

CONTINUITY IN CHANGE

FROM CLINTON TO BUSH to Obama, there is a clear consensus among U.S. foreign policy strategists that India will be one of America's most crucial partners in the 21st century.

BY KARL F. INDERFURTH and BRUCE O. RIEDEL

One cannot help but be amazed by just how far the U.S.-India relationship has come in less than a decade. It has been a remarkable transformation in relations, started under President Bill Clinton, then accelerated under George W. Bush, and now set to continue its positive, upward trajectory under Barack Obama. In each case the incumbent president has found a willing and able Indian prime minister to partner with in this joint endeavour — from Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Manmohan Singh.

This transformation in relations has seen a turning point, a tipping point, and now, in our view, it has gone beyond the point of no return as Obama takes over as the 44th President of the United States. This transformation has also been an excellent — albeit all too infrequent — example of policy continuity and bipartisanship in U.S. foreign policy.

THE TURNING POINT

In advance of President Clinton's visit to India in March 2000, we were asked by the White House to pull together a brief, one page paper, setting out the underlying rationale for the trip and the new agenda envisioned with India. It was ambitious, reflecting the president's often stated desire to see India become an important partner with the United States in the years ahead. The paper entitled, 'Ten Reasons Why We Need to Engage India',

included these points:

- Forge better overall ties with an emerging global power, and the world's largest nation in the making;
- Give operational meaning to our shared democratic values, and interest in strengthening evolving democracies;
- Maximise our partnership with one of the world's largest economies, and one of the world's largest middle classes;
- Help move India toward the global non-proliferation mainstream;
- Enhance our joint efforts on urgent global issues: terrorism, narcotics, rights of women and children;
- Work together to deal with challenges to regional stability;
- Team up to protect the global environment, with clean energy and other initiatives where Indian leadership is essential;
- Join hands in the global campaign against polio, AIDS and other public health problems;
- Upgrade our access to the world-class Indian players in the vital area of information technology;
- Boost our thriving and mutually helpful links in education, culture and people-to-people exchanges.

These 'Ten Reasons' became the 'talking points' for President Clinton's visit, the first by an American president in 22 years. They found their way into his speech before the Indian Parliament and the statement he signed with Prime Minister Vajpayee, entitled: 'India-U.S. Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century'. The first sentence read: "At the dawn of a new century, Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Clin-

ton resolve to create a closer and qualitatively new relationship between India and the United States."

Attached to that statement was a second document on 'Institutional Dialogue Between India and the United States'. Its purpose was to set out, in detail, the architecture for this new relationship, including regular bilateral summits between the two heads of government and annual policy exchanges conducted by the Secretary of State and External Affairs Minister; Foreign Office consultations; a Joint Working Group on Counter-terrorism; an Indo-U.S. Financial and Economic Forum, Indo-U.S. Commercial Dialogue, and Indo-U.S. Working Group on Trade; a Joint Consultative Group on Clean Energy and Environment; and an India-U.S. Science and Technology Forum. Such a network of institutional ties were intended to mirror the arrangements the U.S. already had in place with important allies in Europe and Asia, including Japan.

The positive response to Clinton's five days in India, especially with the Indian public, exceeded all expectations. Indeed his visit was so successful that India's National Security Adviser, Brajesh Mishra, would later say that it represented the 'turning point' in opening a new era in U.S.-India relations.

Moreover, that visit, along with Prime Minister Vajpayee's reciprocal visit to Washington just six months later in September 2000, laid the foundation for the next stage in the U.S.-India relationship. Although many of



GIVE AND TAKE: A file photo of former U.S. President Bill Clinton exchanging the 'Vision Statement' with former Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Delhi

the Clinton Administration's foreign policy initiatives would be scuttled by the incoming Bush Administration, the growing strategic partnership of the U.S. and India proved not to be one of them. In fact, it was expanded to include areas that had been virtually off limits to the Clinton Administration — like military-to-military ties — due to sanctions that were still in effect following India's 1998 nuclear tests.

THE TIPPING POINT

The first years of President Bush's term in office were preoccupied by the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the war in Afghanistan, and his decision to go to war in Iraq in March 2003. But by July 2005, Bush was prepared to leave a lasting mark on U.S.-India relations when he hosted Prime Minister Singh

at the White House.

