The pact with New Delhi is too important to derail

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Tom Donnelly & **Vance Serchuk**

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Will America's partnership with India fall victim to politics? The Bush administration's proposed agreement on civil nuclear cooperation with New Delhi--once predicted to win approval from Congress as early as June--is under a growing cloud. With the November midterm elections fast approaching, the legislative calendar crowded, and the White House weakened, the happy talk about a new relationship with India so much in evidence during President Bush's trip to South Asia this spring has receded, leaving in its place the realization that we could be in for yet another long, hard slog.

As Congress heads into the summer and the administration works damage control, the time is right to take a fresh look at the case for India--not just the nuclear deal but a strategic partnership generally--reminding ourselves why it is so important to pull off this power play.

The experience of the recent past has shown--even to the allegedly diehard unilateralists of the Bush administration--that the forces struggling against the Pax Americana are stronger and more resourceful than once imagined. In a world where terrorists act like great powers, and great powers are few and far between, the possibility of an alliance with a large, rising, free-market democracy with a serious martial tradition is one that should be seized.

The case for India, in short, is about more than the relationship between two great nations. It is the case for institutionalizing a certain kind of international order: what President

Bush has called "a balance of power that favors freedom."

No matter when you date the beginning of the relationship, America and India got off on the wrong foot. The United States broke away from the British Empire just as South Asia was being conquered by it. A century and a half later, relations between Washington and postpartition Delhi got caught in the chill of the Cold War. Even after the Soviet collapse, relations with Delhi remained stagnant, dominated by the nonproliferation community and advocates of a "hyphenated" approach to India and Pakistan: Rather than engaging with each country on its merits, the United States adopted a relentlessly trilateral attitude toward the subcontinent during the 1990s.

The Clinton administration began to break this logjam in its final years, beginning with a dialogue between Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and the Indian minister of external affairs, Jaswant Singh. At the time, Pakistan's burgeoning support for terrorist groups, its nuclear proliferation, abandonment of democracy, and client-patron relationship with the Taliban--the rap sheet of a rogue state--made the old pretense of equivalence harder to sustain.

Enter George W. Bush, whose presidential campaign in 2000 emphasized a renewed focus on great power relations in foreign policy and suggested a particular soft spot for India. Even so, nothing could have prepared Delhi for the charm offensive the new administration unleashed during its first eight months in office.

Robert Blackwill, one of Bush's foreign policy advisers from the campaign, was named ambassador, while a steady stream of senior officials dropped in to Delhi throughout the spring and summer of 2001. Jaswant Singh, who was favored in Washington with a long walk around the Rose Garden with the president, predicted that U.S.-Indian cooperation would result in "a totally new security regime." Bush was expected to visit India in late 2001 or early 2002.

The September 11 attacks disrupted those plans and might well have done deeper damage to the budding relationship, as the old balancing games with Pakistan threatened to reemerge. The mood further cooled after Islamist terrorists attacked the Indian parliament in December 2001, and there ensued several months of intensive, hair-raising diplomacy by the United States and Britain to prevent the outbreak of a nuclear war with Pakistan. Western demands during this period grated on Indian officials, and by the time the crisis had been defused, international attention was turning toward Iraq.

And yet, away from the limelight, patient discussions with the Indians proceeded. And despite the tensions and disruptions, the geopolitical order that began to emerge in their wake actually accelerated the strategic convergence of Washington and Delhi in unexpected ways.

Consider the three overarching security challenges that the United States has stressed in the post-9/11 world: radical Islam, nuclear-armed rogue states, and the rise of China. These dangers also confront America's traditional allies, but in varying, mostly lesser, degrees. India is one of the few states to score the same trifecta as America.

Begin with the fact that more Indians have been killed by radical Islamists over the past decade than any other nationality. From the strike on the Indian parliament in 2001, which killed a dozen people and injured twice as many, to the bombings this spring in Varanasi, which killed 15 and injured more than 60, India is a frontline state in the war on terror.

India also has more than passing familiarity with the threat posed by rogue, terror-sponsoring states armed with weapons of mass destruction. Indian policymakers have watched as Pakistan, since acquiring its nuclear deterrent, has been emboldened in its strategy of sponsoring "third party" attacks against Delhi--safe in the knowledge that India can't retaliate conventionally without risking mutually assured destruction. More dramatically, the potential destabilization or radicalization of Pakistan--terrifying as it is for war planners in Washington to contemplate--represents a near-existential threat for planners in Delhi.

Finally, there's China. Before September 11, Beijing's rise was the most commonly cited rationale for closer ties to India. Critics have countered that it's premature, futile, or dangerous to believe that Delhi can be used as a balancer against the PRC. In fact, both claims are simplistic. Policymakers in Delhi want their country to take advantage of China's economic boom every bit as much as their colleagues in Washington. But at the same time, Indian strategists are concerned about China's military buildup, its growing regional influence, and its relentless global search for natural resources.

Granted, India isn't likely to sign up for an aggressive containment regime aimed at Beijing any time soon; but then, neither are we. Rather, India and the United States share an interest in encouraging China to become a stakeholder in an international system dominated by liberal democracies, while maneuvering to hedge against any challenges that Beijing might be tempted to mount.

