

Narendra Modi and US–India Relations

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When Narendra Modi was elected the prime minister of India, few anticipated that he would turn out to be such an ardent champion of stronger United States (US)–India ties. The auguries were not auspicious when he entered office. Less than six months earlier, the arrest of Devyani Khobragade, India’s deputy consul-general in New York, had debilitated bilateral ties, revealing many latent Indian animosities towards the US. Unfortunately for both nations, many constituencies in Washington too, had accumulated grievances of their own by then. The Indian nuclear liability law, the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act—which was enacted in 2010—had cast an enormous pall over the optimistic atmosphere that followed the historic nuclear deal. And after that, the Indian selection of the French Rafale over an American fighter in the Indian Air Force’s multi-role combat aircraft competition gave the impression of rubbing more salt into an open wound. All told, then, the second term of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in New Delhi brought deep disappointment where the burgeoning US–India relationship was concerned.¹ The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, found himself increasingly marginalised within his own party and in his own government and was thus unable to deliver on any US expectations, whether they pertained to expanding the bilateral cooperation envisaged under the 2005 US–India defence partnership agreement or in multilateral negotiations

such as the Doha trade talks, which were entering a crucial phase in the last months of President George W Bush's term in office.²

It was indeed a frustrating period for supporters of US–India relations in both countries. Ever since the dramatic transformation in bilateral ties during Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's term in office, Americans and Indians who understood the benefits of closer ties had hoped that they would steadily improve to enable the development of a genuine strategic partnership. Vajpayee himself had imagined this prospect when he boldly challenged the US and India to think of themselves as 'natural allies'.³ To the surprise of many, his successor, Manmohan Singh, broke with the suffocating grip of non-alignment that had dominated the Congress party's vision of foreign policy to perpetuate the Vajpayee legacy by negotiating the one outcome that had eluded the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) when it was in power from 1998–2004.⁴ Responding to Bush's special affection for India, Singh concluded a nuclear accord that realised the essence of Vajpayee's dream: an agreement with the US that would permit India to maintain its nuclear weaponry while still benefiting from international nuclear cooperation in the civilian arena. This 'deal', which reversed many decades of US global non-proliferation policy as an exception for India alone, was justifiably viewed as the apotheosis of the transformation in bilateral ties. And the enormous political sacrifices made by both sides on this issue only fed the expectation that even bigger things were yet to come.⁵

These hopes, however, were painfully dashed by Dr Singh's second term. Not only were US–India relations completely rudderless during this period—as sceptics of the relationship like then Defence Minister AK Antony impeded further progress—but India's own progress appeared hamstrung as myriad corruption scandals took the wind out of the government's sails. This depressing environment set the stage for Modi's historic landslide, which gave his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) its first outright majority in the Lok Sabha and the first absolute electoral majority in any Indian national election since 1984. The ascension of Narendra Modi to the apex of Indian politics was thus memorable for a number of reasons: he was the first Indian prime minister elected from a generation born after Independence; his election to high office despite humble beginnings illustrated the political mobility of a

genuinely democratic system; and his elevation to national power from his previous perch as the chief minister of a state highlighted both the ferment and the possibilities inherent in Indian federalism.

While these considerations—when viewed in tandem with Modi's decisive personality and his driving desire to get things done—offered the promise that his election could rescue US–India relations from the miasma that had engulfed them since Singh's second term in office, this hope was tempered by the complications caused by Washington's 2005 decision to deny him a visa because of the 2002 Gujarat riots and the uncertainties as to whether he would be as interested in foreign policy as his predecessors had been.⁶ In any event, both concerns proved unfounded. When Washington finally reached out to Modi through a congratulatory phone call from President Barack Obama, Modi displayed a graciousness that not only belied the anxieties of the past but effectively reset US–India relations for a new era going forward. Appreciation of how this occurred requires an understanding of both the central challenge in the relationship between the two countries as well as Modi's unique contribution towards managing this partnership.

