



Assessing the US-India Strategic Partnership in the Wake of the Trump Visit

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Bilateral cooperation between the US and India has expanded in key areas, but the relationship increasingly rests on unstable foundations.

In late February 2020, Donald Trump made a flashy 36-hour state visit to India amidst growing strains on US-India ties. What did the visit achieve? [Critics suggested](#) it was a showy affair, largely devoid of substance. Such analysis fails to recognise several key developments; however, the overall challenges facing the relationship remain. Minimal progress on economic disagreements, a deepening of security ties, and a growing divergence on values suggest that the foundations of the strategic partnership will be increasingly unbalanced. In such circumstances, Indo-US cooperation will be founded on a narrower and narrower set of issues, raising questions about the contours and constancy of future collaboration.

80% of Success is Just Showing Up

The argument that Trump's visit [was largely symbolic](#) ignores the significance of such undertakings. Despite India's purported centrality to the Trump administration's Asia plans, the country has largely failed to feature on the White House's agenda, except in negative ways such as on trade and tariffs. Given that Trump famously does not like to travel long distances, the fact that he made an India-only trip during an election year conveys a positive message about the importance the US puts on the bilateral relationship. Crucially, this came at a time in which escalating trade tensions are accompanied by a sense of malaise at the strategic partnership and

questions about the degree to which key political values are actually shared between the two countries.

From the Indian standpoint, the visit was significant since it occurred when the government is [on its back foot diplomatically](#). Alterations to the legal status of Jammu and Kashmir have been criticised internationally, while proposed changes to the legal framework of Indian citizenship – which appear to disenfranchise Muslims – have provoked sustained protests across the country. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [cancelled a visit to India](#) in December 2019 as a result of violence in Assam over changes to the country's citizenship laws, and there is a sense that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in need of a diplomatic 'win.'

Compartmentalising Economic Disagreements

Bilateral trade in goods and services between the US and India surpassed \$150 billion in 2019 and saw the US re-emerge as India's largest trading partner. Nevertheless, the volume of bilateral trade is much smaller than would be expected between two economies of this size and the countries have [major differences on trade](#). American complaints against India include tariffs, price caps, import bans, and quotas on everything from textiles and agriculture to pharmaceuticals and motor vehicles, whereas India wants greater access for its agriculture and automobile component exports as well as a reprieve on the Trump administration's tariffs

on steel and aluminium imports. Consequently, the two nations have been imposing escalating tariffs on each other and filing multiple disputes at the World Trade Organization.

The perceived divergence between the US and India on shared political values will likely remain

Trade tensions between the US and India are nothing new. The Bush and Obama administrations both worked to insulate the strategic and defence aspects of the relationship from economic friction. For Trump, however, trade is the primary concern. What partner countries do on the economic front is far more important to him than defence or diplomacy. Consequently, this administration has linked trade commitments with national security and has not hesitated to make economic threats against treaty allies, like Japan, South Korea or France.

Media coverage of Trump's visit largely focused on trade. The failure to complete even a 'mini deal' – which would have significantly eased tensions even if it neglected key areas like information technology and online retail – led to assessments that the visit had failed to achieve [any substantive accomplishments](#). Such assessments overlook the fact that both the joint statement and Trump's comments emphasised



President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi walk around the NRG stadium in Houston, Texas during a state visit by the Indian prime minister in 2019. Courtesy of The White House.

bilateral strategic cooperation and indicated that differences on trade – though real – would not be allowed to dominate attention in the way they had in the recent past. This is not an insignificant development. With economic growth in India at a ten-year low and unemployment at levels not seen since the mid-1970s – even before coronavirus – a comprehensive resolution to trade tensions may not be on the immediate horizon. Thus, a willingness to insulate strategic relations from economic tensions is an important change in behaviour from the White House.

