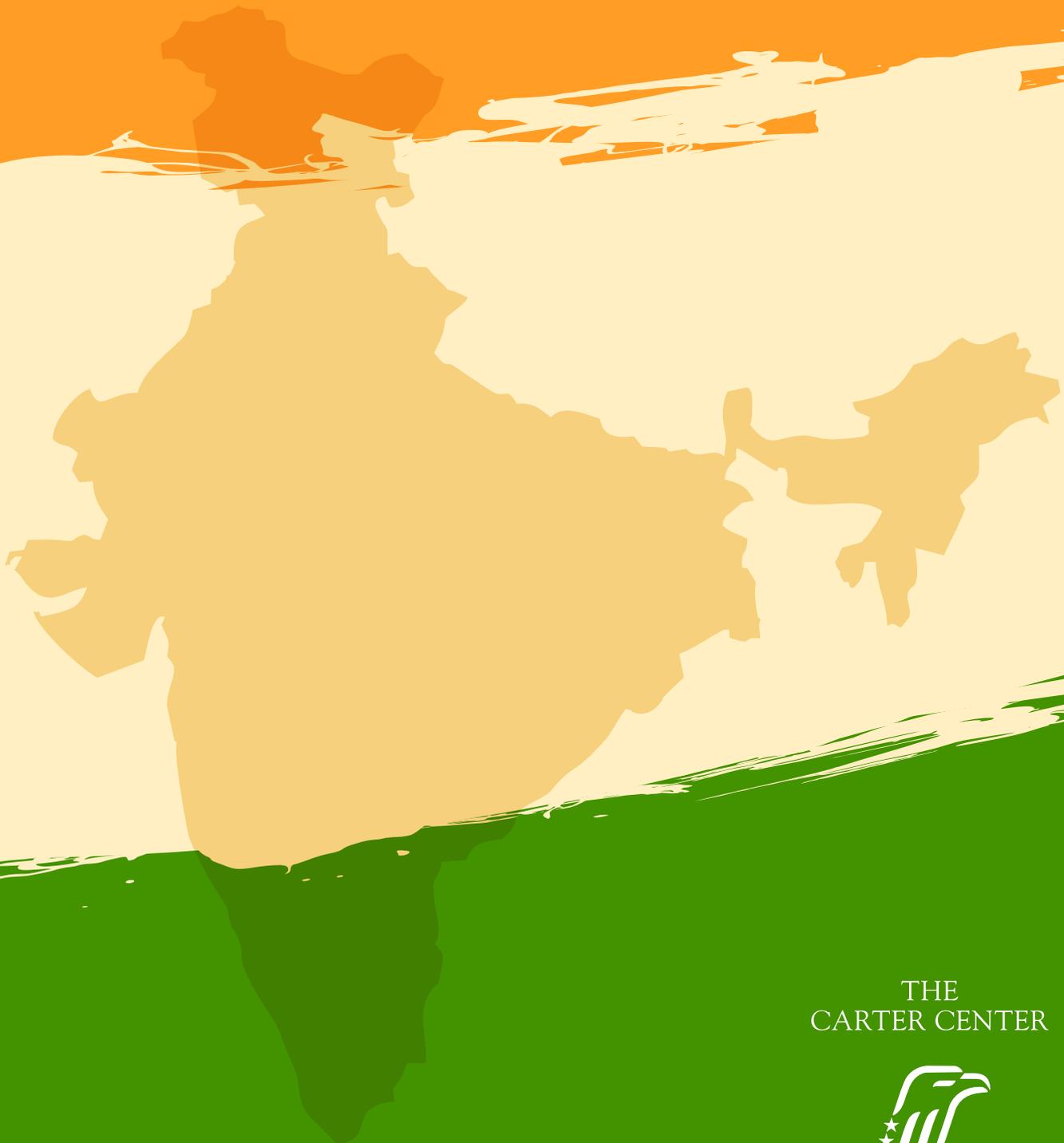


INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

The U.S.-India Relationship: Of Acquiescence and Activism

*By Šumit Ganguly, Dinsha Mistree, and Larry Diamond
February 20, 2023*



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On February 25, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump was in Delhi, concluding what would be his final trip abroad as president. The trip had done much to advance U.S.-India relations. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi organized a warm reception, including several high-level meetings as well as a rally with more than 100,000 in attendance. Apart from the pageantry, the leaders held productive conversations on advancing a new quadrilateral (or “Quad”) security partnership between the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia, and it was announced that India agreed to buy \$3 billion worth of military equipment from the U.S.

But even as Trump joined Modi in a press conference before departing, it was clear that other events were going to overshadow these successes. Earlier in the day, peaceful protesters had gathered nearby to voice opposition to a controversial change in India’s citizenship laws. Many were concerned that this revision would be used to strip citizenship away from tens of millions of Muslims. Local members of Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) organized a violent reprisal against these peaceful protesters—with tacit support from the police—triggering full-blown communal violence between the Hindu and Muslim communities across Delhi.

