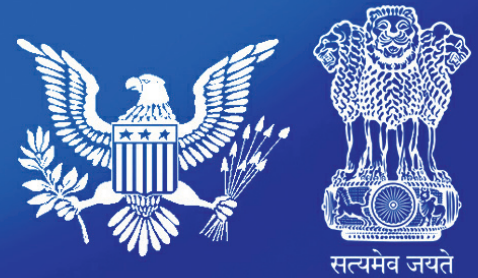


# US-India The Way Forward



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## The Challenge for Obama and Singh

Will there be a meeting of minds? Can there be a meeting of minds? Or, will the two leaders bid farewell to each other, leaving it to their successors to re-invent and rescue the relationship, asks **SANJAYA BARU.**

**R**ead through the several speeches on India-United States relations of Prime Ministers P V Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, delivered at various venues in Washington DC, New York and New Delhi between 1991 and 2009, you will see a consistent and a shared underlying view being articulated, despite differences of nuance, emphasis and style.

India's post-Cold War strategy towards the world in general and the US in particular was shaped by these three prime ministers. As Rao's finance minister Manmohan Singh endorsed and shared Rao's worldview. Prime Minister Vajpayee took forward the relationship taking, what were naturally defined as, the 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership, NSSP.'

The first important foreign policy initiative that Prime Minister Singh took was to authorize his National Security Advisor, J N Dixit, to initiate NSSP-2. The seeds of the India-US civil nuclear cooperation agreement were sowed in NSSP-1 and came to fruition with NSSP-2.

When Prime Minister Vajpayee famously described India and the United States as 'natural allies' at the Asia Society in New York in September 1998, eyebrows were raised both in New Delhi and Washington, DC. However, within two years a distinguished American scholar and strategist, Condoleezza Rice, responded to that remark with her own formulation of why the US should seek partnership with India. ('Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest' *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2000.)

Vajpayee had listed three 'incomprehensible' hurdles, from India's viewpoint, to such a partnership: First, the US stance on India's global role (read: Membership of the United Nations Security Council); second, subjecting India to technology denial and export control regimes (read: Not



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recognizing India as a legitimate nuclear weapons power); third, a policy stance in South Asia that goes against India's 'basic irreducible security needs.' (Read: The US position on the Kashmir issue); finally, a lack of understanding in the US of India's strategic interests vis-à-vis China and Russia.

President Bill Clinton straightaway addressed the concern on Pakistan by using the opportunity provided by General Pervez Musharraf's Kargil misadventure and accepting the Indian view that the 'Line of Control' in Jammu and Kashmir ought to be treated as the 'international border' between the two countries.

The NSSP was launched to address the technology denial

India's post-Cold War strategy towards the US was shaped by Prime Ministers P V Narasimha Rao, left, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. As Rao's finance minister, Singh, seated right, endorsed and shared his worldview. Vajpayee took forward the relationship.

issues. The US held out on supporting India's claim for UNSC membership till President Barack Obama agreed to do so when he visited India in November 2010.

However, this entire process of coming to terms with India's rise and its decision to declare itself a Nuclear Weapons State divided the US policy establishment into pro-India and anti-India lobbies, and the period 1998 to 2004 witnessed vigorous debates within the US and Indian foreign policy communities on the pros and cons of the two countries becoming 'natural allies.'

**T**wo events may have influenced the course of the subsequent discourse. First, a 'collision' between a US Navy plane and a Chinese PLA fighter jet near Hainan in the South China Sea in April 2001, months after George W Bush was elected President. Second, the 9/11 terror attacks in New York later that year. The first incident signaled the rise of Chinese power in East Asia. The second incident signaled the escalation of the threat posed by Islamic jihadism.

In 1998, when Prime Minister Vajpayee wrote a letter to President Clinton explaining that India's decision to conduct nuclear tests was shaped by China's emergence as a major nuclear power in her neighborhood, President Clinton shared this letter with the Chinese leadership. He went a step further and issued a joint statement in Beijing offering legitimacy to Chinese interests in South Asia.

By 2001 the US began to realize that both these decisions were wrong and the time had come for the US to give greater weight to Indian, and other Asian, concerns about the rise of Chinese power.

Similarly, through the 1990s India repeatedly drew US attention to the rise of radical Islam and its growing links with terrorism. The US ignored those warnings, particularly in the context of the Indian sub-continent, giving legitimacy to Pakistani views that terror attacks against India were carried out by Kashmiri 'freedom fighters.' The Al Qaeda attack in New York helped clarify this nonsense.

Terrorists were terrorists, whatever their demand, their motivation and the sources of their anger. As Prime Minister Singh told Congress in July 2005, 'Terrorism anywhere is a threat to peace and security everywhere.'

**I**t was President Bush's clear and categorical recognition of the strategic challenge to the United States posed by the rise of Islamic radicalism and jihadi terrorism, on the one hand, and the rise of Chinese power, on the other, that forced Washington to re-assess its views about India and India's place in Asia and the world.

Consider once again the common elements of the message from New Delhi to Washington articulated by successive governments. The speeches of Prime Ministers Rao, Vajpayee and Dr Singh's very first speech in New York in

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September 2004, at the Council on Foreign Relations, carried the same message. That the US must first recognize that pluralism and democracy were under threat and, second, that the US and India had a shared interest in defending both. The message was finally heard by President Bush.

