

U.S.-INDIA INSIGHT

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

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The Indian-American Diaspora:
Ties that Bind

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Each political season much is said and written about the Indian-American diaspora community and its involvement in U.S. politics, both local and national. It is more common than ever to hear politicians showering accolades on the 3-million strong community in the United States, their educational and professional successes, and the general sense that this is a diaspora with a steep upward trajectory in the political and policy world.

U.S. government officials regularly refer to the diaspora as an important partner in driving U.S.-India relations, which the Obama administration has described as a “defining partnership of the 21st century.” The Indian-American community is increasingly vocal on local issues and in U.S.-India relations writ large, and according to one recent article in *The Times of India*, “...what they lack in numbers they contribute in some measure in money and activism. No other ethnic group outside white, African-Americans, and Latinos...have as many political heavyweights.”

While the 2012 presidential election is expected to draw less than 1 million voters from the community—a tiny fraction of the entire electorate—Indian-Americans are becoming very visible in the political scene. From having one elected representative in Congress—Dalip Singh Saund (D-CA) in 1957—to holding elected positions at all levels throughout the country today—most prominently Governors Bobby Jindal (R-LA) and Nikki Haley (R-SC)—as well as high-level appointments in the current administration, the diaspora has clearly grown in clout in U.S. politics and will continue to do so.

In domestic U.S. politics the community is doing well, but in foreign affairs, two questions deserve attention: What are the community’s priority concerns in U.S.-India bilateral relations; and how can the two governments facilitate the diaspora’s ability to further unlock the full potential of the overall U.S.-India relationship?

Bilateral Concerns

Traditionally, the community has come together to push for a policy viewed as extremely important to the U.S.-India relationship. Since the 1980s, the community successfully organized over issues like protesting the sale of F-16s to Pakistan, fighting a possible decrease in foreign aid, and lifting the 1998 sanctions on India (in reaction to India’s nuclear tests). Most recently the community coalesced behind the 2005 U.S.-India civilian nuclear agreement, allowing India to engage in full civil nuclear cooperation with the United States

BFF?

For years—indeed decades—the most apt description of the U.S.-India relationship was “estranged democracies.” Today, in the abbreviated world of text messaging and twitter, estrangement is being challenged by the concept of BFF (for the uninitiated, “Best Friends Forever”).

Of course, BFF may be getting a bit ahead of the relationship, but the release this month of a Pew Research Center survey of Indian attitudes toward the United States provides ample polling data to suggest that things are moving in that direction.

According to the Pew summary report, a solid majority of Indians living in cities have a favorable view of the United States (58 percent), seeing America in a more favorable light than any of the other major world powers. India’s former Cold War supporter Russia received a 48 percent favorable rating; the European Union, 38 percent; and China, 33 percent.

Indians have confidence in President Barack Obama (60 percent). A majority of city-dwelling Indians approve of his handling of global economic problems and say relations with the United States have improved in recent years. All this prompted *The Times of India* to write: “The numbers are so good for the US president that he might want to move to India.” In political fairness, the same could have been said about Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, as both had high approval ratings in India.

The Pew survey made it clear that Indians like Americans. Most admired is U.S. scientific and technological advances (69 percent) and American ways of doing business (56 percent of urban Indians). As the Pew report notes, however, support for all things America is lower in rural India, in part because of the large portion

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and subsequently other countries. The agreement took three years and the expenditure of significant political capital within both countries in order to pass.

One important issue does remain high on the list of bilateral concerns. Many diaspora members lament the fact that the United States and India do not have a more innovative approach to the freer movement of people between the two countries. The community's longstanding dissatisfaction with the current U.S. visa regime, not just in the realm of H1B or L1, but also with regard to skilled professionals, entrepreneur visas, and tourist visas, is widespread and well known.

Today, however, the foreign affairs focus of the diaspora seems to be moving from single-issue bilateral concerns to broader categories of interests, such as trade and commerce, people-to-people exchanges, and philanthropy. Several observers attribute this shift to a growing maturation of the diaspora, one that closely tracks the maturation of the overall U.S.-India relationship.

