

Bush travels to South Asia in pursuit of key strategic “partnership” with India

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US President George W. Bush travels to South Asia this week with the aim of cementing a strategic and “global” partnership with India. According to his aides, the trip is among the most important that Bush has made in his entire presidency.

Rhetoric aside, the Bush administration has two interconnected objectives.

First, it wants to ensure that corporate America plays a major and ever-expanding role in India’s rapidly expanding economy—as exploiter of cheap labor in the offshore-oriented information technology and business-processing sectors, as participant in public-private partnerships (PPPs) aimed at furnishing India with the transport and energy infrastructure needed to more tightly bind it to the world capitalist economy, and as purveyor of weapons and weapon-systems to India’s burgeoning military.

The Bush administration is especially interested in prying open India’s retail trade sector—in which tens of millions are employed in small, unregulated businesses for want of proper, full-time jobs—to companies like Wal-Mart and in gaining greater access to India’s agriculture sector—which continues to provide over 60 percent of Indians with their livelihood—for agri-business giants like Monsanto.

While Bush will tout the rise in India’s GDP as a spectacular “free market” success story, the post-1991 dismantling of India’s nationally regulated economy has been accompanied by a rapid growth of social inequality and economic insecurity. In “democratic India” hundreds of millions of people must struggle to survive on less than a \$1 per day and education and health care have for all intents and purposes been privatized with only the poorest of the poor using the dilapidated public education and health systems.

The second and even more important objective of Bush’s trip is to harness India—through increased military, civilian nuclear, and geo-political collaboration—to Washington’s drive for global supremacy. In short, the US wants to transform a “rising India” into an economic, military and geo-political counter-weight to China.

Last March, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice publicly announced that the US wants to help India become a “world power.” Subsequently, Washington and New Delhi initialed a series of agreements meant to pave the way for enhanced military cooperation, including sales of advanced US military equipment and joint foreign interventions without United Nations sanction.

In a patent attempt to use the Indian elite’s lust for recognition as a global power and to give a democratic veneer to its predatory foreign policy, the Bush administration proposed, and India’s United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government accepted, the creation of a US-India Global Democracy Initiative, under which the US and India will work together to promote “democracy” in Asia and around the globe. (The precedent for such collaboration is Afghanistan, whose conquest by the US in 2001 was sanctioned by the Indian government and whose US-installed government has enjoyed strong political and financial support from India ever since.)

However, far and away the most pivotal agreement in realizing the Bush

administration’s objective of harnessing India to the US’s global geo-political strategy and ambitions is the proposed Indo-US nuclear accord.

Struck during the visit Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made to Washington last July, the nuclear accord calls for the US to effectively sponsor India’s entry into the club of recognized nuclear-weapons states. Under the agreement, Washington is to press the member-states of the Nuclear Suppliers Group to give India a unique status in the world nuclear regulatory regime that would allow it full access to advanced civilian nuclear technology and nuclear fuel, even though India refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (which upholds the nuclear-monopoly of the five UN Security Council states) and became a self-avowed nuclear-weapons power in 1998 in defiance of international sanctions.

India is anxious to secure international acceptance as a nuclear-weapons state, because it lends weight to its demand for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and to otherwise be accorded great or world-power status. It also is eager to obtain foreign technology and fuel so as to expand its civilian nuclear power capacity, and thereby reduce its large dependence on foreign oil and gas imports and free up more resources within its own nuclear program for military research and development.

Bush administration officials had intended that the centerpiece of the president’s visit to India would be the initialing of the final draft of the nuclear accord. But the deal struck last July is now in jeopardy of unraveling. Nicholas Burns, the number two man in the State Department, flew home from India late last week after conceding that there were significant “remaining differences.”

Speaking to the press last Friday, Bush’s National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley tried to downplay the significance of the apparent failure to consummate the nuclear deal. “This is a very broad and rich relationship between the United States and India right now,” said Hadley. “And the two leaders [Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh] will have a lot to talk about, whether there’s this agreement or not.”

If the agreement is in danger of coming unstuck it is because the US has moved so quickly and ruthlessly to exploit the agreement to coerce India into doing its bidding and to ensnare it into a relationship of technological-military dependence. Even before its aggressive courtship of India has been concluded, Washington has assumed the role of an abusive husband, scolding and bullying India and seeking to rewrite the proposed nuptial agreement.

US officials and Congressmen have repeatedly publicly invoked the nuclear accord in demanding that India support the US and its European Unions allies in their pressure campaign against Iran. In the run-up to key International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) votes last September and earlier this month, US officials demanded that India prove its bona fides as a “responsible” nuclear power by voting with Washington to condemn Iran.

The UPA government has stubbornly maintained that there is not and never has been any linkage between the nuclear accord and India’s relations with Iran, but these claims have been undermined time and again

by public statements by figures in and around the Bush administration.

Declared Tom Lantos, the leading Democrat on the House International Relations Committee and a close ally of the Bush administration, “There is a quid pro-quo in international relations. If we are turning ourselves into a pretzel to accommodate India, I want to be damn sure that India is mindful of US policies in critical areas such as US policy towards Iran.”

