

Media Call Transcript, 02.20.20

Suzanne Schaefer: Good morning, everybody. This is Suzanne Schaefer from the Brookings Institution. Thank you for joining our media call this morning. We're going to go ahead and get started, and just before we do, I want to mention that this call is on the record and it's being recorded. I will send around a transcript about 24 hours afterwards, and to those of you who have asked for the audio file, I will also provide that to you as well.

Tanvi Madan: Sure. Good morning to you all. I just thought I'd kind of set the context for the visit and just highlight some of the things we might see from it, and some of the things we will not see during the visit. The last visit by an American president that took place was President Obama's visit in 2015, and that was a very significant visit for various reasons, but particularly to do with Indian and U.S. convergence on the subject of China and convergence in the Asia Pacific as a whole.

Tanvi Madan: This visit is taking place in the context of a relationship for the Trump administration, which has actually exhibited more continuity rather than change, compared to a lot of other relationships that the U.S. has. The relationship has largely escaped some of the depths or to some extent heights that we've seen, particularly in U.S. relations with some allies.

Tanvi Madan: One of the reasons for this is something you will see reflected over the next few days or weeks when President Trump is in India. I think what you will see during this visit is both the strategic convergences, which are the reasons the visit is happening at all, and you'll also see some of the divergences in the relationship, particularly on the subject of trade, where there are often frictions. There's not quite, not quite a trade war between the two countries, more like a trade skirmish. I think you'll also see during this visit some ways that the Indian government has over the last few years had to adjust to the very different president that President Trump is.

Tanvi Madan: Just very quickly in terms of convergences, the major area of convergence between the U.S. and India over the last few years has been on the diplomatic and security front, and it's been quite remarkable how much progress they have made, spurred in no small part by shared U.S. and Indian concerns about China's actions in the region, which they are increasingly calling the Indo-Pacific. Both countries have a free and open Indo-Pacific vision. Though they're not exactly the same, there's a lot of overlap there, and I think you will see that reflected. While you might not hear the word "China" mentioned, you will hear allusions to it constantly throughout remarks and in some of the deals you see.

Tanvi Madan: I think you will see some defense deals around the visit, and perhaps put into some of the joint statements, and President Trump will no doubt claim credit for them. These include India buying helicopters for its Navy, and perhaps adding too some attack helicopters and surveillance aircraft that has worked in the past. This will take the U.S.-India defense trade to over the \$20 billion limit. Just

to give you a sense of how far the U.S. and India have come on this, about a dozen years ago, that number was zero.

Tanvi Madan: You'll also potentially see, I would look for whether they actually sign the final one of what is called the Foundational Agreements. These are agreements that India used to resist sharing with the U.S. for sovereignty reasons, but we've seen a range of them signed over the last few years for defense and intelligence cooperation, and the final one is called BECA, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement. They've been negotiating it recently, they restarted negotiations, and we potentially could see some progress on that front.

Tanvi Madan: You'll see, I suspect, a laundry list in the joint statement which will make the breadth of the relationship apparent. There will be some details in there that might not be big strategic issues, but really do show some of what has made this relationship sustainable across many different agencies, but also highlighting business collaboration as well as the diaspora connection the two countries have.

Tanvi Madan: The big missing deliverable, at least for now, seems likely to be the one both countries had sought, the trade deal, and this has eluded both sides because of their negotiating styles, lack of political will to a certain extent, different priorities. Both sides feel the other has changed goalposts, and there are domestic political sensitivities in India to some of the concessions that the Trump administration wants.

Tanvi Madan: Could they still pull a rabbit out of the hat? Possibly, if the two leaders decide that it is a priority to at least get a trade ceasefire that could prevent some of these trade divergences from bleeding over into the strategic areas of convergence. I think, partly because they have not been able to get to a trade deal, Prime Minister Modi will make an extra effort in delivering something else for President Trump, which is great optics.

