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India and the United States: Forging a Security Partnership?

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In March 2005, Condoleezza Rice visited India for the first time as secretary of state. Her visit, though not widely noticed in the American press, received a great deal of attention in India. Even the subsequent U.S. announcement of the sale of advanced F-16 aircraft to Pakistan, India's long-term adversary, failed to completely remove the luster of her visit. Indian criticisms of the proposed F-16 sale were almost anodyne in comparison to the intransigence they had generated some 15 years ago. The highly restrained Indian reaction to the announcement highlights the dramatic shift that has come about not only in India's foreign policy orientation but in Indo-U.S. security ties. Beginning in 2004, the two sides had embarked upon a new bilateral program, referred to as the Next Steps in the Strategic Partnership (NSSP). Under the aegis of this program, the United States had agreed to work with India on a quartet of security issues: civilian nuclear technology, civilian space technology, high technology trade, and missile defense.

Will India and the United States succeed in forging a viable strategic partnership? The question is of considerable significance. There is little question that India, despite a number of endemic domestic constraints, especially widespread rural poverty, is now a rising power in Asia. Its economic growth over the past decade has been robust, its political institutions have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of myriad domestic challenges, and its military prowess is steadily increasing. Finally, the country has, for all practical purposes, abandoned its hoary commitments to nonalignment. These factors in concert make conditions propitious for the emergence of a U.S.- India strategic partnership. It is in America's interests to work with India, a large, powerful, and democratic state, to ensure regional stability, to maintain the safety and security of sea lanes that lie athwart India's east and west, and to deal with the scourge of

global terror. Unfortunately, despite this positive constellation of factors, other forces may yet undermine the forging of such a strategic bond. The problems lie in both New Delhi and Washington, and stem from a number of different sources: historical, institutional, and structural.

During the Cold War years, apart from a fleeting moment of cooperation in the early 1960s, Indo-U.S. security cooperation was a slender construct. There was a brief period of cooperation after the disastrous Sino-Indian border war of 1962, when Indian forces suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the People's Liberation Army. India sought and received some U.S. military assistance, but a broader U.S.-India security relationship failed to materialize. India remained committed to nonalignment, and the United States proved unwilling to offend its Cold War ally, Pakistan. Over the next two decades, as the United States improved relations with the People's Republic of China in an attempt to contain Soviet power, India, despite its formal nonaligned status, came increasingly to rely on the Soviet Union for advanced weaponry and diplomatic support. These divergent foreign and security policy alignments were hardly conducive to the evolution of a security partnership.

Ironically, during one of the peaks of Cold War tension, a breakthrough occurred in Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation. President Ronald Reagan met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at a North-South summit in Cancun, Mexico, in October 1981, and the two leaders established a working rapport. Shortly thereafter, Washington and New Delhi signed a memorandum of understanding that permitted the sale of some critical high-tech aerospace components to India, including several GE-404 engines for India's Light Combat Aircraft project. Over much of the next decade, there was only fitful movement toward improved relations, and even with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, no breakthroughs took place. The reasons were straightforward. The United States refused to ease up on its nonproliferation commitments in South Asia, and India was equally adamant about maintaining its nuclear option. The Indian nuclear tests of May 1998 stultified the incremental progress that had taken place. The Clinton administration imposed a raft of military and economic sanctions on India that effectively halted virtually all ongoing military cooperation. It was not until the waning days of Clinton's second term, and after 14 rounds of negotiation between Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, that any resumption of meaningful defense ties could again be discussed. Strategic cooperation, in effect, had to wait until the first George W. Bush administration.

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