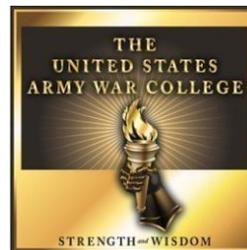


United States and India: Relationship of Convenience or Necessity?

by

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Abstract

The United States continues to operate in a world that is volatile, unstable, complex, and ambiguous during the second decade of the twenty-first century. One of the more complex and strategically important regions in the world is Asia, where President Obama has refocused U.S. national power in direct support of U.S. national interests. To assist in these interests, the United States should improve strategic relationships with India, a rising regional and world power that would be a significant partner in Asia. India's geopolitical position, with a democratic government and a rising economy and naval power to assist in regional security and containing the ambitions of China make them a prime partner for the United States. To improve the relationship, the United States is reaching out through key leaders to develop stronger economic and military ties through trade agreements and arms sales. While the United States sees increased partnership in the future, India is hesitant in creating too strong a relationship due to its non-alignment movement that is still prevalent in its government.

United States and India: Relationship of Convenience or Necessity?

Our rebalance to Asia and the Pacific is yielding deeper ties with a more diverse set of allies and partners. We are primed to unlock the potential of our relationship with India.

—Barack Obama¹

The Twenty-First Century is a world that has become more volatile, unstable, complex and ambiguous. The balance created during the Cold War no longer exists, with states pressured by other states, non-states, transnational actors, and terrorists. After 13 years of continuous conflict, the United States still faces challenging times throughout the world. One of the more complex regions that the U.S. has emphasized more in the past three years is the Asia-Pacific. The rise of China economically and militarily, joined with future reductions in both the U.S. defense budget and personnel end strength could potentially require U.S. forces to assume operational and strategic risks in the region. All of the U.S. military services will have to make difficult decisions between readiness, force structure, and modernization due to the Budget Control Act of 2011. These decisions will determine the direction of future U.S. military strength. The rise in Chinese economic and military power may require additional resources in response in order for the United States to maintain its historical national interests in the region.²

The U.S.-India defense relationship will be a pivotal strategic issue of the first half of the 21st century. India's geographic location and future growth potential position that country as a possible partner in safeguarding U.S. long-term strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and South East Asia, as China grows more assertive in South East Asia, as well as South Asia and the Indian Ocean. India is home to 1/5th of the world's population, is the largest democracy in the world, and is our natural ally in everything

from containing Pakistan, to maintaining freedom of the seas as China's deep-water capacity steadily increases. However, while we see India as a natural ally to contain China, India may not be a willing partner.

In the 2012 Department of Defense strategic guidance, the United States clearly indicates its intent to rebalance to the Pacific.

U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the area extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.³

While one would expect President Obama to mention our reaffirmation to existing allies- Japan, South Korea, and Australia was expected, what was not expected was his singling out the importance of the US-India strategic relationships. The National Security Strategy goes on to state, "The United States is also investing in a long-term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to serve as a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region."⁴ The United States made this a point to improve India's standing amongst world powers while showing China the United States' intent to develop additional allies as a way to contain China.

India's national interests, though similar to those of the United States, do not necessarily align with our national interests. Over 68 years ago, on August 15, 1947, India gained independence from Great Britain after nearly 200 years of rule. Yet from 1947 until today, the United States never really developed a strong strategic relationship with India, due in part to India wanting to remain non-aligned and the United States not seeing the benefit of developing a stronger relationship with India. This started to change with President Clinton in the 1990s, and has continued to gain momentum over

the past 20 years. As the United States seeks to maintain its position in the world order of the 21st century, it only makes sense for both countries to continue developing a strong U.S. - India strategic relationship. As the world's largest democracy, second largest population, and seventh largest state, India seems to be a natural ally of the United States. The question remains whether India actually wants a closer relationship with the U.S. or if it is even in India's national interests.

