



Bush team must avoid pitfalls in emerging ties with India

by Daniel Sneider

President Bush's visit to India this week is welcome – and overdue.

The United States and India have gone a long way from Cold War days of wariness and suspicion to genuine friendship and incipient global partnership. The visit of President Clinton to India in 2000 marked a breakthrough in Indo-U.S. ties, which had been set back by India's decision to conduct nuclear weapons tests in 1998.

President Bush, to his credit, broadened the road opened by Clinton and paved it with a more solid foundation. Cooperation in a range of areas, from military ties to joint scientific work, is well established. A presidential visit puts a personal seal on that budding partnership – even if it is a couple of years late.

When it comes to Indo-U.S. relations, however, there are three pitfalls to avoid: the India card; democracy matters; and it's the economy, stupid!

The India card: Washington has a surplus of geo-strategists. As Kissinger famously played the "China card" against the Soviet Union, the strategists imagine cleverly using an India card against a rising China.

There is one small rub in that grand design – India isn't interested in being an instrument of an American containment strategy against China. As Robert Blackwill, former Bush administration ambassador to India, put it recently: "There's no way better to empty a drawing room in New Delhi of Indian strategists than to start talking about this idea."

Indians eagerly compete with China for economic leadership in Asia. They have a legacy of tensions, from border wars to nuclear rivalry. But Indian policy is to engage China and create the best relationship possible.

The president is avoiding "India card" talk. But it is no secret that some inside the administration harbor these illusions. Let's hope they keep their mouths shut for at least this week.

Democracy matters: Beyond clichés about the world's two largest democracies, both governments have a habit of forgetting that democracy really matters. Witness the up-to-the-last-minute effort to salvage a deal from July to open India's civilian nuclear program to international inspection in exchange for access to nuclear energy technology and fuel.

The Bush administration did little to sell that deal in Congress, either ahead or afterward. Opposition has mounted on both sides of the aisles from those who fear it would undermine nuclear proliferation controls, particularly when

Iran is claiming its own right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology.

The United States has now toughened its requirements. But the coalition government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh faces rising resistance in parliament, encouraged by the prestigious nuclear establishment, to any deal that would significantly restrict India's ability to develop and build nuclear weapons.

I favored the July deal and support any reasonable new agreement that would separate a significant part of India's civilian nuclear program from its military one. Hopefully, the negotiations will succeed, but even if they do, both governments need to do a much better job selling it in their feisty democratic systems.

It's the economy, stupid: The biggest threat to this emergent partnership is to forget what brought the two countries together – not geopolitics but shared interests. Some of those are security-driven, not least a common foe in Islamist terrorism. But the real driver has been economics.

Since India decided to open its protected economy in the early 1990s, the country has taken off, producing sustained growth rates nearing double digits. Led by the high-technology industry, foreign investment and trade with India is rising rapidly. The Indo-Americans who thrive in Silicon Valley form a powerful cultural and economic bridge between our two countries.

India's billion people include a middle class of 200 million to 300 million, equal to the population of the U.S., with an increasingly sophisticated appetite for Western consumer goods. In contrast to China, India has a young population, half of them under 25 years old.

For the United States, there are added opportunities – and competitive challenges. As is evident from the Saturday morning phone calls from telemarketers in Chennai trying to sell me a new mortgage, India has a great resource in its English-speaking educated elite. That has meant job loss in the United States but also openings to create new businesses and new jobs.

Both governments need to focus on what is needed to accelerate the kind of virtual integration between India and the United States we see in Silicon Valley. If we do that right, the geopolitics will follow naturally. If we mess that up, all the strategic castles in the sky will come crashing to Earth very soon.

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