sovereignty” of its neighbours.

New Delhi was also pleasantly surprised by the strong criticism that Tillerson presented against China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Describing China’s development assistance as “predatory economics”, Tillerson echoed India’s criticism of the BRI by saying that China’s projects burden host countries with large debts and conditions that force a swap of debt for equity and a strategic control of assets. Tillerson called for a more intensive regional coordination between the US and Asian democracies – India, Japan and Australia – to ensure peace and promote prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

If conservatives in New Delhi remained sceptical of the US intentions, the Indian government was quick to welcome the Trump Administration’s new approach to Pakistan and China – two factors that have long complicated India’s relations with America. For Modi’s aides, the Tillerson talk seemed a logical extension of the conversations that the prime minister had with Trump during his visit to Washington in June 2017 and the discussions with the US Defence Secretary General James Mattis in New Delhi in September 2017. For the Indian government, Tillerson’s visit provided an opportunity for New Delhi to assess the latest nuances of the new American policy.

New Delhi was pleased to hear what Tillerson had to say – not just in New Delhi but also in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In a meeting with the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at the Bagram airbase, Tillerson declared that Washington would no longer tolerate the terror sanctuaries in Pakistan and that its aid to Pakistan would be ‘conditions-based’. In Islamabad, Tillerson apparently reinforced the message. He is also reported to have given a list of 75 terrorists that Pakistan should hand over.

Summarising his talks in Islamabad, Tillerson later said, “Here’s what we need for Pakistan to do. We’re asking you to do this; we’re not demanding anything. You’re a sovereign

³ “Secretary of state Rex Tillerson pitches for greater cooperation between India and US ahead of visit”, Yashwant Raj, *Hindustan Times*, Washington, 18 October 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/trump-modi-committed-to-building-ambitious-partnership-says-tillerson/story-KBNAa3dTERzHQg5D55p0II.html>. Accessed on 28 October 2017.

country. You'll decide what you want to do, but understand this is what we think is necessary. And if you don't want to do that, don't feel you can do it, we'll adjust our tactics and our strategies to achieve the same objective [in] a different way.”⁴ For New Delhi that wants to see a tougher American posture towards Pakistan on terror, Tillerson's suggestion that if “Pakistan does not act against terror, America will” was long overdue.

New Idiom, Old Doubts

In New Delhi, after his talks with the Indian leadership, Tillerson said India and the US are “natural allies” and will stand “shoulder to shoulder” in combating terror. He also declared that the US is ready to support India's military modernisation by providing the “best technologies”. After his talks with Modi, the Indian foreign office, in a press statement, said India “shared the resolve expressed by Secretary Tillerson on taking further steps in the direction of accelerating and strengthening the content, pace and scope of the bilateral engagement. They affirmed that a strengthened India-US partnership is not just of mutual benefit to both countries, but has significant positive impact on the prospects for regional and global stability and prosperity.”⁵

Soon after Tillerson's pitch for an early revival of the “Democratic Quad” in Asia to counter China's rise, the Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kano said he was calling for a meeting of officials from Washington, Tokyo, New Delhi and Canberra to discuss potential joint efforts to offer an alternative to China's BRI and strengthen regional security cooperation to counter Beijing's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.

If New Delhi had been reluctant in the past to revive the quad, it is now signalling greater flexibility. In a statement issued at the end of October 2017, a spokesperson of the foreign office in New Delhi said, “India is open to working with likeminded countries on issues that advance our interests and promote our viewpoint”.⁶ However, the spokesperson insisted that

⁴ “Act or we will, U.S. tells Pakistan”, *The Hindu*, 28 October 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/act-or-we-will-us-told-pakistan/article19935710.ece>. Accessed on 27 October 2017.

⁵ “US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson calls on Prime Minister”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 25 October 2017. http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29049/US_Secretary_of_State_Rex_W_Tillerson_calls_on_Prime_Minister. Accessed on 28 October 2017.

⁶ “Quadrilateral talks: Open to working with like-minded countries, says government”, Shubhajit Roy, *The Indian Express*, 28 October 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/quadrilateral-talks-open-to-working-with-like-minded-countries-says-central-govt-4909934/>. Accessed on 29 October 2017.

the agenda of the quad must be “relevant to us”. The question for India then may no longer be about the principle of constructing a quad, but its purpose. If New Delhi backed away in the past for the fear of offending Beijing, it now appears more confident in pursuing hard-ball geopolitics in Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

As the prospects for a closer regional alignment between India and the US improve, there is no dearth of those – in Washington and New Delhi – who caution India against putting too much faith in Tillerson’s words. The US foreign policy establishment, which is appalled at the Trump Administration’s perceived incoherence and policy vacillations, is barely saying two cheers to America’s renewed enthusiasm for India. The traditionalists in the Indian strategic community have always questioned the potential for any basic shift in US partnerships with Pakistan and China.

To be sure, Rawalpindi’s critical role for stabilising Afghanistan, and America’s worries about Pakistan becoming a rogue nuclear state, are important considerations in Washington that could certainly limit the extent of change in the US-Pakistan ties. America’s massive economic interdependence with China, and Washington’s need for Beijing’s cooperation on a range of regional and global issues, are also likely to deter the US from an explicit balancing strategy. Modi and his advisers are acutely conscious of these limiting factors. However, they are resisting the traditional temptation in New Delhi for an endless debate on whether America can move away from China and Pakistan and be India’s reliable partner. They are focussed instead on strengthening practical cooperation wherever possible with Trump’s Washington and leveraging it to improve India’s regional standing.

New Delhi’s greater self-assurance in engaging Washington is likely to open up new possibilities for unprecedented regional collaboration and coordination between India and America. While New Delhi and Washington are bound to face multiple obstacles in the coming years, their new readiness to work together for regional security could emerge as a consequential element in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

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