Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu on the U.S.-India Partnership

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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- Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu, India's Ambassador to the United States

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Aparna Pande:

Good afternoon and welcome to all who are watching this webinar on US-India relations. Relations between the oldest and the largest democracies in the world, the United States and India, date back centuries. In March 2000, then President Bill Clinton, and then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, referred to each other countries as natural allies. In recent years, the relationship has been referred to as a defining partnership of the 21st century. To discuss this critical relationship, we are fortunate to have with us today someone I deeply admire and have known for almost a decade, India's ambassador to the United States, Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu. Welcome, Mr. Ambassador.

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

Thank you.

Aparna Pande:

Mr. Ambassador, I would request you to deliver your opening remarks and then I look forward to our discussion.

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

Thank you, Aparna. I'm delighted to be joining this conversation today. Of course, I've interacted with Hudson Institute during my earlier stints in DC. I do admire your Institute's scholarship on India. The theme for today's discussion is India-US partnership. I will start with brief initial remarks. In 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr. visited India on a month-long tour. During the course of his visit, he noted that the world owed much to the nonviolent struggle of Mahatma Gandhi. He acknowledged his own intellectual debt to Mahatma Gandhi, and would write and speak about his visit on several occasions afterwards.

Close to five decades before Martin Luther King's visit, a young Indian scholar, BR Ambedkar, made a journey in the opposite direction. Dr. Ambedkar, who would become the architect of India's Constitution spent time at Columbia University and was deeply influenced by American political thought. So it was natural that when he and other Indian leaders set about writing the Indian Constitution, they would turn to America's Constitution for inspiration. Our fundamental rights draw from the US Bill of Rights. The concept of an independent judiciary and a federal structure that would celebrate the diversity of the country were similarly inspired by the United States. In fact, the very idea of a written constitution, which we adopted came from the US.

I highlight these examples to set in context, the long history of India-US relations. In a few days, United States will be celebrating 244 years since independence. It is these shared values, democracy, liberty, and equality of opportunity, all under rule of law, which are the foundation of India-US relationship. As the world largest and oldest democracies, we are natural allies. The shared values also enable an ecosystem of open exchange of ideas of information, which informs every facet of our bilateral cooperation. There has always been a strong bipartisan support in the United States and in India for the relationship reflecting its strength and wide acceptance and dynamism. In the last two decades or so, our relationship has been on an upward trajectory.

During the recent visit of president of the United States to India in February, we upgraded our relationship to a comprehensive global strategic partnership. Today, there is no aspect of human activity in which India and United States do not cooperate. I would say that economy, defense and security, our knowledge and innovation partnership and people-to-people ties are the main pillars of our bilateral relationship. Our bilateral trade is over $150 billion with potential to grow even more. All major US
fortune 500 companies are among the 2,000 US companies that have invested in India. At the same time, Indian companies numbering over 200 have invested more than $22 billion in the US economy. They have created more than 125,000 jobs in this country.

Energy has become an important pillar of our strategic partnership. The bilateral energy trade is set to cross $10 billion. India imports 80% of its crude oil needs, which are growing. It is the fourth largest importer of energy. With $20 billion in energy trade in just four years, United States is becoming an important partner in our energy security. We are not only buying, but also investing in energy in the United States.

Our defense partnership is stronger than ever before. India was designated as a major defense partner of the United States in 2016. Our defense trade has crossed $21 billion. We have signed enabling agreements, such as LEMOA, COMCASA, which enabled use of common platforms by our forces and also exchange of high-end technology. The two-plus-two engagement format between our defense and foreign ministers have been successful in steering our defense partnership. Both India and United States support a free and open Indo-Pacific based on rule-based order, based on ASEAN centrality with freedom of navigation and peaceful settlement of disputes under the framework of international law. This reflects a growing strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific region.