Tanvi Madan: They will be sensitive on the Indian side that this is an election year in the U.S. They ideally do not like presidential visits in an election year, but I think it was more important for them to have the U.S. president visit because it's a crucial relationship for India, and they will want to ensure that President Trump, who they see as transactional, will not feel that he leaves India empty-handed, even if he does end up stopping over or making an unannounced stopover on the way to sign a deal with the Taliban and get that deal.

Tanvi Madan: I think Delhi will want him, so they will give him the defense deals, but I think they will also, in terms of deliver the large audience that he craves in the stadium event that he's doing, and some visuals that his election campaign will use. I think the Indian government will be more sensitive, given their experience with having Modi, of just not being seen by Democrats as an endorsement.

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- Tanvi Madan: Finally, you'll see various instances that will tell you how differently India has dealt with President Trump as opposed to previous presidents, even the fact that this kind of stadium event is happening. In recent years, these kinds of events haven't happened. Presidents have spoken to smaller groups, but the Indian government has been largely sensitive to having American presidents speak to large domestic audiences.
- Tanvi Madan: This is not unprecedented. President Eisenhower, when he went in 1959, spoke to a crowd of half a million, but it is unusual in recent years. I think the fact that the Indian government is doing this is quite different from previous times.
- Tanvi Madan: Second thing, defense deals, they're usually not announced. India doesn't like to announce defense deals during these leader-level summits with the U.S. Again, the fact that it's doing it is because it's President Trump, who they see as ... this is tailor-made for him in terms of announcing deals. They're also going to reportedly work and are willing to make procurement commitments in trade talks, also very unusual for them.
- Tanvi Madan: They will also, I think finally, downplay any statements that he makes, off-the-cuff statements that he makes on offering mediation on Kashmir, or if he makes statements on Pakistan or China, 5G, that they would normally take exception to. I think you will see them try to roll out the red carpet and ensure that he leaves with a good feeling about India. It's not about him, per se, for them. It is the U.S. relationship for India is crucial as they look at not just the China challenge that's looming, but also an economic growth slowdown in a context that they still look to the U.S. as an economic partnership over the next few years.
- Suzanne Schaefer: Okay. Thank you, Tanvi. Bruce, if you want to get started?
- Bruce Riedel: Yes, certainly. I want to pick up with the one point that Tanvi just made about continuity. I think this trip really is about continuity. Twenty years ago, Bill Clinton made his visit to India at just about this same time of year, and since then I think there's been a very strong bipartisan consensus in Washington that India truly is a strategic partner. It's an important country in the global environment. It's a country the United States needs to get much closer to.
- Bruce Riedel: We've now seen President Trump will be the fourth president in a row to go to India to celebrate that relationship, and that's a big change, as Tanvi's very excellent new book points out. The United States did not always think of India as a strategic partner or even a player on the world stage that was worth courting. For much of the first 50 years of India's independence, the United States had a very ambivalent relationship with India, one troubled by its relationships with Pakistan in particular.

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Bruce Riedel: That really changed in 2000, and that continuity, that consensus is there today. As Tanvi has laid out, it's been turned into material, because institutions on both sides, particularly the military and security services on both sides, have come to really value this relationship. India has more military exercises with the United States than many of our NATO allies have with the United States, which is really extraordinary considering we had virtually no military relationship with India just a quarter of a century ago.

Bruce Riedel: I think there is one other thing to point out about the continuity argument here. While India still is held in high regard in the United States by both sides of the aisle, I think there are more questions in the last six months about India's commitment to democracy, to tolerance, and concerns about Islamophobia in India, than we've really seen in the history of the U.S.-Indian relationship. These concerns are not a threat to the survival of the relationship, but a question mark for that relationship.

Bruce Riedel: The good news for India is that the last person in the world likely to raise any of these issues is Donald Trump. He's an Islamophobe himself, he doesn't practice tolerance for dissidence at home, so these issues are not going to come up in this visit, but they're underneath the surface and they are going to become a problem in the relationship as time goes on, and probably more of a problem if the Democrat is elected in November.

