

India, the U.S., and Internet Governance

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The world is at a crucial moment for the future of the internet. Unfortunately, India and the United States both have Internet governance “problems.” The good news is that each may also have the answer to the other’s woes. For each other, and for the greater good, that is an opportunity that Prime Minister Modi and President Obama should take.

The United States has long been a staunch advocate of the current multistakeholder governance model, which includes mechanisms for private-sector and civil-society participants alongside governments in Internet decisionmaking. Only such mechanisms, its supporters argue, have the flexibility and adaptability to ensure that the extraordinary growth of the Internet will continue along with the economic prosperity it has helped create.

By contrast, India has generally championed a multilateralist approach. That is the idea that only governments, working through international organizations like the United Nations, have the legitimacy to make decisions on such important transnational issues. There are actors in India, particularly in the highly successful technology industry that recognize the risk of imposing United Nations-style decisionmaking on a system as complicated and vital as the global internet. But Indian officials still tend to prefer their international cooperation to be state-based.

Just at the time when the multistakeholder model has needed U.S. leadership, the power of its advocacy has been (at least temporarily) undermined. Un-

fortunately for the U.S., while Edward Snowden’s revelations have actually had little to do with the practical issues at stake in Internet governance, they have undoubtedly exacerbated a widely-held concern about undue U.S. “control” over the internet. The facts hardly support the critics’ claims and, in fact, the Obama administration has recently announced its plans to give up its technical oversight of the management of internet addresses. But the taint of Snowden nevertheless continues to complicate the U.S. ability to talk internationally about Internet issues.

Meanwhile, India’s position also brings with it presentational challenges, not least the fact that despite being the world’s largest democracy, it finds itself in the same camp as authoritarian states such as China, Iran, and Russia, who are widely seen as favoring inter-governmental control as a vehicle for legitimizing national measures to control their citizens. More practically, it is not yet clear how Prime Minister Modi will reconcile his business-friendly electoral platform with an emphasis on internet-driven economic development, with the multilateralist preferences implied by India’s decision not to support the Statement of Principles agreed at the NETMundial Global Multistakeholder Meeting on the Future of Internet Governance in São Paulo in April. That meeting took place a month before the prime minister was elected, but now that those Principles form the basis of an ongoing process designed to agree to a way forward on Internet governance, how India positions itself will be crucial.

Prime Minister Modi is, however, a pragmatist. So while he may encounter resistance from within some in the Indian establishment, if the business/technology community is able to make its case, he may see the benefits of following in the footsteps of his BRICS colleague President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil. Despite initially arguing for multilateral governance in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly last September (in response to learning her own phone had been spied on), President Rousseff quickly and decisively revised her position. After discussions with global internet leaders and Brazil's own private sector and internet experts, she shrewdly recognized that, in fact, Snowden had created an opening for her to redefine Brazil not only as a proud supporter of the multistakeholder approach but also as a more reliable champion of the global Internet than the U.S. While Americans might challenge the analysis, the overall outcome is good for everyone. For his own reasons, Prime Minister Modi could do a lot

worse than aligning India with Brazil as a champion of a multistakeholder but not 'U.S.-centric' Internet.

Quietly, President Obama would have good cause to be happy with that outcome. And if Prime Minister Modi is able and willing to position India squarely within the multistakeholder camp, then he and President Obama should waste no time in agreeing how to secure their common internet goals.

Not only is the NETMundial process underway, but there are other important internet related meetings on the horizon, including the International Telecommunication Union Plenipotentiary meeting in Busan, South Korea in late October/early November. There is a lot at stake and many governments still to be won over. Working together, along with Brazil and other long-standing supporters of the multistakeholder model, Indian and U.S. diplomacy could, and hopefully will, prove decisive.