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The Next Steps for Afghanistan After the New Delhi Visit

Context

- The visit of Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi marks only the start of renewed India-Afghanistan engagement.
- India must now pursue gradual, pragmatic cooperation aimed at stabilising Afghanistan while reinforcing its image as a major humanitarian actor.
- Such engagement also serves India's security interests and could, if approached constructively, contribute to regional stability — even benefiting Pakistan, provided it is willing to cooperate.
- This article highlights the next steps India must take following the visit of Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to New Delhi.
- It examines how India can play a decisive role in stabilising Afghanistan through cooperation in counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, water management, education, and governance.

India's Role in Stabilising Afghanistan's Fight Against Terror and Drugs

- The joint statement between India and the Taliban government, which angered Pakistan, reaffirmed Kabul's condemnation of the Pahalgam terror attack and its pledge not to allow Afghan soil to be used against India.
- The UN Security Council's monitoring report praised the Taliban's fight against the **Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)** but questioned its capacity to fully contain it, as supreme leader Mullah Haibatullah continues to govern from Kandahar.
- The report also revealed that while the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) receives funds from within Afghanistan, the Taliban hesitate to act against it for fear of driving it closer to IS-K.
- Pakistan's accusations, therefore, are more propaganda than genuine concern.
- India can play a constructive role by helping Afghanistan strengthen its successful drug eradication efforts through crop substitution and farmer support schemes.
- With rising drug cultivation and meth production, and large narcotic seizures along Indian borders, cooperation through India's Narcotics Control Bureau to train Afghan officials would be crucial.
- This approach would replace brute force with sustainable solutions, aiding both counter-narcotics and regional stability.

Water Cooperation: The Key to Kabul's Recovery and Regional Stability

- Kabul faces an acute water crisis and could become the **first city in the world to run completely dry by 2030**.
- Years of conflict have crippled infrastructure and delayed essential projects.
- India's renewed offer to construct the **Shahtoot Dam on the Kabul River** can help address this crisis but has raised concerns in Pakistan, which has reported a 16% reduction in river flows.
- Since the Kabul River is part of the Indus system, it should be included in a new water-sharing treaty that ensures fair distribution and mutual benefit.
- Such cooperation would not only support Afghanistan's recovery but also promote stability in a water-stressed region.

Empowering Afghanistan Through Education and Skill Development

- Women's education remains one of Afghanistan's most pressing challenges, with moderate Taliban leaders like Abdul Baqi Haqqani—who supported it—replaced by hardliners such as Mawlawi Habibullah Agha.
- Reversing this regressive stance is essential both for Afghanistan's progress and for shaping India's constructive engagement.
- India's offer of **1,000 e-scholarships** through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations is a positive step but far from sufficient.
- The initiative should be expanded by allowing major Afghan colleges access to online education with relaxed foreign exchange norms.
- Educational and skill development efforts must also align with India's planned investments in sectors like mining to build local capacity, reduce dependency on foreign workers, and generate sustainable employment within Afghanistan.

India's Long-Term Goal: A Stable and Friendly Afghanistan

- Achieving lasting stability in Afghanistan requires a coordinated **"whole-of-government"** approach, where all Indian ministries — including finance, water, and power — work towards a unified goal of maintaining a friendly and secure neighbour.
- The National Security Council Secretariat must be strengthened to ensure policy coherence and continuity across governments, following the principle of maintaining a clear and consistent strategic aim.
- However, regional stability faces a major obstacle: Pakistan's military, which seeks to dominate the Taliban, has little interest in Afghanistan's stabilisation.
- In contrast, ordinary Pakistanis, especially Pashtuns with cross-border family and trade links, would benefit from peace, with potential trade revenues estimated at \$10 billion.
- Ultimately, systemic political change in Pakistan — moving away from military control toward genuine democracy — is crucial, as true democratic governance remains the most reliable path to regional peace and stability.

The Next Steps for Afghanistan After the New Delhi Visit FAQs

Q1. What was the significance of Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister's visit to New Delhi?

Ans. The visit marked the start of renewed India-Afghanistan engagement aimed at stabilising Afghanistan and reinforcing India's global humanitarian and strategic credibility.

Q2. How can India assist Afghanistan in combating drugs and terrorism?

Ans. By supporting crop substitution programmes, training Afghan officials through the Narcotics Control Bureau, and promoting sustainable, non-coercive anti-narcotics strategies for regional stability.

Q3. Why is water cooperation between India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan essential?

Ans. Kabul's severe water crisis and the Shahtoot Dam project highlight the need for a new Indus-based treaty ensuring fair water-sharing and regional stability.

Q4. What role does education play in India's engagement with Afghanistan?

Ans. Expanding e-scholarships and online education, especially for women, can empower Afghans, develop local skills, and reduce dependence on foreign workers.

Q5. What long-term strategy should guide India's Afghanistan policy?

Ans. A unified, whole-of-government approach ensuring continuity across administrations can maintain a friendly Afghanistan and promote democracy-driven regional peace.