Bruce Riedel: Let me turn from the bilateral relationship to two of the elephants, not in the room but just outside of it, that will hang over this trip. One Tanvi already alluded to, which is the question of Afghanistan. The Trump administration very badly wants to get a deal with the Taliban signed and moving in the next few weeks. Much of the groundwork for that has already been accomplished, both by our negotiator in Doha, Zalmay Khalilzad, and I would say even more importantly by Secretary of State Pompeo, working with the Pakistanis.

Bruce Riedel: If the deal is ready to be signed, I can't imagine that Donald Trump is going to not want to be there. He's going to want to be in that picture. It was, after all, his idea to sign it in September at Camp David, which I just have to say parenthetically, in 45 years working in government or about government, I have never heard of a worse idea than signing a deal at Camp David for the Taliban. This won't be at Camp David. I don't know exactly how they'll pull it off, but I think Trump very much would want to be in that picture.

Bruce Riedel: Such a deal is very problematic. We can talk about it more in Q&A. It is going to be very difficult to accomplish, but I think for the president it would be a significant accomplishment, and check the box of him doing something about the endless wars.

Bruce Riedel: The other elephant in the room or outside the room I think is less likely to get a presidential stopover, but I wouldn't rule it out completely, and that's Pakistan.

If you really want to move the deal on Afghanistan with the Taliban forward, you need to get the Pakistanis firmly in the loop. The president has developed a surprisingly good relationship with Imran Khan. I don't think anyone would have anticipated that two years ago, but it seems to be a good relationship. As I said, Secretary Pompeo has a very good relationship with Imran Khan and also with his Pakistani counterpart.

Bruce Riedel: It is possible that you could see a sudden decision to add Pakistan for a quick trip. Most presidents, when they do go to South Asia, include Pakistan on the itinerary. Eisenhower, who was the first president to go to South Asia, did the trifecta of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. We'll see how Donald Trump fares on this trip. My State Department colleagues tell me that there are no plans in the States right now for a Pakistan stop. When I ask them about Afghanistan, they all go mute. I'll stop there.

Suzanne Schaefer: Thank you, Bruce. Tanvi, if you'd like to add a comment?

Tanvi Madan: Yes. I just want to echo Bruce's point that one thing you will not see is explicit criticism of Indian domestic policy and politics, whether it's action vis-a-vis Kashmir or with the Citizenship Amendment Act that's been passed. I think you might see ... and I would listen closely in the speech that he gives in the stadium to allusions about the strength of India being a diverse, pluralistic and stable country. This is something President Obama did as well when he made a speech to students and young people in general, and it was very much seen as a message that that is what partly makes India attractive for the U.S. as a whole and key constituencies, and that could have an impact on U.S. support for India.

Suzanne Schaefer: Okay. Thank you. All right, we're going to open it up to you guys on the phone, but just before we do, please again, remember to keep yourself muted when you're not speaking. Before you do ask a question, please introduce yourself. With that, take it away.

Jordyn Phelps: Hi, this is Jordyn Phelps with ABC. Can you hear me?

Bruce Riedel: Yep.

Jordyn Phelps: Okay, great. First question is on the issue of Kashmir. Can you give us a little bit more context around the Indian perspective on the president's offer to be a mediator in this? My understanding is that Pakistan has expressed some willingness, but India has really shut it down. Then I was hoping, you've already touched on this, but we're talking about the great optics of this trip. This trip in a lot of ways to me seems like it's mostly about those great optics and putting this relationship on display, so could you expand a little bit just on that element of the trip, please?