Whatever the mistakes President Bush may have made in his domestic economic policies and foreign policy, the one thing he got right was his Indian policy. When American critics of President Bush would tell me that Bush had a simplistic view of the world and he thought of it in binary 'black and white' terms — the good guys and bad guys — my response would be that while this may be true the fact is that as an Indian I would not deride him because he thought we were the 'good guys'!

That simple idea constituted the foundation of the new strategic partnership between India and the US. May be we were not yet 'natural allies,' as Mr Vajpayee claimed, but we were both on the same side. We were the 'good guys,' and the US wanted to help.

The new partnership built by President Bush and Prime Minister Singh was based on the recognition by both countries that each one's economic growth was good for the other and that the two could work together to create a global environment conducive to their economic betterment and global political stability.

The US could help India gain strategic space that would enable its economic rise, and India could help fuel the engines of US economic growth, which in turn would widen US's strategic space. The wide range of issues on which India and the US agreed to cooperate and help each other was defined by this perspective.

There were and remain skeptics and naysayers in both countries. Both leaders brushed aside such skeptics and ignored the naysayers to build a new strategic partnership.

However, two developments have since contributed to a weakening of this partnership.

First, President Bush's decision to go into Iraq and the subsequent course of events in West Asia weakened one of the pillars of the strategic partnership. Things became worse when President Obama defined a timetable of transition in Afghanistan without paying much attention to



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India's strategic concerns. Then came the Arab Spring and its aftermath — a sectarian conflict in the Middle East and West Asia.

As home to the second largest community of Muslims in the world, India could not sit idly and go along with every cynical move of the West in the region.

Second, the 2008-2009 trans-Atlantic economic and financial crisis weakened the US commitment to India's economic rise (India also weakened its own case by the positions it adopted on World Trade Organization's Doha Development Round and the various policy initiatives it took at home).

To make matters worse, for India, the economic slowdown increased the importance of China for the US and much of Asia. (Fortunately, for India, China weakened its own case with its hubris and its strategic overreach within Asia). The talk of a 'G-2' — a condominium between the US and China — emanating from US think tanks in the vicinity of the White House forced India to re-think its own strategic options. India responded in a tentative sort of way with a half-baked theory dubbed 'Non-alignment 2.0.'

President George W. Bush, right, and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the White House in 2005. According to Sanjaya Baru, whatever the mistakes Bush may have made in his domestic economic policies and foreign policy, the one thing he got right was his Indian policy.

The 'first steps' (Clinton), the 'next steps' (Bush-1) and the 'decisive steps' (Bush-2) in India-US strategic partnership were not followed up during Dr Singh's second term in office and Obama's first term. Rather, the upturn in the curve witnessed during 1998-2008 was followed by a downturn in 2009-2013.

President Obama and Prime Minister Singh meet in Washington, DC against this background. Their domestic economic situation and the messy state of affairs in Asia to India's west will weigh on both their minds. So too will China's continuing rise and its renewed assertiveness in Eurasia writ large.

But, will there be a meeting of minds? Can there be a meeting of minds? Or, will the two bid farewell to each other, leaving it to

their successors to re-invent and rescue the relationship?

If the two interlocutors in the Oval Room want to leave behind a legacy worth remembering them for as far as India-US relations are concerned they will have to shred the papers written for them by their aides over the past four years (Obama-1 and Singh-2) and re-invent the relationship.

The events and the thinking of Obama-1 and Singh-2 require the re-launch of the partnership. Both countries have, therefore, to take 'New Steps' for a new strategic partnership taking into account the new developments that have come to define the world since 2008.



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## The plateau is at a high elevation today

sites.

Other issues have contributed to a distinct lowering of enthusiasm for the India relationship in the US, such as perceived Indian protectionism exemplified by India's Preferential Market Access decision to force foreign companies to set up manufacturing facilities in the telecom sector in India, the Indian Supreme Court judgment on the patents issue which has exacerbated concerns about IPRs and the retroactive application of India's tax legislation as in the Vodafone case.

The US corporate mood towards Indian has soured of late, and this needs to be reversed. The US is pushing for a Bilateral Investment Treaty. On climate change and WTO-related issues, India and the US have unbridged differences. The general view is that the relationship is now suffering from the fatigue factor.

The slowdown in India's growth and other structural problems that have appeared in the Indian economy have taken the shine off the India story for the time

being, but the medium and longer term prospects remain very positive for the India-US relationship.

On the Indian side, India has problems with the new Comprehensive Immigration Bill that will put more restrictions on movement of personnel from India to the US in the IT sector, the increased cost of H1B and L1 visas that will impose sizable costs on the Indian IT sector and the whole

campaign against outsourcing led by the White House. India has its own concerns about US protectionism and

market access for some of its products, which don't receive a sympathetic response.

All in all, however, ties with the US are decidedly better than they were a decade ago. Even if the relationship has 'plateau-ed' as some say, the plateau is at a high elevation today.



**Ambassador Kanwal Sibal is a former Foreign Secretary of India.**