

# Indian government seeks to curry Washington's favor

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The congratulatory message that Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sent George W. Bush following his victory in the US presidential election was remarkable for its obsequiousness.

The head of the Congress-led, Left Front-supported, United Progressive Alliance government said Bush had received a “strong mandate,” praised him for having brought Indo-US relations to a new level, and reiterated the Indian elite’s commitment to a strategic partnership with US imperialism. “We must,” declared Singh, “embark on a larger and a more ambitious agenda for broader strategic cooperation; high technology, commerce and defense hold a particular promise in this regard.”

Singh also lauded Bush for his leadership of the “war on terror,” adding, “We are confident that the United States and India are on the same side in this effort.” Under the banner of “fighting terror” Washington has unleashed the US’s military might to conquer Afghanistan and Iraq so as to establish US geopolitical hegemony in the Middle East and Central Asia, adjacent oil-rich regions.

Singh welcomed the recent US stage-managed elections in Afghanistan and voiced his government’s support for the Bush administration’s plans to give the puppet regime it has established in Iraq a similar façade of legitimacy. “We all,” said Singh, “have a stake in the early return of Iraq to the international mainstream as a democratic country. India is ready to contribute to the electoral process early next year.”

While meant to find favor in Washington, the Indian Prime Minister’s pledge to support the US in the fight against terrorism and nuclear proliferation was also a diplomatic snipe at Pakistan. Under pressure from the US, which during the Cold War actively encouraged Pakistan in its hostility toward India, the rival South Asian powers pulled back from the brink of war in 2002, then earlier this year launched talks aimed at normalizing their relations. Nonetheless the struggle for advantage continues. India’s elite is troubled by the Bush administration’s strong backing of Pakistani military strongman Pervez Musharraf. Earlier this year, Washington proclaimed Pakistan a major non-NATO ally.

Whenever possible New Delhi seeks to depict India and the US as twin democracies under terrorist siege, while suggesting that Pakistan promotes terrorism, because of its political and logistical support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir, and is an abettor of nuclear proliferation.

Singh’s lavish praise of Bush sparked something of a political outcry, since in India, as virtually everywhere in the world, there is profound popular opposition to the US’s illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq and to Bush as the personification of neo-colonialism and political reaction.

The Indian prime minister’s statement does reflect, however, the views of much, although not all sections, of the Indian bourgeoisie. Several business leaders pointed to Democratic challenger John Kerry’s rhetorical attacks on the outsourcing of jobs, including to India’s burgeoning computer software and office processing industries, in arguing that Indian business would benefit from Bush’s election victory. “Mr. Bush is in favour of free trade,” said Adi Godrej, a prominent Indian industrialist, “and there will not be any problem to our business process outsourcing sector, unlike in a win by John Kerry.”

The liberal, Chennai-based *Hindu*, by contrast, compared Bush’s election win to the December 2002 Gujarat election in which Narendra Modi, who nine months before had instigated communal riots that left more than 2,000 Muslims dead, led the Hindu supremacist BJP to reelection. Like Modi, Bush had used fear tactics and lies to manipulate the electorate.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Stalinist party that leads the Left Front, issued a statement critical of “some of the views” Singh articulated in his message to Bush. “To state that the global war against terrorism benefited enormously from Bush’s steadfast resolve and leadership is contrary to all facts and evidence,” declared the CPM Politbureau. “It can be validly asked whether terrorism has been eliminated or strengthened by Bush’s invasion of Iraq.... To assert, therefore, that we are ‘partners against terrorism’ without qualification, is unwise.”

While the Stalinists criticized Singh sharply, they did so

entirely from the standpoint of how best to uphold the national interests of the Indian national bourgeoisie. They argue that India would have greater leverage in a multi-polar world and to that end have hailed the efforts of French President Jacques Chirac, and other political spokesmen of the European bourgeoisie, to make the European Union a counterweight to US geopolitical ambitions. In keeping with this orientation, the Stalinists do not call for the defeat of US imperialism in Iraq, but only for the present US-British occupation to be transformed into one under the auspices of the UN.

At the same time—as underlined by their support for the Congress-led government at the Center and the pro-business economic reforms implemented by West Bengal’s Left Front government—the Stalinists are active supporters of the Indian bourgeoisie’s export-led growth strategy, which aims to make India a site of cheap-labor production for the world market by attracting foreign capital, including tens of billions of dollars in US corporate investment.

The Stalinists justify their support for the Congress-led UPA on the grounds that it is the only means to keep the Hindu nationalist BJP from office and by claiming that the Congress, the traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie, can be pressured into giving business’s neo-liberal program a “human face.”

In the six months since the UPA came to power a definite pattern has emerged. Repeatedly the Stalinists have issued what they term sharp warnings to the Congress leadership in which they chastise the UPA government for implementing policies little different from those of the former BJP-led coalition. Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and other top Congress officials then respond, in statements to the press and closed door meetings with Left Front leaders, by acknowledging the Stalinists’ discomfort, calling for closer cooperation between the government and its left allies, and mouthing various populist phrases. The government’s right-wing course, however, remains unchanged.

This case was little different.

Manmohan Singh said he did not think that the government and the CPM had major differences on India’s relation with Washington: “[Our] language may be different but we have to look at the realities of the world. International relations are, in the final analysis, power relations. And we are living in a world of unequal power. We cannot wish away the realities of this situation. We have to use the available international system to promote our interests. And, therefore, we have a necessity to engage the US.”

Notwithstanding Singh’s extraordinarily warm congratulatory message to Bush, he, his government and the Indian elite recognize that their geopolitical interests do not,

and will not, always coincide with those of Washington.

In the Indian press, there is much discussion about the need for India to revive its traditionally close relations with Russia and for India, Russia and China to act in concert to restrain US influence in Asia. Shortly after the US invasion of Iraq, the Indian government, then led by the BJP, moved to end the long estrangement between India and China and the Congress-led government has also made closer diplomatic and economic ties with Beijing a priority.

Since the US’s conquest of Afghanistan, India has developed closer relations with Iran. Speaking earlier this month, Singh emphasized that India believes the international dispute over Iran’s nuclear program “can be dealt with within the framework of dialogue between Iran and the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)” and should not be “excessively politicized.”

Last week’s fifth India-European Union summit, which was attended by Singh, ended with the two sides proclaiming the establishment of a “strategic partnership.” As part of the proposed increase in bilateral ties, India and the EU agreed to speed up negotiations on India’s participation in the EU’s Galileo global positioning system, which is meant to be an alternative to the US military-controlled Navstar/Global Positioning System. To the consternations of Washington, the EU has already secured China’s participation in Galileo.

Questioned during his European trip about French President Jacques Chirac’s call for a “multi-polar world,” Singh sought to avoid being drawn into the growing conflict between Europe and the US. Yet he did voice the Indian elite’s aspirations for India to be accorded the status of a major regional power and its opposition to Washington’s turn to unilateralism, declaring that he preferred to speak of “strengthening multilateralism” rather than multi-polarity.



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