

The Transforming U.S.-Indian Relationship and Its Significance for American Interests

Ashley J. Tellis
Senior Associate
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Washington, D.C. 20036

It is probable that when the history of the George W. Bush Administration is finally written, the transformation of the U.S.-Indian relationship will be judged as the President's greatest foreign policy achievement. This success, if sustained through wise policies and skillful diplomacy by future Administrations, would portend enormous consequences for the future balance of power in Asia and globally to the advantage of the United States. The rapid transformation of the relationship between the world's oldest and the world's largest democracies, which began in the final years of the Clinton Administration and which received dramatic substantive impetus in the Bush presidency, has had the effect of obscuring the fact that the bilateral relationship between the United States and India historically represented an engagement marked by dramatic alternation.¹

U.S.-Indian Relations Historically: A Giant Sine Wave

During the dark years of the Second World War, the United States was perhaps the important country to press Great Britain to end its colonial empire in India. Shaped by America's own ideals of liberty, the Roosevelt and later the Truman administrations became strong advocates of Indian independence. The post-Independence Indian leadership led by Jawaharlal Nehru was eager to reciprocate American overtures of friendship and, despite their formal invocation of non-alignment in the face of the emerging Cold War, sought to develop a close strategic relationship with the United States that would provide India with arms, economic assistance, and diplomatic support. Although this effort was only partly successful, in some measure because the United States still deferred to Great Britain on issues relating to security in the Indian subcontinent and more significantly because the emerging U.S. vision of containment left little room for informal allies like India, U.S.-Indian relations nonetheless remained very cordial from 1947-1962. The United States soon became during this period the largest aid donor to India and Washington viewed India as an important theater in the struggle against global communism despite New Delhi's reluctance to become formally allied

¹ A good history of the U.S.-India relationship until the Reagan years can be found in Harold A. Gould and Sumit Ganguly (eds.), *The Hope and the Reality: U.S.-Indian Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); the Reagan years are explored in detail in Satu P. Limaye, *U.S.-Indian Relations: The Pursuit of Accommodation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993); more recent treats that focus on the subsequent period can be found in Amit Gupta, *The U.S.-India Relationship: Strategic Partnership or Complementary Interests?* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2005), and Stephen J. Blank, *Natural Allies? Regional Security in Asia and Prospects for Indo-American Strategic Cooperation* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2005).

with Washington in its anti-communist crusade. The year 1962 in fact marked the zenith of U.S.-Indian relations during the Cold War, when the United States strongly supported India politically, diplomatically and militarily during the Sino-Indian war.

America's growing involvement in Vietnam thereafter, coupled with India's own inward turn in the aftermath of its defeat in 1962, resulted in the 1965-1971 period marking the nadir in U.S.-Indian relations. The growing U.S. disenchantment with Indian neutralism in the face of years of American assistance, the distractions of the Vietnam war, and the increasingly manifest failures of Indian socialism, all together set the stage for repeated confrontations: the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war witnessed the first formal U.S. arms embargo on New Delhi—a dramatic reversal of the earlier U.S. policy of assisting India militarily and one that was viewed in India as unjustified, given that India was a victim of deliberate Pakistani aggression during this conflict; the aftermath of the war also brought new humiliations in the form of coercive American efforts at conditioning food aid during the most serious agricultural failure faced by India in the post-Independence period, an episode that led to the forced devaluation of the Indian rupee and a minor economic crisis; and finally, the most serious confrontation in U.S.-Indian relations during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, when the Nixon Administration, because of its reliance on Pakistan as the intermediary in its opening to China, supported Islamabad against New Delhi despite the Pakistani junta's brutalization of its eastern provinces, which resulted in an armed revolt against Islamabad that eventually precipitated a generalized Indo-Pakistani war that locked India and the United States on opposite sides.

The years 1971-1982 were a frosty period in the bilateral relationship as the United States attempted to come to terms with its own defeat in Vietnam and its gradual loss of influence in South Asia caused both by the defeat of its ally, Pakistan, in the 1971 war and the sharp increase in Soviet influence as a result of the Indo-Soviet Treaty that was concluded just prior to the 1971 war. Just as the United States and India began to grow comfortable in the mutual distance that had set in as a result of the recriminations of 1971, another great Republican president, Ronald Reagan, made a concerted effort to heal the breach between the two democracies. Although Reagan's intentions were shaped greatly by his desire to avoid ceding India to the Soviet sphere of influence permanently, his overtures of friendship were gladly welcomed by the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, because of her own desire to maintain a durable breathing space between India and the Soviet Union. The 1982-1991 period, thus, witnessed delicately gradually warming U.S.-Indian relations: the warming was symbolized by new American efforts to accommodate Indian desires for dual-use high technologies in an effort to wean New Delhi away from excessive dependence on Moscow, while the delicacy was on repeated display as India sought to avoid becoming engulfed by the new Reagan strategy of confronting Soviet Union in what would eventually become the death knell for Washington's Communist rival.

