

Misunderstanding India

By Rajiv Sikri

From *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2008

Summary:

To the Editor:

R. Nicholas Burns' case ("America's Strategic Opportunity With India," November/December 2007) for a U.S.-Indian partnership rests on flawed assumptions. Contrary to what Burns states, the nuclear issue has not been the key point keeping India and the United States apart. Indian mistrust of the United States is rooted in the decades-old U.S. policy of military and diplomatic support for Pakistan. The United States' opposition to India's becoming a nuclear weapons power and its unwillingness to support India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council have only strengthened Indian misgivings.

A change in the United States' attitude toward Pakistan was the one last issue that could have overcome the long-standing estrangement, but the United States deliberately "de-hyphenated" relations with India and Pakistan and persuaded the current Indian government that Pakistan is a fellow victim of terrorism. India has consistently rejected the contention, reiterated by Burns, that Kashmir is a "nuclear flashpoint." Moreover, India's acquiescence to sharing with the United States the responsibility for managing the South Asian region has emboldened India's neighbors to count on the United States to balance India's natural influence in South Asia. This has only aggravated instability in the region.

The United States has failed to appreciate that India's commitment to nonalignment is centered on its desire to follow an independent foreign policy. The nuclear deal between the two countries may well be "wildly popular" among India's affluent elite, but millions of Indians are deeply troubled by reckless U.S. adventurism in India's neighborhood -- in Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq. The Bush administration's arm-twisting of India on Iran has left a bitter aftertaste in the mouths of the Indian public, and its facile equation of Islam with terrorism has drawn a particularly hostile reaction from India's 160 million Muslims.

Whereas the United States emphasizes the strategic significance and nonproliferation objectives of the nuclear deal, India persists in stressing its nuclear energy aspects. Such a disconnect in stated objectives risks the deal's falling through the cracks. The underlying presumption in Burns' article that India is being "rewarded" weakens the foundation of the partnership, whose potential is limited anyway by a long-term divergence of interests on key global and regional issues, including Burma and Iran. The unabashed U.S. attempt to reduce India's military dependence on Russia threatens to undermine Indian-Russian relations, and the Indian political class is not yet ready to strengthen ties with the United States at the cost of its friendship with Russia.

It is a pity that a combination of wishful thinking by the United States and inept handling by India has cast an unnecessary shadow over what is an otherwise ascendant and mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries. If the quest for U.S.-Indian strategic engagement unravels, giving rise to understandable bewilderment, frustration, and annoyance in the United States, it will be in part because Washington has failed to feel the pulse of India and understand its soul.

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