



Is a US-India strategic partnership viable?

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The viability of the envisaged United States-India strategic partnership was once again put under the microscope at a conference, 'Power, Identity, and Security in Asia: Views on Regional Cooperation and the US Role', which was part of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies' multi-year, multi-project research effort, the Rising Powers Initiative.

Dr Deepa Ollapally, associate director, Sigur Center for Asian Studies, and associate research professor, international studies at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, kicked off the discussion on Power and Identity in India and how it relates to ties with the US. The discussion was moderated by senior Obama administration official and longtime South Asia hand Alyssa Ayres, deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs.

"India's new popular image," Ollapally said, "of being sort of a confident, energetic, purposeful actor integrating into the international system to play a major role is at odds when you look at its behavior. On one hand India (*is*) labeling itself as a developing country at the WTO (*World Trade Organization*), but then also seeing itself as a major power when it seeks entry into the UN Security Council (*as a permanent member*)."

This dichotomy, Ollapally said, "is well captured by the 2010 National Security Annual Review (*commissioned by the Indian government*) where "on the first page and the opening sentence, says, 'India is emerging as a ranking power, but it is at a loss as to how to exercise that power.' That really does capture the kind of crossroads that India is at this point."

This has been a burgeoning argument in recent months. In some quarters, there has been a re-think by senior administration officials — albeit privately — and very publicly by leading policy wonks. For example, the American Enterprise Institute recently organized a conference titled, 'US-India Relationship Oversold?'

Ollapally said, "There is a three-way competition in the making of India's foreign policy orientation: Nationalist approach, a nationalist normative identity approach, and a



From left, Jonah Blank, Souresh Roy, Deepa Ollapally, and Alyssa Ayres at the Sigur Center seminar

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realist power approach. From a power politics perspective, India has demonstrated significant failures at different periods in time. For example, it's under-balancing China in the 1960s, its uncertain pursuit of nuclear weapons, and others that include an excessive focus on the Non-Aligned Movement and nuclear disarmament and also its decision not to push its clear advantage over the Bangladesh war in 1971 — to push its advantage in the west and settle Kashmir vis-à-vis Pakistan."

India's "dominant identity variable — autonomy — has remained fairly resilient through major global and regional shifts," she added. She cited the example of "the shock of the 1962 war with China — what I would call strategic isolation in the 1970s, when China, the US and Pakistan were kind of a triangle — and the end of the Cold War in 1991... The most serious domestic contention over Indian foreign policy did not come until 2005 — a good decade-and-a-half after the end of the Cold War. And this was, I would say, marked by the US-India nuclear accord where clear battle lines were drawn in India."

The issue, she continued, "really was not at all about the nuclear accord, but all about how close India was going to the US. Was it surrendering its political sovereignty to a

untrustworthy and imperial US? Or was it kind of becoming a pooodle of the Americans, and so forth. Never mind the US had expended an enormous amount of political capital to get the India exception through US Congress and that India has been railing against nuclear sanctions US had slapped on its sometime before."

Reminiscent of this domestic contention — although at a much lower decibel in recent months — has been the perceived US pressure for India to join in the US-led campaign to isolate Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons program. And, on another front, to walk back from the nuclear liability law approved by the Indian parliament that has incensed US companies.

Ollapally said, "The contentions are going to be not just about the needs, but also some extent the idea of integrating more into the US-led world order — even at the possible

cost of some autonomy."

She said there are "two major taboos governing Indian foreign policy in terms of what it is willing to do and what it's not. And that is, no formal alliance structure or the appearance of an alliance; and two, no use of force to settle disputes or fulfill ambitions. But these taboos have nothing to do with the material in capacity or lack of structural imperatives. It has to do with the nature of India's state identity. Both these tend to make India more open or more favorable to a regional cooperation in Asia, but less and more difficult for cooperation with the US and the US role in Asia. The nationalists in India are suspicious of great powers and the role that if you bring a strong US presence into Asia, what that means for an Indian role and the kind of impact that might have. But the realists see US inclusion as a way to balance China."

Earlier, Ollapally had pointed out: "Even though India is one of the most consistently biggest arms importers and is building up its army capability, international reaction is quite favorable for India, compared to China's rise. And, I suspect, most people would say that's something to do with India's democracy, which goes right to the matter of the nature of India, rather than raw power."

'India is not going to go out of its way to promote democracy elsewhere'

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Democracy will remain central to India's national identity, but will not be a conscious axis of its foreign policy, said Souresh Roy, who was a panelist at the Sigur Center's discussion of Power and Identity in India.

