

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON INDO-US RELATIONS

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In this paper, I contend that there were two periods in the Indo-U.S. history that came closest to a partnership based on strategic vision and mutual understanding. These were the period post India's 1998 tests and leading up to President Clinton's India visit in 2000, and the period around the Indo-U.S. 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement. I argue that strong personal relationships between political leaderships, built on mutual respect and understanding, are especially important for the success of an Indo-U.S. partnership given the manner in which Indian foreign policy decision-making takes place. In the absence of such strong relationships, the Indo-U.S. relationship is vulnerable to destabilization.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between India and the United States has been through many phases since India gained independence in 1947. It has been unreliable and limited, despite the opportunity for engagement between the two countries, and the natural predisposition for two liberal, pluralistic democracies to ally, Indo-US relations. For years, Washington's foreign policy dealings with New Delhi were grouped with Islamabad, and classified as Indo-Pak, much to India's displeasure. For the better part of the 20th century, US engagement with India was focused on India-Pakistan disputes. The turn of the 21st century has seen a dramatic change in Indo-US ties by way of increased security and trade engagement. However, as Ashley Tellis points out, a "pernicious transactionalism" and not a strategic vision dictates the present connections.¹ In this paper, I contend that there were two periods in the history of Indo-US relations that came closest to a partnership based on strategic vision and mutual understanding. The first period was the one that followed India's 1998 nuclear tests, leading up to President Clinton's India visit in 2000, and the second, during the Indo-US 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement. I argue that strong personal relationships between political leaderships, built on mutual respect and understanding, are especially important for the success of an Indo-US partnership given the manner in which Indian foreign policy decision-making takes place. In the absence of these, the Indo-US ties will be relations are extremely vulnerable.

First, I provide a brief history of Indo-US relations to contextualize the 'transactionalism' that Tellis uses to characterize them. Second, I provide an overview of existing perspectives on the Indo-US partnership to contextualize this paper's argument, as well as show that the argument has not been addressed yet. Third, I explain the importance of personal political leadership partnerships in the Indian foreign policy context. Fourth, I use two connections between Indian and American

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political leadership as evidence for my argument. Lastly, I use the arrest of Devyani Khobragade in New York City as an example to show the vulnerability of the Indo-US relationship which lacks the foundation of mutual respect and understanding.

BRIEF HISTORY OF INDO-US RELATIONS

While many assert that India and the United States are naturally suited to be allies given their common values of democracy and liberalism, the relationship remained strained for much of the 20th century. A Congressional Research Service study on US-India Security Relations highlights three important reasons for this: Cold War politics, the United States' favorable policies towards Pakistan, and disagreements over nuclear protocols.² In the years following independence, India developed a strongly anti-imperialist stance owing to its colonial legacy. This attitude led India to found the Non Aligned Movement with a handful of other nations. This philosophy of non-alignment and non-dependency displeased the United States. The US also felt that India seemed to favor the Soviet Union. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had strong socialist and import substitution policies, which were closer to the Soviets' conception of communism than American capitalism.³ In an extremely politically charged Cold War atmosphere, failure to align with the United States kept Indian and American ties strained.

The United States has also historically shared close ties with Pakistan, much to India's annoyance. During the Cold War, Pakistan joined two pro-American organizations: the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). Due to India's disinterest in aligning with America, Pakistan was seen as essential to maintaining American influence in the region. India was particularly irked when Pakistan used American weapons in wars it initiated against India. American neutrality after the 1965 war piqued India.⁴ Indira Gandhi's relationship with the Americans was particularly tenuous. Declassified documents of the period revealing conversations between former US President Nixon and former US National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, document Kissinger referring to Gandhi as a 'bitch' and Indians as 'bastards'.⁵ Another reason for the tense relations was the 1971 Bangladeshi War of Independence. The Americans were displeased at India's support to the separatists and put economic and diplomatic pressure on Indians to cut the support. The tensions reached a peak when American aircraft carrier, USS Enterprise, was dispatched to the Bay of Bengal to convey a strong message to India.⁶ A more cordial relationship between the leaderships might have led to a better dealing of the situation.

