

ASHLEY J. TELLIS

# UNITY IN DIFFERENCE

OVERCOMING

THE

U.S.-INDIA

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# SUMMARY

U.S. President Barack Obama’s return to India in January 2015 carries the hope that Washington and New Delhi may succeed in placing their cooperation on firmer foundations. Achieving this objective will require reconciling American expectations of exchange-based relations with the Indian desire for a no-obligations partnership. This challenge is best handled through a set of complementary policies in Washington and New Delhi that together are most aptly characterized as “unity in difference.”

## KEY THEMES

- India and the United States are still some distance away from realizing their objective of cementing a strong geopolitical affiliation that advances each other’s vital interests.
- Bilateral ties were at their best during the Cold War when Washington pursued unstinting policies toward New Delhi despite the latter’s inability or unwillingness to reciprocate.
- In the post–Cold War period, the willingness of a few American presidents to extend exceptional support to India and the appreciation in New Delhi of the durable strategic partnership with Washington opened the door to transformed bilateral relations.

- Achieving a genuine strategic partnership between the United States and India is challenging, but it will be a worthwhile investment in the long-term security and relative power positions of both India and the United States.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA

**Washington should return to the best of its past practices toward New Delhi: acting to deepen the relationship by strengthening India's capabilities without any expectations of clear quid pro quos.** It is in U.S. interests to bolster Indian power even if no repayment is forthcoming because doing so will help limit the rise of a Chinese hegemon in Asia that could undermine the enduring strategic interests of the United States. The president and his senior subordinates must resist the demands both of pressure groups in American society and of narrow bureaucratic interests in the U.S. government that push for transactional policies that subvert the nation's larger goals.

**New Delhi should articulate a geopolitical vision that preserves a special priority for the United States and look for creative ways to demonstrate strategic solidarity with Washington.** If India is to enjoy the kind of preferential support that the United States usually extends only to its closest allies, its leaders must offer their American counterparts a vision of strategic partnership that they find both appealing and consistent with their own conceptions of the national interest. Such a vision should be reinforced by increasing cooperation with the United States across the widest possible range of issues.

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# INTRODUCTION

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's successful visit to New York and Washington in September 2014 cannot obscure the larger reality that both India and the United States have struggled for decades to build a close bilateral relationship. That endeavor is by no means complete. The very fact that Modi's trip was necessary to energize what had become a floundering partnership indicates that the ties between the two nations are not yet intimate, robust, or marked by consistent improvement. If anything, Modi's achievements appeared to shine all the more because they occurred against the backdrop of languishing ties.

President Barack Obama's return to India in January 2015, this time as the country's chief guest at its Republic Day celebrations and as the first-ever U.S. president to receive this invitation, has captured attention in this context not only because Modi's invitation to Obama came as a surprise but also because it carries the hope that the two countries may, this time around, succeed in placing their cooperation on firmer foundations. These yearnings, in turn, suggest that despite the dramatic transformation that occurred during the presidency of George W. Bush in the last decade, the bilateral relationship has not yet shed its more than half-century-long cycle of alternation: the repetitive oscillation where periods of great improvement are succeeded inevitably by disheartening drift, if not deterioration.

These conspicuous shifts in trajectory are usually explained by the elements of process in international politics—that is, to quote Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, the “patterns of interaction” or “the ways in which the units relate to each other” as exemplified by the actions or failings of individual leaders, or the day-to-day decisions made by states in the realms of diplomacy and bargaining.<sup>1</sup> In this instance, however, there are more enduring

elements that, to stretch the term, are almost structural in quality—the characteristics of the environment within which national actions occur, the political aims of the entities involved, and the positional weight of the United States and India in the international system.<sup>2</sup> These abiding features may better explain why the two countries have been unable to keep their bilateral ties on an even keel over the years, despite a common desire to do so.

The structural factors that have affected the U.S.-Indian struggle for an enduring partnership from the birth of independent India to the current day thus merit exploration. Such an examination is aimed at understanding whether the impossible dream articulated by India's former prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee—that the United States and India share a common destiny as “natural allies”<sup>3</sup>—might in fact be realized in the years ahead. This question is especially intriguing today because the troubled era of Cold War discord has passed into history and both states have openly recommitted themselves to a new, albeit still undefined, “strategic partnership” of presumably global consequence.<sup>4</sup>

Toward that end, the reasons that a productive partnership eluded both nations during the Cold War, even though New Delhi and Washington alike sought such a relationship from the very beginning, must be examined. Specifically worth reviewing are the constraints that prevented deeper cooperation during the period of bipolarity and whether they persist today or have now conclusively disappeared, thereby opening the door to a new era of steadily intensifying cooperation.

The history of the past few years amply suggests that India and the United States are still some distance away from realizing their objective of cementing a strong geopolitical affiliation that advances each other's vital interests. Throughout the Cold War, the quest for such a bond was frustrated by the two countries' often mismatched worldviews, national priorities, and material capabilities. These three factors prevented New Delhi and Washington from realizing the full potential of their relationship, despite the natural kinship bestowed

by their shared identity as liberal democracies. The historical record in fact indicates that bilateral ties were at their best during this period of bipolar competition not when each sought to advance the other's core national aims but when Washington, the stronger entity of the two, pursued unstinting policies despite New Delhi's inability or unwillingness to reciprocate.

Today, the ideological obsession with Cold

War-era nonalignment and the irritant of India's exclusion from the international nuclear nonproliferation regime have largely abated. But vestiges of the older structural constraints persist even as India opens itself to global markets, undertakes economic reforms, and

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chalks up growth rates higher than the historical norm. This implies that many of the constitutive thickets at the Indian end that prevent cooperation with the United States are still around—and these constraints are only amplified when other elements of process, such as bureaucratic resistance, poor political decisions, and sluggish policymaking, are thrown into the mix. Together, these elements often prevent New Delhi from reciprocating American overtures in the manner increasingly expected by Washington, a presumption that is likely to intensify if the United States experiences meaningful relative decline in the future.

The impediments in New Delhi are often matched by those present in Washington. A major obstacle to deepening bilateral relations at the U.S. end is strategic amnesia, the recurring failure to remember why assisting India's success, even when unrequited, remains fundamentally in America's national interest. This shortcoming is only amplified by the fallacious presumption—most evident when American decisionmakers are beset by crises—that India is somehow in the same league as the United States and, as such, should be expected to cooperate by bearing the requisite costs of upholding the global order. What compounds these problems in the most pernicious way, however, is the capacity of various interest groups in American society and narrow bureaucratic interests within the U.S. government to hijack national policymaking toward India, turning it away from what U.S. grand strategic interests demand in favor of more parochial preferences.

Given these constraints at both ends, two outcomes must occur if the United States and India are to make good on the strategic partnership to which they have committed themselves. One is that Washington, as the stronger entity, must return to the best of its past practices toward New Delhi. That entails acting magnanimously toward a friendly but weaker power without any expectations of “specific” reciprocity, which Robert Keohane defines as transactions “in which specified partners exchange items of equivalent value in a strictly delimited sequence,”<sup>5</sup> or in other words, clear quid pro quos. The other is that New Delhi must actively look for ways to deepen its cooperation with Washington comprehensively, thereby increasing the incentives of U.S. policymakers to continually extend preferential support to India especially when the logic and necessity of offering such backing does not always appear to be self-evident.

Think of it as “diffuse” reciprocity—exchanges where “the definition of equivalence is less precise” yet nonetheless involve “an ongoing series of sequential actions which may

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continue indefinitely, never balancing but continuing to entail mutual concessions within the context of shared commitments and values,”<sup>6</sup> as Keohane has insightfully explained. This complementary effort at broad give-and-take completes a strategic approach that can be characterized as “unity in difference.” In effect, it attempts to reconcile the pervasive American expectations of exchange-based relations with the traditional Indian desire for a no-obligations partnership. So long as either polarity in this conjugate strategy is imperfectly implemented, however, the mutual desire for a robust partnership will remain repeatedly frustrated—to the detriment of both countries.

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# THE STRUGGLE FOR PARTNERSHIP: STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AMID COLD WAR COMPETITION

Despite their shared affinities of constitutional democracy, liberal politics, and civic nationalism, the United States and India unfortunately have not enjoyed consistently warm relations since the two countries established formal diplomatic ties. India's birth as a new republic in 1947, after several centuries of colonial domination culminating in the British Raj, roughly coincided with the consolidation of the United States as a global hegemonic power after the Second World War. This conjunction should have encouraged the development of strong bilateral ties because although the United States and Great Britain were steadfast allies in the struggle against Axis tyranny, Washington seemed willing to incur London's resentment by championing Indian independence—a dynamic that played out in the strong personal commitments of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill to their corresponding causes.<sup>7</sup>

This rift between the two principal Western allies in the wartime coalition found its clearest manifestation in their respective interpretations of the Atlantic Charter, the 1941 document outlining the Allied vision for the postwar global order. The United States interpreted the charter's call for respecting “the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live” as applying to all nations, including the subject countries of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> Great Britain, in contrast, contended that this declaration applied only to the peoples under Axis tyranny and as such constituted—in the words of Churchill in the House of Commons—“quite a separate problem from the progressive evolution of self-governing institutions in the regions and peoples which owe allegiance to the British Crown.”<sup>9</sup>

Consistent with the U.S. interpretation, Roosevelt sought to reach out to the Indian nationalist movement in an effort to convey American support for Indian independence. These initiatives were consciously kept low-key in an effort to avoid giving excessive offense to a beleaguered Britain. They nonetheless had the effect of forcing Churchill to attempt to accommodate Indian claims; still, London's actions during the war were intended more to parry Washington's advocacy on behalf of India than to advance the cause of Indian freedom. In any event, the toll exacted by the conflict on British power, the defeat of Churchill's national government in the 1945 election, and the growing strength of Indian political mobilization all made Indian independence inevitable, despite its being finally consummated in the tragic circumstances of partition, which produced two new nations, India and Pakistan. Although India's nationalist leaders were chagrined by the U.S. unwillingness to push Great Britain more vigorously on Indian independence during the war, they were hopeful that the realization of *swaraj* (self-rule) in India would dovetail with the American wartime opposition to colonialism to create a productive relationship between the two democratic states.

These expectations, however, would be repeatedly belied in the decades that followed. This was due less to direct antagonisms and more to contrasts in worldview, differences in national priorities, and asymmetries in power capability, which lasted in their strongest forms until the end of the Cold War. As a result, the promise of an advantageous partnership, although frequently desired by leaders on both sides, was not realized. At the end of the day, this outcome occurred because neither country proved critical to the vital interests of the other, even though the considerable disparities in relative power between the United States and India implied that New Delhi would always depend more on Washington than the other way around.

