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## CONTINUED PRIMACY, DIMINISHED WILL

### INDIAN ASSESSMENTS OF U.S. POWER

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India's accelerating economic growth and the end of the Cold War have dramatically changed the way it looks at the world and at the United States. Since about 1990, India's perception of its international interests has placed greater weight on the country's economic potential, which in turn has become much more closely intertwined with the global economy and specifically with the United States. India's security perceptions traditionally revolved around its land borders and its concerns with Pakistan and China. India's defenses were largely based on its continental character, centered around a large land army. Both its economic and security concerns are now shaped much more by the maritime environment of the Indian Ocean. The traditional rivalries with Pakistan and China are still critical, but the one with China has the primary strategic importance and extends beyond the military realm into economic performance and global presence. The United States, which had a thin and mercurial relationship with India during the Cold War years, has now eclipsed Russia to become India's most important external partner.

This transformation in India's outlook took place between 1990 and 2000. Ten years later, with the United States engaged in two wars, both of them involving countries important to India, and with the world emerging unevenly from a global financial crisis, India is recognized as a rising power—but is also concerned about the strategic implications of China's more rapid ascendance.

This is the backdrop for our reflections on how Indian policy circles perceive U.S. power in 2010. This essay will look at the view from Delhi on the nature of U.S. power, its evolution in the next decade, and its likely impact on India. To establish the context, we start with a brief discussion of India's strategic outlook and a snapshot of attitudes toward the United States as measured by recent surveys of Indian opinion. The heart of our analysis draws on the views of some two dozen people in Indian elite circles, as expressed in their written analyses, in a free-ranging discussion with the author, and in e-mail correspondence with the author. We finish with some conclusions on how India will figure in the U.S. strategic outlook in the coming decade.

In general, the United States is not seen in India as a declining power. Our interlocutors do, however, express concern that the United States is not mobilizing its sources of power as effectively

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as it might. Indian elites with a range of backgrounds and interests fervently hope that the United States will remain powerful and use its power wisely.

## Indian Strategic Perspective

Indian national security, as seen from Delhi, starts with geography. It is sometimes articulated as three concentric circles, reflecting India's most important interests and challenges. The inner circle includes India itself, the challenges to its internal security and governance from disturbances and insurgencies in the Northeast, in the areas affected by the Naxalite movement, and in Kashmir. India's South Asian neighbors, including its long-standing problems with Pakistan, its strategic stake in Afghanistan, and its complicated security relationships with Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, are also part of this core security zone.

The second circle includes the Indian Ocean, which has become even more important at a time of high economic growth because some 70 percent of the energy critical to India's economic growth comes in by sea. Traditionally, India has sought to dominate this space, as its colonial rulers had earlier done. More recently, it has become less concerned about domination—especially in the open sea—and more interested in its relationship with the other powers with a military presence in the Indian Ocean region. A common concern for maritime security is one of the key building blocks of India's security relationship with the United States. Improved relations with Washington have led Delhi to regard the U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean as benign.

The outer circle of India's security perimeter includes East Asia, extending to China and Japan in the east to and the Persian Gulf in the west. Here, India expects to be a significant player, with

important interests engaged, but has no expectation of a dominant role. Here, too, Indian and U.S. interests have important overlaps—but some significant differences as well.

India's post-Cold War foreign policy treats economic growth as a matter of national security, in sharp contrast to the way economics was viewed in earlier years. Both the end of the Cold War and economic success thereafter have led India to adjust its perceptions of its major international partners. The United States is now in the first rank of its partners. Other important relationships include Japan. Russia is significant but much less able to support the rising international role India seeks to craft. Perhaps the most complicated of India's major international ties is the relationship with China, which is at the same time a major strategic challenge, a benchmark for the kind of international status India seeks, an important trading partner, and, less frequently, a collaborator on international initiatives.

