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# The Future of American Soft Power

A CONVERSATION WITH AMBASSADOR TIM ROEMER

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The former U.S. Ambassador to India spoke to *The Fletcher Forum* about his time in office and offered advice to the future generation of American leaders.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *This spring we're asking our contributors to forecast what the world will look like in 2030. What sort of world will our generation face? What are some challenges and opportunities?*

**TIM ROEMER:** The challenges are certainly profound and growing. First, we have variables and trends such as populism that are percolating all around the world, from China and the consolidation of power of President Xi, to the Brexit decision, to a host of European elections, to Mr. Modi's election in 2014 which was a populist election in many ways, to the Trump election in the United States in 2016. Managing this populism and nationalism in a world that is mutually dependent upon each other for security, human rights, rule of law, and the promotion of democracy is a big challenge and an opportunity going forward. Secondly, a trend that is significant is the rising influence of this fourth Industrial Revolution of technology. How does

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**Tim Roemer** is Executive Director and Strategic Counselor at APCO Worldwide. In 2009, he was appointed U.S. Ambassador to India, one of America's largest diplomatic missions and during his time in office, he helped move India from being America's 25th largest trading partner to 12th. He oversaw the signing of the Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative, which broadened U.S.–India coordination in intelligence, homeland security, border security, money laundering, and terrorist financing. Ambassador Roemer served for 12 years in the United States Congress as the Representative for Indiana's 3rd Congressional District and was appointed to serve on the 9/11 Commission. He is a lecturer at the Washington Campus' Executive MBA Program. Ambassador Roemer is married to Sally Johnston Roemer. They have four children, Patrick, Matthew, Sarah, and Grace, a dog named Hoosier and live in Great Falls, Virginia. He collects first edition books and overpriced baseball cards.

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or exchange of information on Twitter or commerce on Alibaba or Amazon or Flipkart. It can be a clear and present danger to a country's national security. We've seen the cyber threat now go from China stealing intellectual property for years from the United States to Russia trying to meddle in and influence our elections. So, how do we manage technology and artificial intelligence going forward? Will robots take people's jobs away? Can this be managed in a way that we create more blue-collar jobs?

Thirdly, there are transnational issues that take on more and more importance as we look forward to 2030. We have terrorism, cybersecurity, water and food security issues, and trade. Managing these issues will be a great challenge for the United States and for our partners around the world.

**FORUM:** *What are some of the key values and skills that you would want future leaders to embrace and work on developing?*

**ROEMER:** I think one of the most important skills to have in the diplomatic and the political arena and the business arena is to be able to surround yourself with talented, skilled, and new types of thinkers and actors. I've been extremely lucky and blessed in my career in Congress, in the 9/11 Commission, and as ambassador to India, to have extraordinarily talented people around me and that will push me into new directions. People that aren't "yes" people but that are creative, outside-the-box thinkers. That's exactly what we need in the world today. Secondly, we need people that are tenacious and have endurance as a character trait. Nothing is easy in today's world. No bill that I have ever been a part of getting through both chambers to the White House has been easy. No initiative that we've negotiated in Delhi has been easy. The character trait of tenacity is just absolutely essential. Lastly, what I've learned in politics is the skill of listening and not just thinking you know everything and saying you're going to convince people of a certain perspective. Listen to new perspectives, and if they're good ideas, act on them. Execution is absolutely key.

**FORUM:** *Jumping back to your idea of the fourth Industrial Revolution, you talked a lot about cybersecurity and the threats we face with new technology. But on the flip side, what do you make of the use of social media as a foreign policy tool and as a tool for public diplomacy?*

**ROEMER:** It is a double-edged sword. Soft power is absolutely something that is practiced every day, twenty-four hours a day. It builds the United States' values, it promotes our reputation and our brand, it makes us friends around the world, and it ultimately can prevent us from sending our men and women into war and potentially losing them. On the other hand, the technology can be a clear and present danger to our national security. As I mentioned before, countries are using this technology both in the United States and internationally to take our companies' invested intellectual property, to cut corners, to directly share it with their businesses in places like China, and create jobs there that displace jobs in America. That is a direct threat to our national security. When Russia uses this technology to attempt to meddle and disrupt our elections, to sow discord between our people, to create division within our people using social media, that can create huge domestic and political problems for the United States. If Russia can do it, others will certainly emulate what Russia has done in 2016. So, that becomes a key priority for the United States. There was a book recently written called *The Darkening Web* by Professor Klimburg at Harvard, and he looks at the kinds of threats that are projected at the United States in the future from an increasingly darkened and ominous web.

**FORUM:** *We've seen a lot of recent coverage about Prime Minister Trudeau's visit to India and Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit in January. How do you think India's relationships with other countries are going to develop as the U.S. looks more inward and as India continues to grow?*

**ROEMER:** I think it's interesting that many people thought Prime Minister Modi would be an expert on creating jobs, on building a relationship with the business community and growing the Indian economy. Given Mr. Modi's experience as a chief minister in Gujarat and growing that state at about ten percent per year, everybody assumed this would be his legacy issue. Instead, foreign policy is becoming one of his strengths. He has reached out in new and provocative ways, like building a relationship with Israel. He just spent several days in the Middle East, improving India's relationship with a variety of partners there. He made a separate trip to Palestine without visiting Mr. Netanyahu. He has reached out to

Saudi Arabia and is trying to negotiate a new trade with the Saudis. He has agreed to a quadrilateral with the United States, Japan, and Australia, which can get China's attention. He's working in new ways to build security for the Indian Ocean and the maritime domain. These foreign policy successes might eclipse his domestic accomplishments because right now, according to the Indian press, it might be a very close election in 2019 because the economy is slowing; he's not creating as many jobs as he hoped to, and the business community is becoming increasingly agitated. So, it's an interesting kind of turn of events there.

**FORUM:** *During your time in India, you were leading one of America's largest diplomatic missions. What do you make of the current state of leadership in America and what implications does it have for future diplomatic leaders?*

**ROEMER:** I'm honored to be here at a place that puts so much emphasis and talent into the world for our soft power and our diplomatic community. Our defense secretary, Jim Mattis, has said this pretty well. He said, "For every dollar you cut from our soft power and our State Department,

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..... you must add a dollar to the Defense Department for me to buy bullets." We need both kinetic power and technology to fight wars and dissuade people from attacking us, but we also must have the soft power and diplomacy that has created this beacon of hope around the world and this value of America being a place of promise and security. Soft-power diplomacy promotes that every day. When I was in Delhi, we had diplomatic initiatives to reach out to the people of India. We had a "Shake a Billion Hands" initiative where I went out to shake hands with Indians across the spectrum in small villages and big cities, from the Jain and the Buddhist community to the Muslim and Hindu community. From the richest to the poorest. We had great feedback on social media for that outreach. We had a specific outreach on diplomacy to the Muslim community of almost 200 million people.

Not just on the month of Ramadan, and not just for iftar dinners, but all twelve months, reaching out into Muslim neighborhoods, schools, and communities to present diplomas. I remember President Obama telling me at the White House before I left for Delhi: “Tim, I want you to not only become best friends with the prime minister and the cabinet and the privileged in India. I want you to go places where no U.S. ambassador has ever been. I want you to be a friend to the villagers and the poorest of the poor. Show our values to everybody there.” And that was an effort we made on an hourly and daily basis. I can tell you that the American ambassador in India showed up at villages, at disaster areas after a flood that no other ambassador from any other country would attend. That projects a certain American power that is essential in the world today. *f*

