

**Flagship Seminar  
A Matter of Trust:  
India-US Relations from Truman to Trump**

**Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)**

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**Discussants:**

**Meenakshi Narula Ahamed** – Author, “A Matter of Trust: India-US Relations from Truman to Trump.”

**Alyssa Ayres** – Dean, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University.

**Shivshankar Menon** – Distinguished Fellow, CSEP.

**Navtej Sarna former** – Ambassador of India to the United States (2016 – 2018)

Moderator: **Constantino Xavier** – Fellow, CSEP.

**Watch the event video here:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wru4xtdjv0o&t=4305s>

*The following is an edited and revised transcript from the event. It has been generated by human transcribers and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding video for the original version.*

## PROCEEDINGS

**Rakesh Mohan:** I'm Rakesh Mohan, President and Chief Executive of the Center for Social and Economic Progress, formally Brookings India. I'm delighted to welcome you all to this third flagship seminar of our series and this, of course, is focused on Foreign Policy, based on the amazing book by Meenakshi Ahamed, on a matter of trust for over 70 years of US India relations

And, I should just should just mention, our next flagship is again on Monday on Fiscal Policy, the third part of the series on next Monday at 6:00 PM. at the same place.

Let me now hand over to the moderator for this evening. Our fellow in Foreign Policy Studies, although I should call him our Czar for foreign policy studies, Constantino Xavier, who will moderate this discussion. Constantino.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you, Dr. Mohan for the introduction and welcome. So, good morning. Good evening. Good afternoon from wherever you're joining us. Welcome to the seminar. We are lucky here today to have a wonderful book as an object of our discussion, "A Matter of Trust India US Relations, From Truman to Trump." For this event, we added "and beyond" to try to look a bit at the future of this relationship. But it really is a wonderful book by Meenakshi Ahamed, just published by Harper Collins here in India. I believe it's just out in the US, so please make sure to grab your copy, whether I think e-book or good old paper copies. There really is something for every audience in the book. A lot of context history, beautifully written, great personal anecdotes, exploration of personalities of leaders on both sides. New materials in terms of the archives and presidential papers from the US. Interviews with former and current policymakers. I believe, I think, Jake Sullivan, currently national security advisor was interviewed. Also on the Indian side, former ambassador Shyam Saran, Ronen Sen, many others critical to this US India relationship.

Thank you, Meenakshi for this book and also for choosing CSEP to bring us all together here, including a really stellar panel of discussants that we have here to take this discussion about US India relations forward, in terms of the past, I won't read out their impressive biographies. They are all distinguished, remarkable experts that we have here today, but very briefly, let me just introduce them to our audience.

We have with us, of course, Miss Meenakshi Ahamed joining us from Los Angeles on the West coast, in the US early morning. She's worked at the World Bank in Washington, DC, also for the NGO Shaka Society. She has a long career in the media sector, as a correspondent of Indian Television, NDTV in the UK and writing for numerous international media houses. Good morning, Meenakshi. Welcome. You are muted, I think,

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Thank you so much Constantino. And it's such a pleasure to be here. And it's an honor to be on this panel with such distinguished people.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you. And, we have from Washington a bit closer to DC and on the East coast, Dr. Alyssa Ayres, she just recently joined as the Dean of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University in Washington, DC. She is an adjunct fellow at the council on foreign relations where she worked as a senior fellow on South Asia for many years. And most importantly, also she served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia from 2010 to 2013. She has her own excellent book on US India relations and how India is grabbing a more prominent role on the world stage. The book is called "Our Time Has Come, How India Is Making Its Place in the World." Good morning Alyssa and welcome.

**Alyssa Ayres:** Good morning and good evening to everyone in India. Happy to join today.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you. From here in Delhi, we have Ambassador Navtej Sarna. He recently served as the ambassador of India to the United States from 2016 to 2018. His long career in the Indian foreign service spans almost four decades, including as I believe the longest serving spokesperson in the Ministry of External Affairs, also heading Indian diplomatic missions to Israel and the United Kingdom. He's published various non-fiction books, with numerous awards and also has currently a monthly column on foreign policy in the Indian magazine "The Week." Welcome Ambassador Sarna.

**Navtej Sarna:** Thank you. Thank you for having me here, Constantino. Thank you.

**Constantino Xavier:** Finally, last but not least, we are lucky to have with us Ambassador Shivshankar Menon, here in Delhi. He's India's former national security advisor and foreign secretary. Posts, he had between 2006 and 2014. A long and highly distinguished diplomatic career, including also most prominently India's Ambassador to China, which he's studied, served in for many decades. Ambassador Menon is a true scholar, diplomat. We're lucky to him at CSEP as a distinguished fellow. He's also a visiting professor at Ashoka University with various books and publications. Most importantly, coming up, I believe next month, a book called "India and Asian Geopolitics, The Past Present." Good evening, Ambassador Menon.

**Shivshankar Menon:** Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

**Constantino Xavier:** Great. So, let's get into the thick of it. Meenakshi Ahamed, I think your book really, we will do justice to your book today. I promise that. Because it's just absolutely phenomenal how you've packed 75 years of US India relations into 500 pages. Anecdote, sources, interviews, I've mentioned that before, but we really have the task today here to not only examine the rich often difficult past that you bring out in US India relations, but more than that, we'll have to also try to guess how what you bring to us in terms of the history will shape the current momentum in India US relations and take it forward in particular under the new leadership of President Biden in the US.

So, I think, we'll start with three questions for you, Meenakshi, if that's okay, sort of, to give us a bit of an overview of your book, and then we'll take it forward with the other panelists. But I think first question really at the heart of the title of your book is this concept of trust. We take it for granted today, I think in the US India relations that these are deeply engaged strategic partners, but your book really shows us this was far from being true for many decades, right? There was actually mistrust. I'm thinking of one chapter where you explain the issue of the Tarapur reactor and the nuclear supplies from the US that fed deep insecurity in India and mistrust.

Another example is I think the 1985 episode where Prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi actually requests for a supercomputer from the US for weather forecast, but the US downgrades that in the computer that is given because it mistrusts India in terms of using that supercomputer for some defense applications. So there was not really much trust, but can you explain this a little bit, "Why?" Why was there so little trust? And when there was so little trust, when did that happen?

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Thank you so much, Constantino. So, yes, the book, it's titled, "A Matter of Trust" because I think there was such a trust deficit for so many years between the two countries. And when you look back at the history, I think that this problem started quite early on. When India was starting to fight for its independence, early on, India look to America for inspiration, when Wilson's 14 points that proclaimed self-determination for all countries was an inspiration for all the freedom fighters in India. This came about in 1918, and forms the basis of the League of Nations and ultimately the UN, which was formed in 1942.

And I think that, this inspired Indian leaders. And I think they thought that America would reach out and help countries like India that were trying to establish themselves as a democracy. But that actually did not happen. And so, that was disappointment number one. And when the Atlantic Charter in 1941, which was proclaimed, and this was a charter that was between really the British government and the United States, and it proclaimed that they were going to respect the rights of all people to live under a government of their own choosing. And this construct was defined in a very narrow sense by the Churchill to really just be for Europeans, because this was about Eastern Europe. And it was about Russia and Eastern Europe. And they wanted freedom for the East Europeans. And Roosevelt at the time thought that this should be extended actually to people throwing up the yoke of colonialism. So, people fighting for independence all over the world against the colonialist, they should also be allowed to have self-determination. But Churchill didn't see it that way. And there was actually quite a split between the people in the State Department in America. Many of them felt that the US would regret not supporting countries who were fighting for nationalism. But there was a big war being fought in Europe at the time. And so Roosevelt had to, in a sense, worry about that. And their priority was Europe at the time and World War Two. And so they had to back off and support Churchill.

