

## U.S.-INDIA INSIGHT

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“Unlocking the full potential  
of the U.S.-India relationship”

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## The United States, India, and the United Nations: Divergence and Convergence

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The promising U.S.-India partnership that New Delhi and Washington have fostered over more than a decade has sometimes seemed less apparent in the two nations' relationship at the United Nations. Rather, multilateral diplomacy has often highlighted the diverging, not the converging, worldviews of India and the United States. President Barack Obama's dramatic announcement in New Delhi in November 2010 that the United States supports India as an eventual permanent member of the Security Council was a crucial step, but it did not of itself narrow the gap between the two at Turtle Bay in New York. However, there are recent encouraging signs of more convergence; these need to be built upon carefully by both sides to forge a more enduring partnership.

## Track Record

The United States keeps statistics on coincidence of voting in the General Assembly, and India—like many other countries in the G-77 group—gets low marks on issues of high importance to the United States, especially Israel and Palestine-related votes and the annual vote condemning the U.S. embargo on Cuba. In 2010 and 2011, India voted similarly to the United States on about 25 and 33 percent of all recorded votes in the General Assembly, respectively. When the more common consensus votes are included, the United States and India are together 85 percent of the time.

The record is also mixed outside New York. The recent high-profile vote on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva found India voting with the United States and Europe and uncharacteristically isolated from all its Asian neighbors. Indian domestic politics (pressure from the Singh government's coalition partner in Tamil Nadu) played a role here, but the vote also demonstrated that India is willing to take the heat of voting independently from its G-77 partners. Similarly in crucial Iran votes in the International Atomic Energy Agency, India has voted against its neighbor and oil supplier to demonstrate its commitment to keeping Iran from a nuclear weapons program (while at the same time arguing that it will honor Security Council sanctions but not necessarily those imposed by the United States and Europe).

During India's current tenure as a rotating, nonpermanent member of the Security Council (since January 2011), the two countries' differing perspectives have sometimes been in sharp focus. From a U.S. perspective, India identified itself more with two other contenders for permanent membership—Brazil and South Africa—and, even more troublesome for the United States, seemed to vote with

## Time Is on India's Side

As U.S. ambassador to the United Nations for special political affairs from 1993 to 1997, I had the experience of sitting through countless meetings of what was known as the Open-Ended Working Group on Security Council Reform. Some opined that it would have been better named the Never-Ending Working Group.

The principal preoccupation of this committee was the important but politically vexing question of how to expand the 15-member UN Security Council to reflect today's global realities rather than those of 1945, when the United Nations was created. Currently, the five permanent seats on the Security Council are held by the five major victors of World War II—the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China (each of which has veto rights)—while the rest of the world rotates through the 10 nonpermanent seats.

During the tenure of Secretary General Kofi Annan, a small window of opportunity opened for change. He wanted the council restructured so that it would be more representative of the overall UN membership, then numbering 191 countries. (There were only 51 in 1945.) He warned that, increasingly, the council lacked “legitimacy in the eyes of the developing world.” Others at the time agreed. *The Economist* put it bluntly, saying in an editorial that the council is “dominated by rich white nations.”

But Annan's efforts to expand the council failed to gain sufficient traction, in part because of tepid support from the United States and others who don't want the council to grow so large that it becomes ineffective, serving no one's interests. Critics say the five  
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Russia and China over the U.S./Britain/France bloc on contentious issues. India, like Russia and China, agreed to abstain, rather than oppose, the March 2010 resolution authorizing a no-fly zone over Libya and, like them, believed that NATO exceeded the council's mandate in the following months. On Syria, though, the record has been mixed. When members of the council in January 2012 sought to condemn the Syrian regime's attack on its domestic opposition, India pursued the middle ground of abstention and watched Russia and China veto the effort. India then worked to find a compromise, supporting a resolution in early February that, while ruling out foreign military intervention, aligned itself with the West and the Arab League; even that fell to Chinese and Russian vetoes.

## Differing Perspectives

Why have the United States and India often taken different views on UN issues?

