

Avoiding the Labors of Sisyphus: Strengthening U.S.-India Relations in a Trump Administration

Ashley J. Tellis

For close to two decades now, the transformation of U.S.-India relations has been a bipartisan project in Washington. It has also been uniquely successful, as alternating Republican and Democratic administrations have worked with governments led by both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress Party to exorcise the ghosts of old corrosive Cold War disagreements. As a result, the United States and India, once sharply divided by the issues of alliances and alignment, today routinely declare their commitment to a durable strategic partnership.

Former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, arguably the progenitor of the new collaboration, once boldly declared the United States and India to be “natural allies.”¹ At that moment in 1998, the vision of fraternity seemed like fatuous rhetoric. But to the credit of Vajpayee’s successors (Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi) and their U.S. counterparts (George W. Bush, in particular), his ambition was brought to fruition rapidly and productively enough for Barack Obama to assert that U.S.-India ties could become the “defining partnership” of the century ahead.

The first section of this essay discusses the potential implications of the “America first” agenda that Donald Trump outlined during his presidential campaign for U.S.-India relations and regional security more broadly. The second section then assesses several challenges facing the bilateral relationship.

The Outlook for U.S.-India Relations during the Trump Administration

Although it is not inevitable, Donald Trump’s election as the 45th president of the United States could interrupt the dramatic deepening in U.S.-Indian ties to the disadvantage of both nations. If this outcome were to materialize, it would not be necessarily because Trump harbors

ASHLEY J. TELLIS is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He can be reached at <atellis@carnegieendowment.org>.

¹ Atal Bihari Vajpayee, “India, USA and the World: Let Us Work Together to Solve the Political-Economic Y2K Problem” (speech delivered to the Asia Society, New York, September 28, 1998)  <http://asiasociety.org/india-usa-and-world-let-us-work-together-solve-political-economic-y2k-problem>.

any particular animus toward India. During the election campaign, he admittedly did complain that “India is taking [U.S.] jobs” and that the United States was being “ripped off” by many Asian countries, including India.² But he also declared that he was “a big fan,” and that “if...elected President, the Indian and Hindu community will have a true friend in the White House.”³

The variety of positions expressed by Trump suggests that the potential threat to the continuing transformation of U.S.-India relations comes less from his views on India—which are probably unsettled—than it does from his iconoclastic convictions about the relationship between the United States and the world. Throughout the campaign, Trump emphatically affirmed his opposition to the existing international order, arguing that the United States, far from being its beneficiary, was in fact its principal victim. To remedy the inconveniences flowing from this pernicious “globalism,” his America-first campaign promoted an agenda that rejected multilateral free trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, demanded that allies bear a greater share of the burdens associated with their defense, and eschewed U.S. military intervention in virtually all instances other than to avert direct threats to the U.S. homeland.

While many elements of this nationalist agenda are understandable—even defensible—the worldview it represents diverges from that which initially cultured the evolving U.S.-Indian partnership. Going back to the earliest years of the George W. Bush administration, the United States’ rapprochement with India was premised on the assumption that the principal strategic problem facing both countries consisted of the rise of China and the threat it posed to both U.S. primacy and Indian security—not to mention the safety of the United States’ other Asian partner and allies—simultaneously. Since it was assumed that the United States would subsist as the principal protector of the liberal international order, and the Western alliance system in particular, even in circumstances where the containment of China was impossible because of the new realities of economic interdependence, the Bush administration slowly gravitated toward a strategy of balancing China by building up the power of key states located on its periphery.

² “Donald Trump Quotes on India, China, Pakistan, Others: All You Want to Know in 10 Slides,” *Financial Express*, May 5, 2016 ≈ <http://www.financialexpress.com/photos/business-gallery/248200/donald-trump-on-india-china-pakistan-others-all-you-want-to-know-in-10-slides-donald-trump-quotes/11>.

³ “Donald Trump’s Quotes on India: Narendra Modi Is a Great Man, I Am a Fan of Hindus,” *Indian Express*, October 16, 2016 ≈ <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/donald-trump-promises-a-better-friendship-with-india-praises-narendra-modi-3085432>.