The year 1991 brought the Cold War to a dramatic close with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. To all intents and purposes, India appeared like the loser in South Asia,

and Pakistan the improbable winner.² India's principal patron, the Soviet Union, had lost the Cold War and had disappeared from the political landscape. Pakistan's principal patron, the United States, had won the Cold War and its lesser patron, China, stood to gain from the Soviet demise. While that might have seemed like an initial advantage as far as Pakistan was concerned, the real consequence turned out to be that the collapse of superpower competition afforded the United States the opportunity to cut Pakistan loose as an ally and reengage India in order to construct that bilateral partnership that both sides desired since India's independence but which eluded them throughout the Cold War. The years 1991-1998, therefore, saw renewed efforts on both sides to build a new relationship unconstrained by the pressures that were dominant during the Cold War. The absence of bipolarity meant that the United and India could judge each other on their own terms and seek a relationship based on the strength of their direct mutual interests rather than the derivative pressures arising from their relations with others. The maturing of the Indian economy, which was an underperformer for much of the Cold War period, provided added impetus for seeking a new bilateral relationship on both sides: for the United States, India held the promise of becoming a big emerging new market for American goods and services, whereas the United States remained for New Delhi a critical source of trade and investments, high technology, and above all political reassurance and diplomatic support.³ Although U.S.-Indian relations throughout this decade were shadowed by new U.S. pressures on nonproliferation—arising entirely out of the U.S. conviction that capping, rolling back and eventually eliminating India's nuclear weapons program was critical to its larger global strategy of controlling the spread of nuclear weapons—both sides attempted as best they could to prevent their disagreements on this issue from impeding the rapprochement in bilateral relations.

The strategy adopted for this purpose by the Clinton Administration was that of a “carve out,” meaning that the United States would segregate its disagreement with India on nuclear weapons, while proceeding to improve bilateral relations in all other issue areas. Unfortunately, this strategy quickly reached the limits of its success, in part because India's economic development had by now reached a point where its further growth required expanded access to a range of dual-use high technologies, all of which, being controlled by various global non-proliferation regimes managed by the United States, would stay perpetually beyond New Delhi's reach so long as the “carve out” approach pursued by the United States dominated Washington's efforts to rebuild relations with India. In these circumstances, the Clinton Administration's efforts—while no doubt well-intentioned and arguably even justified at that point in time—became an enormous source of frustration to India. Even worse, the Administration's nonproliferation successes in the global arena, such as the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation

² For an early statement of this position, see Ross H. Munro, “The loser: India in the nineties,” *The National Interest*, No. 33 (Summer 1993), pp. 62-63. For a more perceptive contrary position, see Sandy Gordon, “South Asia after the Cold War: Winners and Losers,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 10 (October 1995), pp. 879-895.

³ For an extended analysis of U.S.-Indian relations in the aftermath of the Cold War, see Ashley J. Tellis, “South Asia,” in Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2001-02: Power and Purpose* (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), pp. 255-261.

Treaty and the conclusion of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), were seen as fundamentally undermining Indian efforts at maintaining its “nuclear option” and thereby put New Delhi on a collision course with Washington. Ironically therefore, the 1991-1998 period, which witnessed strong efforts on both sides to construct a new bilateral relationship unhampered by historic Cold War pressures, quickly ended with a bang—literally—as New Delhi tested a series of nuclear weapons in May 1998 and in a deliberate challenge to the United States promptly declared itself to be a “nuclear weapons state.”⁴

The testing of nuclear weapons by India—followed quickly by tests in Pakistan—resulted, once again, in a meltdown in U.S.-Indian relations as the Clinton Administration imposed a series of nuclear-related sanctions on India. These sanctions, which came in a period of highly-charged atmospherics and shrill diplomacy, proved to be more of psychological than a material blow to India’s strategic programs but they had the effect of resuscitating past Indian memories of U.S. opposition to India. This discomfiting moment in bilateral relations might have lasted longer than it finally did if it were not for the fact of Pakistan’s aggression in Kargil, a region that lies along the northern frontiers of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. This ill-advised adventure, once again, brought the United States and India together in an intense bout of collaborative diplomacy that had the beneficial result of removing much, though not all, of the mutual discord that had set in after the nuclear tests. It also strengthened the commitment of both sides to work out the disagreement on nuclear issues in a constructive way leading first to an intensely useful fourteen-round dialogue between U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and India’s Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and finally to a wildly successful March 2000 visit by President Bill Clinton to New Delhi.⁵ By the time the Bush Administration arrived in office, therefore, U.S.-Indian relations were once more on the path to improvement, but still lacked a decisive resolution of the one issue that bedeviled mutual ties since 1974: India’s nuclear weapons program and its status as an outlier in the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

