



A Global Partnership between the U.S. and India

By Thomas Donnelly and Melissa Wisner

While Americans have been wondering what to make of the daily news from Iraq and the Middle East and the loves-me-loves-me-not swings of U.S.-China policy, the summer's biggest story has received relatively little attention. The mid-July summit between President George W. Bush and Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh—during which the two leaders resolved to “transform the relationship between their countries and establish a global partnership”¹—initially was covered as a photo-op and remains, in the media's imagination, a story about nuclear proliferation. But when a sole superpower takes a strategic mate, such a blooming global partnership should be front-page news.

As *National Security Outlook* argued in its premier issue,² successfully wooing India is key to preserving the liberal, American-led international order. For all the wonders of our *hyperpuissance*, solving the many security problems of the twenty-first century is a burden better shared with others. Transforming the greater Middle East is as yet beyond the imagination or the interests of most Europeans. The specter of a rising China indicates that Beijing is part of the problem as well as, perhaps, part of the solution. And promoting democracy is a strategy that unnerves *realpolitikers* everywhere.

Outside Tony Blair's Britain, only India stands as a natural great-power partner in building the next American century. Despite the anomalies of the caste system, India is a deeply democratic country. Moreover, for decades, hundreds of millions of Muslims have preferred to remain in India rather than cross the border into Pakistan or Bangladesh. In addition, India has been fighting Islamist terrorism for a long time; doing so is fundamental to its “homeland security.” Regarding China, India cannot be agnostic about the direction of its rise: India has fought wars with the People's Republic; worries about China's growing

regional and global influence, as well as its contribution to Pakistan's nuclear and missile projects; and is itself a rapidly developing economy that will compete with China for energy and foreign investment. Indians also importantly still understand the role of military force in international politics and diplomacy; yes, India wants to join the UN Security Council, but as a measure of its emerging great-power status, not because it views the council as an end in itself.

The Bush administration's unprecedented engagement with India reflects its desire to shape the rise of a potentially powerful ally. Indeed, the administration has been working on this front for some time: former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee described the United States and India as “natural allies”³ during his visit to the White House on November 9, 2002, and a process of negotiating “next steps in strategic partnership” has been underway since January 2004.⁴

The stakes are high. A recent analysis by the Central Intelligence Agency calls India the most important “swing state” in the international system—a country which has the ability to tilt the balance between war and peace.⁵ Though Washington and New Delhi share many interests in the post-9/11 and Cold War world, both sides still have a long way to go in demonstrating that the

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other's desires are in synch with their own. Translating into practice the grand vision of a "global partnership" is the work of many years and will demand the destruction of many policies of the past—we are not beginning with a blank sheet after all. Reviewing some basic geopolitical questions will aid in suggesting a path forward.

What Does India Want?

India has dreams of greatness. In late April, former Singaporean president Lee Kwan Yew—who remains honored for perspicacity, despite the occasional inaccurate prediction—declared that India was on the verge of "entering the front ranks" of nations and that not only China's rise but India's rise "would shake the world."⁶ Lee's appraisal was greeted with special reverence in India, in part because in office he had expressed his sadness at "the general rundown of the country"⁷—a widely reported remark that hit Indians hard. To be given the elder statesman's stamp of approval in this context was, for many in India, proof of their rising status.

In sum, India sees itself as a rising great power deserving of the international community's respect and due regard. To Indian eyes, there are two important measures of such status. First, New Delhi wants a seat on the UN Security Council. External Affairs minister K. Natwar Singh expressed optimism that India would be awarded its entitled position at the United Nations, claiming that "it will be a great pity if the UN structure put together in 1945 is not reformed in 2005. . . . [H]uman kind will not forgive us."⁸ This was an important item at the Bush-Singh summit; said the Indian prime minister: "India has a compelling case for permanent membership on the Security Council. We are convinced that India can significantly contribute to U.N. decision-making and capabilities."⁹

