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India: Challenges and Opportunities

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YouTube recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmflgcGndgo>

Ravi Agrawal:

Thank you Niamh. Thank you all of you for being here. And just a round of applause for our panelists, please. Of course we have Ambassador Blackwell, Dan Twining, and you've traveled all the way from India for very short period, so we're very grateful. We have a very broad topic. It's India challenges and opportunities, and we could go any which way, but what I'm going to do is play to the strengths of our excellent panel here. And so I'm going to begin with Mr. la. It occurs to me that not everyone here might know what the National Human Rights Commission is and does. In a sentence, can you explain what your mandate is?

Bharat Lal:

Good morning. Thank you. National Human Rights Commission is a statutory organization responsible for improving the quality of life and dignity of people, in any case in the country related to human right violation. It is the NHRC initial Human Right Commission deals with.

Ravi Agrawal:

So that's a very clear, succinct definition. And so let me put to you, sir, as a representative of the Indian government here, a lot of people, a lot of indicators show that human rights in India have been declining in the last, well, the commission has been around since 1993. There are a lot of rankings that we could list out that show that, but in particular, minority rights and especially in the last decade or so, Muslims have faced challenging circumstances. And I'm thinking here of, for example, cow vigilantes targeting Muslim herders and butchers. I'm thinking of statements by leading members of this government, including the prime minister and home minister. They have called Muslims, infiltrators, termites, even. What is the role of the National Human Rights Commission here and why can't you stop them?

Bharat Lal:

Let's say, as you all know, that country of 1.4 billion people, yes, there have been instances where one or two mps or somebody is speaking out of turn and using not very appropriate language where the policy of the country is. Please understand that this country is secular country and constitution

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has guaranteed it with fundamental rights, civic and political rights. And thirdly, one example, I'll give that some mps who have spoken out of turn, I think I'll suggest you just look at certain information. In fact, the ruling party has denied tickets also to them so far as the National Human Rights Commission is concerned. The mps who have spoken, it was not in consonance with the Constitution Commission issued notice criminal cases have been filed. In fact,

Ravi Agrawal:

Are you telling me you issued a notice when Prime Minister Modi Muslims infiltrators?

Bharat Lal:

First thing is that as for our understanding, prime Minister, Mr. Modi did not call Muslims particularly as infiltrator. No, he mentioned about infiltration from our eastern border, from Bangladesh, but it was not particularly too Muslim. So if you read very carefully, it is not like that.

Ravi Agrawal:

Well, he did also say, for example, not to get too MADD in this particular topic, but he did say that Muslims are more likely to take away the jewels of your Hindu sisters and mothers. I mean, that's extremely worrying. And as someone who's lived in India, I do wish Indian officials acknowledged it, acknowledged there was a problem and tried to deal with it.

Bharat Lal:

See, at least what we have seen that nowhere Prime Minister has been speaking that language. If you look at the holy speech, holy speech, wherever he has spoken, it is not targeted to one particular committee. And I again repeated that two or three mps, including one minister, I think I can name Mr. Ku, who spoke against particular committee and was responsible for a spreading hatred. The case was filed, national Human Right Commission took up the case, and in fact, criminal case has been filed, number one. But number two, please understand in India today what is happening that each and every individual should have all basic communities, whether it's housing or water or electricity or cooking, gas or financial assistance. And B is ensuring dignity. No one is left out. So the whole governance philosophy is about socioeconomic and cultural rights, where quality of life our people is being improved. And if for want of time, I would not like to Del just imagine that in 10 years, more than 40 million houses have been constructed. One 40 million households, 700 million. I was responsible for providing clean drinking water, tap water. One 40 million households have been given tap water connection. 110 million toilets have been constructed. We don't find that somebody's XY jet cast. Our religion is a universal.

Ravi Agrawal:

Your point is well taken. I've written about exactly that myself. Again, I do wish the rhetoric was different, but I want to move on. I'm going to come back to you. There's a lot to discuss for us. Dan,

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let me bring you in. India just had elections. Frankly, they were surprising elections. Everyone, pundits, pollsters, even the exit polls, everyone thought that the ruling party, the BJP Nare Modi party would come back to power with an incredible majority, 400 seats out of 500 plus. And what happened in the end was they came under the target required to form a government on their own. In many senses, this was a check on their power Modi's. Now running a coalition government, I'd like you to reflect on what that means from your vantage point, how you think that changes India's approach to the world, for example.