The Soviet Union's collapse prompted India to adopt a less confrontational attitude towards the West, if only for economic necessity. However, during the end of the Cold War era, another point of contention emerged between the two nations. India sought to assert its pride and autonomy by establishing a nuclear weapons program and not subscribing to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The United States feared that this would lead to a possible arms race between India and Pakistan, result-

ing in an unstable South Asia. The United States' disapproval of the Indian nuclear program gave India a "nuclear weapons pariah status."⁷ An important flashpoint was India's nuclear test in 1998. The Clinton government cracked down on India with economic sanctions. However, the turn of the 21st century saw a vast improvement in relations between the two countries. The US is currently India's most significant trading partner. India now conducts more military exercises with the US than any other country. US share in Indian defense imports has increased from 0.2% in 1999-2003 to over 7% in 2009-2013. Additionally, the 20th century saw only three Presidential visits to India, while just the first two decades of 21st century have already seen an equal number of visits.⁸

Removing the three, previously listed underlying clauses for a tense Indo-US relationship has led to the current state of alliance between the two countries. After the end of the Cold War, the policy of non-alignment had no purpose. Ever since India's liberalization in 1991, economic incentives have drawn India towards partnering with the US from an economic standpoint. The US has largely stopped favoring Pakistan over India. For example, the US supported India. The US and has also come to respect India's desire for a strictly bilateral resolution of the Kashmir issue. The landmark 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement largely resolved Indo-US nuclear issues. However, the recent Indo-US relationship under Obama and Manmohan Singh's second tenure resembles 'transactionalism.'⁹ In this paper, I argue that there were two periods during which Indo-US co-operation was closest to working towards and having a strategic vision. Strong political leadership relationships differentiated these periods from the rest. The first is the one between former Indian External Affairs, Finance and Defence Minister, Jaswant Singh, and former US Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott. Their relationship was instrumental in alleviating tensions between the two nations following India's 1998 nuclear test. It eventually led to President Clinton visiting India in 2000 and issuing a joint vision statement with Prime Minister Vajpayee. Clinton's visit was the first US Presidential visit to India in 22 years. The second relationship is that between former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and former US President George W. Bush which was vital to the signing of the 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement - a landmark in Indo-US relations.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE INDO-US RELATIONSHIP

There are a limited number of scholars who currently research and write on the Indo-US relationship. It is important to examine existing perspectives to gain a better understanding of the topic. Ashley Tellis argues that it is in the United States' interest to assist India economically and militarily without expecting much reciprocation. US assistance to India's economic rise, which promotes regional peace and stability, is mutually beneficial. Tellis writes that the Indo-US civil nuclear deal was the most vital agreement in setting up the potential for a fruitful partnership. The Indo-US partnership is based on the US seeking to balance China, and will benefit from India's economic ascent. Both the governments should work to create institution-

al and regulatory frameworks that permit their citizens to engage with one another for profitable and social collaboration.¹⁰ However, recent Indo-US engagement has been constricted to 'transactionalism' because of sectoral interests, and the lack of a common strategic vision, dominate. Most importantly, there is room for cooperation between the United States and India in the economic and military fields, especially if the leaders of both states make a sincere effort to comply with the each other.¹¹ Tellis briefly touches upon the significance of strong political relationships driving a strategic Indo-US partnership, but primarily concentrates on system-level benefits that both countries can take advantage of through a stronger partnership.

Schaffer's views echo Tellis' observation on the 'transactionalism' of Indo-US relations. She finds that while there has been a great amount of bilateral engagement, India and the US still fail to share a common world vision. This discrepancy often leads to standoffs at international and multilateral forums on important global issues. Schaffer believes that there are problems surrounding desired outcomes from the relationship. For India, the Indo-US partnership represents strength at home and in the surrounding region. For the US, the benefits are at the global level. Indo-US disagreements stem from the clash of foreign policy ideologies. The strategic core of Indian foreign policy emphasizes autonomy, flexibility and a desire to avoid dependence on stronger powers. The US, on the other hand, likes to dominate over its partners. This difference has created a rift. Schaffer expresses that the US can bridge this gap by helping India become a global leadership force.¹² There is a disinterest in alliance commitments as well as a demand for respect and recognition, even when materially weak. The policy implication of this attitude is that there cannot be a deep political and institutional alliance between the United States and India. However, cooperation can exist when strategic interests align.¹³

