

## The Ties that Bind? U.S.–Indian Values-based Cooperation

In his November 2010 speech before the Indian Parliament, President Barack Obama cited shared values as a key element in the U.S.–India relationship. Pointing to a “final area where our countries can partner—strengthening the foundations of democratic governance, not only at home but abroad,” Obama emphasized an issue that has long received short shrift from those focused on building a new, robust bilateral relationship. Despite deep skepticism among many experts about the prospects for U.S.–Indian cooperation to advance universal values, the president told India’s Parliament, “[P]romoting shared prosperity, preserving peace and security, strengthening democratic governance and human rights—these are the responsibilities of leadership. And as global partners, this is the leadership that the United States and India can offer in the 21st century.”<sup>1</sup>

The president’s remarks constituted perhaps the most prominent call for bilateral cooperation to promote universal values, but they were not the first reference to the unique nature of relations between the world’s two largest democracies. In 1998, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee declared that India and the United States were “natural allies,” a term that has since been adopted by leaders of both parties in both countries.<sup>2</sup> Since then, nearly every bilateral policy pronouncement has included requisite language invoking shared values, and senior officials from both countries routinely cite democracy, a commitment

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to liberal ideals, and a defense of human rights as the glue that binds together the two nations.

Yet, many longtime observers of the relationship remain skeptical that the reality is deeper than the rhetoric. After all, the United States and India were democratic nations through half a century of lukewarm to chilly relations until the late 1990s. Many India-hands in Washington and New Delhi-based experts alike still dismiss the idea that India will promote democracy and human rights abroad. As one former Indian ambassador said at a recent German Marshall Fund/Legatum Institute conference, “Democracy is like Hinduism. You are either born into it or you are not.”<sup>3</sup> And there are clear-eyed, *realpolitik* considerations that drive growing Indo-U.S. ties, not least of which is a shared desire to maintain a balance of power in the face of a rising China.

Differences between India and the United States—on issues from climate change to the Doha trade talks to managing Iran’s nuclear challenge—are real. But so is the promise, if not yet the reality, of Indo–American ideational cooperation, with common values serving as a bridge rather than a wedge between the countries as they pursue their national interests. Both the United States and India regard themselves as exceptional on the world stage as a result of their size, history, and distinctively open and diverse societies. Former U.S. ambassador to India Robert Blackwill recalls that when he questioned then-governor George W. Bush about his special interest in India, the governor responded, “A billion people in a functioning democracy. Isn’t that something? Isn’t that something?”<sup>4</sup>

**Indian leaders’ discourse about projecting democratic values has changed over the last decade.**

U.S. leaders have long justified their country’s foreign policy practices with reference to the ideals of American democracy. Interestingly, what has changed over the past decade is Indian leaders’ discourse about the role of democratic values in world affairs. As the pursuit of non-alignment has gradually given way to India’s opening to the West and growing ambitions to assume a full role in the world’s leading councils, so too have Indian statesmen grown more comfortable articulating and projecting

liberal values. This development, coupled with the overall transformation of bilateral ties, suggests that an agenda of values-based cooperation is realistic—and would provide the missing piece of a relationship that has flourished in nearly all other realms.

Among politicians, policymakers, and thinkers in both countries, there is a nascent sense that shared political ideals infuse the bilateral relationship with a

unique character, as Obama’s parliament speech demonstrated most vividly. At the same time, both New Delhi and Washington have found it challenging to convert rhetoric about ties between “the world’s oldest and largest democracies” into meaningful values-based cooperation in world affairs. It is time for both countries to develop a strategic approach to values-based action—as called for by President Obama—and to articulate a specific agenda for that cooperation.

## **India’s Democratic Instinct in World Affairs**

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“If there is an ‘idea of India’ that the world should remember us by and regard us for, it is the idea of an inclusive and open society, a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual society,” Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said.<sup>5</sup> “All countries of the world will evolve in this direction as we move forward into the 21st century. Liberal democracy is the natural order of social and political organization in today’s world. All alternate systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees, are an aberration.” Standard rhetoric, perhaps, among the leaders of many democratic nations, but as C. Raja Mohan has pointed out, such words mark a major departure from the modern Indian tradition.<sup>6</sup> Indian foreign policy, historically characterized by a non-aligned, post-colonial, and non-interventionist mindset, has not generally been conducive to grand invocations of human rights and democracy abroad.