Daniel Twining:

Great, Ravi, I'm so happy to be here with you and everybody from the Aspen Institute. I've been very lucky for many years to travel with the Aspen Institute to India with Professor Nye, with Anya Manuel, with Master Blackwell and other friends here. So this is like completing the circle. Look, India just had an amazing election, an Indian election arguably is the largest organized activity in human history in any given year that it occurs, right? It's miraculous how this works. India is such a diverse, pluralistic place that it only works as a democracy. I mean, this is the genius of India's constitutional design. You could not run a country with over 200 languages, et cetera, et cetera, as a dictatorship. An extraordinary thing about India of course is not just the power of the center, but frankly the power of the states. There is a great federalism story in India.

I think India is an amazing example. So I run a democracy institute. We work obviously mainly in the global south, all over the world in more than 100 countries. India is an extraordinary example, frankly, in many ways better than the United States of how to develop and deepen democratic institutions and popular participation and make sure that the ultimate authority in a country is its citizens. So I think we just have a huge amount to learn from India, maybe not so much in the United States that we do ideas of pluralism, tolerance, et cetera, inclusion, but also frankly for countries that are looking for development models. China under Xi Jinping is not a successful development model. India is now growing much faster than India. There is a bottom billion that is rising up in this country. I think it's the most exciting thing happening in the world today.

Ravi Agrawal:

Fair enough. Especially on the evidence of this election. It was a very exciting election where it was unpredictable, but also to see people power work in the way that it did, and I would argue in the face of some opposition, which we can discuss was an exciting development. Ambassador Blackwell, you've observed India for so long and invested in the US India relationship. A lot of where we are today is because of a lot of the work you've put in. What's your sense of how India's foreign policy might change given Prime Minister Modi's reduced mandate?

Robert D. Blackwill:

Well, thank you. Let me just first make an aside. I'm not sure we Americans are the best folks to lecture other countries on excess political speech. Agreed. Let me leave it at that. Now, as for the US

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India relationship, I think the Modi foreign policy is going to continue more or less, but I'd like to put it for this audience and those who are watching in a broader context. And I do that also believing that Prime Minister Modi is certainly a contender for being the most successful democratic politician in the last quarter century, along with Prime Minister Abe in Japan and Chancellor Merkel. Notice there aren't any Americans in my list. So the essence of this relationship began in the early George W. Bush administration with the following bet by each country, the leadership of each country, the Indians bet that in departing from non-alignment and getting closer to the United States, that the United States would over time be a successful resolute balancer of the rise of Chinese power.

And that's why they proceeded as they did, and even to this day, in many respects, to get closer to the United States. The United States bet that this India would gradually over time come closer and closer to our vision of world order and each made that bet. And I fear that both those bets are now in question. We heard in the last panel, last terrific panel about the deficits in American competition with China. The Indians see this and they wonder, did they make a good bet? Is this America looking into the next decade and beyond capable of balancing China? And if they are on YouTube watching this, they I would imagine are even more deeply concerned. So that part of the bet is under challenge. As for the United States, we know those of us who follow India every day, that prime Minister Modi chose to go to Moscow and embrace President Putin the day before the 75th anniversary of nato.

And this bewilders me, and I'll wrap this up, this Bewilders me. India has one of the finest diplomatic services in the world, small, too small, but by and large, terrific. I worked in the White House several times and the first thing you do when you look to see if there's important event you wish to schedule, you look to see what else is happening in the world. And it is unimaginable to me that India did not know that they were scheduling this visit the day before the NATO summit. And it bewilders me why they did it, but it's an indication that the anticipation by successive American administrations that India would get ever closer to the United States, not an alliance, but ever closer, is now in question. And I'll finish with a quote over the weekend by hm McMaster, former national security advisor, former President Trump, who said, we have to lower our expectations about the future of the US India relationship.

Ravi Agrawal:

Fascinating. I want to pick up on one of those points with you. Mr. Law. There is arguably no better American friend for India than Ambassador Blackwell. When he says he's bewildered by Modi's decision to go to Russia. What does not surprise me is the bear hug. I think Modi hugs every leader he meets. That didn't surprise me, but the timing did surprise me. What is the message India is trying to send here?

Bharat Lal:

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Please appreciate that. India and Russia relationship is more than 50 years old. And I think in diplomacy, I think it's a very important that we keep on talking. And Indian Prime minister in India is in position to talk to Russia, talk to Russian leadership, talk to President Putin. I think quite frankly, that about war or what our position, so in my opinion, I think it should be seen in this slide that India is in position to convey certain message.