And I think that, there's a book and this is all documented that many of the disagreements that they had between Roosevelt and Churchill were actually over India. But the Indians didn't necessarily know that. Nehru didn't know that, Gandhi didn't know that, Patel didn't know that. And so, what came across to them was really that the US was not helpful. So, that disappointment, shall we say, that deep disappointment that here we are, we're achieving independence in a very unique nonviolent way that has won the admiration of the world, yet the US hasn't actually helped us despite all their idealism about democracy. So, that sort of suspicion of the US dispersal of democratic ideals, but not actually following through on their ideology, sowed some mistrust in the minds of our original founding fathers. I mean, of the Indian founding fathers. And so, Nehru was suspicious of US intentions. Now, there were some personalities that could have mitigated that...

**Constantino Xavier:** Meenakshi, sorry, may I ask you. Could you speak up a bit in terms of volume? Thank you.

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** So, some personalities could have mitigated that. There was a brilliant decision to send Ambassador Brady who Nehru got along with very well. But as my book tells you, there were some rather sort of perfidious things that the British did to prevent the US from establishing trust within Nehru government at the time. And then the US made some mistakes. They sent some people. And then they were thoughtless about some of the ambassadors they sent, who did not necessarily get on well with Nehru.

Anyway, Nehru was not that well disposed towards the US himself having been brought up in a very English mindset. And the British wanted to maintain their assets in India. And so, they use the Mountbatten and people like that who are close to Nehru, to keep him oriented towards Britain. But there were real things like what I've just mentioned, where the seeds were sown.

Unfortunately, when Nehru made his first trip to the US, Truman and Nehru, as the trip was a sort of disaster. And I've described this in great detail in my book as to why. I don't think we have the time to get into all that. Now, people are welcome to read the book. But I think, I called it the chapter "Culture Clash." And I think there really was. And I think part of it was also a lack of understanding of how the US operated. In India, Prime Ministers have a lot of power. Nehru was determining foreign policy. And if he decided he wanted a certain sort of foreign policy, the rest of the country would follow suit. Whereas, in America, it doesn't work that way. You have to not only schmooze with the president, but you have to also bring Congress along. And so, India needed the food aid, and even if Truman wanted

to, the money, had to be appropriated from Congress. And Congress at that point wasn't that inclined. You have to prove that you are going to give something in return. And Nehru felt at the time that, "We are a country trying to get on our feet. We are a new democracy, you should be a gentleman and sort of agreed to help us." And it was a cultural thing. He didn't want to beg for aid. And the American attitude was, "Well, if you want aid, you should ask us and you should be grateful." And it was just a very difficult cultural disconnect. And so, this all is described in the book. So, I think, there were some disappointments in the way the relationship was conducted.

Fast forward down to Mrs. Gandhi, and I think the relationship there really deteriorated. How do you build up the trust? There, of course, the relationship deteriorated, and we all know what happened during the Bangladesh war. I think Nixon and Kissinger conducted their relationships in secret. They were looking for an opening to China. They wanted Pakistan as that conduit. One of their biggest mistakes, I would sort of put forward that Kissinger, one of his biggest mistakes was in South Asia, ignoring the civil war and just not understanding the gravity of the situation of the human rights crisis that then occurred. And I think that trying to sort of restore the situation afterwards, I don't think helps his legacy.

So, I think there was a lot of, let's just say, I mean, lying that went on. And there's no other polite way to put it. And I think when all the sort of facts came out, I think the mistrust, then the suspicion just deepened during that period. And you've seen all the transcripts that have come out from the tapes. There was a personal dislike as well. So, there was no trust that was going to be established there. I think the real change came when Strobe and Jaswant Singh started engaging over the nuclear issue. As you mentioned, Tarapur was a spirit of great suspicion after India exploded the bomb in 74 and India was sanctioned by the US and by the rest of the world. It left a really deep impression on India. And I think they felt that they had a contract and that the world had reneged on its contractual obligations and this was deeply felt. And I think that after Strobe and Jaswant Singh engagement, I think that the trust that was developed really started to shift the relationship.

**Constantino Xavier:** Meenakshi, if I may bring in. You're covering already, like the very interesting aspect of the normalization and the trust building, right? I mean, from that low point, I think you described the 71 things slowly start improving. You had even Indira Gandhi reaching out to Reagan, very interesting, in the early eighties. Right? You mentioned that. But then, certainly, nineties. And I think to change that you bring out in the book is, you mentioned three factors. You mentioned the economy, actually first, economic openness. You mentioned President Bush, the individual that bet big on India. And you mentioned the Diaspora. We'll cover the Diaspora later in the discussion. But on two first aspects, if you could flesh this a bit out for our audience?

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Well, I think the two things that I'd like to say is that, when you have a shift in a relationship, the shift really occurs when there is an emphasis from the top. So, either the president or the prime minister has to initiate or put the weight behind a shift in a relationship, otherwise it doesn't happen. And the shift happened, and I think that Shivshankar who is on the panel can maybe attest to this, President Bush really made that decision, that he wanted this relationship with India, and the white house was going to put their weight behind it. Unless the president was willing to do that, it wasn't going to happen. And I think he will be able to tell you because he was so personally involved in it, how it happened, because it's almost like a thriller. Because that relationship during the nuclear deal, that could have tanked in so many different ways, and it almost did. But literally, the president and the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh would go down and pull it right out and keep it going. And if they hadn't done that, it wouldn't have happened. It almost brought down Manmohan Singh government and frankly it wouldn't have happened if President Bush wouldn't have salvaged it. It really takes that level of involvement to get a relationship like this off the ground.

**Constantino Xavier:** And vice versa, also probably on the Indian side, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** And like I said, it almost brought down his government. So, it needs that kind of weight. And then the way that Rajiv Gandhi tried to reach out and he tried to put his weight behind it, but you need two to tango. And at that point, Reagan had one agenda. And his one agenda was bringing down the Russians and contain them. And India unfortunately was not important enough at the time. I mean, he liked Rajiv personally...

**Constantino Xavier:** So, 2005, Meenakshi, you actually call it the game changer. Right? And you just described why this was such an important, critical point. But then coming out to the present before we open up to the panel. In your book actually, what a very interesting line, and let me quote. It's literally, your last sentence. You are saying that "Nehru's policy of non-alignment may still be the gold standard that plots a safe course for India to navigate today's world."

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** I mean, I actually struggled with this a lot. And I will say that I do say that in today's world, it is so complicated because, Nehru created this well actually Krishna Menon came up with it, but Nehru created this policy of non-alignment. And as wrote this book, I wondered during the Nehru years, during the cold war years, it was such an irritant between the US and India. I mean, John Foster Dulles thought it was an immoral policy. Truman saw the world as black and white. If you chose not alignment, you were against us. So, did it serve India well? Was this the time when India could have benefited, had there been somewhat less uniformly aligned to? But you know what? One thing, people could have had differences of opinions on domestic policy, but everyone in India was uniformly and consistently agreed on that they wanted to remain non-aligned when it came to foreign policy. So, they were all strongly in favor of this. So, India remained non-aligned. And they held to it and it was bi-partisan. Even when the BJP came, everyone stuck to this non-aligned policy.

Today, except for when Indra Gandhi signed the friendship treaty in 1971 with the Russians, but she pulled back. She sort of even after she did that, she was uncomfortable going too far to the left. But today, I'm looking at the Quad and I'm looking at this sort of the Modi shift towards the US. And I do say in my book that when I look at a regional interest and I ask, do we really want to be that close to the US with our regional interests, we need to keep this balanced because of China. And maybe this is the time to remain not aligned. Especially, well, when I was writing the book, Trump was still president and do we really want to be lined up with someone like Trump? So, maybe this is the time when we really do want to remain non-aligned. But I would like to ask the panel, what is their view? Is non-aligned, meant the right policy for India? Can we remain non-aligned in this country? I mean, this is a question for Alyssa and Shankar. The Quad, for example, has become important to Biden because maybe the Europeans haven't been as amenable to Biden recently. He was hoping to approach China with strength, which means with his alliances. He wanted to repair or his alliances in Europe, and then approach China in a way with his European alliances that hasn't quite worked out. And the Europeans are sort of doing their own thing. And I wonder whether this Quad is now the substitute. So, I'll let them answer that question. But, I would like to throw out and ask them, is non- alignment the way to go today? What are India's options?

