

US woos India with support in becoming a “world power”

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22 July 2005

In a joint statement Monday, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and US President George W. Bush proclaimed “their resolve to transform the relationship between their countries” into a “global partnership.”

For several years now, Indian and US officials have been speaking of an Indo-US “strategic partnership,” including increased economic, scientific, technical and military ties. That this partnership has suddenly taken on global dimensions, with Bush and Singh touting it as a means to “promote stability, democracy, prosperity and peace throughout the world,” points to the rapidly shifting world geo-political and economic landscape.

The Bush administration is anxious to court India, hoping that through increased Indo-US economic, geo-political and military linkages, India can be transformed into a viable counterweight to China and one malleable to US objectives and pressure. Buoyed by India’s emergence as a major center for outsourced business processing, research and manufacturing operations and the country’s growing military prowess, India’s economic and political elite is eager, meanwhile, to lay claim to world-power status, including a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Bush administration officials were at pains to demonstrate the importance they attach to the burgeoning Indo-US relationship during the four-day visit Manmohan Singh made to the US this week. Bush greeted the Indian prime minister with an elaborate ceremony on the White House’s South Lawn, then feted him at a state dinner that evening. On Tuesday, Singh addressed a joint session of the US Congress, an honor rarely accorded foreign leaders.

On his first official visit to the US since becoming prime minister in May 2004, Singh went to extraordinary lengths to praise Bush and his administration. He hailed the president who, in the name of fighting “terrorism” ordered the US conquest of Afghanistan and Iraq and sweeping attacks on democratic rights, for his “steadfast determination and leadership in meeting the challenges of international terrorism”.

Putting paid to the traditional anti-imperialist posture of Indian governments, to say nothing of his own Congress party, Singh repeatedly spoke of the common values that India and the US reputedly share, including “the openness of our societies and economies ... our pluralism, our diversity and our freedom.” It was not lost on Singh’s audience that his depiction of India and the US as twin victims of international terrorism, who share a common interest in promoting democratic values around the world, echoes the rhetoric of the Bush administration.

In a speech Wednesday to the National Press Club, Singh did make brief mention of the Indian government’s official opposition to the US invasion of Iraq, but only to say that this controversy was “a thing of the past.” He thereby ignored the fact that Iraq remains under US occupation and that the Bush administration remains committed to the doctrine of pre-emptive wars—that is, the US’s unfettered right to run roughshod over international law and attack any country it deems a potential threat to its interests.

The joint statement issued by Bush and Singh calls, among other things, for: the establishment of a CEO forum, uniting Indian and US business

leaders to promote increased trade and investment; India to take steps to “enhance its investment climate”—a euphemism for privatization, deregulation and regressive changes to labor laws—if it wants to tap into US capital in modernizing its infrastructure; US-Indian cooperation in developing “stable and efficient energy markets in India”; public-private partnerships in the space and high technology sector; and the creation of a US-India Global Democracy Initiative in which the US and Indian government will work together to provide assistance to states wants help in developing “democratic” institutions.

The statement also reiterated both countries’ support for the “New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship” signed last month by top Indian and US officials, including Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee and US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The Framework has provoked much controversy in India. The Left Front, which provides the votes to sustain the United Progressive Alliance coalition in power, and broad sections of the Indian political and military-security establishments are opposing the Framework, or sections of it, on the grounds that it threatens India’s political and military independence. In particular they are opposed to the suggestion that the Indian military could be deployed overseas alongside US forces in non-UN approved operations, and clauses that tie or potentially tie purchases of US military equipment to acceptance of certain US policy stipulations.

However, the most important feature of this week’s joint statement was an agreement between Washington and New Delhi that has as its aim the removal of the international ban on sales of civilian nuclear technology and fuel to India that has been imposed since 1974, when India first exploded a nuclear device.

The Bush administration stopped short of recognizing India, which officially proclaimed itself a nuclear weapons state in 1998, as a state having the legal right to possess nuclear weapons (a violation of the terms of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty). But it has effectively announced that it favors India being accorded a special status in the international treaty and regulatory system governing nuclear technology—what the Bush-Singh statement calls a “responsible state with advanced nuclear technology”—so long as India agrees to certain restrictions and international oversight of its civilian nuclear program and the “other nuclear countries” and the US Congress agree.

Indian government officials are proclaiming the statement a major advance. Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran boasted to a media briefing, “What has been achieved is recognition by the US that, for all practical purposes, India should have the same benefits and rights as a nuclear weapons state.”

India, which is heavily dependent on foreign oil, is eager to expand its nuclear power generation capacity and for this needs greater access to foreign nuclear technology and fuel.

A second major consideration for both New Delhi and Washington is the fact that the sanctions imposed on India for being outside the international nuclear regulatory regime have included prohibitions on the

sale of advanced US military equipment. The US-based intelligence report *Stratfor* says official Pentagon leaks have said India is poised to make up to \$5 billion in purchases from US arms manufactures once the sanctions are lifted, including advanced anti-submarine and anti-missile technology to protect its Indian Ocean fleet.

The Bush administration has a double purpose in seeking to boost arms sales to India. Needless to say, it wants to boost the US arms industry, but it is also extremely anxious to render India dependent on US military technology.

