

India and the US

India



Henry A Kissinger

If the new relationship is to fulfil its potential, both sides must look back and examine how past relations became so strained

PRESIDENT George W Bush's visit to India has brought relations between the United States and India to an unprecedented level of cooperation and interdependence.

It is strange that this relationship should have taken so long to develop. Both countries are democracies. English is India's working language, and the educated classes speak it with rhetorical flourish. The Indian bureaucracy is well trained and competent, albeit slow-moving.

Yet until very recent years, relations between the two great democracies have been wary. It is important to understand the reasons if the new relationship is to realise the opportunity before it.

India straddled the Cold War crises in the name of a non-alignment that proclaimed the moral equivalence of the two sides; on most concrete issues it either tilted towards the Soviet side or remained aloof.

America's attitude towards India was similarly beset by ambivalence - between respect for the moral quality of

Indian leaders and irritation with Indian day-to-day tactics. The democratic institutions that the two countries shared did not determine political choices.

If the emerging partnership is to flourish, each side needs to understand what has brought them together beyond their domestic institutions.

Americans think of their country as "the shining city on the hill"; its political institutions are perceived to be both unique and relevant to the rest of the world as guarantees of universal peace. Crusades on behalf of democracy have been implicit in American political thinking and explicit in American policy periodically since Woodrow Wilson - and especially pronounced in the George W Bush administration.

That is not the way Indians view their international role. Hindu society does indeed also consider itself unique but, in a manner, dramatically at variance from America's. Democracy is not conceived as an expression of Indian culture but as a practical adaptation, the most effective means to reconcile the polyglot components of the state emerging from the colonial past.

The defining aspect of Indian culture has been the awesome feat of maintaining Indian identity through centuries of foreign rule without, until very recently, the benefit of a unified, specifically Indian, state.

Huns, Mongols, Greeks, Persians, Afghans, Portuguese and, in the end, Britons, conquered Indian territories, established empires, and then vanished, leaving behind multitudes clinging to the impermeable Hindu culture. The Hindu religion accepts no converts; one is born into it or forever denied its stringencies and its comforts.

India, striving neither to spread its

culture nor its institutions, is thus not a comfortable partner for global ideological missions. What it analyses with great precision is its national security requirements. And these owe more to traditional notions of equilibrium and national interest - partly a legacy of British rule - than to ideological debates.

India seeks a margin of security within which its culture can thrive and its polyglot nationalities work together for practical goals. This has produced various levels of Indian involvement in international affairs:

With respect to its immediate neighbours and smaller states like Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, Sri Lanka and even Bangladesh, Indian policy has been com-

Too often America's India policy ignores both countries' interests are served. India recognises that Southeast Asian political relationships in which India is a principal actor. Here

parable to America's Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere - an attempt to maintain Indian hegemony, if necessary, by the use of force.

In the north, India faces the Chinese giant across the intractable barrier of the Himalayas and the Tibetan massif. Here India has pursued the traditional remedy of a great power confronted by a comparable rival - a security belt against military pressure.

Neither China nor India has so far engaged in a diplomatic or security contest over pre-eminence in the heartland of Asia. For the foreseeable future, both

- anatomy of a partnership

countries, while protecting their interests, have too much to lose from a general confrontation.

Too often America's India policy is justified - occasionally with a wink - as a way to contain China. But the reality has been that so far both India and America have found it in their interest to maintain a constructive relationship with China.

To be sure, America's global strategy benefits from Indian participation in building a new world order. But India will not serve as America's foil with China and will resist any attempts to use it in that role.

In the region between Calcutta and Singapore, India seeks a role commensurate with its economic, political and strategic significance.

world was largely in the hands of autocrats. Indian leaders used non-alignment to placate their Muslim minority by cooperating with the Muslim autocrats.

That condition no longer prevails. Indian leaders know that fundamentalist jihad seeks to radicalise Muslim minorities by undermining secular societies through acts of terrorism.

Contemporary Indian leaders have understood that if this demonstration of global restlessness spreads India will sooner or later suffer comparable attacks. In that sense, even if India had preferred some other battlefields, the outcome of the American struggle against terrorism involves Indian long-term security fundamentally.

more assertive Japan as an ally of the United States, India's Cold War attitude of aloofness - and historical Congress Party attitudes - towards the United States ran the risk of leading to Indian isolation in the new configuration of power and influence in the world.

Globalisation has reinforced the incentives for cooperation. For much of the 1990s, a combination of Indian bureaucracy and protectionism limited private investment in India. In the past decade, reform-minded administrators from both major Indian political groupings have increasingly linked India to the world economy.

Therefore, the basic dilemma of globalisation will increasingly have to be addressed by Indian and American leaders: Globalisation frequently imposes asymmetrical sacrifices - benefits and costs affect different elements of society differently.

The losers in that process will seek redress through their political system, which is national. The success of globalisation breeds a temptation for protectionism and the need to combine technical achievement with human concern. India and America have an opportunity to overcome these temptations by joint efforts.

While democracy is not what has brought the two countries together, it will surely facilitate their ability to elaborate the relationship.

Relations with Pakistan are a special case. At independence, British India was partitioned between Pakistan and India. But since partition could not separate the Muslim and Hindu populations entirely, 150 million Muslims live in India today.

For Indian nationalists the Pakistan state appears not only as carved out of what they consider their historic patrimony; it is also a standing challenge to the Indian state by implying that Muslims cannot maintain

their identity under Hindu rule.

Balancing the role of Pakistan in the war against terrorism with the emerging partnership with India will require extraordinary sensitivity and an ability to keep in mind that each country's national obsession is the other and that they will interpret American actions not by America's pronouncements, but by their own preconceptions.

Nuclear cooperation with India should be considered in the light of these principles. In 1998, I opposed the sanctions on India's nuclear tests, suggesting that India should be treated as a country whose nuclear progress had become irreversible.

In such a context, nuclear cooperation with India is appropriate. But it needs to make explicit an Indian commitment not to spread nuclear materials to other countries, such as America itself has undertaken.

The scope of the nuclear cooperation should avoid the rhetoric and the reality of a nuclear arms race in which China could be tempted to support nuclear programmes in Iran and Pakistan as a counterweight.

The goal should be an Asia that navigates between an unacceptable hegemony by any power and an arms race that replicates the tragedies of Europe, only with fiercer weapons and even vaster consequences.

In a period preoccupied with concerns over terrorism and the potential clash of civilisations, the emerging cooperation between the two great democracies, India and the United States, introduces a positive and hopeful perspective. COURTESY

INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

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policy is justified as a way to contain China. In reality, served by constructively engaging Beijing. Moreover, east Asia's future will be determined by economic and which China, the US, Japan and India itself will be the re, US and Indian interests are quite congruent

India is well aware that the future of Southeast Asia will be determined by economic and political relationships in which China, America, Japan and India will be the principal actors. A developing Association of Southeast Asian Nations is, or should be, in their common interest. Attempts at hegemony are likely to lead to countervailing pressures. Here American and Indian interests are - or could be made to be - quite congruent.

In the region between Bombay and Yemen, Indian and American interests in defeating radical Islam are nearly parallel. Until 9/11, governance in the Islamic

America is fighting some of India's battles, and the two countries have parallel objectives even where their tactics differ.

A geopolitical confluence of interests has emerged as well. India was able to adopt the role of balancer during the Cold War because the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union threatened India only indirectly. But in the current period, Russia is no longer a superpower nor an adversary of America.

China has emerged as a major and growing geopolitical player with considerable ties to America - especially in the economic field. With the emergence of a