**Constantino Xavier:** Great. Thank you, Meenakshi. I think on that note, that's a great segue for...

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** One little question to go. I just want to also one small question that you had raised about the Cray computer. I mean, I'm sorry to just quickly take this back for one second. The one thing I will say that, in the US, people with the big budgets have the biggest power. And the Pentagon has a huge amount of power because they have the biggest budget. And there's this big joke

about how the state department carries its own suitcases, and the Pentagon flies its own planes. And the CIA is somehow going first class and getting rides with the military.

And because early on under Eisenhower, they set up a military alliance with Pakistan. And after that, once the Pentagon was invested with Pakistan, the military alliance with Pakistan continued on and off through all the various presidencies. They'd have this end use agreement and they didn't want to give the Cray computer that you brought up because they were always suspicious. "Would India share its technology with the Russians?" And because the Pentagon never had a real relationship with India for a very long time. It's completely changed now. But then, they were always suspicious. They never trusted India. So, they were never going to allow, even if the president wanted to give India the technology, the Pentagon was never going to let India get that technology. They were always going to block everything.

So, this trust factor was always critical. And even if it was going to develop in the White House, it hadn't developed in the military or the Pentagon, so you needed different departments. And that didn't happen.

**Constantino Xavier:** And that has changed also. I think radically, like you mentioned,

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** The Military relationship has just taken off.

**Constantino Xavier:** And in fact, I was surprised Meenakshi to see in your book. "I mentioned that the first ever visit of a Secretary of Defense of the US to India was 1986, Caspar Weinberger." I mean, it is just a good indicator of how underdeveloped that relationship was on the issues of suspicion and trust. We have to go to Ambassador Menon and non alignment. That's one question. But, my question on top of that is very simple. Would you say that given what Meenakshi shared with us, the US today, India trusts the US more than ever before in the history? And where does India still not trust the US entirely, if that is the case in a certain sector or the other?

**Shivshankar Menon:** On the whole non-alignment issue. I think the problem is when you use the word non-alignment, Americans think of something very different from what Indians think of non-alignment, and it's got a bad odor in the US. I prefer using strategic autonomy, because that's really the essence of non-alignment. That you make up your own mind on the issues depending on their own interests. And I think that was why there has been consensus throughout, by different governments in India on that policy. Because we didn't want to lose independence again. We've been scarred already. And I think that's the core of it.

Today, what's the alternative to non-alignment? Alignment with whom? And nobody's offering you an alliance. Nobody wants to take on your defense. What you're doing is you're working in partnership with a whole host of countries and different groups of partners for different purposes. And my mantra is sort of issue-based coalitions of the willing and able. And you build them on different issues differently. And you've seen the Quad grow and coalesce and actually address a whole host of issues, which it started as a security dialogue, but it's now doing much more. As you saw, you had a summit level meeting. So, for me, actually, strategic autonomy is the way to go. I think we mean the same thing, Meenakshi and I. But I'm not sure that non-alignment is the word I would use in today's context.

About trust, yes. I think there's a much higher level of trust between the two. But the other thing is that the interests are aligned. And...

**Constantino Xavier:** We missed your audio. I think you're...



**Shivshankar Menon:** Can you hear me now? Because we trust each other to follow our own self interest and because our interests are aligned, I think there's a much higher level of trust today. Where do we not trust each other? We are different countries. We are located in different places. We are completely different levels of development. So, those are the issues on which we will differ, but we know we will differ with democracies. We know how to deal with differences. And I hope we never forget how to. And that's something that I think we're capable of dealing with. But this is why if you look at where are the differences today, they're not political, strategic, military, they're actually in the economics where interests differ.

But I think we build trust also because we've learned. If you look at Indian diplomacy, it started engaging beyond Chancellor Reeds, beyond just going to the state department in this century. MEA set up a public diplomacy division only in this century. And if you look at the kind of work that Navtej used to do, but also the outreach, the use of the diaspora working with them, working with Congress, going to the Pentagon, going to state governors. All that only really is a fairly recent phenomenon. So, I think we learned from the experience and that builds tremendous amount of trust. And certainly among the Indian public, there's always been trust. Otherwise, how do you sell real estate in Gurgaon by calling it Palm Springs or Nassau County? Where is trust out there among the people? Which is why even through all the civil nuclear, when the fate of the government was hanging in the balance, 96% of the public supported it. The political class, the chattering class might've had a lot of trouble, but we were fairly confident that if we could just get it out there to the people, the people are on it. They liked it.

**Constantino Xavier:** But one thing, if I may press where India, you think still is not ready to trust the US entirely. Any specific example, where we think Delhi is not ready to trust Washington?

**Shivshankar Menon:** I don't think we can expect them to override their own interests in favor of ours. So, there is no way that their interests would be 100% identical to ours. But congruence is there and congruence is growing. And for that, we must think, people like China.

**Constantino Xavier:** Great. Alyssa, may I come to you and swap the question in some ways and ask you, do you think the West really trust India? I could be thinking of Russia, Afghanistan, Iran, even trade, climate. China? Can India really be trusted on China or not? So, I'm just curious, where would you say the US still today does not trust India, if that is the feeling in DC in certain areas on certain sectors?

**Alyssa Ayres:** So, let me just first congratulate Meenakshi on a tremendous book. I just wanted to say that for the record, she brings more than seven decades of this deeply researched history of the relationship and brings everything up to date, which I think makes this book a terrific contribution for anybody who has wondered how have these ties unfolded and what's changed over time. This is the place to go.

Now, let me try to tackle this question of trust. And I want to say that I do agree with what Ambassador Menon just said, in particular about the trust grew as interests began to converge more distinctly. I think that you saw, and one of the reasons that the section of Meenakshi's book that covers the civil nuclear negotiation is so important and so powerful is that it covers that watershed moment, which not only worked to undo or overcome rather, the issue that had been the single largest impediment to drawing closer strategic ties. But it also by virtue of the fact that this agreement created the need for huge changes in both countries domestically with our own laws, that created the need to build a level of extremely tight negotiations that lasted over years and that in and of itself built greater trust across the two government bureaucracies. And I think that was also an immensely important

contribution to building that trust. And I have a feeling Ambassador Menon would agree, having been on the front lines of all of that.

The question of trust today is a little bit different. And I think this has to do with the fact that the United States largely works on the basis of alliances. And India is not interested in being a traditional ally of ours, of anybody else's. India historically, does its own thing as the books so appropriately demonstrates over decades. And so, where you at times see tensions over the question of trust, it has to do with these kinds of issues. Oftentimes the United States would anticipate that its close partners will agree with us all the time, and of course that doesn't happen. And that's where you end up having some periods or some phases of tension.

There's an issue that's out there right now having to do with India's relationship to Russia, and the acquisition of the S400 System. There's a law that the US Congress passed. It's not an executive branch action, generated from the concerns of US lawmakers. So, that's hanging out there in the balance as a question of trust. And that's going to be hard to negotiate. I think, we'll have to see what happens as that's confronted.

But I do think that as our interests have increasingly converged, and we've seen a larger economic engagement over time, that has helped build up a sense of how to work together, how to connect our bureaucracies, how to get things done, how to figure out how to overcome disagreements, or if we can't, how to work and bracket those to one side and keep moving ahead in other directions. So, that's what I think is important.