India's large size, its geographic location, and its own rivalry with China made it the ideal partner in such a strategy. Hence, it was not surprising that the Bush administration consciously sought to aid the expansion of Indian power with the expectation that the presence of strong states surrounding China would limit Beijing's capacity for misbehavior. The success of this solution where India was concerned, however, hinged on two complementarities: one, that the United States would continue to remain the ultimate guarantor of Asian security, ready to protect its friends and allies should their own national capabilities or collaborative endeavors prove insufficient to the task of constraining China's aggressiveness; and two, that Washington would persist in strengthening Indian power without any expectations of strict reciprocity because New Delhi's expanding capabilities—insofar as they could help limit Chinese ambitions—advanced the United States' larger geopolitical objectives in Asia and globally.

To the degree that Trump's administration adheres to his campaign agenda and dashes both these expectations, the ongoing transformation of U.S.-India relations will falter. In the first instance, this is simply because no matter how much U.S. allies take responsibility for their own defense, they are as of now simply incapable of protecting the liberal international order independently, much less balancing China's rise effectively. Only the United States has the capability to secure these twin objectives simultaneously. If Washington now wavers in pursuing these goals, it will undermine not only the security and well-being of the United States' friends and allies but also its own global primacy. An Asia in which the United States ceases by choice to behave like a preponderant power is an Asia that will inevitably become a victim of Chinese hegemony. In such circumstances, there are fewer reasons for India to seek a special strategic affiliation with the United States, as the partnership would not support New Delhi in coping with the threats posed by Beijing's continuing ascendancy.

The current U.S. commitment to the rise of Indian power sans symmetric reciprocity was devised during the Bush administration but has been faithfully continued by President Obama for very good reasons. It was anchored in the presumption that helping India expand in power and prosperity served the highest geopolitical interests of the United States in Asia and globally—namely, maintaining a balance of power that advantaged the liberal democracies. Accordingly, it justified acts of extraordinary U.S. generosity toward India, even if specific policies emanating from New Delhi did not always dovetail with Washington's preferences.

Given that what India could become—a power capable of successfully balancing a rising China—mattered more for U.S. interests than what New Delhi did on any other issue, U.S. policy for almost two decades has embodied a calculated altruism whereby Washington continually seeks to bolster India’s national capabilities without any expectations of direct recompense. This approach has been exemplified by bold U.S. policy decisions to conclude a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with India, support India’s candidacy for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, provide New Delhi with expanding access to advanced U.S. defense and dual-use technologies, and champion India’s membership in the governing institutions of the global nonproliferation regime.

Because the burgeoning transformation in bilateral ties during the last two decades has been nourished by such largesse (all motivated by good strategic reason), any shift now toward transactionalism—if that is what Trump’s America-first approach requires toward ostensibly free-riding allies—would inevitably retard the further deepening of U.S.-Indian strategic ties. This enervation would occur mainly because India’s current developmental infirmities simply do not allow it to satisfy any expansive U.S. demands for specific reciprocity, especially in areas such as trade openness.

To be sure, every Indian government would make the best effort possible to satisfy U.S. expectations of reciprocity as they emerge—if the issues at stake are judged to be worth it—but there would be no denying the fact that the character of the bilateral relationship would change fundamentally and not obviously for the better. If New Delhi fails to satisfy the anticipation of reciprocity embodied by an America-first policy—a likely prospect given India’s resource and power constraints—both nations will have ended up worse off. Without the benefit of a preferential affiliation with the United States, India’s challenges with regard to managing a rising China (and even a troublesome Pakistan) will have become considerably more difficult. The United States in turn will have lost the opportunity to preserve an advantageous Asian balance of power, which by incorporating a strengthened India actually constrains Chinese ambitions and thereby buttresses U.S. primacy for more time to come.

