



U.S. Ambassador Richard R. Verma's Speech at Ananta Aspen Centre

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Foundations of the U.S. – India Strategic-Plus Relationship

Ananta Aspen Centre has long been on the cutting edge of developing and discussing ideas that turn into initiatives between our countries. Your support through the years has been a vital part of strengthening the relationship.

I appreciate the invitation to come and speak today about the relationship. I know that speeches on the U.S. – India relationship usually start with a mention of our shared democratic values and histories and then go into detail on our strategic agenda. Today I'm going to take the opposite approach and speak only briefly about the bilateral strategic relationship before discussing our shared democratic values and personal ties in a little more in depth.

I do so because our official relationship is really only a by-product of the values, history, and personal ties we share. Those ties are the relationship's body and soul. And as India has shared with the west through the practice of yoga and other traditions, keeping the body and soul healthy requires constant introspection. With that in mind, I intend to spend my time in India not just discussing the next big thing or where we're going, but also why we're going there. I thought Ananta Aspen Centre – with its long tradition of open dialogue – was the perfect place to start the conversation.

Before I begin, let me again extend condolences to the people of Nepal for all of the losses they have suffered due to the earthquake and aftershocks. We continue to be inspired by India's quick and deep response to aid its neighbor during a time of great need.

Strategic Plus Relationship

Moving to the bilateral relationship, I think it is fair to say the bilateral relationship is stronger and more vibrant than it has ever been. When our leaders first decided to cast off the chill of the cold war and improve our relations, it was mostly due to the many convergent strategic interests of India and the United States. The bet was that the democratic values and deep personal ties our nations shared would lead us naturally toward a strong economic and strategic partnership.

Today we're seeing the benefits of that early strategic vision. The recent visits of Prime Minister Modi to the United States and President Obama to India have re-energized a partnership

that has been growing steadily for at least the last 15 years or so, even if for one reason or another it wasn't always growing as fast as it could. But one of the outcomes of the recent visits was also the recognition that our relationship is no longer solely about our strategic interests. It is also about the trade, academic, scientific, and other unofficial ties that underlie the broad popular and political support the relationship enjoys in both India and the United States. Our leaders therefore envisioned an enhanced relationship where we can utilize these ties as well to build the more peaceful, prosperous, and stable future we seek.

I call this enhanced relationship our Strategic-Plus partnership. In the aftermath of the high-level visits we are now engaging on more than seventy initiatives, everything from space to vaccines. I won't go into details on all of the accomplishments of the past several months, but a short list includes:

1. Launching a civil nuclear contact group that moved us past some of the obstacles that had stalled progress for years;
2. Restarting the trade policy forum to address intellectual property and food security issues;
3. Signing Memoranda of Cooperation on Smart Cities and Transportation;
4. And hosting the bilateral India-U.S. Technology Summit.

The President and Prime Minister also recognized convergences in our Asia policies – the U.S. rebalance and India's Act East policy – and decided we were not examining and capitalizing on these convergences nearly as much as we could. And so the President and Prime Minister issued a Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (JSV) that set a course for a new direction. The JSV articulates our common view that peace, prosperity, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region are secured on a bedrock of connected economies, freedom of navigation and trade, maritime security, a rules-based order, and an inclusive, effective governing architecture.

These are just a few of the accomplishments of the last several months. But I want to assure you we are not resting even though the excitement of the high-level visits is wearing off. The Embassy, our partners at the MEA, and all who work on the official relationship are still moving ahead on our existing initiatives and also thinking constantly of new ways to engage. We are tracking our existing initiatives through a Joint Implementation Working Group that I co-chair with the Foreign Secretary. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman traveled to Delhi last week to review progress during Foreign Office Consults, which also coincided with regional consultations between our Assistant Secretaries for South and Central Asia, Near East Asia, and Africa and their MEA counterparts on issues of shared concern. These regional consults were the first that we've had on these regions in many years. They were also a demonstration that we are working together, we are still discussing issues, looking for common ground, and searching for additional ways to move forward, across the globe.

Democratic Foundations of the Relationship

I'll be happy to answer questions on the official relationship further during Q&A, but for now I'd like to turn to the subjects I mentioned earlier, the shared democratic values and people-to-people ties that are the bedrock upon which our relationship stands. They are the reason that for so many years, regardless of other world events, many U.S. and Indian leaders believed that the United States and India should be natural partners on the world stage.

But what exactly are the democratic values we share? And can we strengthen our shared understanding of them in a way that builds even more resiliency into our relationship, which is sure to face many tests over the years?

The first pillar of our shared democratic values surely is our shared belief in the importance of self-rule and in its offspring, free and fair elections. Everywhere in the world, as citizens united against oppression ultimately gain their freedom, they face a choice about the government they want. The choice they make is rooted in their values. As we know, not all choose democracy.