This has begun to change. Over the past decade, Indian leaders’ discourse about the role of democratic values in world affairs has increased in frequency and depth, and Prime Minister Singh’s words have become a dominant theme. India today brands itself on the world stage as “the fastest-growing free-market *democracy*” (emphasis added), drawing a none-too-subtle distinction with its Chinese rival.<sup>7</sup> Indian officials also understand that good governance can serve as a source of security and stability in their neighborhood, surrounded as India is by weak and failing states that export terrorism, refugees, and contraband into India. “India would like the whole of South Asia to emerge as a community of flourishing democracies,” said Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran in 2005.<sup>8</sup> “We believe that democracy would provide a more enduring and broad-based foundation for an edifice of peace and cooperation in our subcontinent.”

Acting on this belief, India has worked to strengthen democratic institutions in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and most prominently, Afghanistan. India is Afghanistan’s fourth-largest bilateral donor (having contributed some \$1.3 billion since 2001) and has invested significantly in training Afghan civil servants, building the Afghan parliament, constructing infrastructure around the country, and supporting Afghan elections. At the global level, India was one of ten founding members of the Community of Democracies and a leading co-founder of the UN Democracy Fund, dedicated to promoting good governance

and human rights around the world. India has participated in the multilateral activities of the Center for Democratic Transitions, the Partnership for Democratic Governance, and the Asia–Pacific Democracy Partnership.

These and other endeavors suggest that India and the United States can be allies in supporting democracy and human rights, whether they are working together or independently toward similar ends. Moreover, in an era when not only the United States, but also Canada, the countries of Europe, and many nations in Asia—including Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Australia, and Indonesia—fund democracy-assistance programs overseas, it is only logical that the world’s biggest democracy assume a leading place within this group and coordinate its efforts with other like-minded powers.

Even where they have tactical differences over democracy assistance, the leaders of both countries have identified shared political values as the bedrock of broad Indo–American cooperation in world affairs. At their July 2005 summit, Prime Minister Singh and President George W. Bush declared that both nations “have an obligation to the global community to strengthen values, ideals, and practices of freedom, pluralism, and rule of law.”<sup>9</sup> At their November 2009 summit, President Obama and Prime Minister Singh agreed that “the interests of both countries are best advanced through the values mirrored in their societies,” defined these shared values as “democracy, pluralism, tolerance, openness, and respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights,” and agreed that these “common ideals and complementary strengths of India and the United States today provide a foundation for addressing the global challenges of the 21st century.”<sup>10</sup> And in the communiqué issued following the 2010 Obama–Singh summit, the two leaders pledged to “exercise global leadership in support of economic development, open government, and democratic values.”<sup>11</sup>

## Exceptions to the Values-Driven Impulse

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Nonetheless, the two countries not only have a thin record of jointly promoting democracy and rule of law, they also have genuine differences over values-based cooperation. Coupled with their enhanced rhetorical support for the expansion of democracy, Indian officials have often expressed careful caveats. As External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna remarked during the Arab uprisings of early 2011, “India will certainly try to position itself to be of advantage to forces of democracy so dear to India’s heart.” But at the same time he maintained, “India does not believe in interfering in the affairs of another country.”<sup>12</sup>

Particular cleavages arise with nations the United States defines as “rogue states” and India sees as valued neighbors—starting with Iran and Burma. While India certainly does not want to see the rise of another nuclear-weapons state in its neighborhood, it defines its interests vis-à-vis Iran differently from the United

States. This is a function of many factors: geographic proximity, a long history of civilizational ties, trade and energy interests, India's instinctive resistance to international sanctions (given its own subjection to them on technology trade from 1974–2008), and the Shi'ite factor in Indian domestic politics (India is home to the largest number of Shi'ite Muslims outside Iran).

To the east, while India in principle would welcome the restoration of democratic politics in Burma, and supported that country's beleaguered opposition for a time, Chinese encroachment into Burma and anti-Indian insurgencies along their shared border have led New Delhi to shift its approach. Now, New Delhi seeks close strategic cooperation with the Burmese military regime and is a source of significant aid and investment to the country. India's goal is to offset China's influence along its vulnerable eastern flank, defeat Indian insurgents who seek sanctuary in Burma, and gain access to Burmese energy resources.

