

A Realist Explanation for India's Rejection to the US Offer of Mediation

Written by Carlos Gustavo Poggio Teixeira and João Paulo Nicolini Gabriel

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CARLOS GUSTAVO POGGIO TEIXEIRA AND JOÃO PAULO NICOLINI GABRIEL, MAY 20 2017

There are many recent events that suggest that Indian-Pakistani ties are returning to a hazardous level of mutual hostility. Despite some attempts to create diplomatic dialogues, both countries still see themselves as rivals. Recently, a Pakistani military court had sentenced an Indian to death for espionage and New Delhi accused Pakistani officials of killing and mutilating two Indian officials in Kashmir. Moreover, non-state actors' actions make this context more complicated. Terrorist attacks against Indian military units and riots in Kashmir against security forces repression hamper bilateral solutions. For those reasons, the United States ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, member of Indian-American community, stated that Trump's administration considers to assist India and Pakistan to de-escalate their historical conflictual relationship. It is not the first time that an external international actor offered to mediate this question; but, as usual, Indian government readily refused any direct third-party role in resolving it.

During the presidential campaign, Trump attended to a Hindu-American rally in New Jersey and praised Narendra Modi. Not only Trump's willingness to lure the Indian-American community, but also his similarities with Modi's political strategy induced analysts to try to interpret what would represent a concomitant government of two nationalists for their countries' ties. Indeed, their campaign were very similar: they both ran a national campaign against a "corrupt establishment", faced a member of a traditional political family, criticized the government for being "too soft" on fighting terrorism, heavily used social media, and spoke as the ordinary people's representative. Moreover, Trump's proclaimed acquiescence with Indian concerns over terrorism in Asia expressed in a phone call with Modi, which the American president considered the Asiatic country a "truly friend", provided arguments for those who affirmed that two heads of State could boost Indian-American relations due to their closeness in terms of ideology.

However, this kindness in the official speech did not promote a change in the historical Indian inflection on debating internationally its national security and territorial integrity issues – intrinsically linked to its ties with Pakistan which are getting tense again. For those who continue to advocate for a constructivist argument stating that India and the United States have developed an ideological convergence based in democratic values and principles since the end of Cold War, New Delhi's policy to Pakistan, mainly the Kashmir issue, continues to demonstrate that pragmatism and power, as advocated by realists, still plays a decisive role in international relations. Thus, India's rejection of any external interference in certain subjects demonstrates that the realist vision on international cooperation, advocated by Joseph Grieco (1988), is more appropriate to explain India-US ties. For this scholar, cooperation among States basically happens just when countries realize that it brings "relative gains" and in areas that are not too delicate to give up part of its national interests to converge with the other side.

In the last few years, the international system has encouraged India and the US to open new channels for cooperation. What was once marked by antagonism is now considered one of the most important partnerships of the twenty-first century. Instead of describing India-US ties as a convergence of values, this article argues that the approximation between the two countries occurred through a mutual strategic perceptions adopted in order to deal with the new systemic interactions. Analyzing India's unwillingness to accept an external actor in its issues on national security or its policy towards Pakistan, particularly in the case of Kashmir, this article aims to demonstrate

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that Indian refusal to accept the United States mediation is a natural move to defend its national interests inside an international system that hinders cooperation.

New speech, old problems

In spite of the enthusiasm demonstrated in diplomatic conversations or among their supporters, some initial outcomes involving sensitive topics has shown that make India and the United States become "friends" is not as easy as some people think. Consider the Indian-Pakistan issue as example, as a candidate Trump promised to be more assertive against Islamic fundamentalism and considered asking India to help him on combating nuclear proliferation in Asia. For some Indian policymakers who were not convinced of Obama's commitment in completely endorsing their claims over regional issues due to his reticence in taking strong action in areas which could trigger diplomatic disagreements with China and Pakistan, Trump's apparent assertiveness against Islamic terrorism was well received by many as a possible "turning point" in the United States' policy.

However, the first moments of the new American administration have not showed significant moves. Trump's government has already taken two substantial actions involving the relationship between India and Pakistan: proposed to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to classify a leader of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) Masood Azhar as a global terrorist and expressed concerns on India-Pakistan affairs while offering to mediate a process to resolve their issues. While the first attempt was well received for the Indian government because it is an Indian claim and represents an harmony between India's and the United States' interests to fight against jihadist organizations, the latter was refused due to the fact that New Delhi does not want external interferences there.

If India and the United States share the same values and principles, why does New Delhi not support an American mediation of India-Pakistan affairs? The answer for this question is similar to what former presidents of the United States faced when they tried to reduce tensions between the two countries: India wants to have its interests safeguarded and be seen at the international arena as a responsible great power able to solve its own problems.

India's position serves as an example of one basilar premise of the realist theory, as advocated by scholars such as Kenneth Waltz: States live in an anarchic "self-help" environment that forces them to act selfishly, to survive and reach their international goals and therefore seeing no reason to trust each other. Thus, when Washington proposes to be a mediator between New Delhi and Islamabad, according to Grieco's realist perspective of international cooperation, India's policymakers shall bear in mind two variables: a) how much of its national interest will be compromised to reach an agreement; b) what are the possible consequences of having an external agent as mediators. In addition, the willingness to cooperate varies according to the area chosen: if it is intrinsically linked to national security (e.g. nuclear deterrence or territorial delimitation), New Delhi will be less prone to engage in a negotiation or even accept a mediator.

Even if Trump says the last attempts to reach an agreement between India and Pakistan on Kashmir were not accomplished because formers presidents of the United States were supposedly not as good as he is in negotiations, the new leader should consider the calculus carried out by India and Pakistan and understand what this question represents for both countries.

Due to historical, social and geopolitical elements, Kashmir is seen by both countries as part of their territories. India and Pakistan have already fought wars over Kashmir, not to mention the constant attacks perpetrated by Islamic organizations, which New Delhi accuses of being sponsored by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), or incidents involving officials from both countries. This context of national rivalry makes cooperation unfeasible due to the complete incompatibility of interests reinforced by the nationalist feelings present in local societies and mutual lack of confidence.

However, the lack of incentive in cooperating cannot explain everything. If it was the only problem, an external actor or an International Organization serving as a mediator which proposes mechanisms to avoid risks and to increase transparency could be well received by the disputing countries as it has happened in other international conflicts.

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This is an idiosyncratic situation not only because both sides have the dissuasive power of nuclear weapons – which makes it more delicate – but also the suspicion that mainly Indian government has on the involvement of other agents in this context. The initiative of the United States for mediation stumbles on the American unwillingness of imposing its agenda there to not cause diplomatic problems with two partners and mainly on the nature of State, which plays a considerable role in Indian policymakers perspective, to not allow external actors to interfere in its national security affairs.

As former president Obama, the new president of the United States will realize that the Kashmir issue is seen by both countries as a zero-sum game. The United States engagement in a diplomatic alternative is not well received by New Delhi and Islamabad – although the latter officially approves in terms an intermediation as far as it corresponds to Pakistani interest. Thus, it is noted that although official narratives foster an optimistic idea of cooperation based on values, issues of national interest focused on security outweigh this discourse. Despite the exchange of courtesies and tweets between Modi and Trump, there is a complex international scenario based on a constant conflict among States for their respective survivals that does not allow “friends” in international relations.

About the author:

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