India and its South Asian Neighbors: Where does the U.S. fit in?

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In seven months in office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has established himself as a decisive player in his immediate region, willing to turn on the charm but determined to maintain India's primacy. His summits with the United States, Russia and the large East Asian powers have had a pronounced economic flavor, and Modi is encouraging these countries to compete with one another for India's favor. He has made himself the central personality in all these relationships.

The joint statement Modi and President Barack Obama released in Washington in September 2014 to serve as their agenda omits controversial issues that have driven U.S.-India relations for decades. Not a word about Pakistan; relatively few positive words on Afghanistan. These subjects, however, profoundly affect the international and regional context within which the two leaders are working to find the "sweet spot" in India-U.S. relations. The sharp deterioration in India-Pakistan ties since Modi visited Washington and the ongoing U.S. drawdown from Afghanistan complicates this task.

Like earlier Indian leaders, Modi sees no role for the United States in India-Pakistan relations, least of all on Kashmir. He considers Washington insufficiently sensitive to Indian concerns in Afghanistan. Obama's Republic Day visit is an opportunity to put the challenges posed by Pakistan and Afghanistan into the larger picture of India's regional and global leadership, and to reflect together on how India and the United States can pursue the interests they share. This should extend as well to the rest of South Asia, where India and the United States should have an easier time developing common ground.

INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS: FROM SLOW-MOVING TO BRITTLE

India-Pakistan relations have deteriorated dangerously since mid-summer 2014, the result of both the Modi government's policy and internal Pakistani politics. Frequent firing across the Line of Control and the international border between the two countries has largely erased a cease-fire that had held quite well for ten years. One compilation concluded that cease-fire violations were up 57 percent between January and November 2014 over the preceding year, and the most seriously affected sector of the border registered a 167 percent increase.

The Modi government's abrupt decision on August 19 to cancel talks between the Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries played into this worsening situation. India's move was a response to Pakistan's decision to talk to Kashmiri separatists before the India-Pakistan meeting – as it had done before virtually every India-Pakistan negotiating session for years. Cancelling what Pakistan saw as routine talks reinforced its misgivings about the Modi government's intentions, largely wiping out the benefits from Modi's inaugural charm offensive.

Worst of all, in many ways, was the political confrontation that boiled over in Pakistan starting in mid-August. Pakistan's cricket-hero-turned-politician, Imran Khan, teamed up with a Canada-based cleric, Tahir-ul-Qadri, to stage a massive sit-in in the heart of official Islamabad alleging large-scale rigging of the elections over a year earlier. For weeks streets were blocked by containers and the protests were uninterrupted by the army (which had been asked to take over law and order in the capital). The sit-ins gradually fizzled, only to be revived in early December by a series of city-specific demonstrations. These in turn lost steam following the devastating Taliban attack on an army school in Peshawar on December 16 that killed 134 students. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif remains in place, but much weakened; Imran Khan alternates between seeking talks with the government and planning new protests. The army, though not currently interested in taking power, is calling the tune on foreign and security policy.

Serious India-Pakistan progress requires strong governments in both Delhi and Islamabad. Pakistan's upheaval puts that virtually out of reach for now. The India-Pakistan trade opening initiative, once tantalizingly close, has all but disappeared from public discourse. The Modi government is strong and popular, though it faces a challenge from the upper house of parliament, which it does not control. Its decision to cancel the foreign secretary talks suggests that it expects to negotiate with Pakistan by levying demands rather than working out mutually agreeable terms. Even a more forthcoming approach, however, would get nowhere with a Pakistan government in such disarray.

AFGHANISTAN: AFTER THE U.S. DRAWDOWN

In their joint statement, Modi and Obama agreed on the importance of a sustainable political order in Afghanistan and promised to continue close consultations on Afghanistan's future. That is the easy part. Afghanistan's future will be a huge worry for both.