But when the people of India and the people of the United States gained their freedom, they designed liberal representative democracies that put freedom of conscience and self-rule above all else. Our peoples both entered into a social contract with one another that said they would be governed by the same set of rules. They agreed to rules-based systems that would be created by democratically elected representatives, enforced by accountable administrations, and interpreted by independent judiciaries.

Their choices were not surprising. The American Revolution was steeped in the quest for liberty from tyranny. Our founding fathers sought a government that would be run by the people and for the people. American founding father Patrick Henry expressed this when he exclaimed "give me liberty or give me death!"

Over 100 years later, Lokmanya Tilak's declaration that "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it" was a siren call for all in India who sought to end British rule. And as India's freedom came at midnight in 1947, Nehru reflected that her "soul, long suppressed" had found "its utterance."

The similar histories of our founding eras make it clear that our societies are two that reject totalitarianism or authoritarianism in favor of giving every part of society a voice in government. One way we exercise that voice is through elections.

But democracy is about so much more than elections. It is also about constantly pushing our governments toward a better, more just, more enlightened expression of our values. To get there, free societies must engage in a constant and deliberate debate on topics of public concern. We cannot avoid the hard questions in the name of political expediency. We cannot avoid discussions simply because we might not like the answers.

For instance, communities in every part of the United States are engaged in a conversation today about race, law enforcement, and the socio-economic conditions that have caused too many neighborhoods to erupt in protest, which sometimes turns violent. If we seek to improve the fabric of our nation, we must be willing to engage in a vigorous exchange about our values, their meaning, and the direction of our communities.

This belief in the value of debate about the direction of our societies is another democratic principle that we share. It is also one that our founders recognized. In America, the drafters of our constitution explicitly limited our government's power to regulate freedom of expression in its many forms, including religion, speech, and association. In India, Dr. Ambedkar did similarly, calling for "LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship" in your constitution's preamble.

Before I move on, let me pause for a moment to mention an Embassy program. The Mission is currently hosting an exhibition called Kindred Nations at the American Center. This excellent display examines the many personal linkages between the United States and India between 1783 and 1947. We brought some of the exhibition catalogs, but I'd also encourage you to go to the American Center and see it if you haven't already.

I bring the Kindred Nations exhibit up now because one of the photographs that struck me was of Henry David Thoreau, the American author and philosopher. According to the photo's inscription, Thoreau had read the *Bhagavad Gita* at Walden Pond, where he also wrote his most famous work. According to the inscription, another of Thoreau's works – his essay on Civil Disobedience – was one of the inspirations for Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance campaigns.

Civil Disobedience explains why Thoreau could not support a U.S. government that allowed slavery. Because government is a thing created by its citizens, he argued, the citizenry should be free to argue against laws deemed unjust and to disobey their enforcement by the government it created.

Depending on how much of a student of political theory or philosophy you are, you might find it amusing that a government official, and particularly an ambassador, would stand before you quoting this particular essay. I do so because like Thoreau I believe in the inalienable right of citizens in a democratic society to argue peacefully for a government they believe is more just, more moral, and more reflective of their individual beliefs. This is the same right that found a manifestation in Gandhiji's *satyagrahas* in Africa and India. It was a right demonstrated by Martin Luther King as he fought against the injustices of segregation. It is a right still exercised in front of the White House and Capitol building in Washington, D.C. And it is a right still faithfully, regularly, and wonderfully expressed across India today.

But Thoreau also recognized that his will to dissent would not be so strong against injustices lesser than slavery. But the lack of a great injustice against which to fight does not mean that the quest for a better union has ended. There are always things that must and should change.

Whether it is by changing laws or policies, challenging them in court, or by strengthening their enforcement, those that act peacefully to seek change are not anti-government. They are for better government. By seeking to improve government, they strengthen national security, not weaken it.

In today's world, a great deal of the search for the refinements that can improve our governments is undertaken by civil society organizations. They are fighting peacefully around the world for advances in health, inclusive economic growth, environmental protections, human rights, and to strengthen democracy.

That is why President Obama convened members of the international community on the margins of the UN General Assembly in 2013 to launch the Stand with Civil Society Agenda. This is a multi-year effort to accomplish the following objectives: 1) to improve the policy environment for civil society organizations in various countries around the world; 2) to coordinate diplomatic actions in response to restrictions on civil society; and 3) to develop innovative mechanisms for providing CSOs with technical and financial support.

Both of our countries are home to vibrant and vocal civil society organizations seeking change in every conceivable area. India is home to a vibrant community of over 2 million legally registered non-governmental organizations. The United States also has a robust civil society community though I doubt the number is 2 million. With so many voices engaged in the debate, there are sure to be some whose views others find objectionable. That is part of the beauty of the vibrant, thriving democracies we have chosen. I read with some concern the recent press reports on challenges faced by NGOs operating in India. Because a vibrant civil society is so important to both of our democratic traditions, I do worry about the potentially chilling effects of these regulatory steps focused on NGOs.