We are engaging closely in this area, including with other partners. Large scale trial services exercises such as Tiger Triumph display an integrated approach in HADR efforts in the Indo-Pacific. Our knowledge partnership is often ignored when we referred to the strategic partnership. But I would say that in many ways, this is the future of our partnership. The fruits of this cooperation will be orthotic benefit to the world. To give you an example, there are at least three ongoing partnerships in COVID-19 vaccine development between our companies and institutions. Gilead Sciences has entered into an agreement with seven Indian companies to manufacture and distribute remdesivir, which has been authorized for emergency use against COVID-19 to several other countries in the world. In fact, 126+ countries.

Like health, there are other areas where our cooperation is of consequence. Climate change is an area where we can work closely together. We have set an ambitious target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by one third, by 2030. We have a target of 40% energy production using clean technologies and United States can be an important partner in that. Renewable energy is an area where India has already taken leadership in the world through initiatives, such as International Solar Alliance and Coalition of Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the true bridge between our two countries, the strong and vibrant Indian-American community numbering over four million. In addition, there are around 200,000 Indian students, mostly in STEM areas and thousands of other professionals who are working in high-tech areas, including in cutting-edge emergent technologies in AI and data analytics. They are an integral part of innovation ecosystem of the United States, which makes the US economy competitive. The admirable work of the Indian-American community has again come to light during the current pandemic where doctors and healthcare professionals from the community have been at the forefront of response and recovery. Indians are amongst the CEOs of major fortune 500 companies. And there are thousands of small businesses owned by Indian-Americans.

Even as we celebrate the success of our partnership, we must ask difficult questions of the emerging world order in wake of COVID-19 pandemic. Just like the United States, India has always supported a rules-based world order. Our recent election unopposed as non-permanent member of the United nations Security Council will advance our goal of reformed multilateralism. India and United States are working together on regional and international issues of global implications, be it conquered terrorism, cybersecurity, or sustainable development. As a democracy of 1.3 billion people, our primary goal will
continue to be the development of our economy and lifting people out of poverty even as we ensure the safety and security of our people.

India is undergoing profound social and economic change. Our population is young and aspirational. We need to provide them with opportunities for them to realize their aspirations and to build a new India. With the immediate focus will be on economic recovery, our prime minister has set an ambitious goal of transforming India into a five trillion economy by 2025. Our partnership with the United States is critical in translating India's bold vision for development into a reality. There is much that India-US partnership has achieved, and there is much more that remains to be done in the days ahead. Thank you.

Aparna Pande:

Thank you, Ambassador Sandhu. As you mentioned in your remarks, there are three broad pegs to the India-US relationship, strategic, economic and people to people. And in your remarks, you have touched on all of them. I was hoping to ask you to speak a little more on some of these issues, and I'll start off with something which is currently in the realm of news in the US as well. India lies at the core of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. And as you mentioned, our strategic relations has strengthened in the last few years. In the backdrop of the current ongoing border clash with China, how do you see the China factor playing into India-US relations in the weeks and months and years ahead?

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

See, as I mentioned to you on several accounts, the United States and India partnership, whether it is strategic or it is economic, or it is in what I mentioned to you, the future that is knowledge industry, if we can call it like that, this is destined to move ahead, irrespective of China. Now you have, of course, mentioned about the recent border crisis, which has its own history. I think I don't have to point out to what in the post-COVID recently the activities of China, that is for everybody to see, study and perceive it. As far as we are concerned, you are aware that we have a long border with China. A lot of it is line of actual control. For a number of years, we have not had an active border there, but there have been transgressions over time. But this time around, as in the past tradition, we have tried to sort it all and we're committed to sorting it out peacefully.

However, there was what appears to be a premeditated action of actually indulging in violence. Had what had been followed in the past and what was committed on the commander's level on June, early June, had that been implemented, we would not come to this. So therefore that's why it appears that there is a design. However, what I want to mention to you is that irrespective of whatever our relationship with United States is, as my prime minister and the leadership had mentioned that the spirit in India is robust. And as far as territory integrity is concerned, we are determined that will be taken care of. Certainly on the economic dimension, there is going to be a great opportunity. There are challenges, no doubt, because world over we are going to face an economic crisis, but post-COVID the kind of economic activity, the kind of interactions also is going to change. So it's not going to be a static situation.