I do also agree that where we see some quite difficult and perhaps extremely challenging issues to overcome are on the economic side. Many of these economic issues have been around for a couple of decades. And once you start digging into the nature of some of these disagreements, they become in fact quite complex. And that's why they're so difficult to resolve. But the fact that we can keep trying to work towards them, I think is an important piece of eventually hopefully finding some way forward.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you, Alyssa. I'll come to Ambassador Sarna. I think, Ambassador Sarna, I think on the issue of trust, no one better than you then tell us how to build trust in DC from an Indian perspective. And I wonder even today, if your experience in DC, not the recent one, but the previous one in 1998 has any sort of lessons on how India can reach out, reduce mistrust, opposition, build confidence in the US establishment on the Hill and various other stakeholders?

And I mentioned '98, because that was your posting in September, just after the nuke tests, when you had President Bill Clinton, literally, I think the book mentions that two quotes in the saying, the moment he discovers about the nuclear tests in May '98 in India, he goes into the NSC and says, "We're going down on those guys like a ton of bricks." You have sanctions, you have hostility, you have pressure. It must've been a very hostile environment in which you landed in DC in September '98. But then you have a quick shift. '98 Kargil War, the US clearly sort of indicates a greater support for India, 2000, we have the Clinton visit. 2005, just six years later, you have a nuclear deal announced in public, signed in 2008. By November, 2008, post Mumbai attacks, you actually have the US and India cooperating on intelligence and counter terrorism. So, within nine years, the relationship pivots.

But again, to your role, I mean, how do you build trust in DC? How difficult was it and what lessons are there for today?

**Navtej Sarna:** Thank you very much. And I think, firstly, I would like to agree on the issue of trust to whatever Ambassador Menon and Alyssa had said, I think all that holds very much true. But on the point of the '98 tests, I think I have a particular view on it because for several reasons, and I may be

biased. I went there because I was one of the negotiators on the CTBT. So, we had actually seen how hard the US was on this issue. And we had actually felt that we were really in a very tight corner. You must remember that the NPT had been extended perennially or forever. We had the French and the Chinese testing every week virtually. And we were reaching a point when we were not being able to test because as the book recounts how Clinton was so tough on Narasimha Rao. And said that, "Look, please don't test because we are going to sort of, as you said, come down like a ton of bricks and bring in the Glenn Amendment and the whole works."

But, I think those tests really served up a purpose. And I'm not talking in terms of our security and nuclear policy, but I'm talking in terms of waking up to United States. I mean, the atmosphere in '98, when one reached there was, as you said, "truly hostile." You got dirty looks all over the place. Nobody was willing firstly, to talk to you. But then I realized that as you walked around, you had to get out of office for this. You had to go around and push doors and they began to open. They were beginning to open essentially because there was a curiosity about India, suddenly. There was one editorial which had called our nuclear tests - I think it was Selleck Harrison who wrote the editorial, said "India's wake up call." It was literally a wakeup call.

I walked into the Washington Post newsroom actually. And they had to find a chair because you know how those newsrooms are. And said, "Okay, what do you want to say?" So I say, "I want to tell you my story." And you had to actually sit down and people began to listen. Like, "Why did this country have to do this?" People began to place you on a map that, okay, "Here's China, here's Pakistan." And then of course, as Meenakshi appropriately said, I think the start of the trust-building actually began with that long dialogue between Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh. And the getting to know each other. A very personal getting to know each other between the two diplomatic establishments, the two bureaucracies, knowledge about India. And I think while it came into full flower with George W. Bush, I think the Clinton visits to India in 2000 was really something which we can't miss out on in terms of building trust. Because he went back quite enchanted with India, I was fortunate enough to travel with the US press on that visit. And it was quite amazing as to see how he really enjoyed himself and began to see India in a slightly different light.

But your question is how to build trust? I think the building of trust that time was people fanning out, senior level diplomats from India going on visits, doing what we should be doing as a matter of routine. Going and setting up meetings with editorial boards, no matter how hostile. Going into Congress committees, meeting individual congressmen. And then actually engaging the multi-layered influencers of the United States. Because, as I said, it's not only the state department, not even only the Pentagon, but there's so much outside in the United States, the buttons, which we hadn't been playing, we started to play. And a lot of people were sent even as special envoys to go and talk to people, not always from government.

So, all that happening, I think slowly that plus I think the fact that our economy, our reforms had just started beginning to bite. India was being seen as a different economy. And there was a very strange phenomenon which happened which we saw firsthand, was the Y2K. And we used to be seen and New York Times used to call our people 'techie coolies'. But when Y2K came, everybody was scared that the January one, 2000, the computer's going to crash, bank accounts are not going to work, nothing's going to happen. And then the people who began to solve the problems were Indian IT professionals. And I must tell you, that built a lot of trust in Indian industry. People started looking at you as very competent people. And then of course they increased information, they increased engagement. You can't trust somebody unless you know somebody. So, I mean, here, the plethora of dialogues that started, I think today we have over 50 odd dialogues. The meeting of people, the ease of travel, the ease of information exchange, all that helped to build trust. Besides of course, the fact that the Diaspora began

- I've met more than one Congressman who says that his doctor is an Indian. I mean, if you can trust your body to somebody, then you know it helps you improve your trust.

And that's a very sort of broad answer. But yes, I think the critical change in our relationship from which it hasn't actually looked back was the late nineties and thereafter. And I think from there, there may have been blips, there may have been sort of little troughs and peaks, but I think broadly it's been upward.

**Constantino Xavier:** Right. And very important point about it's precisely in the moment of hostility that the outreach becomes all the more important and the accommodation and sort of the engagement. As remembering, I think another figure, I think, Meenakshi, you mentioned in your book that Ambassador Ronen Sen, at the height of the nuclear deal negotiations met with all 49 senators and I think 250 representatives in the house. I mean, that's just phenomenal in terms of outreach, probably had never happened in the history before to that degree with such a short time span.

Alyssa, I'm aware that you will have to leave us a bit earlier today. So, we have maybe another 15 minutes and I'll pick your brain on a couple of three things if you allow me. And then we can continue the discussion once you have to leave. And I apologize for that change because we messed up with the time and the daylight saving time in the US. But Alyssa, I'm keen to bring this now really to the present now and ask you to what extent...? I saw the statement that Meenakshi brings up in her book by Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment in the US. He actually tells Meenakshi in the book and I quote, "We saw this, the nuke deal very much in terms of the China question, but for various understandable reasons, no one wanted to package this initiative as a China balancing act." I just thought this sounds very familiar to the Quad today. And I just wonder what your thoughts are on that?

**Alyssa Ayres:** I think you've really seen New Delhi and Washington have a convergent sense of their own security concerns in Asia. And that convergence began happening probably around 20 years ago. And I think that convergence has become even greater in the past couple of decades. For India facing a live territorial issue with China. That question has become even more acute.

15 years ago, the question for India was one that had a lot to do with the idea of China's maritime expansionism, and what appeared to be a rapid growth of Chinese engagement across the Indian Ocean region and whether or not India was being "encircled." You know, we heard that term. I think today, the question has become far more acute after seeing what's happened with the Island building in the South China Sea, the territorial questions. The development of the Belt and Road Initiative and what that has meant for smaller and more vulnerable economies, and their own economic health. In fact, in India's own region, very close by.

So, that convergence has really tightened. And I think you have seen that in the kind of diplomatic dialogue that India in the United States have had over the last decade about East Asia and the sort of changing geopolitical scenario. The revival of the Quad, which again, in its revived format from 2017 forward, is primarily a diplomatic consultation. So, it's a consultation that covers a whole range of issues on which we appear to have great convergence with India.