The many factors that contributed to the unrealized hopes of a strong U.S.-Indian bond materialized soon after the two countries established formal diplomatic ties. The United States entered the international system after the Second World War as a successor to the British Empire, a triumphant bearer of both Western values and Western order as they had slowly evolved over two millennia.<sup>10</sup> From a more recent perspective—since the beginning of the Columbian era—Washington was merely the latest in a long line of European imperial powers. Although the United States, pursuing a republican imperialism grounded in the ideals of liberty, differed in important respects from bygone hegemonies, the tasks it inherited were identical to those undertaken by its predecessors: maintaining an international regime that protected its core interests, disseminated its values, and spawned institutions that would nurture norms and regulate international behaviors in various arenas to its advantage.<sup>11</sup> As a new superpower that found itself challenged by a militarily dangerous rival and as the global protagonist of capitalism, the emerging American regime would also, almost by definition, become marked by the primacy of material power and the presence of economic and geopolitical inequality.

India entered this environment, in Manjari Chatterjee Miller’s apt description, as an independent entity “wronged by empire.”<sup>12</sup> It recognized the distinctiveness of the United States in contrast to Great Britain, its previous imperial overlord. Still, there was no disguising the fact that the structural realities of international politics had placed Washington and New Delhi in contradictory positions in the evolving order.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the United States, with its new status as a superpower, India was a weak polity that had survived over the millennia thanks more to its cultural unity than its material capabilities. It was also abjectly poor at the time of its independence, which made comprehensive development its principal concern. But it had a glorious history stemming from an ancient civilization, and its potential power was vast. These characteristics made India a great country. Becoming a great power, however, as the modernist factions of its post-independence leadership desired, would require a peaceful domestic and international environment.

## CONTRASTS IN WORLDVIEW

The nationalist yearning for political greatness, without the distractions stemming from entrapment in the Cold War, came to constitute the key for India’s understanding of what its grand strategy required. Conciliatory politics at home, grounded in democracy, would help in unifying India’s population and building a modern *nations*-state. Meanwhile, the quest for peaceful relations abroad would underwrite India’s desire for recognition—despite its material weaknesses—as a significant power in international politics. The Indian consciousness of both the enormity of its developmental tasks and its exceptionalism as a civilizational entity that had much to teach the world about *sanātana dharma*—or how to live appropriately, from an Eastern tradition—would then take its leaders in an independent direction.

The policy of nonalignment as articulated and implemented by Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, constituted a specific response to the particular cleavages of the postwar bipolar rivalry. Even if a different doctrinal formulation were to have found favor, however, New Delhi’s desire for autonomy still would have taken it along different paths from those pursued by the United States. What Nehru wanted for India, and what most of his successors have also wanted, were the material benefits—be they security, technology, or financial assistance—that would otherwise come only from an alliance relationship with stronger powers,

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yet without any of the constraining obligations that go with such formal collaboration. India's freedom to choose its policies on the fundamental questions pertaining to its national interest, when in Nehru's words "the choices come to it,"<sup>14</sup> had to be protected at all costs.

So long as this autonomy was shielded, India could have wide-ranging ties with all the major states in the international system. In fact, Nehru believed that nonalignment in this sense did not preclude India from having preferential partnerships with some states. Emphasizing that "it does not mean that we should not be closer in our relations with some countries than with others... in order to gain something worthwhile,"<sup>15</sup> he held that the only constraint in these instances should be "that these arrangements have not been allowed to influence our major policy,"<sup>16</sup> or in other words, to compromise India's larger freedom of action.

Consistent with this "operational code,"<sup>17</sup> as Nathan Leites would describe it in another context, Nehru made periodic overtures to the United States, seeking a special relationship of some sort. He, as well as his successors, did this even while attempting to maintain a working, if not close, relationship with other powers, including Russia and China, the principal adversaries of the United States during the early Cold War.<sup>18</sup> For Nehru, the initial advances toward Washington were driven by the need for modern arms, food assistance, and the necessity of managing the threats posed by Pakistan. For Indira Gandhi, his daughter and a future prime minister, the objectives originally included food aid as well, but after the American-assisted Green Revolution in agricultural techniques took hold in India in the 1960s and 1970s, they included rolling back U.S. controls on high technology to India and reducing India's dependence on the Soviet Union. But for both Nehru and Indira Gandhi, as well as for other Indian leaders between them and since them, the outreach to the United States was intended to cement a partnership profitable to India but was not intended to lead to any formal alliance, the two countries' democratic affinity notwithstanding.<sup>19</sup>

Given India's desire to escape dependence in the aftermath of its colonial experience, this approach made sense from New Delhi's point of view. But it was unlikely to persuade the United States, especially when the Manichean struggles of the Cold War were at their most intense. Washington's inclination in these circumstances was to double down on containment through a further tightening of the alliance system it had engineered during the early Cold War. Thus the United States was not able to accommodate India's desire for a new world order that respected the expression of indigenous nationalism, the primacy of economic development, and the incarnation of nonviolence internationally. Nor would it entertain the Indian quest in the manner desired by its leaders for a relationship, what was in actuality an asymmetric association, which disproportionately favored India by providing it with various coveted material resources in exchange for New Delhi's freedom to pursue its own course, including frequent criticism of the United States on varied issues

in international politics. As a matter of fact, Washington often ended up being generous toward India throughout the early Cold War in exactly such a fashion, but never at a level that would satisfy Indian policymakers.

From India's point of view, given its historical inheritance, there was perhaps no alternative to such an unobligated partnership. In the minds of many Indian leaders starting with Nehru, India's inherent importance, and the benefits of aiding it for the success of freedom, development, and democracy globally, should have persuaded Washington to settle for what would have been fundamentally unbalanced terms of association. Even before India had achieved its independence, Mahatma Gandhi had in fact defined this expectation succinctly when, in response to a question about how U.S.-Indian ties could be deepened, he wryly but laconically declared: "By the employment of unselfishness, hitherto unknown in international relations."<sup>20</sup> For the United States, however, which was preoccupied with an intense Cold War conflict that threatened its vital interests, this Indian conception of partnership had few takers—except on rare occasions when truly strategic and farsighted leaders such as John F. Kennedy, George W. Bush, and perhaps Ronald Reagan were at the helm.

## DIFFERENCES IN NATIONAL PRIORITIES

The contrasts in worldview were quickly reflected in the differences in national priorities. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States found itself immediately engulfed in a global struggle to defend its security and the safety of its allies, not to mention its hegemonic position, against a virulent Soviet upstart. This systemic danger warranted complete mobilization of national power and willingness to run all the risks associated with a hot war, even in its nuclear variant, if necessary. Economic capabilities, in this situation, were obviously important in their own right for increasing wealth and welfare domestically. But they also were critical insofar as they contributed toward generating military power and resuscitating allies and neutral countries as part of the larger strategy of resisting the Soviet Union. Because protecting American primacy—in order to ensure U.S. security, the defense of its allies, and the survival of the American regime internationally—understandably became the core U.S. objective in the face of the Soviet threat, nurturing the most effective coalition of materially capable states turned out to be the first order of business that occupied Washington for most of the postwar era.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, it was not surprising that India's leadership quickly came to view the United States not as a champion of the postcolonial nations (as it had been during the Second World War), but, as B. M. Jain phrased it, the "'heir' to British imperialism."<sup>22</sup> This perception gained ground most deeply during the Eisenhower administration when the secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, set about building America's alliances during the early phase of

containing the Soviet Union. This mission would end up “bringing the Cold War to South Asia in 1954,”<sup>23</sup> as Robert J. McMahon explained, thanks to the U.S. embrace of Pakistan and the resultant, recurrent poisoning of U.S.-Indian relations.

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The incompatibility of Washington’s containment strategy and India’s priorities could not have been clearer. Indian leaders saw themselves fundamentally as presiding over an impoverished country, confronted by the difficult tasks of building a state, a new nation, and a democratic polity simultaneously—all in highly adverse circumstances. Hence they were desperate for an international environment that would permit India to concentrate wholly on economic, political, and social development while receiving assistance from all the major states that, being at peace with each other and having as their objective the economic resuscitation of the Third

World, would be able to aid New Delhi in reaching its developmental goals. Both Nehru and Indira Gandhi later would emphasize these themes in almost identical terms.<sup>24</sup>

The Cold War, however, undermined this Indian aim in important ways. From New Delhi’s perspective, it divided the international order intensely, thus preventing the kind of great-power cooperation that might have benefited India. It led to an unproductive diversion of resources into military competition, thus reducing the levels of assistance India might have otherwise incurred. And it engendered rivalrous alliance formation that reached India’s doorsteps when Pakistan was admitted into the various U.S.-led, anti-Soviet blocs, thus imposing heightened defense burdens on New Delhi when it could not afford them.

The American support for Pakistan, especially during Pakistan’s several conflicts with India, became the most acute exemplification of this problem. In time, it would turn out to be an important practical reason for U.S.-Indian ties never reaching the epitome of friendship throughout the Cold War. Even when the U.S. response during these collisions was simply neutrality, the economic and political burdens imposed on India were judged to be too high and, more to the point, unwarranted, because in most cases Islamabad’s anti–status quo bias propelled it to initiate the conflicts.<sup>25</sup>

After 1971, the U.S. rapprochement with China would complicate ties with India in similar ways, as witnessed during both the Reagan and Clinton administrations. The intensity of this dalliance, though, would never evoke concerns of the kind associated with Pakistan

because the U.S.-Chinese relationship did not extend to major arms assistance to Beijing. Also, after their 1962 border war, India and China managed to maintain an equilibrium that was not evident between New Delhi and Islamabad.<sup>26</sup>

In any event, the American relationships with Pakistan and China remain good examples of how the mutual U.S.-Indian quest for a productive partnership during the Cold War was repeatedly frustrated by externalities. Specifically, Washington's support for these states at various moments historically was driven less by a desire for a strong relationship per se and more by the states' utility in the pursuit of some other American goal, such as tightening the containment of the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup>

India's response to the reality that American priorities were different from its own did not help its own cause. India eschewed any attempt to build its national power rapidly through a strategy centered on expanding free markets domestically, in which its vast millions might have been able to climb out of poverty faster than under other alternatives. New Delhi balked equally at international integration externally, where India's comparative advantages would have accelerated its technological transformation and its overall growth rates as various East Asian countries did.