Another commentator, Burns, writes that the US and India both seek to spread democracy, expand trade and investment, counter terrorism, and balance China's growing military power. He therefore believes that US strategic interest will align with India more than any other continental Asian power in the 21st century. The second Obama administration saw deterioration in the increasingly friendly Indo-US relationship. The new Modi government is giving both sides a chance to work together to revive their economies and the civil nuclear deal. The bipartisan nature of the support of an improvement in Indo-US ties should allow India to move to the forefront of US strategy in Asia.¹⁴ Malone makes a similar argument. He argues that the reason for a better post-1990 Indo-US relationship is "fundamentally a story about rediscovering common political values."¹⁵ American policymakers through the 20th century viewed India as a revisionist power and not as a potential powerful democratic partner in Asia. In a post 9/11 world, the US followed a value-based approach. This approach coupled with the economic opportunities that India's liberalization presented has led to a convergence of interests between the two countries. Malone also writes that the US sees India as an opportunity to balance China. However, he notes that India and China have some common interests that are opposed to the West, as they are both de-

veloping countries. The relationship between the two countries constitutes a selective partnership and is ultimately unstable.¹⁶

Gilboy & Heginbotham hold a more radical viewpoint than Malone's, regarding the Indo-China-US relationship. They challenge the argument that India and the United States have converging interests and posit that India and China have converging interests that will challenge US interests. They use empirical evidence, such as voting patterns and positions in multilateral organizations, to show that India and China share tighter bonds than India and the US. They argue that the US should rework its relationship with India to ensure greater reciprocity. They assert that the US should cut down on security cooperation with India and demand more politico-economic cooperation from India.¹⁷ All the arguments listed above are relevant to understanding the Indo-US relationship. However they largely concentrate on the international system. They offer arguments on why or why not Indian and US strategic interests will align using this systemic approach. Schaffer touches upon the policy dealings between the two nations, and Narang explains the Indian worldview that causes such a clash. Tellis is the only one who briefly touches upon the role that personal leadership equations can play in transforming the Indo-US relationship. This paper goes on to explore the importance of such relationships in shaping a strategic Indo-US relationship.

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

At the outset, it is necessary to situate the Indian case within existing theoretical literature. Traditionally, international relations theory largely ignores the role of individuals in favor of an emphasis on international systems. Valerie Hudson's book, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, discusses the importance of leaders as well as small group dynamics in foreign policy decision-making. She argues that foreign policy strategies and negotiation relies heavily on an "understanding of the other's worldview."¹⁸ Therefore, both the communication between leadership and leadership attitudes and idiosyncrasies are important in understanding worldviews. Jaswant Singh cites the difference between the Chou Enlai-Kissinger and the Chou-Nehru relationship to illustrate this point. The Chou-Kissinger relationship was outstanding compared to the failings of the Chou-Nehru relationship. He believes that this was led to the growth of the China-US relationship, and the failure of the China-India relationship respectively.¹⁹ Individuals are considered even more paramount in crisis or uncertainty.²⁰ Understanding leader personalities and belief systems is useful in engagement strategies. The Indian approach to foreign policy allows for personal relationships between leaders to have a considerable impact on foreign policy outcomes. In India's case, foreign policy represents the purview of a small and cohesive group with a common and consistent belief system.

Narang and Staniland prove insightful in showing the significance of individual and small group decision making highlighting the foreign policy imperatives of Indian foreign policy-making elites. In their opinion, India's "strategic worldview

emphasizes autonomy, flexibility, and a desire to avoid dependence on stronger powers.²¹ In addition, there is a strong want for respect and recognition. This worldview has remained largely consistent through different Indian governments due to many reasons. Particularly important is the low electoral salience of foreign policy matters in India. Voters in India rarely vote for candidates based on their stated foreign policy leanings. There are exceptions like Kashmir. However, in this case, most national leaders would have identical policy perspectives, as it would be considered electoral suicide to sway from existing policy to one more open to giving up Kashmir. A better example would be the Tamil Tigers issue in Sri Lanka. Regional leaders in South India, particularly in the state of Tamil Nadu, found it useful to use foreign policy to fight elections with respect to this issue. Such regional parties often had diverging opinions from national parties. However, save for such rare exceptions, the Indian voter largely does not take into account foreign policy leanings of candidates when casting votes. Indian political leaders therefore do not run campaigns that stress or opine on foreign policy. There are no democratic electoral incentives for Indian political leaders to ideate on foreign policy. In Narang & Staniland's opinion, this leads to a "remarkable continuity" in Indian foreign policy thinking.²² Such insulation from domestic electoral pressures means that foreign policy is the dealing of an Indian 'strategic core.' Foreign policy decisions are made by just a small elite group consisting of the sitting Prime Minister, a few key cabinet ministers and bureaucrats who are part of the Indian Administrative or Foreign Service.²² This analysis has salient implications for the ability of personal relationships between leaders to influence Indian foreign policy. Foreign leaders who understand the Indian need for respect and autonomy, and spend time inculcating personal relationships with the strategic elite, can have a favorable impact on the relationship between their country and India. This belief is especially relevant to the Indo-US relationship.