Ever since independence, Indian policymakers have been strongly committed to the idea of “strategic autonomy” as a guiding principle in their foreign policy. The idea means that India will not act in ways that give external powers the substance or the appearance of undue influence in India's policies. This has been a source of regular misunderstanding and occasional friction with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## The Public View

The popular view of the United States, as measured in at least four surveys of Indian public opinion conducted since the mid-2000s, confirms the view that the United States is popular in India and is regarded as a critically important external friend.

The United States is viewed favorably by the Indian public. Although the questions asked in each survey are not identical, thus making comparisons risky, the percentage of respondents reporting a positive view of the United States was consistently over 50 percent and usually in the high 50s or 60s.<sup>2</sup>

One large-sample survey by Devesh Kapur in 2007 reports even warmer feelings toward the United States, even in the two Indian states that have elected pro-Chinese communist governments on numerous occasions over the past few decades.<sup>3</sup> In the other surveys, the attitudes toward China were surprisingly positive, including large numbers who considered China a “partner” to India.

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1. For a more detailed exposition of India's security outlook, see Teresita C. Schaffer, *India and the United States in the 21st Century: Reinventing Partnership* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2009), pp. 4–8; 66–71.

2. “Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 17, 2010, [pewglobal.org](http://pewglobal.org); Devesh Kapur, “India in Transition: India-U.S. Relations—What Does the Indian Public Think?” Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, November 4, 2007, <http://casi.ssc.upenn.edu/iit/deveshkapur>; Angela Stephens, “Public Opinion in India and America,” World Public Opinion, March 1, 2006, [www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brasiapacificra/176.php?nid=&id=&pnt=176&lb=bras](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brasiapacificra/176.php?nid=&id=&pnt=176&lb=bras) (BBC Survey); “Global Unease with Major World Powers—Rising Environmental Concern in 47-Nation Survey,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 27, 2007, <http://pewglobal.org/2007/06/27/global-unease-with-major-world-powers/>; *The United States and the Rise of China and India: Results of a 2006 Multination Survey of Public Opinion* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006), pp. 40–45, [www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS\\_Topline%20Reports/POS%202006/2006%20Full%20POS%20Report.pdf](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/POS%202006/2006%20Full%20POS%20Report.pdf).

3. Kapur, “India in Transition: India-U.S. Relations—What Does the Indian Public Think?”

Beyond that, the surveys do not provide very detailed information about popular perceptions. The survey conducted for the 2006 report of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs looked at manifestations of U.S. power. Its respondents assessed U.S. influence in the world at 7.3 on a ten-point scale, higher than any other country they were asked about. They expected this level of influence to stay essentially stable over the next ten years. Similarly, the respondents in this survey saw the United States as the world's top innovator (6.9 on a ten-point scale), and expected this level to go up slightly in ten years. In both categories, China came in about the middle of the countries the respondents were queried about, well below both the United States and India. Respondents were also asked whether they expected the United States still to be the world's most powerful country 50 years hence. The views here were more skeptical. Only 28 percent agreed with that view; 30 percent expected another country to equal U.S. power, and 23 percent expected another country to exceed it.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to distinguish between elite and general public opinion in these reports. Kapur, whose work surveyed more than 200,000 people, notes that among those with low education, the percentage who responded “don't know” or “no opinion” was often over half. He noted that elites had warmer feelings for the United States and, to a lesser extent, for China than the general public, but he also noted that disagreements within the elite category were more numerous and sharper than in the general public. Put another way, elite opinion is where one will find the strongest support for the new foreign policy that India has developed since the end of the Cold War, but also the much more jaundiced view of the United States that held sway in earlier years. The Chicago Council survey also found that respondents with a low education responded “don't know” more frequently than the rest of the respondents. Their report consequently omitted the responses from people with the lowest educational levels (fewer than six years of school) when computing the percentages. In practice, however, this made little difference to the totals.

One interesting observation is the streak of realism that ran through the responses, especially in the Chicago and Kapur surveys. In both cases, the respondents argued that India needed to drive a hard bargain, implying that more powerful countries would otherwise take advantage of it.