India's obsession with the UN and the Security Council is rooted in the leading role the country played in the "nonaligned movement" of the Cold War as well as its colonial past; India's recent global strategy was to position itself between the United States and the West, the Soviets, and what was then called the "Third World." While India can certainly count on finding frustration in Turtle Bay as the country grows in stature and importance, New Delhi has yet to experience the full failures of twenty-first-century multilateralism, or view the United Nations apparatus with the skepticism of Americans. In some sense Indians understand their potential as a great power and rightly believe they

should be taken more seriously in international politics, but they have yet to grasp the realities of what they wish for. A seat on the Security Council would surely symbolize India's growing global influence, yet such a position would grant India figurative prestige rather than true bargaining power. On the other hand, gaining membership in other multilateral organizations such as the G8, APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), or the International Energy Agency would confirm India's seat at the global decision-making table.

Along with a chair at the UN Security Council, India wants to be regarded as a legitimate nuclear power. This has been a sticking point in U.S.-India relations since India's May 1998 nuclear tests. New Delhi regards the Nuclear Nonproliferation Pact as limiting its need to create a genuine credible deterrent arsenal vis-à-vis Pakistan. India wants a mobile, ready nuclear force: as the centrist *Times of India* explained,

India must fix its overall nuclear strategy within the consensus of minimum credible deterrence. Strategists are debating if the deterrents should number in the low hundreds or a medium three-figure number, roughly on a par with British and French arsenals. No one in India wants huge arsenals of the size that the U.S., China and Russia have built.¹⁰

Despite these two desires, it remains unclear how India conceives of its role as a global great power. Beyond the question of Security Council membership—which is more about pride than real power—and a robust nuclear arsenal—which is really about Pakistan—what kind of player will India become on the world stage? Is it a "status quo" power or does it seek change? Is India ready to stand closer to the United States, or will New Delhi "triangulate" between Washington and Beijing, as its Cold War strategy might suggest?

What may tip the balance is the ideological commitment to democracy. One of the prime features of the Bush-Singh summit was an assertion of "common values and interests." The two leaders agreed "to create an international environment conducive to promotion of democratic values" and announced a "U.S.-India Global Democracy Initiative."¹¹ After the invasions and in the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, we have a pretty good idea that democracy promotion is a centerpiece of the "Bush Doctrine." Just where it fits in the "Singh Doctrine," or if indeed there is such a doctrine, is the question.

To be frank, the values rhetoric does not seem to mean much to many Indians, if newspaper and magazine editorialists are any measure; most analyses of the summit stressed that any growing cooperation would be founded on hard-core calculations of national interest. Those writers who did address the new devotion to democratization could be skeptics, as Kuldip Nayar was in the centrist *India Express*:

People want to know what the two countries, which loudly proclaim that they are the two biggest democracies, propose to do to bolster faith in liberal thoughts and free society, shrinking the world over. That America and India have renewed their determination to fight against terrorism strengthens the global resolve that the fundamentalists, *jihadis* or others, will not be allowed to hold entire societies to ransom. . . . [Yet] when democratic America imposed an unnecessary war on Iraq, Washington laid down new rules of morality which do not fit the values free societies cherish.¹²

There is, in some ways, a remarkable echo in India of American attitudes in our early years. India's devotion to universal democratic values is real, but its ability to project power is purely local; like the United States of the Monroe Doctrine era, India's most pressing task is to secure its immediate region, in the subcontinent. Pakistan has been, and will remain, India's top strategic priority.

The situation along India's continental and oceanic borders—a total of almost 15,000 land kilometers and more than 7,500 at sea—is not much better than in the subcontinent. New Delhi has always looked to maintain influence over its “near abroad,” in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Burma, but its ability to sustain this traditional position can no longer be taken for granted as China solidifies its ties to Burma—where China now maintains a maritime surveillance post—and Nepal. When King Gyanendra seized power in Katmandu last year, Beijing maintained its arms sales to Nepal while India cut off supplies, giving China increased influence. In sum, India's position in South Asia is as uncertain and as reflective of a zero-sum strategic calculus as ever.