In a scenario in which you are well aware that Indian market still is unsaturated. So there is a whole lot of scope. So in our time when there is talk of shifting supply chains, et cetera, the Indian leadership has certainly taken note and at the level of the prime minister. In fact, almost a month back an initiative was taken where the top ministers were called in and Prime Minister has shared his vision. So I do think there is a great opportunity here, and there is going to be a lot of scope.
And if I may also add one significant part, which you are aware here, I don't know how much in India that has been realized at people's level, but the fact that India has been a reliable supply chain partner has gone down very, very low, not only amongst the leadership, but also amongst the people that in pharmaceuticals and other areas, despite our huge internal requirements, we ensured that whatever supplies were requested were taken care of. And that is also going to be playing a major role when a number of international companies are looking to invest and India will be a favorite destination.

Aparna Pande:

Thank you, Ambassador. So I will ask you my economic questions since you talked about what India-US are doing currently. And the question I'd ask is, and this is something which a number of our audience would like to know. There has been talk the last few years about an India-US trade deal, whether mini or medium or large. First, do you see any sort of any progress on that front? Is there anything you can tell our audience about it? And the second question I had was you mentioned that US is trying to restructure global supply chains. It's trying to decouple from China and India has also sort of pushed the idea that India would like to move away from dependence on China and Chinese products. For American companies who are watching the show and this talk of ours, what would you tell them? What does India offer that Vietnam or Philippines does not offer? Why should they sort of decide to move to India rather than another country in South or Southeast Asia? Thank you, Ambassador.

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

Let me at the start say why you have said that there is movement from China, India as an alternative, I would say India is an investment alternative otherwise, irrespective of China. And the reason for that as you have absolutely laid it out, that why should these companies be looking at India. So I would say again, that you know, look at the basic statistics. I have mentioned to you, the huge market. We have seen our leadership immediately is not only tackling COVID, but has also insured that major structural changes are in the process. Agriculture for one, there is a clear indication that we will go in for a one unified market. That holds a huge advantage to many of the agriculture aspects of US exports. So that's one, the huge market is an advantage. Then you are aware that we have a huge working age population, which is young. So that's an advantage. The Indian labor costs are amongst the lowest. You know there's a huge planned infrastructure investment. And then we have, we are also creating industrial parks across India.

Then in very recent days, you have seen that competitive tax regime is being put in place. Income tax is being reduced big time. Then there is of course a strong reform agenda. And some of them I have mentioned, but let me mention in the post-COVID situation, which is very, very recent you've seen that there is a 25.5 billion relief package, which has targeted a large number of not only women, but many of the households. Then also the health workers, the emergency health workers, we have taken care of that. On the farmers, I mentioned to you on the facilitation of the farmers, 15 billion has been allocated there. There are a number of these areas. Then of course, FDI reforms that has taken place. Then in bank and CAPSI Code, some of the financial sector. Labor reforms, there are plans to merge 44 labor laws under four categories.

So a number of these, including in National IPR policy, GST, I'm not going into details on that. On R&D and then finally the focus areas, food processing, renewable energy, electronics, pharma. If specifically you ask, I will certainly go into those. Retail sector, oil and gas, et cetera, et cetera. So I do feel that there is a whole lot of inherent advantage in investing into India. And I'm hopeful that the American companies, which keep their eyes and ears open will certainly look at the opportunities of investing into India.
Aparna Pande:
Thank you, Ambassador. You mentioned this in your opening remarks about what you call the knowledge partnership and that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to this additional area of collaboration with not just government-to-government, but businesses and researchers. And you mentioned a few examples. Could you elaborate a little more? I mean, there has been the ventilators, I believe which the United States has supplied. India has provided hydroxychloroquine and remdesivir. Some of the other examples of cooperation, because that is something which sort of you don't hear much about in the news.