For the United States, the Bilateral Security Agreement signed on September 30 and handing over command on December 28 set the structure of its future presence. However, the fusion government that followed the months-long 2014 election took months to nominate a cabinet, and its members have not yet been confirmed by parliament. Its two principal figures, former political opponents, distrust one another. They lack a common approach to the Taliban – assuming that there are Taliban figures interested in working with them and capable of delivering their followers. The Afghan army gets reasonably good marks for combat performance, but is deficient in logistics and airlift, and the best means of providing U.S. support without a combat presence is still being worked out.

India's big concerns are whether Afghanistan can control the Taliban and what role Pakistan will play. Their nightmare is that Pakistan will facilitate the movement of an ever-larger array of terrorists bent on attacking India (as was the case the last time the Taliban controlled Afghanistan).

THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION:

India and the United States have a good track record of consultation on the Indian Ocean, and their common views figured in the September joint statement. The two navies have worked closely together. As China's presence becomes more prominent, the India-U.S. bond is likely to strengthen.

In Bangladesh, the two countries took very different approaches to the troubled election a year ago. India, concerned primarily about the opposition party's ties to Islamic fundamentalists, overtly supported Shaikh Hasina, who won a huge parliamentary majority in an election that her opponents boycotted. The United States initially distanced itself from Shaikh Hasina, to her dismay; it has since backed away from its call for new elections.

In Sri Lanka, Sirisena Maithripala's stunning electoral victory offers an opportunity to both countries to turn

around relationships that have shifted in unproductive directions. The task may be easier for India, where alarm bells went off when Chinese submarines called in Colombo in November 2014. For the United States the big issue had been the strong U.S. push for accountability for events at the end of Sri Lanka's long civil war in 2009, which the defeated Rajapaksa government vehemently opposed. From Washington's perspective a successful Indian "reset" will be good for Indian Ocean region stability and may help the U.S. improve at least the tone of its relationship with Colombo as well.

WHAT SCOPE FOR COOPERATION?

The omission of Pakistan from the Modi-Obama joint statement was not an accident. Indian leaders have chafed for decades at the very idea of an outsider having a role in its most painful bilateral relationship; Modi has strong views on the subject. This applies especially to Washington, with its sixty-year-old security relationship with Islamabad.

However, India and the United States share important interests in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. For both, the erosion of the Pakistan government's authority and ability to keep order is deeply troublesome. The army's decision to go into North Waziristan was well received in Washington, but for both the U.S. and India, its expanding role in governance poses problems. Both have a strong stake in the vigor and longevity of the anti-terrorism initiative on which the civilian government and the army now seem to agree. For both, chaos in Afghanistan has dangerous implications. And for both the political health of countries near the Indian Ocean, including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, is of strategic importance.

President Obama's agenda includes plenty of issues where he will be advocating specific Indian actions. On these regional problems, however, a less prescriptive approach will be more productive. Obama should put these problems into the context of India's regional and global leadership. Maintaining and demonstrating India's primacy in South Asia and the Indian Ocean is perhaps the single most consistent master-theme in the foreign policy of independent India – and indeed it has its roots in the security policy of the British raj. This determination is close to Modi's heart.

Obama should draw out Prime Minister Modi's views on how India wants to use its leadership position: where trends in the region are likely to lead, how India can influence its closest neighbors in ways that advance the security interests India shares with the United States. On Pakistan and Afghanistan, the key is candor – and listening to India's views before offering U.S. suggestions. India's role as regional leader also provides the best frame for the two leaders' discussions on the larger region, and a "listening first" strategy may elicit ways that they can take advantage of the opportunity presented by the new Sri Lankan government.

Surprisingly, given India's commitment to regional preeminence, it has not always had clear answers to these questions – which makes it important to ask them. This type of dialogue can start to change the dynamic of how the United States and India address issues they have historically found awkward. It may also lead toward more concrete forms of cooperation that may mesh better with India's ambitions and capabilities.