Source: TH

India-US Trade Deal - Balancing Strategic Gains and Economic Sovereignty

Context

- The India-US trade **deal** negotiations have **entered a crucial phase**, with media reports suggesting the **possibility of finalisation** during the meeting between the Indian Prime Minister and US President at the **ASEAN Summit** in Kuala Lumpur (October 26-28).
- As both nations approach the deal's "**endgame**", **India must safeguard its long-term economic interests and strategic autonomy**.

Background

- The trade negotiations aim to **address tariff and non-tariff barriers** impacting bilateral trade.
- **The US seeks greater access** to India's markets, particularly in digital services, agriculture, and intellectual property.
- **India aims to secure tariff concessions** and expand exports while protecting domestic industries and policy space.

Key Issues and Considerations

- **Written agreement before announcement**

- India must ensure that **all commitments are documented** before public announcements.
- **Past instances** show the **US has altered terms unilaterally** post-negotiation — India must guard against such last-minute changes.

- **Avoiding last-minute US demands**

- Historically, the US has introduced new conditions during final negotiation rounds at GATT/WTO.
- India should **resist such pressures even at the cost of delayed finalisation** and consult all relevant ministries and stakeholders.
- New demands can be deferred to a “Phase II” of negotiations for later discussion.

- **Reducing overdependence on US markets**

- Over-reliance on one export destination **can make India economically vulnerable**.
- India must ensure the trade deal does not deepen dependence on the US or support US efforts to isolate China through “**supply chain resilience**” clauses.
- **Safeguarding India’s autonomy** in trade partnerships and participation in global value chains is essential.

- **Assessing the cost of concessions**

- India must **evaluate** how the deal alters its existing rights and obligations.
- US trade deals with Japan, EU, and Vietnam show that partner nations often –
 - **Reduce tariffs** on industrial and agricultural goods.
 - **Offer major concessions**, while the US reciprocates marginally (e.g., reducing 50% tariffs to 15–20%).
- India must **avoid an asymmetric agreement** that undermines its developmental and industrial policy space.

- **Protecting red lines – Farmers, fishermen and digital sovereignty:**

- Though assurance on protecting farmers’ and fishermen’s interests is significant, negotiators must also uphold red lines in **digital economy and intellectual property rights (IPR)**.
- The digital sector holds immense potential for India’s **Atmanirbhar Bharat vision** and future economic growth.

US Interests in the Digital Economy and the Threat of Non-Discriminatory Clause

- **The core of US interests:**

- **First**, prevent India from imposing taxes on digital players headquartered in the US.
- **Second**, prevent India from leveraging its data advantage and creating domestic digital champions, including through sharing anonymised government data exclusively with Indian domestic entities.
- **Third**, prevent India from effectively regulating the digital sector.

- **Threat:** A clause stating “both countries agree to grant non-discriminatory treatment to digital services” could –
 - **Restrict India’s ability** to promote homegrown digital platforms (e.g., Arattai).
 - **Undermine data sovereignty** and domestic innovation.
 - **Prevent India from taxing** US digital giants like Google, Meta, or Amazon.
 - **Dilute India’s Atmanirbhar** and Swadeshi policy objectives.

Challenges for India

- **Power asymmetry** in political and economic leverage favours the US.
- **India’s non-confrontational approach** limits its bargaining strength.
- **Securing a mutually beneficial agreement** under these conditions would be a diplomatic achievement.

Way Forward

- **Maintain strategic autonomy:** Avoid clauses that constrain India’s independent trade or digital policies.
- **Insist on reciprocity:** Ensure fair tariff reductions and market access from the US side.
- **Protect core sectors:** Uphold red lines in agriculture, fisheries, and the digital economy.
- **Enhance diversification:** Reduce export dependence on any single market to strengthen resilience.
- **Be prepared to walk away:** As Chanakya advised, when treaty benefits are unfairly distributed, non-agreement is preferable to an unequal one.

Conclusion

- The India-US trade negotiations represent both **an economic opportunity and a strategic test** for India.
- While cooperation with the US can strengthen trade diversification and global integration, India must **vigilantly protect its sovereignty** in the digital domain, agriculture, and trade policy space.
- Walking away from a one-sided agreement would not signify weakness but **strategic prudence** — aligning with India’s long-term vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat and sustainable global engagement.

India-US Trade Deal FAQs

Q1. Why must India insist on a written agreement before the public announcement of the India-US trade deal?

Ans. To prevent unilateral last-minute changes by the US, ensuring transparency and protection of India’s negotiated interests.

Q2. How can overdependence on the US market threaten India’s long-term trade security?

Ans. It can make India economically vulnerable and subject to political or tariff-based coercion, reducing strategic autonomy.

Q3. Why is the digital economy emerging as a crucial red line in India-US trade negotiations?

Ans. Because US demands on non-discriminatory treatment could undermine India’s data sovereignty, digital taxation, etc.

Q4. In what ways do asymmetries in economic and political power affect India's bargaining capacity?

Ans. They limit India's ability to secure reciprocal concessions, often leading to skewed agreements favouring stronger partners.

Q5. What guiding principle should India follow to protect its national interest?

Ans. India should be ready to walk away from the deal, upholding Chanakya's wisdom that an unfair treaty is worse than no agreement at all.

Source: IE

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