

BJP-Bush Bhai Bhai

It's bye-bye BJP in India. Come November will it be bye-bye Bush in the US, asks MIRA KAMDAR in New York



EVEN BEFORE the surprise thrashing of the BJP-led NDA coalition at the hustings, the honeymoon phase of the BJP's relationship with the Bush administration was over. Like a love match gone awry, the two governments found themselves stuck in a marriage that love had abandoned. Worse, mutual trust and respect, the glue that holds many marriages together long after the initial passion has waned, had also eroded to near Cold War levels.

Both parties had cause for complaint: the BJP was crestfallen when its offer of near-unreserved support following the 9/11 attacks was met with silence. The Bush administration was in turn miffed when India declined to send troops to Iraq. Finally, last fall, in a move that recalled those first heady months following the Bush administration's lifting of the sanctions imposed on India after the 1998 nuclear tests, a glimmer of reconciliation and hope returned in the form of a "glide path" agreement that put India on the fast track to acquiring dual-use and other valuable high technologies. Working together on the development of missile defence systems, a BJP-led government of India and a Bush-led United States would embark on a new strategic partnership.

Then Colin Powell visited New Delhi in March, met with Brajesh Mishra and other high-ranking members of the BJP government, denied when asked that there were any "strategic surprises" in the offing, after which he promptly flew to Islamabad and announced that the US was conferring special "non-NATO" ally status on Pakistan. The BJP government was thunderstruck. This, surely, was the equivalent of a wife newly reconciled with her husband, dreamily touching from time to time the diamonds he'd given her to prove again his love, only to read in the newspaper that he had gone straight from the marriage bed to that of his mistress and, worse, given the rival a flashier necklace than that owned by the legitimate spouse. "BJP-Bush, *bhai, bhai*" had turned into something more like "bye, bye" well before the election upset put half of the



"Indians are incredible," he continued. "Given a choice between a flush toilet and a television, they'll go for the television every time. I mean, this is an amazing place! There are actually more televisions than toilets in this country. And what are they seeing on television? All these products they want to buy." Like the NDA, this diplomat failed to understand that people need bread as well as cake; clean water as well as shopping malls. A flush toilet, after all, implies the delivery of a certain level of physical infrastructure (adequate running water piped in; sewage piped out, preferably to a treatment plant) that the vast majority of Indians "choosing" a television over a toilet simply don't have.

Leading BJP pundits also made no secret of their wish that Bush should prevail in November. Bush was seen to stand strong against militant Islam and to be pro-business, pro-missile defence, and pro-nuclear (at least so far as India and the US are concerned). The BJP feared that a Democratic administration might be "sanction happy", might support environmental legislation not to their liking and might even stop the flow of jobs to India's middle class via outsourcing.

Now that the Congress has so stunningly unseated the BJP-led NDA coalition from power, there is much fretting in the corridors of capital and power that the Indo-US relationship will become much more problematic. Alas, divorce is still not an option. For India, the US is the unavoidable nation. India has no choice but to engage with the superpower. For the US, India's geographic location, tantalising market potential and still barely tapped brain power are reasons enough to maintain a strong strategic and economic partnership. It would be more than a mistake on both sides to be tempted to revert to the estrangement of the Cold War period — it would be an impossibility. Too much has changed. Too many aspirations in India have been raised. The Congress party knows as well as the BJP that India needs continued economic growth and development.

Hopefully, it will also deliver on its promise to make sure that the fruits of this growth are distributed to those who need it most, to recognise that good governance at this juncture means delivering reliable basic services such as electricity, clean water, sanitation, education to all its citizens. If it doesn't, it is likely to be voted out soon enough.

And then, as with any marriage in trouble, there are "the children" to consider: the

Indian-American diaspora wields increasing clout over US domestic and foreign policy and can be counted on to raise India's visibility and champion India's interests on Capitol Hill and in the Oval Office. Pro-India lobbying groups, such as US India Political Action Committee are having an increasing impact on US legislation regarding issues pertinent to India. In April this year, a new Senate-level "Friends of India" caucus was formed, co-chaired by Senator John Cornyn (Republican from Texas) and the junior Senator from New York, Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The BJP has been quite cognisant of the importance of the Indian diaspora to its own Hindutva agenda. The Overseas Friends of the BJP and allied groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) have been working diligently to plant their own vision of India firmly in the minds and hearts of second-generation Indian-Americans. They have been very successful in teaching many of these young people simple equations such as Indian = Hindu; Muslim = Terrorist. The Congress has a long way to go in reversing the progress the Hindu right has made with Indian-American youth.