Challenges Ahead

At this juncture in history the fundamental challenge to improving U.S.-India relations does not consist of overcoming the various problems commonly enumerated: the still significant barriers to market access

in India; the Indian clamor for more employment visas, for greater access to U.S. technology, or for a totalization agreement on social security contributions; or even New Delhi's disenchantment with several U.S. global policies, its attitude to various international institutions, or its approach to China and Pakistan. These issues are undoubtedly real, but they can be managed, as they have been more or less satisfactorily for the last twenty-odd years. It would help, however, if the Trump administration took the existing threats of Pakistan-supported terrorism against India more seriously, developed a considered strategy for aiding India in coping with Chinese assertiveness, and persisted with the existing U.S. policy of eschewing mediation on the thorny Indo-Pakistani dispute over Jammu and Kashmir. Yet even such initiatives would realize their fullest success only if the larger architectonic foundations of the bilateral relationship—centered on boosting New Delhi's power—are fundamentally preserved, not because they happen to be favorable to India but more importantly because they serve larger U.S. grand strategic interests in Asia and beyond.

If these interests were to be radically redefined such that the preservation of the U.S.-dominated liberal order globally or in Asia ceased to enjoy priority in Washington, the potential for U.S. benevolence (however motivated) toward India would also proportionately diminish. If it were to be replaced instead by policies that demand greater Indian repayment for U.S. favors, New Delhi's incentives to resuscitate a new version of nonalignment could further increase. By itself, such an outcome does not automatically undermine vital U.S. interests and may even advance them if it results in greater independent intra-Asian balancing vis-à-vis China.

The only question at that point, however, would be whether these behaviors are likely to be successful. If so, the United States will have gained the best of all worlds: constraints on Chinese ambitions at low cost to itself. But if autonomous intra-Asian balancing in the absence of U.S. support fails to restrain China's exercise of its growing power, the major regional countries, including India, may be compelled to reach varying kinds of accommodations with China. These outcomes would neither serve U.S. interests in Asia nor help protect U.S. primacy globally. More importantly, they can be avoided by persisting with the liberality that characterizes the United States' current policy toward its pivotal Asian partners such as India.

Much depends on what the Trump administration's policy toward Asia actually turns out to be in practice and the extent to which it exhibits continuity with prevailing U.S. strategy. Since his election, Trump seems to have subtly shifted away from some extremes of his America-first approach.

He has, for example, in conversations with various European and Asian leaders tacitly indicated his recognition of the value of standing U.S. alliances. Two of his advisers, Alexander Gray and Peter Navarro, have in fact plainly declared that “there is no question of Trump’s commitment to America’s Asian alliances as bedrocks of stability in the region.”⁴ Such reassurances are all to the good. But the new administration must go further.

It is insufficient to think of Beijing as posing merely economic problems for Washington. It certainly does but represents much more: China is fundamentally a geopolitical rival of the United States engaged in a long-term struggle for mastery in Asia. China seeks to recreate the sphere of domination it once enjoyed on the continent by cowing its neighbors—many of which are U.S. allies—and by deploying the coercive capabilities that could prevent the United States from coming to their aid in the event of a crisis. China’s enduring objective consists of nothing less than ejecting the United States from its current position as the hegemonic stabilizer of Asia.

The challenges posed by China’s rise and its assertive behaviors thus implicate the core issues of political order throughout the Indo-Pacific region, a part of the world to which the United States simply cannot be indifferent without suffering grave risks to its own standing in international politics. Coping with these problems will require the Trump administration not only to strengthen existing U.S. alliances but also, and more importantly, to recommit itself to preserving, as Condoleezza Rice once phrased it, “a balance of power that favors freedom” in Asia.⁵ An integral component of that effort involves the unstinting U.S. support of India’s rise to power. Any alternative approach to New Delhi will not only fail to produce the best outcomes for the United States; it will also make the task of improving bilateral relations akin to the labors of Sisyphus. ◆

⁴ Alexander Gray and Peter Navarro, “Donald Trump’s Peace through Strength Vision for the Asia-Pacific,” *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2016 ~ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/07/donald-trumps-peace-through-strength-vision-for-the-asia-pacific>.

⁵ Condoleezza Rice, “A Balance of Power That Favors Freedom” (Walter B. Wriston Lecture delivered at the Manhattan Institute, New York, October 1, 2002) ~ <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/2002-wriston-lecture-balance-power-favors-freedom-5566.html>.