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:
No, you're absolutely right. And as I told you that this is going to be the future. We already had a robust partnership in this, and especially in health and scientific research, but as you likely said, the focus always comes on some of the other strategic areas. And this gets ignored. You know that in the very recent past, we had partnered together and collaborated in producing another vaccine for another virus. It's called rotavirus. And this vaccine is not only popular in both our countries, it has also been distributed in public health in many of the African countries. So similarly at this time, there are at least between ICMR and its institutions here that is in India and here NIH and CDC, they are very closely in touch and they are working together. At least there are three ongoing collaborations in the areas of vaccine development.

So Bharat Biotech, for example, Serum Institute, Thomas Jefferson University here, the University of Wisconsin Madison. Some of these are the examples who are closely working together, and we are hopeful that there will be success in this. Then, as I mentioned to you, that seven Indian companies, Cipla, Jubilant, Mylan, Zydus. Some of them have already signed agreements with Gilead on remdesivir which is going to be together marketed in 127 countries. So you know that India has a great success in mass production, and that plays an important role in public health. So that's one kind.

Then of course, we have this US-India science and technology endowment fund, which has called for proposals that would enable scientists to collaborate, to carry out joint research and especially in fight against COVID-19. So that's another area which is very much in go. And then of course I told you our students, these students are a major factor and most of them more than three-fourth are in STEM areas.

Aparna Pande:
Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. In your remarks, you had mentioned the people-to-people bond and the fact that there are four million Indian-Americans, there are hundreds of thousands of students sort of, and people who work and people of Indian citizenship, I'm one of them. I was a student of this country, then I had a work visa and now I have a permanent residency here. So I'm one of those who is in this country. India has a very large global diaspora and a little known fact is that during times of crisis, the Indian government actually evacuates and repatriates its citizens. Currently from midnight from May 2020, the government of India has launched the Vande Bharat Mission, repatriating citizens from around the world and the Indian embassy here and it's consulates have also been working. Could you speak about something which most people really don't know much about in this country? Could you elaborate on the mission, what it entails and how it is progressing?
Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

Yes. You know post-COVID, I mean, COVID was absolutely unprecedented situation. It took everybody by surprise. And in this context, on the directions of our prime minister, the embassy and the consulate moved very early. In fact, on 11th of March to be pretty precise, we set up 24/7 helplines. We reached out to a large number of students. In fact, we created a special platform which continues, which has now an outreach to almost more than 70,000 Indian students. But let me just give you the context in terms of facts, what is at play here. We have more than, as I mentioned, 200,000 Indian students, we have more than 600,000 Indian Green Card holders, and we have more than 125,000 H1-Bs here. So you can see the number of Indian nationals who are here. So evacuation, because a number of requests started coming on, we dished out on public media, through whatever platforms we could get. And I mentioned to you, we have a special student platform to which we are linked with more than almost 75,000 students top.

So once the government of India decided to undertake the Vande Bharat evacuation program, the US aspect in fact started quite early. That is from May onwards, we started these flights. It was done very scientifically because we have had on our platform about 40,000 registrations so far. So we went about in a methodical way. We again did an electronic lottery system by which different categories of people based on the weightage on the numbers who had registered. We have undertaken those evacuations. Four basically stations were in theirselves were identified from where the flights will go. Now, up till now we have had about almost 45 flights. We have another 45, 50 flights by the time we finish off this particular phase.

Perhaps again, depending upon when the commercial flights will start off at this time, government of India is also looking which are the countries are permitting foreign national or foreign carriers to fly out. Based on that a decision will be taken. But perhaps we are looking at the fourth phase also starting in July. At the fall of July, we will have these evacuation flights and then in August, perhaps a call will be taken whether commercial flights start or we continue with that. In terms of numbers, we still have a long way to go, but this is the largest evacuation exercise that has been undertaken. And as I mentioned to you, we have close to 40,000 requests. We have still managed to only cover part of it so far.

Aparna Pande:

Wow, amazing Ambassador. So four successive American administrations, both Democrat and Republican have sought to build a better relations with India. With the upcoming US presidential elections this November, are you confident that India-US ties are bipartisan enough that it will not make a difference who is president as of November?