By the end of the Cold War, relations between the United States and India were anything but cordial. Part of the distance was due to India's leadership of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), but also the relationship suffered due to India's nuclear testing first in 1974 and again in 1998. The United States signed the Non-Proliferation Act in 1978, which did not sit well with India and the economic sanctions imposed by President Clinton in 1998 added to this estrangement. These tensions led India to seek a better relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, thus delaying better relations until the 21st Century. Relations started to improve between the United States and India after President Bill Clinton's visit to India in 2000. This was the first visit by a sitting US president in over 20 years.⁵ Although President Clinton made it a point to admonish India for its nuclear testing in 1998, he also stated that the United States had no right to speak on India's behalf and that India should determine its own future.⁶ Relations continued to improve when President George W. Bush confirmed India as a strategic ally in 2006, while supporting India's ability to retain its nuclear military capability.⁷ This allowed for increased military engagements between the United States and India as well as opening up previously closed markets for US goods and technologies. India recently relaxed state regulation of the Indian economy, moved

away from over dependence of an agricultural economy, became an attractive destination for U.S. outsourcing of service jobs such as accounting and call center operations, and attracted foreign investment to develop factories in India.⁸ During President Obama's administration, between the United States and India took a step back before beginning to move forward again in the past year. Early in President Obama's presidency, the US created stronger ties with Pakistan and China at the exclusion of India.⁹ Since then, however, the United States has worked to develop stronger relations with India in the ever-more volatile South East Asia region.

Relations seem to be at an all-time high, as evidenced by President Obama's visit to India in January 2015 and his participation in India's important Republic Day holiday. India typically uses the occasion of Republic Day to invite a foreign dignitary from a country with which India wishes to strengthen its strategic relations and development opportunities.¹⁰ From these meetings and many lower-level engagements, the US and India have extended the original 2005 Defense Framework, which improves military cooperation, co-development of defense systems through the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative, as well as India purchasing more US military equipment.¹¹ In 2015, India became the second largest purchaser of U.S. weapons, a hugely important development – and a good indicator of India's greatest interest in this relationship. Only Saudi Arabia purchases more U.S. weapons.¹² In the latest agreement, Prime Minister Modi agreed to purchase \$3 billion worth of U.S. weapons, to include 22 Apache attack helicopters and 15 Chinook cargo helicopters.¹³ Regarding the Defense, Technology and Trade Initiative, the United States and India agreed to establish groups on aircraft carrier technology and jet engine development, and

increased cooperation between the two countries defense industries.¹⁴ These strengthening relations in military sales allow India to distance itself from its historical reliance on Russia while also strengthening its military in response to China's military buildup and improving its interoperability with the United States, which uses the same weapons systems and equipment.

Geopolitical Importance of India

South Asia, which includes India and the Indian Ocean, strategically influences the balance of power across Asia due to its location. Sir Halford Makinder wrote a paper in 1904 entitled *The Heartland*, which describes the Eurasian landmass as the key area in which location and natural resources would allow the state controlling the region to dominate the world. In a follow up article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1943, Sir Halford updated his prediction to include China and India, and the lands they occupied in South Asia and South East Asia, to geographically balance the rest of the geographic regions.¹⁵ As the United States looks to rebalance in the Asia-Pacific, India's position is ideal for developing a stronger strategic partnership. India's geographical location between the Middle East, Central Asia, China, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean makes it the most logical strategic partner for the United States in Asia-Pacific. The geopolitical importance of India to stabilizing Asia is immense. Sitting at the southern end of Asia, India's interests are in developing long-term relations with East Asia for economic growth, Central Asia for developing future energy resources, and West Asia and the Middle East for its current energy resources.¹⁶

India's central location in the Indian Ocean makes it an ideal point from which to secure the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and protect the global commons with a modern navy. Given increased capabilities, India would be able to increase its influence

on both the eastern and western extremities of the Indian Ocean, near the Straits of Malacca, and in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Unless one were to include the United States Navy, India currently has no major maritime peers in the Indian Ocean, though China is working feverishly to increase its blue water navy capability, which will make it a key player in the next decade.¹⁷ In strictly quantitative terms, within the next 10 years, China's navy will have more naval ships than the United States, to include five times as many submarines. Additionally, China has invested in technology that will allow their missiles to hit moving targets at sea.¹⁸

