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**WHEN HISTORIANS ONE DAY LOOK BACK AT THE GROWTH OF US-INDIA TIES, I THINK THEY WILL RIGHTLY VIEW THE PAST TWO YEARS AS THE MOMENT WHEN THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA CEMENTED AN ENDURING BOND OF FRIENDSHIP.**

**ONCE UPON A TIME THE AMERICAN AIRCRAFT CARRIER WAS A SYMBOL THAT DIVIDED THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA. TODAY IT IS A CRITICAL AREA OF OUR COOPERATION, BRINGING OUR TWO NATIONS CLOSER TOGETHER. THAT'S HOW FAR WE'VE COME.**

In January 2015, **Richard Rahul Verma** took over as the US Ambassador to India, the first Indian American appointed to the post.

President Barack Obama arrived days after Verma presented his credentials to Indian President Pranab Mukherjee to attend India's Republic Day celebrations as the chief guest.

In the months since, there have been several high-level visits — like Defense Secretary Ash Carter's visit in April — and Congressional delegations to India.

Verma has travelled to 21 of India's 29 states to connect with ordinary Indians and his blistering pace shows no signs of letting up.

On the eve of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's fourth visit to Washington since he assumed office in May 2014, the ambassador discusses the US-India relationship.

**What's your take on the status of US-India relations two years into the Modi administration?**

I termed 2015 as the year of consequence for US-India relations. We marked many significant milestones in the partnership last year, including a shared strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific region, an understanding on nuclear liability, the first-ever visit by an Indian defense minister to Pacific Command, India's instrumental contribution to achieving the Paris Climate Accord, a record \$107 billion in bilateral trade, and most notably President Obama's visit for Republic Day, the first-ever American President invited as chief guest.

I see 2016 as the year of resolve. Resolve to implement the ambitious vision laid out by the leaders. This requires diligent work on part of the governments in both Washington and Delhi and resilience to overcome obstacles that may arise.

President Obama and Prime Minister Modi have set a high bar for the partnership and we are on an excellent trajectory. When historians one day look back at the growth of US-India ties, I think they will rightly view the past two years as the moment when the US and India cemented an enduring bond of friendship.

**Modi will be on his fourth visit to the US and will have his third working summit with Obama, which could perhaps be the last before the end of his presidency. What do you see as the legacy of these meetings and the perfect rapport they have developed vis-a-vis US-India relations at this time in their administrations and also going forward?**

Senior-level engagements are the new normal in US-India relations.

This will be the President's sixth interaction with the prime minister since 2014, and that's on top of their many phone conversations.

Secretary of Defense Ash Carter has met with Defense Minister Parrikar four times in the past year, and they'll be seeing each other again at the Shangri-La Dialogue.

And the number of Assistant Secretary and above interactions, those are beyond count.

These interactions not only speak to the strengths of personal relationships between our senior officials, but to the fact that the issues demand constant dialogue.

From climate change to counterterrorism, as global leaders the US and India must work together on the most pressing



## Richard Rahul Verma

**THE US AMBASSADOR TO INDIA SPEAKS TO INDIA ABROAD EDITOR AZIZ HANIFFA IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW.**

issues of our time. But as the President has said before, it's only natural that he and the prime minister are friends, given that our countries share so many deeply held values.

**A significant manifestation of Modi's visit this time around will be his first address to a joint meeting of Congress, where there is so much support and bipartisan expectations for the continuing exponential growth of US-India ties.**

**As an erstwhile Congressional staffer, both in the House and Senate, how significant is this address in terms of getting out the India story out to all of America and Americans?**

Congress has been and will continue to be an essential partner in advancing the US-India relationship. I've seen that first-hand over the past 20 years — there is broad bipartisan support for stronger US-India relations across the House and Senate. An invitation to address Congress is indeed a great honor. It is, by extension, an address to the American people as well, so the audience and the platform are huge.

Prime Minister Modi's address is an opportunity to highlight the very real progress taking place and expand upon former prime minister Vajpayee's vision in his address to Congress 16 years ago: 'The dawn of the new century has marked a new beginning in our relations. Let us remove the shadow of hesitation that lies between us and our joint vision.'

**Of course, not everything is honky dory and the challenges**

**and concerns do remain from trade, economics and negotiations over BIT, etc, still to come to fruition.**

**What's your take on these issues in terms of forward movement in the last few months of the Obama presidency, or is the election fervor and fever in the US too much of a distraction for anything tangible on these issues to be not just move forward, but be institutionalized?**

As with any relationship, there will be obstacles, both substantive and bureaucratic, when it comes to advancing shared interests.

With our trade surpassing \$100 billion, it's not surprising that we sometimes have points of friction in our economic relationship. This goes to my earlier point about the importance of continuous dialogue. One advantage of 30 plus government dialogues is that we can both manage differences and sustain the momentum in our relationship even as the domestic political environment in either country changes.

