

## Press Release

### Meenakshi Ahamed, Alyssa Ayres, Shivshankar Menon, Navtej Sarna discuss India-US relations at CSEP's Flagship Seminar

March 16, 2021

"I don't see the Quad in any way limiting India's strategic autonomy. It is actually an expression of our strategic autonomy and gives us more scope to be autonomous," said Shivshankar Menon during the Centre for Social and Economic Progress' [Flagship Seminar](#) on Meenakshi Ahamed's new book, 'A Matter of Trust: India-US Relations from Truman to Trump' and other aspects of bilateral relations.

The discussion, moderated by Constantino Xavier, Fellow, CSEP, [featured](#) Meenakshi Narula 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 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 others.

#### 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.

"Cultural disconnect, personality clash between Nehru, Indira and their US counterparts had bearings on the relationship and deepened the mistrust. The real change in relationship came when Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh began to engage," she observed.

Navtej Sarna drew on his own experience as a negotiator in the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1998 and recalled the hostility in the US regarding India's nuclear tests.

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."

The panel was in agreement that a fundamental congruence of interests is emerging in India-US ties over the last few years. "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," said Alyssa Ayres. Ayres pointed out that India's relationship with Russia and the acquisition of the S-400 systems raises a question of trust. "As our interests have increasingly converged, and we have seen a larger economic engagement over time, that has helped build a sense of how to work together," she added.

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## **The future of the Quad**

On the topic of the Quad, 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 arenas of convergence that are non-military.”

“Which country is capable of helping us achieve our fundamental goal, which is to transform India, make it a prosperous, secure, modern country? As far as I can see, it is only the US,” said Menon. Menon identified services sector, energy, climate change and environment, defence and technology as the key areas of priority for India-US ties.

Speaking of the Quad’s importance to India’s strategic autonomy, 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.”

## **On shared values of democracy**

Constantino Xavier raised the question of shared democratic values turning into irritants in some cases, such as the diplomatic statements being exchanged over the farmer protests in India and the Biden administration’s focus on human rights issues, asking 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. 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?” said Ayres. “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, as has been 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. Perception building should not be done as part of crisis-management, rather it should be a matter of routine.