When viewed in retrospect, however, the dispute over India’s nuclear program was merely the third impediment to the strong bilateral relationship that President Truman and Prime Minister Nehru had envisaged at the time of India’s independence in 1947. The first and most significant impediment throughout the Cold War was simply India’s quest for strategic autonomy. This desire for freedom to choose one’s own ideology, policies, and friends, sat uncomfortably with U.S. preferences at a time when Washington was engaged in a global confrontation with Soviet communism. In that Manichean struggle, the Indian desire for non-alignment was occasionally viewed in the United States as a

⁴ For a detailed history of this period, see George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Sumit Ganguly, “India’s Pathway to Pokhran II: The Prospects and Sources of New Delhi’s Nuclear Weapons Program,” *International Security*, 23:4 (Spring, 1999), pp. 148-177; Ashley J. Tellis, *India’s Emerging Nuclear Posture* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), pp. 173-211.

⁵ This episode has now been detailed by the principal U.S. and Indian interlocutors in Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004) and Jaswant Singh, *A Call to Honour* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2006).

form of moral indifference in the struggle between good and evil. Even when moral considerations were not at issue, the pursuit of U.S. global interests, which resulted initially in formal or tacit alliances first with Pakistan and later with China—both Indian rivals—resulted in strained relations with New Delhi. These strained relations were to engender a deepening of Indo-Soviet ties, as New Delhi sought to acquire a superpower patron of its own to deal with the threat posed first by an American-supported Pakistan and later an American-supported China to its security. The end of the Cold War, however, decisively removed this first impediment to closer U.S.-Indian relations and while it does not assure perfect amity between the two countries by itself, it at least removes a key structural impediment that historically impeded the development of close collaboration.

The second impediment to close bilateral ties arose from factors specific to India: New Delhi's relative weakness during much of the Cold War. The traditional Indian strategy of relying on a centrally planned economy that emphasized self-reliance (at least in the industrial sector) failed to advance both political and development goals and instead institutionalized poor management, pervasive inefficiency, a rentier bureaucracy, the stifling of initiative, low rates of return, the absence of internal and foreign competition, and depressed rates of economic growth. The net effect was that India not only failed to develop into the great power that it sought to become at the time of its independence, it actually lost out in relative terms to the Asian tigers which were its economic peers as late as the early 1960s. India's pervasive economic underperformance and its lack of connectivity to the Western economic system (or the global economy) arising from its autarkic policies virtually guaranteed its strategic irrelevance during the Cold War.⁶ Whatever relevance India had derived mostly from the fact that it was viewed as a battleground during the early phase of U.S.-Soviet competition. Once a more mature understanding of the global balance of power set in (as was the case during the latter half of the Cold War), India, with its relatively poor economic performance, provided the United States with few stakes in its success. As a result, Washington made some efforts to wean New Delhi away from Soviet enticements after 1982, but India's marginality in the global economic system guaranteed that these efforts would never be robust or long-lasting. The steady shift in Indian economic fortunes after about 1980, and the relatively high growth rates sustained since after 1991, ensures however that the future of U.S.-Indian relations is likely to replicate the past. Today, India is widely viewed as a rising economic power and virtually all studies suggest that its economy will find a place within the world's top three or four largest concentrations of economic power sometime during the first half of this century.⁷ This reality by itself ensures that the second structural impediment that prevented the growth of close U.S.-Indian relations—New Delhi's economic underperformance and, by implication, its strategic irrelevance—is on the cusp of disappearing forever.

By the time the Bush Administration took office in 2001, therefore, there remained only one last structural impediment to closer U.S.-Indian ties and that was New Delhi's

⁶ For more, see Tellis, "South Asia," in Ellings and Friedberg (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2001-02: Power and Purpose*, pp. 255-261.

