

# A Story of Leaders, Partners, and Clients

By Zia Mian | September 27, 2005

The past few months have seen important developments in relations between the United States and India. Much of the commentary has focused resolutely and rightly on the wisdom and possible consequences of the new agreements on military and nuclear policy and programs. But these recent agreements need also to be seen in the light of the more than 50 years of U.S. efforts to have India become a part of American political, strategic, and economic plans for Asia. What becomes clear is how difficult this proved to be over the years. It begs the question why Indian leaders have finally started to fall in step so easily in the past few years.

### Cold War Era

The first efforts by the United States to co-opt India into its strategic ambitions came soon after independence. The U.S. goal was to have India join the U.S. side in the Cold War against the Soviet Union and, in time China. The pattern was set during Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to the United States in 1949, which followed on the heels of the first nuclear test by the Soviet Union and the success of the Chinese communists in seizing power. Robert J. McMahon, a historian of U.S. diplomacy toward South Asia records in his book *The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India, and Pakistan*, that before Nehru's visit, the CIA and the State Department argued that India was the only potential regional power that could "compete with Communist China for establishing itself as the dominant influence in Southeastern Asia."

Nehru was feted during his trip. But the notion that India could serve as a lever for U.S. policy toward China, and more broadly in Asia, came to naught. Speaking to the United States, Nehru was clear—India needed help, but not at any cost—he said: "We shall ... gladly welcome such aid and cooperation on terms that are of mutual benefit. We believe that this may well help in the solution of the larger problems that confront the world. But we do not seek any material advantage in exchange for any part of our hard-won freedom." He explained his

refusal to cooperate on his return home, saying that "they expected something more than gratitude and goodwill and that more I could not supply them."

For its part, after Nehru left, the U.S. National Security Council noted "the current reluctance of the area to align itself overtly with any power bloc" and determined that "it would be unwise for us to regard South Asia, more particularly India, as the sole bulwark against the extension of Communist control in Asia."

Pakistan, on the other hand, was happy to accept a role in U.S. plans for South Asia. It built an enduring relationship with the United States, starting in 1954. The United States provided economic and military aid, and Pakistan provided military bases, prepared to be the frontline in a possible war with the Soviet Union, and supported the United States in international fora.

The U.S. tried again, during the early 1960s, under President Kennedy. Even before becoming president, he had argued that the United States and its western allies put together a package of aid and support "designed to enable India to overtake the challenge of Communist China." As president, he sought to put together such a package. But U.S. efforts to enlist India in support of U.S. policies and in particular, the effort to counter China, were frustrated. When Kennedy and Nehru met in 1961, they apparently clashed over Vietnam and nuclear disarmament



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among other things, and it is suggested that “particularly frustrating to U.S. officials was Nehru’s refusal to accept the mantle of leadership in Southeast Asia.”

Recently declassified reports from May 1963 reveal that President Kennedy and his aides considered whether and how the United States might support India in case there was another China-India war. The defense secretary Robert McNamara argued that “Before any substantial commitment to defend India against China is given, we should recognize that in order to carry out that commitment against any substantial Chinese attack, we would have to use nuclear weapons.” The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor, worried about the long-term and “the overall problem of how to cope with Red China politically and militarily in the next decade.” Kennedy took the position that “We should defend India, and therefore we will defend India.”

## Nuclear Policy

Nuclear weapons figured prominently in other ways. In 1964, amid American concerns about China’s first nuclear weapons test, George Perkovich has documented how senior officials in the State Department and the Pentagon went so far as to consider offering “the possibilities of providing nuclear weapons under U.S. custody” to India. Perkovich reveals that the plan envisaged helping India modify aircraft to drop nuclear weapons, training crews, providing dummy weapons for practice runs, and information on the effects of nuclear weapons for use in deciding targets. At the same time, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission was considering helping India with “peaceful nuclear explosions,” which would involve the use of U.S. nuclear devices under U.S. control being exploded in India.

It was not just the Americans who thought this way. Homi Bhabha, the founder and head of the Department of Atomic Energy, in 1965 urged the United States to give India a nuclear device or just the blueprints for one to help it catch up with China’s nuclear development. But his plans came to naught.