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- Tanvi Madan: Sure. I'll jump in, and then maybe Bruce can respond as well. On Kashmir, the responses of India and Pakistan are fairly consistent with their historical approach. Pakistan has welcomed internationalization as a Kashmir issue, because it sees that as giving it more leverage in negotiations with India.
- Tanvi Madan: Largely over the last few years, American presidents used to make it a habit of offering mediation, even if not themselves. They've stopped doing it, partly because American administrations ... and Bruce can talk a little bit more about this, having had direct experience ... have come to the conclusion that, while it would be really helpful for India and Pakistan to reach an agreement to the Kashmir dispute, that India will not accept international mediation, and so they treat it as largely a bilateral dispute, with of course very high stakes if it breaks out into conflict.
- Tanvi Madan: The Indians have seen, I think when President Trump first made the offer, and they were aware that in the past, even before he was president he's talked about, just like he had on other peace deals, trying to make peace between India and Pakistan. I think they largely would have objected vociferously if anybody else had made the comments, and pushed back much more strongly.
- Tanvi Madan: Now, they just reiterate the traditional position that this is a bilateral dispute which will be settled and talked about between India and Pakistan. They also usually point to his caveat, which President Trump has stuck to his talking points and added that he will only mediate if both sides are willing. Of course, the Indians just say they are not willing.
- Tanvi Madan: On the optics, Bruce well attest to this as well. All American presidential visits to India are optic-heavy. In some ways, American presidents go to India to feel loved. They get a huge amount of welcome, despite. Even President Bush, who was not considered to be very popular around the world, when he went to India towards the end of his administration, when he was getting criticized in U.S. allies and in other places, his popularity rating was very high and his favorability ratings were very high in India. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh then hugged him and told him that, "All of India loves you."
- Tanvi Madan: As with President Clinton and President Obama, Indians really do roll out the red carpet for American presidents. They are often invited to speak to joint sessions of Parliament. There's a lot of color. This is a loud and boisterous country, and that exactly in some ways really fits with the Trump style. He has been there before. He was there in 2014 when Prime Minister Modi had just come to office. Of course, he was then a businessman, not a president. He's not unfamiliar with the country, and of course his family has business there.
- Tanvi Madan: I think the optics, he will get more of them than other presidents do, because I think the Indians recognize that that is something that he will want and will appreciate and will perhaps keep them in good stead over the next few months,

even as some of those trade frictions rear their ugly head every once in a while. I think you will see the stadium visit. There will not be 7 million people on the streets, but I think there will be a lot of people. As long as it looks like a lot of people to President Trump, I think the Indians will be satisfied.

Tanvi Madan: I think you will see a state dinner at the Presidential Palace, which, for those of you who have been to Delhi, is quite impressive as a building, the former Viceroy's residence. I would not be shocked if the Indians named something after President Trump. This would also not be unusual. There's a village actually just a 15-minute drive from the Trump Tower near Delhi. It's a village called Carterpuri, which was named after Jimmy Carter when he was there. I think you will see them take extra efforts on the optics front for this president.

Bruce Riedel: Let me just add a couple of brief points on Kashmir. The Indians have, from the beginning of the Kashmir dispute, said this is a bilateral matter. I think that's even more intense now that Modi has changed the constitutional arrangements for Kashmir to make it more integrated into the Indian state than ever before. The administration has no plan, no practical plan, for mediating between India and Pakistan on Kashmir. In 1999, President Clinton briefly flirted with the idea of mediation, and the Indians shut it down almost immediately.

Bruce Riedel: I think the Pakistanis were, to some extent, shocked when the president offered to mediate during his meeting with Imran Khan. If you look closely at the face of the prime minister when that offer came up, it was almost like he was puzzled. They would love to pursue it. They will certainly bring it up. I don't think they're going to find much of a resonance with the Trump administration.

Bruce Riedel: Tanvi is absolutely right about optics. I traveled with President Clinton in 2000 to India, and the nearest thing I can say to it was it must've been like what it was when the Beatles came to America for the first time. It was just crazy, enormous crowds everywhere he went, and this for the man who had just imposed the most intense economic sanctions on India in the history of the bilateral relationship, which were still in place during that visit. The outpouring was enormous.