⁷ See National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 2004).

anomalous nuclear status in the post-1974 period: a state with nuclear weapons, but not a nuclear weapon state. It is this reality that President Bush has gone to great lengths to correct, first through the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) concluded during his first term, and then through the July 18, 2005, Joint Statement with Prime Minister Singh, wherein he proposed the renewal of international nuclear cooperation with New Delhi, which is tantamount to accepting India as a de facto nuclear weapon state.⁸ Although it is unclear, at the time of this writing, what the legal future of this proposal will be, the fact remains that Bush's bold initiative is colored greatly by his judgment that avoiding the sine wave oscillations characterizing the bilateral relationship in previous decades will be critical if the United States is to master the geopolitical challenges that are likely to confront it, especially in Asia, in the twenty-first century. In this context, setting aright the U.S.-Indian relationship in a way that assists the growth of Indian power is judged to be essential to U.S. interests because it permits Washington to "pursue a balance-of-power strategy among those major rising powers and key regional states in Asia which are not part of the existing U.S. alliance structure—including China, India, and a currently weakened Russia," a strategy that "seeks to prevent any one of these [countries] from effectively threatening the security of another [or that of the United States] while simultaneously preventing any combination of these [entities] from 'bandwagoning' to undercut critical U.S. strategic interests in Asia."⁹

The Value of a Transformed U.S.-Indian Relationship

The principal value in transforming the U.S.-Indian relationship is that it provides hope for reaching the *summum bonum* that eluded both sides during the Cold War. The possibility of decent U.S.-Indian relations during that period survived at the end of the day only because of the shared values that derived from a common democratic heritage. As the historical record of this epoch in the last section indicated, these values sufficed to prevent both countries from becoming real antagonists, but they could not prevent the political estrangement that arose regularly as a result of divergence in critical interests. With the passing of the bipolar international order and with India's own shift towards market economics at home, the traditional commonality of values is now complemented by an increasingly robust set of inter-societal ties based on growing U.S.-Indian economic and trade linkages, the new presence of Americans of Indian origin in U.S. political life, and the vibrant exchange of American and Indian ideas and culture through movies, literature, food, and travel.

These links are only reinforced by the new and dramatic convergence of national interests between the United States and India in a manner never witnessed during the Cold War.

⁸ For this history of this episode, see Ashley J. Tellis, *India as a New Global Power* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005); C. Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2006).

⁹ Zalmay Khalilzad, David Orletsky, Jonathan Pollack, Kevin Pollpeter, Angel Rabasa, David Shlapak, Abram Shulsky, and Ashley J. Tellis, *The United States and Asia: Toward a New U.S. Strategy and Force Posture* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), p. 47.

Today and for the foreseeable future, both Washington and New Delhi will be bound by a common interest in:

- Preventing Asia from being dominated by any single power that has the capacity to crowd out others and which may use aggressive assertion of national self-interest to threaten American presence, American alliances, and American ties with the regional states;
- Eliminating the threats posed by state sponsors of terrorism who may seek to use violence against innocents to attain various political objectives, and more generally neutralizing the dangers posed by terrorism and religious extremism to free societies;
- Arresting the further spread of weapons of mass destruction and related technologies to other countries and sub-national entities, including sub-state actors operating independently or in collusion with states;
- Promoting the spread of democracy not only as an end in itself but also as a strategic means of preventing illiberal polities from exporting their internal struggles over power abroad;
- Advancing the diffusion of economic development with the intent of spreading peace through prosperity through the expansion of a liberal international economic order that increases trade in goods, services, and technology worldwide;
- Protecting the global commons, especially the sea lanes of communications, through which flow not only goods and services critical to the global economy but also undesirable commerce such as drug trading, human smuggling, and weapons of mass destruction technologies;
- Preserving energy security by enabling stable access to existing energy sources through efficient and transparent market mechanisms (both internationally and domestically), while collaborating to develop new sources of energy through innovative approaches that exploit science and technology; and
- Safeguarding the global environment by promoting the creation and use of innovative technology to achieve sustainable development, devising permanent, self-sustaining, market-based institutions and systems that improve environmental protection, developing coordinated strategies for managing climate change, and assisting in the event of natural disasters.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that for the first time in recent memory Indian and American interests in each of these eight issue-areas are strongly convergent.¹⁰ It is equally true to assert that India's contribution ranges from important to indispensable as

¹⁰ Robert D. Blackwill, "The India Imperative," *The National Interest*, No. 80 (Summer 2005), pp. 9-17.

far as achieving U.S. objectives in each of these issue-areas is concerned. That does not mean, however, that the United States and India will *automatically* collaborate on every problem that comes before the two countries. The differentials in raw power between the United States and India are still too great and could produce differences in operational objectives, even when the overarching interests are preeminently compatible. Beyond the differentials in raw power, bilateral collaboration could still be stymied by competing national preferences over the strategies used to realize certain objectives. And, finally, even when disagreement over strategies is not at issue, differences in negotiating styles and tactics may sometimes divide the two sides.

