India and the Global South: Past Obstacles and Future Partnership

Richard Rossow
Senior Adviser and Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies
To the American mind, the “battle for the Global South” conjures up images of U.S.-China competition. . . . Within its own neighborhood, India will never cede leadership to either China or the United States.

India’s Changing Leadership of the Global South

Since gaining independence from the British in 1947, India has viewed itself as a natural leader of the Global South. From the 1955 Bandung Conference of Asian and African nations to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement as a middle path during the Cold War to the 1964 creation of the Group of 77 (G-77) under the United Nations, India has continuously positioned itself as the leading voice of developing nations.¹

India frequently engages, and sometimes leads, a range of organizations meant to provide alternatives to non-Western leadership on global issues. These include BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and India’s own India-Africa Forum Summit. India’s leadership of the Group of 20 (G20) in 2023 focused on giving voice to the Global South among its main objectives. However, the practical utility of these forums is limited. Given China’s leadership ambitions and participation in several common forums such as BRICS, the SCO, and the G20, India already realizes that sharing leadership with China is tricky.

Despite frequent engagement, Indian influence on global affairs has historically been limited to intellectual leadership. India has not been a major economic partner to many nations; it has had a modest budget for international aid and a miniscule foreign service, providing humble contributions to global development institutions.²
Despite limited influence on global affairs, India has the economic and military heft to be influential in its own neighborhood. It is further strengthened by its historical societal and cultural bonds with other South Asian nations. While attempts to create a strong regional organization in the form of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have floundered, India has led smaller initiatives with sub-groups of nations in its region and shown a renewed focus in recent years in improving bilateral ties with most neighboring nations.  

**Diverging Approaches to the Global South**

The United States and India have dramatically improved security and commercial ties over the past two decades. Yet the two nations often have a difficult time building shared approaches to global issues. For instance, the countries continue to fight on global trade issues. They also have very different reactions to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Even within India’s own neighborhood, the two countries have often had different approaches.

For instance, despite being a significant donor to Afghan reconstruction in the period between Taliban governments, Indian officials privately complained the United States did not effectively engage India in their planning and talks with the Taliban ahead of U.S. withdrawal. Moreover, the United States was critical of efforts to thwart free and fair elections ahead of Bangladesh’s recent national election, while India was pleased to see the Awami League-led government remain in office, irrespective of a viable electoral opposition, as the status quo favors Indian interests. The United States is aggressively pursuing sanctions and drawing down development assistance to squeeze the military junta in Myanmar. By contrast, India believes engagement is a better way to shape political evolution. The differences continue even in Sri Lanka: after the conclusion of the decades-long civil war in 2009, the United States pushed Sri Lanka to bring government perpetrators to justice, whereas India focused on reconciliation.

**Way Forward**

The divergent approaches on key issues in India’s own neighborhood have been and will continue to be among the most volatile elements of U.S.-India ties in the years ahead. The countries, however, share an interest in preventing further security inroads by China, especially in maritime nations like Maldives and Sri Lanka.

If the United States wants India’s support in its endeavors to engage the Global South, U.S. officials must redouble efforts to find shared approaches in India’s region. This means occasionally putting U.S. interests second and applying resources in ways that augment India’s regional approaches. It also might mean taking steps in South Asia to augment India’s role as a regional leader. Efforts aimed at boosting India-led infrastructure projects with partner nations, supporting India-led humanitarian assistance and disaster response missions in the region, augmenting India’s expanding healthcare cooperation, and reinforcing India’s start-up initiatives with its neighbors may prove effective.

India and the United States have shared interests in a wide range of issues. The United States could be more deliberate in streamlining this assistance alongside Indian efforts. India will not blindly follow the United States on global issues, especially those related to the Global South. However, India shares U.S. concerns about China’s global ambitions. Balancing U.S. interests with partners like India will take nuance and trust. The United States must find meaningful ways to support India’s initiatives in its own neighborhood. Simultaneous support in key areas of cooperation, with a clear alignment on issues, will go a long way.

*To see endnotes and all contributions in the 2024 Global Forecast, please [click here](#).*