

DYNAMISM IN INDIA-U.S. TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

The trajectory of India-U.S. bilateral ties continues to go up. While there are regular interactions among officials at various levels and across sectors, as well as people-to-people engagement, there are no formal interactions between Members of Parliament in India and members of the U.S. Congress.

In November, a congressional delegation (CODEL) led by U.S. Senator John Cornyn travelled to the Indo-Pacific Command countries, including the Philippines, Taiwan and India. In New Delhi, the six-member delegation interacted with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and representatives of the Dalai Lama. Senator Cornyn is a senior member of the Republican Party and co-founder and co-Chair of the Senate Caucus on India and Indian Americans. Mr. Modi and the members of the delegation noted the “increasing convergence of strategic interests” between India and the U.S. and said they would like to “further enhance cooperation... to promote global peace and stability”.

After the trip, Senator Cornyn said, “The Indo-Pacific is the largest military theater in the world, and our allies there are invaluable to ensuring we can counter China’s overreach. Our delegation was able to see firsthand the issues facing countries from mainland India to island partners in the Pacific...”. The China overhang was visible in the backdrop. Mr. Modi appreciated the consistent support and constructive role of the U.S. Congress in deepening the India-U.S. comprehensive global strategic partnership. Mr. Modi and CODEL exchanged views on enhancing the bilateral relationship and strengthening cooperation on contemporary global issues such as terrorism, climate change and reliable chains for critical technologies.

Last month, Senator Cornyn and Democrat colleague Mark Warner urged President Joe Biden to grant a waiver to India which faces the prospect of sanctions for procuring S-400 missiles from Russia. Two days after returning from his trip to India, CODEL member Senator Tommy Tuberville favoured India getting the presidential waiver under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. More on the issue is in the works on Capitol Hill.

The significance of the CODEL visit is not lost in the U.S. as members of the U.S. Congress play an important role in determining foreign policy, which at times is dictated by the demands of constituents. But despite the robustness in India-U.S. relations, there is no institutional communication or interaction between MPs in India and members of the U.S. Congress. Noting that there is popular and political support in both countries for a robust India-U.S. partnership, the joint statement at the end of the 2+2 Dialogue in 2019 stated: “The Ministers looked forward to the establishment of India-US Parliamentary Exchange to facilitate reciprocal visits by Parliamentarians of the two countries”. With the next edition of the 2+2 Dialogue due to be held soon, the Ministers could examine progress on this aspect. India can take it forward through the Indian Parliamentary Group, which acts as a link between the Indian Parliament and the various Parliaments of the world. In 1953, the Group had first invited then U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon to address MPs in the Central Hall of Parliament. Over the years, Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama also addressed MPs at Central Hall.

At present, there are eight Parliamentary Friendship Groups of India’s including Japan, Russia, China and the European Union. The U.S. is absent from this list. It is important to note what former Congressman and veteran Democrat Jim McDermott, a former co-Chair and pioneer of the India Caucus on the House side, said: legislative interactions inject dynamism in bilateral relations. Dr. McDermott was part of the CODEL led by John Lewis to commemorate the 50th

anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's historic journey to India. CODEL travels across the world during the periods when Congress takes a break from legislative work. Interactions during these travels are important in shaping relations with foreign countries.

India's connection with the U.S. Congress goes back to November 17, 1954, when Vice President S. Radhakrishnan presented the Senate with a gavel to replace the hour-glass-shaped piece of ivory that had shattered during a heated debate when Nixon had used it. Radhakrishnan hoped that the gavel would inspire senators to debate "with freedom from passion and prejudice". In 2022, when Parliament celebrates its 70th year, a formal arrangement with Congress can institutionalise this unique relationship between representatives of the U.S. and India.

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