



## **The Other (Equally Important) Dimension of U.S.-India Relations** by David J. Karl

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Much of the media coverage of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's whirlwind five-day tour of Mumbai and New Delhi last month focused on high politics. The rebuff over climate policy issued by India's environment minister has been well publicized, though his words seemed directed as much to the domestic audience as to Mrs. Clinton. The announcements pertaining to defense and nuclear cooperation also garnered much attention. The end-use monitoring agreement opens the door for large-scale Indian purchases of sophisticated U.S. military technology, further bolstering the security (tacitly anti-China) partnership that has sprung up in recent years. And the Indian announcement that U.S. firms would have exclusive rights to build nuclear power plants at two sites represents New Delhi's payback for Washington allowing it to escape the pariah status of the international nonproliferation regime.

The "low politics" of the trip were largely ignored even though they are every bit as important for the future of bilateral relations. First, Clinton was very attentive to the private-sector and societal linkages that are the foundation for the new era in U.S.-India affairs. Headlines about nuclear cooperation, expanding military ties, and convergent geopolitical interests obscure the critical role that these nongovernmental connections play in building ties. Clinton spent a good part of her visit away from the Indian capital and made a conscious effort to engage a wider range of people than traveling secretaries of State usually do: corporate chieftains, film stars, village artisans, educators, agricultural researchers, green tech enthusiasts and university students.

Second, the trip resulted in two initiatives aimed at enhancing research and scientific cooperation, a natural area of collaboration that the Bush administration failed to exploit. Both governments agreed to activate a \$30 million endowment designed to spur joint undertakings in industrial research and development, a program that was originally announced with some fanfare during President Bush's trip to India in March 2006 but then remained in bureaucratic limbo for three years. An agreement also was signed to expand civilian space cooperation, another promising but overlooked field for joint action. Finally, Clinton emphasized agricultural development as a key item on the bilateral agenda, an important but often ignored area of partnership that would have a positive impact on global food security concerns. Despite the rhetoric Washington once attached to the 2005 Agriculture Knowledge

Initiative with India, the U.S. funding commitment was allowed to expire in late 2008.

Third, the trip culminated in the creation of a U.S.-India strategic dialogue that will be co-chaired by Secretary Clinton and Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna. The dialogue, which consolidates dozens of existing consultative mechanisms but also promises to bring high-level focus to a range of new topics, is symbolically important. Since the United States has established strategic dialogues with only a handful of countries, the announcement will help reassure status-conscious Indians who fret that the Obama administration is not as attentive to their needs as its predecessor was. And because the dialogue in some ways mirrors the high-level discussions that the Obama administration has launched with Beijing, New Delhi can claim some level of emblematic parity with that other rising power in Asia. This is all the more important since Secretary Clinton co-hosted the inaugural meeting of the Obama administration's dialogue with China just a week after departing India.

The new U.S.-India dialogue will also serve a useful substantive function if it revitalizes the institutions managing U.S.-India economic affairs. For all the Bush administration's focus on India, the high-profile Strategic Economic Dialogue it launched with China offered a stark contrast to the languid U.S.-India economic exchange. The SED was driven by a top-ranked, hard-charging Cabinet secretary, while the much less prominent National Economic Council was the lead U.S. agency for the economic dialogue with India. Although bilateral trade and investment flows have increased markedly in recent years, they have yet to reach critical mass and remain a small fraction of the U.S.-China level.

Fourth, the Clinton trip underscored how the secretary has taken ownership of the India portfolio in the Obama administration, filling an important void at the top levels of the U.S. government that has existed for several years. True enough, President Bush himself displayed an unusual personal commitment to strengthening bilateral relations and his leadership was critical in pushing the landmark civilian nuclear agreement through an often-cantankerous U.S. bureaucracy. But the focus on nuclear matters also diverted senior policy attention from other important aspects of the relationship, including the critical economic and societal bonds that Clinton rightly emphasizes.

In many ways, Secretary Clinton is the right person to fill the vacancy. She and her husband are well known and admired in the country. As First Lady, she undertook a high-profile visit to India in 1995 that was the forerunner of President Clinton's breakthrough journey five years later. She co-founded and co-chaired the Senate India Caucus (the first country-specific caucus in the Senate) and is so identified with

Indian causes that Barack Obama's presidential campaign staff sought to malign her as "the senator from Punjab." A political heavyweight and celebrity in her own right, she makes no secret of her India-philia. During the trip she even confessed her overindulgence of Indian cuisine ("I eat way too much of the food every chance I get"), leading the *Times of India* to remark that the "U.S. secretary of state seems to be going desi."

To be sure, the Clinton visit is no elixir for all the challenges facing the U.S.-India relationship. Old irritants – the impasse over global trade negotiations and differential approaches to Afghanistan and Pakistan – continue. New frictions over climate change and the global nonproliferation system are already evident. And much will depend upon how much energy and imagination both governments pour into the new strategic dialogue, including in the areas of "low politics" that provide significant ballast to the entire relationship. But the trip did accentuate the often-ignored factors that create an important stake in enduring ties, and which limit the risk that momentary political and diplomatic aggravations could disrupt the overall U.S.-India partnership.