

U.S. Silence on India's Undemocratic Farming Bills

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Abstract

250 million farmers and activists are protesting throughout India against three farming bills recently passed through an ordinance by Prime Minister Modi and his government. In short, the farming bills deregulate agriculture, paving the way for the private sector to exploit and monopolize agricultural commodities. Indian farmers are outraged by the passing of these laws, claiming it will ruin their livelihoods and increase their already existing debt.

Many first-world leaders and economists have publicly condemned these laws as well as the unjust treatment of protesters. Yet, the most formidable democracy and the world's largest superpower, the United States is silent in condemning these undemocratic laws and is yet to speak out against the inhuman treatment of the protesters by the Indian government. The United States has failed to claim its title as the protector of life, liberty, and the right to protest that it so proudly hails. Below is an analysis of the strategic relationship between the U.S. and India in order to explain America's silence.

Why Isn't the United States Addressing India's Regressive Farming Bills?

Upon the onset of the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's win in 2014, Narendra Modi's Prime Ministership realigned India's fragile political structure toward right-wing politics. Historically, Modi had been a divisive figure due to his lack of intervention as the chief minister during the Gujarat Muslim genocide in 2002 (Sinha & Suppes, 2015). In 2019, the Modi-led Indian government further polarized its image after passing the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), deemed "anti-Muslim" ("Citizenship Amendment Act," 2021). In his latest political attempt to strip Indians of their inalienable right to life and liberty, the government passed three farming laws that have further deteriorated the fragile state of democracy (Ramesh, 2020). While first-world leaders have come out against these bills, the United States has been quiet (Miglani, 2020). The strong alliance between the United States and India has a lot to do with the silence. This tactical relationship, cultivated for decades, has resulted in the U.S. turning a blind eye to oppressive laws, in the quest to maintain its hegemony.

Obama-Modi Era

The Obama Administration saw Narendra Modi's election as an opportunity to forge a strong and resilient relationship between the world's two largest democracies. Before becoming India's Prime Minister (PM), Modi was banned from entering the U.S.—the U.S. State Department's visa refusal cited his involvement in the Muslim massacre as a violation of religious freedom (Mann, 2014). However, as it became increasingly clear that Modi would be the elected PM, the U.S. reversed its position as President Obama was eager to capitalize on the Indo-American partnership (Gowen, 2016). During Modi's U.S. visit in 2014, both nations renewed the 2005 Defense Cooperation Agreement Act (DAA) for another ten years, stating that the U.S. and India would remain close partners on defense and intelligence issues (Qadir, 2015). The DAA allows India to acquire U.S. defense technology and reap the significant benefits of being a defense partner of the U.S.

Furthermore, Obama's welcoming embrace of Modi was a strategic attempt to assert dominance and curb China's rising influence under the Belt and Road Initiative—a long-term investment and policy program aimed at accelerating infrastructure development and economic growth of the countries along the historic Silk Road (Li, 2016). Currently, both the U.S. and India are involved in rivalries with China.

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Trump-Modi Era

While the Obama-Modi relationship was tactical, President Obama did raise concerns to Prime Minister Modi of religious intolerance exhibited in India (Gowen, 2017). On one occasion even stating that “a country shouldn't be divided on sectarian lines and that is something I have told Prime Minister Modi in person...People see the differences between each other much too vividly and miss the commonalities.” Once President Trump assumed office, he used his new power to fuel Modi's divisive rhetoric.

Trump has long held anti-immigrant stances which were affirmed by his restriction of immigrants from seeking refuge in the U.S. Early in his presidency, Trump issued a travel ban on Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen citing the need to prevent terrorism as a matter of national security (“Trump's executive order,” 2021). However, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Intelligence and Analysis Unit concluded that people from the nations listed above posed no increased terror risk (Nixon, 2017). Since the travel ban was enacted, the U.S. has seen a rise in violence, prejudice, and hate crimes against people in Muslim majority communities (“Anti-muslim hate crime,” 2018). In 2019, the Modi administration, under the Hindu Nationalist BJP Party, passed the Citizenship Amendment Act offering fast-tracked amnesty to non-Muslim undocumented immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who entered India before 2015 (Vaid, 2020). This bill is inherently rooted in islamophobia and blatantly violates the “secular” principles of the Indian constitution.

