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Commentary: Manmohan Singh in Washington – Making Partnership Workmanlike

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's state visit to Washington – the first under the Obama Administration – succeeded in its goal of creating a warm tone at the top and a stronger sense of momentum for a relationship that is moving forward on many fronts, but is not driven by a single big idea. This is not a breathtaking result, but it should leave both sides feeling good. What the two countries need now is to deepen their engagement, to figure out where their interests are a natural fit and where they may need to accommodate one another – in short, to move from talking about partnership to actually making it happen.

There was a strong bilateral core to the prime minister's program. Singh had serious discussions on defense cooperation, against the background of \$3 billion in U.S. defense sales to India in the past year. The two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on counterterrorism cooperation, turning a traditionally difficult area into an emerging success story.

Singh's program showcased the economic relationship. His visit was the occasion for relaunching the bilateral CEO Forum, which for some four years has been remarkably effective in troubleshooting obstacles to expanding trade and investment. Singh spoke to a roomful of business personalities from both countries at the U.S.-India Business Council. Expanding private trade and investment launched the new U.S.-India partnership nearly two decades ago, and it will continue to provide both stability and enhanced momentum regardless of the occasional speed bumps the two governments encounter.

As expected, the two leaders had serious discussions about regional security. What was a bit more unusual was the high profile Singh gave to his concerns about Afghanistan. All his public speeches stressed that India wants the international community to remain engaged in Afghanistan, and urgently wants the U.S. effort to stabilize Afghanistan to succeed. Also noteworthy was the emphasis on the common interests of India and the United States in the safety of sea lanes in the Indian Ocean.

Two features of the discussion suggested that India and the United States are now starting to move their dialogue beyond the bilateral into global issues. The first was the treatment of India's place in the larger Asian setting. President Obama's public statements in East Asia two weeks earlier had not made any particular mention of India, and his reference in China to "working with China" on peace in South Asia raised concerns in Delhi. Singh's visit provided an opportunity to present the full picture. At the two leaders' joint press conference, Obama stated that "the United States welcomes and encourages India's leadership role in helping to shape the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Asia," and Singh echoed similar views.

The second global feature had to do with global warming. India and the United States had clashed on this issue, with India holding to its traditional refusal to accept binding emissions caps and the United States, now eager for global progress, pushing hard for India to take on some of the burden of lowering emissions. The statements emerging from the summit made clear that India is joining the somewhat messy global give-and-take on this

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process with the United States and others. There are still significant differences, but both countries are looking for a way to accommodate each other's interests. This is an important milestone, not just for climate change but more broadly for India's emergence as a player in the forums that set global norms.

The bilateral engagement between the United States and India is still the heart of this growing relationship. There will be ups and downs. Indians are watching to see when and how the two countries reach agreement on nuclear reprocessing, part of the unfinished business of the civil nuclear deal. For the United States, this will be tough.

But the decision on both sides to give a higher profile to global issues – even issues where they have disagreed in the past – suggests that they are moving toward a partnership with strategic significance. India and the United States have interests that largely coincide in the Indian Ocean and Asia, and even to a significant degree in the Middle East. This does not necessarily add up to a shared global strategic vision, but it gives them a broad range of issues on which they can start to work together. U.S. willingness to treat India as a serious global player and India's willingness to get into the fray of global negotiations will pay off in the long run.

Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington will not go down as one that made history. However, it will stand as a time when India and the United States clarified the path they are on and began taking important steps together. That is the job it needed to do.