Suzanne Schaefer: Thank you, Bruce. More questions?

Howard LaFranchi: This is Howard LaFranchi, Christian Science Monitor. Just a quick question for Bruce. Is there any downside, potential downside, for the president in being in the picture, as you say, signing the deal with the Taliban, given that up until just last week or recently, they're still killing U.S. soldiers? I'm just wondering if you see politically is it all good for the president, or is there some downside?

Bruce Riedel: I think it's risky. I think it's very risky. Just based on watching Trump's behavior over the last five years, it seems to me it's a risk that he relishes taking, but you're absolutely right. You could have, the day after the signing, a car bomb go

off in Kabul and 30, 40 people killed ... they didn't have to be Americans, but it would be even worse if some of them were Americans ... which would immediately demonstrate that this deal is at best off to a shaky start, if not stillborn.

Bruce Riedel: The other risk is more long-term. Under the best of circumstances, getting a deal between the Afghans ... which is after all what we really need in order to have a stable departure ... is very, very hard to do. It's gotten even harder in the last couple of days with the announcement of the alleged results of the Afghan presidential election, which had been rejected by Abdullah Abdullah, and we now in effect have two Afghan governments. Who's going to negotiate with which government? It's a big complication to an already very complicated problem.

Bruce Riedel: I think the risk here for Donald Trump is less serious, simply because it's not going to have the same visuals and optics that a massive car bomb going off in Kabul or something like that happening would have. It would certainly tend to undermine the impact of any deal come November, which I think is very, very important. I know it's very, very important for the Trump administration.

Suzanne Schaefer: Thank you, Bruce. Just a reminder to please mute yourself. We do have some typing noise coming through. Next question?

Akbar Ahmed: This is Akbar Ahmed with HuffPost. Thanks for the call. Could you comment on the private sector's point of view of this, particularly the U.S. business community? I mean, given that you said it's not likely to get a comprehensive trade deal, what can President Trump come back to Wall Street or others interested in the Indian market and say he's achieved from this, or what are the expectations?

Tanvi Madan: I'm sure there is a CEO summit that will take place on the sidelines of the visit, and one of the things you will see there is that American companies are actually a little bit wary of the approach that the president has taken because they think there's too much emphasis on tariffs, tariff reductions and things like that.

Tanvi Madan: What American companies would like to see more of ... and it is unlikely that we are going to see in the trade package, the mini-trade deal that they were negotiating ... is a better investment climate and more market access in India, and the Indian government addressing restrictions in two areas.

Tanvi Madan: One, like the Europeans, India is going through a process of detailing and laying out some rules about data localization. They want Indian data being stored in India. This has caused some complications for a number of Indian companies that operate there and don't want to actually do this.

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Tanvi Madan: Second, there are now some e-commerce restrictions that India has put in place. Particularly for companies like Amazon and Walmart, this matters. Having said that, they don't want the U.S. and India to get into any sort of heightened trade tensions, because they actually think that, even though India is not the easiest place to do business, it's still a good place for them to be, particularly for the companies that have been shut out of China.

Tanvi Madan: I think they'll want to see the administration do what they can to open up the Indian market. This is where Prime Minister Modi and President Trump, for all the comparisons made about their similarities, are quite different in economic philosophy. Prime Minister Modi's party can be quite protectionist in various ways. The Indian government can be quite protectionist in terms of keeping the market restricted and closed.

Tanvi Madan: Unless we see a real rethink in the Indian government that they need to open up the economy, as they did in the early '90s with serious economic reforms liberalizing the economy, you're not going to see that necessarily get any better for American companies. I think they are just going to keep trying to get some concessions along the way, try to ensure that bad policy doesn't get implemented, and work directly with the Indian government to get some of these restrictions lifted or not put in place in the first place.