Ranging a bit farther abroad, the view from New Delhi improves somewhat. For the past decade, following a “Look East” strategy, India has been reaching out to its Southeast Asian neighbors, although its economic influence does not match that of China. India has successfully gained membership in ARF (ASEAN Regional

Forum) and is a full dialogue partner with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Yet India's Southeast Asian strategy has not been entirely successful, for India still has many regional relationships to strengthen and solidify. India must continue to fortify its political and economic ties to its regional neighbors, particularly if India hopes to gain membership to APEC—a hurdle New Delhi has twice failed to clear.

Indian strategists clearly realize that the “struggle for mastery of Southeast Asia” has begun, and New Delhi is jockeying for advantage. India secured a seat at the inaugural East Asia Summit—a new Pan-Asian forum from which China managed to exclude the United States. Like Japan, India will not allow Beijing to establish the equivalent of a modern tributary system in South East Asia, nor will it acquiesce to the South China Sea becoming a Chinese-owned lake. New Delhi is sure to find ways to become more active in the region, looking toward Japan, Singapore, and the United States to help in that regard. Washington would be wise to forge its own Pan-Asian Pacific groupings, with India, Japan, and Australia at the core. All indications are that New Delhi would welcome a proactive American approach so that it is not left having to openly counter Beijing's machinations.

Nonetheless, Pakistan and China are arguably the most important Asian players to India. Although China and India have made great strides in resolving territorial disputes—particularly regarding China's recognition of India's claim to Sikkim—India and China will compete for energy, foreign direct investment, regional influence, and potentially arms. Although both nations share some fear of unmitigated American hegemony, the competition between these two nations may overpower their common interests and lead to tension and conflict.

Islamabad will, however, always cause concern for New Delhi despite the fact that the past year's negotiations have eased tensions between the two powers. Although Pakistan will continue to be a sensitive issue for India—with Kashmir at the center of the conflict—India will also try to separate itself from this long-standing dispute so as to become a world power in its own right. India will predictably reject what is referred to as the “hyphenated view” of India and Pakistan in order to take a seat at the global decision-making table free from the shadow of Indian-Pakistani tensions.

Militarily speaking, India is interested in engaging in military-to-military contacts with the United States. In particular, New Delhi needs access to U.S. technology and markets so as to prepare its military in the face

of shifting threats and challenges. According to then–undersecretary of defense for policy Douglas Feith, speaking to the U.S.-India Defense Seminar in 2002, “defense sales are a part of our overall national security policy, not simply a matter of business and commerce.”¹³ Accordingly, the United States has permitted Lockheed Martin and Boeing to offer sales of F-16s and F-18s, respectively, to India’s multi-role air force program.¹⁴ Yet, we must recognize that India is not interested in establishing a military relationship similar to that which existed between the United States and Europe during the Cold War period. In fact, because India insists upon a degree of freedom of action, this partnership will inevitably be limited in nature. On the other hand, this defense pact will enhance military cooperation, permit weapons transfers, and authorize joint work on missile defense.¹⁵

Clearly India has some very specific objectives that significantly overlap with the regional and international goals of the United States. Perhaps most importantly, however, both India and the United States are liberal democracies. Both nations are, therefore, threatened by anti-democratic movements, particularly Islamic radicalism, and must actively fight terrorism. We must remember, however, that in doing so, India may often “march to the beat of its own drummer” and, like the Europeans, may be an ally whose actions and motivations will inevitably be questioned.

What India Offers the United States

If India, like early America, is essentially still an inward-looking democracy with regional strategic priorities, the United States today is the inverse: a confident—even, in the eyes of the rest of the world, arrogant—democracy striving to manage a global order that is fundamentally strong but coming under increasing strain. The Bush administration’s desire to help India become a great power is genuine, but it is hardly selfless; it reflects the hope that India can stand with Great Britain and Japan as America’s closest great-power partners in the front ranks of the free world.