## Perceptions in Indian Policy Circles

A more complex view of shifting patterns of U.S. and global power and what they mean for India emerges from a series of interviews of people drawn from different parts of the policy elite, amplified by published analyses prepared by people with similar levels of expertise.<sup>5</sup>

### Elements of Power

Some of our respondents saw power as “holistic” or indivisible, but those who were willing to distinguish different sources of power focused primarily on five:

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4. *The United States and the Rise of China and India*, pp. 40–45.

5. The views summarized here, unless otherwise sourced, come from a seminar conducted in New Delhi on July 23, 2010, by the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies with the participation of a dozen former senior officials and academic experts, and from the author's correspondence in August 2010 with some respondents unable to attend the seminar.

- First, the inherent productive capacity of the United States. Several participants saw innovation as the key driver here, including the capacity to turn innovation into wealth and military power. Most participants argued that this was the most important factor, the one most beneficial to India, and the one least likely to erode. One held that this was a factor that was uniquely important for the United States—though the discussion of India’s sources of power later in the seminar highlighted some of the same factors, suggesting that domestic capacity is a critical limiting factor in assessing the power of other countries as well. A couple of participants contrasted the way the “inherent productive capacity” issue works for the United States and for China and India: for the United States, productive capacity was measured in innovation and economic output, whereas for India and China the sheer size of their populations, assuming a reasonable level of economic performance, is an element of power that can compensate for a lower level of modernization and technological sophistication. The stress on innovation was a major theme of one published analysis by Admiral Raja Menon (retired) and Dr. Rajiv Kumar, which looks specifically at the question of how shifting global power patterns are likely to affect India.<sup>6</sup>
- Second, national will and confidence, the “can-do attitude” and even “swagger” that have often been looked on as American characteristics.
- Third, soft power—ideational and cultural attraction. The people we interviewed were divided on the importance of this factor, some regarding it as very important, others as ephemeral. One participant noted that U.S. soft power was largely “people driven,” in contrast with China’s, which was primarily state driven. Some of those who considered it important saw soft power as connected with innovation. One person singled out “the idea of freedom.” There was relatively little discussion of democracy in this context, but the significance of shared democratic values that reinforced the U.S.-India relationship cropped up at multiple points in the discussion.
- Fourth, dominance of the international institutions that set the terms for participation in global life and that serve as tools for global governance. This dominance is in part a legacy of global power from years past and is subject to redefinition when new powers become more important participants. The extent to which powerful countries use these institutions, and less powerful or rising countries see the multilateral arena as favorable, varies depending on the issue and on a country’s ability to develop a working alliance with others. Several of those interviewed noted that the United States is selective in how and when it uses international institutions. This was regarded as a predictable habit of powerful countries. It was interesting that no one listed coalition-building capacity as an important element in U.S. power although, as noted below, the discussion of East Asian security clearly assumed that the United States would continue to need to mobilize the support of a diverse group of countries in that region.
- Finally, military power. Surprisingly few of those interviewed noted this as a critical element in how India relates to U.S. power. Indeed, one participant argued that U.S. policy was becoming excessively militarized. There were two important exceptions. One retired senior official argued that U.S. naval strength was the most important element in U.S. military power and in the U.S.-India relationship. China was “overawed” by it. Naval power presented a tremendous opportunity for a U.S.-India security partnership. And the previously cited analysis by Menon and Kumar, while it does not address directly the size of the U.S. military machine or the impact of

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6. Rajiv Kumar and Admiral Raja Menon, *The Long View from Delhi: To Define the Indian Grand Strategy for Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: ICRIER and the Academic Foundation, 2010).

the recession on U.S. defense spending, argues that the single most important factor in determining the future U.S. global role is the outcome of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## How Does the United States Measure Up?

At a time when major countries like China, but also Brazil and India, are becoming more powerful, some of our respondents noted that a relative decline in U.S. power is inevitable—if only to accommodate the rising powers within a fixed total of 100 percent. With this caveat, most participants saw little evidence of significant decline in U.S. power. They argued that the United States had such strong inherent domestic capacity that it was likely to remain the dominant global power at least for the next decade. One economist downplayed the significance of the financial crisis in determining the future of U.S. power, arguing that “the United States can still get what it wants,” such as, for example, the revaluation of the Chinese yuan.

