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India's Strategic Culture and U.S.-India Ties

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Sarang Shidore, Visiting Scholar at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, explains that “In the absence of a clear mutual understanding on the systemic front, [US-India] bilateral differences over narrower issues such as immigration visas or multi-brand retail have become disproportionately prominent and gained traction beyond the transactional.”

Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to the United States has raised high expectations for a US-India "reset" in ties. After nearly a decade of unprecedented convergence, the relationship has been widely and accurately perceived to have stalled around 2010, with differences emerging in multiple arenas. Most analyses have correctly pointed to a deficit of political stewardship and a degree of divergence of material interests on both sides. However another lens—that of strategic culture—is of value in attempting to trace the past trajectory of the relationship, recent difficulties, and what may be in store in the future.

The framework of strategic culture emphasizes the effects of history and ideas in shaping the security orientation of a state. It thus complements other analyses of state behavior based on a balance of power, threat, and interdependence. The core pillars of a state's strategic culture are located in what Alastair Johnston termed as its central strategic paradigm. This is the lens that defines the role of war, the nature of an adversary, and differentiation between friend and foe. Though typically applied to situations of war and conflict, strategic culture can also be a useful tool in understanding more complex and increasingly common relationships between states that involve both cooperation and competition.

The US relationship is rather unique from an Indian perspective. The United States is not simply just another powerful state, but rather a founder and upholder of the current liberal global order. Consequently, the US looms large in the Indian view as both a bilateral and a systemic actor. The differences between Washington and New Delhi are as much about the latter as the former. In the absence of a clear mutual understanding on the systemic front, bilateral differences over narrower issues such as immigration visas or multi-brand retail have become disproportionately prominent and gained traction beyond the transactional.

The Indian state's evolution in the international system, with the United States as the world's leading power, has undergone marked shifts since its independence nearly seven decades ago. In India's case, not one but three central strategic paradigms can be discerned in its tortuous journey since 1947 - moralism, realism, and neoliberalism. At its foundation India was marked with a dominant worldview of moralism, that posited itself as an anti-colonial actor with its identity firmly rooted as a third-world nation. Strategic autonomy, defined more narrowly as "nonalignment", was seen as a paramount interest, as was self-reliance in economic development, and a general suspicion of great powers, particularly the US, which was sometimes perceived in adversarial terms. Though short periods such as immediately after the war with China in 1962 saw much more favorable views of the US-led order, these episodes were by and large deviations from the moralist norm.

The 1980s marked a turning point for Indian conceptions of the world system. As the limitations of the autarkic model of development became more apparent, the Indian state first took a pro-business and then gradually a more pro-market stance that articulated an explicit desire to integrate its economy with global regimes of trade and capital. This neoliberal streak in Indian thought opened a major opportunity for a radical shift in ties with the originator of

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the post-Cold War order - the United States. The consequent and dramatic improvement in relations was only facilitated further by the prominent contributions of the Indian diaspora. Indian neoliberalism challenged moralism's discomfort with the global order and saw strategic autonomy as a secondary priority to a stake in the world system.

Along with neoliberalism however, a realist tradition also gained prominence during this period. This tradition was always present, even in the early years after independence, as witnessed in Indian actions towards amalgamating holdover princely states and the Portuguese colony of Goa. The advent of terrorism in India, first in Punjab, and then in Kashmir, energized realist voices calling for a major defense modernization effort and a more pro-active stance towards India's adversaries. The interventions in Sri Lanka and Maldives, and two crises with Pakistan and China in the 1980s were partly a product of this realist logic. Over the past decade, Indian realism also became far more concerned with the scenario of a unipolar Asia and increasingly frustrated with the limited success achieved in deterring non-conventional actors based in Pakistan.

The convergence between the United States and India was greatly aided by the twin engines of neoliberalism and Indian realism. However, while moralism's imprint was steadily weakening, it remained a significant force in shaping Indian reluctance on taking punitive action towards Pakistan and setting limits on the economic liberalization process.

Going forward, much depends on the ideational framework dominant within the current dispensation in New Delhi. It must be emphasized that it is too early to draw definitive conclusions. However, in one likely scenario, moralism could wane even further in India's attitude towards the global system. It also seems likely that a distinctive Indian realism of the sort that places a high priority on strategic autonomy and a strong emphasis on defense modernization will come into its own in New Delhi. However, it is a realism with an acute awareness of the necessity of leveraging global capital to achieve the sort of growth rates that India wants and needs, with the prioritization of infrastructure and energy as core areas for targeted investment. In this sense neoliberalism has left its lasting legacy on Indian strategic culture.

Consequently, defense trade is one area where trends in Indian strategic culture favor strong convergence with US interests. A \$100 billion market for arms in India over the next decade indicates that there is plenty of room for US exports to grow without diluting the diversity of supply sources, especially with the US modifying its stance somewhat on offsets. Energy is another area of potential breakthroughs, with further action on energy subsidies, stepwise reform of the coal sector, renewables, and even a resolution of the nuclear liability issue within the bounds of feasibility.

The rise of China presents a conundrum whose impact on US-India ties remains as yet indeterminate. Indian realism seeks to balance Chinese power, yet recognizes the value of enhancing trade and investment ties with its Asian neighbor. Meanwhile Washington's policies on China are as yet evolving but with rising distrust and dissonance. New Delhi will therefore likely seek to further strengthen relationships with Asian states to achieve a countervailing and expanded presence in Asia.

An area of possible US-India divergence is the India-Pakistan dynamic, with its impact extending to Afghanistan and potentially Iran. Strategic autonomy is an enduring feature of Indian strategic culture driven both by an ascendant realism and a residual moralism. This may facilitate New Delhi's embrace of policies in these theaters that may not always align with US preferences. The challenge for the two governments now is to capitalize quickly on the numerous areas of convergence to impart a momentum to the relationship, thereby setting a firm foundation for a more secure and prosperous global order in the 21st century.

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