The most recent summit and the steps that the four members of the Quad have taken is all about the kinds of civilian security issues, right. The vaccine initiative is protecting the health and the livelihoods of our citizens; focus on economic recovery in the wake of this terrible pandemic that is spread around the world; trying to find ways for the four countries to work together in shoring up the whole range of security issues that are not inherently military in nature. I think that's actually a quite important comment on the arenas of convergence here. Now, of course it is also the case that India and the

United States have quite dramatically developed a strong military and security partnership, and that has been happening slowly, steadily, incrementally and without stopped, from 1995 forward.

The regularization of our exercises, the addition of Japan as a standing member of the Malabar Exercise in November, 2020, the addition of Australia as a one-time invitee to that as well. These are all important steps to finding a strong way for both countries to continue working together and to developing that partnership in more minilateral kinds of formats.

**Constantino Xavier:** Alyssa, let me come on the issue of value since that's also the next topic we were going to discuss a little bit. But, how do you see the issue of values? I mean, it's a facilitator, it's a glue, it's an important issue for the relationship. I think Meenakshi brings it up in the book, but it can also be an irritant. I think there's a lot of concern here and on both sides that this becomes an issue. We've seen the diplomatic statements being exchanged on the farmer protests. President Biden has clearly stated human rights and democracy will be centerpiece again of US foreign policy. What's your sense of how this may affect the relationship positively, negatively, more or less?

**Alyssa Ayres:** This is a really important question. And so, thank you for raising this. I mean, I think one of the lessons of Meenakshi's book is the unfortunate fact that the power of our democracy in the earlier years of the relationship was simply not enough to pull us together. But we've had challenges on the values front and on the democracy front, certainly in the last couple of years. And that has been as true in the United States, as it has been in India.

Now, in Washington, we have a new administration in place that places a high priority on democracy and democratic values. You've heard President Biden's say over and over again, how important this is and that we want to lead by the power of our example. So, we are already seeing a lot of work beginning to think about our challenges at home, to help what we are able to do as a democratic power in the world to lead by example.

India has faced challenges. There have been big challenges in India in particularly the last year and a half, nearly two years. And a lot of that is affecting the way people around the world see India. Is it a chaotic and disputatious democracy? Or is it a place where sometimes freedom of expression is not fully observed? I think these are issues that Indian citizens are debating vigorously. It's for Indians to decide. But I think you will see the United States use its quiet diplomacy to raise these issues, even as people outside of government make their own critiques of both India and the United States,

**Constantino Xavier:** What could both countries do together, Alyssa in third countries on democracy and rather than it being a bilateral issue of policing each other's human rights and values and democracy, and becoming an irritant, the Quad has adopted a very strong, normative democracy language. India has been traditionally a bit more hesitant about doing that. The US, a bit more active. But you've done some interesting work on this also, and sort of explaining there's an opportunity for India and US to support in some, say institutional resilience, capacity, building, governance of third countries across the Indo-Pacific?

**Alyssa Ayres:** Yes. Some of the issues where there is a likely opportunity to try to work together. Some of those could be things like elections management, where we've had some initial conversations in the past. And that's an arena where India has been very comfortable doing work in third countries as an advisor or trainer. There are also possibilities to think about technology and what it means. This is a whole new world out there that is shaping the way our citizens experience the processes of democracy. So, this is another arena kind of next horizon, where I think there's possible opportunity to be thinking about working together in some way.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you, Alyssa. If you don't disappear, I'll come back in a few minutes with more questions. If not, thank you so much for joining us, and I think giving us these various perspectives on the geo strategy with the values and also the econ relationship. Actually, before you go, Dr. Mohan wants to come in. But Alyssa, before we let you go, on the econ relationship, you were at State between 2010 and 13, that's generally often seen as a bit of a slowdown in US India relations. Then we have this whole discussion about narrowing down of the relationship to defense and security issues, but where do you see opportunities for the US India to work together going ahead? Maybe looking back, it was happening 2010 to 14?

**Alyssa Ayers:** One of the things that occurred between 2010 and 2013 was the ramping up of, as Ambassador Sarna referenced, a large number of diplomatic consultations across virtually every area you can imagine. Science and technology, cybersecurity, women's empowerment, space. I think we had a space dialogue. Different kinds of economic dialogues. One on communications and information technology. Another commercial dialogue. I mean, at one point there was nearly 40 different types of dialogues.

One of the reasons for that was because this relationship is comparatively new and lacks the kind of regular standing mechanisms of consultation that certainly the United States has with its far older, more traditional alliance partners. And I'll just restate here, India is not a US ally. It is a close partner. It is not an ally. And so that relationship is a little different.

So, during 2010 and 2013, of course, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, with her counterpart at the time, stood up these strategic dialogues. We had not had a cabinet level standing annual dialogue covering the entire range of issues in the bilateral relationship. And to have that be a touch point that the rest of the diplomatic calendar could also work toward, that was actually quite important. Energy dialogue, clean energy research and development, many different other offshoots of this resulted. And I think that was quite important. And of course this strategic and defense relationship continued to grow and develop.

I think during the Trump administration, we saw the strategic and defense relationship continue moving ahead. But the range of conversation on many of these other issues just kind of scoped down. So, there just simply hasn't been that broad range of conversations anymore. I'm a big believer in these consultations. I think they matter a lot. I don't think that consultations are just talk shops as some people derisively call diplomatic consultations. I actually think they're really important to orienting both governments to helping each side understand what the other is interested in pursuing and has the capacity to pursue. And some things move quickly. Some things take a while, but you don't know that unless you have a kind of regularized place on the calendar that you know you'll come back to and you can work toward on your diplomatic initiatives.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you, Alyssa. And I'll come to Ambassador Menon briefly, we'll go to the economic and trade relationship in a second, but I want to finish this strategy and values part. Ambassador Menon, I was particularly struck when you wrote in your foreign affairs article last year, I think published in September or October that India will, of course keep strategic autonomy, will balance, will diversify. But, and I quote you "If push comes to shove, self-interest will likely compel India to choose the United States." Why?

**Shivshankar Menon:** That's because of two simple reasons. The shared values of course, but more than that, which country is capable of helping us to achieve our fundamental goal, which is to transform India, to make India into a prosperous, secure, modern country? As far as I can see, it's really the US. And so, there is that fundamental congruence of interest, which, and when I look at the sort of

security challenges that we face, and this is no longer just adversarial relations with neighbors and so on, with very powerful neighbors or, but also the really long-term problems that we have. Whether it's climate change, energy, these are the things that can actually get in the way of India progressing and being transformed. Who's going to help us solve these things? Who can do it? The US. And the US has been willing to. If you look at what's happened, as Alyssa was saying, you look at the energy dialogues that we used to have. You look at what's happened in agriculture. Why can we feed ourselves today? Because of the Green Revolution. Who did we do that with? With the US. If you look at education, you look at technology, the things that we need, we can do together with the US. And the US has an interest in actually doing this and has a very good record of being able to do this. Because, it's a relationship where it doesn't all have to be government. It doesn't all have to be managed bureaucratically. You can have the dialogues, but then you need to just open the doors and let the normal laws of physics and economics work. And so, that's really why it seems to me that ultimately we do tend to view it. And, at the most basic level, who did Nehru write to for help in 1962 when we were attacked? The US.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you, Meenakshi, would you like to come in on any of these issues discussed? I'll go next to Ambassador Sarna. But if you have any views on what we've discussed so far?

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Well, I mean, I think it's a very interesting discussion. Has Alyssa gone?

**Constantino Xavier:** Yes.

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Okay. I had a question for her, but if she's left and that's fine. Well, no, I think to go back to Shankar's point, I agree with him that yes, the appeal to JFK went out in '62. On the other hand, Mrs. Gandhi in '71 signed a friendship treaty with Russia. Shankar, I'd like to know how you answer that because in the end, Russia was very forthcoming with the MIGs and with defense equipment, and frankly the US wasn't, for many years,

**Shivshankar Menon:** But I think there's a very simple answer to that. Mrs. Gandhi, when she came to power, her first visit abroad was to Washington, not to Moscow. And she actually hit it off well with President Johnson. And as your book says, "Those who didn't like that said she vamped him." I think you mentioned that in your book...