Growing the Relationship

According to Mitul Desai, senior adviser to Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake, "As the U.S.-India relationship has grown to cover a broad range of areas, so too has the diaspora's engagement with India grown to be multifaceted in nature. Indian-Americans are contributing to U.S.-India projects across everything from medical research and clean energy to higher education and space cooperation. And the community is thinking strategically about how to increase U.S.-India trade between states and cities and in the SME space."

Examples of the diaspora's multifaceted engagement abound and demonstrate the contributions that can be made to unlock the full potential of U.S.-India relations.

First, expanding trade relations at the small and medium-size enterprise (SME) level is a common concern. Diaspora SME owners already have a familiarity with different states and cities in India, but many could benefit from assistance in helping to navigate the complexities involved in creating the necessary economic linkages between the two countries. The Virginia-India Business Roundtable is one such initiative, but replicating this to reach into smaller cities throughout the United States would enable more joint initiatives between small Indian and American companies. As more state-to-state linkages are created, and more investment is attracted from both countries, this is a key area of potential.

Of equal importance is the diaspora's desire to engage with and act as a bridge to India's health care sector. Indian-Americans are prepared to devote time, talent, and money in order to build capacity and expand the delivery of health services in India—something the government of India is attempting to do as well. Repeated attempts have been made to build those bridges but have been met with resistance from local bureaucracies throughout India. Interestingly, there is much to learn and gain for the United States, as well, as it seeks ways to cut costs in its health care sector while maintaining quality. Engaging and cooperating with the Indian government as well as India's health care sector could facilitate mutually beneficial outcomes for both nations.

Finally, educational and service exchanges are a vital way to unlock more potential from the next generation. Young Indian-Americans participate in initiatives like the William J. Clinton Fellowship (American India Foundation) and Indicorps, among others, in order to work and serve throughout India on projects of interest. Increasingly, universities across the United States are looking to create study-abroad programs, engage in joint-degree programs, and open campuses in India. Connecting young citizens in both countries serves to cultivate deep partnerships and networks that will sustain the bilateral partnership in the long term, and if one observes the data, there is a lot of traffic coming to the United States from India, but only a trickle going the other way. Besides study-abroad programs, initiatives like Passport to India and Connect to India should be more prominently promoted in order to facilitate a higher level of participation among American students.

of the population that voices no opinion (which is a good argument for more people-to-people exchanges).

Finally, the Indians surveyed threw a few caution flags regarding U.S.-India ties: a little over half of city dwellers think it is bad that American customs are spreading in India, and 55 percent say they dislike American music, movies, and TV.

U.S.-India observers have long been aware of the importance of respecting India's "strategic autonomy"; it would clearly behoove Americans to pay close attention to India's "cultural autonomy" as well.

—Karl Inderfurth

BTW: For the full Pew report, visit <http://pewglobal.org/>.

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Fulfilling the Vision

The Indian-American diaspora is itself internally diverse, composed of economic and social linkages to varying parts of India, and consequently the policy goals and objectives pursued may differ among different segments of the diaspora. Nevertheless, the community is bound by the common vision to see stronger overall U.S.-India ties. This commonality should provide the framework for any particular policy advocacy, whether economic or strategic in nature.

In March 2000, President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee issued a statement entitled “India-US Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century.” In it, they acknowledged the critical role the diaspora would play in fulfilling this vision: “Our partnership...is reinforced by the ties of scholarship, commerce, and increasingly of kinship among our people. The industry, enterprise, and cultural contributions of Americans of Indian heritage have enriched and enlivened both our societies.”

What was true then is even truer today. The Indian-American community serves as a bridge between the two countries, promoting mutually beneficial links in education, commerce, culture, and people-to-people exchanges. These are, indeed, the ties that will bind the two countries ever closer together.

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