### **The Logic of Ideational Cooperation**

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Iran and Burma underscore the limits to the argument that India and the United States, as democracies, define their interests in similar ways.<sup>13</sup> But they may be special cases—like U.S. alliances with non-democracies such as Saudi Arabia as well as Washington's occasional support for military rule in Pakistan—that do not vitiate the possibilities for Indo–American values-based cooperation elsewhere. Indeed, India has defined its relations with the world's leading democracies as more important than with non-democracies such as Iran, Burma, and China. A leaked Indian Ministry of External Affairs memo in 2006 identified relations with the United States, Britain, France, Germany, and Japan as being more strategically important to India's future than ties to other states—presumably not simply because of their power or wealth but because of a basic alignment of interests, reinforced by a set of common values, that India does not share with other countries.<sup>14</sup>

Strategically, the key question is whether India and the United States can move beyond rhetoric and a limited record of cooperation to build a global partnership rooted not only in growing security and economic ties, but also in a common commitment to strengthen good governance and pluralism within states as sources of security and stability. If India, like the United States, defines a world with more open societies as one that will best allow its interests to flourish, the two countries should be able to put into place a program of cooperation to work jointly toward that goal. If, by contrast, U.S. officials choose to minimize ideational cooperation and instead treat India simply as an important rising power given its array of capabilities, they risk minimizing the qualitative differences between India and China—differences that Indians

believe merit a special relationship with the United States of the kind neither Washington nor New Delhi enjoys with Beijing. In an era of diminishing Western influence and the “rise of the rest,” India’s success as a thriving market democracy is itself a critical U.S. interest, in part to disprove to those so enamored with the Chinese model of authoritarian development that prosperity can equally, and perhaps more durably, flourish amidst political tolerance and accountability.

Can Washington and New Delhi outline an agenda for values-based cooperation in areas where it reinforces their respective, and increasingly converging, national interests? The long-term

**The long-term future of Indo–U.S. strategic partnership may hinge on values-based cooperation.**

future of Indo–U.S. strategic partnership may hinge on the answer. All of the United States’ closest relationships with key powers are based on democratic affinity and some sense of shared values. Where these elements are missing—as in U.S. relations with China—competitive pressures and mutual mistrust limit the possibilities for true partnership. Similarly, framing Indo–U.S. relations in purely transactional terms could undermine

the staying power of the relationship on the U.S. side. This could put bilateral ties at risk should there be a political shift at home—or should a changing power balance in Asia render China, based purely on its geopolitical and economic heft, a seemingly more valuable U.S. partner than India. From the U.S. perspective, then, qualitatively distinguishing between Asia’s rising giants on the basis of the possibilities for democratic cooperation with India in world affairs is a strategic imperative.

### **An Action Agenda**

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Developing a bilateral values-based action agenda with India is very much *terra incognita*. Even the Obama–Singh commitment to build a “shared international partnership for democracy” was short on specifics. At their summit, the two leaders agreed to launch an “open government” dialogue to promote using new technologies and public–private partnerships in order to make official information more widely available to publics at large. They agreed to “explore” coordinating efforts to support “elections organization and management in other interested countries.”<sup>15</sup>

But unlike areas such as defense, trade, and the sharing of high technology, the values agenda remains nascent at best. While this raises doubts in many minds about the very feasibility of such cooperation, it also suggests a bold new

direction for this deepening relationship. Following ratification of the landmark civil nuclear agreement, and at a time when policymakers on both sides are earnestly attempting to identify a new “big idea” that would drive forward the newly established bonds, values-based cooperation could provide the impetus for increasing alignment.

An action agenda for Indo–U.S. ideational cooperation could consist of at least six elements:

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### **Democracy Assistance**

The United States does not “export” democracy; rather, its foreign policy and assistance programs seek to catalyze and empower internal reformers in non-democratic countries, and to strengthen the rule of law, civil society, and governing institutions in transitional democracies.<sup>16</sup> India has pursued a similar approach in Afghanistan and other countries, though it frames its initiatives differently. Since Indo–U.S. people-to-people relations are still stronger than inter-governmental ties, and given the civic nature of democracy-assistance programs, one principle for closer cooperation would be to channel it through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) wherever possible. Just as business ties between the two countries have sometimes moved faster than cooperation between their respective bureaucracies, so too can both countries’ non-profit sectors collaborate to promote common agendas to strengthen basic rights. The women’s empowerment initiative that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently launched with her Indian counterpart in New Delhi is one example of this approach that could, in turn, be employed in other countries like Afghanistan and Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

