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US-India Relations: Can India Step Up to the Plate?

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Dhruva Jaishankar, Program Officer for Asia at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, explains that “Although rising Asian democracies such as Indonesia and South Korea will no doubt feature prominently in US regional policy, India—given its size, plurality, and economy—is perhaps in a unique position to help sustain American preeminence well into the 21st century.”

It might seem natural to despair about the current state of US-India relations. Since President Barack Obama’s state visit to India last November, New Delhi has eliminated two US suppliers from a landmark competition for 126 front-line fighter aircraft, a contract worth over \$10 billion. India also abstained in a UN Security Council vote that sanctioned intervention in Libya, its first high-profile decision since rejoining that body with US support. In addition, the US government and corporate sector alike have been frustrated by the slow pace of Indian reforms that would enhance access to the lucrative Indian civilian nuclear, education, and retail markets.

Indians, meanwhile, have been unhappy with Washington’s weak stance on Sino-Pakistani nuclear commerce, its ambiguity regarding a desired end-state in Afghanistan, a creeping sense of American protectionism and isolationism, continuing constraints on high technological access, and the seemingly lower political priority accorded India by the Obama administration. None of this is helped by the perception of relative American decline following the financial crisis and recession.

Amid this backdrop, Hillary Clinton’s second visit as US Secretary of State in July, 2011 for the US-India Strategic Dialogue, was met with a disappointing level of apathy in India. Despite a sense of stagnation and domestic political preoccupation in both countries, her three-day visit did, in fact, manage to showcase a rich and diverse agenda indicative of a new normal in US-India relations. The bilateral agenda for the latest round of the strategic dialogue incorporated homeland and cyber security, defense cooperation and sales, trade and investment, civil nuclear and clean energy cooperation, and higher education, as well as programs to increase the number of young Americans traveling to India.

There were also consultations on third countries, such as Afghanistan, and on India’s role in the wider Asia-Pacific, including the possibility of enhanced trilateral dialogues with East Asian states. The very act of conducting regular consultations on such a wide array of issues is a massive improvement over a decade ago, when such interactions were scarce and often marked by acrimony.

Beyond the scheduled conversations, Clinton’s speech in the southern city of Chennai—formerly known as Madras—was anything but ambiguous in its calls for India to assume a greater leadership role in regional and international affairs. “[W]e see, as President Obama said, a nation that is not simply emerging, but has emerged,” she said, “and...one that will be a leader globally in shaping the future we will all inherit.” Adding that the United States was “betting on India’s future,” Clinton proclaimed that the United States desired India’s leadership to extend beyond its



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immediate neighborhood and into the Asia-Pacific region: “we encourage India not just to look east, but also to engage east and act east as well.” And in an implicit acknowledgment of both countries’ domestic priorities, she also warned against insularity. “This is not,” she said, “a time when any of us can afford to look inward at the expense of looking outward.”

While doubts may still remain about American priorities and intentions—doubts that will hopefully be assuaged in the coming months and years—Indians should be carefully contemplating the Secretary of State’s message. Despite its extraordinary rise over the past two decades, India’s political class—if not always its leaders—has often expressed hesitation about striving for a leadership position in global affairs, beyond the token mantle of permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

C. Raja Mohan, one of India’s leading strategic experts, has listed four possible reasons for this: the inherent self-preoccupations of a large developing state, the intellectual legacy of “third world-ism,” a Deng-like caution against premature power projection, and the high priority placed on strategic autonomy. He concludes that some combination of the four—rather than simply non-alignment, post-colonialism, strategic restraint or institutional reactivity—is to blame for India’s diffidence.

For India, breaking out of these shackles will require a number of developments beyond addressing the serious and complex social and economic challenges at home. The first requirement is political coherence at the center. However, a spate of corruption scandals combined with a strong electoral mandate for the ruling United Progressive Alliance coalition have paradoxically lent the current government both stability and, unfortunately, impotence. Barring an unforeseen political crisis sparked by a major setback, this political dispensation in New Delhi is unlikely to change before the next general election, which must take place by 2014.

A second necessary development over the long run is the need for India to improve its tools of statecraft. India’s diplomatic service is woefully understaffed given the country’s size and diversity of interests, and its military is only just embarking on a modernization program that would greatly improve its power projection capabilities. While India has indeed upgraded its economic interactions with the rest of the world—particularly in East Asia—it has not been nearly as effective in integrating with its own neighbors.

Questions about India’s ability to assume a leadership role in alignment with American interests must also factor in its willingness to do so. As analyst Sourabh Gupta has rightly pointed out, improved Indian relations with individual powers have in recent years produced a virtuous spiral of improved bilateral ties with each of the others. At the same time, since India is understandably unwilling to treat these relationships as zero-sum, wariness in Beijing, Moscow and various European capitals will also limit India’s desire to partner more overtly with the United States.

None of these obstacles, however, should lead to undue pessimism in Washington about the ability to forge a valuable partnership. With an eye on the strategic horizons of the mid-21st century, US strategic planners would be hard-pressed to identify other large, rising powers with converging interests on major global challenges, shared values, and a wide array of military, economic, and diplomatic tools at their disposal.

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