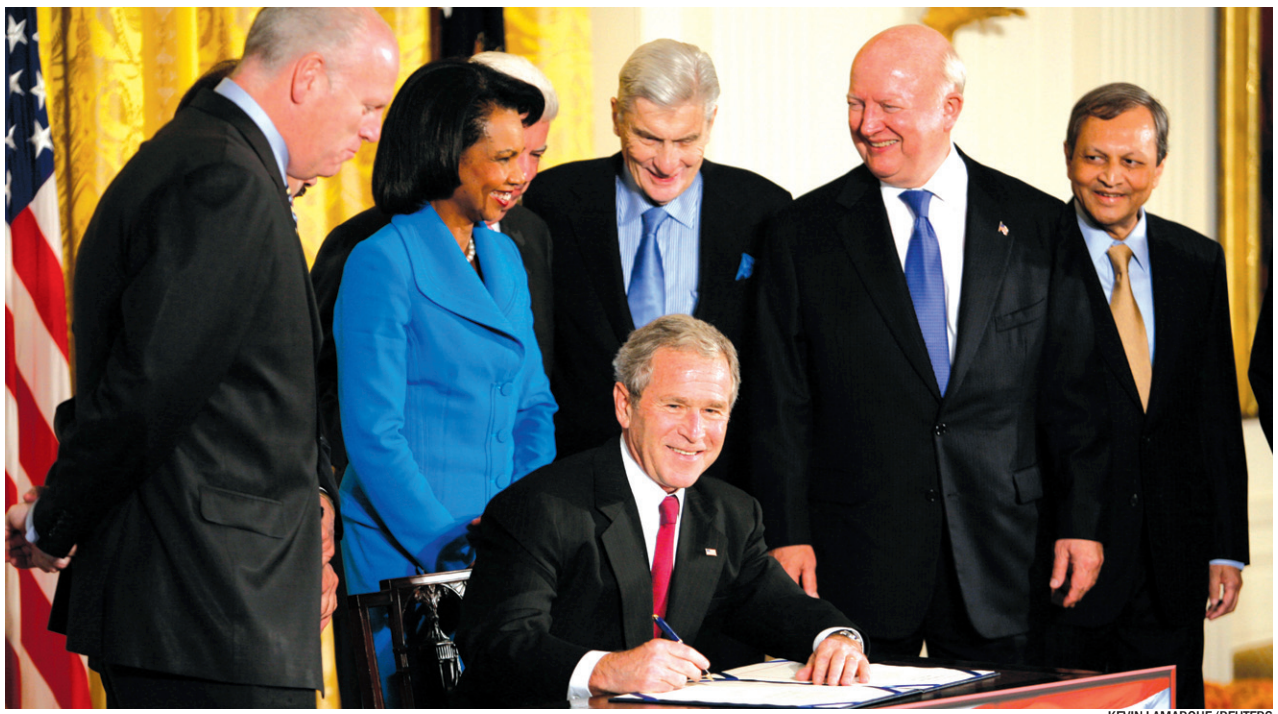
Ambassador **RONEN SEN**, during whose tenure the India-US relationship improved beyond recognition, evaluates the progress since in this frank interview with **SHEELA BHATT**.



KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

President George W Bush signs the United States-India Nuclear Cooperation Approval and Non-proliferation Enhancement Act during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House in Washington October 8, 2008. Standing from, left, Representative Joe Crowley, then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, then Senator John Warner, then Energy Secretary Sam Bodman and then Indian Ambassador to the US Ronen Sen.

'The relationship has been consolidated and our cooperation broadened'

One of India's most cerebral diplomats, **Ronen Sen** played a stellar role in taking India-United States relations to another level as India's Ambassador to the US, during the crucial years, 2004 to 2009.

Ambassador Sen's tenure intersected with the second Bush term when the President decided to erase India's nuclear pariah status and transform the US-India association for the better, likely forever.

For Ambassador Sen, who served as his nation's envoy in the most important capitals of the world before coming to the US, his tenure in Washington will always be remembered for what it achieved in a relationship long dormant, yet bristling with possibility.

