

## Bookends of Stability: President Trump's India Policy

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### Abstract

This paper examines the Trump administration's policy towards India. Given the administration's repeated assertion that the long-term interests of the two states are aligned, the analysis identifies the major trends that drive the two countries together in the areas of Geopolitics, Security, Culture, and Economics. It then surveys how Indo-U.S. relations have progressed since the Bush administration's breakthrough agreement in 2008. From there, the examination identifies how the Trump administration policies help to further the positive aspects of these trends. It concludes with an assessment of several "spoilers" that have the greatest potential to derail the deepening of the strategic partnership, as has so often occurred since the founding of the Indian state.

## **Bookends of Stability: President Trump's India Policy**

This paper examines the Trump administration's policy towards India. Given the administration's repeated assertion that the long-term interests of the two states are aligned, the analysis identifies major trends that drive the two countries together in the areas of Geopolitics, Security, Culture, and Economics. It then surveys how Indo-U.S. relations have progressed since the Bush administration's breakthrough agreement in 2008. From there, the examination identifies how the Trump administration policies help to further the positive aspects of these trends. It concludes with an assessment of several "spoilers" that have the greatest potential to derail the deepening of the strategic partnership, as has so often occurred since the founding of the Indian state.

Secretary of Defense Mattis identifies the current period as "a historic opportunity for our two democracies, a time of strategic convergence."<sup>1</sup> As evidenced by decades of abortive attempts at rapprochement between the two states, there is reason to suspect this may be overly optimistic. Still, Mattis's comment reflects a recognition of the progress made by the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership initiatives of the Bush and Obama administrations. The trends that have been drawing India and the United States (U.S.) together may have finally reached a critical inflection point on which the Trump strategy can capitalize, in contrast to the Cold War history of neglect and mistrust.

### **Forces Drawing the United States and India Together**

Before examining some of the specific policies that President Trump is pursuing, it is useful to recognize the underlying forces that have facilitated the current thaw and provided the impetus for a more cooperative relationship. In the realms of geopolitics, culture, security, and economy, India and America are increasingly finding themselves drawn together.

## Geopolitics

The convergence of the United States and India is the most straightforward in the area of geopolitics. This paper uses the term “geopolitics” to describe “the interaction between, on the one hand, geographic settings and perspectives and, on the other, political processes.”<sup>2</sup>

Physically, India lies at the crossroads of Asia, dominating maritime trade routes across the Indian Ocean and land routes south of the greater Himalaya mountain range.<sup>3</sup> As the United States seeks options to counter China’s influence across the Indo-Asia-Pacific region,<sup>4</sup> India’s location, and her naval potential in particular, make it a highly attractive partner. With its 200 million-person Muslim population and its location between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> largest Muslim-majority states in the world,<sup>5</sup> India is positioned at the geographic center of the fundamentalist Islamic radicalism that the United States is determined to eradicate. Indeed, for each of the “Big 4+1” security threats that the United States has been focused on,<sup>6</sup> India’s location in the world could prove decisive terrain. From the American perspective, India’s location, combined with a potential economic and military boom, suggests a lucrative prospect. Action now provides an opportunity to develop a long-term and like-minded partner who can assume some of the costs of policing the world order. Not coincidentally, that partner could also supply key basing locations and overflight rights in the event of conflict with China.

For India, the United States presents a potentially unique geopolitical partnership opportunity, largely because it is located outside of, but remains significantly engaged in, the South Asia region. While maintaining a commitment to the “strategic autonomy” policy that often limits the relationship, India has recognized some alignment of strategic goals with American interests. Since the days of Kautilya, Indian leaders have looked at

any physical neighbor as a potential threat.<sup>7</sup> With ongoing and frequently violent border disputes with both China and Pakistan, that is as true today as it ever has been.

America's ability to project power in support of partners, without making any territorial claims of its own, lends it a particular strategic attraction. With a history of Islamic terrorism, India fears regional instability and the impact of a "belt of terror" developing if the Pakistani state fails.<sup>8</sup> Even a United States that is increasingly pulling away from Pakistan provides a potential lever to assist India in maintaining at least a less-threatening neighbor to the west.<sup>9</sup>

In Afghanistan, India remains committed to the U.S.-backed Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, providing \$3 Billion in development assistance and ongoing training for Afghan government and security officials.<sup>10</sup> It has been the largest financial contributor to Afghan reconstruction from the South and Central Asian regions.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, India seeks a peaceful and friendly Afghanistan that can provide access to Central Asian markets. As such it has recently welcomed the American long-term commitment there.<sup>12</sup>