The fact sheet issued by the White House after the two leaders concluded their highly successful meeting was entitled 'The United States and India: Strong Global Partners'. Eight major initiatives were spelt out, several of which build on the America-India agenda envisioned and begun five years earlier:

- A U.S.-India Global Democracy Initiative to Aid Developing Democracies was announced;
- A CEO Forum was established, an advisory group comprised of top U.S. and Indian CEOs;
- A U.S.-India Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture was launched, focussed on promoting teaching, research and commercial linkages and a second 'Green Revolution'.

Other important steps dealt with

forming a U.S.-India HIV/AIDS Partnership, disaster response (building on the successful collaboration in providing emergency assistance after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami), and space cooperation.

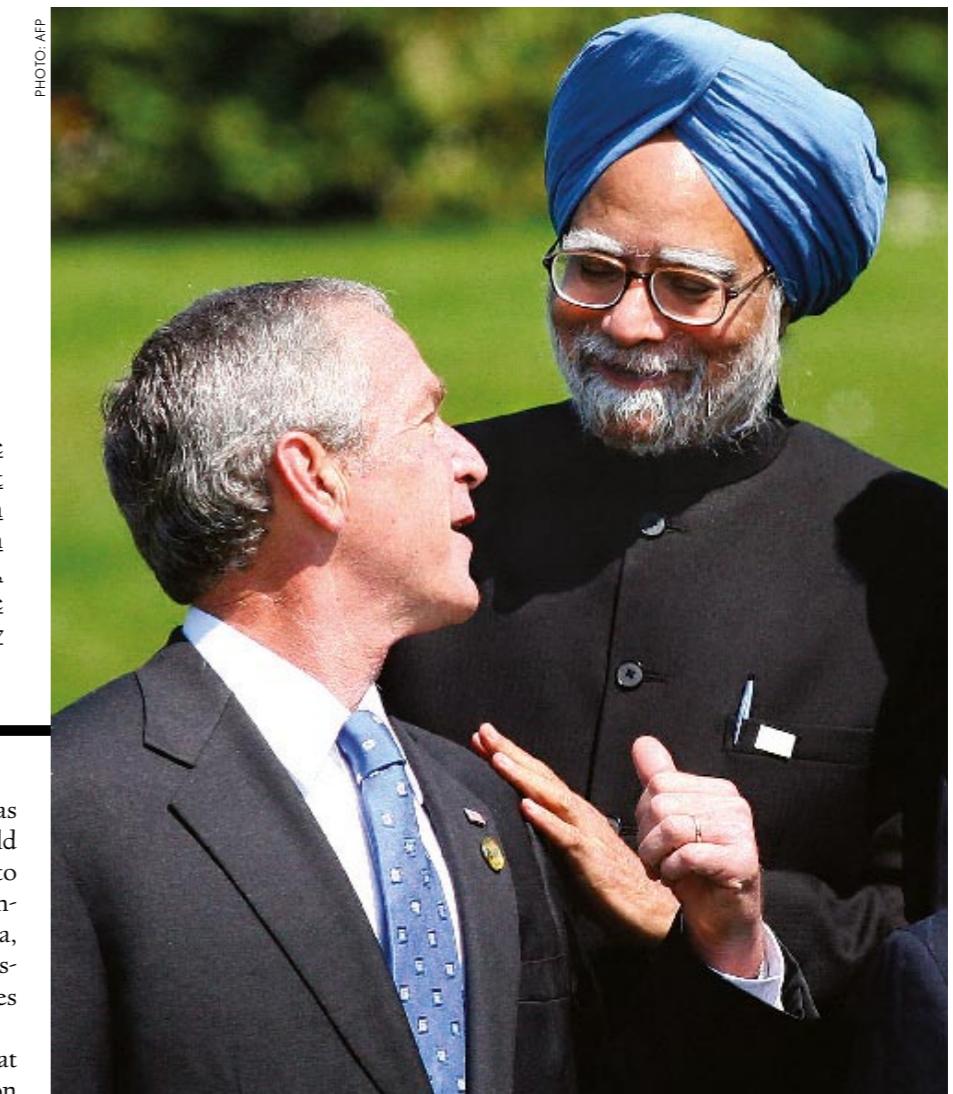
The statement also called attention to the fact that the Prime Minister's visit coincided with the completion of the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) initiative. Launched in January 2004, the NSSP was designed to clear away obstacles to closer U.S.-India cooperation on a 'trinity' of issues that had remained beyond the grasp of previous U.S. administrations: dual-use, high technology transfers, civilian nuclear and civilian space cooperation. The 'trinity' would later become the 'quartet' with the inclusion of missile defence cooperation.