The Bush administration's scheme to give India a special status within the international nuclear regulatory regime is clearly an attempt to give substance to the offer that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made when she visited India last March of US assistance in making India a world power.

Here is not the place to recount the complex history of US-Indian relations. But it must be noted that for four decades India and the US were estranged, because the Indian national bourgeoisie, having won independence from Britain, refused to submit to the US's demand that its foreign policy should be framed by the US's Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. Subsequently, Washington made India's bitter South Asian rival, Pakistan, a linchpin of its Cold War alliance-system, which led India to develop close military and economic relations with the USSR. The Indian bourgeoisie's foreign policy was, it should be added, bound up with its attempt to pursue a national economic development strategy that sought to lessen the economic domination of the advanced capitalist powers through import substitution and a fair measure of state ownership.

With the end of the Cold War and the growing crisis in India's economy created by its relative isolation from the resources of world economy, the Indian bourgeoisie has since 1991 pursued a radically different strategy, aimed at soliciting foreign investment so as to make India a cheap-labor haven for world capital. The dismantling of the traditional nationally regulated economy and accompanying assault on the limited concessions made to the working class and oppressed masses in the first decades after independence has been accompanied by a major shift in India's foreign policy. The US has emerged as India's single largest trading partner and foreign investor and increasingly New Delhi and Washington have developed a gamut of ties, including joint military exercises.

The US for its part has increasingly embraced India as an ally. Already under the Clinton administration there was a major change in the US attitude towards South Asia, with Washington tilting away from Pakistan and toward India. Because of its apprehensions about the growing power of China, the Bush administration from the time it came to office in 2001 sought to place relations with India on a new plane. The US decision to invade Afghanistan and subsequent revival of Washington's close relations with Pakistan, especially the Pakistani military, complicated the Bush administration efforts to draw India into a "strategic partnership."

But leading figures in the administration have indicated—as exemplified by Rice's offer of help in making India a "world power"—that the pursuit of a partnership with India is central to its world geo-political strategy.

In May, the number three man in the State Department hierarchy, Nicholas Burns, the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, said of US-Indian relations, "I think you'll see this as a major focus of our president and our secretary of state, and it will be the area of greatest dynamic change in American foreign policy."

One indication of the importance powerful sections of the Washington establishment attach to the "India card" is demonstrated by a recent CIA report which reputedly identified India as the most important "swing state" in the world's geo-political system—that is to say a state that could either ally with the US or become a party to anti-US alliance.

Doubts as to whether India is destined to be allied with the US in the intensifying struggle among the great powers for resources, markets and geo-political advantage are not misplaced. Many in the Indian political

and national-security establishment remain deeply skeptical of US intentions and objectives and these concerns have only been heightened by the Bush administration's bellicose and unilateralist course.

India has maintained close diplomatic and military ties with Russia. Shortly after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, India's National Democratic Alliance government, led by the strongly pro-US Hindu supremacist BJP, launched a concerted drive to repair relations with China. In April, the Chinese Premier visited India and the two countries announced a strategic partnership. India has also taken steps to join the Chinese and Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization, through which Moscow and Beijing are seeking to counter US influence in the Asia, especially Central Asia.

While Manmohan Singh has shied away from joining Moscow and Beijing in counterposing a multi-polar world to the current geo-political order, he has repeatedly spoken out against unilateralism in world affairs, in other words Washington's current policy. And he and his government have been forced to speak out forcefully against US attempts to coerce India and Pakistan into giving up their plans for a gas-pipeline connecting the two South Asian countries to Iran.

What India's multiple strategic partnerships with Russia, China, and the US indicate is that the current Congress-led UPA is trying to exploit India's status as a state that is being courted by other great powers. However, this is a dangerous game. Others within the Indian establishment fear the current government is too accepting of the embrace of an increasingly volatile and provocative US and may already be seriously eroding India's room for maneuver.

At the same time there are significant divisions within the US political and national-security establishment over the wisdom of so openly pursuing the building of an Asian counterweight to China and placing so much stock in an India which has a long history of opposing US objectives and a political and economic elite that has jealously guarded its independence from Washington. Even in the immediate term, the Bush administration's hot pursuit of India complicates the US's relations with Pakistan.

Significantly, while the US has embraced the demand of longtime ally Japan, a state that shares its concerns about the rise of China, for a permanent UN Security Council seat, it has failed to officially endorse India's similar quest.

Overall the response to Singh's visit within the US media was highly positive, not least because US corporations are increasingly focusing on using India as a low-cost platform in winning world markets. But the jury remains out on the most important decision announced during the summit—the Bush administration's willingness to accord India a new special status in the world nuclear regulatory regime. Many question if this will not further undermine the US's credibility when it claims to be upholding the authority of international law in opposing the efforts or alleged efforts of powers deemed unfriendly by Washington to obtain nuclear weapons.

The *Washington Post* was especially biting in an editorial titled "A new nuclear era." "The Bush administration," begins the *Post*, "is known for gambles, and Monday's about-face on nuclear cooperation with India qualifies as such." The editorial concludes by observing that "as the Bush team has discovered before, announcing a bold new policy is easier than implementing it."



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