India's relationship with China necessarily involves a careful balancing of interests. Chinese trade and investment in India continue to rise, making it a significant factor in the Indian economy, but India remains cautious about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>13</sup> India's investment in the Chabahar port of Iran as a part of the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) is widely viewed as a direct competitor to the BRI, a strategic move to prevent Indian encirclement from China that could choke access to northern and western markets and energy sources.<sup>14</sup> PM Modi's personal investment in the relationship with Sri Lanka is at least in part designed to ensure India retains

influence there, the better to monitor China's activities at the Hambantota port, which China has now leased for 99 years.<sup>15</sup> As Modi implements his "neighborhood first" approach to improve relations across South Asia, the aim appears to be directed primarily at countering China's influence with each of India's neighbors.<sup>16</sup>

### Security

As with geopolitics, the security-related trends that draw the United States and India together are relatively recent, dating roughly to the end of the Cold War. Since that time, however, they have progressively converged. By President Obama's second term, the relationship had progressed to the point of issuing a Joint Strategic Vision including a commitment to "oppose terrorism, piracy, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction within or from the region."<sup>17</sup>

The simplest security issue, in many respects, is freedom of navigation. The fact that naval operations take place at sea tends to reduce their domestic political significance, allowing the Indian navy to operate alongside U.S. partners without fear of a backlash for inviting foreign domination or violating the principle of strategic autonomy.<sup>18</sup> The Indian public is strongly in favor of exerting greater leadership in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Strong majorities agree that India should have the most powerful navy in the IOR, do more to lead regional cooperation there, and that the US can be a good partner in the Indian Ocean.<sup>19</sup>

Indian interest in countering piracy and ensuring access to shipping routes is not new. The United States and India began the annual Malabar Exercise in 1992, then expanded it to include Japan beginning on 2007 and Australia in 2017. India has been deploying ships to the Gulf of Aden to escort merchant vessels continuously since 2008.<sup>20</sup> During PM Modi's visit to Washington in July 2017, he and President Trump

reiterated the importance that both countries place on freedom of navigation, overflight, and commerce throughout the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>21</sup>

Counterterrorism is another long-standing mutual security interest for India and the United States. Despite a historic low point in diplomatic relations that had lasted since India's nuclear test in 1998, India was one of the first countries to offer support for the US after 9/11.<sup>22</sup> In addition to formal condolences, India extended access to air bases and unprecedented intelligence sharing about terrorist organizations in the region.<sup>23</sup> India has been fighting terrorism on its own soil since the early 1990s, during which period it routinely approached the United States for assistance against Islamist terrorist organizations based in Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it well: "As America reacts to the mass murder of 9/11 and prepares for more, it would do well to consider how much terror India endured in the second half of the last century."<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, nuclear security is a third area of longstanding mutual interest, if not necessarily mutual trust. Despite the aggressively negative U.S. reaction to India's initial development of nuclear weapons, successive administrations beginning with President George W. Bush have increasingly supported bringing India into the international cohort of accepted, responsible nuclear states. While this has created some criticism internationally, especially from China, it represents at least a tacit acknowledgement of India's history as "a model of nonproliferation behavior in its foreign relations – particularly when compared to China, Pakistan, and Russia."<sup>26</sup> Here again, the events of 9/11 provided the impetus for the United States to recognize the commonality of the two countries' concerns for nuclear technology and weapons spreading to unpredictable and undeterrable nonstate actors.<sup>27</sup>

## Culture

In the area of culture, India and the United States have been drawn together primarily below the level of strategy elites and national policy processes. While emphasizing the sub-state level of interactions, this paper uses the Merriam-Webster definition of culture as “the customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of a ... group.”<sup>28</sup> Although official policy is formulated by elites in any state, in a democracy the political interests that sustain or undermine policy are often dictated by the activity and interest level of the electorate, especially as reflected in lobbying and special interest groups. One need look no further than the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) to see an example of how a motivated and organized group can exert significant sway across different administrations to influence policy.