Ravi Agrawal:

So if I may, I feel like the theme of my first few questions to you was that words matter. And the theme of this line of questioning is that symbolism and imagery and timing matters. No one I think is questioning even Indian purchases of Russian crude, which have been dramatically ramped up. India needs cheap oil. We get it. It's the timing and the symbolism.

Bharat Lal:

See, this widget was overdue. In fact, last five years, it could not take place because of had number of reasons. President Putin came to India two years back and India and Russia has annual summit planning. And this was scheduled during this time. And I think in our opinion, there is not much to read between the lines in any other context. But yes, there was a necessity that India should be talking to us here about these things. And Prime Minister Modi publicly also spoke on that issue.

Ravi Agrawal:

Well, you're here in the United States, you will hear a lot of people like Ambassador Black ask you about the timing questions. So clearly it is on the minds of one of your close allies. Let me segue from there into another topic, soft power. This has come up a lot already in the 24 hours of this conference. We still have Joe Nye and the audience here who coined the term soft power. There's an argument to be made that India enjoyed tremendous soft power around the world through the 20th century, largely because of the moral force of its project and what it stood for and its foreign policy. There are many observers now, people who love India even, who will say that that soft power is being eroded.

Bharat Lal:

Well, so far as the India soft power is concerned, I think you are one of the examples

Ravi Agrawal:

How so

Bharat Lal:

Indian produce people like you who go rest, stop the word and take things forward.

Ravi Agrawal:

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But I'm among the people who would argue that India's soft power is being eroded.

Bharat Lal:

But let me give example, just a few examples. Today's soft power, let's take G 20. India still has the same values, same ethics when it spoke on behalf of African Union and brought everybody together. That G 20 African Union was admitted as 21st member state during Covid to a hundred countries. India provided vaccine wherever in war zones. And when we have to equate our people, we always evacuate people from other countries, take yoga, take our engineers and our doctors, India producing roughly free 1.5 million engineers annually and roughly 110,000 doctors annually. And wherever they are going, wherever they are going, including United States of America, I think they're contributing very, very, very positively. So whatever knowledge, whatever is skill, whatever value systems are there, we try to take it to other countries and people who go from India, they carry for take yoga. Our meditation, it looks very small thing, but I think all those who practice yoga are meditation. I think it makes you a better person. If see India strike record in many, many field India, never. It never goes against, it never promotes violence. So these are the certain values I think we stand for and work project

Ravi Agrawal:

Dan Twining. Let's talk about China. 10 or 15 years ago, one could argue that in terms of India's defensive posture, it was focusing a lot more on Pakistan than it does today and a lot less on China than it does today. Everything changed in 2020 in a sense when India and China had their skirmish on the border. And in a sense that was a huge own goal on China's part. Where do you see that headed in terms of India's willingness to engage more with the West as it has an open border conflict with China?

Daniel Twining:

Great question. We could run a seminar on this all day. Ambassador Blackwell. I think India by and large made a strategic decision in 1998 and it's culminated and grown. 2020 was a wake up call when Chinese forces invaded and took Indian territory in the Himalayas. That China, not Pakistan is enemy number one. Pakistan in this configuration is actually kind of an agent of China rather than its own danger, which it remains because of fostering extremism, et cetera. So India has more to lose arguably than any major power in the world. From a future, if America should retrench and retreat and put our head in the sand and China commands the heights of the world economy, the international political system, India is in huge trouble, right? India has a foreign policy strategy premised on the rise of a multipolar world. Now, this is different from the strategy of Russia and China because in fact, one of our Indian friends who sometimes has been a China skeptic made this point just last week during the Modi Summit with Putin, which is that India wants a multipolar world.

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But unlike China and Russia is actually quite comfortable with American primacy in that world, India wants more international space, more strategic space for itself to rise and flourish and develop the way China had quite a lot of strategic space to rise and flourish and develop. Unfortunately now we're dealing with some of the consequences of that. India has very little margin for error. They share, this is the longest contested border in the world. The configuration of forces on that border right now is a clear and present danger to India. China claims a large tract of Indian territory, so India wants a multipolar world. It is aligning with the United States and other friendly democracies, Japan, Australia, friends in Europe, et cetera. That is the primary thrust that I still see of India's foreign policy, Russia. Last point, Russia had, there was a logic to the India Russia relationship for many years.