Roy, a protégé of Professor Amitabh Matoo, one of India's leading thinkers on international relations, added: "What I mean to say is that democracy is a desirable value to have, but India is not going to go

out of its way to promote democracy elsewhere. First of all, because it's not easy to promote, and secondly, often India has to deal with authoritarian governments of national interests or strategic considerations."

It was yet another apparent rebuttal of the viability of the kind of United States-India strategic partnership that Washington envisages, where India is looked upon as a partner in fostering democracy worldwide.

Roy said, "India wants to be a model to be

emulated," even though it had no desire to go on the road to spread democracy globally, like the neo-conservatives in the US would.

But, Roy continued, "If you go to New Delhi these days, the discourse on relations with Pakistan would be more on how to strengthen democratic institutions, how to strengthen civil society organizations in Pakistan. If you leave aside the hawkish parts in the establishment, it is more in terms of how to do things on the margin, rather than go the whole hog in going

ahead in promoting democracy."

With regard to Asia overall, Roy said, "The realists in India will want complete integration with the US whereas the power-driven nationalists would prefer a kind of strategic integration, which excludes China, so that India can reap maximum benefits. The identity driven (*nationalists*) would ask for an integration without excluding China."

Thus, according to Roy, "India will be driven into an alliance with the US only when it sees China as an existential, imminent danger — and not before that."

With regard to the recent report, *Non-alignment 2.0*, which has created quite a buzz in US policy circles, he said, "Non-alignment is the label you give and strategic autonomy is the value that it (*India*) wants to have — it does not want to be seen as threatened. That is as true as it was in the 1960s as it is today."



Indian decision-making process 'drives US policymakers crazy'



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A snapshot of the audience at the conference

India's decision-making process "drives US policymakers crazy," said Jonah Blank, till recently policy director for South Asia on the Majority Staff of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Blank, now the senior political scientist at the Rand Corporation, was part of the session on Power and Identity in India that was part of the conference on Power, Identity, and Security in Asia: Views on Regional Cooperation and the US Role, organized by the George Washington University's Sigur Center for Asian Studies.

He said any policymaker who "has ever had to deal with the Indian decision-making process would say undoubtedly yes on the question: Does India in fact display a very high degree of attachment to autonomy as a core goal in foreign policy? US policymakers do not like it one bit... Very few of them would deny that it is really a fundamental aspect of India's foreign policy decision-making."

Blank, an anthropologist by training and also a one-time journalist who spent years based in South Asia and covering the subcontinent, is the author of *Mullahs on the Main Frame: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras*, and *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God: Retracing the Ramayana Through India*.

He pilloried India's "idea of civilizational entitlement. Why is it that India might be willing to take more of a backseat in terms of international engagement? India is great simply by being India — or they put forward that as an encapsulation of part of that theory of civilizational entitlement. I raise two questions about this. One is, why have we not seen the same civilizational entitlement (*claim*) from China? One could say we have seen it and that it's all in the past. But why is that? Why has China moved from a self-contained civilizational entitlement to a view that is a lot more expansive, particularly when Chinese civilizational entitlement has historically been far more bounded than India's until the end of the Ming Dynasty."

The second line of inquiry, he said, "goes to the hard power side of the internationalist interpretation. How is it that the hard nationalist narrative deals with the civi-

lizational theory that there have been only three times in history when Indian empires or states have controlled more territory than the current boundaries of modern-day

India? And all three of them were explicitly non-Hindu empires. How does Hindu nationalism deal with that civilizational question?"

Blank also argued: "How is it that India has responded to colonial humiliation by turning inward in a sense, or at least favoring autonomy rather than outward, when one looks at other examples of post-colonial responses? Why has India's response been to stay divided from other colonial nations? The Non-Aligned Movement was part of a rhetorical attempt to come together, but India never seriously considered giving up its autonomy to the greater Non-Aligned Movement."

Blank also said Nathuram Godse killing Mahatma Gandhi had "discredited Hindu nationalism, precisely at the time when Indian national identity was being created in a sense... So, was Nathuram Godse one of the drivers of this vision of India as an autonomous power?"

Thus, Blank argued that the policymaking and policy-shaping community has "to look at the India that really is, rather than the India that some of us — and I don't include myself in this — wish that it were. The United States, in the policymaking community, often wishes that India would become part of a new alignment — a Western alignment — as sort of a junior partner of the United States. I would contend that this is unrealistic — autonomy is not a passing phase. It's not simply a bit of a neurosis that India has to work through. I would contend that it is a central value of Indian policymaking and of Indian identity, and it would be with us for a long time. US policymakers can ignore this, they can bemoan it, or they can embrace it. And, in my view at least, we are just beating our heads against a wall if we try to get a country to change an aspect of identity they consider to be core to its true nature."

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