Four years after he returned to New Delhi, Ambassador Sen discusses the nuclear agreement, which he shepherded through many obstacles, the India-US relationship and where it is headed with *India Abroad*.

Would you agree that, despite occasional problems, for the first time since Independence, the last decade-and-a-half has seen the closest ties between India and the US?

Contrary to popular perceptions, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War did not usher in closer India-US relations. India was peripheral in US priorities till the 1998 nuclear tests and the exposure of Pakistani perfidy at Kargil in 1999. President Bill Clinton's five-day visit to India and five hour stop-over in Pakistan in 2000 reflected US recognition of the realities in our region.

The most rapid transformation of India-US relations was, however, between 2004 and 2008 — starting with the joint announcement of the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership, NSSP, by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and President George W Bush in 2004 and the signing of the historical civil nuclear deal in October 2008.

Since then, the relationship has been consolidated and our cooperation broadened under the guidance of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Obama.

You were ambassador to the US during the crucial period, 2004 to 2009. What were the parameters within which you were working during your assignment? What was the brief given to you by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh?

I was asked to try to reverse the negative legacies of the Nixon and Carter administrations, representing the worst phases of India-US relations. The Nixon legacy was that of a US-Pakistan-China axis, symbolized by the presence of the *USS Enterprise* in the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war. Carter's contribution was the unilateral abrogation of the Tarapur agreement by retroactive application of US Congressional legislation in 1978, following our 1974 nuclear test, and setting up an international regime to isolate India.

By coincidence, I was personally closely involved in India's response to both these missions. On the nuclear issue, I was instructed by our prime minister to complete and build on the NSSP process initiated by his predecessor, Prime Minister Vajpayee, which envisaged civil nuclear cooperation, civil space cooperation and cooperation in dual use technologies, apart from missile defense consultations.

Phase 1 of the NSSP was completed the month after my arrival in the US, and so were the remaining two phases in the following year.

The dramatic announcement of the civil nuclear initiative during our prime minister's first visit to Washington, DC in July 2005, was preceded by the signing of an important long term framework for defense cooperation in June 2005 by our then defense minister Pranab Mukherjee and his counterpart Donald Rumsfeld. Civil nuclear and defense cooperation are, by their very nature and long term perspective, major manifestations of a truly strategic partnership.

You mentioned the nuclear deal, which was a game-changer in India-US relations. What was the background and circumstances under which both governments moved in working out this deal?

There were obviously pressure groups in both countries, as well as resistance from many other countries, which made negotiations very difficult, and the process took over a thousand days to complete.

The initiative was so bold, so breathtaking in its audacity, that most people were stunned by its first announcement in July 2005.

On that evening in the White House, two prominent Senators told me that they were most unhappy about not being kept in the loop. They reflected the sentiments on both sides of the aisle in both Houses in Congress. The fact was that negotiations on the text were inconclusive till the last moment.

It was the same touch-and-go situation during President Bush's visit to India in March 2006, when the joint statement was finalized literally minutes before the press conference by the two leaders. This happened again and again on a number of critical occasions right up to our prime minister's final meeting with President Bush in end September 2008.

It was only after President Bush signed the India-US nuclear deal into law on October 8, 2008, and the reassurances in his signing statement, that the deal was signed a couple of days later.

There were strong lobbies in both countries. The non-proliferation hardliners had, and continue to have, powerful influence in the US as well as in other countries in the 45 nations Nuclear Suppliers Group. This influence was reflected in some clauses of the enabling Hyde Act of 2006 and subsequent documents, which we did not accept.

We finally overcame obstacles that, on several occasions, appeared to be insurmountable, both in the US Congress and the NSG.

However, while being tied up in knots in technicalities and legal details, many people did not realize that the nuclear deal was not just about nuclear energy. It was a historical landmark in bilateral relations that held the promise

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of a tectonic geostrategic shift in the balance of power.

I could understand the opposition from some Leftist friends in India, but not the reservations of some national Opposition party leaders who appeared to have lost their earlier policy moorings and wanted to disown their own legacy.

There were difficulties in India. The Congress party itself, by tradition and historically, has not been enthusiastic about closer ties with America. How did its leadership come on board?

