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Welcome To India, Obama Sahib

by Eric Margolis

Getting out of the Washington goldfish bowl is also good for American presidents, particularly after an electoral shellacking.

It must have been a relief for President Barack Obama to see smiling Indian officials on his visit to Delhi rather than snarling Republicans back home.

India is a hugely important nation by any measure, so it was right for the president to continue the Washington-Delhi dialogue begun by former President George W. Bush.

After six decades of hostility and distrust, the United States and India appear set on a course of warm relations and strategic cooperation.

One million talented Indians already live in the United States, with many more to come. They already play an important fundraising role in US politics.

The catalyst for US-Indian amity was the 9/11 attacks that shocked the US and India into an alliance of convenience against foes in the Muslim world. But the looming threat of China, and Pakistan's nuclear arsenal that worried Israel, also played a key role. To Republican strategists, the most obvious way to contain China's growing power was to build up its great rival India as a counterweight.

India is now the latest international Klondike. Its \$1,070 trillion economy, freed of oppressive government regulations known as the "license Raj," is booming at over 8% annual growth. While the US has a mostly negative image around the globe, it is wildly popular in India.

US arms makers and high-tech industries are salivating at the thought of entering India's market. India's rapidly expanding military forces need modern equipment and replacement for aging Soviet-supplied weapons systems. America's military-industrial-financial complex pushed Bush hard to make nice to India and pry open its formerly sealed gates. The pressure continued on Obama who dutifully continued Bush's Indian policies.

However, some perspective is in order. The GDP of 1.2-billion person India is still only half of that of Italy. Forty percent of India's 1.2 billion people subsist below even that nation's dire poverty level. Almost half have no indoor plumbing. Childhood malnutrition and child labor are rampant. India's evil caste system remains entrenched in spite of government efforts to uproot it, a racist system that condemns darker skinned Indians to a life of penury and servitude.

While the western media fulminates against Taliban's or Iran's treatment of women, a leading British medical journal reports an estimated 40,000 Indian women are burned alive each year by their in-laws to grab their dowries. Infanticide of female children is endemic. But few in the west seem to care.

India is a giant with feet of clay. A senior western diplomat in unhealthy Delhi told me that at any given time, half his staff is ill with serious maladies. India is plagued by grave health and environmental problems.

India is really two nations: modern, dynamic, high-tech urban India of about 100 million, and antique, timeless rural Mother India of 1.1 billion souls. The two are often in conflict and uneasily coexist. Per capita income is about \$1,050, up 10% in 2010. By contrast, per capita income in rival China is three times higher – provided we believe Beijing's statistics.

To China's annoyance, President Obama proclaimed in Delhi that India should have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. India is becoming a great power and deserves a seat among the world's big boys. But so do Germany, Japan, Turkey and Brazil.

India and its people, long disparaged by British racist jokes, are delighted to be called equals by the great powers. In fact, nuclear-armed India sees itself very much as regional hegemon of the entire Indian Ocean extending from East Africa to Australia.

The Bush administration's deal with Delhi to sanctify and facilitate India's nuclear weapons programs was thought at the time a clever move. But it dismayed the rest of the world, made a mockery of non-proliferation, and outraged the entire Muslim world,

which has been blasting the US for hypocrisy by threatening war against Iran, which is under UN nuclear inspection, while playing nuclear footsie with India, which rejected all UN inspection.

India's leaders are no fools and will not be easily pushed or bribed into a stronger anti-China and anti-Iran stance by Washington – unless doing so suits Delhi. India needs oil from the Gulf even more than the US and is expanding its naval power to assure its supply lines.

Delhi maintains cool but correct relations with Beijing, but behind the wintry, trans-Himalayan smiles lies growing rivalry over Chinese-occupied Tibet, Indian-ruled Ladakh and Kashmir, their long, poorly demarcated Himalayan border (another gift of the British Empire), strategic Burma, and their intensifying nuclear and naval rivalry.

India claims China is trying to surround it, using Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Burma. The two Asian superpowers have been locked in a strategic and conventional arms race for a decade. In 1999, this writer postulated that the two giants would one day clash over their contested borders.

India will follow its own strategic and diplomatic interests – which are not synonymous with those of the United States.

Delhi has a long record of clever diplomacy that has isolated Pakistan and kept the world and UN out of the burning Kashmir problem, where 40,000–80,000 Kashmiris have died in a long independence struggle against Indian rule.

But the United States is now slowly being drawn into the dangerous Kashmir dispute – which triggered the 2008 terror bombing in Mumbai. Just look for example at the embarrassing revelations that one of the men involved in the 2008 Mumbai massacre was working for the US Drug Enforcement Agency.

The more Washington backs and arms India, the more its relations with China will deteriorate. Japan is also quietly building up India against China, to Beijing's mounting anger.

The US could even be drawn into an India-China regional conflict. So caution is advised to US diplomats as they charge into the murky, tangled, poorly understood geopolitics of South and East Asia.

We also wonder if President Obama was briefed on India's growing strategic arsenal. India has been steadily developing a family of long-ranged intercontinental ballistic missiles that can carry nuclear warheads behind the cover of space-launcher vehicles.

Delhi already has enough medium-ranged Agni-series missiles to cover potential foe China. Why then is Delhi spending billions to develop a reported 12,000 km ICBM whose only targets could be North America, Europe or Australia?

India is also developing nuclear submarines and subs armed with nuclear-armed cruise missiles capable of striking distant targets, as well as the powerful BrahMos anti-ship missile whose primary function is to attack aircraft carriers and large warships. Only the US Navy operates such large vessels in the Indian Ocean. India is also intent on building more aircraft carriers to project power.

The US and India appear destined to become rivals for Mideast and Central Asian oil and influence. There is no guarantee that today's bonhomie between Delhi and Washington will be permanent. Great powers have their special interests – and no permanent friends or enemies.

Euphoria over the new US-Indian love-in should not cloud our judgment of South Asia's realities, nor make us believe we can cajole India into becoming a regional policeman for US interests.

Meanwhile, Pakistan, Washington's vital ally in the failing Afghan War, is seething with ill-concealed fury over Obama's Delhi love-in and his claim that India has an important role to play in Afghanistan – which Pakistan sees as its strategic backyard.

South Asia is a minefield. Caution, and more caution, is advised.