MANAGING THE ASYMMETRY IN US–INDIA RELATIONS—THE MODI WAY

The central issue in US–India relations in the post-Cold War period has always been management of the tension in their mutual strategic calculations. Both Washington and New Delhi view each other as partners that share common—but not always congruent—interests. The US seeks to preserve its extant primacy in the international system. As the reigning hegemon in global politics, it can do no other. India, in contrast, seeks to increase its relative power both in order to satisfy its own development goals domestically and to increase its security and influence externally. The objectives of both countries today are challenged primarily by China. Beijing threatens US hegemony both regionally within Asia and globally, and it threatens India's security and influence along their common borders, in India's near and extended neighbourhood, and across Asia writ large.

This competition between the US and China, on one hand, and between China and India, on the other, has opened the door for greater US–India

cooperation since the end of the Cold War.⁷ It led to a stunning display of American strategic altruism witnessed during the George W Bush administration in the form of the civilian nuclear cooperation agreement and in other forms of US support for India ever since. But long before the advent of President Donald J Trump, American support for India, however generous, could never be unlimited. Although it was intended to strengthen Indian power as a means of constraining China's capacity to undermine those interests shared by Washington and New Delhi, American generosity towards India would always be conditioned by the degree of political intimacy between the two states. To the degree that India resiled from seeking the closest possible relationship with the US—the kind extant between America and its allies—Washington's incentives to assist New Delhi by various means would be proportionately constrained.

From an American point of view, supporting the growth of Indian power was undoubtedly important, but the potentially exorbitant cost of that backing could not be borne as long as India's willingness to demonstrate solidarity with the US on critical issues remained unclear. For New Delhi, the strategic challenge conversely lay in convincing Washington to lend the maximum possible material, institutional and ideational support, even though Indian policymakers would not always support American preferences in world politics.⁸

When Modi took over as India's prime minister in 2014, Barack Obama had been the president of the United States for almost six years. His perception of India was shaped largely by his judgment that India, unlike Pakistan next door, was thankfully 'not a problem'. India instead represented a great opportunity for the US and—in large measure due to his interactions with Modi's courtly predecessor, Manmohan Singh, at the height of the global financial crisis—could be a potential asset for Washington as Obama restructured the character of US global engagement in the aftermath of the excesses of the Bush era.⁹ Unfortunately for Obama and the US, the second UPA term in office was completely unlike the first, and the hope of a deepened bilateral partnership quickly ran dry—to the President's consternation—at exactly the time when most American policymakers were expecting a blossoming strategic partnership.

Narendra Modi's political instincts allowed him to quickly appreciate the extent to which US–India relations had fallen around the time he took office. Despite his limited experience with Washington up to that point, he understood that the pervasive frustration in both capitals did not bode well for his larger project of revitalising India, balancing the threats posed by growing Chinese power, and expanding New Delhi's influence on the international stage. Consummating India's resurgence would require sustained American support for kick-starting its economic growth as well as for expanding its sway abroad. Based entirely on his conviction that he must do whatever is necessary to advance India's interests, Modi, brushing away any wounded *amour propre*, set out to repair the US–India relationship with alacrity in three ways that would affect both the style and the substance of Indian foreign policy.

First, and in a manner unlike his recent predecessors, Modi invested heavily in building up personal relationships with his peers abroad. Whether through his dramatic hugs, his invitations to Presidents Obama and Trump to visit India as honoured guests on major national events, or his repeated breaches of protocol by personally receiving visiting dignitaries at Indian airports, Modi sought to cement personal friendships with national leaders who were politically important to India. Beyond leaders within South Asia itself, or those of Japan, Israel and a handful of European states, no one was more important to Modi than the US president. Consequently, he invested heavily in developing strong friendships with his American counterparts, first Obama and now Trump, guided by the logic that, even if US and Indian national interests did not always cohere, the latter would always come out ahead if the individual steering policy in Washington were favourably disposed towards India.¹⁰ When strategic convergence between the two countries existed, warm personal ties could push the envelope to produce even better policy outcomes for India; when strategic dissonance persisted on some issues, the camaraderie between the two leaders would help to minimise the effect of frictions that would inevitably arise. By so focusing on developing a personal rapport with his American counterparts, Modi personalised the conduct of India's international relations in ways not seen in decades to the advantage of India's interests as a whole.