What does it mean then to say that U.S.-Indian interests are strongly convergent, if bilateral collaboration cannot always be assumed to ensue automatically? It means three things:

First, that there is a grand *summum bonum* that the two sides can secure only collaboratively, even though each party is likely to emphasize different aspects of this quest.

For the United States, the ultimate value of the U.S.-Indian relationship is that it helps preserve American primacy and the exercise thereof by constructing a partnership that aids in the preservation of the balance of power in Asia, enhances American competitiveness through deepened linkages with a growing Indian economy, and strengthens the American vision of a concert of democratic states by incorporating a major non-Western exemplar of successful democracy such as India. For India, the ultimate value of the U.S.-Indian relationship is that it helps New Delhi to expand its national power. Although this growth in capabilities leads India inexorably to formally demand a “multipolar” world—a claim that, strictly speaking, implies the demise of American hegemony—the leadership in New Delhi is realistic enough to understand that American primacy is unlikely to be dethroned any time soon and certainly not as a result of the growth in Indian power. Rather, because Indian power and national ambitions will find assertion in geographic and issue areas that are more likely to be contested immediately by China rather than by the United States, Indian policymakers astutely recognize that only protective benefits accrue to New Delhi from American primacy, despite their own formal—but not substantive—discomfort with such a concept.

Second, that the United and India share a common vision of which end-states are desirable and what outcomes ought to be pursued—however this is done—by both sides.

Irrespective of the tensions that inhere in the competing visions of hegemony and multipolarity at the level of theory and in the grand strategies formally pursued by the two countries, both Washington and New Delhi are united by a common understanding of which strategic end-states are in the interests of both sides. Thus, both countries, for example, are in agreement that a powerful authoritarian China that has the capacity to dominate the Asian landmass serves neither American nor Indian interests. Both sides similarly understand that a radicalized Islam at war with itself

and the world outside it threatens the security of both countries even if only in different ways. Further, neither country believes that despite their own possession of nuclear weapons and their reluctance to surrender these capabilities either permanently or to some global authority, other states or non-state actors—even if friendly—ought to be encouraged to acquire such capabilities. Such a list can be developed further, only proving that the ambiguities that lie in each country’s conception of the *summum bonum* at the grand strategic level does not in any way translate into fundamental differences at the practical level where certain critical political goals are concerned. As a result, not only is a close U.S.-Indian bilateral relationship eminently possible, it is fundamentally necessary since both countries will be increasingly critical to the achievement of those goals valued by each side.

Third, that there are no differences in vital interests, despite the tensions in the competing grand strategies, which would cause either party to levy mortal threats against the other or would cause either country to undercut the other’s core objectives on any issue of strategic importance.

These two realities—informed by the convergence in interests, values, and inter-societal ties—provide a basis for strong practical cooperation between the United States and India, realities that do not define U.S. bilateral relations with any other major, continental-sized, states in Asia. The fact that the United States and India would never threaten each other’s security through the force of arms—and have never done so historically despite moments of deep disagreement—provides an enormous cushion of comfort in the bilateral relationship because it insulates policymakers on both sides from having to confront the prospect of how to manage the most lethal threats that may otherwise be imagined. U.S. relations with neither Russia nor China enjoy any comparable protection. Therefore, even when U.S.-Indian relations may be confronted by profound disagreement, these altercations would be no better and no worse than those arising with other friends and allies. This reality in effect, then, bounds the lowest limits of the relationship: while disagreements between friends and allies are never desirable, they at least hold out the reassurance that these disputes will not end up in violent conflict and that by itself provides an opportunity for exploring some reasonable “positive sum” solutions.

Given these three judgments, President Bush’s decision to accelerate the transformation in U.S.-Indian relations (through multiple avenues now being contemplated by the Administration) represents an investment not only in bettering relations with a new rising power in what will become the new center of gravity in global politics—Asia—but also, and more fundamentally, an investment in the long-term security and relative power position of the United States.

