

US-India The Way Forward



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Washington and New Delhi are no longer courting teenagers in the throes of first love, but a comfortably established couple where heated ardor has given way to settled routine, notes **ROBERT M HATHAWAY.**

The US capital, sunk in gloom and self-absorption, awaits the arrival of Manmohan Singh on what is probably his last visit to Washington before stepping down as prime minister. At moments like this, I miss my old boss Steve Solarz.

Representative Stephen J Solarz, often called 'India's best friend in Congress' by this newspaper, came to Washington in 1974 as a member of the famed 'Watergate class,' and served in the US House of Representatives for the next 18 years. His energy, smarts, and unrelenting focus on foreign policy fueled his quick ascent in the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

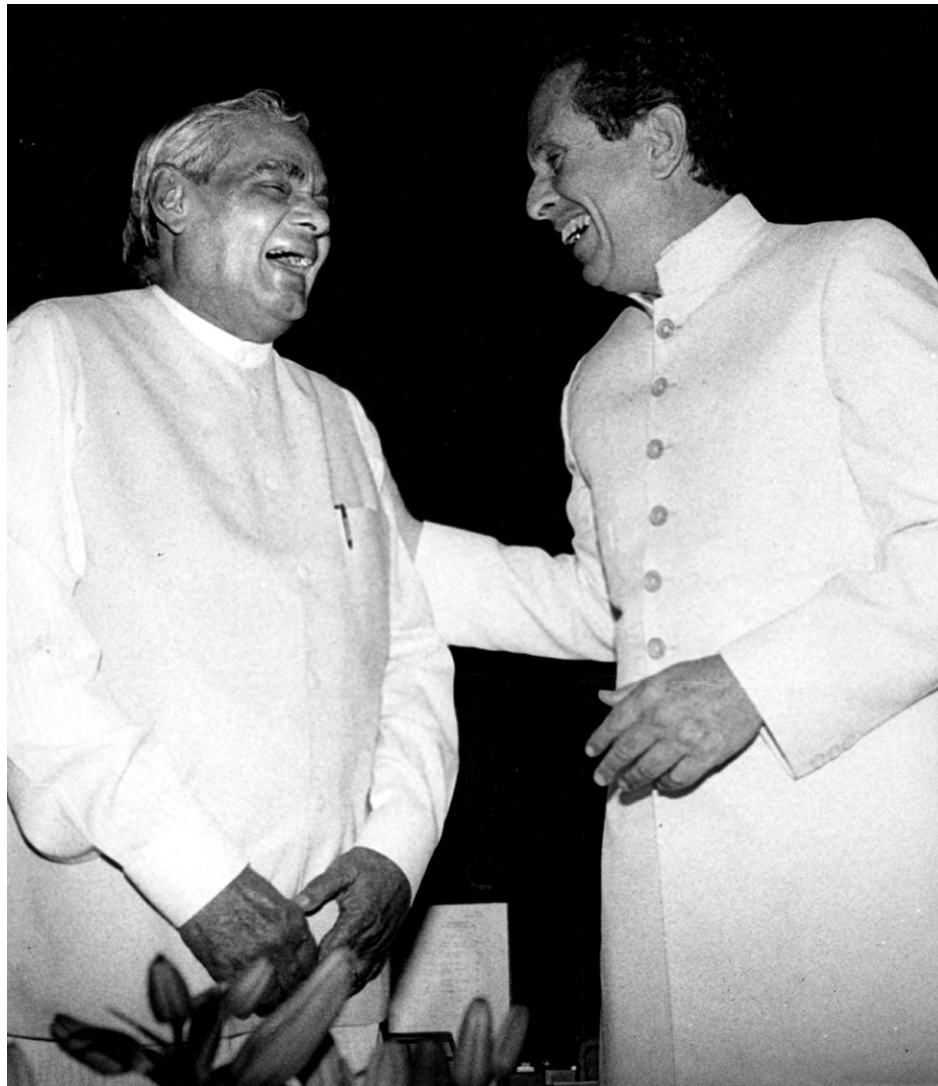
Originally, the chair of another subcommittee, he leaped in 1981 at the chance to head the Asia subcommittee, and was easily the best informed and most influential member of Congress on all things Asian until his electoral defeat and retirement in 1992.