There were certainly difficulties in India, in our Parliament. But do not underestimate the difficulties in the US Congress either. Both of us are democracies. We sometimes think our problems begin and end at home. We sometimes tend to overlook that even in bilateral relations, several interests of several players could be at stake, and these are constantly at play. This was true then and it remains even more so now.

The Congress party has never been monolithic in its approach on all foreign, security and economic issues. It has never been that way. Some people remain ensconced in a time warp, and find it difficult to accept that the world has changed over the decades and so has India.

Just after the first Non-aligned Summit in 1961, the majority of the NAM leaders were non-aligned between India and China in 1962. (*Then Indian prime minister Jawaharlal*) Nehru turned to the US for military aid and gave base facilities for US surveillance on China and approved cooperation with Taiwan.

Not many are aware that Indira Gandhi's decision to visit the US before the USSR in the early 1980s was a strategic decision, nor of Rajiv Gandhi's special equation with Ronald Reagan. Some prominent Congressmen had strongly opposed Rajiv Gandhi's path-breaking visit to China in 1988.

Whatever the internal debate at that time, the fact remains that UPA-1 (*India's United Progressive Alliance in its first term*) had ultimately rallied around Manmohan Singh and put its survival as a government at stake because of its decision to go ahead with the nuclear deal.

Our people's verdict after that demonstration of unified and decisive leadership was clear.

Your attitude and motivation was questioned at a critical time. What was the most difficult part of your job?

All that is history. I agreed to stay on for an extended tenure to complete an unfinished job. This would have been impossible without the leadership of our prime minister and President Bush. My role in the negotiations was negligible. My primary task was to get US Congressional approval. My colleagues and I worked round the clock and had individual and collective meetings with nearly half the Senators and Congressmen, including in their constituencies.

The Indian-American community played a pivotal role and worked unitedly, transcending the political affiliations in the US or in India. Why did they do so? Not everyone understood all the intricacies. But they all knew that something extraordinary, something truly transformational, was happening.

And at a very basic level, they thought that something so strongly resisted by Pakistan and China must have something intrinsically good for India. And that national good was what ultimately mattered for them.

LARRY DOWNING/REUTERS

From left, then President George W Bush, then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh attend the launch of the UN Democracy Fund in New York in 2005. According to Ronen Sen, Bush's approach to India was never purely transactional, but what both countries could do together for the world. It was thus not accidental that Bush and Singh launched the UNDF.

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The job was daunting for several reasons. First, the intense lobbying against the deal had to be countered. Second, what we wanted was not only US Congressional approval. We wanted Congress, for the first time, to suspend its own rules of procedure for approving the agreement.

This was needed because of its much delayed submission since we took our own time in UPA-Left consultations. Finally, it was not easy to introduce this in the Congressional agenda in its few final days at the height of the Presidential campaign and in the midst of its preoccupation with emergency economic stabilization legislation in the wake of the worst financial crisis since the 1930s.

We overcame all these extraordinary odds, and that too with a 85 percent Senate majority and 70 percent House majority vote.

India's nuclear experts, particularly Department of Atomic Energy's retired and serving officers, felt at that time that Ronen Sen never understood the issue. The issue was that there was some sort of cap coming on India's atomic weapons capacities.

I fully appreciated their concerns and apprehensions. I was part of our atomic energy establishment when the US Congress adopted a law retrospectively overturning the Tarapur agreement. I was there when Carter was caught saying off-mike in Delhi that he would send a tough and blunt letter to Morarji Desai.

At a time when the US took the lead to establish an international regime to isolate India, I prepared all notes sent by the then Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission to successive prime ministers.

For over a decade-and-a-half, I dealt at the policy level with our civilian and military nuclear projects. The main concern of some of our scientists, most of whom I held in the highest regard, was that our strategic program would be adversely affected. The fact is it was not.

Nothing was done behind the back of the then AEC chairman. Eminent scientists like former President (*A P J Abdul*) Kalam would not have otherwise supported it. Nor would other patriots like our first National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra.

All international deals involve some *quid pro quo*. What was the prime US interest in granting India such a special privilege?