The completion of the NSSP led to the most important initiative an-

nounced by the two leaders. It was also the least expected. Bush told Singh that he was now prepared to work to achieve full civil nuclear energy cooperation and trade with India, despite over a quarter-century of disagreements between the two countries over nuclear issues.

That announcement signalled that a new era in U.S.-India cooperation had begun. If President Clinton's visit represented the 'turning point' in the relationship, the nuclear agreement would represent the 'tipping point'.

The task of finalising the civil nuclear cooperation deal would dominate the U.S.-India agenda for the next three years, involving not only the two governments at the highest levels but the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). It was a major diplomatic undertaking



CLOSE RAPPORT: A file photo of U.S. President George Bush and Indian PM Manmohan Singh in Heiligendamm, Germany, during the G8 Summit in 2007

and, ultimately, successful. The overwhelming bipartisan support for the civil nuclear agreement in the United States was evident in the votes in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate and the affirmative votes cast by both presidential candidates. This strong political support reflected the consensus of American foreign policy strategists that India will be one of America's most crucial partners in the 21st century.

THE OBAMA AGENDA

That is the relationship that the new American President inherits. A firm foundation has been laid to reach its full potential.

In his statements in the Senate and on the presidential campaign trail, Obama made it abundantly clear that he recognises the transformation that has taken place in U.S.-India relations over the past two administrations and that his administration will continue

THE CLINTON ERA: Laying the foundation



1998

The U.S. makes a vital differentiation between India, which it refers to as a 'nuclear democracy', and others, as rogue states.

1999

Clinton assures India that 'concrete steps will be taken' to restore the Line of Control between India and Pakistan.

2000

Clinton arrives in New Delhi, the first U.S. presidential visit to India in 22 years, to improve ties.

2001

U.S. lifts sanctions which it imposed against India and Pakistan after their tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998.

THE BUSH DECADE: Consolidating ties



2005

Summit meeting between Manmohan Singh and George Bush signals the establishment of a global partnership between the two democracies.

2006

Bush signs the enabling legislation permitting full civilian nuclear cooperation with India into law.

2007

India and the U.S. announce the finalisation of bilateral civil nuclear cooperation agreement, also called the 123 Agreement.

2008

The U.S. Congress approves the 123 Agreement allowing India to purchase nuclear fuel & technology from America.

HIGHLIGHTS

A firm foundation has been laid for U.S.-India relations to reach its full potential as Obama takes over as the 44th President of the United States.

During his presidential campaign, Obama recognised the transformation that has taken place in U.S.-India relations over the past two administrations and his presidency will continue the positive, upward trajectory of these ties.

Another area for greater cooperation during an Obama Administration would be at the regional level.

India and the U.S. should also cooperate in trying to stabilise Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, both of which face internal political difficulties.

India shares the U.S.' interest in a secure, stable and free Afghanistan. This is one of Obama's highest priorities.

The U.S. and India collaborated in trying to end the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Obama has said he will seek to support the initiatives by India and Pakistan and give them the full backing of the U.S.

The new President is committed to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

Over the course of the past eight years, the U.S. and India have moved from 'estranged democracies' to 'engaged democracies'.

In a letter sent to Obama before his election, the Asia Society Task Force on India proposed that America and India should widen their collaborative focus to include the range of global issues facing the world today.

the positive, upward trajectory of these ties. In a letter to Prime Minister Singh in September, on the occasion of Singh's last trip to the U.S., he wrote: "Deepening and broadening the friendship between our countries will be a first order priority for me in the coming years."

During the campaign, Obama spelt out how he would go about doing that. Asked by *Outlook* in July, in what areas he would like to see U.S.-India relations grow, he said: "Across-the-board would be the short answer." Then he elaborated with several key examples, laying out a robust agenda for the next stage in U.S.-India relations, including on the need to join forces to combat terrorism which has been tragically underscored by the recent attacks on Mumbai:

"I believe that the U.S. and India must work together to combat the

common threats of the 21st century. We are both victims of terrorist attacks on our soil, and our counter-terrorism partnership is based on a shared interest in defeating the forces of extremism. Our common strategic interests call for strengthening U.S.-India military cooperation. We share an interest in democracy and the rule of law, and can work to promote democracy and strengthen legal institutions in South Asia and beyond. We share an interest in combating global climate change, and the U.S. and India can both do more to lead the world in securing a cleaner and more sustainable energy future. I intend to increase energy cooperation with India so we can together address the climate crisis that threatens our planet. We share an interest in combating the spread of disease, including HIV/AIDS. And we share an interest in combating global

poverty, which is why I will seek the U.N.'s goal of halving extreme poverty by 2015. We cannot allow the world's neediest to be left behind.