The United States has conventionally been perceived as a dominant partner in the majority of its foreign policy dealings. Wills refers to America as the bully of the free world and argues that until "America's leaders address...nations with...respect, attention and persuasion, we shall lack foreign policy leadership of any kind."²³ Considering India's foreign policy imperatives of respect and autonomy, it is no surprise that the Indo-US ties will be tense if America adopts its conventional approach of foreign policy dealings. Drezner posits that telling other countries that their actions are irrational, if they do not have the same goals as the US, is "self-defeating diplomacy."²⁴ Given Narang & Staniland's description of the manner in which Indian foreign policy decisions are made, and the United States' dominant partner attitude, there is a natural tendency for the partnership to be unstable. Personal relationships between leaders of both countries therefore have great potential to better Indo-US ties. Such relationships have the ability to promote mutual respect and a strong understanding of the others' worldview. In India's case, where foreign policy decision-making is concentrated with the strategic core, such a strategy is even more potent. In the next section I put forth two cases in Indo-US relations when such a strategy led to land-

mark progress. The first case is the relationship between Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh. The second case is that between George Bush Jr. and Manmohan Singh.

SINGH – TALBOTT AND THE PRESIDENTIAL VISIT

On May 11 1998, India conducted its second nuclear test, termed Pokhran II, or Operation Shakti, which announced to the world that India was an official nuclear state.²⁵ In the aftermath of the tests, President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee assigned Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh respectively to manage the fallout in Indo-US relations due to America's disagreement with India's tests. During this period, Talbott was US Deputy Secretary of State, while Singh held various portfolios such as Advisor, External Affairs Minister, Defense Minister and Finance Minister. Over two and half years, Talbott and Singh met fourteen times in ten locations. This is considered the most intense and sustained set of interactions between Indian and American representatives above the rank of Ambassador.²⁶ In the same period, Talbott also held a number of meetings with Pakistani officials. Talbott distinguishes the two sets of interactions by saying that those with Pakistan would not qualify as a dialogue. He says that in a successful dialogue, "each makes an effort to understand what the other has said and to incorporate that understanding into a reply."²⁷ In a foreword written for Singh's book, *In Service of Emergent India*, Talbott writes that their dialogue's contribution to the Indo-US relationship was largely successful because of "Jaswant Singh's ability to advocate and defend his government's position while instilling in me and other American officials a high degree of trust and respect."²⁸ He stresses the importance of trust, respect and understanding between the two nations, all of which their dialogue promoted to turn around the Indo-US relationship.

At the time when Talbott and Singh were appointed to be interlocutors for the two countries, Indo-US relations were severely strained. India's nuclear test had caused irked the US as the latter had a stated objective of wanting nations to subscribe to the NPT and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The US imposed strong economic sanctions on India following the tests. Furthermore, it persuaded multilateral organizations like the World Bank to delay loans and grants to India.²⁹ The World Bank delayed loans amounting to \$865 million to India in response to the tests. India was nettled too as it thought that the US response to Pakistan's subsequent nuclear test was timid in comparison.³⁰ Also, the late 1980s were a time when the US viewed South Asia as one diplomatic region, reflecting the relative unimportance of India to the United States. Jaswant Singh states "in those days we still lived in the age of the "hyphenated relationship": "India-Pakistan."³¹ In a visit to China in 1998, Clinton made a comment urging the Chinese to accept responsibility to arrest nuclear weapons proliferation.³² This comment directly offended India and contributed to mounting tensions.

Most importantly, the Indians and Americans lacked a sound understanding of each other's worldviews due to a lack of relationship building between political leaderships. The statements and war of words in the aftermath of the nuclear test are

a testament to this fact. National Security Advisor Sandy Berger and States Department Spokesperson James Rubin commented that India had misled the US in diplomatic discussions, and claimed that the Indians had expressly given assurances that no such tests would take place. In another statement, a State Department spokesperson used strong words to criticize Indian Home minister Advani. In both cases,, India responded definitely by saying that there were never any assurances made and that there should be a level of courtesy in diplomatic conversation, especially with respect to senior leaders.³³ At a later date, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright commented that India and Pakistan should “climb out of the hole they have dug themselves into.”³⁴ Singh at the time replied that Indians do not dig holes either metaphorically or literally. He spoke that such a comment explains a lack of comprehension on the American’s part to understand the Indian stance and “Indian sensibilities.”³⁵ Talbott and Singh began their dialogues in these tense circumstances, and yet were able to develop a deep friendship that benefited the Indo-US relationship.