Quasi-nongovernmental organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and counterpart institutions in other countries—many of which are increasing their coordination in providing democracy assistance—could provide an additional model for partnership between the United States and India. India might look to Europe for models of organizations through which it could channel such assistance, just as the United States looked to German *stiftungs* when establishing the NED and similar organizations. An Indian Endowment for Democracy, for instance, would not only reinforce direct assistance provided by organizations in other countries, but would also demonstrate more forthrightly that democracy is not a Western monopoly or export. Rather, the liberal values that comprise it are embraced and promoted across the globe. It would also demonstrate clearly that democracy has a better

claim as a core “Asian value” than a modern reworking of Confucian authoritarianism.

At the inter-governmental level, India and the United States could reinvigorate their cooperation in the Community of Democracies and the UN Democracy Fund; jointly revitalize the Asia–Pacific Democracy Partnership launched in 2007 to promote free and fair elections across the region; develop a program of coordinated assistance to strengthen the Bali Democracy Forum—an Indonesian initiative to bolster human rights and political institutions in Asia and the Middle East—through the provision of expertise and assistance; and discuss ways to strengthen good governance and human rights through Indian leadership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

### **Development Assistance**

Long a recipient of foreign assistance, India has emerged as an important external donor in its own right. From the perspective of U.S. national interest, bilateral Indian assistance to build the infrastructure of democratic development in Afghanistan is particularly important and should be better coordinated with U.S. aid programs there. It is also worth exploring whether some of the dramatic reforms in U.S. foreign aid could find resonance on the Indian side. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) aims to provide assistance to countries that have made fundamental commitments to good governance, and enshrines such commitments in formal compacts. Channeling even a portion of Indian aid in a similar governance-linked fashion would create a force multiplier for the positive effects the MCC hopes to generate. In order to explore such prospects, New Delhi and Washington could launch a joint development dialogue aimed at coordinating foreign assistance activities in specific areas of mutual interest, and in ways consistent with strengthening the rule of law and sustainable economic growth in Afghanistan, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

### **Internet Freedom**

As open societies that benefit greatly from unfettered access to the cyber commons, India and the United States have a critical interest in preserving freedom of the Internet. Washington and New Delhi could form part of a core group of countries, including partners in Europe, to launch a new global Internet freedom initiative. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton articulated a broad Internet freedom agenda in January 2010, but administration officials have said little about how the United States might work with foreign partners to further online freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Working with India, such an effort could include a code of conduct that establishes basic norms of governmental and corporate behavior with respect to

privacy and censorship, freedom of online speech and assembly, and the legitimate conditions under which governments may monitor their citizens' online behavior. It might also explore joint approaches, to include sharing of technology and best practices, to secure them against manipulation or cyberattack by hostile governments or private parties. The synergies between the U.S. and Indian high-tech sectors make the countries natural partners in leading such a multilateral initiative. In addition, such collaboration would provide a clear distinction with the values embraced by countries such as China, which engage in pervasive online censorship and monitoring. By simply establishing common norms and content-neutral platforms for online interaction, an Internet freedom initiative would arguably be less controversial than more active, targeted forms of democracy promotion.

### **Institution-Building in the Middle East**

The changes roiling the Middle East present a historic opportunity for India. These developments position New Delhi to help shape a region home to five million Indian citizens and most of India's energy supplies. As the *Times of India* notes, recent events "present an opportunity to project New Delhi's soft power, which is considerable in the region. [India] presents a working democratic model in a sociocultural environment far closer to the Gulf's than western democracies are—and with none of the political baggage of the latter."<sup>19</sup>

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has raised the possibility of Indian support for upcoming elections in Egypt. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has approached India for help with conducting nationwide elections. Reformist Arab states from Tunisia to Iraq need to establish the institutions of good governance, from strong political parties to independent judiciaries. New Delhi's advice and assistance on building a culture of democracy would make these countries better homes for Indian workers, better allies in stabilizing a region of great strategic importance to India's development, more reliable energy suppliers, and more prosperous trade and investment partners.

