

US-India The Way Forward



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While expectations for the US-India partnership are lower than they were four years ago, **LISA CURTIS** feels this is not entirely a bad thing.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's September 27 meetings in Washington are unlikely to generate the same level of enthusiasm as his November 2009 visit. At that time, there were high expectations in Washington that India would play a crucial role in US foreign policy, as evidenced by the fact that Singh made the first State-level visit of Obama's first term.

Four years later, US leaders have adopted a more measured, and likely more realistic, view of the partnership. They have been chastened by stalled Indian economic reforms, lack of closure on the much-heralded civil nuclear deal, and modest levels of defense trade that have fallen short of expectations.

The Indian parliament's passage of nuclear liability legislation in August 2010 that complicated US companies' ability to participate in India's civil nuclear sector and India's decision in the spring of 2011 to buy French, rather than American, fighter jets came as major disappointments for the US

Strategic Logic of Ties Still Stands

Yet widen the lens beyond the bilateral sticking points to the broader Asian landscape and the logic behind a strong Indo-US partnership still stands.

Both India and the US share concerns about the growing maritime ambitions of China — a country that is party to disputes with virtually all of its neighbors. India also is feeling the pressure of China's rise on its land borders, where the Chinese have recently increased construction projects and fueled border tensions with assertive troop movements.

US strategists generally believe that investing in India is still worthwhile. But India should not take that support for granted.

Singh will need to demonstrate that Indian leaders also value the importance of strategic ties with America. India's foreign policy has drifted over the last three years, and some Indian policymakers and commentators have even lapsed into Cold War era-thinking, arguing that India should revive its policy of non-alignment as a way to balance relations between the US and China.

The September 27 meeting with President Obama is an opportunity for Singh to show the kind of pro-US stance he so memorably displayed during his 2009 visit. In the midst of the American financial crisis, the Indian prime minister went out of his way to show support for American power by praising the resilience of the American economy and calling the US economic downturn a 'temporary setback.'

A close relationship with the US — not a military alliance — will help India maintain its long-held tradition of exercising strategic autonomy. Instead of keeping the US at arm's distance, with the hope of placating the Chinese, India should be drawing closer to the US in ways that solidify and build trust in the partnership, which will deter the Chinese from pursuing a more aggressive posture toward India.

In a report released earlier this year by the Heritage Foundation and the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation, titled *Beyond the Plateau in US-India Relations*, researchers highlighted that New Delhi and



A protest against possible US military action against Syria outside the US embassy in New Delhi, September 7. The decision over what to do about Syria could become a distraction during the Obama-Singh meet, but the author believes both leaders should agree to disagree up front and move on to other issues.

Restoring US confidence in the Relationship

Washington need each other now more than ever before. In particular, they have an interest in encouraging responsible Chinese behavior and peaceful management of its territorial disputes and security of the Indo-Pacific waters.

Push for Deliverables

The announcement of a new policy or initiative in the defense arena would certainly help overcome the feeling of malaise in the relationship. The two sides have been working diligently behind the scenes on the 'Defense Technology Initiative' then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta launched nearly a year ago. The initiative is aimed at streamlining each country's respective bureaucratic processes to encourage more defense trade.

The other area ripe for movement is the languishing civil nuclear agreement. Secretary of State John Kerry said during his July visit to India that the two sides were close to finalizing a commercial agreement between Westinghouse and the Nuclear Power Corporation of India that would allow preliminary work to be done in areas of licensing and site development.

The glacial pace of these negotiations has raised doubts that US firms will ever gain access to India's nuclear industry, despite that US pressure was critical to obtaining the Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver that allowed India to receive nuclear technology and fuel for the first time in forty years.

Finally, the US is looking to India to take steps that will ameliorate US business concerns about Indian trade barriers and foreign investment restrictions. Frustration within the US business community and Congress on this issue is

peaking. US House and Senate Congressional committees recently requested the US International Trade Commission to investigate the impact of Indian protectionist policies on US exports and investments.

Staying Focused, Realistic

The decision over what to do about Syria could become a distraction from the Obama-Singh meet. The fact that the Obama administration and Singh government widely disagree on the issue might be difficult to paper over.

India says it will not support any military action against Syria without the approval of the UN Security Council, while President Obama has decided not to bring the issue to the UNSC, where Russia and China would undoubtedly veto it. Both leaders should agree to disagree up front and move on to other issues.

While expectations for the US-India partnership are lower than they were four years ago, this is not entirely a bad thing. With a better understanding of each other's core concerns and limitations, the two sides can narrow their focus to issues of overlapping interest, while avoiding areas in which there is little common interest.

With a narrower and more defined approach to the relationship, the two sides may find it easier to reach agreement on an issue or two.



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