There are many instances and actions that describe the Singh-Talbott relationship and its utility. Talbott reveals that both he and Singh have the same picture of the two of them kept in their respective offices as a memory of the journey they took together.³⁶ He writes that they enjoyed informal discussions beyond what their official governmental roles necessitated. He believes that such discussions “were essential to whatever chance we had of fulfilling our original assignment.”³⁷ Such discussions allowed a better mutual understanding, both on an individual and an international level. At the year-end of 1999, Singh officially became External Affairs Minister, thereby outranking Talbott. Traditional diplomatic protocol would dictate that Talbott be replaced in the dialogue with someone of equal rank as Singh. However, on a congratulatory call from Talbott, Singh told him that the dialogue should continue as before.³⁸ An especially tough time for Jaswant Singh was the Kandahar hijacking of an Air India plane. Singh was personally entrusted with going to Kandahar and negotiating the release of the hostages. Talbott made an effort to keep in touch with Singh during the Kandahar crisis and put in a phone call to him every morning.³⁹ Singh writes, “Strobe personally had been most supportive.”⁴⁰

By November 1998, the US had partially lifted sanctions on India. The efforts of Singh and Talbott helped alleviate the hostility. They had also moved forward on achieving the US agenda, as Prime Minister Vajpayee promised to sign the CTBT in a year’s time in his speech at the UN General Assembly.⁴¹ In the midst of the dialogue, Secretary Albright believed it was a good idea to have former President Jimmy Carter become a special envoy to South Asia. Carter would play arbitrator between India and Pakistan. Having spent time with Singh and understanding the Indian worldview, Talbott held that Carter’s appointment was a faulty decision. He argued with both President Clinton and Secretary Albright to ensure that Carter was not selected.⁴² Having developed a personal relationship with Singh, Talbott understood the India’s desire for autonomy, respect and bilateral resolve of any India-Pakistan disputes. Their relationship was important in ensuring that the Indo-US relationship

did not take a dive in 1999 when the Indians did not fulfill their promise of acceding to the CTBT due to a hung parliament. Talbott trusted Singh when he told him that the Indian government had made an honest effort.⁴³ In 1999, the US took India's side on the Kargil conflict and commented that the Kashmir conflict must be resolved bilaterally.⁴⁴ This was a significant move since the US had conventionally been sympathetic or ignorant to Pakistan's activities in Kashmir. Tellis believes that Singh and Talbott's "extraordinary friendship" was critical in influencing America's favorable stance towards India following Kargil.⁴⁵

In 2000, President Clinton visited India, becoming the first US Presidential to visit India since 1978. Singh writes, "This visit might have done more to change the relationship between the two countries than any other single event of recent times."⁴⁶ Clinton's address to Indian parliament stressed the importance of listening and mutual understanding. He acknowledged India's right to autonomous decision-making. Clinton made a short five-hour visit to Pakistan on his way back to the US. He took a stern stance against Pakistan's terrorist activities and urged Musharraf to take Pakistan back to democracy.⁴⁷ Clinton's visit was a pivotal moment in Indo-US relations. During the visit, Vajpayee and Clinton issued a joint document outlining the strategic vision both countries shared for the 21st century.⁴⁸ Within a short span of time, Talbott and Singh's dialogue and relationship was instrumental in alleviating post Pokhran hostilities and prompting such a crucial Presidential visit, thereby laying the foundations of a renewed Indo-US relationship in the 21st century. Singh writes that he and Talbott set the shared objective of "harmonization of positions between the United States and India, as they evolved through a harmonization of respective views."⁴⁹ The level of understanding that their relationship allowed both countries to achieve would not have been possible without it.

