



India-US Counterterrorism Cooperation: The Way Forward

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Narendra Modi's visit to the Trump White House in June was his fifth visit to the US since becoming PM of India in 2014, but his first encounter with an American president who does not seem to share his immediate predecessors' positive view of India. Since Trump's election on an "America First" platform, there has been apprehension in New Delhi that it might fall off Washington's radar.

State visits are a good indicator of the strength of bilateral relations, in terms of the hospitality bestowed on the visiting leader and the deals reached. According to these criteria, Indian PM Narendra Modi's June visit to the US was successful.

From an Indian standpoint, the meeting was about ensuring the continuation of the positive momentum that had been a feature of the bilateral relationship. Despite low expectations, the leaders got along well. Not surprisingly, Modi and Trump vowed to "destroy radical Islamic terrorism." The Trump administration also approved a long pending Indian demand that the US sell it unmanned surveillance drones. (The Indian navy wants these drones to keep watch over the Indian Ocean, which has witnessed an unusual spurt in maritime activity by China.) The deal is the first such purchase by a country that is not a member of the NATO alliance.

After the Modi-Trump meeting, the sides released a joint statement entitled "United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership." The statement emphasizes profound cooperation on counterterrorism, with the two leaders "stress[ing] that terrorism is a global scourge that must be fought and terrorist safe

havens rooted out in every part of the world.” The countries decided to strengthen their cooperation against terrorist groups including al-Qaida and ISIS, and India expressed its appreciation to the US for naming the leader of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. The statement also addressed the countries’ intelligence-sharing and operational-level counterterrorism cooperation to disrupt global terrorist recruitment efforts.

US-India security cooperation has expanded in recent years, and an important component of that cooperation is counterterrorism. The India-US Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, which came into being in 2001, has led to the exchange of intelligence on terrorist financial operations as well as support for joint training in border management, surveillance techniques, and terrorist incident response. Through the Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) Program, American agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have trained scores of Indian security personnel in counterterrorism activities.

The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks prompted greater bilateral counterterrorism cooperation, including a commitment by Washington to pressure Islamabad further on the issue. During the inaugural India-US Strategic Dialogue in 2009, US President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called for eliminating terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative (CCI), signed in 2010, is forging close and effective cooperation on counterterrorism, information-sharing, and capacity-building. The CCI has included several projects for enhancing joint counterterrorism capabilities through the sharing of advanced techniques, best practices, and investigative skills. In 2014, the US created a Homeland Security working group under the bilateral High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG) with the aim of facilitating joint access to counterterrorism-related technology.

The Indian and US intelligence services have collaborated on many regional terrorism threats, such as al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), the Haqqani Network, and ISIS. The Indian and US defense ministries have discussed these threats at the highest levels. In February 2015, India formally banned ISIS and its associated organizations.

In September 2015, both sides decided to transform their relationship into “a defining counterterrorism partnership for the 21st century” during a meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and then US Secretary of State John Kerry. In 2016, the annual Yudh Abhyas military exercise focused on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in mountainous regions.

In his June 2016 speech to the US Congress, Modi emphasized the need to “deepen our security cooperation” through a well-crafted policy “that isolates

those who harbor, support, and sponsor terrorists; that does not distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ terrorists; and that delinks religion from terrorism.” President Obama also stressed the importance of finding more creative opportunities for collaboration in counterterrorism.

Cooperation against cyberterrorism is another important feature of India-US security cooperation. The governments launched a Strategic Cyber Policy Dialogue in 2013. The Framework for the India-US Cyber Relationship, the first such document the US has signed with any foreign government, commits both countries to principles such as promoting international law, public-private partnerships, and appropriate norms of state cyber conduct. More recent cooperation has expanded to further command, control, communications, computer, and intelligence (C4I) elements.

In December 2016, Washington designated New Delhi a Major Defense Partner, a status unique to India. According to a joint statement, it “institutionalizes the progress made to facilitate defense trade and technology-sharing with India to a level at par with that of the United States’ closest allies and partners, and ensures enduring cooperation into the future.”