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Robert Coleman said.

**Shivshankar Menon:** Yes. Exactly. And frankly Johnson stood up in the press conference and said, "I'm not going to let any harm come to this girl." And that's very patronizing. But even so, the sentiment was clear. But I think neither of them could actually carry their own political systems or bureaucracies with them. And I think...

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** In this case, it was because...

**Shivshankar Menon:** We know the people involved. But anyway, I think the problem was, not that India doesn't turn to the US, I think the fact is that the US had other concerns. Today, we share a similar view of the world. We also agree on what to do about it. If you look at the second Eisenhower administration, you look at Kennedy's administration and the amount of work that was done at that time to try and improve the relationship. It was because we shared a view of the world, but we didn't agree on what to do about it. Today, we actually have both conditions met to a much greater extent than ever before. And that's why you can see what happened in the court, what you see today in the relationship.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you. On Russia, actually, I'd like to go to Ambassador Sarna. You were in DC in 2018 when India signed the deal with Russia for the S400 equipments. That was a tough moment. It

remains to be seen what happens on that. But if you could just speak to the importance of - there was one question we got from a participant asking about to what extent can Russia remain, or will it remain on an irritant in the US India relationship?

**Navtej Sarna:** Well, in some ways, probably, the beginnings lie in the last exchange between Meenakshi and Ambassador Menon as to what happened in the late sixties and '71. And the fact that we did go for the Indo-Soviet treaty was, also a reflection of Nixon's complete preoccupation with Pakistan as an instrument to get to China. And we were really left with little choice. So, I think from their own, what has happened and the US has increasingly become aware of this. And I would say that, to some extent started discounting it as part of the decision-making process that India has a Russia legacy. India has a Soviet/Russia weapons system legacy. And you can't just wipe it out.

And this has been part of the discussions on the defense side for the last several years. And I'm sure perhaps even on the nuclear side. But overall in the security discussions, this point has been made by us repeatedly. So, when the CAATSA was there and the S400 deal was on the cards. I think one of the problems with CAATSA was that in its original form, it did not have a waiver provision. So, I think our effort in 2018 was to go and explain to people who mattered in DC that "Listen, we are increasing our defense relationship with you, but you can't be sanctioning us, as your strong partner, we can't be sanctioned by you." I mean, this is cutting your nose to spite your face to an incredible degree.

So, this point had to be driven home again and again. Fortunately, we had a champion in the US administration, which was Secretary James Mattis, and he was convinced of this point, and he was the person who actually led the effort in the US Congress using his immense credibility and his friendships in the Congress to get a waiver provision. Now that waiver provision is there, it's not an India specific waiver. There is no guarantee that it will be applied if push comes to shove. But there is a provision that if a country serves broad US strategic objectives, then the administration of the day can actually waive the CAATSA sanctions.

Now, this is a task for us. When I say us, I mean, our diplomats, our government, our interlocutors to constantly keep the US administration aware that of the broad, strategic implications of this relationship, the broad, positive, strategic objectives of this relationship, so that you don't end up sanctioning an important partner. I don't think it's an impossible task. It's not easy. But then, your stakes are high, so it's hard work, but it can be done.

So, this is my feeling on what happened and what the future holds for us as in, when this issue actually comes to the fore.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you. This question actually came from Nipun Mudgil, just to mention who asked it. But Meenakshi, one issue you bring up in the book all the time is the importance of chemistry, importance of chemistry and personality, the top, and how leaders get along. very briefly, we have another 20 minutes, so I want to cover a lot of trades still, at the end. But, what do you expect from President Biden and Prime Minister Modi in terms of the chemistry? Your book actually mentioned that I think Biden had been in India in 2007, supporting the nuclear deal. He had come to DC in a delegation. So, he certainly no stranger. But what's your expectation on that chemistry?

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Well, I mean, look, Prime Minister Modi has been very astute about handling the US. Manmohan Singh and President Obama got along very well. They're sort of in a sense, a few, you know, like-minded people, both intellectuals. And so, you sort of wonder how did President Obama get along with Prime Minister Modi? But, they did. Because, they found common ground. And I think Prime Minister Modi understood that President Obama wanted the climate deal and he went all out



to work with him on it. And he basically decided "What's in India's interest?" And he figured out what Trump wanted and he went all out to cater to Trump.

I'm not sure how much of this is chemistry and how much of this is, "Let me see." He's made a decision that the US is a big priority for him, and he's going all out to manage the relationship. So, I think that he's been super friendly to President Biden. And I think, Biden certainly sees India as an important piece of this Indo-Pacific strategy. And I certainly know that Jake Sullivan does, so they are no strangers to India. They all know India extremely well. And yes, Biden was very critical and was a very critical part of the nuclear deal. Well, I think Shankar can tell you, because he was so involved in the nuclear deal, how important Biden was and getting it through the Senate.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you, Meenakshi. We have a bunch of questions lining up, but Dr. Rakesh Mohan, you'd asked to come in.

**Rakesh Mohan:** Yes. Very quickly, I just wanted to take off on where Ambassador Sarna was talking earlier about the kind of ironic turnaround after the bomb in 1998, in terms of building trust between the countries. I just want to give a couple of vignettes, which is it really was only after the bomb in 1998 that we started getting more attention in United States. I am not saying on the economic side. And also, deepening of trust on the intellectual side. It was only after 1998 that we started what was called the Neemrana Conference with the National Bureau of Economic Research. So, for 21 years, something like 10 to 15 mainstream, the most prominent US economist came every year. And at least 200 must've come in that period. Prior to that, you could not get even two minutes attention.

Similarly, the Stanford University had an annual conference on the Indian economy, again for 21 years, starting again after the bomb. Third, our own founding that is Brookings India, the Centre for Social and Progress, Strobe Talbott Brookings started this. Again, this may not have been possible before. Carnegie had established institution here. Universities like Yale, Chicago, Harvard, et cetera, all wanting to set up things here.

So, there's been a very large kind of engagement. I would also add one more thing, which perhaps Ambassador Sarna can tell whether I'm right on this. My recollection is, before the bomb, even Indian cabinet members could not get appointments with US cabinet members. After 1998, everyone got them all the time. So I just want to make this point that ironically, the bomb made our matter of trust, somehow take place. And I'll end by just saying that what I'm seeing today from the economic side and also the intellectual side, some waning of interest. And I wanted to ask Ambassador Menon, Ambassador Sarna, Meenakshi, whether there is some waning of interest on the intellectual side, on the economic side in the relationship in the last few years?

**Constantino Xavier:** Before I let you go, Rakesh, there's a question from Anupam, and only you are entitled to reply. He says "Among the big four departments in the US government, I found the most skeptical, suspicious and difficult about India to be the treasury department." He spoke a lot about defense and state. What's your sense in dealing with treasury department in the US which played important role?

**Rakesh Mohan:** I don't think so. I mean, we're defending our interests, they're defending their interests. But I haven't seen that kind of skepticism and especially given the kind of relationships that our own distinguished fellow, Montek Singh Ahluwalia had personally, with many of the key actors in the Treasury and others also. So, I don't accept that actually. But of course, there has always been differences in interest.

**Constantino Xavier:** Got it. Thank you.

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Can I mentioned something here?

**Constantino Xavier:** Yes. Meenakshi, Please.

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** I don't think that Rakesh is giving himself enough credit here. I think I've mentioned this in my book. To put it sort of somewhat crudely, you got to follow the money. The reason that everyone paid attention, it wasn't really the bomb or this or that, it was the reforms. The reform period led to growth and it made India emerge as a global economic power, after the nineties. And Dr. Rakesh Mohan sitting here on the panel was the architect of those reforms with Manmohan Singh. And these reforms are what put India on the map.

