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U.S.–India: An Enduring Partnership in Uncertain Times

Lisa Curtis

President Barack Obama welcomed Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh today with an emphasis on the continuing value of a partnership carefully developed over the last two American Administrations. President Obama referred to India as a “rising and responsible” power and encouraged India’s role in helping to shape the political and security environment in Asia. Both leaders also emphasized their common commitment to democratic values such as individual freedom, rule of law, and religious pluralism as a basis for stronger cooperation.

Moving forward, Washington and New Delhi should apply the principles behind those statements when implementing their foreign policies, especially in China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. President Obama was right to acknowledge India’s central role in advancing freedom, peace, and prosperity in Asia. But the Obama Administration should consult with India on a more consistent basis on the world’s major challenges. For its part, India should place more emphasis on promoting democratic principles outside its borders, building on this internal strength as a way to increase its soft power projection.

Common Goals. The contrasts between the U.S. relationship with China, as played out in President Obama’s visit to Beijing last week, and that with India are already visible. While Obama’s visit to Beijing fueled questions about American power and influence in the region, it has been just the opposite with Singh’s visit to Washington.

The Indian prime minister has gone out of his way to show strong support for American power by praising the resilience of the American economy. In an interview with CNN on Monday, Singh declared that “as far as I can see right now, there is no substitute for the dollar,” and he described the U.S. economic downturn as a “temporary setback.”

These optimistic statements on the U.S. economy, combined with Singh’s words of encouragement on U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, attest to the increasingly strong bonds and common purpose the two countries share both in the region and globally.

President Obama hopefully took the opportunity in his private meeting with Singh to provide reassurances that the U.S. is attuned to Indian strategic concerns vis-à-vis China, particularly their ongoing border disputes and Chinese efforts to extend its influence into South Asia. Over the last three years, China has increasingly pressured India over their disputed borders by questioning Indian sovereignty over the state of Arunachal Pradesh and by stepping up probing operations along different parts of their shared frontier.

Many Indians were irked by a reference in last week’s U.S.–China joint statement on Washington

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and Beijing working together to “promote peace, stability and development in South Asia,” viewing it as an example of the Obama Administration’s benign view of Chinese intentions in the region and willingness to discount Beijing’s past unhelpful behavior, including secretly assisting Pakistan with its development of nuclear weapons.

A simple acknowledgement of Indian concerns on the China border issue would signal Washington is keeping tabs on these developments and would not stand by idly were Beijing to further seek to inflame border tensions.

Pakistan Challenge. China policy aside, the greatest challenge the U.S. and India will face in growing their partnership is the ongoing Indo–Pakistani regional rivalry. President Obama got off to a rough start with the Indians because of a comment he made last year on the campaign trail, hinting that he would consider appointing a Kashmir envoy. Many Indians viewed the comment as reflective of a Pakistani view of the region.

Indians were also taken aback by references in General Stanley McChrystal’s report describing India’s role in Afghanistan as provocative toward Pakistan. By dint of history, the U.S. and India find themselves supporting mutual goals in Afghanistan, including the development of a stable democratic government that will prevent the Taliban and its extremist affiliates from regaining power. President Obama’s expression of gratitude to India for its assistance to the Afghan people was thus important as it tacitly acknowledges that he does not view Afghanistan through a Pakistani lens.

The two leaders also took note of their growing counterterrorism cooperation. U.S.–India coordination following last year’s Mumbai attacks was unprecedented and broke down many bureaucratic walls between the two countries’ intelligence and law enforcement agencies. The recent investigations of the David C. Headley case offer further opportunity to enhance U.S.–India counterterrorism cooperation. Headley was arrested in Chicago in early October for allegedly plotting with the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) in Pakistan to attack India and Denmark. The case demonstrates that LeT is not solely a problem for India but is part of the international ter-

rorist network that threatens all civilized countries.

The terrorism issue is particularly salient when it comes to efforts to improve the overall dynamics of the Indo–Pakistani relationship, a key goal of the Obama Administration. Any initiative by Obama to try to reduce tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi should include convincing Pakistan to prosecute the Mumbai attackers, arrest LeT leader Hafiz Muhammed Sayeed, and shut down the operations of this terrorist group. Obama made clear that the U.S. is not pushing for direct mediation between India and Pakistan but would instead help both countries feel more secure.

Reaffirming Ties. President Obama rightly took advantage of an opportunity to reaffirm ties to India and recognize the U.S.–India partnership as one of the “defining partnerships of the 21st century.” The two countries now need to follow through on their leaders’ pronouncements on a range of issues including education, trade, health, energy, defense, nuclear nonproliferation, space, and the environment. More specifically, the Obama Administration should:

- Support India as a stabilizer in Asia by agreeing to deepen military-to-military ties through new defense trade deals and a commitment to increasingly complex and robust military training exercises. Military ties should focus particularly on increased naval cooperation to secure sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean region.
- Maintain commitment to carrying forward the civil nuclear deal initiated under the previous Bush Administration. Obama clarified that his support for strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and for ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty does not translate into a desire to roll back civil nuclear commitments made to India under the previous Bush regime. This was an important indication of his personal commitment to the deal, but he needs to follow through on that commitment.
- Continue to acknowledge India’s helpful role in promoting development and democracy in Afghanistan without supporting India gaining a strategic foothold in Afghanistan at Pakistan’s expense. The idea is to support the types of pos-

itive activities India is involved with in Afghanistan and to encourage Pakistan to follow suit. Obama should express support for cooperative initiatives between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan and push the two countries to increase overall trade and economic linkages as well as military-to-military contacts and counterterrorism cooperation.

Not a Passing Whim. The Bush Administration was clear in its interest in seeing India become a stronger and more influential player in the Asia-

Pacific and that it viewed India as helpful to the overall power balance in the region. President Obama's statements today signal he has a similar vision for the U.S.–India relationship and that the previous Administration's focus on India reflected a broad, bipartisan consensus within Washington in support of a lasting strategic partnership between the two countries into the 21st century.

—*Lisa Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*