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

Aparna, I have been here, the first time I was here was in 1997. So I have had the distinct honor of seeing the relationship over time. And therefore, let me answer you from my experience. As I mentioned in my opening remarks that our relationship is bipartisan and I will not go into names. I can tell you since I was the Congressional Liaison Officer and at that time in '97, it was a very new setup. And many of those leaders are still around and in much senior leadership positions. So we have had support both from Republicans and from Democrats. And I’m confident the relationship is between United States and India, and there is so much more in today's set up to further deepen this relationship.

So therefore, irrespective of whichever administration is there our relationship is between United States and India, as I underlined and at the people-to-people you interact, you talk. I think in your time from
when you came in as a student, and if you measure it today, it is almost unbelievable. So some of the things which I'm tackling as ambassador, if I look back when I was here as a First Secretary, it looks almost unbelievable. But even at that time, I felt that this relationship will certainly go ahead. And even today I feel it's on a positive trajectory and this is still tip of the iceberg for various reasons, which I brought out right from our old traditions, our democratic atoll spirit, the thinking of the institutions. So there is definitely a great this.

And let me just point out one aspect to you, often it's seen as in symbolism terms, but let us see from President Clinton's term onwards. In the recent time, whenever the president of the United States has gone to India and there has been an effort to reach out to people, including the last visit, the people in India have responded in big time. And this is despite the fact that United States had not had to sink billions of dollars in India. There is positivity. There is the young, which are aspirational that United States is seen as a friend. And I think it's significant because some of the other countries where billions have been sunk in, I don't have to say more.

Aparna Pande:

Thank you, Ambassador. Now my final question to you, and this is, you mentioned this is I believe your fourth stint overall in the US? Three in DC and I believe one in New York, if I'm not mistaken?

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

Yes. The DC one are linked with United States. The New York one was to the UN, I was only there.

Aparna Pande:

Yes, but US, so let's say, three stints in DC. You have built a number of friendships and relationships over the years. How does it feel to be back here as ambassador? Any challenges or opportunities, and is there any way that we can help you or I can help you in your challenges or opportunities?

Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:

I could tell you from all my three postings, the posting in the United States is never dull. There'll always be interesting challenges, but there are great opportunities. And as I mentioned to you from '97 to now, where the relationship has come, but still there's a lot that can be covered. And I feel certainly we have a challenge right now, and I'm sure we will overcome and then 10 years later, perhaps we are discussing [inaudible 00:35:16] and he that this was also one of the milestones. And certainly people in think tanks, the think tanks, all around can certainly play an important role. And that important role is that there is importance of looking at the bigger picture. Sometimes I find that a lot of energy is spent on smaller issues. The relationship between United States and India is much bigger and it needs to go keeping that big picture in mind here.

Look, I'll be very honest to you. Every democratic polity has challenges. India too has challenges, but keep in mind, it's 1.3 billion people and considering that elections are coming here. If you look back in our last election, you know the percentage of participants was 70%. Look at the vibrant democracy. Look at the people, they have so much pride in their vote. They come out and vote. And therefore, I think we certainly need to have the larger perspective and there's a lot of ground to be covered. A lot of it, which you have mentioned. And as I last underlined, that the knowledge partnership is going to be huge and it's going to be deep.
And you know these students, these 200,000 students, many of them, of course stay here, but Indian-Americans and them, they bring value. They bring in the competitive edge in United States. And many of these students go back and so are important bridge in not only our economic and commercial relationship, but also they take with them, the US [inaudible 00:37:26] the way of doing business and bridge the two countries together. So hopefully I’m sure you do need to highlight these aspects also because most of the time think tanks are talking about many strategic issues, but this aspect too needs to come into prominence.

_Aparna Pande:_

Absolutely. Thank you so much, Ambassador. Thank you for taking out time today. I know you have a busy schedule, and so you spend some time with us and sort of, we will continue to have such discussions on many of the issues we have discussed, not just the strategic and economic, but the knowledge partnership and the people-to-people relationship. We hope to have a few more events this year. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

_Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu:_

Thank you very much and thanks to all your team. And I look forward to our continued interaction. Take care. God bless. See you soon.

_Aparna Pande:_

Thank you.