



***YOUNG AMERICAN EXPERTS NEED A
BIGGER TASTE OF INDIA***

BY ROB YORK

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It's hardly unusual these days for US policymakers to call for closer relations with India, and even to call it a [key relationship](#) for the future. Reasons for this include the economic benefits: Here India's potential is exceptional, thanks to its gargantuan (and relatively young) population, and its importance is aggrandized in this era when the East Asian "miracle" economies are [rapidly aging](#).

India, it must also be noted, has massive military, the only one on the Asian continent that can rival the People's Liberation Army in terms of active personnel. Furthermore, while some of the People's Republic of China's neighbors' willingness to mount an effective resistance against the PRC may wax and wane depending on election results, India's determination is clear and shows little sign of wavering. Also, while Japan and South Korea, for example, find themselves in a moment of political weakness that may inhibit effective policy formation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a firm grip on his country's politics and his top diplomat, S. Jaishankar is [widely regarded](#) for his negotiating skill.

That said, the distrust between the two countries is evident, and frequently highlighted. They effectively found themselves on opposite sides vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and today Indians still commonly believe the US desires to [undermine their government](#) and many Americans think Indians

are [coming for their jobs](#). Both sides also regularly highlight alleged mistreatment of the religious minorities they'd be most inclined to care about – Christians for the US and Hindus for India – in the other country.

Under such circumstances, what would be the best step forward for the two countries in fostering better ties? While defense coordination, arms deals, and trade talks are all important (and ongoing), youth exchanges are where the relationship probably has the greatest room for growth. Specifically, the young Americans who will one make up the intelligentsia, business leaders, and officials need more exposure to India.

Pacific Forum is proud to have fostered such ties on both sides. Through Pacific Forum's fellowships programs I have mentored several young rising experts, many more have joined our Young Leaders program, and I have trained a number of young aspiring Indian journalists on how to report on international affairs, especially involving the US. Having spoken to college-age and early-career professionals, their enthusiasm for engaging with American experts is palpable. The government of India will always have different orientations than the US, shaped by its geography and history, but the country's interest in the US and the opportunities this presents looks likely to endure.



National Interest Assistant Editor Lake Dodson answers a question from students of the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education following a guest lecture from Pacific Forum Director for Regional Affairs Rob York (right) on Feb. 19

while National Interest Managing Editor James Himberger listens.

But young Americans' opportunities to learn more about this important partnership need expanding. Rather than hearing second-hand from observers about India's democratic standards or how its minorities live, let them see first-hand how Indians of all backgrounds interact in classrooms, in election season, in offices, and especially on the bustling streets of its cities. Rather than read about India's ongoing interactions with Russia and recent negotiations with China and drawing inferences, let them hear first-hand from experts in India, whose own political leanings vary but who understand the calculus behind these moves.

Between Feb. 16-26 Pacific Forum took two young American professionals—[James Himberger](#) and [Lake Dodson](#), both of *The National Interest*—on a tour of the country, thanks to the generosity of the Hindu American Foundation. For both it was their first visit to the country, and accordingly we scheduled a full range of experiences: visiting the Takshashila Institution in Bengaluru, the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Gateway House in Mumbai and staff of the O.P. Jindal Global University in Delhi. They also enjoyed the sites, from the Lalbach Botanical Gardens in Bengaluru to the Elephanta Caves in Mumbai and the Swaminarayan Akshardham in Delhi.

Insights gained along the way include:

- Policy experts in India see the Line of Actual Control [agreement](#) reached with the PRC in October as an effective means of lowering the temperature but have little belief that Beijing will honor it should doing so become inconvenient.
- Indians have not felt the need to push back against accusations of the mistreatment of Christian communities because they have felt the polycultural nature of their society spoke for itself.
- Steep cuts to USAID and NED, whatever else if true of them, may increase trust between the US and India due to the suspicions that

past mass movements in the South Asia – including India, but also neighboring countries like [Bangladesh](#) – did not happen organically.

- India-based experts are frequently disdainful of Western commentary and media coverage of their country, saying they don't recognize the country in such reports.

Americans need not accept all Indian criticisms uncritically—they should push back where fact dictates. Nor is the answer for the US to abandon “values-based” diplomacy for the sake of pure interest-based engagement, and that is not something India should wish for: Americans' values vary by individual, but have historically deepened US relations with Asia, and a purely “interests-based” diplomacy could conclude that future conflicts between China and India are none of Washington's concern.

Deeper connections, more interactions, and more conversations are what this moment requires. That and an understanding that India – with its different perspectives, history, and culture – will be undoubtedly play a part in the story of how the US engages Asia.

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