The Practical Consequences of Transforming the U.S.-Indian Relationship

Several practical implications flow from the three realities that define the U.S.-Indian relationship. To begin with, the strengthening U.S.-Indian bond does not imply that New

Delhi will become a formal alliance partner of Washington at some point in the future. It also does not imply that India will invariably be an uncritical partner of the United States in its global endeavors. India's large size, its proud history, and its great ambitions, ensure that it will likely march to the beat of its own drummer, at least most of the time. When the value of the U.S.-Indian relationship is at issue, the first question for the United States, therefore, ought not to be, "What will India do for us?"—as critics of the Bush Administration's civilian nuclear agreement with New Delhi have often asserted in recent memory.¹¹ Rather, the real question ought to be, "Is a strong, democratic, (even if perpetually) independent, India in American national interest?" If this is the fundamental question and if the answer to this question is "Yes"—as it ought to be, given the convergence in U.S. and Indian national security goals—then the real discussion about the evolution of the U.S.-Indian relationship ought to focus on how the United States can assist the growth of Indian power, and how it can do so at minimal cost (if that is relevant) to any other competing national security objectives.¹²

Advancing the growth of Indian power consistent with this intention, as the Bush Administration currently seeks, is not directed, as many critics have alleged, at "containing" China. A policy of containing China is neither feasible nor necessary for the United States at this point in time. India too, currently, has no interest in becoming part of any coalition aimed at containing China. This is not because New Delhi is by any means indifferent to the growth of Chinese capabilities but because Indian policymakers believe that the best antidote to the persistently competitive and even threatening dimensions of Chinese power lies, at least in the first instance, in *the complete and permanent revitalization of Indian national strength*—an objective in which the United States has a special role.¹³ The United States, in turn, has a complementary perspective. Rather than merely "containing" China, the Administration's strategy of assisting India to become a major world power in the twenty-first century is directed, first and foremost, towards constructing a stable geopolitical order in Asia that is conducive to peace and prosperity. There is little doubt today that the Asian continent is poised to become the new locus of capabilities in international politics. Although lower growth in the labor force, reduced export performance, diminishing returns to capital, changes in demographic structure, and the maturation of the economy all suggest that national growth rates in several key Asian states—in particular Japan, South Korea, and possibly China—are likely to decline in comparison to the latter half of the Cold War period, the spurt in Indian growth rates, coupled with the relatively high though still marginally declining growth rates in China, will propel Asia's share of the global economy to some 43% by 2025, thus making the continent the largest single center of economic power worldwide.

¹¹ For the most cogent version of this question, see Ashton B. Carter, "America's New Strategic Partner?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (July-August 2006), pp. 33-44.

¹² For a discussion of this issue, see Ashley J. Tellis, "South Asian Seesaw: A New U.S. Policy on the Subcontinent," *Policy Brief*, Number 38, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., May 2005.

¹³ For a more systematic treatment of Indian strategy towards China, see Ashley J. Tellis, "The Changing Political-Military Environment: South Asia," in Zalmay Khalilzad, et al, *The United States and Asia: Toward a New U.S. Strategy and Force Posture*, pp. 203-240.

An Asia that hosts economic power of such magnitude, along with its strong and growing connectivity to the American economy, will become an arena vital to the United States—in much the same way that Europe was the grand prize during the Cold War. In such circumstances, the Administration’s policy of developing a new global partnership with India represents a considered effort at “shaping” the emerging Asian environment to suit American interests in the twenty-first century. Even as the United States focuses on developing good relations with *all* the major Asian states, it is eminently reasonable for Washington not only to invest additional resources in strengthening the continent’s democratic powers but also to deepen the bilateral relationship enjoyed with each of these countries—on the assumption that the proliferation of strong democratic states in Asia represents the best insurance against intra-continental instability as well as threats that may emerge against the United States and its regional presence. Strengthening New Delhi and transforming U.S.-Indian ties, therefore, has everything to do with American confidence in Indian democracy and the conviction that its growing strength, tempered by its liberal values, brings only benefits for Asian stability and American security. As Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns succinctly stated in his testimony before the House International Relations Committee on September 8, 2005, “By cooperating with India now, we accelerate the arrival of the benefits that India’s rise brings to the region and the world.”¹⁴

Once the fundamental argument is understood—that India’s growth in power is valuable to the United States principally not because of what it does for us, but because of what it enables New Delhi to become in the context of an emerging Asia—the second-order consideration of whether (and how) India will collaborate in endeavors critical to the United States can be appreciated in proper perspective. Only when the importance of strengthening India in America’s own self-interest is affirmed first, however, does the question of whether and how New Delhi would partner with the United States become a useful one. It is not necessary to have a Realist obsession with great power politics in order to defend the validity of such an approach. As George Perkovich, arguing from what is unabashedly a Liberal-Humanist perspective, has concluded, deepened U.S.-Indian relations that have the effect of strengthening India make strategic sense whether or not New Delhi supports Washington on a range of political issues because:

...India is too big and too important in the overall global community to measure in terms of its alignment with any particular U.S. interest at any given time. It matters to the entire world whether India is at war or peace with its neighbors, is producing increasing prosperity or poverty for its citizens, stemming or incubating the spread of infectious diseases, or mimicking or leapfrogging climate-warming technologies. Democratically managing a society as big, populous, diverse, and culturally dynamic as India is a world historical challenge. If India can democratically lift all of its citizens to a decent quality of life without trampling on basic liberties and harming its neighbors, the Indian people will have accomplished perhaps the greatest success in human history.