SINGH – BUSH AND THE NUCLEAR DEAL

While the relationship and dialogue between Jaswant Singh and Strobe Talbott had resulted in a turnaround in the Indo-US relations, it had not been able to resolve the nuclear problem. The United States has always maintained the need to arrest nuclear weapons proliferation and urged nations to subscribe to the NPT and the CTBT. However, India viewed this as hypocrisy on the United States' part and asserted its autonomy by not subscribing to these treaties. This has historically been a thorn in the relationship. Over the course of their tenures as heads of their respective states, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh worked with each other to remove the obstacles to a new era of Indo-US cooperation. With significant risk to their respective domestic political capital, they went about reaching the pivotal 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement. The agreement was a significant break from both countries' policies and brought the two closer to sharing a strategic vision.

On Singh's 2005 visit to the United States, Bush proposed the civil nuclear agreement. The agreement would mean that the United States would lift nuclear sanctions on India and allow India the benefits of full civil nuclear cooperation with

the United States and other countries. The deal would be a breakthrough for energy deficient India, as it would allow access to capital and technology in fueling India's civil nuclear needs. In return, India would be expected to separate its civilian and military nuclear facilities. It would be expected to put all of its civil nuclear reactors permanently up for inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Any future civil nuclear reactors would be subject to such inspection. The agreement reserves India's right to conduct a nuclear test, but gives the United States the power to rescind its cooperation and return all of technology if India does so.⁵⁰ The agreement was a significant break from stated Indian and American policies. India's foreign policy had always stressed autonomy and resisted dependence on great powers. By allowing their civilian nuclear facilities to be permanently subject to foreign inspection, India compromised on its strong autonomous character. The agreement cedes a level of dependence on the United States for running India's nuclear program by granting the former the right to rescind cooperation and technology. The United States made significant compromises as well. The United States' stated policy was to sanction countries that did not subscribe to the NPT. India's refusal to comply with the NPT had led to its isolation from the world in nuclear issues and cooperation. Manmohan Singh characterized this as a "nuclear apartheid."⁵¹ Bush therefore reversed a pillar of a more than three-decade-old US foreign policy of non-proliferation to accommodate India.⁵² In effect, he implicitly accepted India into the elite nuclear club. When Bush visited India in 2006, he and Singh he jointly declared their intention of going forward with the deal. The deal was finally inked [and operationalized] in October 2008 after both heads of state had dealt with domestic political opposition.⁵³ Former American diplomat Nicholas Burns writes, "During the two years of... negotiations, my Indian counterparts and I worked more closely and intensively than we ever had before."⁵⁴ Bush and Singh's trust-based relationship laid the foundation for such a momentous agreement to go through.

While Singh and Bush did not share the level of personal friendship that Talbott and Jaswant Singh came to develop, their mutual respect and affection for one another is documented. Sanjaya Baru, Singh's media advisor during his tenure, writes that Bush and Singh surprisingly shared a friendship based on mutual respect. He says that Singh, who is widely considered shy and a poor conversationalist, was relaxed in Bush's company and took an "instant liking" to him.⁵⁵ He writes, "Bush was deferential and, rather surprisingly for an American President, kept addressing Dr. Singh as 'Sir'."⁵⁶ He believes that over the year Bush and Singh became buddies.⁵⁷ In a manner rather unlike that of the Prime Minister, Singh publicly told Bush that the "people of India deeply love you" during his visit to US in September 2008.⁵⁸ Singh further commented, "I have been the recipient of your generosity, your affection, your friendship."⁵⁹ Those familiar with Singh will vouch for the fact that such professing of affection is highly uncharacteristic of the usually reserved and reticent leader. A year later when he came to India and the landmark civil nuclear agreement was reached, Bush said, "I really like Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The prime minister is a

wise leader.”⁶⁰ Political science scholar Teresita Schaffer noted that Bush’s relationship with India was one of the few diplomatic and foreign policy successes of his tenure.⁶¹ This could be attributed to the strong respect-based relationship Bush developed with Singh, which enabled them to work courageously towards the 123 agreement.

Dr. Singh was often criticized for his lack of power in driving policy while in government, due to the power resting in Congress party head Sonia Gandhi’s hands. In the case of the civil nuclear agreement, Singh fought hard to ensure the deal went through. Faced with strong domestic political opposition from his Leftist coalition partners, Singh even initiated a no-confidence motion in parliament to ensure that the deal went through. Sanjaya Baru writes that Sonia Gandhi was not enthused about the idea of risking the survival of the government to pass the deal. Singh apparently felt let down by this lack of support.⁶² Despite the opposition, Singh uncharacteristically pushed through with the deal. It is the respect and mutual understanding that Singh shared with Bush that allowed him to trust the United States and stress the importance of the agreement in shaping an Indo-US strategic relationship. Bush was able to understand the Indian need for respect and equal footing, and he leveraged this understanding to push through the landmark deal.

