

LEAD

For a 'Look Northwest' policy



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It is worrisome that while the most formidable challenges to India's national security invariably originate from its northwestern frontiers, New Delhi's focus has been on the global stage and its southern and eastern neighbours.

The uneventful >[visit of the Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani](#) to New Delhi last month has further strengthened the widespread belief that India is losing strategic influence and geopolitical standing as far as its northwestern frontier is concerned, especially Iran and Afghanistan. Just a year ago, during the Karzai presidency, India was the “most favoured nation” in Afghanistan. Today, there is a perceptible change in the new Afghan government’s attitude towards India. For instance, no major agreements were signed during Mr. Ghani’s visit and the India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2011, hardly figured in the agenda.

Indeed, India’s new northwestern strategic environment, in which the relegation of the > [Indo-Afghan strategic partnership](#) is merely one element, is undergoing a grand geopolitical transformation, but New Delhi seems to be clueless about how to engage with it. Moreover, it is worrisome that while the most formidable challenges to India’s national security invariably originate from its northwestern frontiers, both historically and presently, the focus of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government has primarily been on the global stage and the country’s southern and eastern neighbours.

Regional power vacuum

The most important element of the new strategic landscape in Southern Asia is the ongoing >[withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan](#) and the resultant power vacuum, as well as the subsequent rebalancing of forces in the region. China has begun the process of filling the post-American power vacuum, albeit without military involvement for the moment. The withdrawal by the U.S. and the attendant strategic uncertainty could also provide a favourable environment for forces like the Taliban and the Islamic State (IS) to enhance their influence in the region. This clearly worries Kabul. Given the American withdrawal and India’s unwillingness to involve itself militarily in Afghanistan, Mr. Ghani is left with no choice but to engage both Pakistan and China. Moreover, he realises that Beijing is perhaps the only actor today that has some traction in Islamabad.

It is this that has led to a flurry of activity among the three countries. On the one hand, China is enhancing its influence in the region with the unveiling of its innovative ‘>[New Silk Road](#)’ strategy and by offering economic and developmental assistance to Pakistan, while on the other Beijing is also increasingly engaged in regional “conflict management” initiatives by mediating between Kabul and the Taliban, and organising trilateral strategic engagements with Afghanistan and Pakistan. In November 2014, for instance, representatives of the Taliban from its Doha-based office met in Beijing for talks. In February this year, China’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Liu Jianchao, Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry, and the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Hekmat Karzai, met in Kabul for the inaugural round of a new trilateral strategic dialogue.

New Delhi has been disappointingly quiet in the face of these strategically significant developments, unable and unwilling to contribute towards stabilising the region.

Af-Pak rapprochement

The second significant component is the newfound warmth between Kabul and Islamabad. Abandoning the trend of public spats, they are now on a path of cooperation and friendship, or so it seems. Immediately after assuming office, Mr. Ghani signalled a desire for reconciliation with Islamabad and Rawalpindi. In his September 2014 > “five-circle” foreign policy speech, not only did he place Pakistan in the first circle of countries that are most important to Afghanistan (with India in the fourth circle), but also took the unprecedented step of visiting the Pakistan Army’s headquarters in Rawalpindi, a gesture signifying the deep policy changes under way in Kabul.

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Pakistan has also been making efforts to strengthen its relationship with Afghanistan; its Army and the intelligence chiefs have already visited Kabul to discuss joint counter-terrorism measures and to enhance the fight against terror. More importantly, given Chinese concerns about terrorism and its increasing influence on its borderlands, the Af-Pak rapprochement will most likely be superintended by China.

While this in itself need not concern New Delhi, Islamabad is deeply suspicious of any cooperation between India and **Afghanistan**. Therefore, the worry in New Delhi that the Af-Pak rapprochement could have zero-sum implications for India is indeed a legitimate one.

▶ The third major driver is the mainstreaming of radical Islamist terrorism in the form of the rise of the IS and the resurgence of the Taliban. While the West Asian region is currently the hotbed of Islamist terrorism, the Southern Asian region would not only be a potential target of such forces but also a fertile breeding ground. There are already reports of growing support for the IS in the region and its focus there.