Instead, Nehru's socialism, and later, Indira Gandhi's even more asphyxiating variant, took India in the direction of stultifying state command of the economy. This ensured that neither the country's economic growth nor its larger state- and nation-building goals were achieved with

alacrity.<sup>28</sup> The reality of substandard economic performance, then, deepened Indian dependence on the United States—especially in the multilateral financial institutions where Washington was the dominant actor—far more than New Delhi desired, leaving it in the unenviable position of detesting such reliance even as it found itself unable to escape this necessity. Both the economic and food aid programs that India relied on until the 1970s and the technology denial regimes that India struggles against to this day painfully remind New Delhi of this fact.

India's economic weakness throughout the Cold War thus cast it as yet another underperforming Third World state, despite New Delhi's claims to the contrary. India was accordingly not taken seriously by the United States—except when absolutely necessary. The Sino-Indian War in 1962 was one such moment. President Kennedy's acceptance of Indian nonalignment, combined with his fear of a catastrophic Indian defeat and its

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obvious implications for the global struggle against Communism, inspired unprecedented American military assistance. The flow of aid to India was matched only by a despairing Nehru's willingness to momentarily consider becoming part of "someone else's bloc."<sup>29</sup> The third Indo-Pakistani War, in 1971, was another occasion when New Delhi commanded Washington's attention, this time however with results opposite to those produced during Kennedy's presidency. Irked by what he perceived as overbearing Indian policies in South Asia, President Richard M. Nixon pursued, in Henry Kissinger's famous description, a "tilt" toward Pakistan at India's expense,<sup>30</sup> leaving New Delhi fuming at the dramatic downswing in bilateral relations that had occurred within a decade. Although the directions of American intervention during these two episodes were completely antipodal, they do represent examples of the few moments—Washington's engagement with New Delhi during the Korean War being one more—when India mattered in somewhat significant ways to U.S. global strategy during the Cold War.

The larger neglect of India, which was rooted in its peripheral position in Cold War geopolitics and deepened by its flailing economic performance, was amplified by New Delhi's emphasis on maintaining a predominantly closed economy centered on import substitution until 1991. Denying American and Indian private enterprises the opportunity to trade vigorously with one another prevented the creation of important social and political constituencies in both the United States and India that would have had a stake in the establishment and preservation of a strong bilateral relationship. Ironically, however, while India's anemic economic growth dampened the economic relationship, it accelerated the flight of Indian human capital and talent to the United States, thus creating inadvertently a new factor that would contribute to the transformation of the bilateral relationship after the Cold War's end.<sup>31</sup>

## **ASYMMETRIES IN POWER CAPABILITY**

The stark asymmetries in American and Indian national capabilities finally completed the picture. From the very beginning of its independent life, India found itself inserted ever more deeply into an American international system where the strategic choices made by Washington regarding everything from economic assistance to geopolitical alliances to international institutions affected India's prospects far more than New Delhi would have preferred. For India, a newly sovereign nation that led the dissolution of the colonial order, such dependency was a dagger to the heart of its pride. Just as importantly, it signaled the fading of the Indian dream of an equitable international order. At its root, this lopsided impact derived principally from India's material weaknesses, manifest in its economic, technological, military, and even geopolitical dependency on Washington and others.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the United States enjoyed a radically different level of development.

The differences in American and Indian national capabilities boiled down to the fact that thanks to its vast actualized power, the United States was a producer of its own security, while India was largely a consumer of the security provided by others. At different points this security was furnished by either the United States or the Soviet Union or the externalities ensuing from bipolarity itself. Thus, for instance, India was content to live with benign American power until the 1960s, in fact, gravitating toward what Dean Rusk described as an “unlimited military partnership” with Washington in the face of Chinese aggression in 1962.<sup>33</sup> Just as purposefully, it swung toward the Soviet Union in 1971 when faced with the prospect of Sino-American rapprochement and a brawling Pakistan supported by the United States.

These transient flirtations served the purpose of protecting Indian security at those troubled moments, even as, in Gopal Krishna’s words, New Delhi’s larger pursuit of “autonomy without power” benefited from the “balanced stalemate between the Atlantic and Soviet blocs.”<sup>34</sup> Still, these solutions could not have been consoling for a nation with a proud past and great ambition. Yet India’s capacity to build its national power rapidly during the Cold War was hampered by its own economic choices. And the one strategic decision that India made during this era that offered it the hope of becoming self-sufficient in regard to its own security—developing nuclear weapons—quickly took it afoul of the United States. There had been a window of opportunity for New Delhi to acquire nuclear weapons when it might have been not only acceptable but also legitimate in terms of the global nonproliferation regime. But India’s indecision over the years and its overconfidence in regard to its own scientific and technological capabilities held it back.<sup>35</sup>

The eventual Indian decision to demonstrate its nuclear prowess came too late, materializing exactly when Washington was awakening to the larger perils of proliferation. India’s Pokhran-I test in 1974, the first nuclear explosion outside the bounds of the new Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, put Washington and New Delhi at odds for more than thirty years. These difficulties surfaced in acute form during the presidency of Jimmy Carter—who was otherwise a friend of India. They went on to frustrate every U.S. administration since, including that of Ronald Reagan, who in National Security Decision Directive Number 99 became the first to declare the importance of “adopt[ing] a diplomatic strategy which more explicitly recognizes India’s strategic importance in both regional and global terms” in order to strengthen ties with New Delhi while simultaneously denying the

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Soviet Union an ally.<sup>36</sup> The bilateral altercation over India's nuclear weapons program cast a shadow on every other form of cooperation, including the ones India valued most of all, such as technology transfer. Over time, it became the most conspicuous example, in Indian perceptions, of a virulent American hegemony that was determined to freeze the existing asymmetry in relative power to New Delhi's permanent disadvantage.<sup>37</sup>

## FRUSTRATING INTERACTIONS

All told, the contrasts in worldview, the differences in national priorities, and the asymmetries in power capability interacted in unproductive ways throughout the Cold War to deny both the United States and India the opportunities to build the close relationship they otherwise desired in principle. These structural causes, respectively, gave rise to three particular outcomes in India that frustrated the development of deeper bilateral ties. First, a policy of nonalignment whose ability to protect Indian interests in extremis was questionable. Second, an addiction to state control as the solution to India's development goals despite the low economic growth that accompanied it. And third, a hesitant embrace of nuclear weaponry that provoked international opposition without fundamentally remedying India's weaknesses in power capability.

These consequences, however, did not imply that U.S.-Indian relations throughout the Cold War were either uniformly antagonistic or perpetually competitive. Although it is now popular to describe the United States and India during this period as "estranged democracies"<sup>38</sup>—following the title of Dennis Kux's masterly survey of bilateral relations—the truth of the matter is more complex. As Rudra Chaudhuri has insistently reminded a readership long used to the idea of U.S.-Indian bilateral ties as "inherently fractious and necessarily in conflict," "India's relationship with the United States has [in actuality] been the most comprehensive association [that] the country has had since independence."<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, then, extensive cooperation persisted despite the structural frictions, and bilateral engagement was in fact pronounced in agriculture, education, health, industry, science, space, and other areas.

For many decades until the 1970s, India was in fact one of the largest recipients of U.S. development assistance. Beyond food aid, which made American generosity visible to the eyes of millions of ordinary Indians, Washington paid for numerous Indian public sector programs to include, as S. J. Kamath described it,

fertilizer and industrial plants, large-scale irrigation projects, state-owned power and rural electrification projects, dairy development, highway construction, locomotives and rolling stock for the government-owned railway system, airplanes for the state-owned international airline,

agricultural extension and the establishment of agricultural universities, and technical assistance and equipment for large state-owned institutions of higher education.<sup>40</sup>

Official U.S. assistance was complemented by substantial private activities as Ford, Rockefeller, and a number of other major American foundations established residence in India. They remain there to this day in support of these efforts, many of which produced sterling transformative innovations such as the Green Revolution.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the evident persistence of cooperation, the structural problems and the policies they provoked have prevented U.S.-Indian ties from reaching their full potential—the promise that was believed to exist at independence and that still exists in their shared values as democratic states. The U.S.-Indian relationship, consequently, fluctuated for most of the postwar period: when the national priorities of both sides demanded improved ties, relations deepened, more usually than not succeeded by a weakening of bonds when the immediate imperatives that drove the rapprochement dissipated.

Thus, the hopeful expectancy of the Roosevelt era, in which FDR championed India's independence, slowly gave way to the dismay of containment, first during the presidency of Harry Truman and later, and more acutely, during Dwight Eisenhower's tenure. Bilateral ties sharply improved during the Kennedy period and, in fact, reached their Cold War peak as a result of American assistance to India during the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Thereafter, the relationship slowly deteriorated thanks to Lyndon B. Johnson's distractions in Vietnam and his irritation with Indian opposition to U.S. policy in Southeast Asia at a time when New Delhi still looked to Washington for economic aid, especially food. The downward trajectory continued under Nixon, reaching its nadir during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, when Washington's deployment of the USS *Enterprise* to the Bay of Bengal was seen as the ultimate embodiment of a U.S. policy that was deeply threatening to India.<sup>42</sup>

Both nations attempted to repair their fractured ties under Jimmy Carter and Morarji Desai and, subsequently, under Ronald Reagan and Indira Gandhi, when the relationship enjoyed a surprising renaissance despite Washington's renewed combativeness toward the Soviet Union in what was widely decried in India as a "second Cold War."<sup>43</sup> The hope for consequential change for the better persisted—without noticeable improvement, however—through the George H. W. Bush presidency and Bill Clinton's first term. Ties nose-dived again during Clinton's second term as a result of the decision of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government to test nuclear weapons, which provoked deep acrimony and targeted U.S. sanctions against India. After the Kargil conflict in 1999 and Clinton's triumphant presidential visit to India in early 2000, U.S.-Indian relations began to recover. It was only in the second full decade of the post-Cold War period that the bilateral relationship was dramatically transformed under George W. Bush, reaching the heights last witnessed in 1962. Since then, U.S.-Indian ties have once again slowly stagnated, especially during the

last years of Barack Obama's first term in office, in part because Washington's distractions with economic and foreign policy crises were matched by the rudderless second term of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi. Whether Prime Minister Modi's 2014 visit to the United States and President Obama's return to India as the chief guest at its Republic Day celebration in January 2015 will mark a new inflection that confirms a more durable upward turn in strengthened ties remains to be seen.

In any event, the pattern of bilateral interactions during the Cold War clearly suggests that Washington and New Delhi, for the most part historically, have been caught in a low-level equilibrium trap. Whether the trajectory of their relationship has been upward or downward, it has not proceeded to its limit in either direction. This is because both the advances and the retreats did not derive fundamentally from permanent convergences or unremitting clashes of interests, respectively. As a result, the gains and the losses in U.S.-Indian relations were usually bounded in both directions for the two countries. While this dynamic prevented the bilateral relationship from ever breaking irrevocably, it also left well-wishers on each side with a wistful yearning for permanently better ties that never seemed to come.