The most cogent example of this effect in Indo-U.S. relations is the rise of the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian-Americans, now the largest such group focused on a single country in the U.S. Congress.<sup>29</sup> The bipartisan group exists to further the relationship between the United States and India and to craft legislative strategies aligned with priorities important to the Indian-American community.<sup>30</sup> Closely related are the lobby organizations Indian American Friendship Council (IAFC) and the U.S.-India Business Council, a subordinate organization to the U.S. Chamber of Congress. The missions of both groups include improving Indo-U.S. relations, advancing the interests of the Indian-American community, and educating Members of Congress.<sup>31</sup> Taken together, the three organizations present a significant and focused effort by the Indian-American community to nudge the U.S. government into an ever-closer relationship with India. While not attempting to dictate U.S. policy in accordance with the views of the Government of India, the lobby has demonstrated the ability, as

recently as the 2005 nuclear agreement, to provide the energy and influence needed to advance an otherwise unpopular pro-India agenda.<sup>32</sup>

The Indian-American community that the lobby represents is large by almost any measure, a group with at least strong potential to be sympathetic to closer ties between the two countries. In 2016, it included over 3.8 million self-identified Indian-Americans, or just over 1% of the total U.S. population. The only countries of origin with larger populations were Mexico (34 million) and China (4 million).<sup>33</sup> In addition, just under 166,000 Indian students were studying in American universities in 2016, second only to China.<sup>34</sup> The United States remains the destination of choice for Indian students studying abroad, and given the costs associated with studying in the United States, those students are overwhelmingly coming from (and returning back to) the highest socio-economic classes of India.<sup>35</sup> The frequency of personal interaction between Indians and Americans provides significant basis for increasing understanding and mutual trust, which is likely to only increase as the younger generations move into elite positions in Indian and American policy-making circles.

One additional facet of cultural convergence between the United States and India is in the area of human rights. Although some observers have questioned the Modi administration's commitment to human rights,<sup>36</sup> the trajectory of Indian society has been positive in the areas of caste, class, and gender. The 1950 constitution guarantees equal rights regardless of gender or caste. That legal benchmark, combined with the incentives of democratic electoral politics, has allowed for increased social mobility and opportunities for historically repressed groups to have a voice.<sup>37</sup> In recognition of their shared value for universal rights, the Obama-era "Joint Strategic Vision" between the

United States and India highlighted the two states' "common commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."<sup>38</sup> While not precisely aligned, the United States and India share a common legal framework and philosophical commitment to the principle of universal human rights that contributes to drawing the two nations together.

These cultural trends are reflected in the public perceptions of each state with the other. Indians feel warmer towards the United States than any other country.<sup>39</sup> They feel that India should be more like the United States than any other country,<sup>40</sup> and that India's relationship with the United States should grow stronger over the next 10 years.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, Americans' perceptions of India are more mixed. In terms of warmth, Americans tend to place India in the middle of other nations, with formal allied partners such as Korea, Japan, and NATO members ranking far higher.<sup>42</sup> Still, when asked if it is desirable for India to exert strong leadership in world affairs, a healthy 63% of Americans respond favorably, below more traditional allies but significantly above other world powers such as Russia and China and on par with South Korea.<sup>43</sup> All told, public perceptions in both countries suggest significant support for greater partnership.

### Economic

The final category of trends addressed in this analysis is economic. Like culture, economic ties between the two nations typically occur below the level of national policy-makers, but over time the increase in personal business connections contributes to drawing the state-level affinity of India and the United States closer together. India currently ranks as the 9<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner of the United States, but significantly, the total trade of goods between the two countries grew 110% in the last ten years.<sup>44</sup> Over that same period of time, trade in services grew 280%.<sup>45</sup> Exports to the United

States have risen at a similar rate (110% over the last ten years), and the United States is the largest single destination for Indian exports.<sup>46</sup> American exports to India have also risen apace, increasing 124% in the last ten years, and making India the 18<sup>th</sup> largest U.S. export market in 2016.<sup>47</sup> Indians account for 70% of all non-immigrant (“H1-B”) work visas to the United States and 84% of all work visas for non-immigrant spouses.<sup>48</sup> Those proportions have remained relatively consistent since 2007, dwarfing work visas from any other country.<sup>49</sup> The United States ranks third in terms of the total amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) in India.<sup>50</sup> FDI from the United States has grown from \$9.75 Billion in 2006 to nearly \$33 Billion in 2016.<sup>51</sup>

### From Bush to Trump

Before examining some of the Trump administration’s specific policies, it is useful to understand how the geopolitical, security, cultural, and economic draw has influenced state-level cooperation in recent years. After PM Vajpayee’s outreach to the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Bush and Vajpayee administrations made significant strides to repair the historically damaged relationship and set it on a sustainable path to positive future growth. The result was encapsulated in the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) initiative. NSSP committed both states to “increase cooperation in civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programs, high-technology trade, and missile defense,” as building blocks to expanding “cooperation on strategic, energy security, and economic matters.”<sup>52</sup> Each of these areas has seen a degree of progress since the inception of NSSP, although significant work remains.