Perhaps the most brazen and provocative of all was last month’s statement by the official US government representative to India, Ambassador David Mulford, that if India failed to vote with the US against Iran at the coming IAEA meeting the nuclear accord would “die.” While the Bush administration was forced to disassociate itself from Mulford’s remarks, after the Indian government recorded a meek protest, Secretary of State Rice delivered the same message only a few days later, declaring that “in order to move on to a new phase in which civil nuclear power would be available to India, India has to make some difficult choices.”

Further aggravating relations with New Delhi and stoking Indian opposition to the deal with the US, has been Washington’s very public campaign to scupper the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. New Delhi is anxious to see the pipeline project go ahead, not only because it desperately needs the energy, but because the project would underpin the recently-begun peace process with Pakistan.

US officials have gone so far as to protest to India, via diplomatic channels, against the joint purchase that, respectively, India’s and China’s largest state-owned oil companies have made of an energy property in Syria—thus signaling that the US wants not just to dictate to India whom it should buy its energy from, but is also determined to thwart Indo-Chinese cooperation.

From the beginning, a section of India’s political and military establishment has opposed the nuclear accord on the grounds that it will be used by the US, along with the offer of sales of advanced military equipment, to ensnare India into a relationship of dependence. These critics point out that the US has a long history of seeking to pressure India by imposing sanctions and embargoing transfers of advanced US technology.

In recent weeks they have been joined by a large section of India’s military-scientific establishment and the official opposition, Hindu supremacist and traditionally very pro-US Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in arguing that the deal may have to be abrogated to preserve the integrity and autonomy of India’s nuclear military capacity.

The scientists accuse the US of using the negotiations over the fine print of the nuclear accord, and in particular over the proposed separation of India’s nuclear sector into a civilian program subject to international inspection and a closed military program, to gain leverage over India and greatly restrict its capacity to develop its arsenal of nuclear weapons. According to the scientists, the US is insisting that far more of India’s nuclear capacity be subject to international inspections than that of the internationally-accepted nuclear states.

Earlier this month Anil Kakodkar, chairman of India’s Atomic Energy Commission and secretary of its Department of Atomic Energy, accused the US of “moving the goalposts” in the negotiations on the nuclear accord and warned that the independence of India’s nuclear program would be compromised if the UPA government buckled under US pressure for India’s fast-breeder nuclear program to be open to international inspections. “This would amount to getting shackled,” Kakodkar told the *Indian Express*.

According to the UPI press agency, a memo prepared by a senior Indian security official, characterizes the nuclear accord as a “lose-lose situation” for India. The memo reputedly says that through the nuclear accord, the US is seeking to “lock India’s indigenous nuclear program under the IAEA; to degrade India’s efforts toward achieving minimum deterrent capabilities; and to make India’s nuclear energy US-dependent.”

It should be added, that it has not gone unnoticed in Indian political and military/geo-political circles that US has refused to endorse India’s bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. But it has endorsed the bid of Japan, the other Asian pivot of the US’s strategy to contain and constrain China.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi have pressed hard for the Indo-US nuclear deal, demoting one minister (Mani Shankar Aiyar) and pushing another out of cabinet (Natwar Singh) who were seen to be too critical of the increasingly close ties between New Delhi and Washington.

But in a speech to parliament Monday, Manmohan Singh appeared to endorse some of the criticisms of the US demands, saying that India would not accept its fast-breeder reactor program being subject to international nuclear safeguards.

The Indian elite is fully cognizant of the US’s strategic ambition to use India as a counterweight to China. For the most part, the India bourgeoisie is determined to resist having India’s geo-political posture subordinated to Washington’s dictates, both because they don’t want to be forced into a potentially ruinous confrontation with their giant neighbour to the north and because they don’t want to see their room for maneuver on the world stage circumscribed by Washington.

Even as New Delhi has been seeking much closer ties with Washington, it has been seeking to reinvigorate its longstanding relations, particularly military collaboration, with Moscow and has sought to effect a major change in its relations with Beijing.

While trade with the US grew 63 percent between 2000 and 2005, Indo-Chinese trade exploded, rising more than 500 percent and catapulting China into second positions behind the US in India’s trade tallies. Aware of the potential for conflict over oil and natural gas—both India and China are increasingly dependent on energy imports—Beijing and New Delhi have taken some small steps toward containing their rivalry, including joint exploration ventures.

The hope of the Congress Party-led UPA government is that it can finesse India’s position—according to a US intelligence document India is the biggest potential “swing state” in the world geo-political system—to enhance India’s interests, by allowing itself to be simultaneously courted by the US, China and other great powers.

While it remains to be seen whether the nuclear accord will be salvaged, Washington’s aggressive drive to harness India to its global geo-political strategy has already shown just how dangerous such a course is and points to the increasingly fractious and explosive character of the relations between all the great powers and aspirant great powers.



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