Deepening Security Cooperation

Defence partnership has always been the most advanced pillar of this bilateral relationship. From a position of near-zero interaction during the Cold War, the last two decades have seen the US emerge as India's second-largest defence supplier, extensive intelligence cooperation between the two countries, and the initiation of India's most extensive program of military exercises with any foreign partner. Yet, over the

last year, a sense of malaise has taken hold of this aspect of the relationship. Indian analysts complain that despite their strategic partnership, the US rarely takes India's interests into account on important foreign policy decisions and remains reluctant to share sensitive defence technology. On the American side, [there is frustration](#) that India's emergence as a major power has not been as rapid as many anticipated in the early-2000s, with the sluggish growth of the country's anaemic defence budget raising questions about the country's diplomatic and military capacity to play a leading role in the Indo-Pacific. US officials have also expressed exasperation [at the slow pace](#) at which interoperability between the two militaries has developed and New Delhi's marked preference [for acquiring Russian military hardware](#) rather than US platforms. These views have not been helped by the fact that, [on a host of foreign policy issues](#), ranging from Russia's annexation of Crimea to the future of Diego Garcia – not to mention voting patterns at the UN – it is divergence rather than convergence that characterises US and Indian positions.

Trump's February trip saw the administration's first major defence deal with India: the purchase of \$3 billion in anti-submarine warfare technology and attack helicopters. In the context of aggregate US defence sales to India, which have totalled some \$18 billion since 2008, this is a sizable procurement. Not only will the purchase of US platforms enhance the ability of the two militaries to operate alongside each other, but the specific enhancement of maritime surveillance and anti-submarine warfare capabilities will also facilitate India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean at a time when China is expanding its maritime presence in the region. US willingness to sell India the most advanced naval helicopter on the market does demonstrate growing levels of trust in the strategic partnership.

Rhetorically, the bilateral relationship was elevated to a 'comprehensive global strategic partnership' which signals that the alignment of US and Indian interests extend beyond concerns about sustaining a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. This effort envisions increased ties between the defence industries of the two countries, as well

as expanding the scope and scale of joint military exercises across all three services. In addition to cooperation on counterterrorism, maritime security, and space, the two sides also pledged to re-start a dialogue between the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs and the Department of Homeland Security.

Beyond bilateral security cooperation, the two countries also agreed to enhance joint dialogues with other nations, including the US-Japan-India trilateral summit as well as the quadrilateral consultations between the US, Japan, India and Australia on topics ranging from maritime security in the Indo-Pacific to cyber security and counterterrorism. Given India's past concerns that such dialogues would provoke a negative response from Beijing, the clear willingness to consolidate ties and deepen multilateral cooperation with the region's leading democracies is significant.

Diverging Values

Beyond economics and security, the US-India partnership has long been seen to have a foundation in common values, including respect for the rule of law and democratic principles. This perceived convergence has contributed to a remarkable bipartisan consensus in Washington on the need for a close US-India relationship. In the last year, however, a range of observers have highlighted increasing illiberalism in India's domestic politics that calls some of these basic assumptions into question, including [an increase in mob violence targeting religious minorities](#), rhetorical and physical [attacks on the media](#), and an overall perceived [erosion of civil liberties](#) in the country. These concerns were further compounded by the imposition of a curfew, travel restrictions, and a suspension of telecommunication services to 8 million people in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. Irrespective of whether such measures were necessary to avert a backlash following changes to the state's legal status, they have stained the image of a country that is regularly billed as the world's largest democracy.

In his set piece address at the 'Namaste Trump' rally, Trump repeatedly praised India's diversity and tolerance as one of the key attributes that marked it as an example for the rest of the world. As one analyst noted, Trump invoked these values [with greater frequency](#) than even President Obama had during his visit to India. Few observers had expected that Trump would directly raise such issues in public, but the obvious reference to the growing illiberalism of Indian politics was lost on no one.

Whatever positive impact this message may have had was quickly overshadowed by the outbreak of communal rioting in northeast Delhi, allegedly triggered by a local politician from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who urged his supporters to disperse a group of women protesting the country's citizenship laws. [More than 75% of the victims of the violence](#) – which left more than 50 dead and 200 injured – were Muslims, who also saw their shops and homes destroyed. Disturbingly, the Delhi police – who are under the direct authority of the home minister Amit Shah – were [reportedly slow to respond](#) and according to some accounts, [encouraged the rioters](#). Trump pointedly refrained from commenting on the events, but India boosters in the US Senate [expressed alarm](#) at the violence.

A Partnership Resting on Unstable Foundations?

2019 saw the emergence of friction across all three pillars of the US-India relationship: trade, strategy and values. Where do things stand in the wake of the Trump visit?

- The agreement to sell advanced military helicopters and deepen security cooperation both bilaterally and as well as with other like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific further strengthens the strategic pillar, despite some residual doubts about aspects of each other's behaviour.
- The commitment by both sides to compartmentalise economic differences is a positive step,

particularly since the failure to resolve existing trade disputes may negatively affect other aspects of the relationship.