Several participants, however, argued that the United States no longer seemed to have the drive to dominate internationally—or, as one participant put it, “there are increasing doubts about whether the United States has the stomach to police the world any more.” Another participant felt that, as a result, the United States would be “neutralized” in Asia within five to ten years, with China emerging as the dominant power. One of the scenarios explored by the Menon and Kumar study has the United States “withdrawing” from Pakistan and reducing its engagement with East Asia. Several participants in our interviews felt that U.S. soft power had declined at least in relative terms.

Two recent surveys echoed this more pessimistic tone. A 2009 CSIS study based on interviews with a small number of elite respondents found that most Indian respondents expected China to eclipse the United States as the most important country for India within a decade.<sup>7</sup> The 2006 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey referred to above similarly reported that Indians expected to see a shift in power toward China, albeit a more gradual one. The 2008 survey took place at a time when India-China relations were in relatively good shape. Sino-Indian friction in 2009–2010 may have had an impact on the views expressed in our interviews.

Longer-term projections of the relative power of the United States and China are more guarded. Some, including at least one of those interviewed for this project, argued that the key question was whether the United States would succeed in “reinventing itself” and renewing its educational and start-up funding capacity. This view also figured prominently in Menon and Kumar’s analysis.

## What Are the Key Competitive Arenas?

Overwhelmingly, Asia was looked on as the key arena where the redistribution of global power would be manifested. China was regarded as the principal competitor to U.S. power and the principal strategic challenge. The U.S.-China-India triangle was seen as the key relationship, a view that also comes out in published analyses. The most often noted features of Chinese power were its military buildup and its diplomatic presence, but some argued that China was also building up its soft power, especially in Asia. There was strong support for the United States maintaining its influence in Asia. Some expressed the hope that India could address the coming changes in Asia “in a spirit of partnership with the United States, without antagonizing China.”

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7. Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji, and William Watts, *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis* (Washington: D.C.: CSIS, 2009).

The doubts expressed about U.S. “national will” were important in the China context. One participant whose views seemed to be fairly widely shared commented that “the most troublesome U.S. relationship with China is one where the United States is weak and China is in the ascendant; the most beneficial would be the U.S. taking the lead” to develop regional cooperation. There was a widespread expectation that China would become more assertive. One participant saw this as the natural consequence of a likely fall in China’s growth rate, “akin to a country approaching middle age,” and expected China to accelerate its push for greater economic and military presence away from its immediate borders, with adverse consequences for both the United States and India.

Our respondents’ view of the global distribution of power was centered on the problem of China. One participant even argued that the current U.S. preoccupation with Afghanistan and Pakistan was a distracting “sideshow” and that the sooner the United States pulled out, the better.

More frequently, respondents saw Afghanistan as the critical current test of U.S. power and of the U.S. ability to transform regions for stability and peace. As already noted, the Menon and Kumar study shared this view. One participant saw Afghanistan as a place where U.S. national will was being tested: “self-imposed limits on projection of U.S. power . . . [are] probably going to make it so hard to win in Afghanistan.” Some see U.S. sensitivity to India’s strategic concerns in Afghanistan as a key indicator of the value of U.S.-India ties, a view also often expressed in the establishment press. Some argued that the United States and India should be working together to advance the values of liberalism and pluralism in this large and strategically important area. One person said that the United States must “rid itself of the Pakistan habit to truly benefit from its partnership with India.”

The discussion of Islamic radicalism brought up two perspectives that get relatively little emphasis in Washington. First, most of the world’s Muslims are South Asian or Southeast Asian, not Arab, so the “Muslim world” should not be looked on as an Arab phenomenon. Second, the issue is not so much “Islamic radicalism” as radicalism itself.

One participant noted the importance of Indian Ocean security as an area for India-U.S. cooperation, and cited the Horn of Africa as an area of great potential danger, which was likely to be aggravated by population growth and climate change.

