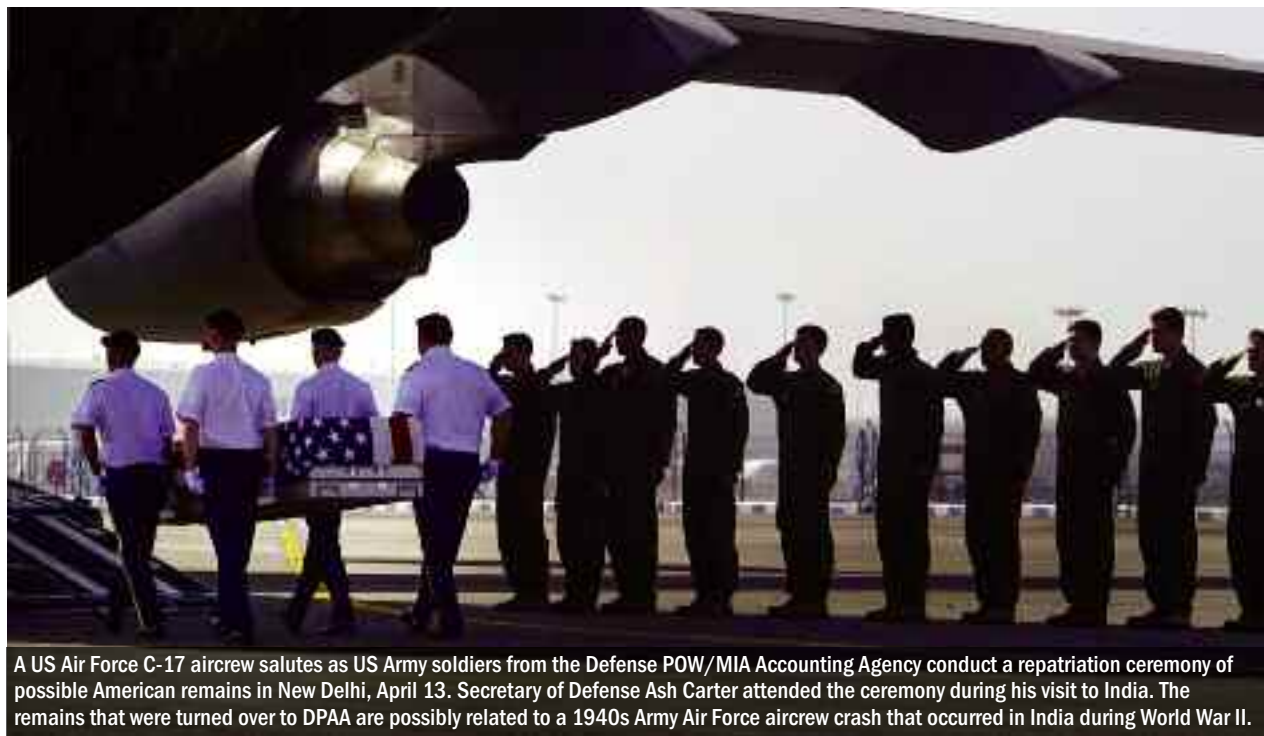




Great Expectations, Tempered by Reality

HOPES FOR THE US-INDIA RELATIONSHIP CONTINUE TO SOAR. STILL, WHILE OPTIMISM IS IN ORDER, IT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP EXPECTATIONS IN CHECK, SAYS MICHAEL KUGELMAN.



A US Air Force C-17 aircrew salutes as US Army soldiers from the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency conduct a repatriation ceremony of possible American remains in New Delhi, April 13. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter attended the ceremony during his visit to India. The remains that were turned over to DPAA are possibly related to a 1940s Army Air Force aircrew crash that occurred in India during World War II.

Last summer, I was part of a small group of India analysts that met with a senior United States military official. The US-India partnership is in terrific shape, the official declared, and the only thing preventing it from truly taking off is India's unwillingness to sign several "foundational" agreements. These are routine deals — largely technical and logistical in nature — that the United States often signs with other nations to facilitate military cooperation.

Fast forward to April of this year. During a trip to New Delhi by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, the two countries agreed in principle to sign one of those foundational agreements — a deal that would allow the United States and India to use each other's military facilities for refueling purposes.

Predictably, many observers concluded that the bilateral relationship — already suffused with recent infusions of momentum and goodwill — was poised to enter a deeper level of partnership.

And then came the reality check.

Several weeks after Carter's India trip, reports emerged that progress on the refueling deal wasn't moving as quickly as originally believed — and that a deal likely wouldn't be finalized by the time Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets President Barack Obama in Washington on June 7.

When it comes to US-India relations, high expectations can be a dangerous thing. Big-ticket developments have frequently yielded to big-time disappointments.