THE VULNERABILITY OF INDO-US TIES: THE CASE OF DEVYANI KHOBRAGADE

In December of 2013, a seemingly petty incident spiraled into a major diplomatic tussle between India and the United States. Devyani Khobragade, Indian Deputy Consul General in New York, was humiliatingly arrested by US law enforcement on charges of visa violations. Devyani was charged for allegedly submitting fake documents that agreed to pay her Indian maidservant \$4500 per month when in reality she was paying her less than \$500 per month. Devyani allegedly coerced the maid to lie in her visa application about receiving a higher pay. Her maidservant left work unexpectedly and brought charges against Devyani; this eventually culminated in her arrest. It was not only the arrest but also the manner of the arrest that caused outrage in India. Devyani was arrested while dropping her children off at school, then strip-searched and kept in general detention. For a country in which “pride and the public face are so important as to become an essential diplomatic quotient,” such humiliation of a diplomat was beyond tolerance.⁶³ The US response to Indian outrage was lukewarm. It took Secretary of State John Kerry three days to put out a statement expressing regret in regards to the manner in which the arrest was made. The Indian government argued that the arrest violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations that guarantees diplomats courteous treatment if arrested for a grave crime. Following the US government’s general apathy with respect to this case, the Indian government carried out a strong diplomatic backlash. Investigations on American diplomats’ treatment of hired labor were started, security roadblocks outside the American embassy in Delhi were removed, and airport privileges of American diplomats in India were revoked.⁶⁴

In less than a week, a relationship carefully cultivated over a decade and a half came to a standstill over the arrest of a mid-level diplomat. This case is a validation of the uncertainty and instability of Indo-US relations. It exemplifies the rift that exists between the Indian and US foreign policy camp without the existence of meaningful political leadership relationships to inculcate respect and mutual understanding of worldviews. Exemplifying the anger felt in India, External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, said that it “is no longer about an individual. It is about our sense of self as a nation and our place in the world.”⁶⁵ Given India’s worldview based on the want for respect and autonomy, and its increasing economic and military might, the American camp should have expected such a response. Initial rumors that it was the local States Attorney who had carried out the arrest without the State Department knowing were quashed when New York prosecutor Preet Bharara revealed that the orders to arrest came from the State Department.⁶⁶ The charges might be qualified and the arrest warranted. However, at a time when America insists India is an equal partner, the handling of the arrest makes India feel “patronized, bullied and lectured by the superpower.”⁶⁷ Ex-US Ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, noted that the American handling of the incident “gave new meaning to the word stupid.”⁶⁸ The incident is a testimony of the diverging approaches to foreign policy. It shows that without the understanding and respect that strong relationships between political leaderships promote, the Indo-US relationship is extremely vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary foreign policy literature has come to largely ignore the importance of individuals and leaders in international relations. While systemic perspectives are no doubt important to the analysis of bilateral relations, they should not constitute the only lens through which analysis is conducted. Personal relationships between political leaderships have attracted limited scholarly work. This paper highlights their importance in light of furthering bilateral relationship between Indian and the United States. The United States and India are both democratic, liberal, market economies and therefore compatible for a strong bilateral relationship. However, their methods of foreign policy dealings and decision-making lead to tensions. India has foreign policy imperatives of autonomy, lack of dependence, and want of respect. Because a cohesive ‘strategic core’ makes decisions with little domestic electoral salience in foreign policy issues., individuals in this ‘strategic core’ exercise great authority in foreign policy decision-making. America is accustomed to being the dominant partner in bilateral relationships, dictating the terms of the relationship. Such a clash in ideology has led to a relationship that has much room for improvement. Given this ideological clash, mutual understanding and respect are essential for the success of the Indo-US relationship. As political leaderships are responsible for the conduct of foreign policy and bilateral relations, such mutual understanding and respect must be inculcated through relationships between the respective political leaderships. Jaswant Singh notes that “trust between individual negotiators thus often becomes the

foundation of a transformation between two countries.”⁶⁹ In the absence of such relationships, the Indo-US relationship could be precarious. The arrest of the Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade and the ensuing drama are evidence of this vulnerability. Strong partnerships at the leadership level are essential in moving India and the US towards a relationship based on a common strategic vision.

NOTES

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