This fact notwithstanding, the U.S.-Indian relationship in the post-Cold War era has vastly improved. This is undoubtedly owed to the bold willingness of a few American presidents to extend exceptional support to India and the presence of leaders in New Delhi who appreciated the worth of a durable strategic partnership with Washington. The question of whether the traditional variation in trajectory will continue indefinitely or whether the post-Cold War era will finally permanently transform U.S.-Indian ties, then, becomes the central issue. On its answer hinges the prospect of forging a durable strategic partnership between the world's oldest and largest democracies in the modern era.

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# THE STRUGGLE FOR PARTNERSHIP: BEYOND THE COLD WAR

Any effort to assess the future of U.S.-Indian relations must begin with an attempt to understand whether the fundamental constraints that prevented the development of close bilateral ties in the past have disappeared irrevocably. In retrospect, it is obvious that India's three policy initiatives that prevented closer relations—its practice of nonalignment, its emphasis on maintaining a planned economy, and its nuclear weapons program—all underwent important changes after the Cold War. These alterations made possible the transformation in ties fostered by Prime Ministers Vajpayee and Singh on the Indian side and by President George W. Bush and to a lesser degree Presidents Clinton and Obama on the U.S. side.

The most dramatic development that enabled this renewed bilateral engagement obviously had nothing to do with India. It had much to do, ironically, with the success of containment—the policy pursued by the United States in the face of Indian opposition for over forty years—which led ultimately to the collapse of its Communist rival and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact. The demise of the Soviet Union undoubtedly came as a shock to India. It suddenly removed from the scene a superpower that had protected Indian interests since at least 1971, even though India was by no means a servile client at any time during this period.<sup>44</sup>

The dissolution of bipolarity made the Indian policy of nonalignment formally irrelevant in one fell stroke. Although India's germinal idea of protecting the nation's freedom of action would survive the disappearance of the competing power blocs, the fact remains that “there is nothing unique about India's quest for preserving ‘strategic autonomy.’”<sup>45</sup> The

defense, and even expansion, of decisional independence, which the staunchest advocates of the newest variants of nonalignment argue has been “the defining value and continuous goal of India’s international policy ever since the inception of the Republic,”<sup>46</sup> is actually far from being distinctive to India. Indeed, it represents the aim of all states in any competitive international system. But the atrophy of nonalignment in the unique sense that defined the eponymous movement—a refusal to get enmeshed in competing Cold War alliances—removed one major irritant in U.S.-Indian relations. This, then, freed New Delhi to seek new forms of engagement with the sole superpower—and many other states.

Successive Indian governments sought to do just that in the last decade of the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup>

The circumstances that made such a quest significant began occurring even earlier but reached their consummation—serendipitously—in the same year that the Soviet Union collapsed. Beginning in the

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## **The dissolution of bipolarity made the Indian policy of nonalignment formally irrelevant in one fell stroke.**

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late 1980s, when it became evident that India’s command economy had failed to deliver either growth or equity domestically, New Delhi initiated some modest economic reforms. These reforms slowly increased the rate of India’s gross domestic product (GDP) growth from its previously abysmal average of 3.5 percent to something closer to 5.5 percent. But even this GDP improvement could not stave off what would be India’s most serious balance of payments crisis since independence. This disaster, which finally struck in 1991, forced more fundamental reform of the national economy.<sup>48</sup> Internally, price and production controls were dismantled, and India opened itself to international trade and investment in a manner without precedent. These changes pushed the economy into a higher growth band of around 7.5 percent, soon making India a “big emerging market” and one of the motors of growth in the global system.<sup>49</sup> In short, it was an economy with which every other country wanted to be connected. The data indicate that India’s GDP expanded almost 109 percent between 1992 and 2002. That made it the third-fastest among all the big emerging markets identified by the Clinton administration in 1992, and the second-fastest after China, if the comparison was restricted to large economies. Not surprisingly, the United States was no exception among countries seeking to expand commercial links with India. Bilateral trade grew dramatically—for example, India’s imports of U.S. goods expanded some 114 percent between 1992 and 2002. For the first time, New Delhi had become a desirable commercial partner for Washington.<sup>50</sup>

The functional demise of both India’s nonalignment and autarky within some two decades created new opportunities for the United States and India to attempt repairing their relationship. A series of dispensations in New Delhi and Washington attempted to do just that throughout the 1990s, but the conspicuous remaining dispute over India’s nuclear

weapons always intervened. This bickering became acute from 1995 onward when the United States secured the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and, after an interval of many decades, concluded the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Both developments were perceived by New Delhi as deeply troubling.<sup>51</sup> Vajpayee finally decided that India would challenge the global nonproliferation system by becoming an overt nuclear power through five dramatic nuclear tests in 1998. That left the United States with the choice of opposing this development and seeking to restore the status quo ante or accepting it and starting afresh with New Delhi.

Bill Clinton, choosing the former course, imposed sanctions on India and sent the bilateral relationship into yet another tailspin that lasted two years. Despite his administration's energetic efforts at crafting a new *modus vivendi*, which involved enticing India into accepting a "nuclear restraint regime"<sup>52</sup> that would arrest the development, testing, and deployment of its strategic forces, the bilateral divide could not be overcome, notwithstanding the valiant efforts made by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and India's Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh. Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, reversed course entirely, and over his two terms in office forged a unique nuclear cooperation agreement with India.<sup>53</sup> Washington expended extraordinary political capital to secure congressional consent for amending U.S. domestic law and an agreement within the Nuclear Suppliers Group to permit global nuclear trade with India despite New Delhi's decision to continue building its nuclear deterrent. This momentous decision by Bush, in support of his pursuit of a strategic partnership with India, was driven by two interacting reasons: "Viewing India as part of the solution to nuclear proliferation rather than as part of the problem,"<sup>54</sup> his administration concluded that "help[ing] India become a major world power in the twenty-first century" served American interests effectively in the face of rising Chinese power in Asia.<sup>55</sup>

Heated debates ensued in both the United States and the wider international community about the potentially dangerous consequences of extending civil nuclear cooperation to India at a time when New Delhi still rejected accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Ultimately, the successful conclusion of the Bush initiative demonstrated that the key global powers were either persuaded by the administration's claim that the agreement with India represented a "net gain for nonproliferation,"<sup>56</sup> or they chose to support it because they did not wish to damage their bilateral relations with either India or the United States by opposing New Delhi and Washington on this score.

In any event, the enormous, and ultimately fruitful, exertions of the Bush administration from 2005 to 2008, not to mention the pathbreaking Next Steps in Strategic Partnership initiative that was concluded earlier, convinced Indian elites about the sincerity of the U.S. interest in developing a new strategic partnership with India. It is a view that Bush's

successor, Barack Obama, has tried hard to sustain through his decisions to extend fuel reprocessing rights to New Delhi and to endorse India's candidacy for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council.

## CONFRONTING THE ANTINOMIES OF PARTNERSHIP

While the reconciliation over nuclear issues has removed the last outstanding policy impediment to better U.S.-Indian relations, the question of whether a genuine strategic partnership is possible still hangs out there. Bush was undoubtedly motivated to seek such an association because both he and his Indian partners—first Vajpayee and later Singh—were convinced that the common democratic bond in effect transformed their two nations into natural allies. But the United States and India have long enjoyed the benefits of democracy, yet democracy alone did not suffice to forge the close relationship that leaders of both sides had sought since India's independence. Their shared democratic identity

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undoubtedly prevented the two countries from ever becoming real antagonists, but it was unable to eliminate the political disaffection that arose regularly as a result of divergence in critical interests.

This issue is of central importance because the three structural constraints that have characterized the U.S.-Indian relationship since 1947 have not disappeared, even if their specific policy consequences have atrophied in varying degrees. Thus, for example, the contrasts in worldview still endure. The United States views inter-

national politics from the vantage point of a hegemonic power and remains determined—as it should—to preserve its primacy. In contrast, India views the international system very much as a subordinate state and desires a multipolar system that would more easily accommodate its preferences. Although this divergence may seem overly abstract at first sight, it nonetheless produces practical disagreements especially in regard to diplomatic cooperation over questions of global order.<sup>57</sup>

The differences in national priorities persist as well. The United States seeks to renew its civilian economy and its military power through domestic rejuvenation, aggressive expansion of the liberal economic system internationally, and continued renovation of its traditional

alliances. India profits from the American-led international order and desires its sturdy entrenchment in principle. But India is wedded to a much more cautious approach—contesting some elements of that regime that impinge on its sovereignty, but desiring the enlargement of its economic component centered on the multilateral trading system, even as New Delhi often impedes its expansion in an effort to protect India’s economic development from the pains of globalization.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, the asymmetries in power between the United States and India, while diminishing somewhat modestly as a result of rising Indian growth, nevertheless survive quite durably. While India is steadily doing better in regard to economic performance, it still lags behind the United States dramatically where the motor of economic growth is concerned—the capacity to foment disruptive innovation. Furthermore, there are also persistently sharp differentials in economic size and inclusive wealth, military capabilities, the availability of alliance partners, dominance in international institutions, and ideational influence.<sup>59</sup>

Given these realities, it seems unlikely that democracy by itself would be able to overcome the quite substantial gulf that divides the United States and India. In the first instance, then, a strategic partnership could prove all but elusive because the two states may have somewhat different views of what such an affiliation entails—if they could in fact summon the discipline to have a serious and sustained conversation about this issue.

Here, as in much else, the two countries are prisoners of their history and their circumstances. The United States desires the rise of Indian power as a means of strengthening the liberal international order that has served well the interests of both states. Washington has actually proved capable on occasion of making spectacular contributions toward aiding India’s ascent in global politics, but there is no unanimity about the extent of the costs that the United States should bear to help India reach this goal. With few exceptions, most American policymakers today view supporting India—through preferential access to high technology, membership in key international institutions and regimes, and the transfer of advanced military capabilities—as desirable.

But at the same time, they believe that such assistance should impose on India some minimal obligations of reciprocity. After all, in an international system populated by self-regarding egoists, nothing is truly free. And, in democratic polities, such as the United States, the power of various interest groups, such as business and civil society organizations, invariably acts as a powerful constraint even on enlightened policymakers, sometimes pushing them to make demands on their international partners that might otherwise have been avoided.<sup>60</sup> India, in contrast, continuing in the tradition defined early on by Gandhi and Nehru, welcomes all meaningful American contributions toward enhancing its national power but is fiercely protective of its freedom to part ways whenever its other interests might so demand.