Now, when you become a global economic power and all of a sudden people notice and people begin to take you seriously, that is what gave India a seat at the global high table. So, it was a combination of things, but that was frankly a very critical part. So, that is what sort of put India on the map. And President Clinton noticed that. That is what got Clinton in trade and said, "Look, India is going to play an important part in the future of the world. We've got to pay attention to India." He didn't have time in his first term because he was caught up with the breakup of Russia. But, that is why the second time he started to pay some attention and Strobe came out. But that is why President Bush said, "This is going..." Like Ashley Tellis said, "We didn't want to frame this as a China thing." But it was a China thing. They saw the China was rising. It was going to become a competitor. Of course now it's become an adversary, not just a competitor. But Bush recognized that they needed India. But it was because India had now become a substantial economic player. You got to follow the money. For 50 years, India was inconsequential. We punched above our weight because Nehru was such a personality.

**Constantino Xavier:** And like you quote, Meenakshi, in your book Ambassador Richard Verma saying that "As long as India was growing at 7%, 8%..." I think while he was here, "-Things were going well." And that's what attracted investors and things have slowed down. So, that may be one answer to Rakesh's question. Ambassador Sarna, please feel free to address the waning interest or waning energy level question. An additional one for me is what you had shared with me interestingly, over a call we had over how close you were to a US India trade deal, even under President Trump. And if he had been re-elected, if that had gone through... If you could just share a bit your insights on that, because I think the usual evidence is that nothing was happening, but it'd be interesting to hear your thoughts on that while you were in DC?

**Navtej Sarna:** Well, frankly I think the deal part came much after I had left post in 2018. But what was happening was that, the Trump years were very good in terms of strategic military security, counter terrorism engagement. And we actually did make fairly substantial gains. Unfortunately, a lot of the headlines got grabbed by the trade differences. And the trade differences are nothing new to the India US relationship. We've had them forever. The only thing is in a sort of "normal administration" , they would get enveloped into the larger relationship and everything would go on together. I mean, they've had issues on IPR, on child labor or whatever.

But in Trump's administration sort of, you know, because of his personality, his interest, his understanding of trade in his own way, it became an irritant. Because for him, for instance, the trade balance was a big thing. And the fact that we were 9th or 10th on the trade balance list, so we didn't get it in the first few months, but we began to get it a bit later. Then, there are known issues like the Harley Davidson tariff issue, which frankly, we actually prepared a note and got very close to him. And his advisors used to smile and laugh, saying, "We all know this, but we can't."

So, it was an idée fixe in Trump's mind, and he was going to go on speaking about it. He was going to call us a Tariff King at every opportunity. And the trade relationship sort of went because, growing

protectionism on both sides, growing inter-agency for want of a better word, problems on both sides, we were unable to resolve fairly minor market access issues, which led to taking away of the GSP. So, it was a downhill on the trade. But when he came here in February 2020, from what I understand that the negotiators were fairly close to doing a mini deal and they couldn't get it ready in time for the visit. But this is what one read about, that there was a strong possibility that that could have happened, but for the fact that COVID then took over and everything went into a tizzy.

So, my point is that, trade differences are not new, but they can be problematic. We have to yet see how the USTR of the Biden administration is going to approach these issues. And it would serve our interest to resolve this. Because issues are being added, unfortunately, I mean, what was minor market access issues on almonds and cherries and all that sort of stuff, are now got data localization, data privacy. Now, we're getting into e-commerce problems. You're getting into video streaming problems for Amazon and Netflix. So, all this is going to sort of gather and could become an irritant in the bilateral relationship, or more than an irritant. So, these need to be addressed aggressively. And whatever the fluff, needs to be removed, and we need to move on. So, I don't think they will become transactional under the Biden administration as they were under the Trump administration. So, hopefully, things will go back to just normal differences.

**Constantino Xavier:** On economic, still, Shankar, if I may come to you on, one question from Sarthak Roy, in continuation of what we've been discussing saying that "The WTO has been a place where there's not been generally a lot of trust between the India and the US." The question from him is "If the US decides to bring back the dormant dispute settlement chamber, for example, will there be more tensions?" And I'd extend the question broadly to your thoughts on the possibilities of a stronger trade investments relationship between India and the US, despite what you cautioned against, insularity, the protectionism that has sort of taken over here in India?

**Shivshankar Menon:** Well, I think we still have to get a good sense of where the Biden administration is going on trade and economic issues. Because like in India, there is naturally, at a time when the global economy has slowed down, when we sense tremendous competition from China and other economies, there is a shift towards self-reliance towards more protectionism. And I think, frankly, there's a battle for the soul of the democratic party in between the progressives and the others. We have the same arguments here at home. So, I don't think that has worked out yet.

How it will translate into WTO? WTO, I think, is going to be actually one of the later areas that we will address. There is already a proposal from the EU, Japan and the US to reform WTO. But you know, that will need consensus and that's going to take a lot of work. And I'm not sure that any of these governments or administrations is going to put in the effort to fixing a WTO before they fix their own bilateral and other relationships, which are much more important. So, I wouldn't expect quick movement on WTO either way. Either in terms of reviving dispute settlement. Yes, they might appoint a few people to do that. It has enough business, which has clogged up and which has now accumulated over the years to keep it busy for several years ahead. But I would expect that some of our other bilateral issues that Navtej mentioned, those are the ones that I think we will probably end up looking at much earlier. And that's where I think the rubber hits the road, where those are bread and butter issues for both economies. And these are now serious issues. I've told the US was our largest trading partner. Now China's overtaking the US again. But the US could well overtake China again, and especially on the services side, but many of the new issues that we're now discussing, data, et cetera, are on the services side. And I think we need to work that out between ourselves quite rapidly, because that's where our strengths are. Both of us.

**Constantino Xavier:** So extending the question I'd asked Alyssa about reviving the say 2010, 16, if you want 2014 agenda, with that variety of dialogues that have been established. That multiplicity of channels between both countries. I wonder, what do you see as a priority of sectors where India should put forward the first step and take the initiative? I mean, what? We could talk about science, technology, data has come up, services industry, but what do you think would be, say, the two or three top things you'd see as priority?

**Shivshankar Menon:** I think services is one certainty and that includes data and many of these other issues, including internet governance and so on. But, I would say that we should also be looking at energy. There's a cluster there of energy, climate change, environment, which actually comes together. And I think there is scope there for us to do innovative things together, both of us. There is an opportunity there in the crisis, which we should be seizing just as we see as the opportunity on vaccines, on health, in the Quad this time. So, we need to actually think of innovative ways of doing that.

I would like on the defense relationship that we actually try and revive the defense technology initiative on joint research, on co-production production and so on. And I think there is an opportunity maybe to do some of that as well, because there is now enough critical mass in that relationship and that we move beyond just buying and selling and exercising together. I mean, those are the three things that I would look at. It's a good relationship. I mean, I don't want people to leave with the impression that, "Oh, we have so many problems and it's not..." It's actually looking very, very good,

**Constantino Xavier:** Right. We're running out of time. So, I'll come once to each of you for please brief answers as sort of a mixed bag of questions. Let's start with you, Shankar. A provocative question about the Quad. We're getting a lot of questions and interest on that. And I was thinking to what extent would you agree that India's Quad cooperation is compatible with India's strategic autonomy? And non-alignment if you want, but we've disused that.

**Shivshankar Menon:** A hundred percent. What's the point of being strategically autonomous, if you can't exercise that autonomy and do something?

**Constantino Xavier:** So, we can call the Quad a non-alignment strategy?

**Shivshankar Menon:** I don't see how the Quad, in any case, in any way, limits your strategic autonomy. It's actually an expression of your strategic autonomy and gives you more scope to be autonomous.