Finally, in this marriage, India has hardly played the role of the faithful spouse to America's cheating husband. Well aware that the world's superpower primarily looks out for "Number One", and is quite capable of throwing even longstanding alliances to the wind in fits of pique that recently have resembled nothing more than childish tantrums, India has, quite understandably, set about wooing other suitors, including Russia, China and the European Union (EU).

Most irritating to the US, at least under a Bush administration, is India's warm relationship with France, a connection that strays well beyond the level of cultural exchange into hot areas such as arms sales. In fact, India recently conducted the largest ever naval exercise with a foreign power, France. One can only imagine the delight of the neo-conservatives in the White House to

learn that the battleship Charles de Gaulle had been at the centre of the operation. France has even come out in favour of supporting India's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, a move that proves, once again, those legendary French powers of seduction. The way things are going under the Bush administration, the EU may well rival the US in more than moral credibility in the not too distant future, especially if in November the American electorate proves itself less intelligent than the Indian electorate.

If India plays its cards right, it has the potential to have the last laugh on both suitors. It remains to be seen, however, whether the new Congress government is up to creating an India that could assume the mantle of a great world power beholden to none, respected by all. India should aspire to be more than the global bully of the sort currently bandied being about by the US.

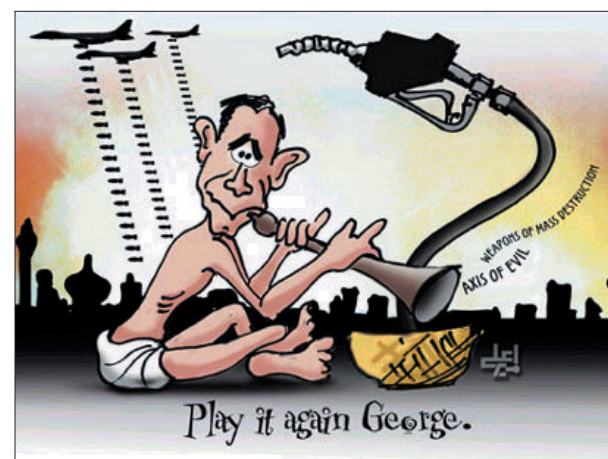
It was under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru during the heyday of the Non-Aligned Movement and in the fresh glow of a non-violent independence struggle, that India enjoyed great moral stature. Nehru's party ruled India for most of the next half century. Alas, it did not eliminate poverty, feudalism, communalism, corruption, or any of the other ills that still beset India. In fact, some of these problems got worse and new grave dangers such as severe environmental degradation, AIDS, POTA abuses and the threat of nuclear holocaust have emerged. Most menacing, perhaps, to India's secular democracy is the brainwashing that is taking place in millions of young Indian minds through the fact-defying text-



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equation out of business.

Still, as with many unhappy couples: the relationship offered too many material and social benefits to be abandoned. The Bush administration made no secret that it favoured a return to power by the BJP. As I heard one American diplomat put it a couple of months ago in New Delhi: "We have assurances from the Indian government that, as soon as the elections are over, they're going to push hard for the next round of reforms. After that, things will really take off here. This is going to become the biggest market for American consumer goods in the world."



The BJP knows the importance of the Indian diaspora. The Overseas Friends of the BJP has worked diligently during Bush's tenure, to plant their vision of India in the minds of second-generation Indian-Americans. They've been successful in teaching them equations like Indian = Hindu; Muslim = Terrorist. The Congress has a long way to go in reversing the 'progress' made by the Hindu Right

book revisions pushed through by the BJP to advance the cause of Hindutva. Without tackling these threats and providing every citizen in India the means to live a decent life in freedom and dignity, no missile defence system will be able to save India.

Hopefully, this election will give the voters who voted out the BJP a reason to be happy they got the Congress back in.

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