



India-US Relations: A Chance for a New Beginning

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Ms. Nancy Powell resigned from her position as the US ambassador to India on March 31, 2014. The resignation has brought renewed focus on the relationship between India and the US. In 2010, President Obama declared that India-US relationship would be "one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century." However, the momentum gathered during the India-US nuclear deal and carried forward during the first term of President Barak Obama has slowed down considerably. There are a number of reasons for the current chill being experienced in the relations between the two democracies. They find themselves at opposite ends of international relations on a number of issues such as India's nuanced support to Russia during the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, India abstaining from voting to demand an independent investigation of the Sri Lankan government's actions against the Liberation of Tamil Tiger's Eelam (LTTE) and differences on the application of sanctions on Iran. The two countries also have differing views on Afghanistan; cooperation between the two has also slowed as a result of US desire to involve Pakistan in Afghan affairs.

The need to rebuild the relationship

The recent resignation of the US ambassador is being viewed as a possible end of a series of disagreements between the two countries the most recent of which was the 'Deviyani Khobragade incident'.

US ambassadors are elected by the President and serves as per 'pleasure of the president', thus their tenure is not fixed. The most common practise has been for ambassadors to resign during the end of the President's term. Nonetheless, US ambassadors have been appointed in the middle of a president's term as well. It is possible that the US would like to appoint a new ambassador to India to take the relations forward with the new government in India after the elections. The US is waiting for the new government to assume office to discuss the next steps that could deepen the 'strategic partnership'. In such an environment the resignation by the US ambassador can be viewed as a possible fresh start for the relationship.

It would be the priority of the new ambassador to champion the cause of India-US relationship within the administration in Washington. Economic relations have to be revived. India has expressed its displeasure at being given a downgraded status by US trade representatives after complains by US companies that India does not protect patents. The US believes enough is not being done by India to protect the patent rights of foreign technology firms investing in India, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry. The US also claims that India's preference for its domestic defence producers is unfair, and that other trade barriers such as restrictive import licensing and customs regulations are excessive. It has stirred Cold War era images and resentment over US bullying and lack of respect.

There is a sense that India's importance within US policy making has decreased in recent years. The Obama Administration has been distracted by economic crises at home and more occupied with the developing situation in the Middle East. Its focus in Asia has also changed. It is now more wary of alienating China and the US is in talks with China for a 'G-2' partnership. It is focussing on its relations with allies in the Asia Pacific like Japan and South Korea, in a bid to reassure them of the presence of the 'US Security Umbrella'. In such an atmosphere India feels that it is being neglected. The new ambassador has to refocus on India-US relations where New Delhi is a partner and not revert back to the relationship of suspicion and mistrust.

It is understandable that India and the US would have different priorities and focus on different issues. Nonetheless, that does not mean that differences should not be removed. There are a number of areas where cooperation between the two would be mutually beneficial, security

relations being one, along with partnership for joint military exercises. Nuclear disarmament is another area where the two countries have similar views. India has been an advocate of nuclear disarmament and its efforts have been lauded by the US.

For the relationship to grow, the US has to address a few issues. First, the US has to mitigate the negative public opinion in India that has been formed as a result of the treatment of the Indian diplomat in US custody. Second, the US needs to commit itself to the establishment of a free trade agreement with India. India presents an enormous business opportunity for the US. Third, the US has to work towards reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The US endorsement of India for a permanent seat in a reformed UNSC has to be made a reality. Fourth, the US has to allay concerns India has with respect to the new US immigration laws being debated in Congress. And lastly the US needs to understand and appreciate that India's responses are based on its own national interest.

According to a recent PEW survey, majority of Indians trust and like the US. Similarly for the US public, India is a more important ally than China. This is not surprising because of the similarities the two countries share and the linkages they have been able to build over the years.

Despite the challenges facing the bilateral relationship, there are a few simple, but undeniable truths regarding the strategic partnership. First, India-US relations cover a multitude of issues and sectors. They are multidimensional in character and multifaceted in scope. Second, the underlying strategic logic of the relationship remains sound even in light of all the difficulties currently plaguing India-US ties. The two countries have to look at the future and look at the potential that it has.

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