While there are no naval rivals to India in South Asia, Pakistan is taking a stance to counter the current disparity between the two countries. In 2009, India launched its first ballistic missile submarine with the intent of developing a naval nuclear capability as another means to deliver a nuclear missile.¹⁹ With the close proximity of Islamabad's nuclear weapons to New Delhi, India felt a need to create a third means of delivering a nuclear strike that was out of reach of Pakistan. In response to India's growing naval nuclear capability, Pakistan created the Naval Strategic Force Command Headquarters in 2012 with the intent to develop its own sea-based nuclear deterrent.²⁰ While some see these two actions as an escalation to a nuclear strike, with both countries developing a naval nuclear threat, the balance in capabilities will allow for a more conventional versus strategic response of hostilities. A Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report on India – Pakistan naval capabilities stated "Further institutionalizing relations between their navies and by insisting on stronger transparency with regard to naval nuclear developments, both countries may succeed in

adding a greater degree of stability to what otherwise promises to be a dangerously volatile maritime environment.”²¹

US National Security Strategy

The United States continues to look for opportunities to strengthen relationships while protecting its national interests. As stated in the 2015 National Security Strategy, the United States has four enduring national interests that will guide strategy:

The security of the United States, its citizens, and U.S. allies and partners; A strong innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity; Respect for universal values at home and around the world; and A rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.²²

The United States is re-focusing on Asia to expand its security relationships with countries such as India while re-affirming current alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines.²³ Economically, the United States realizes the importance of free and open trade in Asia, since the majority (over 60%) of the U.S. commerce flows through this region. The United States can accomplish this through strengthening organizations such as the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

US Relationship with India from 1947

Many factors contributed to India’s development of a non-alignment policy and the leadership of NAM, but the three key issues were nationalist inclinations, proximity to the Soviet Union, and a poor economy. At the time of independence in 1947, there were no realistic external military threats to India. India’s largest concern was being drawn into disagreements with other nations. The only external threat to India was the creation of East and West Pakistan in 1947. After the 1971 India-Pakistani war,

Bangladesh emerged out of East Pakistan, thus reducing part of the threat felt by India. By remaining non-aligned, India could concentrate on using resources to deter threats from Pakistan while at the same time not alienating themselves from other countries. India reasoned that this non-confrontational stance would increase its security in the long-term.²⁴

Economically, India in the 1950s was in no position to expend any significant amount of its budget on defense. At the time, India was largely an agricultural society with very little industry or goods to export, a legacy of British colonial rule that suppressed Indian competition with home manufactures. By remaining non-aligned, India believed it could look to internal matters, specifically to fixing its economy in a predominantly poor country with a growing population. In the end, India would reach out to industrialized countries for aid and technical support to assist it in developing its own capabilities of self-sustainment.²⁵

Poor decisions by the United States and India contributed to their lukewarm relationship. The United States maintained an arm's distance relationship with India up until the early 1990's due to India's decision to maintain its non-aligned stance during the Cold War. During the initial stages of the Cold War in the 1950's, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) were dividing the world into two camps. The U.S. wanted a formal relationship with India to deter Russian expansion in South Asia, while the USSR was using India to increase its sphere of influence in South Asia. While the United States was providing diplomatic and economic aid to India, the USSR was also bidding for India's support by providing food aid to India.²⁶ At the time, India felt its best position was to benefit from both sides without committing itself to one

or the other. In reality, this stance of neutrality pushed the United States to develop a stronger relationship with Pakistan through providing weapons and economic support.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and every prime minister after him, believed that non-alignment was India's best course of action. Nehruvian strategic thinking was the basis for India's strategic doctrine for over 45 years and is still felt today.²⁷ Prime Minister Nehru believed in peace and harmony among nations with a view of peace diplomacy versus world hegemony.²⁸ Nehru, and his successors, were looking for partners that could provide material benefits, such as technology, security, and financial assistance that normally come with a formal alliance, but without locking India into one.²⁹ Due to poverty and an exploding population that India could not sustain without assistance, India was desperate for an environment that would allow it to develop relationships that would provide assistance without drawing it into the Cold War. India remained focused internally in the 1950's, with little time to deal with the rest of the world outside of South Asia.