Trump was asked a number of questions about the open violence taking place nearby. He initially chose to sidestep the topic, saying that the issue of the citizenship policy had not come up in his discussions with Modi. Trump then went on to praise Modi for his commitment to religious freedom. In choosing his remarks, Trump likely did not want to disrupt his personal relationship with Modi or the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The riots continued for another three days before the Indian government stepped in. By the time order was finally restored, more than 50 people had died and hundreds had been injured.

These state-condoned riots were not an isolated incident. Modi and the BJP are advancing an agenda whose primary aim is to undo India’s secular traditions and prioritize a particular fundamentalist vision of Hinduism. As a result, violence against Muslims has seemingly become a daily occurrence in many parts of the country. Apart from this routinized violence, Modi and the BJP are legislating policies designed to target Muslims. In the BJP-controlled state of Karnataka, a law was passed making it illegal for Muslim women to wear hijab to government schools, and there was a move to ban Muslim vendors from operating near Hindu festivals. Also in 2022, a journalist named Mohammed Zubair was imprisoned for a political tweet that simply referenced a Hindu god. The German Foreign Ministry condemned the arrest; a spokesperson said: “India describes itself as the world’s largest democracy, so one can expect democratic values like freedom of expression and freedom of the press to be given the necessary space there.”

At the national level, the government has sought to ensure that future generations of Indians do not learn about the 2002 Gujarat riots, caste oppression, or Mughal history. Apart from Muslims, India’s other religious minorities have also been subject to reprisal. According to the [State Department’s 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom for India](#), there were almost 500 violent attacks on Christians in 2020, again almost exclusively taking place in BJP-controlled states.

Modi's government has made several other moves in defiance of India's rich tradition of civil liberties, including taking actions to harass the political opposition. Although the government has mostly opted to continue India's long history of free elections, there are concerns about a very uneven playing field when it comes to campaign finance and the opposition's ability to engage in free speech. Members of opposition parties, [including Rahul Gandhi of the Indian National Congress](#), have credibly accused the government of monitoring their private communications, including through the use of Israeli-supplied Pegasus software. [Another leading opposition figure who was facing corruption charges was allegedly told that these charges would disappear if he joined the BJP.](#)

These internal developments create a dilemma for U.S. policymakers. On the one hand, the U.S. cannot afford to ignore India's domestic politics. India's steady move away from secularism is not just concerning from a moral perspective, but it also has the potential to destabilize the country as well as the South Asian region. With 200 million Muslims—and tens of millions of other religious minorities—communal violence could once again paralyze India, as it has in previous generations, with considerable economic and political costs. Such communal violence would not only destabilize India but could also strain India's relations with its neighbors as well as its relationships with U.S. partner countries in the Middle East.

On the other hand, if U.S. leaders expend political capital on issues of domestic concern, they could derail other strategic objectives of the U.S.-India partnership. India is home to 18% of the world's population and is a growing economic powerhouse. Trade between the two countries stood at \$150 billion as of 2019 and shows signs of rebounding following the COVID-19 pandemic. [India has more than 230,000 students studying in the U.S.](#), a number that is increasing rapidly, as well as an engaged diaspora. As reflected in the gradually maturing Quad partnership, India and the U.S. share common geostrategic interests, not just in the Indo-Pacific, but across Asia. And the U.S. needs India to be a critical partner in the battle against climate change.

How should the U.S. balance these seemingly competing concerns? We propose three immediate courses of action.

First, the U.S. needs to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of India's domestic politics and what is taking place under the Modi government. Many pundits like to say that the U.S.-India partnership will automatically deepen as a strategic convergence is underway. Instead, we believe that this partnership can only be furthered if both sides properly internalize the dynamics and constraints that their counterparts face.

Second, U.S. officials need to speak about Indian human rights issues, both publicly and privately. When U.S. leaders repeatedly ignore the ground realities—or worse yet, publicly praise Modi's track record—we should expect more violence, more extremism, and a less stable partner. India's turn toward Hindu nationalism is predicated on an ethno-religious superiority over Muslims, Christians, and others. Such mounting intolerance is deeply inconsistent with American values and interests and will sooner or later alienate the American public, risking grave losses for bilateral trade and defense cooperation.

Third, the U.S. needs to swiftly appoint an ambassador to India. Apart from the symbolic role that an ambassador provides, the U.S. needs a voice in Delhi who can capably advance U.S. interests. Eric Garcetti was nominated to become U.S. ambassador to India in July 2021, nearly six months after the Biden administration came to power. His nomination is currently stalled in the U.S. Senate over sexual misconduct concerns that took place in his office during his time as mayor of

Los Angeles. The U.S.-Indian relationship is at a critical stage: Garcetti's nomination needs to be voted upon or abandoned.

A close U.S.-India partnership needs to ultimately define the Asian Century. This partnership will suffer if U.S. leaders are ignorant of—or willfully ignore—India's turn away from its legacy of religious freedom and respect for human rights.

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