

India's Quest for Continuity in the Face of Change

Unlike the dominant sentiment in the United States and many other countries for change in Washington, New Delhi seeks continuity in its engagement with the next U.S. administration. Although much of the world cannot wait to see the back of the Bush administration, New Delhi, in contrast, immensely values the historic changes already wrought by the Clinton and Bush administrations in the U.S. approach to India. President Bill Clinton ended the historic U.S. tilt toward Pakistan in its protracted conflict with India over Jammu and Kashmir. President George W. Bush has sought to resolve the long-standing U.S. dispute with India on nonproliferation with a civil nuclear initiative that integrates India into the global order on terms favorable to New Delhi. Such a partnership is important for both countries, the South Asian region, policy toward Iran, and the management of China's rise.

Reimagining Bilateral Ties

These basic changes could not have been possible without Washington's acceptance, grudging or otherwise and under two vastly different administrations, of India's exceptionalism. The admiration of Clinton and Bush for India's democracy, the prospect of a rapid economic transformation of more than one billion people, and a recognition of India's potential to emerge as a great power on the world stage contributed to Washington's willingness to treat India differently. Together, Clinton and Bush removed two of the most important national grievances that steadily drove India away from the United

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States during the Cold War, helped build a new level of mutual trust, and opened the door for a reordering of the bilateral relationship.

Nowhere is this transformation more evident than in rapidly expanding Indian-U.S. bilateral defense cooperation. Besides a new intensity of exchanges between the armed forces of the two countries aimed at generating interoper-

ability, India has begun to purchase U.S. military platforms for the first time in six decades. The acquisition of the USS *Trenton* in 2007 and the decision to buy C-130 military transport aircraft in 2008 are merely appetizers for what could turn out to be massive defense industrial cooperation and greater cooperation in shared military objectives, such as protection of sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean.

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The idea that India must be treated exceptionally has been a fundamental premise at the very source of Bush's controversial civil nuclear initiative with India.¹ Despite the criticism of a number of former Clinton administration officials regarding the nuclear initiative, Democratic senators and representatives came out in large numbers at the end of 2006 to support the passage of the Hyde Act, which revised U.S. nonproliferation law to facilitate renewed civilian nuclear cooperation with India subject to various conditions. The new U.S. policy toward India is also based on a second, unstated premise that the fruits of U.S. engagement might be slow in coming and that patience is a necessary virtue in dealing with India. Finally, it involves a third premise that India will not fit into the traditional alliance structures of the kind Washington has had with its friends in Europe and Asia. Put another way, the current U.S. policy is to support India without an expectation of immediate returns and automatic reciprocity. It is rooted in the belief that a strong democratic India will serve U.S. interests in large parts of the world, especially in preserving the Asian balance of power and sustaining peace and stability in the Indian Ocean littoral.

By any stretch, these U.S. assumptions about India are audacious and certainly uncharacteristic. The United States does not often cut such slack to other powers. Not surprisingly, these premises have been greeted with considerable skepticism in the U.S. foreign policy establishment.² It required Bush's stubborn political convictions to sustain a creative U.S. policy toward India in spite of the frustrating pace of India's strategic evolution. It will not be surprising if the next president, especially a Democratic one, might be tempted to discard the notion of Indian exceptionalism. Unlike the Bush administration, the Clinton team, for example, was reluctant to promote a strategic partnership with India in the nuclear arena.

Even if the new president believes in the importance of a strategic partnership with India, without firm political protection from the top, the vast U.S. bureaucracy might return to the old framework of treating India as just another nation that is neither an ally nor an adversary. Old issues such as Kashmir and nuclear proliferation could once again come to haunt the bilateral relationship, especially amidst the current volatility in the U.S.-Pakistani relationship and New Delhi's domestic political difficulties in implementing the civil nuclear initiative. New issues of contention might emerge between India and the United States and prevent the two sides from consolidating recent gains.

Some would argue that structural changes that have already occurred at the national, regional, and international levels are strong enough to sustain the momentum in Indian-U.S. relations. Yet, that perspective does not in any way preclude the necessity for consciously tending the India account in Washington.