#### Civilian Nuclear Activities

In civilian nuclear activities, the progress has been relatively straightforward. In 2008, Bush and PM Singh finalized an agreement that increased the security and

transparency of India's nuclear material as well as separating military from civilian nuclear production facilities. The United States passed new laws to exempt India from certain requirements and lobbied on India's behalf with the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).<sup>53</sup> The 2008 deal was followed in 2016 with a further agreement between President Obama and PM Modi for India to purchase six civilian nuclear reactors from the United States.<sup>54</sup> Following closely on the heels of that agreement, India joined the IAEA's Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM), committing to a series of international best practices for securing nuclear material.<sup>55</sup> Although so far unsuccessful, the United States has continued to advocate on behalf of India joining the NSG as a full member with the power and responsibility to help oversee the international system of nuclear trade.<sup>56</sup> In this area, the promise of the NSSP has born substantial fruit, with the completion of the current deals for nuclear reactors and India's accession into the NSG as the only significant factors outstanding.

### Civilian Space Programs

Similarly, the NSSP's focus on civilian space programs has yielded substantial advancement. In 2008, an Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) rocket carried two NASA satellites as part of its payload on India's first successful lunar mission.<sup>57</sup> In 2014, the two agencies initiated a joint program to launch a Synthetic Aperture Radar to observe the Earth, and created a Mars Working Group to collaborate on future joint missions to Mars.<sup>58</sup> In 2016, ISRO's commercial arm signed a deal with Google to place nine micro-satellites into orbit, the first time an Indian rocket launched from Indian territory will carry an American payload.<sup>59</sup> Also in 2016, ISRO and U.S. Geological Survey each agreed to allow the other to receive geological survey data directly from their satellites.<sup>60</sup>

Counting Europe as nation for the purposes of space, there are six space-faring nations (United States, Russia, China, India, Europe via the European Space Agency, and Japan). These have generally solidified into two opposing blocks in determining the appropriate international guidelines to govern the uses and regulation of traffic in space. India, however, has remained largely silent on the most contentious issues.<sup>61</sup> India and the United States might productively further the relationship in cooperation on the global governance of the space domain.

### High Technology Trade

The third plank of the NSSP, high-technology trade, has primarily been pursued through the U.S.-India High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG) and the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI). The HTCG was created to ease the barriers to trade between the two nations and to create an environment of trust that would also facilitate partnership with the private sector. It aims to ease export controls from the United States on dual-use technology while increasing the credibility of Indian guarantees on valid end use and nonproliferation.<sup>62</sup> As a part of the HTCG's work, the United States has reduced or adjusted the export licensing requirements on both commercial and military items. At the group's creation, 24% of all U.S. exports to India required export licenses. By 2014, only 0.3% did.<sup>63</sup> Classes of aerospace and military munitions regulations have been revised to place them under the jurisdiction of the Department of Commerce instead of the State Department, increasing the timeliness of approval.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, in 2013 the United States revised regulations governing satellite technology, enabling Indian companies to purchase U.S. satellites and satellite components that were previously banned.<sup>65</sup>

The HTCG continues to focus its working groups on nanotechnology, defense trade, information technology, and biotechnology, working to increase the ease and speed of trade. It also facilitates courses to educated U.S.-based companies on India's defense procurement and pharmaceutical trial policies, as well as procedures to improve understanding and maximize the opportunities for successful contracting bids from American firms.<sup>66</sup> Following the most recent meeting, representatives from both sides acknowledged that more work should be done to clarify and reduce restrictions on technology sharing, especially in light of PM Modi's "Make in India" requirements.<sup>67</sup>

The Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) was formed in 2012 with a focus on developing high-technology defense systems cooperatively, rather than simply selling or assembling US-designed military equipment in India.<sup>68</sup> Five years on, DTTI continues to make progress, but so far the tangible outputs have been negligible. DTTI has yielded agreement that U.S. and Indian defense laboratories should jointly lead the development of several projects, but none has yet moved beyond the conceptual phase.<sup>69</sup> Still, the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) institutionalized the DTTI into law as a standing entity, indicating that the Trump administration intends to continue cooperative efforts under this Obama-era construct.<sup>70</sup>