### **Asian Security Cooperation**

Indo–U.S. ideational cooperation can also encompass mutually beneficial multilateral security arrangements which complement growing bilateral military ties. The United States and India could formalize trilateral security cooperation with Japan, as Secretary of State Clinton called for in her January 2010 Honolulu speech on Asian security architecture.<sup>20</sup> Both Japan and India have been interested in such a grouping for some time; they and the United States have previously conducted joint military exercises (and in the case of the December 2004 tsunami relief effort, operations) with each other as well as with Australia, Singapore, and other partners. The 2008 Japan–India security

cooperation agreement, and these countries' close defense ties to the United States, should facilitate trilateral cooperation on maritime security and other common interests.<sup>20</sup>

The United States could also encourage NATO to formalize a strategic dialogue with India to complement the alliance's Asian partnership agreements with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Such a step would be particularly important in light of NATO's ongoing military operations in Afghanistan—India's strategic backyard—where India and the West share a host of common interests in promoting democratic state-building and security. Security cooperation of this sort is not direct democracy promotion per se, but would instead contribute to the understanding, as with the North Atlantic democracies, that shared values bind together the two countries as much as do common threats and interests.

### **Global Governance**

India has long yearned for a seat at the “high table” of world politics. The United States would be wise not only to welcome it, but also to work with it in key forums to shape their agendas and evolution in ways which benefit the interests of both countries. For example, India and the United States could consider launching a caucus of like-minded Indo-Pacific powers within the framework of the G-20, to develop and coordinate positions on key issues.

President Obama's bold endorsement of permanent Indian membership on the UN Security Council goes well beyond considerations of democracy promotion, and entails both risks and benefits for the United States. While India and the United States rarely vote together in the General Assembly, Security Council membership would impose a different set of responsibilities on India as a manager of global order, rather than permit it to exist as a free-rider or aggrieved outsider to the great-power club. India's growing weight in international affairs is already changing its calculus about its equities on critical issues such as Iran's nuclear program, which India has voted to sanction repeatedly in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), demonstrating its maturity as an international stakeholder.

India's temporary Security Council rotation in 2011–2012 will provide an important test case both for the way in which India assumes the responsibilities of great-power status and for the possibilities and limits to Indo-U.S. cooperation at the UN. Should the United States find that India serves as a responsible partner and stakeholder at the Council, it seems natural that, as it has with democratic Japan, the United States would seek additional ways to welcome the weight and perspective of the world's largest democracy in a variety of international forums.

## Enshrining the Values that Bind

None of the proposals offered above would be embraced overnight; some may never be. The goal, however, should be not merely to articulate a programmatic approach to occasional collaboration on abstract liberal ideals. On the contrary, such an agenda, however initially tentative and limited, would reflect precisely those core values that animate the political systems of both the United States and India. To exclude such considerations from this relationship therefore would be, in a fundamental sense, unrealistic. It would serve to artificially stunt the growth of what is arguably the key geopolitical realignment of the early 21st century.

Nor does presenting such an aspirational agenda suggest either that all democracies automatically have shared interests or that they are likely to view their regions and the world in the same fashion, based purely on the nature of their domestic political systems. The U.S.–India relationship should—indeed must—be rooted in shared interests. But this realism should be leavened by a healthy dose of idealism. While the two countries have some interests which do not converge, their leaders quite clearly and routinely express support for the expansion of liberal values. A program of bilateral action which excludes promotion of the very principles around which India and the United States have constructed their respective political systems would be, quite simply, incomplete.

**The relationship must be rooted in shared interests, but leavened by a healthy dose of idealism.**

Washington should proceed cautiously and modestly in pursuing this agenda with New Delhi. Strategic partnership is relatively new to the relationship, and both countries must develop a deeper sense of mutual trust as they continue to move beyond decades of geopolitical alienation. But given the extraordinary possibilities for the partnership, the United States should seek to raise the bar on ambitions for greater values-based cooperation where possible, in keeping with the aspirational approach to Indo–U.S. relations that has paid such dividends over the past decade.

Doing so is undoubtedly difficult today, but it may well prove a wise investment over time: generational change in India is producing an increasingly young, globalized middle class that is more comfortable projecting a liberal “idea of India” as a source of soft power and influence in world affairs—and which is less enraptured of non-alignment and other Indian

**As rising younger Indian generation may be a more willing partner for values-based cooperation.**

foreign policy dogmas from the past. As this younger generation rises within Indian government and society, the United States may find that it has a more willing partner with which to pursue a graduated policy of values-based cooperation, both bilaterally and in multilateral forums. Ultimately, the goal of both countries should be to shape an ideational order in world affairs that catalyzes, rather than undermines, the security and prosperity of their peoples.

## Notes

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