Recasting the Great Game in South Asia

If Clinton broke from the zero-sum game that had characterized U.S. policy toward India and Pakistan, Bush presided over an unprecedented simultaneous improvement in U.S. relations with Pakistan and India, advancing both bilateral relationships on their individual merits.³ At the same time, U.S. policy has ended the mutual suspicion between New Delhi and Washington of each other's intentions in the rest of the subcontinent. The Bush administration has consciously chosen to defer to Indian leadership in promoting peace and stability in South Asia's smaller countries. Washington has been quite happy to let New Delhi take the lead in Nepal's transition toward a republic and in handling other crises in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Pakistan, however, has been an important exception to this new U.S. regional policy. The United States has been reluctant, for seemingly good reasons, to be seen as talking to India on the future of Pakistan or Afghanistan, let alone exploring the prospects for joint actions to stabilize the two nations.

The next administration should develop an integrated and strategic view of the subcontinent and synergize the now-separate policies toward India and Pakistan based on four new premises. First, Washington and New Delhi have a shared interest in the stability of Pakistan and its emergence as a modern, moderate, and democratic nation. Neither Washington nor New Delhi can help restore stability in Pakistan on their own. Acting together, they might have a reasonable chance to engineer a safe landing for Pakistan from its deepening domestic crises.

Second, an integrated view toward India and Pakistan does not mean that the next administration, especially a Democratic one, should go back to hectoring New Delhi on the Kashmir dispute. India and Pakistan have managed to sustain

a rather productive peace process since 2004. Bush's firm decision to eschew diplomatic activism on Kashmir has allowed New Delhi and Islamabad to begin a historic negotiation on the dispute within a bilateral framework.⁴ The challenge for the next administration is to promote a grand reconciliation between India and Pakistan without interposing itself directly in their negotiations. In the short term, the task will be to prevent the unraveling of the Indian-Pakistani peace process amidst a potential failure of the new Pakistani civilian govern-

ment to prevent cross-border terrorism.

Third, U.S. prospects of prevailing in Afghanistan will rapidly improve if India and Pakistan can be encouraged to work together rather than compete for influence in Kabul. This need not be considered an impossible task. Realists in the Indian strategic community are beginning to recognize that India's interests in Afghanistan are much larger than merely need-

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ding Pakistan. They also now recognize India cannot significantly expand its role in Afghanistan in opposition to Pakistan. New Delhi is concerned that failure of the U.S. war on terrorism along the Durand Line, which separates Afghanistan and Pakistan, will shift the frontlines much closer to India.⁵ Meanwhile, Pakistan's long-standing policy of seeking "strategic depth" in Afghanistan, the legacy of British Indian policy toward Kabul, has failed. British India had the luxury of a united subcontinent and its massive resources to extend its influence into Afghanistan as part of its rivalry with other great powers. Pakistan, which never had the resources to acquire the strategic depth on its own, now finds the "Great Game" being played on its own territory and faces a loss of sovereign authority over the tribal areas along the Durand Line.⁶

As the template of the conflict across the Durand Line changes, the next administration should promote the idea of an annual trilateral summit among the top leaders of Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. It should encourage the three of them to negotiate a liberal trade and transit treaty that will allow Afghanistan to access the larger Indian market, India to gain overland access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and Pakistan to benefit from large volumes of transit trade. This framework could benefit all three countries. The regions between Kabul and New Delhi were once part of a single economic space. Restoring that connectivity and ending mutual rivalry will provide a regional core that could complement the U.S. objective of stabilizing the northwestern parts of the subcontinent.

Finally, it is in the United States' interest to promote the rapid regional integration of South Asia and facilitate its emergence as an economic community that could eventually rival China in size and dynamism. An internally

integrated South Asia under Indian economic leadership can also become an important U.S. partner in stabilizing the abutting regions of the Persian Gulf and Central and Southeast Asia.