### Missile Defense

Both the United States and India have made strides in ballistic missile defenses (BMD) since the initiation of the NSSP, but there is little evidence of substantive cooperation. As recently as December 2017, India announced its third successful test of an indigenously-developed supersonic missile interceptor.<sup>71</sup> The Obama administration downplayed this aspect of the NSSP out of a concern that BMD cooperation would be too destabilizing regionally.<sup>72</sup> In deference to Pakistani concerns, the United States even

denied Israel's request to transfer the jointly-produced Arrow-II system to India.<sup>73</sup> To date, it is not clear that the Trump administration has re-initiated BMD cooperation, but this is a potential area for significantly increased cooperation as the relationship improves.

### The Trump Administration's India Policy

While not publishing a specific strategy solely for U.S.-India relations, the Trump administration has provided a wealth of detail in how it views the relationship and America's desire to move it forward. The objectives of the strategy imply a progressively closer bilateral relationship to balance Chinese hegemony. These are articulated in the 2017 National Security Strategy, as well as in repeated statements by Secretary of State Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Mattis. They include "a free and open Indo-Pacific,"<sup>74</sup> "sustaining favorable balances of power,"<sup>75</sup> "countering terrorist threats,"<sup>76</sup> "preventing cross-border terrorism that raises the prospect of military and nuclear tensions,"<sup>77</sup> and "preventing nuclear weapons, technology, and equipment from falling into the hands of terrorists."<sup>78</sup> In addition, the June 2017 Joint Statement of President Trump and Indian Prime Minister Modi emphasizes increasing energy linkages and economic growth between the two nations.<sup>79</sup>

Secretary Tillerson and Secretary Mattis each refer to India and the United States as "pillars of stability" for the Indo-Pacific region, sharing a "strategic convergence" of interests which include "a rules-based order to promote sovereign countries' access to the global commons," as well as shared commitments to rule of law, freedom of navigation, universal values, and free trade.<sup>80</sup> The tone of both Secretaries implies that the United States is ready to go farther toward an alliance than

India, and that America will welcome almost any initiative the Indians may put forth to strengthen bilateral ties.

The methods articulated by the administration include “a menu of defense options”<sup>81</sup> to build India’s capacity and increase interoperability between the two states’ military forces. There is an eagerness from the U.S. side to cooperate further on maritime domain awareness, peacekeeping and capacity building in Africa, improving economic integration and connectivity across South Asia, promoting innovation and co-development to provide jobs in both countries, and harnessing the competitive advantage of open societies to sustain a technological edge over China’s military build-up.<sup>82</sup> The strategy includes a desire to expand mechanisms for “transparent, high-standard regional lending mechanisms” as a direct competitor to China’s various Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) development projects.<sup>83</sup> While recognizing that military-to-military relations have been steadily improving over the last decade, the United States desires to expand these with “additional and specialized exercises.”<sup>84</sup>

Taken as a whole, the objectives of the U.S. strategy toward India depict the United States as a trusting, like-minded partner who is willing to cooperate extensively in maintaining stability and the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. The emphasis is on jointly securing an environment in which commerce can grow, to the benefit of both nations. This objective stands in contrast to India’s and America’s suspicion of China’s Belt and Road Initiative as an attempt to undermine and dominate the region at the expense of the United States and China’s neighbors.

#### Specific Initiatives

Although only in office for one year, several of the Trump administration’s policies reflect an understanding of the positive Indo-U.S. trends and demonstrate potential to

capitalize on them to further the strategic partnership. The most promising is the continuation of an Obama-era initiative to manufacture F-16 fighters in India for the Indian Air Force. Emphasizing expansion of the UN Security Council to include India as a permanent member is a more challenging, but intriguing policy. A third initiative is the administration's assistance in completing the construction of nuclear reactors agreed to under President Obama, despite Westinghouse Corporation's declaration of bankruptcy. The final policy that seems likely to further the historic trends is the administration-wide tone of acceptance of Indian sensitivities with respect to aggressive, rapid expansion of the strategic partnership.