Early in his career, Steve singled out India and US-Indian relations as one of his primary interests. Indeed, India was more than an interest; it became a passion. He was drawn to India's vibrant democracy. He admired the way in which Indians had resisted the examples of South Korea, Taiwan, and other countries that had pursued economic development at the cost of democratic freedoms.

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the Cold War raging and most of Washington viewing New Delhi as far too friendly toward Moscow, Steve's belief in the importance of close US ties with India placed him badly out of step with most of his Congressional colleagues.

Today, the India Caucus is perhaps the largest caucus in Congress. But it was not always so. Steve used to joke that in his day, the entire caucus could fit inside a telephone booth, with room to spare. (Older readers may have to explain that reference to this newspaper's younger readers, many of whom may never have seen a phone booth.)

On numerous occasions, as one of his subcommittee staffers, I accompanied Steve to the floor of the House, where he argued passionately — and usually successfully — against anti-India legislation. In those lonely days, Steve



Stephen Solarz, right, with then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Solarz was ever the optimist about India, some of his staff thought incurably so. But the past 20 years have shown how right he was to have bet on India, and its ties with the US. INDIA ABROAD ARCHIVES

broader context of how far bilateral ties have progressed in recent years.

Let us not forget that it was only 15 years ago that the Clinton administration slapped sanctions on India because of its nuclear tests.

Even during the administration of George W Bush, who was and remains wildly popular in India, the revitalization of Washington's alliance with Pakistan and the US designation of Pakistan (but not India) as a major non-North Atlantic Treaty organization ally caused considerable anger and anguish in New Delhi.

The naysayers and the purveyors of gloom also ignore both the depth and the breadth of today's relationship, compared to only a decade ago. The two countries regularly — without much fanfare or even notice from the media — communicate, coordinate, and collaborate on issues ranging from geopolitics to disaster relief, from defense to health, from space to energy, from information technology to higher education.

It's important that we not romanticize this partnership. Some of the overblown language that both countries have used in the past to characterize the present and future of the relationship has contributed to unrealistic expectations, which in turn have led to dashed hopes and even the sense of having been let down that one hears from time to time today.

Nor should we ignore the disruptive issues that could destabilize bilateral ties. Visas, trade and investment, Iran, climate change, and — always — US ties to Pakistan unsettle the relationship.

Most urgently, as the US completes its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan next year that troubled country could increasingly become a source of serious discord between Washington and New Delhi.

India, unconvinced that the Afghans will be ready to assume full responsibility for their security, worries that the US departure will lead to chaos in the region, with India left holding the bag. Some war-weary Americans retort that India is perfectly willing to see the US fight in Afghanistan to the last American.

Nonetheless, as Prime Minister Singh visits Washington this month, both sides should celebrate the bilateral relationship — and the huge strides India has made over the past two decades. As India's prime minister for the past nine years, and as the chief architect of India's economic miracle stretching back to 1991, Singh perhaps more so than any other individual can appreciate the progress that has occurred, and justly claim some of the credit.

Steve Solarz was ever the optimist — some of his staff thought incurably so. But surely the past 20 years have shown how right he was to have bet on India, and on the ties between our two countries.



Robert M Hathaway directs the Asia program at the Woodrow Wilson Center. His latest book is the co-edited *New Security Challenges in Asia*.

Betting on India

was often the only member of Congress to speak out on behalf of India. Today, of course, members elbow each other out of the way to get to the podium to praise India and support cordial US-India ties. That is one of Steve's legacies.

Why resurrect these memories of a man now gone from Congress for more than 20 years? It's simple, really. At a moment when foreign policy mavens write of a malaise in ties between New Delhi and Washington, it's useful to recall just how far that partnership has come in a remarkably short period of time.

True, the sense of anticipation that surrounded the relationship a few years ago has somewhat dissipated. But in an odd way, this underscores the maturity of today's relationship. Washington and New Delhi are no longer courting teenagers in the throes of first love, but a comfortably established couple where heated ardor has given way to settled routine.

Sure, there are points of difference, even irritants, in the relationship, but these disagreements must be seen in the