The Tehran Trouble

As Iran's power and influence expand in the Persian Gulf, the next U.S. president has the opportunity to treat India as a potential partner, rather than a problem, in stabilizing that energy-rich and volatile region. Throughout the Bush administration's second term, the U.S. foreign policy establishment sought to make Iran a test for the credibility of New Delhi's commitment to build a long-term political partnership with Washington. Although India voted twice against Tehran in its nuclear dispute with the international community during 2005–2006 at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), stood by the sanctions regime imposed by the UN Security Council, and openly proclaimed its opposition to an Iranian nuclear program, there has been unceasing noise in Washington about India's relations with Iran and a microscopic examination of every single contact between New Delhi and Tehran.⁷

It is not often that the United States cuts such slack to other powers.

U.S. analysts have tended to overestimate India's engagement with Iran, which is far less in its scope and depth in comparison to those of Beijing and Moscow with Tehran and far less threatening than the nuclear relationship between Islamabad and Tehran. Putting India to a "loyalty oath" on Iran is hardly the way to build a strategic partnership with New Delhi, especially when Washington itself is deeply divided over the strategy and tactics of coping with Tehran's rise and the pace of its nuclear weapons program.

Given its tradition of an independent foreign policy and its massive Muslim minority of more than 150 million, India cannot be a cheerleader for Washington at every twist and turn in its confrontation with Iran. Nor is there a case to be made that India is the United States' main problem in Iran. Every attempt in Washington to put India in the dock on Iran has produced an inevitable backlash in India that New Delhi is surrendering its foreign policy autonomy to Washington. Domestic critics of India's expanding engagement with the United States have used the Iran question to mobilize the large Muslim constituency in India against the ruling Congress Party and the civil nuclear initiative its government had negotiated with Washington.⁸ The government, in turn, has had to posture constantly that it remains committed to engaging Iran.

Looking beyond the domestic dynamics of New Delhi's foreign policy debate on Tehran, India's engagement with Iran is inconsequential in comparison to its engagement with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Although Iran is important in India's considerations of long-term energy security, it is by no means the principal source of petroleum for India; it provides less than 10 percent of India's petroleum imports. In contrast, Saudi Arabia is the largest supplier of hydrocarbons to India, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is among India's five largest trading partners. The Indian migrant labor pool in the six Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) now stands at nearly five million and contributes massively to external hard-currency remittances. In contrast, barely 500 Indian families live in Iran.

As skyrocketing oil prices produce windfalls for the Arab states of the Gulf, economic integration between those states and India is bound to pick up renewed momentum. This integration, combined with the fact that the Arab states of the Gulf will have to face most of the security consequences of a rising Iran, open up new possibilities for Indian-U.S. strategic cooperation in the Gulf. Some U.S. analysts recognize the parallel U.S. and Indian policies in the Gulf.⁹ The next U.S. administration should encourage India's fledgling military diplomacy in the Gulf, which has cultivated security ties with a number of smaller states in the region, especially Oman and the UAE.

After King Abdullah's visit to India in January 2006, the first by a Saudi monarch in nearly a half-century, there is a new basis for strategic partnership between New Delhi and Riyadh that is entirely in Washington's interest. The next administration should also go beyond merely opposing the proposed Iran-India-Pakistan natural gas pipeline. The political symbolism of this project has overshadowed its commercial viability. Whatever its public posturing on the pipeline project may be, New Delhi knows that many technical hurdles need to be overcome. Moreover, the United States' preferred alternative, the pipeline from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Iran, has even more difficulties to surmount. A new administration in Washington should instead support the construction of an underwater pipeline from the Gulf to India that will solidify the links between the two regions and further reduce Iran's salience in India's energy security considerations. Above all, promoting a deeper partnership between India and Saudi Arabia will help reduce the impact of the Muslim question on New Delhi's foreign policy.