Tanvi Madan: I think you will see also some highlighting while this trip happens of Indian companies that are investing in the U.S. and creating jobs, partly to send a signal that President Trump is bringing these companies investment. It's going to predate President Trump, but I think they want to say that he's bringing some of this investment in. It suits India's purposes to say, "Look, our companies are not taking jobs, they're creating jobs," to mitigate some of the concerns about immigration and high-skilled worker concerns that the Trump administration has.

Suzanne Schaefer: Okay, thank you. Next question.

Dave Lawler: Hi, there. This is Dave Lawler from Axios. Just a question about the domestic political situation that Trump is walking into in India. I'm just wondering whether perhaps he won't refer directly to the citizenship law or to protests, et cetera, but I'm wondering how closely his remarks will be watched on any of those things, any references. Obviously, after Kashmir he made a remark on protecting borders that got a lot of attention. Just wondering whether Trump riffing on this stuff has major domestic political implications in India.

Tanvi Madan: I think it won't have major domestic implications, but it will be watched very carefully. I think if he does say something ... and I suspect his prepared remarks will have these allusions, support for equality, diversity pluralism, India's strengths. I think you'll see it in that way in his talking points, at least in his public talking points, and in his speech.

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- Tanvi Madan: I think you might see it brought up somewhat privately, and I think there are concerns within the administration ... though not, as Bruce said, on the part of President Trump ... about some of these moves, for different reasons. Some care about it as Members of Congress on the Hill do for the impact on democracy and human rights, but there are others who are concerned about what this does to India's stability and whether these are distractions from what India should be focusing on, which is its economy and its military strengthening in the face of a rising China.
- Tanvi Madan: They have concerns that Prime Minister Modi is using the political capital he has for these moves, which won't really add to India playing this regional role that the U.S. would like it to. I think you will hear some concern, but I don't think this is going to be front and center for the administration to bring up too much. I think they will want to send a message that they aren't looking the other way.
- Tanvi Madan: You've seen also, in the last few days, the Democratic chair of a key House subcommittee travel to India with the ranking member and express concerns about Kashmir ... this is Congressman Ami Bera ... about Kashmir, about the Citizenship Amendment Act as well.
- Tanvi Madan: There's always the possibility that President Trump sees something on TV while he's there. If you get a chance, put your earphones on. If you watch Indian TV channels, you'll notice they're quite vocal and vociferous. If he sees something while going through Indian TV channels about protests ... it is a democratic country. There are protests going on. There are even people who disapprove of the Trump visit. If he sees something about Kashmir or the Citizenship Amendment Act protests, he could make an off-the-cuff remark.
- Tanvi Madan: It won't down go down well with the government. A number of members of the Indian press will pick up on it. Will it have domestic political implications, no, but arguably it has already had domestic political implications, at least the Act itself, in terms of some setbacks politically that Prime Minister Modi has had in state-level elections, both these protests as well as the stalling of the Indian economic growth rate.
- Bruce Riedel: If I could add just one point, as we all have come to realize, Donald Trump's capacity for off-the-cuff remarks, that at best are amusing and sometimes are worse than that, is legendary. Apparently he alluded in a previous meeting with Prime Minister Modi to the notion that India does not share a border with China, when of course, India shares one of the longest borders in the world with China.
- Bruce Riedel: I think the propensity, as Tanvi has suggested, of the Indian government will be to laugh these things off or to just try to throw them away as meaningless. The Indian press, on the other hand, will pounce on something like that and have a field day with it, and that could start a spiral of comments. We'll see. It's

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certainly something, I'm sure, that the president's advisors are going to try to avoid happening, but it's Donald Trump's show, and as we know, it can be quite entertaining sometimes.

Suzanne Schaefer: Okay. Thank you. Bruce. Are there any additional questions?

Suzanne Schaefer: If there are no further questions, we'll go ahead and end the call, but I do just want to flag for you all really quickly, as mentioned in the invitation email, Tanvi Madan does have a new book recently published called "[Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations During the Cold War](#)," which is of course quite relevant to this conversation, and I encourage you all to check that out.