Whatever one says of George W Bush, he acted on the basis of his convictions. And he was convinced that this deal was the right thing to do, and used all his political capital to push it through in the twilight period of his stay in the White House.

Even when I was in Britain, some people had told me of the fascination which George W Bush had for India. A fascination of a very large, very diverse country meeting formidable development challenges through democratic governance.

Bush's approach was never purely transactional. Values mattered to him. So did the power of ideals and ideas. His approach was not just what both countries could do for each other, but what they could do together for the world.

It was thus not accidental that Bush and Manmohan Singh launched the UN Democracy Fund and that India and the US are the largest contributors to this global initiative.

There was no behind the scenes understanding or any *quid pro quo* on the nuclear, defense or other strategic agreements. However, in any relationship, there is always give and take.

The most durable relationships are based on mutual understanding and benefit.

Did a mutual understanding include India's vote against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency?

No. The Hyde Act had a non-operative clause expecting India's active participation in US efforts to isolate and sanction Iran. We did not accept this clause or some other provisions.

In fact, I told some Senators and Congressmen that if they expected unquestioned Indian support for US positions on any issues, including on Iran, they should vote against the deal. Having said that, if we expect the US to take our concerns into account on issues of vital interest to us, we should not be insensitive to US concerns either. The Iran votes were, however, primarily influenced by other factors, including Iran's behavior at that time.

Surely there would have been some motivation, including that of large contracts for US companies?

If this was indeed a major motivation, why did the Bush administration put in such a colossal effort to push through the NSG exception for India a month *before* the India-US deal was cleared? This cleared the way for all countries to enter into contracts and agreements with India.

The India-France nuclear agreement was, in fact, signed before the India-US deal and the India-Russia agreement followed. One of the two major US companies is a wholly owned Japanese subsidiary, and the other also has a significant Japanese stake-holding.

Nonetheless, in September 2008 we reached an agreement with the US for procuring nuclear power reactors from the US and also agreed to sign the Vienna Convention which exempts suppliers from liability. The nuclear liability law adopted in our Parliament adversely affected this prior

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international commitment with retrospective effect. This is, however, not the only case in recent years of our legislative, executive and judicial actions affecting our prior international commitments with a number of countries.

It took over three years to finalize the nuclear deal, and it has been five years since the deal was concluded. How long do you think it will take to finalize contracts?

I am not sure. There have also been some delays on the US side, in terms of post-Fukushima regulatory clearances. But we should have moved faster. I hope we will see some sign of progress during our prime minister's forthcoming visit to Washington, DC.

There were also greater US expectations in terms of defense cooperation.

There was considerable disappointment about US firms not getting the large contract for multi-role combat aircraft. They did not understand that, unlike our own past practice and unlike most countries, major defense procurement decisions in India are now apparently no longer strategic decisions.

In fact, they are not even techno-economic decisions, since the initial short-listing or selection is done on technical parameters only, and often without different weightage to different requirements.

This is water under the bridge. US companies have signed very substantial contracts in recent years, often single-vendor contracts, and more are in the pipeline.

Defense cooperation has, however, not taken fully developed as envisaged in the 2005 agreement. Even in procurements there are persistent irritants, and there is slow movement on technology transfers, co-production and so on. The US can and should do more to treat India as a partner and not merely as a client.

We should also, on our own, revive and sign CISMOA and LSA agreements. It will be in interest of both the countries to address such issues at a political level so as to frame a new long term defense agreement in 2015.

Do you feel there is a slowing down in India-US relations in recent years? Differences have appeared on Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance.

I'm not in the know of our bilateral interactions at different levels. From what little I know, there seems to have been a decline in zeal and loss of momentum in the relationship. Perhaps this is partly due to growing domestic preoccupations in both countries.

In recent years, we had established a good practice with the US of prior confidential consultations and even close coordination of actions in our region, including on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I hope that this has continued to be so, including on the controversial Doha Initiative on talks with the Taliban. We have long-term converging interests in the region.