Balancing China's Rise

The question of balancing China has been an important subtext in the dramatic expansion of the Indian-U.S. relationship during the Bush years. In contrast to Clinton, who saw Beijing as a strategic partner, Bush saw China

as a potential peer competitor at the beginning of his first term. Although the focus shifted to the Middle East after the September 11 attacks, China came back into focus in the second term of the Bush administration. Since 2005, the United States has sought to reinforce the traditional alliances in Asia as well as put them into a multilateral framework. Beyond the trilateralization of U.S. military engagement with Japan and Australia, the development of the idea of a “democratic quad” that will include India has been an important contribution of the Bush administration.¹⁰

The next administration will be torn between two competing impulses. Across the political aisle in the United States, there is general enthusiasm for the idea that democracies in Asia and the world must embark on political collaboration. Presumptive Republican nominee Senator John McCain (Ariz.) has talked of building a league of democracies, and many leading lights on the Democratic side have proposed something similar: the construction of a concert of democracies. Yet, the pursuit of this idea, particularly within the narrower context of Asia, will inevitably run into questions about China’s response. Even during the Bush years, sections of the U.S. bureaucracy have been wary of constructing a mechanism that is bound to be perceived in Beijing as part of a hostile maneuver against it. In the next few years, it is not difficult to visualize a Democratic-dominated Congress becoming sharper in its criticism of Beijing’s internal and external policies. At the same time, a Democratic administration might be averse to taking a balance of power approach to the rise of China in Asia. There is some apprehension in Japan and India that the next administration, if Democratic, might just return to the Clinton policy of putting China first in its approach to Asia. This development might undercut the presumption of a strategic convergence of Indian and U.S. interests in Asia.

India, in turn, needs to reconcile two competing factors that shape its own China policy. On one hand, New Delhi has enjoyed one of its most productive periods of engagement with Beijing for nearly a decade. China is set to emerge as India’s largest trading partner, and the two societies have barely scratched the surface of their potentially expansive bilateral cooperation. India would like to persist with such cooperation to the fullest extent. On the other hand, as it feels the heat of China’s rise on its borders in the subcontinent, the extended neighborhood in Asia, and the Indian Ocean, India is increasingly convinced of the need to balance China. For all of its current positive sentiment toward Beijing, New Delhi will find it difficult to resign itself to a secondary status to China in Asia.

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Not surprisingly, New Delhi has embarked on a significant competition with China, manifest most explicitly in Burma, where India is vigorously competing with China for political influence, economic gain, and access to energy resources.¹¹ India's strategic determination to catch up with China also expresses itself in varying degrees in its regional policies toward Africa and East and

Southeast Asia, its maritime orientation in the Indian Ocean, and its high technology programs such as space exploration. New Delhi's perceived imperative of balancing China was also seen in its enthusiasm for the Asian democratic quad, despite its tradition of nonalignment. In contrast, Canberra's and Tokyo's second thoughts on the democratic quad have put the idea in cold storage for now. India also took the initiative, despite considerable domestic opposition at home and surprising opposition abroad, to convene massive

joint naval exercises involving Australia, Japan, Singapore, and the United States in September 2007.¹² Although the Chinese-Indian relationship remains nonantagonistic at this moment, the prospects for future conflict are not negligible.¹³

Much like the United States, India has no reason to make up its mind whether China is a partner or a rival at this stage.¹⁴ Irrespective of how the next U.S. president might define U.S. policy toward China, India would want to construct its own unique policy of simultaneously engaging and balancing China. New Delhi wants neither a Chinese-U.S. condominium in Asia nor a new confrontation between Washington and Beijing. India's preference will be for a U.S. policy that is agnostic about Beijing's long-term intentions and that builds a structure of security cooperation in Asia that insures against a negative political evolution of China. As it hedges against China's rise, New Delhi would like Washington to do the same.

Traveling Together, Hopefully

Indian-U.S. relations have seen a transformation thanks to Bush's willingness to take a strategic view of India's exceptionalism and its rise, as well as recognition of the United States' benefits in accommodating India in a new global order. India's rise will increasingly be palpable on all issues of global importance, such as liberalizing global trade, mitigating the effects of global warming and constructing a regime for the steady reduction of worldwide carbon emissions, promoting liberal values in the world, and reconstructing global institutions to reflect changing realities on the ground. This much is clear.