Second, Prime Minister Modi has, without apology or embarrassment, emphasised solidarity among democracies as a leitmotif of India's new engagement with the world.¹¹ It would be easy to dismiss such rhetoric as mere window dressing, but even if meretricious, it is strategic in intent. It represents Modi's considered effort to augment Indian security by developing a network of key partnerships that include Japan and especially the US—countries that not only represent sterling antipodes to authoritarian China but also happen to be favoured partners due to a confluence of common interests and common values.¹² Modi's private remarks to his international counterparts, including to political figures in the US, suggest that he genuinely views democratic regimes as a source of stability in international politics. Hence, he has more openly allied India with other democratic partners and, in a remarkable evolution from times past, has encouraged his counterparts to consider not merely increased bilateral economic cooperation, but, rather, initiatives aimed at bringing security and prosperity to other parts of the globe. Such enthusiasm has been welcomed by his American interlocutors, at least prior to President Trump. They view India's emerging emphasis on democratic solidarity as affinitive to America's own efforts at promoting democracy, albeit by different means, hoping that it will advance the goals of strengthening the liberal international order and sustain the provision of global public goods, positioning India as a democratic great power in the evolving global system.¹³

Third, to the chagrin of some and the delight of others, Modi has quietly but resolutely moved India away from the rhetoric of non-alignment to the practice of strategic partnership.¹⁴ This does not imply that India is content to be a camp follower of the US or, for that matter, any other great power. To the contrary, India has ploughed its own course in foreign policy, dictated by a sense of its own interests. As it has moved forward in its quest to become a 'leading power', however, Modi has not shied away from developing and nurturing partnerships with other nations, most importantly, the US.¹⁵ Unlike those votaries of non-alignment who argue that India should be cautious about developing special affiliations with great powers—because that might possibly constrain India's freedom of action in the future—Modi has freely reached out to the US (as well as Japan, Israel, Germany and France) in the

hope of building a robust strategic partnership that could enhance India's power and standing. In many ways, this represents a continuation of India's traditional grand strategy—but with one important difference. India no longer exhibits diffidence in affirming its special relationships with some critical partners; not only is the misleading term 'non-alignment' now banished from the official dictionary, New Delhi has moved resolutely to cement specific foreign ties that are of supernormal value to India, celebrating them publicly rather than merely seeking them furtively.¹⁶ Given this refreshing change in Indian attitude, it is not surprising that leaders as different as Barack Obama and Donald Trump have been united in their pursuit of a new relationship with India.

While these changes in Modi's approach to foreign policy may appear to be stylistic, they have yielded important substantive successes. Two examples in widely different areas prove the point. The first is in the area of climate change. There is little doubt that the US and India played pivotal roles in the discussions leading up to the Paris Agreement. Prime Minister Modi, recognising the significance of securing an international consensus on mitigating climate change, pushed back against many in his own country to commit India to concrete pledges that made the final compact possible.

Modi's willingness to accept India's global responsibilities in mitigating climate change was equally vital to success in the lead-up to Paris: a concession unimaginable under India's tradition of 'Third World' posturing, which would have prevented it from accepting the obligations that finally made an international accord possible.¹⁷ The fact that this climate accord is now endangered as a result of President Trump's policies does not in any way undermine the conclusion that Modi's approach to US–India relations yielded important gains for India at a time when New Delhi could have all too easily become the object of unremitting international pressure.

The second example of remarkable success has been India's cooperation with the US in shaping the security environment in the Indo-Pacific. While this term has taken on new life under President Trump, the defining agreement between the US and India occurred under President Obama. Prime Minister Modi's active involvement in shaping the 'US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region' was couched in innocuous

language, but its import was momentous.¹⁸ India did not simply reaffirm its commitment to the freedom of navigation and overflight—especially in the South China Sea where the threats from China are particularly acute—but it declared its willingness to contribute towards larger diplomatic and regional integration in order to ‘bolster long-term peace and prosperity for all’.