Also of interest was that Europe did not figure in the interviews as a strategic factor. Europe, however, does appear in foreign policy commentary—including from at least one member of the group interviewed for this project—as a power center whose relationship to India would enhance India’s ability to hedge against excessive dependence on the United States or vulnerability to Chinese pressure.

## International Institutions

All the participants appeared to see global institutions, as they currently function, as an extension of U.S. power. They expected China to become more of a shaper of these institutions over time. Its vote would increase in the institutions that use weighted voting, such as the international financial institutions.<sup>8</sup> Several participants expected China to expand its influence in international institutions by diversifying its financial holdings, now disproportionately in the United States, so that other countries would be inhibited from challenging China on the multilateral scene.

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8. India’s voting share is also increasing, albeit more slowly than China’s.

One participant wondered if we were close to the point where China would take on a kind of “Middle Kingdom mentality” about when to follow the rules of international institutions and when not to. Several were concerned that China’s proposal of a nuclear deal with Pakistan, with no attempt to obtain the consent of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) as was done with the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement, was an early indication of precisely this trend. Participants were alarmed at the mild U.S. response.

Against this background, Indian elites see India’s election to a two-year term on the United Nations Security Council as an opportunity for India to start reshaping its international profile as a major power. President Barack Obama’s announcement in New Delhi in November 2010 that the United States would support a permanent Security Council seat for India was taken as a critically important marker of the U.S.-India partnership. The strong U.S. response to tensions in Korea and the well-publicized disagreements between the United States and China on the South China Sea were both received in India as indications that the United States was willing to be firm when China challenged its interests. In other words, Indian perceptions of U.S. willingness to defend its power in Asia are regularly shaped and reshaped by the way the United States handles its relations with China.

While interviews for this project devoted relatively little attention to the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement, other conversations with the same participants and with others from India’s policy elite circles regard that agreement as a critical step toward India’s move away from what they often refer to as “nuclear apartheid.” U.S. willingness to push that agreement through the NSG was seen not only as an important exercise of U.S. power, but as an indication that the United States was willing to use that power for India’s benefit. President Obama’s endorsement of Indian membership in the export control groups that form part of the nonproliferation system was seen as another indication (and also represented a change in India’s traditional posture toward the formal nonproliferation system). India’s foreign-policy watchers are keeping careful score on whether the Obama administration continues to be willing to do this.

One participant argued that India would remain multilateralist in its orientation. The more common view was that India would have limited influence in global institutions. Several argued in effect that India needed the United States to stand up for the rules of the international institutions. These views contrast with the perception in the United States that India and the United States have a hard time working together multilaterally. As seen from the United States, India seems to use a number of global venues to strengthen its nonaligned credentials, which leads it to take positions that fit in badly with the kind of understandings the United States is trying to reach.

Our interviews did not focus on Asian regional institutions as such, but the 2008 CSIS study found strong support for “an East Asian community” among its Indian respondents. Although the composition of this community was not specified, it is not unreasonable to see this as an expression of interest in greater integration of India into East Asia-centered organizations.

## India’s Sources of Power

The group generally agreed on the importance of economic capacity in shaping India’s power and was quite optimistic about India’s growth potential in the coming decade. Opinions were divided as to the importance of soft power and India’s ability to use it as a source of global influence. Similarly, the respondents argued that India’s ability to innovate would be a key source of economic strength, hence of power, in the future.

Most participants saw India's sheer size as a key element in India's power, coupled with its "demographic advantage"—not just the size of India's population but the benefit deriving from the anticipated high percentage of India's people who would be in their economically most productive years during the next couple of decades. Several mentioned the Indian diaspora as an element. This also linked India to the United States. Not only is there a large and dynamic Indian community in the United States, but historically immigration has added greatly to the energy and productivity of the U.S. economy. Participants saw this as a sharp contrast with China and Japan, and something of a contrast with Europe, where immigrant groups have had more trouble being integrated into society.

