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US-India Relations: From Vision to Process

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Barack Obama's first visit to India as US president was a welcome tonic for ties between the world's two largest democratic powers. Indian observers were correct in interpreting several early missteps by his administration as indicative of the lower priority the United States accorded India, particularly with regards to shared strategic challenges: the stabilization of Afghanistan and Pakistan where international terrorism can no longer incubate, and the maintenance of a secure balance of power throughout Asia in light of a rising China. As many proponents of closer US-India relations have argued, both challenges could be ameliorated considerably by India's continued rise as a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic state.

Dhruva Jaishankar, Program Officer for Asia at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), discusses President Obama's recent visit to India and concludes that "While the relationship may no longer suffer from a lack of vision, it does appear to still fall short on matters of process."

Given this backdrop, Obama's visit can be considered a success, even if only a mild one. The length and timing of his visit, its broader context as part of a tour of democratic Asian states, and the diversity of the president's activities in India were all designed to put to rest lingering reservations about his enthusiasm for the country. The visit was a particular success in terms of public outreach, with First Lady Michelle Obama earning considerable plaudits from Indian observers. The president's emphasis on India's democracy in his speech to its parliament was well-received, as were his call for the need to eradicate terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan and his acknowledgement of the US-India bilateral relationship as "a defining partnership of the 21st century."

While the relationship may no longer suffer from a lack of vision, it does appear to still fall short on matters of process. After all, the "nuts and bolts" of this bilateral relationship—discrete steps to advance both mutual cooperation and India's emergence—constituted one important aspect of what this visit was intended to showcase. Acknowledging that military sales, export control reform, and support for India's permanent membership on the UN Security Council were listed among the major tangible accomplishments of the trip, precise details on how the United States and India will actually reach such outcomes remain frustratingly elusive.

Furthermore, there is a serious lack of consensus within the United States on the nature and severity of the two countries' common challenges. George Perkovich, a leading South Asia expert and author of the definitive work on India's nuclear development, has called for a more "realistic" approach to India, given the two countries' different means of attaining shared objectives, their often divisive democracies, and the existence of significant challenges within India that cannot be surmounted solely with Washington's assistance. While Perkovich's is a fair assessment, such factors do not necessarily preclude more ambitious cooperation. In fact, recent and past collaboration on such diverse issues as counterterrorism, regional diplomacy, and agriculture provides a sufficient precedent for an enhanced partnership.



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Among other critics of greater US investment in the relationship with India, David Pollock of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has argued that Obama should have focused on lowering India’s profile in Afghanistan, thereby accommodating Pakistani interests, but which in turn would help efforts to find a peaceful solution to other regional tensions. Robert Grenier, a former US intelligence official with extensive experience in South Asia, has argued that the prevailing narrative of the US-India partnership advanced in various forms by the three previous US administrations was “pure blather” and a “romantic fantasy.” In his reading, India and China are not in competition with one another; India remains vigorously autonomous and anti-American, and actually motivates international terrorists through its draconian policies in Kashmir. Just prior to Obama’s arrival in Mumbai, *The New York Times* ran a story on an Indian army doctrine that enables rapid mobilization against Pakistan, known as Cold Start, noting that it would not feature in discussions despite its potentially destabilizing consequences for the region.

Such criticism is misleading, if not misinformed. India’s profile in Afghanistan consists of civilian capacity-building and development initiatives, and the Indian government’s presence constitutes a besieged embassy in Kabul and four understaffed consulates. The last two years have witnessed periodic spikes in Sino-Indian tensions. Meanwhile, India and the United States have both enjoyed unprecedented cooperation on maritime security, diplomatic intervention in South Asia, and Iran’s nuclear program, while militancy in Kashmir has fallen dramatically since peaking ten years ago. Finally, India has articulated, both privately and publicly, that Cold Start is not government or military policy.

Critics are right about one thing, however. Cooperation between the United States and India will undoubtedly be complicated. But this is only to be expected of a partnership of two roughly co-equal democratic powers, a phenomenon not seen since Britain and the United States allied in the early 20th century. While India will certainly aim to retain its autonomy of action, the fact that its objectives on significant strategic issues adhere so closely to those of the United States carries a powerful logic of its own. Moreover, Washington has few better alternatives among other major rising powers, having experienced some difficulties in recent dealings with Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, South Korea, and Vietnam, whose publics and/or policymaking communities are considerably more skeptical of, if not hostile to, American intentions. Unlike those in the aforementioned countries, Indian elites and the broader public are enthusiastic about furthering good relations with the United States despite lingering grievances and historical baggage voiced primarily by older generations. According to a Pew Research Center poll released last month, an overwhelming 66 percent of adult Indians view the United States favorably, while 51 percent see it as a partner, compared to only 24 percent who perceive it negatively.

While India, for its part, has to better articulate what it wants of its relationship with the United States, Washington should build upon the success of the president’s visit to establish a robust process for incrementally improving bilateral ties. One possibility would be advancing an unprecedented formal defense partnership, one that addresses India’s concerns about autonomy and equality while creating a legal structure that facilitates joint defense collaboration. This has the potential to encourage India’s emergence in line with American strategic interests. If it is to be a defining partnership of the 21st century, US-India relations will require not just definition but also momentum. For this, Washington must move beyond an ambitious vision for US-India relations and delve into ways of advancing it in concrete terms.