- While the United States and India have forged a genuine partnership of mutual respect and sovereign equality in their bilateral relationship, the United Nations is not an assembly of equals. India chafes deeply at the postwar structure that persists in New York. The permanent five members of the Security Council, including its Asian neighbor China, exercise significant power in choosing the secretary general, in making decisions binding on all members, and in prioritizing peacekeeping missions around the world. India sees itself as rightfully at that “high table,” but it does not see a clear way forward to achieve that goal.
- India has been consistent in its opposition to what it sees as interference in other country's domestic affairs, a fundamental principle that has defined India's international engagements since its independence. This has meant opposition to annual human rights resolutions in the General Assembly, as well as resistance to UN involvement in the crises in Libya and now Syria.
- India's desire for a permanent seat on the Security Council has not changed its belief that the council has exceeded its mandate and intruded on the turf of the General Assembly in recent years. India's UN ambassador, Hardeep Singh Puri, has been eloquent in arguing for a revitalized General Assembly in which all respect “in letter and spirit” its role as the chief deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the United Nations. The United States, by contrast, has been at the forefront of those urging the Security Council to act on emerging global security issues.

## Nurturing a New Partnership

The United States and India need to find a way to work together at the United Nations, befitting the “strategic partnership” the two countries are forging. This should be achievable, but it will require some creative thinking by both sides and an increased willingness to take each other's views into account.

The United States needs to acknowledge the importance to India of its “strategic autonomy.” The United States and India will always have different interests reflecting their geographic, economic, and strategic realities. This will translate into different voting patterns. India wants to hear why it is in its own interest to vote with the Western “bloc.” As former Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru famously said about the United Nations: “Our instructions to our delegates have always been to consider each question first in terms of India's interest, and secondly on its merits.” India is not alone in this regard.

The United States and India need to communicate early and often in New York. “No surprises” should be the rule. The practice of the Security Council's five permanent members to consult among themselves too often means decisions are made before an issue is

permanent members simply have no interest in diluting their “great power privileges.”

Today, the reform effort that began almost two decades ago is still underway. A resolution on Security Council expansion is making its way forward in the General Assembly, led by four leading aspirants for a permanent seat on the council—Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan (known as the “G-4”). India's UN ambassador, Hardeep Singh Puri, says the resolution has received “solid support” from countries across regions.

Still, the odds are against Security Council reform rising to the top of the UN agenda any time soon. This is no reflection on India. Rather, it is a pragmatic realization that Security Council expansion is a Pandora's box that many countries would prefer to keep closed for now. Among the many unresolved issues: China's opposition to Japan's entry as a permanent member; Africa's demand for two permanent seats; dramatic overrepresentation of Europe if Germany were to achieve its goal of permanent membership; and the role of the veto. The last has been described as “the thorniest issue in a thicket or thorns.”

But delay for India certainly does not mean never. As the recently released [NON-ALIGNMENT 2.0](#) study by the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi rightly points out: “India should recognize that time is on its side in this matter. As the structure of global power shifts, India's case inevitably becomes stronger. But India will also, in the interim, have to demonstrate a leadership capacity to propose solutions to and artfully handle some of the difficult challenges facing the world.”

—Karl. F. Inderfurth

discussed with other members of the council. If the United States wants the support of India—or of other nonpermanent members—it needs to bring them in at or near the beginning.

Similarly, multilateral topics should be on the table when our leaders meet in New Delhi and Washington. The decision last year to launch a bilateral dialogue on UN matters was a start. This June’s third meeting of the U.S.-India “Strategic Dialogue,” led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna, offers an early opportunity to take this one big step further. The UN ambassadors from both countries should be included for this portion of the dialogue.

## Wise Counsel

Last month former secretary of state Henry Kissinger was in New Delhi for the *India Today* conclave. He was asked about India pursuing a policy of “strategic autonomy.” Consistent with his being a leading proponent of the realist school of international relations, Kissinger responded: “I think India should pursue its own perception of its national interest. And I hope that on key issues we [India and the United States] can find a parallel policy.” Asked to explain his concept of parallel policies and whether they could converge, Kissinger said they were already doing so in many areas, adding: “I would like to think that each side following its own convictions leads to results that are compatible and cooperative.”

This is wise counsel that, over time, should also apply to the United States and India at the United Nations.

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