Prime Minister Nehru's principals still drive much of India's strategic philosophy today. Nehru believed a state's own interests must come first and that no state should interfere in the business of other states.³⁰ India has maintained that position throughout its existence, only becoming involved in the affairs of others when its own sovereignty was threatened. This continues to influence India's current foreign policy and strategy as it struggles with a past identity of non-alignment. Seeing themselves as a world power, though, maybe a course of action for India and Prime Minister Modi, but it is still a challenge. Becoming a world power would go against most everything Prime Minister Nehru emphasized throughout his lifetime.

India and Military Engagements

India is working to increase its military capability to be a counter balance to China in South Asia and East Asia through increasing their military presence as well as military engagements. While India has focused the majority of its military resources to defend the territories of India due to ongoing issues in Kashmir and Northern India, Prime Minister Modi is beginning to look outward. While India has engaged in joint exercises with countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, its greatest impact is offering its military expertise to countries in the region.³¹ Indian forces have conducted drills with Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.³² This is the new India, and part of Prime Minister Modi's "Act East" program. In the past, India would have been happy looking internally, developing domestic programs and increasing economic growth. From its independence from the United Kingdom in 1947, India has focused the majority of its effort and resources in developing a land based force to deal with issues along the Indian border, specifically with Pakistan and China. Border security issues with Pakistan and China as well as dealing with internal strife have kept India too busy to become engaged in other regional issues.³³

Military and Regional Security

The United States and India have a common interest in security throughout the whole of Asia. The United States achieves this through diplomatic, military and economic engagements while India is still determining its course. Though the two countries may never have a formal treaty as allies, increasing security ties is important to improving future relationships. Building this cooperation will take the form of developing counterterrorism plans, expanding defense trade, and increasing military-to-

military engagements.³⁴ If India has an interest in being more than just a regional power, which is still to be determined, it must take on more roles of importance in securing more than just itself and its own interests. In a joint statement between Secretary of State Kerry and Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in September 2015, India committed to more of a role in United Nations peacekeeping operations as well as being involved in high-level talks in Afghanistan.³⁵

The United States plays a key role in assisting with security and counterterrorism in South Asia. The U.S. should encourage India to increase assistance to Afghanistan with economic aid, democratic assistance and police training. India and Afghanistan have long had a cordially relationship, with commerce and trade building a stronger trust between the two countries. Recently, India and Afghanistan have held meetings to discuss various aspects of regional security -- particularly terrorism, which threatens peace and stability of the region.³⁶ India is the fifth-largest donor to Afghanistan with over \$2 billion in support. Help has come in the form of developing Afghanistan's infrastructure, training police forces, and engineering.³⁷

India has realized Afghanistan is an important element to the stability in the region. A stronger central government in Afghanistan paired with a capable military force would deny safe havens for the Taliban and other Islamic terrorist organizations that have based out of Afghanistan in the past. India has a keen interest in keeping Pakistan from using Afghanistan as a client state.³⁸ India's expertise in the democratic process and state police training would go a long way in defeating terrorism in Afghanistan, as long as the government is supportive. A stable Afghanistan could assist in reducing extremist attacks on India, as well as opening up trade and resources that

would help in the economic development of India.³⁹ US diplomacy will be critical in developing this option by engaging India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Defense cooperation between the United States and India continues to improve. During President Obama's visit to India in January 2015, President Obama and Prime Minister Modi laid the groundwork for the 2015 Defense Framework. In June 2015, U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter visited key Indian leaders, to include Prime Minister Modi and Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar. During the visit, Secretary Carter and Defense Minister Parrikar signed a 10-year defense framework agreement, which will bring the two countries together to develop defense technology. "This is just one more of many signs of what a positive trajectory we continue to be on with the defense community here in India," said Secretary Carter.⁴⁰ Additionally, this framework provides guiding principles for defense engagement for the coming decade, including military exchanges and exercises, and increasing close consultations on regional security issues, to include maritime security.⁴¹