That is a breathtakingly ambitious goal and, as the section above should indicate, one that will require generations of effort and effective diplomacy to achieve. It is also a reflection of an amazing reversal in American strategy: where the United States saw India as a frustrating irritant, it now sees warming relations as a strategic opportunity to be cultivated and explored. A shift in

America’s attitude could be detected from the very beginning of George W. Bush’s presidency, at which time he declared that, “After years of estrangement, India and the United States together surrendered to reality. They recognized an unavoidable fact—they are destined to have a quantitatively different and better relationship.”¹⁶ Indeed, the winds of change began to blow in the late Clinton years.

The change became most obvious in March 2005 when the Bush administration announced that the United States welcomes and will aid India’s growth as a global great power. As former ambassador to India Robert D. Blackwill put it, the United States is “seeking to intensify collaboration with India on a whole range of issues that currently confront the international community writ large.”¹⁷ At the July summit, President Bush affirmed that “common security objectives” would make India a “diplomatic” and “strategic” partner, spelling out America’s new strategic reality: it will need to look beyond its historical allies, such as Britain, Europe, and Japan, to face the challenges posed by the modern world.¹⁸

In simple terms, this means that Washington will be looking increasingly to coordinate a comprehensive strategic approach with New Delhi. The commonality of interests in regard to the Islamic world will be the foundation of this broader alliance, even as differences over Pakistan and Iran continue. New Delhi understands the threat posed by radicalism as well as Washington does: India has lost more of its population to jihadi terrorism than any other nation has over the last fifteen years.¹⁹ The rhetoric of the summit revealed a strong agreement. President Bush articulated that “America and India understand the danger of global terrorism, which has brought grief to our nations, and united us in our desire to bring peace and security to the world. . . . [W]e believe that by spreading the blessings of democracy and freedom, we will ensure a lasting peace for our own citizens and for the world.” Prime Minister Singh echoed the president when proclaiming, “We must oppose the evil of terrorism together. To meet such vital challenges, we must be together on the same page. We must speak the same language and display the same resolve.”²⁰

Yet developing a synchronized strategy for Pakistan will not be so easy. Although tensions between India and Pakistan have eased since India’s 1998 nuclear testing—particularly with the establishment of a Kashmir bus line in February 2005 between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad—Islamic radicals from Pakistan will always be one of the first and foremost national security issues

for India. The Bush administration's recent recognition of Pakistan as a "major non-NATO ally" and the decision to renew F-16 sales underscores the U.S. commitment to reengagement with Islamabad; for America, South Asia policy cannot be an either-or choice. The challenge for the United States and India is to begin to build complementary strategies toward the Musharraf regime and to embrace it while slowly pushing for liberalization. The lesson of the past two decades is clear: disengagement from the government in Islamabad is very, very dangerous.

Coordinating strategy for the rest of the region will be but slightly less difficult. The dashed hopes that India would contribute to the post-invasion force in Iraq are not the end of that story: Prime Minister Singh has suggested that India will be ready to contribute to the electoral processes in Afghanistan and Iraq in the future.²¹ More challenging will be creating a complementary approach to Iran. India's traditional ties with Tehran will not be undone overnight, although New Delhi appears to be searching for a solution to the question of plans for a natural gas pipeline from Iran into Baluchistan that would satisfy U.S. interests. As with Pakistan, the two nations need to develop a joint long-range strategy that contains Iranian adventurism and sponsorship of terrorism, strings out Iranian nuclear development while hedging against the near certainty that this nightmare will become reality, and eases the way for political transformation in Tehran. By concentrating on change elsewhere in the Islamic world, the United States and India can help to weaken the Iranian regime while containing it strategically.

The most difficult task will be to come to an agreement over how to deal with China. Both the United States and India understand China's economic importance and growing global influence, yet both fear rising Chinese military power—indeed, with Beijing's increased influence in South Asia, many Indian strategists feel this even more keenly than their American counterparts. Yet the same misguided "engagement vs. containment" arguments bedevil all nations' China policies, and only become multiplied in an alliance arrangement. The attempt to harmonize policy over the questions regarding the future of the greater Middle East and the rise of China—and the inevitable intersection of these two issues—will be one of the greatest challenges for India and the United States during the twenty-first century.