Trump refused to outwardly condemn this discriminatory act. Instead, in December 2020, Modi was awarded the Chief Commander Degree of the Legion of Merit Award, one of the highest military awards in the U.S. (Manral, 2020). Trump lauded Modi for his “exceptionally meritorious service” as the leader of India.

Renewing the Defense Cooperation Agreement Act provided the U.S. with a partner to assert its defense policy in a region dominated by Chinese influence. Additionally, the U.S. now accounts for 15% of India's military equipment purchases. During the Trump administration, India signed lucrative defense agreements with the U.S. that eluded previous Indian administrations (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The agreement included arrangements promoting the two countries' interoperability covering everything from logistics to communications. Since 2005, the Indian armed forces have conducted more joint exercises with the U.S. military than with any other state (Bowman & Gabel, 2019). In addition to military cooperation, parallel policies have fostered extreme nationalist movements in both countries, aligning Washington and New Delhi closer together than in previous administrations.

Both Trump and Modi have been viewed as fascist leaders for their hateful rhetoric against minorities and dissenters. The extraordinary events of the insurrection in Washington D.C. (Fandos & Cochrane, 2021), fueled by Trump's incendiary words, perpetuate the same narrative that Modi and his party have projected to incite terror and violence against minorities and democratic institutions.

Ambani-Modi Era

In 2009, Modi awarded Mukesh Ambani, now India's wealthiest man, the “Pride of Gujarat” award, which led Ambani to endorse Modi for prime minister publicly. Once Modi was elected, Ambani strategically influenced the Indian government to privatize specific public sectors that Ambani directly profited from. Modi has enacted controversial farm bills, as recently as September 2020 that allow Ambani to benefit directly from the deregulation of agriculture.

When President Trump visited India last year, he was approached by Ambani, who pitched the president on why U.S. companies should invest in telecom and his digital service business, Jio Platforms. Ambani caught Trump's attention by mentioning, “We're the only network in the world that doesn't have a single Chinese component.” As the pandemic intensified the anti-Chinese sentiment within both the U.S. and India, Silicon Valley agreed on four deals with Jio Platforms (Raval & Massoudi, 2020). These deals sparked another Ambani influence in the U.S., along with his current Reliance empire.

Potential Biden-Modi Era

President Biden is expected to take the same approach as the Obama administration in tightening the relationship between the U.S. and India. While the Biden administration is expected to pay more attention to human rights injustices in India, sparked by the farmer protests, most experts believe the U.S. will not drastically alter its relationship as Biden values New Delhi's leverage in helping counter China's increasing global influence (Verma & Gettleman, 2020). Additionally, during Biden's senatorial days, he played a crucial role in improving the relationship between the two nations. As addressed in his agenda for the Indian American community, Biden, in 2006 stated, "My dream is that in 2020, the two closest nations in the world will be India and the United States" ("Joe Biden's Agenda," 2020).

The United States' interests in establishing democratic institutions worldwide have been placed on hold as other objectives have taken precedence. Even though the Trump administration's racist rhetoric and exploitation of the capitalistic capabilities have effectively trickled into India, the Biden administration will not want to alter their tactical relationship at the cost of disrupting the unipolarity, even as the blatant abuse of life and liberty occurs in the developing world.

As the Modi administration continues to infringe on its citizens' rights, the U.S. continues to remain silent. For American leaders, it seems counterproductive for the U.S. to address human rights abuses given the priority trade and defense receive on the foreign policy agenda. The strategic partnership between the two countries positively affects their pursuit of power.

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