#### F-16 Block 70 (Military)

One of the most well-developed policies is the proposal to sell F-16 Block 70 fighter aircraft to the Indian Air Force (IAF). On the Indian side, PM Modi's "Make in India" initiative prioritizes the physical production of military hardware at Indian factories, employing Indian labor, and transferring cutting-edge technologies to Indian partner companies. As President Trump came into office, some observers questioned whether "America First," and especially Candidate Trump's emphasis on increasing manufacturing jobs for American workers, would interfere with the F-16 proposal.<sup>85</sup>

However, in June 2017, the administration approved a deal between Lockheed Martin and India's Tata Advanced Systems Limited to partner in building the aircraft in India. Since then, Lockheed has sweetened its bid. If the IAF commits to the F-16 purchase, the company has offered to shift the entire production line from Texas to India. The offer includes production not only of the planes for India, but those for export to other nations as well.<sup>86</sup>

The administration's response is an important indicator both physically and informationally. Physically, one of the limiting factors in military-to-military relationships between the two states is the simple challenge of interoperability between Russian and American-produced systems. The more U.S. equipment in the Indian military, the easier will be for the two forces to operate in concert. In simple economic terms, to the extent that the Indian armed forces shift procurement from Russia to the United States, American companies stand to gain both in revenues and in maintaining active production lines.

More significantly, the informational message that the policy sends reinforces the trends drawing the two states together. The desire for greater diplomatic and military cooperation appears to have trumped the domestic American political motive to protect jobs and even technology. By accommodating India's concerns both for mutual respect and for India's economic challenges (especially with respect to job creation), the administration has signaled an assessment of relative priorities. The imperative to grow the relationship with India emerged as the weightiest.

#### UN Security Council (Diplomacy)

On the diplomatic front, the Trump team has continued the policy (first endorsed in principle by the Obama administration)<sup>87</sup> of support for India as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Where President Obama stated support for the change as a policy position, the United States now appears to be actively working at least to lay the groundwork for substantive reform of the Security Council.<sup>88</sup> That the diplomatic challenges will be significant is clear and beyond the scope of this analysis, but the indication that the United States is willing to address them will further draw India and the

United States together. This policy highlights American recognition of India's global potential both to influence world events and to serve as a beneficial security provider.

#### Westinghouse Nuclear Reactors (Economy)

Like the F-16 and UN Security Council membership issues, President Trump inherited a monumental agreement on civilian nuclear technology from his predecessor. Central to that agreement was for the United States to provide six nuclear reactors to India which will assist with the domestic energy demand required to fuel India's economic growth.<sup>89</sup> What has changed for President Trump is that Westinghouse Corporation, the American company responsible for building the plants, has declared bankruptcy. As with the F-16s, the rhetoric of "America First" might have been used to scuttle the deal or re-negotiate it to increase the balance of benefits for American workers. In contrast, during Modi's visit to Washington, President Trump reiterated his support to the finalization of the contracts for the project "and also related project financing."<sup>90</sup> Especially at a time when Trump has been openly critical of the Obama-era nuclear deal with Iran, the contrast of full-throated support for rescuing the Indian nuclear agreement stands out. It acknowledges India's place as a responsible nuclear power, committed both to assisting with the global non-proliferation regime and to a nuclear deterrent that contributes to stability, rather than challenging established international norms.

#### Tone (Information)

In the area of information, the tone adopted by the Trump administration towards India similarly reflects the trends drawing the two nations together. Both Tillerson and Mattis emphasize "a menu of options" that the United States has presented for official Indian consideration rather than a list of American demands.<sup>91</sup> Mattis acknowledges

India's "rightful place at the global table," while praising India's "stabilizing leadership" in the Indian Ocean and beyond.<sup>92</sup> The implication of the Trump team's tone is significant. While fully prepared to "talk tough" where it feels it is warranted,<sup>93</sup> the administration appears to recognize India's aversion to any implication of western re-colonialization. Rather than presenting even a mix of carrots and sticks, the outreach involves open offers of cooperation combined with a willingness to accept Indian reluctance to some of them. The tone is one of mutual respect for a true partner on the global stage, rather than a patron-client relationship.

The Trump administration even eschews the language of transactional relationship that is used with some other states, instead approaching India as a nation of "shared values" and "a common vision," in addition to "aligned interests."<sup>94</sup> Despite calls for increasing alliances across the globe,<sup>95</sup> none of the statements regarding India suggest proposing a formal alliance. While manifestly desiring a closer relationship, the current policy is one of welcoming further partnership while accepting Indian limitations on that partnership.

#### Pitfalls on the Road to the Bookends Partnership

Despite the persistence of trends that pull the two nations together and the Trump administration's policies that seem likely to capitalize on those trends, numerous pitfalls remain which have the potential to spoil the developing relationship. This paper identifies several of the most likely spoilers which might intervene to negatively impact the drift of Indo-U.S. relations.