Precisely because the asymmetries in relative power between the two countries are still considerable and could even grow more—not less—acute in the future, thanks to the revolutions occurring in the American economy in energy production, additive manufacturing, next-generation genomics, continuing digitization, and advanced robotics and transportation, U.S. and Indian interests could become harder to bridge, especially in the realms of trade and economic cooperation and in the management of the global system.<sup>61</sup> In such circumstances, the historical record suggests that breakthroughs in bilateral ties are likely to occur only when the stronger partner consciously adopts a liberal attitude toward the weaker associate. In this case, that would be if the United States chooses to assist New Delhi in exemplary ways—despite the proclivity of India’s governments to pull in directions that may run counter to Washington’s immediate preferences—either because India’s success is valued for its own sake or because it advances other larger American geopolitical objectives.

Whenever bilateral relations have been propelled sharply upward in the past, the momentum for such change has derived substantially from extraordinary American support to India. This assistance was proffered without any strong expectations of specific reciprocity. And while it is possible, in fact, even likely that expectations of diffuse reciprocity did cross the minds of U.S. leaders, the two key peaks in the bilateral relationship make clear that even diffuse reciprocity never functioned as a precondition for American support.

Neither Kennedy’s actions in aiding India at the height of the Sino-Indian War nor Bush’s post-Cold War civil nuclear cooperation agreement with India was driven by any transactionalism that pivoted on “specific” reciprocity. Although U.S. policymakers in each case had hoped that India would gravitate more closely toward the United States as a result of their assistance, backing New Delhi was viewed as a defensible bet even without any fundamental alteration in Indian geopolitical attitudes. The initiatives in both instances, however, were made easier by the fact that the United States was indeed preeminent in international politics and possessed vast reserves of usable power. As a result, American decisionmakers could view their support for India as a relatively low-cost burden whose strains were tolerable because of their desire to see New Delhi succeed and thereby advance Washington’s own strategic aims.

During the Cold War, Indian success mattered to the United States because it prevented a large and populous nation from falling victim to Communism or becoming trapped in its global orbit. Simultaneously, all Indian gains demonstrated to the larger international system that democracy could thrive successfully even amid great poverty and stark internal heterogeneities and that it could produce economic growth without the need for any comprehensive or coercive collectivization.

In the post-Cold War era, the necessity for Indian success—from the viewpoint of the United States—has been driven by different considerations, but ones that are no less important. At a time when the central challenge of international politics consists of coping

with China's ascendancy, aiding India's emergence as a successful great power in the future contributes toward the preservation of a regional equilibrium in Asia that advances Washington's highest geopolitical interests.<sup>62</sup>

Given such calculations, American support for New Delhi has occurred not because U.S. policymakers believed that India would, in compensation for such backing, mute its policy differences with the United States. Rather, the outreach to India has occurred despite Washington's full awareness of those differences. This detached attitude survived, in the final analysis, fundamentally because of the power disparities favoring the United States, which led to the judgment that either Indian opposition, whenever that materialized, was never significant enough to undermine Washington's attainment of its objectives or encouraging India's success would outweigh all the encumbrances that otherwise arose from New Delhi's resistance to American power.

As the bilateral relationship faces the future, however, the viability of the strategic partnership increasingly hinges on how the issue of reciprocity is conceived and resolved. At the end of the day, many in Washington believe that American support for India must ultimately precipitate some measure of corresponding Indian support for American aims. The Obama administration has in fact been accused of taking such "transactionalism" to new heights, but it is likely to represent more or less the norm that will govern U.S. policy toward New Delhi in the future. That is especially the case if various interest groups in civil society or single-minded bureaucracies within the U.S. government gain the upper hand in national policymaking. As India gradually grows in power and becomes more successful in regard to its economic development, American expectations of Indian cooperation on various issues of regional and global politics will only increase. If American power were to decline significantly over time, these expectations could further intensify. Presidents Kennedy and Bush were able to adopt unstinting policies toward New Delhi because of their perception of how India's success per se advanced larger American interests. Barring the return of such unique individuals or the rise of some dramatic new challenges to American security that would justify aiding India without expectations of reciprocity, it is probable, in other words, that future American leaders would expect greater Indian cooperation on issues that matter to Washington as the price for continued preferential support.

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Such expectations, in turn, could run afoul of India's traditional approach, which holds that any support forthcoming from the United States (or from any other nation) cannot be permitted to limit New Delhi's freedom in regard to how it responds to wider U.S. policies. The inherent tension in these two approaches can often be negotiated away by adroit diplomacy on specific issues. However, the central inconsistency between Washington's continual search for political confederates (or, at the very least, for practical support by declared partners on matters of avowed importance) and India's continual desire to avoid binding affiliations (or any actions that might even convey such an appearance) makes cementing the U.S.-Indian strategic partnership a particularly trying endeavor.

During the early years of George W. Bush's first term in office, the Indian and American national security advisers, at the prompting of Robert D. Blackwill, the U.S. ambassador to India at the time, attempted to define certain rules of engagement to manage the inherent tension between U.S. expectations of India and New Delhi's approach to international politics. Recognizing that Washington's desire for close and visible collaboration sits uneasily with New Delhi's desire for perpetual nonattachment, the two officials, Brajesh Mishra and Condoleezza Rice, agreed to engage in private consultations about their nations' specific policies as well as their expectations of each other and various other countries. The intent was to provide a means of identifying, anticipating, and managing problems before they materialized.

Against this expectation of persistent and intimate discussions, the two sides agreed to three critical norms of behavior. First, both partners would ensure that neither side was ever surprised by policy initiatives undertaken by the other (in other words, neither capital would learn of the other's decisions first through the newspapers or in international forums). Second, both nations would discuss their disagreements vigorously at the highest levels but would work to keep them private and contained to the degree possible (meaning that leaders in both capitals would seek to prevent differences on one issue from getting out of hand and subverting cooperation on other matters). Third, both parties would look for ways to support the other, especially on those concerns that deeply mattered to it (in effect, allowing for at least diffuse, if not specific, reciprocity as a means of deepening the partnership, given the high likelihood of divergence on many subjects).

The pattern of engagement between the United States and India hewed to these understandings while Vajpayee and Bush were both in office and survived well into Singh's first term. The rapport created as a result—in fact stimulated by what C. Raja Mohan has called Vajpayee's extraordinary “rush to embrace the United States”<sup>63</sup>—would lead eventually to Bush's climactic decision to extend civil nuclear cooperation to India. Unfortunately, the strategic collaboration that both nations had assiduously invested in atrophied during Prime Minister Singh's second term in office, leaving the contradictions in the U.S. and Indian approaches to partnership to once again come to the fore.<sup>64</sup>

This antithesis, however, could be less severe in the future since the traditional shared values between the United States and India are now complemented by two other important factors. First, an increasingly robust set of intersocietal ties has emerged based on growing U.S.-Indian economic and trade linkages, the new presence of Americans of Indian origin in U.S. political life, and the vibrant exchange of American and Indian ideas and culture through movies, literature, food, and travel. Second, and perhaps more important, there now exists a new and remarkable convergence of U.S. and Indian national interests in a manner never witnessed during the Cold War. Today and for the foreseeable future, the evolving challenges in the international system imply that Washington and New Delhi will be bound by common concerns that include defeating jihadi terrorism, arresting the spread of weapons of mass destruction, protecting the global commons, preserving the multilateral trading order, ensuring food and energy security, and managing climate change. These priorities will prevail even if the American and Indian approaches to dealing with them vary widely because of their differing capabilities, which often strain their capacity for cooperation.<sup>65</sup>

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## **THE CHINESE DILEMMA IN U.S.-INDIAN RELATIONS**

Beyond all these issues, however, lies one gigantic convergence of unparalleled significance: the rise of China. The reemergence of China as a global power fundamentally challenges the United States and India in different, but complementary, ways. Beijing's ascendancy would be dangerous to Washington if it precipitates a power transition at the core of the global system, undermines the U.S.-backed security system in Asia, and spawns a closed Asian trading system that excludes the United States.<sup>66</sup> That is not to mention the other challenges that would be posed to American values and interests in more peripheral regions of the world. China's growing preeminence would be dangerous to India if it results in the entrenchment of a new superpower on India's doorstep—a danger that India has never had to face in its modern history. It is one that the traditional strategy of the British Raj had attempted to ward off at all costs through a complex “ring fence” that was

intended to prevent the major external powers “from intruding upon the security cynosure of the subcontinent.”<sup>67</sup>

Independent India sought to preserve this mechanism in a modified form for many decades. Its conclusive demise is now exemplified by China’s growing warfighting capabilities along India’s terrestrial frontiers, its collusive ties with many of India’s subcontinental neighbors, and its disconcerting naval presence in the Indian Ocean. The success of these initiatives would cement what Gurmeet Kanwal has called “the strategic encirclement of India” long feared by Indian planners.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, it would permanently eclipse New Delhi as an Asian center of influence (especially in South Asia), precipitate irreversible transformations in the local military balance, and enable the successful assertion of all of Beijing’s territorial claims on New Delhi at a time when India is still incapable of mounting a successful counter-encirclement of China.<sup>69</sup>

The United States and India are thus united by the challenge of rising Chinese power, which creates for the first time objective conditions in the realm of high politics for strategic cooperation in regard to balancing China. This reality underlay the transformation in U.S.-Indian relations during the Bush administration, and the prospect of China’s continued ascent provides incentives for both nations to deepen their partnership, a perspective shared fully by the Obama administration.

Obviously, the shape and the extent of this collaboration will be determined by a multitude of variables: the robustness of China’s rise, the intensity of the assertive behaviors accompanying its advance, and the impact of such aggressiveness on American and Indian interests, respectively; the nature of the American strategic response to China’s surge; and the Indian reaction to China’s and America’s trajectories as well as their conduct. What complicates matters immensely, however, is that China today, unlike the rising powers of the past, is deeply entwined with both its global and its regional rivals—including the United States and India—by unprecedented bonds of economic interdependence. This makes security competition between these entities a mixed-sum game of enormous intricacy.<sup>70</sup>

The pressures leading to convergence in U.S.-Indian relations as a result of China’s rise, then, automatically get diluted in the first instance because of the differentials in relative interdependence between the United States and India vis-à-vis China. A cursory look at the trade linkages in recent times among the three states illustrates this fact (see table 1).

