

# Tillerson touts US-India partnership on South Asian tour

By Deepal Jayasekera  
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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson used a visit to India last week to promote intensified military collaboration between Washington and New Delhi.

In a speech to the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) days before his trip, Tillerson spelt out the purpose of his South Asian tour. He declared India would play a key role in the US-led offensive against China.

Tillerson claimed that the “very international order that has benefited India’s rise—and that of many others” was “increasingly under strain” from Beijing. He touted “India’s rise” as a counterweight to growing Chinese influence throughout the Asia-Pacific.

At a press conference in New Delhi last week, Tillerson said India and the US are “natural allies,” standing “shoulder to shoulder against terrorism,” with growing defence and economic ties.

Tillerson alluded to the US strategy of cultivating India as an attack dog pressing Washington’s interests throughout the region, declaring his support for “India’s emergence as a leading power.” He committed the Trump administration to “continue to contribute to Indian capabilities to provide security throughout the region.”

Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Saraj signalled her government’s full support for this agenda. Saraj hailed the “clear vision” of Tillerson’s comments on an “India-US global partnership” during his CSIS speech. “We fully share your strong desire to strengthen this relationship between the two largest democracies of the world,” Saraj said.

Tillerson also held talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval.

The Indian trip was part of a tour of the region in the wake of the newly-announced South Asian policy of

President Donald Trump. This strategy includes escalating pressure on China, and countries in the region with ties to it, such as Pakistan, and an expanded military presence, particularly in Afghanistan. Tillerson also visited Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Qatar, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Afghanistan, Tillerson pointed to the scope of New Delhi’s partnership with Washington. “Our view of the relationship with India is one that’s of strategic importance not just for this specific region,” he said, but for “a free and open Indo-Pacific region stretching all the way from Japan to India. So it’s a broader relationship.”

Tillerson reprimanded India’s chief rival, Pakistan. “In Islamabad, we were frank to conclude that there are too many terrorist outfits that find safe havens in Pakistan.” He said the US was “putting in place mechanisms” to tackle “these outfits.”

In Pakistan, Tillerson reiterated warnings that the Trump administration would scale back aid if Islamabad failed to crack down on Islamic groups fighting US occupation forces in Afghanistan.

While advancing US interests in Afghanistan, Tillerson’s accusations against Pakistan are also an endorsement of India’s long-time charges that Islamabad sponsors “cross-border terrorism.” New Delhi has used such claims to promote chauvinism and justify inflaming border disputes with Pakistan, which led to armed clashes last year.

Encouraged by Tillerson’s comments, Swaraj said: “US President Donald Trump’s policy on terrorism can only succeed when Pakistan takes an action against the terror groups.” The US is also using the charge to place pressure on Pakistan to move away from its close ties with China.

While in India, Tillerson raised New Delhi’s

diplomatic ties with North Korea and its economic and strategic relationship with Iran. The visit took place in the context of the Trump administration's provocative threats of war against North Korea and moves to scuttle a nuclear deal with Iran signed by the Obama administration.

India has already lined up with Trump's aggressive stance against Pyongyang, parroting US denunciations of North Korea's limited nuclear and missile arsenals as a threat to world peace. It has also implemented sanctions against North Korea in line with a UN Security Council resolution moved by the US.

Swaraj claimed India has resisted Washington's demand for an end to diplomatic and economic ties with North Korea. She downplayed those relations, stating that trade between the two nations "has reduced substantially to be minimal" and that diplomatic relations "should remain there so that some channels of communication remain open."

With the continuous escalation of US provocations against North Korea, India will likely come under intense pressure from Washington to break off all relations with Pyongyang. Swaraj, however, claimed that Tillerson "appreciated" the limited character of economic and diplomatic links to North Korea.

Tillerson took a conciliatory attitude toward India's ties with Iran. He said it was not the US "objective to interfere with legitimate business activities" or "agreements that are in place or promote economic development and activity to the benefit of our friends and allies."

This stance is contrary to Tillerson's warnings to the European powers not to invest in Iran. While in Saudi Arabia on October 22, Tillerson said "those who conduct business with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, any of their entities—European companies or other companies around the globe—really do so at great risk."

Tillerson's "soft" position on India's ties with Iran are aimed at boosting New Delhi's geo-political influence in the region, to counter China's growing clout.

India is developing Iran's strategically-located Chabahar port and a transport corridor connecting it to Afghanistan. This is aimed at expanding Indian access throughout the oil- and gas-rich Central Asian region. These plans run counter to the attempts by China to economically integrate the Eurasian landmass under its

One Belt, One Road infrastructure project.

It is not clear whether Tillerson raised proposals to establish an anti-China "quadrilateral dialogue" by incorporating Australia into the trilateral front involving the US, Japan and India. Tillerson floated the proposal in his CSIS speech.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono however, told *Nikkei* last Thursday that the Japanese government would propose the move during Trump's Asian tour next week.

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