



***TWO IMPEDIMENTS TO US-INDIA
TIES AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM***

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Many analysts and commentators called Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the United States late last month a historic and defining moment in the India-US relationship. That's because the agreements unveiled by Prime Minister Modi and US President Joe Biden are, by all accounts, unprecedented in both depth and breadth. They include commitments to strengthening advanced technology cooperation, enhancing the bilateral defense partnership, promoting shared prosperity and people-to-people connections, and showing joint leadership to address key challenges in the Indo-Pacific and on the global stage.

A convergence of interests on various fronts is behind these developments. For starters, the United States and India share numerous similarities. That's why, in an address to the Asiatic Society back in 2000, former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had described this relationship as that of "natural allies." To be sure, the two countries have never been formal allies. But the operative word in Vajpayee's statement was "natural," highlighting the centuries-old tradition of freedom, democracy, openness, pluralism, inclusivity, and liberal political ideas that both countries, on two different continents, steadfastly upheld.

A hegemonic, as opposed to a peaceful, rise of China has also been a cause for concern for both the United

States and India. Both appreciate the necessity and opportunity of working together to confront this challenge and build a more inclusive and peaceful multipolar Indo-Pacific. This is also a key driver of stronger US-India cooperation in multilateral forums, notably in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Australia and Japan.

Beyond counterbalancing China, the United States and India are interested in leveraging their comparative advantages to stand as responsible stakeholders of the changed and changing Indo-Pacific order. They want to expand their joint role as net exporters of public goods both through enhanced cooperation in several functional areas and through closer geographical rapprochement. Traditionally focused on the Pacific side, the United States is now emphasizing the importance of the "Indo" side; it has, in that spirit, renamed the Hawaii-based US Pacific Command the US Indo-Pacific Command. And India is expanding its role beyond South Asia and the Indian Ocean and into ASEAN and the Pacific, having transformed its "Look East" policy into an "Act East" policy, wherein it invests more in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Although based on mutual goodwill and commitment, operationalizing US-India cooperation may be challenging, however, due to at least two potential impediments.

The first is differences between the two countries' preferred approach to partnership. The United States has long felt more comfortable partnering with countries committed to following its leadership, or countries it has power to shape the thinking and actions. Absent that, it has felt frustrated.

Consider US-France relations; the United States places much value in its alliance relationship with France but also often deems it difficult, in part because Paris is determined to maintain a degree of strategic autonomy. So is New Delhi. Unlike France, India not is a treaty ally of the United States; India never joined military alliances. But, like France, India is a powerful country with an approach to partnership that preserves independence in its strategic thinking and decisions. These fundamental differences in

approach could thus complicate implementation of the US-India agenda of work.

The second potential impediment in taking the US-India relationship to the next level is the difficulty of adapting the US and Indian bureaucratic and political systems to permit bilateral cooperation to blossom. High-level attempts to advance a more cooperative relationship, after all, are not new, and history has shown that they have had limited success or failed primarily because of hurdles in the US and Indian internal systems. In each country, bureaucratic hurdles can be maddening, and political hurdles stand as major obstacles, too. For instance, while India's continued relationship with countries like Russia are viewed negatively by the US establishment, the United States' support to Pakistan or its unilateral actions in India's neighbourhood attract the hackles in New Delhi.

What, then, should the United States and India do in the face of these potential impediments?

For starters, both should refine and redefine their traditional approach to partnership. The United States should embrace the idea that partnering with India means working with India, not rallying India behind its leadership. Doing so means accepting that India will remain strategically autonomous and, therefore, that New Delhi will not always see eye-to-eye and could even have deep disagreements with Washington, and that such circumstances should not prevent or jeopardize cooperation so long as the overall benefits outweigh the costs and risks.

Similarly, India should acknowledge that increased cooperation with the world's preeminent power involves certain give and take, especially at a time of intense strategic competition. Plainly, even as it remains master of its own destiny, India should be clear-eyed that its convergence with the United States is growing and that, as a result, it will have to adapt to this new reality to maintain, let alone further deepen, that relationship.

The United States and India should also work their internal systems relentlessly to remove actual and potential barriers to cooperation. In the immediate

term, they should focus on cooperation in geo-economics because there is fertile ground for joint work in this space, while not losing sight of the imperative of working together in geo-strategic areas in the long term.

There has never been a time to be more enthusiastic about the future of the US-India relationship. Potential impediments notwithstanding, this new-found bonhomie is bound to rise to phenomenal heights if the two countries can finetune their objectives in the framework of larger global good than their own strategic interests.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.