The IS has reportedly made some inroads into Pakistan and some Pakistan-based terror outfits have offered their allegiance to the organisation. While there may not be any ideological unity among them, the IS has the dangerous potential of providing a “wave of the future call” to the disparate terror outfits in the region. The IS has also been making recruitments from India; the speech by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in July last year specifically referred to the “atrocities against Muslims in Kashmir”.

For India in particular, the potential resurgence of the Taliban and the rise of the IS have dangerous implications. The belief, in this context, that by merely strengthening its borders, India would be able to survive the scourge of terrorism is a mistaken one.

Iran as game changer

The fourth major variable is the mainstreaming of Iran into the contemporary international system. Israel and Saudi Arabia have not made peace with the idea of a normalised Tehran-West relationship, and the nuclear deal between P5+1 and Iran is still being finalised. Yet, Iran is potentially the new game changer in West Asian geopolitics. A strong, self-confident and internationally mainstreamed Tehran could help stabilise the region, and the world is increasingly cognisant of that: Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop made a smart move by visiting Tehran last month. Western companies are already courting Tehran to advance their business interests.

The question is whether India would be favoured by Iran as it has not been a supporter of Tehran in the recent past. New Delhi's votes against Tehran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) still remains a blot. Given the huge strategic stakes New Delhi has in Iran, it should have been playing a proactive role by facilitating Iran's mainstreaming, or at the least maintained an "independent" Iran policy. It is indeed encouraging that New Delhi has reached out to Tehran by inking a Memorandum of Understanding to develop the Chabahar port which could be India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. India did the right thing to ignore the unsolicited advice of the U.S. Under Secretary, Wendy Sherman, who told New Delhi to "wait for a final nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers before actively engaging with Tehran".

Southern Asian realignment

The last variable is the Chinese ability to realign the balance of power equations in the South, West and Central Asian regions, and the manner in which it would go about doing so. The U.S. may or may not be on the decline, but its standing and influence in the Southern Asian region certainly is. The country that is increasingly willing and able to take the responsibility of being the regional balancer is China. This is evident in the flurry of high-level visits between China and countries in these regions to discuss development assistance, trade, arms sales and technical assistance.

India's engagement with China focusses on bilateral trade and border incursions. While they are important, it is also important to engage China at the broader regional level in the larger Southern Asian region.

Explaining the non-strategy

One of the major reasons why India is unable to devise prudent and timely strategies to engage the northwestern region is due to its obsession with great power diplomacy. New Delhi takes great pride in engaging the great powers of the international system and this is often done at the expense of engaging its northwestern neighbourhood. With the relatively small corps of diplomats that it has, New Delhi can only do so much. Hence, if much of the attention is diverted to great power diplomacy, there would be no space for important neighbours in connection with the government's strategic agenda. A cursory comparison of the BJP government's engagement with the U.S. and other great powers with say Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan, would clarify the point being made.

Second, Indian **diplomacy** seems to be trapped in compulsive bilateralism wherein it is unable to think beyond bilaterally engaging the neighbours, or the great powers. While there has been engagement with Beijing on a variety of bilateral issues, India has not been able to join forces with China and other neighbours in fighting terror, stabilising Afghanistan, addressing the IS threat or even mainstreaming Iran. Why, for instance, does New Delhi not find it useful to join the regional fora aimed at stabilising Afghanistan or even initiate such a forum with like-minded countries?

The third reason is in its unwillingness to have a sustained dialogue with Pakistan. One way or another, due to geostrategic reasons, Pakistan plays a crucial role in the Southern Asian subsystem. Given the absence of a dialogue between the two adversarial sides, Islamabad will continue to harm Indian interests in the region, be it Afghanistan or with China. If New Delhi wishes to proactively engage its northwestern neighbourhood, it needs to engage Pakistan, bilaterally and multilaterally.

Finally, New Delhi should realise that the remedies to the region's problems lie within the region, and not in the Western capitals. Therefore, Mr. Modi needs to spend more time in the neighbourhood. New Delhi also needs to articulate a "pivot to northwest" policy.

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