¹⁴ R. Nicholas Burns, “The U.S. and India: An Emerging Entente?” Remarks as Prepared for the House International Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2005.

India will struggle to do this largely on its own, disabused of notions that the United States or others might help without asking anything in return. This capacity to do things on one's own is autonomy, a form of power that India has achieved to its great credit. To go further and make others do what one wants them to do through payment, coercion, or persuasion is a more demanding measure of power. Iraq raises questions whether even the United States has this power. India, to be great, has more urgent things to do.¹⁵

Although Perkovich's argument may not satisfy a hard-nosed Realist concerned about protecting U.S. national security interests conventionally understood, there is nonetheless good news even from a narrowly self-interested perspective of American national interests. The good news about India's obsession with its national autonomy is that while it does not *a priori* guarantee New Delhi's support for Washington in regards to any specific operational objective, implementation strategy, or political tactic (even when the larger interests are otherwise identical), *it does not preclude such assistance either*. In fact, during the last five years, India has built up an impressive record of backing the United States in a wide variety of issue-areas, despite its formal and continuing commitment to "non-alignment" as a foreign policy doctrine. The list of Indian initiatives in support of the United States is a lengthy one—many specific activities are in fact still classified—but the following iteration highlights the reality and the possibilities of U.S.-Indian strategic collaboration.

Since 2001, India:

- Enthusiastically endorsed President Bush's new strategic framework, despite decades of objections to U.S. nuclear policies, at a time when even formal American allies withheld their support;
- Offered unqualified support for the U.S. anti-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan to include the use of numerous Indian military bases, an offer that was never made even to the Soviet Union which functioned as New Delhi's patron during the last decades of the Cold War;
- Expressed no opposition whatsoever to President Bush's decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, despite the widespread international and domestic condemnation of the U.S. action;
- Endorsed the U.S. position on environmental protection and global climate change in the face of strident global opposition;
- Assisted the U.S. initiative to remove Jose Mauricio Bustani, the Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons despite strong third-world opposition in the United Nations;
- Protected high-value U.S. cargoes transiting the Straits of Malacca during the critical early phase of the global war on terror, despite the absence of New Delhi's traditional requirement of a covering UN mandate;

¹⁵ George Perkovich, "Is India a Major Power?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Winter 2003-04), pp. 142-143.

- Eschewed leading or joining the international chorus of opposition to the U.S.-led coalition campaign against Iraq, despite repeated entreaties from other major powers and third-world states to that effect;
- Considered seriously—and came close to providing—an Indian Army division for post-war stabilization operations in Iraq, despite widespread national opposition to the U.S.-led war;
- Signed a ten-year defense cooperation framework agreement with the United States that identifies common strategic goals and the means for achieving them, despite strong domestic opposition to, and regional suspicion about, such forms of collaboration with Washington;
- Collaborated—and continue to partner—with the United States by becoming one of the largest donors to the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan despite strong—and continuing—U.S. efforts to limit Indian assistance in certain programs because of sensitivities involving Pakistan; and
- Voted with the United States at the September 2005 IAEA Board of Governors meeting to declare Iran in “non-compliance” with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, despite strong domestic opposition and international surprise.

These examples, viewed in their totality, illustrate several important aspects of U.S.-Indian strategic collaboration. First, despite the absence of preexisting guarantees, bilateral cooperation between Washington and New Delhi is eminently possible on many issues vital to the United States. Second, from the perspective of American interests, what New Delhi does in some instances may be just as important as what it refrains from doing. Third, in every instance where the United States and India have been able to collaborate during the last five years, the most important ingredients that contributed to achieving a fruitful outcome were the boldness of leadership, the astuteness of policy, and the quality of diplomacy—both American and Indian.

