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Knock, Knock on Heaven's Door

Only with a subtle and intelligent combination of pragmatism and principles can India forge a sustained and strategic unity with the United States

BY ALMOST any measure, the visit last week of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the United States was a stunning success. It can be safely said that not since Jawaharlal Nehru addressed a joint session of the US Congress in 1949 and sang the praises of American and Indian democracy have the two countries' relations been on such positive terms. That time around, the India-US honeymoon was relatively short-lived. Now, with an Indian-American community growing in numbers and importance and a web of people-to-people relations binding the two countries together in a myriad of ways across nearly every aspect of the relationship, the marriage is likely to last much longer, despite the inevitable bumps along the way.

Still, all is not totally rosy. Neither side got — nor is likely to get — exactly what it wants from the other. India will not be willing to embrace its designated US role as a counterweight to China and as a fully subscribed agent of US global management in the Asia Pacific region, nor will the US demonstrate soon enough unambiguous support for India's assuming a permanent seat on the UN Security Council nor accept India's engagement with Iran and Myanmar. However, the announcement by President George Bush during Manmohan Singh's visit that his administration will assist India fully with developing its civilian nuclear capacity — even to the point of getting the US Congress to change existing rules and laws which may impede this action — as one element of a larger commitment to help India achieve great-power status was a knockout.

Effectively, the US has made India a nuclear "state of exception," a recognised nuclear-weapons State existing outside the norms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). New Delhi is certainly as delighted with this revolutionary outcome as the world's non-proliferation partisans are dismayed.

Though the nuclear genie has been out of the bottle in India for some time and will not be put back in, there is great reluctance in the US outside of a pro-nuclear core (both in favour of developing civilian nuclear capacities and nuclear weapons) within the Bush administration to admit to India's nuclear status without requiring it to show compliance with international non-proliferation norms. Why? India has, after all, shown itself to be a highly responsible custodian of its nuclear resources. As a democracy of diverse peoples with global ambitions and a galloping economy to back these ambitions up, India has a huge stake in conducting itself responsibly as a global citizen and future global leader. True. But what of Iran, ask the naysayers? What of North Korea?

There are American experts who feel this is the worst possible moment to make such an announcement, in effect giving the message to the rest of the world's nuclear power wannabes: "Just go for it and then wait it out a bit. Eventually, the US will give in to the *de facto* situation and you'll be fine." This was the thrust of much of the negative coverage of the announcement in the US media.

Indeed, putting aside the merits of this bold step for India and for US-India rela-

tions, which are certainly on the positive side within these contexts, this action of the Bush administration for India puts the American government in rather a schizophrenic position with regard to its position on nuclear non-proliferation and forces a profound change in US foreign policy. From supporting clear global norms with which all states are expected to comply, the Bush administration has embraced a *realpolitik* approach that advocates for double or even multiple standards to which states will be held variably according to whether they fall on the side of a strategic asset or a strategic threat to the US.

"do as I say not as I do" approach — could lead India to grave domestic instability as the country's 350 million or so poor are potentially left stranded in front of the department store doors of the new consumer economy with no means of entry.

IN THIS view, the successful efforts of Manmohan Singh and his team to include agriculture, healthcare and distance learning in the package of collaborative initiatives agreed to during his visit will be critical for India. The prime minister has rightly made developing India's human resources by investing in primary education,

An unmitigated embrace of US-style free-marketeteering could lead India to grave domestic instability as the country's 350 million plus poor are potentially left stranded in front of the department store doors of the new consumer economy with no means of entry



Good Job Done: led by their wives Laura Bush and Gursharan Kaur, George Bush and Manmohan Singh in Washington

India's challenge is to nurture and strengthen a relationship with the global superpower in such a way which benefits yet does not compromise its independence, security and the enhanced well being of its people. The evident asymmetry of the relationship places the onus of achieving this difficult balance on India

For the moment, India is viewed as an extremely high-value strategic partner, and is beginning to reap the benefits as such. However, this could easily change over time as India's stature, as well as that of the US, relatively speaking, evolves over the coming decades. India must be wary of becoming too enmeshed in the US' seductive web of military, commercial and strategic perks if it is to preserve independent interests, policies and actions. At the same time, an unmitigated embrace of US-style free-marketeteering — always promulgated by the US, which, in fact, enjoys a highly regulated economy as a

healthcare and agricultural production (in other words, investing in the rural economy) a high priority which could benefit greatly from joint efforts with the US.

But the prime minister should be extremely wary of, say, collaborating with this US administration on such critical issues as addressing India's HIV/AIDS epidemic. The Bush administration's approach to HIV/AIDS is excessively constrained by conservative ideological considerations informed by a prudish evangelical Christianity which preaches abstinence and monogamy as the only true "cures" for the disease — to the point of with-

drawing aid to programmes and countries that promote, among other proven tactics, condom use. Brazil recently announced it would forgo millions of dollars in assistance by the US for its HIV/AIDS prevention programmes rather than eschew the encouragement of safe sex practices including condom use, proven to positively impact the spread of the disease but disallowed by the Bush administration in US-funded programmes.

As the inevitability of India's rise as a major global power of the 21st Century begins to sink in, more will be expected of India by its own people and by the rest of the world — than mere military might or economic profits going primarily into the pockets of the global elite. Our world finds itself facing a host of potential tipping points: global warming, lethal pandemics, terrorism and political chaos, a painfully reorganising world economy, the deterritorialisation of culture. India has a once-in-a-century opportunity through the way it chooses to confront these scourges to shape both its own and, potentially, the rest of the world's destiny. In order to do that, India must preserve its independence from the US even as it embarks on these important joint ventures.

Nehru, a fan of American democratic principles if ever there was one, would surely be quite scandalised — as are some observers in India and around the world — to watch India seemingly abandon its non-aligned tradition to fall so enthusiastically into America's embrace. India's challenge — no different than the stated position of the US with regard to its own interest in the relationship — is to nurture and strengthen a relationship with the global superpower in such a way which benefits yet does not compromise its independence, security and the enhanced well being of its people. The evident asymmetry of the relationship at this point in time places the onus of achieving this difficult balance on India.

If the Bush administration has made this bold step on the nuclear front in favour of India, it is doing so for purely self-interested considerations deriving from its quite idiosyncratic perceptions of how best to protect US global interests. In other words, it is acting out of pure pragmatism according to its perceptions. As US influence wanes and India's influence increases over the coming decades, India will have the opportunity, provided that it acts pragmatically with regard to the US, to provide a dose of principle if the US-India partnership is to be — as the prime minister asserted during his eloquent speech to a joint session of the US Congress last week — one of both principles and pragmatism. India can draw on its diverse democracy and its historic stature as a leader of the post-colonial world as wellsprings for the store of principles it will need if it is to emerge from America's embrace as the great power the US insists it wants India to become. As Manmohan Singh well understands, truly great powers are not made by pragmatism alone.

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