Increasingly bogged down in Vietnam and worried that its future wars in the Third World would be even more difficult if nuclear weapons continued to spread, the United States decided that it preferred instead to stem the spread of nuclear weapons. It joined with the Soviet Union, which had similar worries, in crafting a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The treaty was negotiated in 1968 and came into force in 1970. At the same time, the United States began to improve its relations with China. India’s 1974 nuclear test further eroded hopes of a U.S.-India nuclear relationship as a new regime of non-proliferation restrictions took shape.

## Post-Cold War Era

As the Cold War ended, the United States determined that no other power would be allowed to emerge as a potential rival. The now infamous 1992 draft Defense Planning Guidance prepared by Paul Wolfowitz, the under-secretary of defense for policy for Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, that was leaked to the press declared “Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.” In particular, it noted “we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.” In other words, the geopolitical order must be stabilized and the United States maintain its relative superiority not just globally, but even in the different regions of the world.

China again became the focus of attention as it increasingly became a major economic and political force in international affairs. This time story was to be different. India had new leaders. Vajpayee and the BJP have long believed that Nehru was mistaken to pursue non-alignment in the Cold War and have argued that India should have made common cause with the United States against Communism and against China. This was particularly clear in the May 1998 letter Vajpayee wrote to President Clinton justifying India’s nuclear tests, with the first point being

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China—the “overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India” and claiming that “an atmosphere of distrust persists.” This was despite important breakthroughs such as Chinese president Jiang Zemin’s visit to India in 1996 and the signing of an agreement on confidence-building measures along the so-called “line of actual control” in the border areas. This built on an earlier 1993 agreement on “Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility” in the disputed border areas.

The new direction in U.S.-India relations became clear in March 2000, when President Clinton visited India. The joint statement that he issued with Prime Minister Vajpayee noted that “There have been times in the past when our relationship drifted without a steady course. As we now look toward the future, we are convinced that it is time to chart a new and purposeful direction in our relationship.”

This new direction for the U.S.-India relationship was described as one in which: “In the new century, India and the United States will be partners in peace, with a common interest in and complementary responsibility for ensuring regional and international security. We will engage in regular consultations on, and work together for, strategic stability in Asia and beyond.” The shared goal of “strategic stability in Asia” can be read as India finally accepting U.S. ideas about what should be the relative balance of power in Asia, and in particular, U.S. concerns that a rising China could in time constrain the exercise of U.S. power.

### New Direction

The “new direction” identified in Clinton’s March 2000 visit was taken up concretely in the “Next Steps in Strategic Partnership” agreement of January 2004. This announced that the United States and India would “expand cooperation” in civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programs, and high-technology trade, as well as on missile defense. It is worth pointing out the obvious, namely, that cooperation in this context is a euphemism for the United States

providing India access to aid, information, and technology in these areas.

The U.S. officials have made clear the purpose of this agreement. A senior official announced that “Its goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st century ... We understand fully the implications, including military implications, of that statement.” The deputy State Department spokesman explained further that the United States was ready to “help India” with command and control, early warning and missile defense, and noted that “Some of these items may not be as glamorous as combat aircraft, but I think for those of you who follow defense issues you’ll appreciate the significance.”

Former senior U.S. officials and countless strategic commentators have pointed out the inference that is to be drawn from the new U.S. effort to “help India.” Robert Blackwill, who served in the Bush administration as U.S. ambassador to India and then as a deputy national security adviser for strategic planning, has wondered, for instance, “Why should the United States want to check India’s missile capability in ways that could lead to China’s permanent nuclear dominance over democratic India?”

It is against this background that one should read the joint statement by President Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of July 18, 2005. The statement has the two leaders “declare their resolve to transform the relationship between their countries and establish a global partnership” and explains that this partnership will “promote stability, democracy, prosperity, and peace throughout the world.” The agreement aims, it says, to “enhance our ability to work together to provide global leadership.” It is clear who will lead and who will follow.

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*Zia Mian is a Pakistani physicist with the Program on Science and Global Security at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and a frequent contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus (online at [www.fpfif.org](http://www.fpfif.org)). This report is a slightly revised version of an article published in Economic and Political Weekly on September 10, 2005.*

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