Maritime security and the free flow of commerce in the Indian Ocean continue to be a key concern from the coast of Africa through the Straits of Malacca. Over 90% of world goods travel by sea, while 70% of all goods pass through the Indian Ocean.⁴² Realizing this, the Indian Navy updated its 2007 maritime strategy to reflect the changing security dynamics. In 2015, India released its new strategy, entitled "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy". This new strategy shifts the focus from 'using' the Indian Ocean to 'securing' the Indian Ocean.⁴³ For much of India's independence, the Indian Army has played a greater role in India's security. Today, the

Indian Navy is beginning to take on a greater role of importance to the Indian government and Prime Minister Modi.

Indian National Interests

The policy change from “Look East to “Act East” under President Modi is a step in the right direction in increasing India’s multi-regional influence. India is beginning to take on a more active role in shaping South Asia and South East Asia. This is seen in India’s membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since 1991, India’s foreign policy relied on a “Look East” strategy. This strategy was India’s way of becoming more internationally engaged through economic and diplomatic engagements. Eventually, India increased its exposure through broader security and defense ties across all of Asia-Pacific.⁴⁴

The end of the Cold War caused India to reevaluate its national interests and objectives. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, India had to look elsewhere for economic support.⁴⁵ India also had to be concerned with China’s economic growth and expansion into South East Asia, which could cause India to lose position to China both economically and politically in the region.

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to office in 2014, India has become a more assertive power in the region. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has formed the strongest government in over three decades that does not have to rely on a coalition government.⁴⁶ This government has allowed Prime Minister Modi to take a stronger stance against Pakistan and China.⁴⁷ Moving forward from its initial success over the past 20 years under “Look East,” Prime Minister Modi is taking a more active approach under the new “Act East” policy. This policy and the intent going forward are for India to

take on a more active strategic role through increased security and defense. This new policy became the new Indian policy during Modi's speech at the ASEAN Summit in November 2014. In his remarks, Modi stressed economic partnerships but also India taking on a more prominent role in the region that would benefit all.⁴⁸ Currently, India has security agreements in place to assist multiple African nations as well as nations in South Asia and the Middle East with Naval assets to secure those nations against maritime piracy along each nation's exclusive economic zone. India has a vested interest in ensuring open sea-lanes of communication to allow commerce to flow through the Indian Ocean.

During Prime Minister Modi's speech at the 37th Singapore Lecture on November 23, 2015, he stated, "India will work with countries in the region and beyond, including the United States and Russia, to ensure that our commons - ocean, space and cyber – remain avenues of shared prosperity, not become new theaters of contests." He continued to state, "India will use its strength to keep the seas safe, secure, and free for the benefit of all."⁴⁹

India's plan is to play a bigger role in security in the Indian Ocean. The current prime minister will determine how large that role is. Prime Minister Modi has called for a stronger approach to China's expansionist program, but without seeming to look as if India was attempting to contain China.⁵⁰

India's ability to balance China's intrusion into South Asia and South East Asia through a type of coalition with the United States and its allies is limited. India must weigh the benefits of balance while attempting to maintain some sort of strategic autonomy while not creating a rivalry with China that would negatively affect India.⁵¹

China

India has to be concerned with China's aggressive moves in South and South East Asia. This assertiveness has come in the form of China's maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea, as well as its 'One Belt One Road' vision using Eurasia and the Indian Ocean to transport commerce.⁵² Additionally, China's development of naval ports in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Pakistan could lead to a threat to India, as China seems to be enveloping India. China is a growing concern to the United States and Asia as well. In the past, China was content in not becoming involved in regional affairs. Today, China uses its superpower status to influence Asia and other regions in the world. China is staking more claims to islands in the South China Sea as well as developing man-made islands to improve its claim to the natural resources in the region. In addition to China's economic influence, the increased size of its military and expanding capabilities of a blue-water navy influence the region as well. Throughout this, the United States declares that it welcomes the rise of China but only on U.S. terms.