Challenges

The real obstacle to India-US counterterrorism cooperation comes from Washington’s ties with Islamabad. Pakistan, particularly its notorious Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has sponsored terrorism against Indian targets. American officials, while agreeing with Indian accusations, have felt compelled to cooperate with the ISI, as they have considered its help necessary to support America’s war efforts in Afghanistan.

The 2008 Mumbai attack deepened India’s suspicions about US reluctance to share information detrimental to Pakistan with India. The US authorities denied Indian agencies access to David Headley, a Pakistani-American who participated in the attack.

The major victory of Modi’s visit to the US was on the issue of terrorism. The language in the joint statement on Pakistan was sharp: “The leaders called on Pakistan to ensure that its territory is not used to launch terrorist attacks on other countries. They further called on Pakistan to expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai, Pathankot, and other cross-border terrorist attacks perpetrated by Pakistan-based groups.”

The Trump administration seems incapable, however, of making crucial decisions about the sixteen-year war on terror in Afghanistan or the American relationship with Pakistan, where the US has extremely low favorability ratings. American decisions in these areas will lay the groundwork for a potentially terror-free South Asia.

The US State Department's *Country Report on Terrorism 2016*, released on June 19, states, "Numerous terrorist groups, including the Haqqani Network (HQN), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), continued to operate from Pakistani soil in 2016. Although LeT is banned in Pakistan, LeT's wings Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation (FiF) were able to openly engage in fundraising, including in the capital. LeT's chief Hafiz Saeed (a UN-designated terrorist) continued to address large rallies." The report, which also laments the slow progress on regulating madrasas, blocking extremist messaging, cutting off terrorist financing, and strengthening the judicial system, clearly vindicates India's longstanding position on the menace of cross-border terrorism.

Hence, business as usual is unsustainable on this front. The current war against an ever-increasing number of jihadists and the stalemate in Afghanistan derive from America's ill-thought out support for Pakistan's ISI and its monstrous jihadist proxies in the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s. The Trump administration must decide whether it can afford to treat Pakistan as a partner or whether the time has come to confront it for its long-term support for terrorist organizations.

India strongly believes that defeat of the non-state organizations that propagate the Wahhabi and jihadist creed would require a strategy to undermine both the will and capacity of al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammad, and the states that provide material and ideological support for them, such as Pakistan.

Unique facilitators

India and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992. One of the primary drivers of India's decision was pressure from the US.

Following the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, India decided it was going to liberalize its economy and needed a global interface. India was looking for new markets to meet its defense requirements after the collapse of its main supplier, and the US was the obvious choice.

The US was ready to help, but wanted India to accommodate Israel in its foreign policy. It was against this background that on January 29, 1992, the eve of Indian Prime Minister Narsimha Rao's significant visit to the US, India decided to upgrade ties with Israel, amending its long-held position on the Middle East conflict.

The main purpose of Rao's visit was to increase US economic and military aid to India. It was also strongly felt in some circles in the Indian government that the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel would improve India's image in the US and facilitate approval by the IMF and the World Bank of financial aid that India desperately needed at that time.

It was recognition of the influence of the Jewish lobby in the US that promoted this positive development in Indo-Israeli relations. When Modi made his historic visit to Israel on July 4-6, 2017, the former US ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, tweeted that the “stunningly successful visit of Indian PM Modi this week was a huge strategic win for Israel.”

At present, there are around 3 million Indians living in the US, representing approximately 1% of America’s total population. Indian Americans, who constitute the third-largest Asian group in the US, are among the best educated and highest earning minority groups in the country.

This group is becoming increasingly integrated into the American political system. Over the past two decades, they have started to organize politically via the creation of lobby and advocacy groups. Their primary organizational model is the American Jewish lobby.

There can be no doubt that closer interaction between the lobby groups has facilitated closer interaction between the two governments. Modi’s successful Israel visit is the most visible manifestation of this.

The Indian and Jewish communities in the US are very proud that India and Israel, respectively, have remained liberal democracies since they acquired independence. This is no small achievement, as they are the only two countries out of more than 100 that gained independence after the end of colonialism to stay democratic.

The Jewish and Indian lobbies in the US must come together to convince influential figures in the Trump administration that Pakistan is the real source of jihadist terrorism in South Asia. They must continue to demand the shutting down of terrorist sanctuaries and the countering of jihad ideology, which is bent on destroying secular societies.

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