Equally clear is the fact that India has made up its mind to pursue a long-term strategic partnership with the United States. Despite its prolonged hand-wringing at implementing the civil nuclear initiative amidst fierce domestic political resistance to a new relationship with Washington, in the summer of 2008 the Indian National Congress put its government, led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, at risk to clinch a new partnership with the United States. As the Indian Communist parties were withdrawing support from his government in New Delhi, Singh stood with Bush on the sidelines of the Group of Eight summit in Japan to declare, "Our relationship with the United States has never been in such good shape as it is today.... And it is the intention of my government ... whether it is a question of climate change ... [or] global economy, India and [the United States] must stand tall, stand shoulder to shoulder, and that's what is going to happen."¹⁵

Can the next U.S. administration adequately address the exceptional nature of India's rise?

No previous government in independent India's history had to face a crisis of domestic political survival because of a controversial foreign policy initiative. The controversy was less about the terms of the nuclear deal and more about Singh's proposal of a sweeping transformation of India's relations with the United States. That this attempt has come from the center-left party that invented nonalignment and had nurtured anti-Western sentiments in India's political mainstream for so long underlines the structural shift in New Delhi's worldview.

What is not evident at this stage is whether the great U.S. debate on foreign policy after the Bush tenure can adequately address the exceptional nature of India's rise. Four problems stand out. First, India will be very different from Japan, which was the first Asian power to burst onto the modern state system but was tied down by political consequences of its military adventurism in the early decades of the twentieth century. Unlike Japan, India will not cede its freedom for independent action or be tied down by an alliance that will be dominated by another power. Unlike illiberal China, the second Asian power to emerge, India is very Western in a political sense, thanks to the Enlightenment values on which its republic was founded.

Second, having forged its unity and development entirely within a democratic framework, it will not be surprising if India becomes vulnerable to accusations of being arrogant and self-righteous, not very different from the charges usually leveled against the United States. The next U.S. administration may not take much time to figure out that New Delhi will not submit itself to any stakeholder test such as the one applied to China.¹⁶ One of the great chal-

allenges facing Indian foreign policy is shifting from the emphasis on autonomy to an emphasis on responsibility.¹⁷ Such a transition will indeed take place on India's own terms and timelines, which must bow to the democratic processes at home. The frustrating Indian domestic debate on the civil nuclear initiative is a valid example. Like Bush, the next president will need large amounts of strategic patience. The rewards will be worth the wait.

Third, Bush's success with India has been rooted in his willingness to view the relationship with India in terms of the unfolding global power shift. His

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willingness to accommodate India in the nuclear order has not been matched by an effort to integrate India into the main structures of global governance. The current U.S. foreign policy debate has begun to recognize the urgency of drawing India into the restructured world order. This progression cannot be realized, however, by adding "x" number of new seats in the UN Security Council or "y" number of places at the annual summits of developed nations. India's emergence, close on the heels of China's rise, demands a fundamental reconstitution of the global *directoire*.

The next administration cannot make do merely by tinkering with current international institutions.

Finally, critics might want to argue that Bush's India policy was "faith based," for it was rooted in the assumption that assisting the rise of democratic India was a worthwhile enterprise in itself and would also serve future U.S. interests. This core assumption cannot be proved or disproved at this time. What can be affirmed, however, is the extraordinary similarity of the two nations.

In its diversity and democracy, its sense of a larger national destiny, an uncontrollable attraction to idealism, and the self-referential nature of its debates, India is very like the United States and therefore a difficult partner to engage. Yet, the next U.S. president can continue to shape the positive strategic evolution of New Delhi if he is determined to raise Indian democracy's political comfort levels in dealing with the United States. The greater the U.S. empathy for India's emergence as a great power, the larger the prospect of New Delhi working with Washington on major global issues.

Given the bias in the national bureaucracy of each country to insist on "either my way or no way," Washington and New Delhi will have to find customized solutions to expand areas of strategic cooperation and minimize the many potential areas of friction. Put simply, the sense of exceptionalism in both countries implies that Washington and New Delhi cannot benchmark their relationship against precedents from elsewhere.

Notes

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