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**Partnering with India: Regional Power,
Global Hopes**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines India's expanded power and international role and draws implications for U.S. policy.

MAIN ARGUMENT:

With a booming economy, an increasingly trade-driven foreign policy, an expanding footprint both in Asia and on the global scene, and strong relations with the great powers, India's strategic horizon is generally positive. The U.S. is India's most important outside friend, and the new relationship between the two countries is based on important common interests, especially in Asia and in Indian Ocean security. Yet at the same time India's foreign policy outlook rests on a strong political commitment to "strategic autonomy"—avoiding even the appearance of undue outside, and especially U.S., influence on its policy. U.S. experience with partnerships, however, involves mainly working with junior partners. This disconnect complicates the task of developing the U.S.-India partnership.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- The partnership between India and the U.S. will be most effective if they develop a new model for selective cooperation, one based on their common interest in the security and prosperity of the region extending from the Persian Gulf to the Pacific Ocean. The two states have developed strong bilateral ties. They can now begin to develop a common view of the world, or at least of the areas where their interests are close.
- For the U.S., India is a key element in the emerging balance of forces in Asia. A larger Indian role in Asian regional integration and global governance would suit both countries' interests.
- The biggest danger to U.S.-India cooperation in advancing Asian security would come from U.S. military action in Iran.

Partnering with India: Regional Power, Global Hopes

Teresita C. Schaffer

The end of the Cold War and a two-decade surge in India's economic growth marked a turning point in India's strategic approach to the world and relationship with the United States. A similar transformation characterizes the U.S. approach to India. Beginning in the late 1990s the United States cultivated a new relationship with India based on the premise that India's rise favors U.S. interests. The question this approach poses for the new administration is whether and how this promising beginning can become a truly strategic partnership. This chapter argues that such a partnership can develop on a foundation of shared interest in the security and prosperity of the region extending from the Persian Gulf to the Pacific Ocean. Under such a foundation the United States and India would need to discuss more candidly what kind of global cooperation will advance their shared interest. The two countries would also need to develop a new partnership model, more selective in its foreign policy ramifications than existing U.S. alliances and more in tune with India's concept of sovereignty.

To illuminate the possibilities and the pitfalls of the U.S.-India relationship, the chapter begins with a look at India's strategic outlook. India has been strategically in good shape in this first decade of the new millennium. India has a booming economy, an increasingly trade-driven foreign policy, an expanding footprint in Asia and on the global scene, and strong relations with the great powers. Yet there are also dark spots: the slow infusion of prosperity into India's countryside, the unsettled and sometimes violent state of India's neighborhood, and India's dependence on expensive energy imports from a volatile Middle East and other politically

controversial regions. The United States is India's most important external connection—the country that can best facilitate India's emergence as a serious global player. The broad lines of India's approach to the world converge with U.S. interests more than at any time since India gained independence.

India's foreign policy includes a strong commitment to strategic autonomy, which in Indian usage entails not aligning foreign policy with that of another country. Some U.S.-India policy differences (such as differences over Iran) have therefore become symbols of Indian sovereignty. The notion of strategic autonomy is the greatest challenge that India and the United States face in managing their new partnership.

The chapter next examines where India fits into the U.S. strategic outlook and how the United States has developed the partnership with India thus far. India's strategic importance to the United States derives both from a common commitment to preventing Asia's domination by a single power and from a common dependence on the smooth functioning of energy markets and maritime security in the Indian Ocean. The democratic bond—often cited as the basis for U.S.-India relations—is now amplified by more tangible common interests.

The United States and India have made tremendous strides in strengthening bilateral ties. Active defense links, expanding trade, and a raft of working groups that create real relationships among counterpart officials while tackling sometimes prosaic problems have changed the way the two governments relate to one another. India and the United States have done little, however, to explore the extent to which they share a common vision of the world. In some areas common interests are apparent; in other areas, such as issues related to Burma and Iran, there are important disagreements.

A new administration will want to develop a more global partnership with India and to have a strong India as a player in the de facto balance of power in Asia. The policy most likely to advance this goal centers on integrating India more fully into the Asian scene and into global institutions. Such an approach would also provide the best framework for dealing with the next century's policy minefield of issues, including some on which Indian and U.S. views diverge such as climate change. Paradoxically this approach might even provide political space for India and Pakistan to manage better their stubborn dispute. Success is not guaranteed, however. A serious economic slowdown or post-election political deadlock in India would certainly inhibit the kind of partnership that would benefit both countries. U.S. military action in Iran could seriously disrupt U.S.-India relations, at least temporarily. Yet the odds for such a partnership look favorable. The current partnership has been built by both major parties in

each country; the new leaders elected in the coming year in India and the United States should therefore have a solid political base on which to build.

India's Strategic Objectives

India's policymakers are generally reluctant to articulate a grand strategy as the basis of policy. There is a strong consensus, however, that India should recover the major place in world politics India regards as its birthright. India's most important international goals, as outlined below, have remained quite stable through the years; what has changed is the country's capacity to achieve these goals and the means of doing so.

When it gained independence in 1948, India was a poor country whose international desires reached far beyond its actual power. A decade into the new century, India's owes its rising strength to the acquisition of nuclear arms, nearly ten years of rapidly growing defense expenditures, and an economy that is one of the fastest growing in the world. The expanding economy has led the world to see India as an important global actor, while the acquisition of nuclear weapons and investment in military power projection capability have given India's policymakers a new assertiveness and confidence. Both factors reduce the gap between goals and capabilities.

India's security objectives form four concentric circles. The first circle is the home front: India wants to contain internal insurgencies and to prevent neighboring states from inciting future unrest. Besides violence in Kashmir, India faces unrest in the northeast and opposition from Naxalite insurgents in the central part of the country. These problems are aggravated by porous borders—especially with Nepal and Bangladesh, where insurgents have found sanctuaries.¹

The second circle is South Asia, encompassing neighbors across India's land borders (excluding China) and Sri Lanka. Aiming to protect the country's standing as the preeminent regional power, New Delhi seeks safety and stability in these border areas and the regions just beyond them. Although Indian strategists identify China as the primary security challenge and Pakistan as a secondary threat, Pakistan remains the neighbor with whom India has the most acute dispute. A four-year ceasefire has reduced the near-term risk of conflict, but the India-Pakistan problem is still susceptible to sudden spikes in violence. With both countries possessing

¹ The importance of sanctuaries in Nepal and Bangladesh is a common theme in discussions with Indian security officials and analysts; for one fairly typical example, see Wilson John, "The Roots of Extremism in Bangladesh," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 1, January 13, 2005, <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369092>.