

U.S.-India Insight

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The United States' 2023 Agenda for Building a Stronger Relationship with India



U.S.-India relations will start 2023 on solid footing. However, 2022 showed us that some lingering weaknesses persist. Senior-level support in both governments to meaningfully expand the relationship remains deep, yet precariously narrow. In the face of domestic political challenges in the United States and escalating threats abroad, it can be hard to give the bilateral relationship with India the focus it requires. The long-term promise of the relationship is not yet assured. Fulfilling that promise takes patience, vigor, and speed when opportunities for progress present themselves.

To further improve relations, the CSIS Wadhvani Chair offers seven key goals that U.S. officials should prioritize in the coming year. Each has a cost, either in terms of money, time, or political influence. Despite the costs, they will meaningfully contribute to a more positive economic and security partnership with India.

- 1. Confirm a U.S. ambassador in Delhi.** The United States has now [passed](#) two years without a confirmed ambassador to India—the longest period of vacancy in the history of our bilateral relationship. With each passing day, the United States loses some degree of political access, has a reduced ability to mobilize Washington, and on a more basic level, strongly signals the deprioritization of links with India.
- 2. Dramatically increase senior government engagement and programs involving India's powerful regional leaders.** Senior U.S. government engagement tends to be limited to visits to a small number of diplomatic and commercial centers in India, namely Delhi and Mumbai. Yet India's commercial and development trajectories are almost entirely written by state governments. The United States' four consulates (Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, and Hyderabad) provide crucial day-to-day presence, which should be further utilized. Moving ahead with the long-planned fifth consulate is crucial, especially after the short-sighted decision to close the "North India Office," a quasi-consulate covering key northern states like Uttar Pradesh.
- 3. Meaningfully engage the private sector in Quad workstreams.** Several Quad workstreams focus on strategic commercial areas like regional infrastructure, strategic technology, critical minerals, and more. Having robust [engagement](#) from private sector leaders from all four nations in these sectors is vital for the government dialogue to achieve effective outcomes. The end goal is obvious—break China's ability to embargo key technologies and

KEY DATA

+25%

U.S.-INDIA GOODS TRADE, 12-MONTH
COMPARISON, PER U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

-10%

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT, 12-MONTH
COMPARISON, PER RBI

\$7.2 bn

FII ASSETS NET FLOWS, LAST 12 MONTHS,
PER NSDL

minerals from adversaries. The four governments must ensure new programs are ready-made for the private sector. This government-corporate link cannot be left to chance.

4. **Find a platform for truly aspirational bilateral economic conversations.** A decade ago, U.S. officials would privately voice concerns that the two nations had “too many dialogues.” On paper, that may still be the case. But some dialogues do not meet regularly, and others fall well below aspirations. This is particularly true in the commercial realm. India and the United States lack any platform for aspirational bilateral conversations about the future of their commercial relationship—and the critical steps to take to “get it right.” While the Indian commerce minister Piyush Goyal recently [visited](#) the United States for the Trade Policy Forum (TPF), expectations for concrete decisions were low. The TPF certainly didn’t disappoint in that regard. Perhaps, the long-delayed U.S.-India Commercial Dialogue can reinvigorate bilateral economic conversations when U.S. commerce secretary Gina Raimondo visits India in the spring. Or the habitually underperforming U.S.-India CEO Forum, with its new membership, can surprise all parties. The two nations cannot go another year without a platform to get commercial links on a better footing. The two nations cannot go another year without a platform to get commercial links on a better footing.
5. **Formally announce plans to waive potential sanctions over the S-400 purchase.** The United States should look for decisive ways to clearly convey its long-term support for the relationship with India, and ways it can further build trust. The potential application of U.S. sanctions on India under the [Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act](#) (CAATSA) for its [acquisition](#) of Russian-made S-400 Triumf missile defense system continues to cast a shadow on the relationship. The pace of senior-level meetings indicates neither side expects a sanctions program to be introduced imminently. Yet, it remains on the table—feeding concerns in India about the United States’ reliability as a partner. Of course, India should avoid taking steps to tangibly deepen strategic relations with Russia, or this decision will become infinitely more difficult.
6. **Reinvigorate engagement between parliament and Congress.** Exchanges between members of Congress and the Parliament of India have become irregular. A concrete effort to get these engagements back on track is important. Many key political leaders in India today had the chance to meet their U.S. counterparts during these exchanges in the past—creating bonds that persist. The United States is in danger of losing a generation’s worth of such relationships if these exchanges are not continued.
7. **Reduce the wait time for visa appointments.** The average [wait time](#) for a business or tourist visa appointment in India as of January 12, 2023, is 472 days. This compares unfavorably to peer markets like Manila (126 days), Bangkok (42 days), Ho Chi Minh City (20 days), Beijing (20 days), and Shanghai (28 days). The Embassy and consulates are chipping away at this backlog, but as the gap between India and peer markets widens, the U.S. Department of State should look for ways to re-allocate resources. Visas are the lifeblood for business relations as well as people-to-people ties.

India continues to lumber its way to world-class economic heft and has already become a defining military power in the Indo-Pacific. Its ability to weather global economic downwind, while effectively managing Chinese and Russian policy overtures speaks to its undeniable influence in framing the emerging policy ranks. U.S. policymakers should constantly assess the channels and priorities for engagement and make changes when improvements are required.