#### Domestic Politics

In the realm of domestic politics, the anti-immigration narrative that fueled much of Donald Trump's rise has significant potential to derail the relationship and even to

counteract the cultural trends highlighted above. If the United States begins to restrict Indian access to student and temporary work visas, cross-cultural contacts will naturally decline. At the same time, the issue will be portrayed in the Indian domestic press as evidence that the United States cannot be trusted and that American isolationism combines with inherent racism toward South Asians.<sup>96</sup> These pressures are likely to prove more significant to politicians on either side than any desire for closer diplomatic and security relations.

### Ethno-Sectarian Conflict

Indian reactions to internal security concerns, particularly in the area of ethno-sectarian violence, have a similar potential to create domestic political forces in both countries that would drive a wedge between them. After all, it was only the election of Modi to Prime Minister that allowed him to gain a visa to United States. Prior to that, he was denied entry based on a perception that during his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat he provided tacit support for violent Hindu extremists. In 2005, the State Department determined him to be in violation of the Immigration and Nationality Act, resulting in the denial of a diplomatic visa for “severe violations of religious freedom.”<sup>97</sup> Were the Indian government to face a significant domestic challenge and respond with measures that appeared to U.S. audiences as overly repressive, even the influential India lobby would be challenged to overcome the impulse to dial back American support.

### Pakistan

The most likely scenario to derail Indo-U.S. relations remains now, as ever, the Pakistan problem. Although the Trump administration appears to be deliberately favoring its Indian over its Pakistani relationship, Pakistan retains powerful leverage to

influence the partnership. Pakistan's most significant soft power levers are the land and air corridors that the United States relies heavily on to support its efforts in Afghanistan. Were Pakistan to limit overflight and ground movement across its territory unless the United States cancels any of its recent initiatives toward India, the United States would be hard pressed to resist that pressure.

Even if the United States is successful in withdrawing the bulk of its effort in Afghanistan, Pakistan retains its ability to use proxy non-state organizations in India or against Indian nationals in Afghanistan. On at least two occasions since 2003, the United States has urged Indian restraint in the face of spectacular terror attacks by Pakistan-backed groups.<sup>98</sup> Presumably, the Indian public will not accept that level of restraint indefinitely. If the United States responds to further Pakistani provocations with additional calls for restraint, the Indian public is likely to suspect the value of the American relationship. One need only imagine how the American population would have responded to calls for restraint after the 9/11 attacks. If India were to retaliate, the U.S. government would likely be challenged to convince the American public that the price of supporting India's seemingly endless conflict with Pakistan is worth further investment. Were the United States to give even a lukewarm response to India, it is likely to fuel the left-leaning Indian parties who automatically suspect the United States of being an unreliable partner already.<sup>99</sup>

## China

Despite the geopolitical trends that pull the United States and India together in opposition to China's rise, the potential remains for China to orchestrate events such that the United States finds its interests in cooperation with China outweigh the potential of the Indian partnership. The precedent goes back to the Nixon administration, when

the outreach to China, facilitated in part by Pakistan, overshadowed a then-nascent Indo-U.S. reconciliation.<sup>100</sup> On the positive side, China might be able to link full support of the U.S. strategy to isolate and de-nuclearize North Korea to American disengagement in South Asia. Similarly, China could orchestrate a crisis in its relations with Taiwan, and then offer the United States the opportunity to choose between defending Taiwan or (in exchange for peaceful resolution) disengaging with India.

### Russia

Although less influential, Russia retains some ability to play spoiler in the budding Indo-U.S. relationship. Still the largest supplier of hardware to the Indian military, Russia might conceivably choose to provide further subsidized equipment to continue to lock the U.S. defense industry out of India. As an energy exporter, Russia might also be able to play on India's energy insecurity fears, perhaps partnering to increase energy infrastructure between the two states as a way to undermine both U.S. and Chinese influence in South Asia. These Russian initiatives, while potentially detrimental, seem unlikely to prove significant enough to counteract the forces that are drawing the United States and India together. Still, they could slow the development of the relationship and foment distrust, especially from the American side.

### Iran

The final significant international influencer in the region that is likely to resist the budding Indo-U.S. partnership is Iran. India's desire for assured access to Middle Eastern energy, combined with its historic ties to Iran under the Non Aligned Movement, have already placed India in an awkward position as the United States insists on support for sanctions against Iran's nuclear development program.<sup>101</sup> While India and Iran have partnered on the development of Chabahar port as part of India's North-South

Transit Corridor (NSTC), viewed by many as India's attempt to outflank China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),<sup>102</sup> Iran has also indicated that it is open to connecting the port to the BRI terminus in Pakistan, a route which India vehemently opposes.

