

India, Pakistan, and the United States

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By inviting the leaders of the other South Asian countries to attend his inauguration, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent a message of continuity and change. The continuity lies in India's strategic commitment to maintaining primacy in the region. Every government of independent India has shared this determination; so did India's imperial rulers. The change is primarily one of tone, but tone has a way of becoming substance. It adds up to a moment of opportunity for India, which the United States can encourage.

India has the biggest problems, and potentially the biggest opportunities, with Pakistan, the only country in the region with ambitions to be India's strategic equal and the one that most resents India's assertion of primacy. Historically, Pakistan has been India's most contentious neighbor, and the opponent in almost all its wars. The off-again, on-again U.S. relationship with Pakistan has also been the most contentious issue in India-U.S. ties.

The opening of trade between India and Pakistan, initially proposed by Prime Minister Modi's predecessors, presents his greatest opportunity. It plays to the strength of both Prime Minister Modi and Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, two leaders with a strong pro-business orientation. Their initial encounter involved the kind of personal diplomacy—such as gifts of saris for each other's mothers—that can help create chances.

But Prime Ministers Modi and Sharif face spoilers hostile to improved relations. They will need to move

decisively and deftly to take advantage of this opportunity. Afghanistan's future also weighs heavily on the India-Pakistan relationship. Indian policymakers have a dark view of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, and Prime Minister Modi's advisers have in the past called for putting painful pressure on Pakistan to abandon its efforts to control the future Afghan government. The attack in May on India's consulate in Herat, Afghanistan was a warning of what could go wrong; so were the border incidents between India and Pakistan in July.

A more fundamental problem is the internal turmoil currently facing Pakistan. India now has a strong government. For Pakistan, achieving a negotiating breakthrough, and especially implementing it, will be difficult while government-army relations are strained and dissident groups are mounting massive protests.

The United States does not have, and should not seek, a direct role in improving India-Pakistan relations. Strengthening U.S. business relations with both India and Pakistan, however, could open up possibilities for integrated trade expansion that could benefit all three countries and perhaps add some momentum to the proposed India-Pakistan trade opening.

The circumstances of the U.S. exit from Afghanistan and the magnitude of its role in Pakistan create another important vector for India-U.S. cooperation. Delhi and Washington, perhaps surprisingly, share

an interest in the peace and governability of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This would be a good time to develop a serious India-U.S. policy dialogue about Pakistan, including a candid discussion of some of the more difficult problems, like terrorism. This would

supplement the discussion on Afghanistan that is already taking place. Perhaps the successful India-U.S. dialogue on China can provide some inspiration on how to proceed.