Articulating the larger objective in this way was remarkable for many reasons. First, India did not seek the cover of traditional multilateral fora such as the United Nations (UN)—India’s traditional ‘go to’ mechanism, in order to legitimise its security contributions, but felt comfortable enough to signal its role through a bilateral announcement with the reigning superpower. Second, India utilised the process of developing the joint strategic vision to convey to the US and to others how it intended to contribute towards the common goal of ensuring maritime security in its traditional and new operating spaces in the Indo-Pacific. Third, and finally, the US—in active collaboration with India—began to treat the joint vision statement as a road map for developing the bureaucratic justifications necessary to authorise the sale of advanced military technologies that would enable India to execute the relevant operational missions in the wider Indian Ocean Region. Modi’s investment in building personal ties with Obama, his use of democratic solidarity to confront Beijing’s authoritarian assertiveness, and his willingness to dispense with the distractions of non-alignment thus paid off in terms of Washington’s endorsement of a larger Indian regional role. And, equally importantly, it opened the door to increasing India’s access to controlled American technologies, supporting India’s membership in the organs of global governance, and rewriting the rules of the international system to accommodate Indian interests more generally.

LOOKING AHEAD: TAKING THE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP FORWARD

Today, the US–India relationship encompasses the most intense bilateral engagement that New Delhi enjoys with any nation.

Given the steady expansion of the bilateral partnership over the last two decades, the range of joint activities today is breathtaking: from frequent bilateral summits between the heads of government to regular senior-level dialogues, the US and India today engage in numerous strategic consultations,

wide-ranging defence, counterterrorism, homeland security, cybersecurity and intelligence cooperation, as well as myriad activities in energy, education, science and technology, public health and culture.¹⁹ What the density of these interactions makes clear is that the US seeks the closest possible relationship with India, while remaining respectful of India’s constraints, even as New Delhi seeks a deeper affiliation with Washington that bolsters its national power. For all the breadth of its successes, however, the partnership still lacks the requisite depth; mitigating this deficit remains the key task for both countries in the years ahead.

Three elements in particular deserve concerted attention. To begin with, Prime Minister Modi’s vision for a deeper US–India relationship is not often shared by his own government, let alone the country writ large. When individual hindrances are brought to his attention, he is invariably quick to resolve them, but the very fact that impediments repeatedly emerge—and are not resolved at lower levels of government—suggests that his vision may not be sufficiently internalised by his ministerial colleagues and their supporting bureaucracies. Changing entrenched world views is often the most difficult part of governing, as the earlier experience of Manmohan Singh’s tenure testified, where, despite his valiant efforts, his own government and party were often indifferent, if not actually opposed, to his initiatives. Since this challenge remains, albeit in different ways, there is perhaps no alternative in the near term to greater oversight by the Prime Minister himself and his national security team, if the promise of a deeper US–India strategic partnership is to be meaningfully realised.

Furthermore, because the national security space remains the most critical arena for deepening US–India ties, it is unlikely that New Delhi will be able to take full advantage of its cooperation with Washington without structural reforms in Indian defence policy.²⁰ Indian leaders, for example, have to consider whether the recent acquisitions of major military equipment from the US can yield their full fruit operationally if India remains unwilling to secure all the complementary capabilities that enhance their effectiveness. Similarly, a reluctance to expand the nature and scope of the current military exercises by including other Asian partners regularly, to utilise the opportunities afforded in US professional military education, to solder deeper

linkages in intelligence collection and assessment, and to engage in combined operations that will enhance New Delhi's dominance (especially of its oceanic spaces), will prevent India from enjoying the utmost benefits of its evolving relationship with the US.

Finally, the strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi will remain perpetually handicapped if trade relations between the two countries remain un-reformed. India, under Modi and even before, has made significant progress in opening its economy to foreign investment. This is undoubtedly a major step forward, but it remains incomplete so long as the US exports to India still remain limited by regulation and policy. The importance of trade liberalisation goes far beyond satisfying Trump's obsessions with remedying the current US trade deficit with many of its partners. Rather, it matters because deepened two-way trade contributes towards increasing prosperity in both countries and, in doing so, creates enduring stakes in each other's success.²¹ Such structural affinity not only immunises the partnership against the vagaries of political winds, but it also buttresses the underlying geopolitical imperatives that made the strategic partnership so attractive in the first place.

ENDNOTES

1. A helpful overview of the state of US–India ties at the time of Modi's election can be found in Pant, Harsh V and Joshi, Yogesh. 'Indo-US Relations under Modi: The Strategic Logic Underlying the Embrace,' *International Affairs* 93, no 1 (2017): 133–146.
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