Iran therefore presents two challenges. The United States will need to balance its desire to isolate Iran economically and diplomatically with a recognition of India's strategic interest in maintaining close Indo-Iranian relations. India will need to resist any Iranian moves to link the connectivity and energy issues to India's partnership with the US in other arenas.

### Indian Economic Stagnation

A final factor with the potential to de-rail Indo-U.S. relations is a sustained stagnation in the Indian economy. India's rise to high- or even middle-income status is not guaranteed, and still faces significant challenges. The U.S. desire to draw nearer to India is largely predicated on India's ability to serve as a net security provider in the broader Indo-Pacific region. It remains to be seen whether India's massive youth bulge represents a pending economic boom or a population bomb. The Modi government has so far fallen short of its goal of creating 1 million jobs per month. The growth of the economy has slowed in recent years, and the middle class (historically the biggest driver of growth for developing countries) has failed to grow on pace with GDP. Rather, growth in recent years has been tightly concentrated among the already-wealthy.<sup>103</sup> Corruption is endemic. Quality education is significantly short of the demands of the still-growing populace.<sup>104</sup> If over time India proves unable to generate the significant economic growth it needs to project credible regional security and international diplomatic power, the United States loses its incentive to continue a full-throated pursuit of a Bookend Partnership.

## Conclusion

After decades of neglect from American policymakers and Indian mistrust of foreign entanglements, Indo-U.S. relations are the closest they have ever been. The United States and India have been increasingly drawn together by a convergence of geopolitical, security, cultural, and economic trends. The Trump administration's policies toward India recognize and seek to build on those trends. As they continue to pursue closer relations, both India and the United States should acknowledge the existence of multitude potential domestic and international spoilers and commit to mitigating those risks to the bilateral relationship. Only then can the two nations reverse the historical pattern of reacting to immediate crises and seize the opportunity to shape the future world order on terms of bilateral respect, shared interests, and mutually beneficial growth.

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<sup>92</sup> Secretary James Mattis, “Secretary Mattis Joint Press Conference with Minister of Defence Nirmala Sitharaman.”

<sup>93</sup> For example, in the President’s recent statements about the lack of support provided by Pakistan.

<sup>94</sup> Rex Tillerson, “Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century”; Terri Moon Cronk, “Mattis: Meeting With Indian Defense Minister Comes at Time of Strategic Convergence.”

<sup>95</sup> Secretary Jim Mattis, “Guidance from Secretary Jim Mattis,” Memorandum for all Department of Defense personnel, October 5, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/GUIDANCE-FROM-SECRETARY-JIM-MATTIS.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2018).

<sup>96</sup> See, for example: Seema Sirohi, “Down the H-1B Discussion Hole: What the Other Side Says,” *The Wire Online* (October 3, 2017): <https://thewire.in/115547/h-1b-trump-hate-crimes-indians/> (accessed January 31, 2018).

<sup>97</sup> Annie Gowen, “Once Banned from the U.S., India’s Modi Set for Historic Address to Congress,” *The Washington Post Online* (June 6, 2016): [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/06/from-pariah-to-capitol-hill-narendra-modis-extraordinary-rise/?utm\\_term=.28ad73ba8b1d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/06/from-pariah-to-capitol-hill-narendra-modis-extraordinary-rise/?utm_term=.28ad73ba8b1d) (accessed January 30, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> Bhasin, *The Big Three*, 39-42.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>100</sup> Bruce O. Riedel, *JFK’s Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and Sino-Indian War* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 151-63.

<sup>101</sup> Lawrence Sáez, “U.S. Policy and Energy Security in South Asia: Economic Prospects and Strategic Implications,” *Asian Survey* 47, no. 4 (July/August 2007): 657- 78.

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Mehtab Karan Singh, “Chabahar: Deal Done But Miles To Go for India,” *DefenceInfo.com*, June 9, 2016, <http://www.defenceinfo.com/chabahar-deal-done-but-miles-to-go-for-india> (accessed March 5, 2018).

<sup>103</sup> "India has a hole where its middle class should be," *The Economist* 426, no. 9074 (January 13, 2018): 9-11.

<sup>104</sup> Adeney and Wyatt, *Contemporary India*, 114-15.