It was kind of a cold war carryover. India's military is still very dependent on Russian supply. What's changed since the invasion of Ukraine, which connects very directly to India, even though India has tried to stay out of it. What's changed is that Putin is now Xi Jinping's younger brother. And so the Indian equation, I don't think any longer works, which is that Russia can help India balance China and Pakistan. In fact, I think India needs to make a new set of choices that recognize the reality that Russia and China are in a proto military alliance. This is a huge danger to India

Ravi Agrawal:

Ambassador, if you can expand on that. What strikes me, I'm not sure everyone realizes this, but China is India's biggest trading partner and prime minister Modi is under some pressure now from corporate Indian companies that want India to actually open up some of the things that were closed off from 2020 onwards. I'll also point out that India has lost some territory to China refuses to admit it in public. It's a very tricky situation for India to navigate.

Robert D. Blackwill:

It is, and I agree entirely with the eloquent generalizations of Dan. Here is an irony and a peculiarity. India has to do with the India China relationship. China is challenging Indian sovereignty and consistently violating it. And yet across the world, when Putin sends his army in to commit war crimes in Ukraine, India is not able to condemn that and continually avoids condemning it. And the connection between the two is ironic because India has an enormous power on its border, which is challenging its sovereignty, and yet and yet does not defend the proposition that you don't change borders by force.

Ravi Agrawal:

Mr. Law, do you want to reflect on that? I mean, again, to tie into our soft power conversation, it would be a soft power win for India to make the kind of statement that Ambassador Blackwell just suggested.

Bharat Lal:

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You have seen it what Ambassador Blackwell is saying, I fully endorse it, that India has consistently, it has told President, put prime Minister himself, has told that this is not an era of war. And in this visit also he has to, but just keep one thing in mind, neither it is interest of the whole world, not in India, that Russia and China come together. So I think if India is able to have some kind of relationship with Russia, I think it is in everybody's interest, it serves certain purposes.

Ravi Agrawal:

Let me ask you this, is there a reason why India can't publicly admit that China's sliced off some territory?

Bharat Lal:

No, not necessarily. See, there are borders, which basically both the sides they keep on patrolling and they go back to their lines. But two years back, China tried to undertake certain construction activities and permanently occupied that case. And as from my understanding, in two or three sectors, it has to be resolved.

Ravi Agrawal:

That was a non acknowledgement, but I'll let that pass. Let me ask you about business. We haven't talked about India's economy yet. The trend lines have long been very strong in terms of annual growth rates. The biggest concern that all of us have for India is job creation. Unemployment rates are stubbornly high youth unemployment is running at around about 15%. Many observers will say one of the primary reasons why the BJP didn't win as many seats as it wanted to was in some sense a buildup of youth disaffection. However you interpret that it is a problem India needs to do more about. India also needs to figure out foreign direct investment, which is down year on year for the last three years. How are you thinking about approaching those challenges in the next five years?

Bharat Lal:

See, Indian voters has, if you see the result very carefully, it has voted for continuity. A third term has been given to this government and the government. But second point is that if you see the voted percentage, take BJ, P, whatever, last time it got 37%. Almost same number it has got. But it was tactical alliance in different state, which specifically resulted to certain other kind of numbers. This is the first part, second point that in different state, as you all know, that India is a diverse country, 29 states. Each state has its own challenges, own issues. Somewhere military reforms is playing out somewhere. Farmers are, agriculture reform is playing out certain places, some kind of permutation in combination. The partnership with regional party comes. That comes out. But the most important part is that so far as the direction of the reforms, direction of the governance is concerned, I think Indian electorate has given a very clear verdict that yes, they want this government to continue in certain direction, certain messages also there.

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But more important there are challenge is that roughly 46% of our population is involved in agriculture, which is basically share is 15% of the GDP and 70% population is dependent on it. So 15% GDP, 46% workforce and 70% population dependent. I think this need to be sorted out, this need to be sorted out. And second part is that yes, we have been focusing on manufacturing, but as we all know that manufacturing has a certain limitation when it comes to job creation. So the third dimension, that service sector in India, I think it has a huge role and it has to be backed by quality education and quality skilling. And that is being done in addition to infrastructure and digital, physical infrastructure and other issues.

Ravi Agrawal:

If I had to ask you one last question about the election, it would be this, your government got a reduced mandate, the vote share is still 37%. You're right on that, but it wasn't what you had wished for. And so in as much as the voters are telling you something that there's something they're unhappy about, is there a lesson to learn there?