Our concerns about withdrawal of US combat forces and the uncertainties about the size and role of a residual US military presence, if any, after 2014, are legitimate. Yet, as a fellow democracy, we need to appreciate the growing popular opposition in the US to boots on the ground in Afghanistan or in other conflict zones.

Whatever his compulsions, President Obama appears to have no illusions about Pakistan. This was evident in his bold and unilateral action at Abbotabad, his three visits to Afghanistan and not a single visit yet to Pakistan. This could, of course, change.

MANSI THAPLIYAL/REUTERS

Iranian Oil Minister Rostam Qasemi, right, with India's Oil Minister M Veerappa Moily in New Delhi, May 27.
While India has always made it clear that the US should not expect unquestioned Indian support for it positions on any issues, Ronen Sen says India should not be insensitive to US concerns either.

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But, why are bilateral relations so lackluster?

There seem to be a loss of momentum. It is a certainly a matter of concern that the same constituents who were in the forefront of promoting this relationship, like members of both Houses in the US Congress or like corporate leaders do not have the same level of interest.

It is possible that prior consultations with the US and other stakeholders on our preferential market access measures and persistent tax problems faced by some companies could have averted problems posed to our companies by some provisions in the Senate immigration bill.

Maybe a cumulative impact of it is that of the India story losing its sheen. But, you can bridge the gap between perception and performance to a certain extent only. You can't separate foreign, economic and security policies. They are inextricably intertwined.

In this whole situation, the biggest concern is uncertainty, unpredictability. And also the direction in which our economy is headed.

Apart from Pakistan and Afghanistan, has not China shaped India-US relations?

Without undermining the importance of other countries, I feel that the two most critical relations for India are those with the US and China, for different reasons.

Our greatest challenge is the management of these relationships, or rather inter-relationships, in the Asian and global architecture. US positions have vacillated, but a unipolar Asia is not in our interest, nor a US-China condominium.

There is a clear convergence between India's Look East policy and the more recent US rebalancing in the Indo-Pacific region. The marked improvement of our relations with Japan holds great promise for the future.

We have to dovetail and align economic, political and security policies in not only bilateral, but in multi-lateral mechanisms. It will be in the interests of the US and India, and other countries including those of ASEAN, Japan and South Korea, if India could be invited to join the Asia Pacific Economic Forum and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

It is high time we started thinking big, and in strategic terms of our trade ties. Incremental steps taken in isolation will not help.

When India gets closer to the US it has to take care of nuances. India is trying to safeguard its interests because China is its immediate neighbor with whom India cannot afford an offensive type of relationship. The US is on the other side of the world.

In some respects, you are right. But even given its isolationist tendencies, with some exceptions, the US will for practical purposes, in terms of its political, economic and military role, remain a major player in the Indo-Pacific area despite its geographic distance.

Look, technologies are also moving fast. What difference will geographic distance make in the context of cyber warfare, for instance. Can we apply even 20th century, let alone 19th century logic, to today's world?

Talking of advanced technologies, why was India's reaction so guarded to the revelation of the US intrusion into the privacy of millions in the world, including India, through its PRISM program?

Were you aware that the Indian embassy was specially targeted during your days in Washington, DC?

You have raised two separate issues. The first is about the massive scale interception of personal communications and data of millions of ordinary people worldwide, including in the US.

Citizens of all democracies are naturally concerned about where the line should be drawn between providing security and protecting privacy.

The second issue is that of surveillance of activities of foreign countries and agencies, including the sovereign premises of embassies, or spying in common parlance. This has been prevalent since ages. It would be naive to feign righteous indignation about such activities, where the constraints are not legal or even moral but the levels of technological ability and financial resources.

I was not aware of PRISM or any such US programs during my stay in the US. However, my senior colleagues and I took it for granted that all conversations at the embassy or at my residence, and phone calls or e-mails were being monitored.

Anything typed on a computer was also not regarded as secure, irrespective of its designated classification or distribution. This was not specific to my assignment in Washington. I followed the same practice in Moscow, Berlin and London during my ambassadorial assignments, and also during visits to other countries.

Frankly, any savvy diplomat uses such covert surveillance as an effective form of communication. After all, isn't it human nature to believe what you overhear more than what you are told directly?