**TABLE 1. Volume of Trade Among the Three States (as a percentage)**

Year	China's Share of India's Total Trade	U.S. Share of India's Total Trade	China's Share of U.S. Total Trade	India's Share of U.S. Total Trade	U.S. Share of China's Total Trade	India's Share of China's Total Trade
2013	6.5	9.2	12.3	1.93	13.1	1.45
2012	6.5	8.9	11.9	1.91	13.5	1.59
2011	7.0	8.5	11.6	1.84	13.5	1.78
2010	7.2	9.1	11.8	1.78	14.8	1.76
2009	6.9	10.1	11.3	1.71	15.8	1.64
2008	5.9	9.4	10.1	1.53	15.3	1.45
2007	6.3	10.8	10.4	1.45	17.0	1.40
2006	5.5	10.6	9.9	1.24	18.7	1.20
2005	5.1	10.8	9.2	1.12	19.1	1.10
2004	4.1	11.6	8.4	0.99	19.0	0.79
2003	3.4	13.3	7.6	0.94	20.1	0.65
2002	2.9	14.4	6.6	0.88	22.4	0.59
2001	2.1	14.2	5.5	0.78	22.5	0.47
2000	1.7	14.8	4.9	0.76	23.1	0.41

Sources: United Nations Comtrade database; World Trade Organization (WTO) International Trade Statistics 2014, 2013, and 2010; and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).

Note: Total trade was calculated by summing exports and imports of goods and services using WTO International Trade Statistics annual reports. Share of trade is the total trade with the specific partner country divided by the total trade with all countries. Bilateral trade with the United States is based on BEA data including goods and services; bilateral trade between India and China is based on United Nations Comtrade data, which exclude services.

Judging by the most recent trade data available (from 2013), trade interdependence between the United States and China is far more significant—accounting for more than 12 and 13 percent of their national trade, respectively—than either of those countries’ trade with India (which hovers at less than 2 percent in both cases). Although the Indian shares of trade with the United States and with China are comparatively higher—exceeding 9 and

6 percent, respectively—the volumes of trade between India and the United States and between India and China are much smaller than the volume of trade occurring between the United States and China. The 2000–2013 data confirm that this has been consistently true (see table 2).

**TABLE 2: Value of Trade Among the Three States (in millions of dollars)**

Year	India-China Trade	India-U.S. Trade	U.S.-China Trade
2013	68,052	96,749	616,542
2012	68,869	93,794	585,071
2011	72,201	87,150	546,293
2010	58,689	74,048	492,294
2009	40,983	60,015	395,130
2008	41,680	66,430	437,696
2007	34,068	57,884	412,223
2006	23,468	45,344	364,776
2005	17,351	36,880	302,129
2004	10,150	28,920	245,842
2003	6,182	23,930	191,755
2002	4,152	21,002	158,145
2001	2,751	18,551	130,918
2000	2,212	19,084	124,897

Sources: United Nations Comtrade database and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).

Note: Bilateral trade with the United States is based on BEA data, including goods and services; bilateral trade between India and China is based on United Nations Comtrade data, which exclude services.

There may be good reasons for this divergence, which is rooted equally in the levels of development characterizing the three states and their respective national economic strategies. But the strategic implications are disconcerting: the divergence implies that the United States is locked into a relationship of tight interdependence with China, its potentially chief rival, while its economic links with India, its potentially strategic ally, are much weaker. Thus, although Beijing may threaten Washington’s regional and global interests to a greater extent than India ever might, the United States is constrained to be more cautious in responding to challenges involving China because the pain associated with any devastating meltdown would be very high. In contrast, all U.S. engagement with India, while important, generally falls short of being compelling because neither Washington nor

New Delhi has deepened the relationship to a point where its failure would end up costing both sides dearly.

The irony, therefore, is that despite greater fears and suspicions, the U.S.-Chinese relationship has turned out to be more important than the U.S.-Indian relationship. Hence, the attention it incurs is stronger because both the benefits of success and the penalties for failure are indeed acute. The U.S.-Indian relationship, by way of comparison, lacks such intensity and thus remains consigned primarily to the arena of the desirable—at least for now.

If the differentials in relative interdependence between the United States and India vis-à-vis China tend to weaken the convergence that should otherwise bind Washington and New Delhi more tightly, the disparities in vulnerability between the United States and India vis-à-vis China only complicate things further. Of the two democratic partners, India is clearly more exposed for two reasons: it physically abuts the Chinese mainland while the United States obviously does not, and its military capabilities are weaker than China's, in sharp contrast to the United States, whose capabilities are utterly superior to China's.

These twin realities should in principle push New Delhi and Washington closer together, but the usual impediments intrude. One is India's discomfort with being too closely affiliated with the United States, which may be due to its fears of entrapment in other U.S. conflicts, its perception that partnering with Washington too visibly might compromise its claims to independence, or its lack of confidence in the U.S. willingness to come to its assistance in any future crisis with China. This last consideration has grown in intensity in recent years: New Delhi fears that too visible an embrace of the United States might precipitate the very Chinese actions that the partnership is supported to guard against, especially when the strong interdependence in U.S.-Chinese relations could circumscribe Washington's actions in support of India. All these factors then end up weakening India's commitment to deepening the strategic partnership with the United States, no matter how attractive that might otherwise appear in principle.<sup>71</sup>

Significant impediments hobble the United States in this regard as well. For starters, many U.S. policymakers are still uncomfortable with the idea that Washington ought to extend the kind of diplomatic and material support that India seeks in the face of its persistent reluctance to more visibly support the United States, let alone ally with it, on a variety of global issues.<sup>72</sup> The notion that Washington ought to aid India's rise for its own sake, or more importantly because its growth in power might serve larger American interests by acting as an objective constraint on China's growing capabilities—even if India does not pursue any consciously pro-U.S. policies along the way—remains an all-too-subtle idea that galvanizes a small coterie of American grand strategists but has yet to find deep resonance within the larger universe of decisionmakers across the U.S. government. Even if senior officials are gradually being persuaded by its logic—and the Obama administration's record suggests success in this regard—it is not uncommon for those newly converted to

often lapse into a transactionalism that demands quid pro quos. This makes all the more arduous the challenge of persuading the lower officialdom tasked with implementing even enlightened policies.

This expectation of reciprocity from New Delhi, especially on global economic issues, is usually rooted in the failure to recognize India's still-glaring developmental deficits. The fact that India, despite its recent economic gains, remains fundamentally a developing country is frequently obscured by the rhetoric surrounding its rise, leading many a time to unreasonable—and ultimately dashed—expectations about its capacity to cooperate with the United States on various issues pertaining to international trade and commerce or preserving the global order. The bilateral disagreements over international politics derive from other sources, but they also implicate India's status as a relatively new entrant into the modern state system. Given this fact, New Delhi is apt to feverishly defend the traditional notion of sovereignty at a time when Washington and other Western capitals appear more willing to limit it in circumstances that are sometimes difficult to distinguish from the raw exercise of power.

The presence and activities of various interest groups in American society, as well as the power of strong, single-issue bureaucracies within the U.S. government, constitute the final stumbling block at the U.S. end to building a strong bilateral relationship with India. By pushing national policy to promote certain causes rather than the geopolitical interests of the country writ large, pressure group politics in Washington often ends up proving that

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Thanks to these complementary obstacles, the U.S.-Indian partnership risks forging the protection and benefits that might otherwise arise from a tighter embrace, even one clinched with finesse, subtlety, and sophistication. The United States undoubtedly values deeper cooperation with India—and, in fact, craves it. But New Delhi's traditional yearning for strategic autonomy, the fractures in Indian domestic politics that block a stronger affiliation with Washington, and the failure of several Indian governments to pursue consistent and coherent policies

toward the United States all end up exposing India to greater strategic risk in the face of rising Chinese power.

Tighter cooperation with the United States could compensate for India's inability to successfully balance China through internal means alone. But as the Sino-Indian War ought to have demonstrated, the long-standing Indian inclination to eschew tighter cooperation potentially leaves New Delhi in a situation where it lacks the resources within and without to cope with the worst manifestations of Chinese power. Certainly, India is much stronger today than it was in 1962, and it will only get stronger over time. But the essence of its predicament is unchanged—and shows no signs of easing. Power in the international system, after all, is always relative, and, for the moment at least, Chinese power appears to be outstripping India's across almost every dimension and in some cases by orders of magnitude.<sup>74</sup>

Over time, the Indian avoidance of singular collaboration with the United States may prove to be right. That is, it may turn out to be justified if, as many Indian analysts argue, Indian growth rates begin to approximate China's current pace at some point in the future (while China's own prospective growth rates begin to flag), and if the Indian economy begins to rival China's in technological capacity, if not in size.<sup>75</sup>

If such an outcome occurs, India's desire to stay nonaligned in the interim will have paid off. But much can happen in this intervening period, and not all of it good for either India or the United States, while the interlude itself could prove to be extended and long-drawn-out. In such circumstances, India could find itself potentially adrift even as Washington would be hard-pressed to justify preferential support for New Delhi at a time when U.S. relations with China—however problematic they might be on many counts—turn out to be deeper, more encompassing, and, at least where the production of wealth is concerned, more fruitful.

The complexity of the triangular relationship between the United States, China, and India, therefore, suggests that, although the rise of Chinese power ought to naturally intensify ties between Washington and New Delhi, the U.S.-Indian strategic partnership remains something to be produced by assiduous effort on both sides rather than a spontaneous outcome that materializes automatically. The nature of the mature Chinese threat, the viability of the Indian preference for internal balancing, and the future of American power and how it might be exercised are all still unclear. As a result, the fruitfulness and durability of the U.S.-Indian association in regard to China can be neither predicted a priori nor simply assumed.

The success of U.S.-Indian bilateral relations during the Bush era, however, suggests that three ingredients were essential: policy entrepreneurs with “big ideas,” a strong and determined leadership at the highest levels on both sides, and committed “pile drivers” within the bureaucracy capable of implementing their leaders' intent.<sup>76</sup> Absent any one of these factors,

the transformation of bilateral relations will continue to be stymied because the headwinds impeding the productive evolution of this relationship are still strong on both sides.

In the United States, bolstering ties with India is still not a pressing foreign policy priority given that Washington has stronger and more committed allies willing to readily partner with it in managing the challenges posed by a rising China. In India, the U.S. relationships with both Pakistan and China fuel doubts about American credibility in different ways, and the country as a whole has yet to rid itself of old suspicions of the United States nurtured during the Cold War. The current Indian dissatisfaction with U.S. policy in Afghanistan, especially insofar as it implicates Pakistan, holds the potential for deepening New Delhi's grievances against Washington, particularly if the security environment in Afghanistan were to corrode beyond repair in the aftermath of the American withdrawal.