"India has enormous potential to contribute to a shared, sustained global economic growth. Our agenda should also include strengthening our economic relationship on a mutually beneficial basis. I would also like to see agriculture given a higher priority in our relations, as India pursues its goal of a 'Second Green Revolution'. I would like to see a ramp-up in higher education collaboration in fields like science, public health and information technology."

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Another area for greater cooperation during an Obama Administration should be at the regional level. India shares the American interest in a se-

cure, stable and free Afghanistan. This is one of the highest priorities of the new President. We should work closely together to achieve these goals. The U.S. and India collaborated in trying to end the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Now we need to work together while that country pursues a permanent peace. India and the U.S. should also cooperate in trying to stabilise Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, both of which face internal political difficulties.

The toughest longstanding issue in the South Asia neighbourhood remains relations with Pakistan and trying to advance the nascent Indo-Pakistani dialogue. In recent years, this dialogue has produced some movement on normalising ties and confidence building measures, including with respect to Kashmir.

The resumption of trade across the Line of Control after 60 years is an important and significant step. The two governments have also been engaged for some time in serious and purposeful exchanges on Kashmir, another encouraging sign.

As President, Obama has said he will seek to support these initiatives by India and Pakistan and give them the full backing of the United States. He has also said he believes the right approach is for India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute bilaterally, taking into consideration the wishes of the Kashmiri people who have suffered the most.

In sum, as Obama told *Outlook*, "The U.S. should be a strong supporter of this (dialogue) process, one that will, if ultimately successful, have enormous benefits for both India and Pakistan, and the region as a whole."

ON NUCLEAR PARTNERSHIP

In his letter to Prime Minister Singh, Obama also wrote that it was his hope that the civilian nuclear agreement 'can open the door to greater collaboration with India on non-proliferation issues. This subject will be one of my highest priorities as President. I am committed to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons'. This proposal is gaining increasing attention and traction due to its advocacy for the past two years by four former high-ranking U.S. officials — Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, William Perry and Sam Nunn.

On this subject of a nuclear-free world, Singh indicated in his speech to the United Nations on September 26 that India would be a willing partner. Singh told the General Assembly that the opening of international civil nuclear cooperation with India 'is a vindication of India's impeccable record on non-proliferation and to our long-standing commitment to nuclear disarmament that is global, universal and non-discriminatory in nature'.

Singh went on to say that the blueprint for this was spelled out by former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi at the U.N. 20 years ago and added: "I reiterate India's proposal for a Nuclear Weapons Convention prohibiting the development, production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons and providing for their complete elimination within a specified time frame."

As Singh cited Rajiv Gandhi's call in 1988 for nuclear disarmament, President Obama will also have a U.S. president of that era to cite in making his case — Ronald Reagan. He also

proposed the total elimination of nuclear weapons, when he met with Mikhail Gorbachev at their summit at Reykjavik in 1986. Perhaps history will find that Reagan and Gandhi were just a little ahead of their time.

A NOTE OF CAUTION

Over the course of the past eight years, the United States and India have moved from their oft-described relationship of 'estranged democracies' to the now more appropriate description of 'engaged democracies'. This transformation, in our view, has progressed beyond the point of no return. But here a note of caution is worth making. Like any allies, Washington and New Delhi will continue to have differences and disagreements.

For example, during the U.S. debate in Congress over the civilian nuclear agreement, India was criticised by some for maintaining strong economic ties with Iran and for having exchanges of low-level military delegations. Some even suggested that the civilian nuclear deal should be held hostage to a break in Indian-Iranian relations.

Those concerns needed to be placed in their proper context. New Delhi has historic ties to Iran and there is a great cultural affinity for Persia in India. India also has the second largest Shia Muslim population in the world after Iran. It naturally does not want to be estranged from a major energy exporter.

But India also made it clear that it does not want to see Iran develop nuclear weapons. It sided with the U.S. at two important IAEA votes on the Iran issue. New Delhi takes the position that Iran signed the NPT and must



IN A NEW LIGHT:
President-elect Barack Obama waves while walking with outgoing President George W. Bush at the White House

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