Opposing Views

While strengthening the relationship between the United States and India seems logical, some may argue that this relationship is not necessary for either country. A stronger relationship may have second- and third-order effects that negatively influence both countries. China may see the relationship as a means to contain China, its economy, and its stated rights to islands in the South China Sea. This may cause friction between the United States and China and between India and China. Improved U.S. – India relationships may cause Pakistan to increase support to terrorists in order to destabilize India. The United States is still an economic and military power that can dominate events in Asia. The question is how long the United States can maintain this

position without developing stronger allies in Asia. India may be better off creating a stronger relationship with China instead of the United States. Another option is for India to continue a new form of non-alignment and take advantage of deepened economic agreements with China and the United States to strengthen its position in South Asia. Creating a healthy relationship with both countries would be both economically and strategically better for India in the end. The relationship would improve tensions along the China-India border as well as provide a larger market for Indian goods.

While the United States may view China as a 21st Century adversary, China may not have the same view. China's strategic plan may only include becoming an economic power and not a world power, as many Americans believe. Part of China's strategy anchors in lessons learned from the relationship between Japan and the United States during the 1930's. Japan attacked the United States in 1941 because it felt it had no other choice. In the 1930s, Japan was attempting to move from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy, and aggressive U.S. economic policy in the region was seen by Japan as restricting Japan's access to strategic industrial resources. Without oil and steel, Japan would remain a primarily agricultural economy, and U.S. hegemony appeared to be thwarting Japan's aspirations at every turn. Japan determined that control of Southeast Asia would give them the oil and raw materials which its industry required and would reduce its economic dependence on the United States.⁵³ Knowing this, Japan concluded that war was inevitable if Japan were to develop into a modern nation, a conclusion that drove the decision to attempt to eliminate U.S. naval power at Pearl Harbor.

Making a similar transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy in the same region, it is likely that China has drawn lessons from that decision. To break what it perceives as the economic hegemony of the United States, China is arguably looking to ensure its access to strategic resources without going to war. China is expanding its economic influence in Southeast Asia and globally, securing the resources around the world necessary to ensure that its industrial economy continues to expand. To support this, China continues to expand its military capabilities to protect its access to those strategic resources and allow it to influence smaller regional powers while keeping the United States on edge.

Conclusion

Developing a stronger strategic relationship between the United States and India is becoming a priority issue for both nations. India wants the economic benefits from a relationship with the United States without having to lose any sovereignty that would accompany any U.S. military presence on its soil. Since World War II, the United States has maintained an interest in Asia. From defending democracy in South Korea to rebuilding Japan, the United States has supported democracy, assisted development, advanced security, and improved global commerce. To remain competitive on a global scale, the United States is seeking to develop a better relationship with China that benefits both countries. If the United States sees a growing China as a threat to its national interests, developing a stronger strategic relationship with India to balance against China seems like the next logical step. The current government of the United States continues to take steps in strengthening this relationship through increased trade and defense agreements. Whether this is to counter China or to develop India's ability to provide additional security capabilities in South and East Asia are both "wins" for the

United States and the region. Smaller countries with little ability to push back against China or fight terrorism would benefit from India's growth into more than just a regional power.

While the United States' position in Asia is clear, it remains to be seen what India desires going forward. India is in unfamiliar territory concerning its national strategy. While a position of non-alignment was beneficial to India after independence, the end of the Cold War brought the need for a new strategy. It is still unclear whether Prime Minister Modi has the political influence or desire to make India more than just a regional power. India's population is expected to overtake China in the next 20 years. This will require India to continue to improve internal issues such as governance, job creation and infrastructure to keep up with demand. Security concerns along India's borders with Pakistan and China will require resolution for India to shift focus externally. While these issues seem difficult to resolve, India has the government and resources for improvement. A continued strengthening of the strategic relationship with the United States will assist in these endeavors as well.

Endnotes

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