- Events on the ground in India continue to bolster the narrative that domestic politics are growing increasingly illiberal and the specific policies pursued by the Modi government are taking the country in a direction that does not align well with the rule of law and civil rights.

The foundations of bilateral relations are being pulled out of alignment as the strategic pillar of the relationship is further strengthened, the economic pillar languishes, and the values component weakens. The effects of these developments on perceptions are cumulative – with the Indian economy slowing, there is not an economic 'good news' story to displace the narrative that a majoritarian government is trampling on civil rights. The strategic aspects of the partnership might be able to carry the load for the other two, but the more this part of the relationship has to bear the burden, the more that will be expected of both sides to sustain progress. Whether they are willing and able to make that work remains an open question.

In the past, the US business community was a key supporter of US-Indian ties, but we cannot expect that economic cooperation will be as important going forward. Despite the optimism expressed by Trump and Modi about the imminent signing of a 'phase 1' trade deal – presaging a more comprehensive agreement by the end of 2020 – there is a tough road ahead. Across the Indian commercial spectrum – from large corporations to small traders, as well as farmers – there is a strong demand for protection from international competition. This outlook aligns with the government's concern that vital sectors like agriculture and manufacturing should not be opened to increased competition at a time of economic slowdown and rising unemployment. Simultaneously, important segments of the US business community are beginning to sour on India. Recently implemented rules on

e-commerce and data that dramatically affect large American firms like Amazon and Walmart, alongside the Modi administration's failure to initiate substantive economic reforms, leave some wondering if India's latent economic potential will ever be realised. As the Indian economy slows and government policy doubles down on protectionism, other emerging markets appear more attractive. All of this suggests economics is unlikely to be a key driver of US–India ties in the near future.

Finally, the situation does not appear to be positive with respect to shared values. The BJP's dramatic win in 2019 came on the back of [new social welfare programs](#). With the economy slowing and fiscal deficits rising, the ruling party will instead have to lean much more heavily on majoritarian appeals to mobilise voters in vital state elections. Thus, the perceived divergence between the US and India on shared political values will likely remain and perhaps increase. This will require American policymakers to [answer some tough questions](#) about the relative importance of values in their India policy in coming years. In an era of increased great power competition, [some argue](#) that whether India and the US share liberal values is irrelevant because a 'common threat' from China will push the two countries together. Yet, [history has shown](#) that a threat from China is insufficient to sustain Indo–US cooperation – particularly since the specific challenge that Beijing poses to India and the US is very different. Moreover, the view that a divergence of values does not matter ignores the effect this can have on both future cooperation and material considerations. The bipartisan support underpinning US–India ties is under pressure as an increasing number of boosters of the US–India relationship on Capitol Hill ask tough questions about the state of religious freedom and civil liberties in India. To date those expressing concern are primarily Democrats, but when combined with the appearance that the Indian government has repeatedly [endorsed Trump's re-election](#), there are worries that support for strong ties with India could increasingly become a partisan issue in Washington. A comparative

reduction in bipartisan enthusiasm for India may constrain the growth and development of bilateral ties in the future. At the same time, the political capital and time that the BJP is dedicating to advancing its social agenda—and managing the backlash against it—are not being devoted to boldly pushing forward on the next generation of economic reforms that would lead to the growth of India's defence capabilities and overall material power. An economically stagnant India that is preoccupied with internal concerns is not the kind of partner the US envisioned when the George W Bush administration set out in 2005 to accelerate India's rise.

Once positioned on opposite sides of the Cold War, the US and India were brought together by a shared strategic vision, as well as a commitment to economic openness and common democratic principles. The development of the strategic partnership over the last two decades has been both rapid and successful, in no small part because favourable trends in the strategic, economic, and values arenas all meant that things were pulling in the same direction. Whereas one might expect that a 'comprehensive global strategic partnership' would rest on a broad base of shared interests, the risk is that the US–India partnership will increasingly be founded on a limited range of mutual concerns. In the face of an increasingly revisionist China, it might be the case that shared values and deep economic engagement are left by the wayside in the name of strategic convergence and realpolitik calculations. Such bilateral ties, however, would necessarily rest on a weaker foundation. This is not what anyone would want for a relationship that is [routinely described](#) by proponents as 'the most important partnership of the 21st century'.

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