

# Flagship Seminar

## A Matter of Trust: India-US Relations from Truman to Trump and Beyond

March 2021

- On 16th March, 2021, the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) organised its flagship seminar to discuss **Meenakshi Ahamed's** new book titled *"A Matter of Trust: India-US Relations from Truman to Trump"* and other aspects of India-US bilateral relations.
- The panel discussion featured **Meenakshi Ahamed**, author and journalist; **Alyssa Ayres**, Dean, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University; **Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP and former National Security Advisor; and **Navtej Sarna**, former Ambassador of India to the United States (2016 – 2018).
- The event was moderated by **Constantino Xavier**, Fellow, CSEP.

The wide-ranging discussion featured seven decades of India-US relations, growing convergence on issues of trade, defence, technology and climate, the role of the Quad, among other areas of interest.

### From history to contemporary times

Meenakshi Ahamed started proceedings by outlining the long and rocky road that India and the United States (US) travelled to reach their current moment of convergence. She observed that "cultural disconnect, personality clash between Nehru, Indira and their US counterparts had bearings on the relationship and deepened the mistrust." Ahamed explained how the real change in the relationship came when Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh began to engage, after 1999.

Navtej Sarna drew on his own experience as a negotiator in the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and recalled the hostility in the US after India's nuclear tests, in 1998. Ahamed emphasised that the reason the world, including the US, took notice of India is not because of its emergence as a nuclear power but because of the economic reforms that put India on the global map, "earning it a seat at the high table."

Talking about the growing trust between the two countries in contemporary times, Shivshankar Menon said, "Today, Indian and the US interests are aligned. Because we trust each other to follow our self-interest, there is greater trust today. Yes, there will be differences, but we are better prepared to deal with them." Elaborating on the relationship further, Menon explained how the US is the only country capable of helping India achieve its fundamental goal of transforming India and making it a prosperous, secure, modern country.

The panel was in agreement that a fundamental congruence of interests is emerging in India-US ties over the last few years. Talking about the same, Alyssa Ayres said - "The question of trust today is a little bit different. The US largely works on the basis of alliances...India historically does its own thing, so where you at times see tension over trust, often it is these types of issues". Ayres also pointed out that India's relationship with Russia and the acquisition of the S-400 systems will pose a further test to the new levels of trust.

### On shared values of democracy

Constantino Xavier raised the question of shared democratic values turning into irritants in the bilateral

relationship. He cited the diplomatic statements being exchanged over the farmer protests in India and the Biden administration's focus on human rights issues, and asked how these developments may affect India-US ties.

Ayres acknowledged that both the US and India have faced challenges on the democracy and values front in the last few years. She explained, "The Biden administration places a high priority on democracy and democratic values and wants to lead by example. There have been big challenges in India, particularly in the last two years. A lot of that is affecting how 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?. This is for Indians to decide, but the US will use quiet diplomacy to raise these issues even as people outside the government continue to make their critique of both India and US."

According to Sarna, a continuous, old-fashioned engagement with the media, part of Indian diplomacy for decades, will go a long way in managing perceptions of India. He said that no amount of tweets could replace the traditional methods of explaining issues, whether in person, in the media, or through engagements with think tanks that carry a lot of influence. Elaborating further, he said that perception building should not be merely done as crisis management, but as a matter of routine.

## The future of the Quad

The panelists also commented on the emergence of the Quad, a grouping of the US, Australia, Japan, and India often seen as a strategic counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific. Discussing on the Quad's agenda, Alyssa Ayres said, "The most recent Quad summit and the steps the four members of Quad have taken is all about civilian security issues: the vaccine initiative in protecting the health and livelihoods of our citizens, as well as economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic. The member countries are trying to find ways to work together on a whole range of security issues that are not inherently military in nature. There are many areas of convergence that are non-military."

Speaking of the Quad's importance to India's strategic autonomy, Shivshankar Menon said, "The Quad is open, willing to work with others, and is becoming a provider of global public goods...It should not tie itself down with any set five-year plans, it needs to keep responding to what it sees as global needs." Bilaterally, he identified the services sector, energy, climate change, defence, and technology as the priority areas to deepen India-US ties.



(From L to R): Constantino Xavier, Fellow, CSEP; Shivshankar Menon, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP and former National Security Advisor; Meenakshi Ahamed, author and journalist; Navtej Sarna, former Ambassador of India to the United States (2016 – 2018); Rakesh Mohan, President & Distinguished Fellow, CSEP.

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