The much-ballyhooed civil nuclear accord inked nearly a decade ago, and famously described as a cornerstone for an emerging strategic relationship, has still not been fully operationalized.

In 2010, in a move that was wildly popular in India, Obama announced his support for a permanent Indian seat on the UN Security Council. Several years later, however, the arrest of a New York-based Indian consular official obliterated the relationship's new stocks of goodwill and plunged the relationship into its deepest crisis in decades.

A more recent rude awakening occurred this March. Despite considerable progress in US-India security relations in recent years — fueled in particular by the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative — Indian officials quickly rejected a proposal made by Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of the US Pacific Command, to stage joint naval patrols. The rejection was a sobering reminder of the limits of bilateral defense cooperation, and of India's continued allergies to alliance-like arrangements.

It's easy to understand why soaring expectations so often accompany US-India relations: There are so many compelling reasons for the two countries to enjoy a deep partnership. These range from shared democratic values to convergent interests (such as mutual concern about terrorism in Pakistan and about the rise of China).

A 3-million-strong Indian-American Diaspora serves as a natural bridge for the two countries. And there have been genuine success stories, from a booming trade relationship to ample maritime cooperation.

Problematic perceptions and policies explain why the soaring expectations so often fall short. US-India relations have come a long way since the dark days of the Cold War, but the mutual mistrust from the past dies hard today.

Meanwhile, New Delhi resents Washington's continued relationship with the Pakistani military; Washington believes New Delhi takes overly protectionist positions in global trade

talks; and Indians think Americans don't sufficiently appreciate India's rising global clout — even as Washington wants India to play a more robust role in promoting regional stability in Asia.

This isn't to say we shouldn't be optimistic. On the contrary: Modi arrives in Washington at a particularly auspicious time for US-India relations, thanks to two geopolitical factors that work in the relationship's favor.

First, with US combat forces no longer in Afghanistan, Washington's strategic focus on South Asia is widening beyond the narrowly defined 'AfPak' lens of recent years, thereby creating opportunities to zoom in on India.

Second, Washington appears to be intensifying its rebalance to the Indo-Pacific region — as evidenced most recently by Obama's trip to Vietnam and Japan in May.

The US pivot to Asia ensures that India's strategic standing will remain high in US policy calculations — and particularly as India engineers its own eastward shift, as articulated in New Delhi's 'Act East' policy.

All this said, expectations still need to be tempered. Ultimately, it pays to be positive — but also prudent, not Pollyannaish. Modi would be wise to set an appropriately measured tone during his joint address to Congress on June 8.

In his address, Modi should certainly speak of the relationship's shared interests and soaring opportunities, and underscore the latest efforts to solidify it — from progress toward a bilateral investment treaty to newly introduced US legislation that would deepen defense relations.

At the same time, however, he shouldn't shy away from acknowledging the challenges and constraints confronting the relationship, and from highlighting the tension points.

Straight talk is just as important as happy talk.

It's never been a better time to be keeping our expectations about US-India relations in check. And that's because of this year's US presidential election, which could plunge the partnership into great uncertainty.

Many of the relationship's successes over the last two years can be attributed to the blooming bromance between Obama and Modi (though to be fair, Obama, the former law professor, also made clear his admiration for Modi's predecessor, the bookish Manmohan Singh). A major question for US-India relations moving forward is the extent to which the relationship can continue to flourish after Obama, and by extension the great chemistry he developed with Modi, are no longer in the picture. These two men, as I've written previously, share more in common than may be assumed, and the warm personal diplomacy they cultivated has been remarkable.

A President, Hillary Clinton, who played a prominent role in the Obama administration, would likely pose no problems to the US-India relationship (recall that in 2014, during Modi's first trip to the US as premier, he met Clinton and her husband in New York). However, if Donald Trump takes over the White House, all bets are off when it comes to predicting the relationship's trajectory.

Trump's pronouncements on India, as with his foreign policy comments in general, have been muddled and contradictory. On the one hand, he has mocked Indian call center workers and accused India of stealing American jobs. On the other hand, he has praised India for 'doing great.' Given his business interests in India, Trump likely won't want to alienate the country. But then again, Trump is nothing if not a wild card.

Not surprisingly, advance analysis of Modi's US visit — a working one, not a State one as originally reported — has cast it as an effort to 'consolidate and celebrate' the gains of a bilateral relationship that faces an uncertain future. Still, a frank and realistic appraisal of where things stand is important as well. Ultimately, safeguarding a strategic relationship will require as much straightforwardness as sugarcoating.

Michael Kugelman is the senior associate for South Asia at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. He oversees the Wilson Center's new India in Asia initiative. He can be reached at michael.kugelman@wilsoncenter.org or on Twitter @michaalkugelman.