



Modi's Visit and India's Strategic Decision Point

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to meet with President Joe Biden and members of Congress during his first official state visit to the U.S. this week. The visit is a vital one, with the potential to significantly elevate the strategic partnership between India and America. For that to happen, however, requires some sober thinking in New Delhi about shortcomings in India's foreign policy that are holding it back from becoming one of the world's next responsible superpowers, and what role the U.S. can and should play in India's rise.

Since 1961, India has simultaneously maintained trade ties and defense partnerships with both the U.S. and Russia, a state of affairs that has prevented either relationship from achieving its full potential. That balancing act prevailed for much of the "post-Cold War" era, but recent years have seen the global landscape shift for India in two major ways.

The first is China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific, which poses a serious threat to India's security and its regional sphere of influence. While ties between Delhi and Beijing have always been tense, recent years have seen the Sino-Indian relationship shift to intense competition over everything from economic markets to international politics to border disputes. Through its sprawling Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), China has built a vast range of military ports and bases strategically positioned to encircle the Indian Ocean region, and is working to secure supply lines, energy resources and military power across the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Chinese economic projects, like the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, compete directly with India while creating a number of security and sovereignty concerns.

The second is Russia. Currently, India is caught in a Catch-22, as its longstanding relations with Russia run counter to the country's ambitions to grow economically, militarily and politically. While Delhi has made efforts to diversify its supply of military weaponry and decrease its dependence on Moscow in recent years, little concrete progress has been made on that score—an estimated 60-70 percent of India's arsenal is made up of Russian equipment. India's dependence on Russian energy, meanwhile, is deepening. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, India has taken advantage of heavily discounted Russian energy, purchasing more than ten times as much oil and four times as much coal from Moscow in 2022 than it did the previous year. Russian oil now accounts for one-third of India's total oil imports. But while this collaboration is advantageous in the short term, it is bound to come at a high reputational and strategic cost in the long run. As a result of its war in Ukraine, Russia's international isolation is deepening and will inevitably drag its strategic partners (like India) down with it.

How can Delhi continue to grow in a changing global environment? The answer is closer partnership with Washington.

Today, the United States and India have a number of core values and interests in common; among them are upholding democracy and a rules-based international order, countering Chinese aggression, and promoting economic prosperity. The two countries have had a robust defense partnership since 2005, and that cooperation is being strengthened through a host of new initiatives, from the annual bilateral MALABAR naval exercises to security alliances like the Quad and I2U2 that are intended to counter threats (such as those from China) in the Indo-Pacific. Economic cooperation between the two countries, however, has evolved more slowly, and the past year has made clear that real progress on this front hinges upon a more comprehensive Indian disengagement from Russia.

Prime Minister Modi's upcoming visit is as an opportunity to bolster bilateral collaboration. The potential benefits are legion, including everything from stepped-up military coordination, which would help counter China's rising regional aggression, to increased intelligence sharing to collaboration on ensuring that the global economy and the world's supply chains remain secure as China's BRI expands.

But to get there requires trust, and that means Washington needs to be convinced that it and New Delhi see the world more or less the same way—and that India understands that its future prosperity hinges on closer alignment with the United States, and greater distance from Moscow. Modi's visit is a good time for India's leader to make that fact clear.

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