**Constantino Xavier:** And then on extending that, then if I made then provoke further, will the Quad summit of last Friday and deeper Quad cooperation actually improve the prospects of India- China normalization over the next few months?

**Shivshankar Menon:** Well, I think you will hear the Chinese say the normal contradictory things that it's an Asian NATO, but it's actually form and it means nothing. So, if it means nothing, why do you think it's an Asian NATO? But in any case, you'll hear a lot of noise about it. But if they sat down seriously and looked at what the Quad has said and is planning to do, I think they will realize that a lot of it will actually serve everyone's interest. It's a common public good. But that's up to the Chinese, whether they choose to be rational, sensible, or whether they choose to be wolf warriors. And I'm not going to predict what they choose.

**Constantino Xavier:** Right. Meenakshi, I'll leave you last because you brought us here, you're guilty of that and you'll get the last word today. But Ambassador Sarna, coming to you, you surely followed the tremendous noise about India US relations or India's pushback on issues of democracy. The feeling in India expressed across the country in many sectors beyond just the government, that India is,

somehow on the receiving end of interference – there's a biased Western media reporting, India's being ideologically persecuted, there are double standards, the US is being easy on China, but tough on India... You keep hearing this more and more intensely and regularly. My question is really, I mean, you've served in diplomacy, you know the value of counter narratives. You are a novelist and you write fiction too, so you certainly know how to package an importance of diplomacy to come up with counter narratives. But to what extent is that a priority for India? What can India do in DC, for example, to correct the perceptions Alyssa was sharing with us?

**Navtej Sarna:** Again, I have a very old fashioned sort of view on this. I think it's a treadmill. This is not something which should be done episodically. In diplomacy, it should not be done as a matter of crisis management that, "Oh, there is an issue and there is an op-ed against us." We neither need to be thin-skinned about it, nor do we need to be, just say that "It really doesn't matter to us." The honest thing is that it matters to everybody, it matters to every country, how you're perceived, like it matters to every person how he or she is perceived in society. Similarly, in the community of nations, it matters how our country is received or perceived. So, I think it's part of the bread and butter of diplomacy to be improving perceptions, to be explaining things, to be engaging people. And I think this is something which we have done. Ambassador Menon knows much more than I do on this, but for years, the foreign ministry has done this as a matter of routine. And I'm sure that they will continue.

Today, the tools are much more nuanced. The social media is something which we didn't have at the scale 10 or 15 years ago. But so, today, the job is even harder. I'm afraid there is no easy way out of this. I think it's the old fashioned thing of engaging the media. There's no number of tweets can replace a meeting over coffee or lunch with a writer. There's no amount of sending pictures can replace a relaxed evening explaining issues. So, I do hope that these methods of media engagement, and when I say media, I'd like to cover the broader aspect of think tanks, universities, et cetera, the broader public diplomacy, I think there is in particular in a country like the United States or in the UK for that matter, where these are institutions. They carry weight, they carry power, they carry influence. And people read. I mean, you know the United States, a lot of people outside San Francisco, New York, Washington, DC, LA, may not know the nuances of foreign policy or bothered about them. So, they will actually go by what they read in a newspaper. So, even if you get in your two line bits into any important article, I think it's an important engagement.

So, broadly speaking, world opinion has to be molded. And it can only be done the hard way of constant engagement.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you. Seema Sirohi sent a question from DC that must be answered before we go. Shankar, that goes for you. I mean, she's asking how the Quad may develop. How would you like to see the Quad develop further after what we saw on Friday?

**Shivshankar Menon:** I think exactly as it is now. It's open, it's willing to work with others, and it's becoming a provider of global public goods. Its core competence is security and maritime security. That's what joins us. The Indo-Pacific or free and open Indo-Pacific, and that's in everyone's interest. But it also has other competencies. These are big economies. So, it's doing things on the economy, on the trade side, it's doing things about climate change, it's doing things on health. And I think exactly like this, it shouldn't tie itself down into some set plan, five-year plan and decide what it's going to do. I think it needs to keep responding to what it sees as global needs and a provider of global public goods, working with everybody else who is willing to work with them.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you, Meenakshi, we'll come to you. Thank you so much, really for bringing this book to us, and I hope you would at least enjoy this hour and a half with us. And I leave you with

one question. You are free to discuss whatever you wish, but Arfina Hussain sends in a question, I think is also quite interesting. She asks, "Do the US and India really need China to grow closer together? Is China's growth, the cause of this relationship, or is there more to it?"

**Meenakshi Ahamed:** Well, for many years, I think the mutual interests were fairly limited, India's and the US. I think there is a convergence now. But I do believe that - I think that China has quite a lot to do with it. But I also think let's not forget that the Diaspora, the Indian Diaspora in the US has increased substantially. And so there is - I mean, Biden himself, he made that statement about how Indians are taking over the running of the US government. They're the second largest minority after Mexicans in the US and they're projected that it could be that they would take over in another 10 years or 20 years and become the largest ethnic minority. That's quite an astounding number.

So, that I think in itself tells you that there's going to be continued interest in India. When you have a country that has to compete - we are now living in a technological era. The whole world is going to be dependent on technology. And when you look and see that 70% of the H1B visas are given to Indians, because the US needs a constant supply of technological experts from India. India supplies the US with a lot of tech experts. And if the US continues to grow and has to compete with the Chinese, there's going to be this sort of co-dependence in a way, with India. So, I think they're going to need each other. And so, the US can be thanking Nehru for a long time for those IITs.

And then, of course, the security and geopolitical interests that they have in common, not just because of China, but the overarching issues that Shankar has mentioned. So, climate change. There's all kinds of geopolitical interests at stake. If climate change, if the projections are true, we're going to see mass migrations all over the world. I'm not quite sure where that's going to lead us, but there's going to be food insecurity. There's going to be all kinds of other issues that we're going to be dealing with. So, I don't want to get into all these sort of extrapolations, but yes, there are there issues that could be of great importance that there will be common ground to work with.

**Constantino Xavier:** Thank you. I mean, in fact, you mentioned the first Indian Prime Minister and you have that amazing speech he gave, I think in 1949 when he visits DC. I mean, it's just an amazing listing of all the values and principles that bring the US and India together. He mentioned I think liberty, equality, fundamental human rights, republicanism, federalism, freedom of the individual, rule of law, the root of democracy. And he makes an important distinction between institutions and individuals as two foundations of democracy. Right? And I think that's also what your book treats us through time in terms of the larger, what you call convergence or drivers of this relationship.

Thank you all for joining us. I'm going to pass the word to Dr. Rakesh Mohan to close it down. But from our side and from the foreign policy team, thank you very much. And a special word of thanks to the team that helps us work very hard on this and the communications, Aditi and Nitika Nayar **01:38:14-15]** in the foreign policy team. Rakesh, over to you.

**Rakesh Mohan:** Thank you. Thank you very much, Constantino. Let me first, thank Meenakshi. I'm delighted that she wrote this book so that we could have this discussion. I'm sure that it was the only reason you did it. So, that's very kind of you to do all that hard work that we could have this opportunity.

My tremendous thanks to Ambassador Menon. Our own Ambassador Menon. Our own distinguished fellow. Ambassador Sarna, Alyssa Ayres, whose of course not here right now, but really, we had very insightful comments from all of you.

And finally, I really do want to congratulate my colleague, Constantino Xavier for an absolutely masterful job of moderating. I've learned something on how to run a meeting like this. And of course, to the whole audience, congratulations. And also you had a great opportunity to take part in this amazing conversation that we had, very substantive, very insightful.

And overall, I would say, in these days of COVID and everything else, an unusual sense of optimism about India US relations and the world at large. Thank you very much.