Bharat Lal:

Well, my current position doesn't allow me to deliberate on those electoral politics, but I think all those who are understand that you will find that case by case, state by state, you'll go, you'll find that some tactical regions, some tactical region, if you take one state after another, a state is specific issue. A state is specific issue and it is basically community. Are there some economic challenges? As I hinted, it could be farming, it could be military reform. When recruitment is taking place in armed forces only for five years earlier, reduced to be 20 years, this thing. So these are the factors which has reduced the number. It's not like that there has been any kind of angst against the government, but yes, in certain pockets, in certain sphere, there has been different expectation from people from the government and especially on the two camps, agriculture reform. And second thing is that what we call military reforms.

Ravi Agrawal:

I'll take that. Okay. We're almost out of time. I want to get in a couple of audience questions. I will take two questions. I'll take them together and we'll put them to our panel. Let me see. Hands, hands, hands. Okay. Only in the front row, there's one here and one there. So both front row questions, please make it a question and short and we will put them to our panelists. Sir, you're first and then here.

Question 1:

Hello, my name's Kim Ro with the State Department, and we're also a rising leader. My question is India has been accused of forced allegations of engaging in transnational repression, particularly against political opponents and activists around the world, particularly Canada. What do you assess

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as the broader implications of India's international relations and measures that the United States and other countries can take to address this? Thank you.

Ravi Agrawal:

That's a great question. This is about an alleged assassination, actual assassination in Canada that the Canadians alleged. India was behind. India says it played no role in it. Ambassador, I'm going to put that to you and we'll take the other question as well.

Question 2:

Hi, I'm Joey with the outpost, also a rising leader. A lot of our hope for the India US partnership is based on the economic dependency that we can help facilitate over the next 15, 20 years. We took the same strategy with China a couple decades ago. That hasn't worked out well for us in building the alliances closer and aligning our incentives for the future. What else do we need to do differently to help bring our countries closer together?

Ravi Agrawal:

Terrific question. Okay. A very quick last one from Asha Jja right there behind you. A question please.

Question 3:

Thank you so much. Just a quick question is about the role of the diaspora. How do you see, see the role of the diaspora, given that we are adamant that the US India partnership has to be stronger and we are working 24 7 on this mission at every level, from regulations to AI, to funding various think tanks in DC and stuff like that. Do you see that as a positive? And do you think India would support that kind of momentum from us and say we build trust based on the fact that we have 5 million strong Indian diaspora here?

Ravi Agrawal:

Okay, that's enough from questions. Har, I'm going to ask you to maybe take on Mr. Dejas question and then ambassador, I'm going to end with you on the other two.

Bharat Lal:

As Asha, you know better the Indian, wherever they go, I think by and large, they prove to be a kind of role model citizens. And we expect that diaspora, wherever they're working in US or in other countries, they must contribute in that society, in that country. And B, I think they can bring prosperity when they do these kind of things, I think they're going to make huge contribution in basically building this relationship between respective countries, India and US or any other country. So my message would be that yes, diaspora who have come to us, they must contribute in American

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society, in this countries prosperity, and that will help the whole two countries coming together. Ambassador Blackwell, I'm going to give you the last word

Robert D. Blackwill:

On the issue of the assassination. This is now being investigated, as was said. The Indian government denies it, but we have to see what facts emerged from the investigation. And it's in my judgment too early to begin condemnations about India without the case being proven. So let's let the judicial process proceed. I want to say something about less. I be misinterpreted earlier about the US India relationship over the period ahead. The Chinese military philosopher Zu once said, don't worry about the challenges in front of you, worry about the challenges beyond the third mountain range. I think we'll be with India beyond the third mountain range, but there's going to be a bumpy period here where India has to leave. And this was said earlier by Dan has to leave many of its tried and true diplomatic frameworks to deal with the rise of Chinese power. And the United States, as the previous panel emphasized, has to be confident and resolute in the period ahead to reverse these negative strategic trends and to persuade India that it's a good bet to bet on the United States because just to vivify it, India now basically has a strategy that the United States is capable of dealing with China to produce the necessary equilibrium. If it concluded that China was inevitably going to dominate the Indo-Pacific, it would have a very different strategy.

Ravi Agrawal:

That's a great response and great note to close on. I want to thank Ambassador Blackwell, Dan Twining, and frankly, especially Mr. Paral, it's not often journalists like me get to speak with Indian officials in America. So thank you very much for coming and subjecting yourself to.