While I am in India, I hope to find many areas of agreement and forward progress with both my official and unofficial friends. But I also know there will be times when we disagree, and I look forward to those conversations, too. Yes, I look forward to the tough discussions because my argument is not that our two sovereign countries must be exactly the same. Rather it is a suggestion that our democratic traditions are strengthened when we use discussion and debate to improve. Therefore, we can build resilience in our bilateral relationship by having frank discussions on all matters of shared concern, including the importance of civil society and free expression to the promotion of a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable future.

We started this discussion last week during a highly successful Think Tank Summit the Embassy hosted with partners: the University of Pennsylvania, the Observer Research Foundation, and Brookings. This novel event brought together over sixty organizations from across India for two days to discuss the important role think tanks play in the democratic process. We also looked at ways to strengthen the think tank community through capacity-building, effective communication strategies, and outreach to both the public and policymakers.

People-to-people Ties

Perhaps more importantly, the Think Tank Summit built or furthered personal ties between Indians and Americans that share a similar vision for what can be accomplished by working together. It furthered our people-to-people ties, the other bedrock of our relationship that I mentioned earlier.

These are the deep and growing personal ties between India and America that have been forged either through the diaspora, exchange programs, business, and so many other avenues. There are so many connections that this is yet another area where we could talk all day, but I'd like to focus on the importance of our academic and exchange programs to our past and future together. These programs play a crucial role in helping to develop the critical thinking skills, shared experiences, and understanding that lead to the development of the deeper principles that we've been discussing today.

Let's start with a story about one of the founders we mentioned earlier, Dr. Ambedkar, who spent three years at Columbia University in New York City. According to one recounting of his time at Columbia, Dr. Ambedkar said these years awakened his potential. His transcript revealed that he audited many more classes than he took for credit. Later, he wrote, "The best friends I have had in my life were some of my classmates at Columbia and my great professors." We are rightfully proud in the United States that one of our universities could have such a profound impact on a leader so tall.

Plenty of other leaders have visited, studied, or worked in the United States on a wide variety of programs, including my own father who went to the USA from Punjab in 1963 on an academic scholarship. Alumni of our exchange programs include Presidents Narayanan and Patil, as well as Prime Ministers Atul Bihari Vajpayee, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, and Narendra Modi. Indeed, through our Fulbright-Nehru and International Visitors Leadership Programs and several others, more than 30,000 American and Indians have participated in a U.S.- or Indian-government sponsored exchange program. You can add to these 30,000 over one lakh (100,000) that are studying on student visas at any moment. Each of these students, teachers, artists, musicians, and future leaders have been exposed to even larger numbers of people and ideas, shaping their perception of the world and the way things should be. The benefits to both of our societies are innumerable. So in addition to thinking deeply about our shared values, we should also think about ways we can continue increasing our commitment to programs like these.

Let me conclude with a story that starts with Anandiben Joshi. Joshi was a young woman from Maharashtra who gained admittance to the Women's College of Pennsylvania to focus on obstetrics after she herself lost a child. In 1886, at age 21, she returned with a hero's welcome to India as the first female Indian doctor educated in the United States. Unfortunately, Dr. Joshi died shortly after her return, but her legacy lives on both in name and deed.

Today, the United States and India are collaborating deeply on a variety of healthcare issues. Of note are the successful programs we have to prevent child sickness and death, the issue that spurred Joshi's quest to become a doctor. For instance, epidemiologists from the

American and Indian Centers for Disease Control work together on the India Epidemic Intelligence Service Program. Through this cooperation, we might have finally found the source of a disease that was killing far too many children in the Muzaffarpur district of Bihar.

Rotavirus is another example. Through a collaboration between our government health agencies, U.S. and Indian industry, and the Gates Foundation, India can now make an effective vaccine for rotavirus which is affordable in India and beyond. If used in India – and the Prime Minister has said it will be – this vaccine might save as many as 80,000 lives of Indian children under 5 each year. It was a model of research collaboration. It included Intellectual Property Rights-respecting tech transfer that resulted in a product that can be made in India and which saves babies from death because of diarrhea.

The roots of these successful programs were sown during Joshi's studies in America. Studies that were made possible because an Indian woman crashed through all sorts of barriers both here and in America. Studies that were made possible because of the democratic belief of free academic expression. The roots Dr. Joshi and her colleagues sowed have blossomed into a beautiful tree of medical cooperation that is addressing some of our most difficult medical challenges. It is roots like those, my friends, that form the foundation of our "strategic plus" relationship. Thank you.

About Ananta Aspen Centre

An independent and not-for-profit organization, Ananta Centre – formerly part of Aspen Institute India – is registered under the Indian Trust Act. It engages the civil society, inclusive of business, NGOs, Governments and other stake holders on issues of importance to India's development and national security. Ananta Centre holds discussions on key foreign policy issues as well as security matters and strategic affairs pertaining to India through regular public sessions and round tables. The Centre is based in New Delhi.

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