

New Indian government demonstrates loyalty to Washington

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The visit by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the US last month has made clear that the new Congress-led government will not only maintain, but strengthen the ties established with Washington by the previous Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led administration.

Singh's trip was his first since Congress scored its surprise win in the Indian election in May. He met with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in London before travelling to New York to take part in the UN General Assembly. More significant, however, was his talks with President George Bush and other top American officials over India's close strategic and economic alliance with the US.

When Congress formed its coalition government with the backing of the Communist Party of Indian Marxist (CPI-M) and other "left" parties, concerns were raised in ruling circles that India's relations with Washington may be in doubt. During the election campaign, Congress leaders had criticised the BJP's pro-US orientation. Last month, however, Singh was at pains to dispel any doubts. Speaking to the Council of Foreign Relations, he stressed: "We [US and India] are on the same side."

In his address to the UN General Assembly, Singh underscored the point, expressing his government's support for the Bush administration's "global war on terror" and remaining silent on the illegal US occupation of Iraq. He expressed the empty hope for an "end to the suffering of [Iraqi] people" and praised the "international community" for assisting Afghanistan "in pulling back from chaos".

Just prior to Singh's arrival, the Bush administration lifted restrictions on the sale to India of sensitive US technology including for the country's nuclear power plants and civilian space program. The bans were

imposed in 1998 on both India and Pakistan following the testing of nuclear weapons by both countries. While the end of the restrictions was agreed in January as part of the Next Step in Strategic Partnership, the timing of the move was clearly designed to foster good relations with the new Indian government.

The Bush administration has been keen to extend the relationship with India developed under the previous Clinton administration. Not only has India emerged as a major source of cheap labour but the country is viewed as a key element in US plans to secure hegemony in the neighbouring Middle East and Central Asia. The US also regards India as a crucial counterweight to China's growing influence within Asia.

Singh met with Bush and other top officials including Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and former US ambassador Robert Blackwill on September 21. A joint statement issued after the meeting noted that "bilateral relations had never been as close as they were at present and they (Bush and Singh) set the direction for further development of the India-US strategic partnership... Expanded defence cooperation was perceived as an integral part of the expanding ties."

Singh was no less craven than his BJP predecessor Atal Behari Vajpayee in embracing cooperation with US imperialism. He boasted to the media in New York that he and Bush had agreed that they "cannot be satisfied with the status quo.... When I used the words 'the best is yet to come', the President said 'yes I agree with that'. That is the measure of the agreement among ourselves."

On most regional issues, US and Indian interests coincide. The Singh government backs the US intervention in Afghanistan as a means of weakening the influence of rival Pakistan in the country. Both the

US and India have been backing the monarchy and arming the Nepalese military against Maoist insurgents. In Sri Lanka, the two countries have been pushing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to enter a powersharing arrangement with the government to end the country's longrunning civil war.

The Bush administration is also pressing India to normalise relations with Pakistan. Washington regards the bitter decades-long rivalry between the two countries as a dangerous obstacle to its plans to exploit the region's cheap labour and use India as a key base for its broader ambitions. At this stage, Pakistan is also playing an important role for the US in cracking down on militia groups opposed to the US-installed puppet regime in Afghanistan.

Singh has continued the talks with Pakistan begun under the BJP-led government. He met with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on the sidelines of UN General Assembly and described the talks as a "significant step forward". Both countries are keen to expand economic opportunities and trade. Singh agreed to consider plans for an oil pipeline to India from Iran through Pakistan—a proposal that New Delhi earlier rejected.

On the key issue of Kashmir, Singh and Musharraf agreed to explore "possible options for a peaceful, negotiated settlement" but made no concrete proposals. The dispute over Kashmir—the product of the communal partition of the subcontinent in 1947—has twice sparked war between the two countries and threatened a third military conflict in 2002. Neither side is capable of compromising on Kashmir which has been central to the communal politics exploited by the ruling elites in both countries to buttress their rule.

During his visit, Singh also made a direct appeal to the corporate elite. In what was a first for an Indian prime minister, he addressed the New York Stock Exchange and called for \$150 billion in investments in India over the next decade. Singh, who as finance minister initiated market restructuring in the early 1990s, pledged in talks with Bush that his government would be "deepening and broadening the process of economic reforms".

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Singh emphasised there would be "no roll back of privatisation". In encouraging foreign investment, he declared: "India is now an open book". At a press

conference in New York, Singh baldly summed up his message to global capital: "I am here to sell India. As prime minister it is my duty that I should promote India."

Singh's comments were made in response to muted criticisms by CPI-M leader and former West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu who declared the prime minister was behaving like a salesman in New York. The CPI-M, however, has no intention—at this stage at least—of withdrawing its support for the minority government. Having backed Congress as the "lesser evil" against the BJP, the CPI-M is anxious to deflect growing hostility to the new government's policies.

Singh's visit represents a sharp shift in the foreign policy of the Congress Party—the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie which held power virtually continuously from 1947 to the mid 1990s. During the Cold War, India was one of the leaders of the so-called non-aligned movement. Congress governments were able to balance between Washington and Moscow. As well as receiving considerable aid from the Soviet Union, Congress politicians were able to indulge in "anti-imperialist" rhetoric with Moscow's blessing.

But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the diplomatic room for manoeuvre has also vanished. The Hindu supremacist BJP began the process of forging a strategic alliance with Washington in the late 1990s as a means of pursuing India's own ambitions in the region. But Singh no less than his predecessor, Vajpayee, recognises that Indian capitalism cannot afford to alienate the US. As a result the Congress-led government has rapidly jettisoned even muted criticism of the US as it seeks to sell Indian cheap labour to US corporations and benefit from acting as the loyal lieutenant of US imperialism in South Asia.



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