On the negative side of the ledger, many participants cited the need for the Indian state to demonstrate its capacity, and implicitly or explicitly noted the importance of extending growth to the lower end of the income spectrum. One mentioned job creation as a critical variable. At least two mentioned international factors that serve as a drag on India's power: first of all, the need, as one participant put it, to get "the monkey of the Pakistan problem" off India's back; and, second, the need for India to take up responsibilities for global management as it took on a more visible role in global institutions.

## What Do Trends in U.S. Power Mean for India?

On this point, views were consistent: erosion of U.S. power is bad for India. Most participants expressed a preference for a multipolar, or at least a "non-unipolar," global power structure. The United States was seen as the only power capable of counterbalancing China. A significant increase in Chinese influence in international institutions, or greater Chinese willingness to disregard the norms established by these institutions (for example, the China-Pakistan nuclear deal mentioned above), would be a problem for India that could be addressed only with U.S. help.

One especially interesting illustration of this strong support for continuing U.S. power and influence came in the 2006 Chicago Council survey. Asked whether the United States should "continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems," 34 percent said "yes." Another 42 percent agreed with the proposition that the United States should "do its share," in partnership with others, to solve world problems. And a surprising 53 percent agreed with the notion that the United States had a "responsibility to be a world policeman." A separate question in the same survey, however, also had 53 percent of respondents agree with the statement that the United States played the role of world policeman more than it should.<sup>9</sup>

The ambivalence suggested by these survey results was understated in our interviews, but it is evident in India's foreign policy toward the United States, international organizations, and Asia. On the one hand, U.S. innovation, drive, success, and idealism are widely admired in India. There is much evidence that India's policy and economic elite believe the United States is pursuing an Asian vision that accords better with India's than the alternatives, especially at a time when a somewhat mercurial China is on the rise. On the other hand, there is a persistent skepticism—born partly of the long and often troubled U.S.-Pakistan relationship and partly of a conviction that India ultimately has to look after itself—that the United States is prepared to honor India's security concerns. This gives India's decades-long attachment to "strategic autonomy" great staying

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9. *Global Views 2006: Comparative Topline Reports* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 11, 2006), pp. 58–59.

power, and it also gives rise to the view we found in several larger population surveys that India needs to drive as hard a bargain as possible.

## The View from Washington

Four themes emerge from these pages. First, domestic factors—innovation, creativity, expanded productive capacity, and human and demographic resources—are widely seen as the basic raw material from which both India and the United States derive their power. There are strong strategic reasons for the United States to focus on rebuilding its economy and strengthening its resources of people and creativity, and for India to do the same. Neither can afford to think in terms of a trade-off between domestic and international power.

Second, maritime security and naval cooperation are likely to remain two of the most positive areas in U.S.-India military cooperation and areas that reinforce constructive perceptions of U.S. power.

Third, China will be India's principal metric for assessing trends in U.S. power. The United States will need to develop policies toward East and Southeast Asia that convey its views firmly but without confrontation. These policies need to be well understood in both Beijing and Delhi, and pursued steadily. The Obama administration's decision to articulate its policy toward India in a larger Asian context, as it has done quite consistently since November 2009, is a welcome step in the right direction. President Obama's trip to India in November 2010 was a particularly important event from that perspective. In contrast, recent developments like the proposed increase in H-1 visa fees that appeared to be targeted at Indian companies are viewed as ominous signs.

Fourth, Afghanistan and Pakistan will continue to be a problem for India, and, unlike years past, U.S. actions there are also interpreted as indicators of overall trends in U.S. power. U.S. ties with Pakistan have of course been a perennial problem for the Indian government and more generally for Indian observers. In today's circumstances, the Pakistan issue brings together three problems. The first is the traditional concern that U.S. support for Pakistan, and military sales in particular, enhances Pakistan's ability and willingness to confront India both militarily and by cross-border subversion. The second, paradoxically, is India's interest in the stability and governability of both Pakistan and Afghanistan—an issue on which India and the United States are in fundamental agreement and that Indians believe would be threatened by a hasty U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Finally, because China's support for Pakistan is a major security concern for India, the future of U.S. relations with China also affects India's troubled relationship with Pakistan and the impact of that relationship on its ties with the United States.