For example, later this year, we'll have the Strategic and Commercial Dialogue and the Trade Policy Forum. And the upcoming summit will no doubt launch new lines of effort that will continue to draw our two countries closer.

**In this regard, the nuclear deal is still in limbo, notwithstanding the contact group and the optimistic outlook in the negotiations, etc. Can some movement forward in terms of Westinghouse and GE be expected during this summit between the PM and President?**

What we have seen on civil nuclear cooperation over the last two years is continuous progress, and I think we will continue to witness forward movement.

Our work on civil nuclear issues demonstrates that we can overcome the most daunting of challenges, such as nuclear liability. India's membership in the Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage earlier this year and issuance of a nuclear supplier's policy have helped to enable the participation of US companies in India's nuclear market.

I have no doubt that one day in the not so distant future American nuclear plants will be powering Indian cities and villages. I'm optimistic about the path we are now on.

**In the House of Representatives last month, no doubt in appreciation of the burgeoning US-India defense trade and military partnership, bipartisan legislation to further bolster defense ties with India was passed with a proviso to even bring it on a par with NATO allies and Israel in terms of the sale of defense equipment and technology to India.**

**Similar legislation introduced by Senate India Caucus co-chairs Cornyn and Warner is also pending in the Senate.**

**What's your take on all this? Is the defense and military relationship with India now the catalyst and crown jewels of the US-India strategic partnership?**

Defense relations are one of the 'crown jewels' of the US-India partnership; the pace of our cooperation today is scarcely recognizable compared to where we were a decade ago.

We're making new strides on maritime cooperation, as part of our Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region.


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## Richard Rahul Verma

Ambassador Richard Verma hails 'India's instrumental contribution to achieving the Paris Climate Accord' as one of the landmarks of the US-India relationship in 2015. The President and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the COP21 Summit in Paris, November 30, 2015.

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Japan is a regular participant in the Malabar naval exercise; the next iteration takes place this month. The US-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative continues to make progress in new areas of technology cooperation, and the private sector in both countries continue to work together to support the 'Make in India' initiative.

We are supporting India's indigenous carrier program through the Joint Working Group on Aircraft Carrier Technology Cooperation. Once upon a time the American aircraft carrier was a symbol that divided the US and India. Today it is a critical area of our cooperation, bringing our two nations closer together. That's how far we've come.

Also in the House, ignoring the administration's protestations, a resolution was approved to condition aid to the tune of \$450 million to Pakistan unless Islamabad took concrete actions against the Haqqani network and released Dr Shakil Afridi who was invaluable to the capture of Osama bin Laden.

This comes close on the heels of Congress, particularly the Senate, putting a hold on the sale of F-16s to Pakistan and the administration asking Pakistan to pay for it, which effectively means the sale is dead.

Both you and Secretary Kerry had earlier argued that this

was a 'legacy sale.' These actions by Congress, coming on the eve of Modi's trip, is it unequivocal that Congress seems to be more sensitive to India's concerns than the administration vis-a-vis Pakistan?

Both the administration and Congress have spoken in one voice on the importance of the US-India partnership. The only hyphen we seek is one that links the US and India.

On Pakistan, the US and India have shared interests and a clear-eyed view of the challenges. We have a shared interest in a stable Pakistan at peace with its neighbors. And we face a shared challenge to regional stability in the form of cross-border terrorism, including by groups such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and by the Pakistani Taliban.

The US has been clear on this point: No country should allow its territory to be used by terrorists to launch attacks. Both President Obama and Congress have been clear that Pakistan, which is also threatened by terrorism, must take action against terrorist groups of all stripes.

Also, among certain segments of the Indian Diaspora in the US and some members of Congress, who are human rights activists and proponents, and, of course, USCIRF, who were denied visas to visit India, there is concern over the rise of the Hindutva groups and other chauvinistic elements in India and discrimination and persecution of minorities and a ris-

ing ultra-nationalism.

Does this remain a concern to the US? Is it brought up in US-India discussions?

There is a perception that an administration, more bent on trade and commerce with India and not wanting to rock the boat — diplomacy and political-wise — does not bring up these issues strongly enough.

Close partners are allowed to have frank and honest conversations, and that's what India and the US are doing on a range of issues, including human rights. And it's a two-way exchange.

When India has concerns about the treatment of minorities in the US — for example, hate crimes against Sikh Americans — we hear and welcome their concerns.

Likewise, we raise our concerns about trafficking in persons, religious freedom, equal opportunity for all Indians, protection of women's rights, and space for civil society. Our Ambassador at Large for Trafficking in Persons, Susan Coppedge, just had a very productive visit to India in April.

India is a confident democracy; it shouldn't shy away from these sorts of discussions or view them as infringements of sovereignty.

As two diverse and large democracies, we are both constantly striving to form a more perfect union.