

# US-India The Way Forward



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If Manmohan Singh can reinforce, with greater conviction, the merits of better cooperation with the United States during his visit, it will cap an important aspect of his legacy as prime minister says **DHRUVA JAISHANKAR.**

In 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh famously staked the future of his government on improved relations with the United States. But his visit to Washington — on what may well be his final trip to the United States as prime minister — will be clouded in a certain unshakeable sense of disappointment.

Given the promising trajectory of US-India relations from May 1998 to December 2008, there has been a comparable lack of forward movement over the past five years. Not that there haven't been any positive developments. US exports to India are booming. Defense commerce has grown and no longer elicits surprise or much comment in either country. Working level contacts between the two governments have improved, as have direct links between the Indian and American people.

So, why the concern?

Today, the bilateral relationship faces two big problems. The first is expectations. The relationship now characterized by numerous dialogues, regular cooperation, and frequent official contact is unrecognizable from that of the 1990s, when India was a low strategic and economic priority for Washington and an outsider to the global non-proliferation order. But work clearly needs to be done as long as New Delhi takes umbrage at every perceived slight by the US government and Washington expresses its frustration whenever an Indian decision appears at odds with its wishes.

The second — and equally vexing — problem is complacency. In many quarters, there is now a sense that bilateral cooperation between India and the United States has reached its natural limits and that no further effort needs to be exerted on either side to improve ties. Those who call for more 'realistic' relations downplay the potential value of both countries to the other and underestimate the areas of true alignment.

A basis of any strategy is a clear understanding of one's goals. But better relations in and of themselves do not constitute a goal. So, within reason, what exactly are both sides' objectives with regards to one another?

There remains considerable debate in New Delhi about the scope of relations with Washington. But in the broadest possible sense, India has two somewhat contradictory objectives. The first is a 'special relationship,' one in which certain critical aspects of American regional and economic policy are pursued with Indian sensitivities taken into consideration, even when they are not completely in alignment with Indian interests.

The US, in other words, must be committed to facilitating India's rise. This might translate, in practice, to India being consulted on American intervention in countries with large Indian populations, on the nature and scope of the US' defence posture in Asia, and on its foreign assistance to other countries in South Asia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi in 2012. American leaders accustomed to working with India have become increasingly appreciative of the fact that it will not be a US ally in the traditional mould and that India-specific exceptions will often have to be made. But that is still not universally acknowledged in Washington.



GRIGORY DUKOR/REUTERS

## The Weight of Expectations, The Perils of Complacency

Indian officials are cynical enough to understand that their American counterparts will not be motivated by sentiment when granting India any special consideration, but rather by self-interest. While some American leaders have certainly internalized India's strategic importance, it has by no means permeated the entire US government, either at the bureaucratic or political level. Most American policymakers may still need to be convinced of India's importance and informed about India's perspectives.

The second Indian objective is strategic independence. In practice, this means maximizing India's decision-making options and ensuring that ties with the United States develop at minimal cost to India's other relationships, such as with Russia, Europe, China, and others. American leaders accustomed to working with India have become increasingly appreciative of the fact that it will not be a US ally in the traditional mould and that India-specific exceptions will often have to be made. But that is still not universally acknowledged in Washington, and India must still work to minimize the uncertainty that accompanies every change in administration.

For its part, the United States has its own vision of what healthy relations with India look like.

First and foremost, it means a strong, rising India that helps to uphold the US-led international order. This requires India to play the parts of a security provider in its region and a global institution-builder, which in turn requires India's economy to be more open and integrated and for it to play a more active diplomatic role starting in

its own neighborhood. It may also require India to be more active in multilateral forums, not just as a state that vetoes decisions, but one that tries to proactively shape the global agenda.

Both countries have had reasons to resent the other's behaviour over the past five years. India's economic performance has been less than impressive, and its role as an institutional leader has been underwhelming, whether at the United Nations, World Trade Organization, or other such apex bodies.

On the American side, India policy has become bogged down in narrow bureaucratic channels as it has slipped down the list of priorities. The solution, on both sides, will require top down leadership, a better articulation of shared objectives and a long-term vision for the relationship that transcends near-term institutional resistance.

If Manmohan Singh can reinforce, with greater conviction, the merits of better cooperation with the United States during his visit, it will cap an important aspect of his legacy as prime minister, and he will provide his successor a platform upon which to build warmer relations over the coming decade.



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