The budding relationship with India also ought to put to rest the charge that the Bush administration is essentially unilateralist. Indeed, the administration is

simply extending the logic that became obvious in the Clinton years: American interests in Europe are no longer very much at risk, while our interests elsewhere are. The auxiliary—that our European allies, always with the exception of Great Britain, are not very much interested or able to project power outside their own continent—simply reinforces the larger strategic thinking. In the greater Middle East, the United States has created a new dynamic, but the region's troubles are so numerous and so deeply rooted that exploiting the initiative won since the invasion of Afghanistan demands that others take up the cause in a serious way. Likewise, geopolitically engaging with China along its vast oceanic and continental periphery demands a multinational effort. Japan remains a reliable partner and will become an increasingly capable one, but a bilateral partnership with Japan is hardly sufficient to secure the complete Northeast Asia-to-South Asia maritime periphery, let alone balance Chinese influence in Central Asia. We need India to become a linchpin of the liberal, international order.

In addition to strategic cooperation, the United States should expand its military relationship with India, exploring not only the professional military-to-military relationship but also arms sales and joint development. Washington should not only sell the F-16s and F-18s it has agreed to, but should work toward larger-scale defense industrial cooperation, making New Delhi a partner on the Joint Strike Fighter or, better yet, the F-22 program. But more important than platforms are the electronic subsystems that give the greatest qualitative advantage in modern combat and form the core of command and control networks. As former senior policy analyst at RAND Ashley Tellis observes, "What India needs most often are not 'big ticket' weapons that galvanize public attention but high-quality assemblies and components that make a difference to the durability and effectiveness of existing inventory."²² Given that computer software codes provide such an important element in these networks, Indian firms are well poised to partner with U.S. counterparts.

Closer operational collaboration is as important as defense-industrial cooperation. U.S. and Indian forces have been creeping toward greater combined and coordinated military operations in recent years, beginning with naval patrols in the Strait of Malacca in the immediate aftermath of September 11 and nearly culminating in Indian participation in the war in Iraq. The Indian air force last year famously "defeated" the U.S. Air Force in

exercises—an event most noted by advocates of the F-22 program but indicative of India's increasing sophistication. These first steps need to be rapidly expanded upon in all dimensions of combat: air, land, sea, and even space. Tellis has suggested a memorandum of understanding regarding operations in the Indian Ocean, but the geographic scope—and, indeed, the operational and combined scope—of such operations should be larger.²³

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the obvious common strategic interests, forging a working alliance—in name or simply de facto—between the United States and India will not be easy. Indeed, the alliance may be stillborn if the nuclear agreement that was the centerpiece of the July summit is blocked in Congress or if the Bush administration caves in to the interests of its own arms control specialists. Moreover, much larger potential pitfalls loom ahead: Pakistan, Iran, China, the UN, and, ultimately, the obstacles inherent in preserving the liberal international order. A genuine partnership requires sacrifices and trade-offs on each side.

The consequences of U.S. failure to craft a comprehensive post-Cold War global strategy—and in particular the frittering away of the first decade of Pax Americana during the Clinton administration—are now being felt. The Bush administration's impulses to rethink the U.S. approach to the Islamic world and to encourage Indian power are fundamentally sound, but impulses alone do not a strategy make. Impulses cannot be mistaken for a plan of action, a set of priorities, or a reliable guide for how to deal with China.

Ideally, the administration will leverage its opening to India into a genuine and full articulation of a detailed Bush Doctrine. It is important to help India become a truly global power, show it how it can play a leading role in the world, and cure its South Asian myopia. But it is even more important—especially now, when American spirits seem to be flagging in Iraq and elsewhere—to attract others to what are not simply American purposes, but the rightful purposes of the world's free peoples.

Notes

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