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Clinton Visit to India Should Stress Core Strategic Interests

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When U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrives in India tomorrow, she will need to demonstrate that the Obama Administration has a strategic vision for U.S. relations with India. This vision must acknowledge New Delhi's growing global economic, political, and geo-strategic clout. Clinton will likely try to assuage concerns among some Indians that the Obama Administration takes a narrow view of India—one that revolves around its Afghanistan–Pakistan agenda—and that it lacks the Bush Administration's determination to advance the relationship.

A Broad Agenda. Secretary Clinton is popular in India, having traveled there as First Lady, co-founded and co-chaired the Senate India Caucus when she was a U.S. Senator, and reached out to Indian-Americans during her presidential campaign.

She will highlight a number of areas in which the U.S. and India can enhance their partnership, including the health, agriculture, education, and energy sectors. Clinton plans to attend a meeting on climate change and interact with scientists working on innovative agricultural projects. The real substance of the visit, however, will involve discussions on the civil nuclear agreement and defense cooperation. Although the heavy-lifting on the civil nuclear agreement has already been done by the Bush Administration, some finishing touches are still needed from the Obama Administration.

The U.S. is still looking for an official announcement from India designating sites for U.S. nuclear power plants. India has already designated sites for

French and Russian firms, which has irked some Members of Congress, given Washington's efforts to convince the international community to waive restrictions on India receiving civil nuclear fuel and technology, despite being a non-signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Once the sites are made official, there still remains significant government work left to be done on both sides before American firms can sign contracts.

India, for its part, is eager to start negotiations with the U.S. to establish a new national reprocessing facility dedicated to reprocessing safeguarded nuclear material. U.S. and Indian officials have indicated that the reprocessing talks will begin later this month, but they will likely be complicated and drawn-out. The negotiations are not expected to involve discussions of the transfer of enrichment and reprocessing (ENR) technology from the U.S. to India. Transfers of such sensitive nuclear technology would require an amendment to the 123 Agreement signed by the two countries in October 2008.

Even so, a recent G-8 declaration curbing the transfer of ENR technology to non-NPT states has raised concerns in New Delhi about general U.S. commitment to the India civil nuclear deal. Indian officials are also concerned about the appointments

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of what they consider to be “non-proliferation hawks” to key posts in the U.S. Administration—over the last several years, one of these appointees has frequently argued that the U.S.–India nuclear deal poses a threat to the international nonproliferation regime. Secretary Clinton will need to reassure the Indians that the Obama Administration is committed to negotiating the final portions of the civil nuclear deal in good faith.

Another important agreement likely to be inked during Clinton’s visit is an end-use monitoring agreement to ensure U.S. arms technology sold to India does not leak to third-party countries. The agreement would pave the way for future U.S. arms sales to India and help strengthen the nascent U.S.–India defense relationship. India still buys the majority of its military hardware from Russia but is beginning to look to other countries like the U.S. to purchase advanced weapons systems that would modernize its fast-growing military. The U.S. and India have conducted dozens of joint military exercises since 2002, including one off the Indian coast involving three other countries.

Tread Carefully on India–Pakistan. Secretary Clinton’s first stop in Mumbai, India—where she will pay respects to the victims of the November 2008 terrorist attacks—demonstrates her sensitivity to the event’s impact on the Indian psyche and will be received with great appreciation by the Indian public. In the past, Indian officials have complained that Washington is insensitive to terrorism directed at India from groups located across the border in Pakistan. Clinton, however, should be careful not to link terrorism in India to the political situation in Jammu and Kashmir. While she will almost certainly stress the U.S.’s interest in the resumption of Indo–Pakistani dialogue, she should also make it clear that Pakistan must crack down on terrorist groups within its borders, like the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), the group responsible for the Mumbai carnage. LeT leader Hafiz Muhammed Sayeed’s early release from a Pakistani jail has shed fresh doubt on the Pakistani commitment to act against the terrorist group.

The U.S. gains little by continuing to publicly press for a resumption of Indo–Pakistani talks as an end in itself. It should instead quietly encourage changes in the dynamics of the Indo–Pakistani relationship that will reduce tensions and uproot terrorism from the region. Indian insistence that Pakistan shut down the LeT was a reasonable demand even before the Mumbai attacks and has now become essential to reducing the chances of additional acts of terrorism, which could lead to conflict between the two nuclear-armed nations. Pushing for a resumption of Indo–Pakistani peace talks without concerted action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks could well embolden groups like LeT to up the ante.

Highlight India’s Global Role. Secretary Clinton should spend some time explaining India’s position in the Obama Administration’s broader foreign policy agenda. During a June 17 address at an annual U.S.-India Business Council event in Washington, Clinton said that “we see India as one of a few key partners worldwide who will help us shape the 21st century.” This is encouraging, but she will need to flesh out the Administration’s goals concerning India more clearly.

Indian strategic thinkers have expressed concern that Obama advisors appear less skeptical of China and its role in the region than the Bush team and are more interested in placating the Chinese than in strengthening India. These misgivings have developed at the same time that Indian concerns regarding China and its regional intentions are increasing. The Bush Administration did not shy away from stating its goal of building up India so that nation could play a stabilizing role in the broader Asia region, even as it built a strong relationship with China. Clinton will have to reach beyond strictly issues-based diplomacy and lay out a deeper, strategic agenda for the U.S.–India relationship. Only then will her trip be deemed a genuine success.

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