While some of these impediments could erode over time, the fact remains that meaningful bilateral cooperation will be challenging even when Washington and New Delhi agree on many issues. The differentials in raw power between the United States and India are still too great and could produce differences in operational objectives, even when the overarching interests are eminently compatible. Beyond raw power, bilateral collaboration could be stymied by competing national preferences over the strategies used to realize certain objectives. Moreover, even when disagreement over strategies is not at issue, differences in negotiating styles and tactics may sometimes divide the two sides. Finally, both nations, being democracies, are always susceptible to the vagaries of domestic politics, which could sometimes pull them in directions that defy rational policy.

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# THE STRUGGLE FOR PARTNERSHIP: HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

All these elements collectively suggest that the U.S.-Indian strategic partnership will continue to be neither effortless nor easy. Short of the most desperate circumstances—which would surely have a greater impact on India than on the United States—it is highly unlikely that the partnership will result in the two nations agreeing to a formal alliance of any sort. The most valuable operational bequest that U.S.-Indian engagement could yield, therefore, is continuous and intimate consultation on a wide range of global, and not simply bilateral, issues. If these parleys prove to be productive, they would lead to strategic coordination. This would entail Washington and New Delhi working toward the attainment of certain common goals, tacitly for the most part but without excluding the possibility of conscious collaboration whenever that proves appropriate or necessary.

When the prospects for a genuine strategic partnership are considered, therefore, the key point is that achieving such an outcome would be laborious, but it is possible—if both sides can agree on how to manage the problem of reciprocity. Because the differences in relative power between the United States and India will persist for a long time to come, this challenge is best handled through a set of complementary policies—one arising out of Washington, the other from New Delhi—that together are most aptly characterized as “unity in difference.”

## TASKS FOR THE UNITED STATES

At the American end, U.S. policy toward India should be rooted consistently in the geopolitical imperatives that drove the transformation of bilateral relations. That is, the necessity of preventing Asia from being dominated by any single power that has the capacity to crowd out others and pursue assertive policies that endanger the security and the autonomy of the local states as well as threaten America's presence in the region and its ties with all its Asian partners. The country that is most likely to undermine American and Indian interests in this way today and for the foreseeable future—and from a position of strength—is China. Consequently, U.S.-Indian relations, whether acknowledged publicly or not, ought to be grounded on the ambition of creating an Asian order that serves the vital interests

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of both states. Washington, for its part, has long reconciled itself to the reality that India will never become a formal ally in this endeavor, but that by itself does not preclude meaningful cooperation in diverse areas of high politics.

Such a partnership does not entail the containment of China. But it does require a conscious effort at balancing Beijing in ways that diverge significantly from the traditional U.S. policy of integrating China into the global order—the policy followed by every U.S. administration since Jimmy Carter's.<sup>77</sup> A strategy of balancing China has diverse components by necessity. Where New Delhi is concerned, it requires Washington to purposefully

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assist the rise of Indian power—in tandem with similar policies directed toward other states on China's periphery—to create a sturdy continental equilibrium that prevents Beijing from misusing its growing capabilities.

Even though India obviously stands to benefit from American support, this assistance should not be viewed as a favor to New Delhi requiring either strict or loose reciprocity. Any Indian requital would obviously be welcome in this context. Even if no repayment were forthcoming, though, it still remains in Washington's interest to bolster Indian power because such an investment, at least for now, promises to advance the objective of limiting the rise of a local hegemony in Asia that could undermine America's enduring strategic interests.

To be sure, China's global emergence could yet sputter because of its own serious internal contradictions. That outcome would obviously make the compensatory strategy of

supporting India's rise less pressing. But U.S. policymakers cannot count on the Chinese challenge shriveling of its own accord. And on current evidence, the likelihood that Beijing will appear as a serious competitor to the United States is high, whatever the vicissitudes confronting the Chinese leadership may be in the interim. China, at any rate, appears to be preparing itself for this possibility.<sup>78</sup> Given these realities, Washington ought to aid New Delhi in various ways despite the costs entailed for the United States. These outlays are not particularly onerous to begin with, given the U.S. advantages in wealth and power vis-à-vis India. They are worth the sacrifice in any case because the stakes are so high. With alternative strategies such as containing China remaining beyond reach, augmenting India's capabilities as part of building a larger Asian balance that favors American interests remains the best option for now. The irritations and frustrations that invariably accompany any partnership with New Delhi do not change that.<sup>79</sup>

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There is no doubt that the United States could cope with the rise of Chinese power independently, without any reference to India, if it chose to. Such a course of action, however, would be costlier than one that required investing in a major regional actor, such as India, because of New Delhi's specific geography and power-political attributes as well as the persistence of its own reasons for resisting Beijing, again in its own distinctive way.

At the end of the day, the ultimate rationale for bolstering New Delhi is that it is Washington that stands to gain the most from any successful strategy of balancing China. Thwarting the emergence of any unconstrained challenger to its status as the only hegemonic power in the world today bestows on the United States greater advantages than that accruing to any other nation. Consequently, the burdens of abetting the expansion of countervailing Indian power and that of other Asian states to China must be treated as a necessary investment (among other complementary initiatives) in preserving American primacy for yet another long cycle in world politics.<sup>80</sup>

Senior American policymakers should undoubtedly encourage India to reciprocate their liberality by cooperating with Washington whenever possible on various bilateral and global issues. Yet they should resist the temptation of demanding recompense in big or small ways (except perhaps as a negotiating ploy on occasion) because bolstering Indian power remains of strategic value to the United States in the larger context of managing China as an emerging competitor. Such cooperation with New Delhi, obviously, should be conducted with due sensitivity to the ever-present need of all Indian governments to save

face—the desire to be seen as full and credible partners—in part because the character of relations with any stronger state invariably becomes a larger issue of domestic politics in the weaker country.

Deepening the collaboration with India will, therefore, require both forbearance and discipline on the part of senior national security managers in Washington because, absent these virtues, their subordinate bureaucracies—the organs of government that actually implement political initiatives—are likely to lose sight of the nation’s larger strategic interests and are apt to push for pet policies toward India that tend to be transactional in nature. Any determined presidential leadership must also be capable of resisting the tug and pull emanating from interest groups in civil society that would like to extract various concessions from India as the price for continued U.S. support. Surmounting these challenges in a democracy, however difficult, is nonetheless essential for realizing the larger American objective of preserving “a balance of power that favors freedom” in Asia.<sup>81</sup>

## TASKS FOR INDIA

A return to calculated magnanimity in this way is thus important at the U.S. end for the future success of the strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi because of the continuing American advantages in power vis-à-vis India. At the Indian end, a different, but complementary, logic prevails. No matter how rational it may be for the United States to aid India unconditionally because of the gains accruing to its own power position internationally, there is always some risk that Washington will fail to implement such a policy effectively or consistently. There are many reasons for this. Among them are: genuine uncertainties about the durability of China’s rise, differences in conviction or priority among presidents about the value of investing in India vis-à-vis an emerging China, doubts about the benefits accruing to Washington from specific concessions toward New Delhi, crosscutting pressures of bureaucratic politics that prevent desirable strategic initiatives from being realized, and compulsions to accommodate demands for alternative policies emerging from various special interests in civil society.

Given the potential for transactionalism arising from such factors, New Delhi should be doing its utmost to reinforce the incentives for American policymakers to pursue preferential policies toward India. There is no better way for achieving this aim than by seeking to deepen cooperation with the United States meaningfully and across the board. These actions, emerging out of New Delhi, should be motivated, just as in Washington, entirely out of self-interest. That is, far from assuming that the United States can and will aid India persistently because of the larger benefits to itself, Indian security managers should be acting in ways that constantly entice Washington to behave in exactly such a fashion.

For such an approach to bear fruit, however, India will have to shed its traditional expectation that it should be supported by American resources always for its own sake, that India's importance warrants perpetual special treatment of the kind afforded to American allies or to no other, even while Indian leaders persist in maintaining their prerogative to oppose American policies, sometimes on marginal issues, in international forums. Successfully working in concert in the future will, therefore, require both sides, but especially New Delhi, to recognize the importance of "the exchange of considerations."<sup>82</sup> This approach should be taken to heart particularly in New Delhi, which traditionally has been more comfortable promulgating high principles than muddying its hands in considered deal making.

Beyond jettisoning its persistent habit of "getting to no,"<sup>83</sup> India needs to do two things right if it is to successfully collaborate with the United States on an enduring basis. For starters, it would help immensely if New Delhi could clarify for its American interlocutors its understanding of the term "strategic partnership." Specifically, it needs to explain how this affiliation with Washington stacks up against the more than 30 other strategic partnerships India enjoys with countries as diverse as Argentina, Canada, Iran, Japan, Mozambique, Russia, South Africa, and South Korea. It also needs to spell out what it believes to be the obligations of such an association in the myriad areas of high politics.

To date, India has been reticent to speak clearly on this issue. While U.S. policymakers have been transparent about how India fits into American strategic interests, Indian leaders have either shied away from addressing this matter or responded to it in banalities. Prime Minister Modi, for example, has been eloquent about the importance of U.S. resources for accelerating Indian economic development. But given the opportunity during private conversations with President Obama to discuss his vision of how the United States fits into India's grand strategy, and even when directly queried about it during his public address to the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, the prime minister conspicuously demurred.<sup>84</sup> India's minister for external affairs, Sushma Swaraj, did only marginally better when, in response to a journalist's question about the meaning of the strategic partnership, she peremptorily declared, "Strategic partnership has definite definition. If you have partnership in the area of trade, defense and space, then that partnership is called strategic partnership. So, there is no ambiguity about that."<sup>85</sup>

While silence and platitudes might satisfy the demands of politics and public diplomacy, they cannot persuade U.S. decisionmakers who want to know if the value they place on nurturing a special relationship with India finds reciprocal regard in New Delhi. Stated bluntly, if India is to enjoy the kind of preferential support that the United States usually extends only to its closest allies, its leaders must be able to offer their American counterparts a vision of strategic partnership that they would find both appealing and consistent with their own conceptions of the national interest.

In other words, they will want to know how India imagines positioning itself as a partner that is valuable enough to warrant receiving privileged political support as well as preferential access to America's most sophisticated capabilities. This kind of discussion, which is necessary to attract Washington's unstinting support for New Delhi, will not revolve around particular initiatives or modalities pertaining to process, important though those might be. Instead, the conversation will have to be about the highest aims of both countries in a national as well as international context, how each fits into the other's vision of realizing these aspirations, and how they propose to collaborate in achieving these goals despite their particular constraints.

Gaining clarity about these fundamental questions is essential to rescuing the strategic partnership between the United States and India from both derision and vacuity. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there is currently no task more important where rebuilding bilateral ties is concerned. The two states must achieve a common understanding of what the strategic partnership entails, and all else will follow; fail on that count, and nothing both sides do right on the minutiae will save its consolidation.

