



Old Truths for Changing Times

by Robert M. Hathaway

Everything has changed. So runs the mantra since the treacherous Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Yet, not all is different and it is useful to recall the old truths at this moment of heightened anxiety and uncertainty.

Sept. 11 has not, for instance, altered Washington's determination to forge a genuine partnership with New Delhi. The Bush administration remains convinced that the United States can no longer treat India with the casual disdain so common in the past. Neither have the terrorist attacks lessened New Delhi's interest in refashioning its relationship with the United States. Less happily, the old points of disagreement between the two countries also persist - on nuclear issues and Kashmir and trade, among others.

Still, the landscape of the U.S.-Indian relationship has shifted noticeably in the weeks since Sept. 11. Following the attacks, the government of India stepped forward with extraordinary speed to extend, in the words of one New Delhi official, "unconditional and unambivalent support" to the United States.

India's offer to share intelligence with Washington and to allow military bases on Indian soil to be used as a staging ground for U.S. forces preparing to strike targets in Afghanistan would have been unthinkable a few years ago. This open-ended cooperation is all the more wondrous when one recalls how during the Gulf War, New Delhi retracted its permission for U.S. warplanes to refuel at Indian airfields as soon as the public got wind of such activities.

This is not all. Washington has lifted the sanctions imposed on India after its 1998 nuclear tests. Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra have visited the U.S. capital for high-level consultations, and Secretary of State Colin Powell has journeyed to New Delhi. Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee and President George Bush have spoken by telephone, and the prime minister has accepted Bush's invitation to come to Washington this month. As the U.S. ambassador in New Delhi has pointed out, the frequency, intensity, and transparency of Indo-American contacts have all increased dramatically. Without the tragic events of Sept. 11, Ambassador Blackwill has observed, it would have taken years for the two countries to reach current levels of cooperation.

It is in the context of this unparalleled collaboration that one must view the new anxieties that have cropped up in New Delhi in recent weeks. The Indian press reports that some Indians, inside as well as outside government, are angry as Washington, searching for allies in the war against terrorism, has sought to resurrect something of its Cold War partnership with Pakistan. Making matters worse, stories in the media (denied by the Bush

administration) suggest that as the price for Islamabad's help in the fight against Osama bin Laden, Washington is prepared to give a more sympathetic hearing to Pakistan's complaints concerning Kashmir.

The attack by a suicide bomber on the legislative assembly building in Srinagar last month and the claims of responsibility (later retracted) by a Pakistan-based Islamic group have heightened the sense of foreboding in New Delhi about Washington's reinvigorated ties with Islamabad. Washington's disinclination to embrace India's conclusions regarding the linkage between the attacks in the United States and the violence that has wracked Kashmir for more than a decade has infuriated New Delhi. Many Indians resent the manner in which Pakistan has been transformed from being part of the problem to its new status as an essential element in the solution.

Indeed, Indian unhappiness and Indo-Pakistani discord reached such a point last month that President Bush sent his secretary of state to the region in an effort to dampen tensions, ease anxieties, and clear up suspicions in New Delhi about Washington's intentions.

India's shelling of Pakistani military positions across the Kashmir line of control was an understandable response to the terrorist attack in Srinagar, which killed 38 people and injured twice as many. Nonetheless, the shelling was also singularly ill-timed, occurring just as Secretary of State Powell was arriving in Islamabad for discussions in which he was certain to tell the Pakistanis to rein in cross-border incursions. Extremist sentiment in Pakistan appears to be gaining strength, and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's room for maneuver is narrowing. For India to raise the ante at this moment was neither prudent nor politic.

Indian officials frequently pay lip service to the idea that New Delhi has a compelling interest in a prosperous and stable Pakistan. But nearly as frequently, a slip occurs between the cup and the lip, between the expression of the idea and the execution of the policy.

It is hardly likely that New Delhi will sing the praises of Musharraf, the general behind Kargil. But it does not seem too much to expect India to refrain from actions that, by making his hold on power less secure, open the door to more extreme elements in the Pakistani political firmament.

Neither should India insist that Washington choose between New Delhi and Islamabad, as some prominent Indian commentators have demanded. The Bush administration values its ties with both South Asian countries and would be loathe to jettison one at the price of maintaining the other. This is especially true at the current time, as Washington seeks to fashion a broad-based coalition composed of Islamic as well as non-Islamic states to fight the scourge of terrorism.

India should not view the U.S. refusal to choose India over Pakistan as a threat, let alone a betrayal of the new understanding that has grown up between Washington and New Delhi over the past several years. To the contrary, this U.S. desire to decouple American ties with India from U.S.-Pakistani relations represents the fulfillment of a long-held Indian dream. The United States, belatedly to be sure, is at last moving away from the zero-sum mentality that for too long imprisoned the Indo-American relationship in a sterile pattern of recrimination and disillusionment.

India is certain to remain the preferred partner for most Americans; Pakistan has irretrievably lost that particular race. But Washington will have little interest in an exclusive relationship with New Delhi that bars any meaningful cooperation with Islamabad. Moreover, a newly-confident India no longer needs to fall back on such tired tactics of the past.

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