As we look at the three most pressing challenges likely to dominate the common attention of the United States and India in the first half of the twenty-first century—the rise of China amidst Asian resurgence in general, the threat of the continuing spread of weapons of mass destruction, and the dangers posed by terrorism and religious extremism to liberal societies—two assertions become almost self-evidently true: Not only are the United States and India more intensely affected by these three challenges in comparison to many other states in Europe and Asia, but effective diplomacy, wise policy, and bold leadership will also make the greatest difference to achieving the desired “strategic coordination” between Washington and New Delhi that serves American interests just as well as any recognized alliance.¹⁶

Since the character of U.S. policy, leadership, and diplomacy will be critical to making such U.S.-Indian collaboration—whether tacit or explicit—possible, both the Administration and the Congress will have to partner in this regard. The most important contribution that the legislative branch can make here is by helping to change India’s entitative status from that of a target under U.S. non-proliferation laws to that of a full

¹⁶ Blackwill, “The India Imperative,” pp. 9-17; Tellis, “South Asian Seesaw: A New U.S. Policy on the Subcontinent.”

partner. The Administration's civilian nuclear agreement with India is directed fundamentally towards this objective. To be sure, it will produce important and tangible non-proliferation gains for the United States, just as it will bestow energy and environmental benefits on India.¹⁷ But, at a grand strategic level, it is intended to do much more: given the lessons learned from over fifty years of alternating engagement and opposition, the civil nuclear cooperation agreement is intended to convey in one fell swoop the abiding American interest in crafting a full and productive partnership with India to advance our common goals in this new century. As Undersecretary of State Burns phrased it in his recent testimony, "our ongoing diplomatic efforts to conclude a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement are not simply exercises in bargaining and tough-minded negotiation; they represent a broad confidence-building effort grounded in a political commitment from the highest levels of our two governments."¹⁸

Many administrations before that of George W. Bush also sought this same objective, but they were invariably hobbled by the constraints of U.S. nonproliferation laws that treated India as a problem to be contained rather than as a partner to be engaged. Not surprisingly, these efforts, though admirable, always came to naught for the simple reason that it was impossible to craft a policy that simultaneously transformed New Delhi into a strategic partner on the one hand, even as it was permanently anchored as the principal nonproliferation target on the other. These prior American efforts, however, served an important purpose: they confirmed that trying to transform the bilateral relationship with India would always be frustrated if it was not accompanied by a willingness to reexamine the fundamentals on which this relationship was based.

To its credit, the Bush Administration learned the right lessons in this regard. Recognizing that a new global partnership would require engaging New Delhi not only on issues important to the United States, the Administration has moved rapidly to expand bilateral collaboration on a wide range of subjects, including those of greatest importance to India. The agreement relating to civilian nuclear cooperation is, thus, part of a larger set of initiatives involving space, dual-use high technology, advanced military equipment, and missile defense. Irrespective of the technologies involved in each of these realms, the Administration has approached the issues implicated in their potential release to New Delhi through an entirely new prism. In contrast to the past, the President views India as part of the solution to proliferation rather than as part of the problem. He views the growth of Indian power as beneficial to the United States and its geopolitical interests in Asia and, hence, worthy of strong American support. And, he is convinced that the success of Indian democracy, the common interests shared with the United States, and the human ties that bind our two societies together, offer a sufficiently lasting assurance of New Delhi's responsible behavior so as to justify the burdens of requesting Congress to amend the relevant U.S. laws (and the international community, the relevant regimes).

¹⁷ Ashley J. Tellis, "Should the US Sell Nuclear Technology to India? – Part II," *YaleGlobal Online*, November 10, 2005; Ashley J. Tellis, *Atoms for War? U.S.-Indian Civilian Nuclear Cooperation and India's Nuclear Arsenal* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

¹⁸ R. Nicholas Burns, "The U.S. and India: The New Strategic Partnership," *The Asia Society*, New York, October 18, 2005.

In reaching this conclusion, the Administration has—admirably—resisted the temptation of “pocketing” India’s good nonproliferation record and its recent history of cooperation with the United States, much to the chagrin of many commentators who have argued that New Delhi ought not to be rewarded for doing what it would do anyway in its own national interest. On this question too, the President’s inclinations are correct: Given India’s importance to the United States in regard to each of the issue-areas identified earlier in this paper, reaching out to New Delhi with the promise of a full partnership is a much better strategy for transforming U.S.-India relations than the niggardly calculation of treating Indian good behavior as a freebie that deserves no compensation because New Delhi presumably would not have conducted itself differently in any case. On all these issues, President Bush has made the right judgment—after a hiatus of many decades—with respect to India and its importance to the United States. In that judgment lies the best hope for avoiding yet another unproductive sine wave in bilateral relations in this new century.