Addressing this task should become a near-term priority for Prime Minister Modi. He has already conveyed through several actions, big and small, that Washington enjoys an important place in his calculations because of the difference the United States can make in helping India realize its economic and strategic ambitions. What is needed now is a direct affirmation of this judgment in conversations with President Obama and other senior U.S. policymakers (to include the U.S. Congress), particularly because the United States and India are likely to remain engulfed by complex disagreements on several issues such as Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Ukraine, and perhaps even China, not to mention climate change, global governance, and international trade—divergences that could derail the effort at shoring up the U.S.-Indian strategic partnership if it is not insulated by a clear conviction about its importance for New Delhi.

The effort at articulating the priority that India places on special ties with the United States must lead naturally to the second element essential to the objective of sustaining ungrudging American support for New Delhi: actually cooperating with Washington on various issues across the widest possible canvas. The strategic imperatives underlying such collaboration will always remain Indian self-interest, which in this instance is oriented toward sustaining the U.S. commitment to aiding India's emergence as a great power. Nothing would intensify American investments in this regard more than evidence that India was actively looking for ways to walk the extra mile with or for the United States.

The Vajpayee government, with its record of bilateral cooperation between 2001 and 2004, set the gold standard in this regard, chalking up achievements that have never been matched since, including by Manmohan Singh who was otherwise deeply committed to forging

strong ties with the United States. Whether the issue involved support for the Bush administration's "new strategic framework," the offer of Indian military facilities for Operation Enduring Freedom, the Indian Navy's protection of U.S. cargo in the Strait of Malacca, or the careful Indian response during the lead-up to the U.S. war in Iraq, Vajpayee's policies demonstrated that India was, as Condoleezza Rice once put it, "prepared to think differently."<sup>86</sup> And not simply think, but actually act, differently. In other words, it was exactly the kind of posture that encouraged the United States to seek ever more creative ways of extending favors to India, just the attitude New Delhi should aim to permanently congeal in Washington as it looks to the future.

The necessity of motivating the United States to demonstrate continued partiality toward India has now increased because of Modi's new approach to the U.S.-Indian strategic partnership. Two of his predecessors, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, fervently believed that India needed the United States more than was true in reverse. Unlike them, Modi confidently told Obama during his recent visit to Washington that the United States and India needed each other. Irrespective of whether this proposition is factual, such a view of the relationship imposes significant obligations of reciprocity on India. It implies that India, too, would have to contribute in exemplary ways toward assuring the success of the strategic partnership. Such gestures obviously would be welcome in Washington.

India's contributions in this regard need not be restricted to the mutual exchange of favors. In fact, everything India could do to partner with the United States in achieving common goals globally or multilaterally would count in spades. More to the point, even if the Modi government were to focus relentlessly on completing the second-generation economic reforms in India so as to deepen trade linkages with the United States (thus erasing unfavorable comparisons with China), stimulate increased bilateral investments in both countries (thereby nurturing new constituencies with tangible stakes in the success of the other), and accelerate Indian national growth so as to improve the well-being of Indian society and the robustness of the Indian state (accordingly making New Delhi a capital of consequence in the Asian geopolitical stakes), India will have come a long way in being able to assume the burdens of partnership that Modi's conception of symmetrical dependence entails.

Unfortunately, Modi's record thus far has not lived up to the expectations inherent in his vision. U.S. ideas for cooperation in defeating Ebola were met with a faltering response, with New Delhi unable to satisfy even modest administration requests. U.S. calls for collaboration in confronting Islamic State militants proved unpersuasive, as India responded with an unwillingness to contribute anything except rhetoric. And even on defense, where U.S. proposals to cooperatively develop India's next-generation aircraft carrier are patently in New Delhi's interest, the reticence of Indian officials hindered the conclusion of an agreement. None of these responses bodes well for institutionalizing the reciprocity implied by Modi's desire to deepen bilateral ties.

His failure to get India's domestic economic reforms off to a blazing start has proven to be even more problematic. Already, the undercurrent of anxiety in both India and the United States about Modi's willingness to attack the central problem of India's political economy—reducing the overbearing role of the state—is steadily rising, justifying the charge articulated by one of India's most distinguished reformers, Arun Shourie, that, to the contrary, Modi's government “continue[s] to do the opposite.”<sup>87</sup> Even the prime minister's strongest supporters, such as Ashok Malik, have warned that “the Modi government's ‘say-do’ ratio is at the edge of perilous territory.”<sup>88</sup> This inability to pursue comprehensive reform has consequences that go beyond stifling Indian economic development. It denies the most important interest groups in American society, such as business, the opportunity to become true champions of India within the United States. Instead, these interest

groups are turned into detractors that end up exacerbating the ever-present temptations for transactional relations.

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Finally, and perhaps most problematically, Modi's short term in office has coincided with an uncomfortable upsurge in confessional nationalism driven by extremist Hindu groups, often against India's religious minorities, mainly Muslims and Christians. Modi is not known to have encouraged this intolerance. At the same time, he has shied away from vociferously condemning members of his own government and party who have issued provocative pronouncements that disturb communal harmony.<sup>89</sup> As one Indian commentator, Ravinder Kaur, noted pointedly, “While not making a single misstep on

social and secular issues, Modi has maintained a stoic silence on the dangerous pronouncements and actions of BJP ideologues.... How does one read his silence? Is Modi, as prime minister, not in a position to pronounce on the misdemeanors of people from his party? Does his silence not reflect his acquiescence?”<sup>90</sup>

Although such concerns appear at first glance to pertain entirely to Indian domestic politics, there are potentially grave implications for the U.S.-Indian strategic partnership. Any fundamental corrosion of liberal democracy in India would make it a less attractive partner for the United States, given the solidarity deriving from common values. It also would undercut Modi's growth and development agenda at home and by implication deprive American investors of fresh opportunities in India. Furthermore, it would inflame

advocates of religious freedom in Washington—many of whom have neither forgiven nor forgotten Modi’s role in the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat—and could precipitate a process that ends up bringing upon India exactly the kind of political pressure that New Delhi dislikes.

Thankfully, these myriad problems are neither irresolvable nor have they reached crisis proportions yet. And Modi can defuse these headaches if he moves with the discipline, determination, and urgency that he displayed in spades during his election campaign. But his reticence to do so thus far suggests that, when all is said and done, it will perhaps be some time before India can actually bear the burdens of an equal partnership with the United States, though its present desire to do so clearly represents a new and welcome maturing of its role.

## **CONCLUSION: UNITY IN DIFFERENCE ONCE MORE**

For the foreseeable future, Washington must be reconciled to the fact that the success of the bilateral relationship will require asymmetrical American contributions both because of the power-political advantages enjoyed by the United States vis-à-vis India and because all American investments made in enhancing Indian power ultimately represent contributions toward cementing American primacy in international politics for a while longer.

Conscious U.S. movement toward such a pattern of engagement is obviously difficult for a country accustomed to dealing mainly with either allies or adversaries.<sup>91</sup> India can certainly help the process, and its own cause as well, by articulating—publicly to the extent possible—a geopolitical vision that preserves a special priority for the United States. Looking for creative ways in which to demonstrate solidarity with Washington while also remaining true to its own founding ethos would be immensely helpful. All of this would reward U.S. policymakers for their benefaction merely as a way to continually elicit American support for accelerating India’s economic development and its rise to power.

Even if these new terms of association—the “unity in difference” that characterizes this strategic solution—can be successfully forged to engender productive bilateral cooperation in the future, each partner is likely to emphasize different aspects of the quest. For the United States, the ultimate value of the U.S.-Indian relationship is that it helps preserve American primacy. It achieves this by cementing an affiliation that aids in the preservation of the balance of power in Asia, enhances American competitiveness and enlarges its markets through deepened linkages with a growing Indian economy, and strengthens the American vision of a concert of democratic states by incorporating a major non-Western exemplar of success such as India. For India, the ultimate value of the U.S.-Indian relationship is that it helps New Delhi to expand its national power more easily than it might have

done otherwise. It also limits the dangers that might be posed by unrestrained Chinese power. And, finally, it helps to legitimize India's entrance on the world stage if such occurs with American acquiescence, not to mention support.

Any growth that occurs in Indian capabilities in this way leads inexorably toward a multipolar world—a reality that, strictly speaking, implies the demise of American hegemony. But the leadership in New Delhi is realistic enough to understand that American primacy is unlikely to be dethroned anytime soon and certainly not as a result of the growth of Indian power. Rather, Indian national ambitions will find assertion in geographic and issue areas that are more likely to be contested immediately by China than by the United States. As such, astute American and Indian policymakers recognize that only protective benefits accrue to New Delhi from American primacy, despite India's own formal—but not substantive—discomfort with such a concept.<sup>92</sup>

Given this fact, a close U.S.-Indian bilateral relationship is both possible and fundamentally necessary because both countries will be increasingly critical to the achievement of those goals valued by each side. This consideration acquires even greater salience given that, despite any tensions in the two countries' grand strategies or national priorities, no differences in vital interests would cause either state to levy mortal threats against the other or to undercut the other's core objectives on any issue of strategic importance. These two realities, informed by the convergence in interests, values, and intersocietal ties, provide a basis for practical cooperation between the United States and India.

The U.S.-Indian affiliation is thus unique among Washington's relationships with the other major, continent-sized nations in Asia. The fact that the United States and India have never threatened each other's security by force of arms despite moments of deep disagreement provides an enormous cushion of comfort in the bilateral relationship. And the fact that taking up arms against each other going forward is inconceivable insulates policymakers on both sides from having to confront the prospect of how to manage such a scenario. U.S. relations with Russia and China enjoy no comparable protection.

Therefore, even when U.S.-Indian relations may be confronted by profound disputes, these altercations would be no better and no worse than those arising with other friends and allies. This phenomenon in effect bounds the lowest limits of the relationship. While disagreements between friends and allies are never desirable, there is at least the reassurance that any such dispute will not end in violent conflict, and that by itself creates the opportunity for exploring positive-sum solutions. If such outcomes can be produced, the continuing struggle for an enduring U.S.-Indian partnership will have proven to be a worthwhile investment in the long-term security and relative power positions of both India and the United States.

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# NOTES

- 1 Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence Revisited," *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 745.
- 2 The term "structural" here is not used in the strict sense understood in contemporary international relations theory. Of the various factors identified, only the characteristics of the environment within which national actions occur (meaning the systemic distribution of power) would be a structural attribute. The positional weight of the United States and India in the international system and their political aims would be unit-level attributes. Yet, they are all labeled as structural factors in this paper only to highlight their durable quality.
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