Even so, cooperation between the United States and India is driven by more than just a calculus of shared dangers. It springs from shared political principles. As Indian strategist C. Raja Mohan has eloquently put it, India is "the single most important adherent of the Enlightenment in the non-Western world," representing "the triumph of the values of reason, cosmopolitanism, scientific progress, and individual freedom against great odds."

What's more, in contrast to world-weary Europeans, profoundly cyni-

cal of projects to remake the world, Indian policymakers often share Americans' faith in the universality of political liberalism. As a 2002 study commissioned by the Pentagon concluded from interviews with dozens of Indian civilian and military leaders, "Indians believe that as the only democracy in South Asia--and a highly successful 'democratic experiment'--they are the appropriate model for developing countries around the Indian Ocean basin."

India's location in the middle of a rough neighborhood also makes its population more likely to appreciate that the defense of freedom requires the taking up of arms. While Europeans have let their defense establishments go to seed, India is pressing ahead to develop a modern military capable of projecting power. Delhi already commands one of the best navies in Asia, not to mention the third largest air force and fourth largest army in the world.

Indeed, when it comes to questions of global power, India is moving in precisely the opposite direction from Europe. As Mohan has argued, "While Europe was the principal arena of conflict in the world, India could posture about the problems of deterrence, containment and the Cold War. The Europeans, in contrast, emphasized the centrality of defeating totalitarian ideologies. But today with the focus of the new war on terrorism being riveted on the Middle East and South Asia, India is far more sensitive to the complexities of the battle and the importance of imparting a resounding defeat to the forces of extremism and terrorism."

"India in the twenty-first century is a natural partner of the United States," said President Bush during his trip to Delhi in March, and it's easy to see why. But even if the desirability of a closer relationship between the world's two largest pluralistic, free-market democracies is a no-brainer, there's still the issue of how to make it happen.

The first comprehensive attempt at rapprochement by the Bush administration and its Indian counterparts came in 2004 and pledged Delhi and Washington to work together in four contentious areas: civilian space programs, high-technology trade, missile defense, and civilian nuclear energy. This was followed in July 2005 by the visit of Prime Minister Singh to the White House, where landmark proposals on bilateral cooperation, including civilian nuclear power, were announced. Several months of negotiations over the contours of the nuclear agreement followed, resulting in the deal announced in Delhi this March.

Briefly, the agreement promises to bring India into the nonproliferation mainstream. In exchange for full trade in civil nuclear energy, India has agreed to separate its military and civilian nuclear programs over the next eight years, placing 14 of its 22 reactors under permanent international safeguards, as well as all future civilian thermal and breeder reactors. It has also agreed to maintain its unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and to work with the

United States toward a fissile material cutoff treaty, which would ban the production of fissile material, like plutonium-239, used in nuclear weapons and other explosive devices.

Critics have argued that the Bush administration's decision to tackle head-on the thorny question of Delhi's nuclear status was a miscalculation. Rather than focusing attention on a divisive issue, they suggest, Washington and Delhi should have first gone after the low-hanging fruit in fields like trade, economic development, and military-to-military cooperation.

This is an appealing argument, but there are several problems with it. For starters, the Bush administration and the Singh government *have* pursued those other avenues of cooperation, and with vigor. Although you'd hardly know it from the press coverage, energy cooperation was just one element of the July 18 U.S.-Indian Joint Statement. Perhaps the nuclear issue distracted attention from the other proposals--although a "Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture" might not have made the front pages on the slowest of days.

What cannot be said is that the nuclear deal has inhibited broader bilateral cooperation. On the contrary, the past year has witnessed a quiet explosion of wonky agreements, initiatives, treaties, delegations, and bilateral consultations between the United States and India. And although the Bush administration might have succeeded in pushing these in the absence of the nuclear deal, there's no question that the agreement gave the relationship a new momentum. That's precisely why proponents of the U.S. strategy argued for disposing of the nuclear albatross in the first place: Only if this were done, they insisted, could the broader partnership get off the ground. And so far, it looks like they were right.

It's also worth noting that the Bush administration--with less than three years to go in office--has its own reasons to be leery of a go-slow approach. In the past, closer U.S.-Indian ties have been hamstrung by hostile bureaucracies and personalities in Washington or Delhi or both. Since 2005, however, the constellation of power in the two capitals has been almost perfectly aligned. Condoleezza Rice and her team at the State Department are united in their push for a nuclear deal, even as the Indian prime minister is prepared to spend political capital to reach an accord. It's an opportunity that may no longer exist come January 2009. Given that uncertainty, it's hard to blame Bush and Singh for deciding to be bold.

As for the substance of the deal itself, there is a growing body of literature--both in India and the United States--about whether it gave away too much or too little, whether it will be good or bad for the cause of nonproliferation, and so on. This debate reveals the extent to which the agreement is the product of a genuine compromise by both sides; the suggestion that Delhi took Washington to the cleaners, or vice versa, simply doesn't hold up. It

should also send a cautionary signal to congressional leaders who think they can reverse-engineer eight months' delicate diplomacy by rewriting the agreement in the months ahead. (As congressman Tom Lantos sagely put it, "Every member of Congress could come up with a more perfect agreement--but we could not sell it to the government of India.")

Like any challenge to the status quo, the agreement has also riled entrenched constituencies, who are now on the warpath. For the most strident members of the American nonproliferation community, the very notion of nuclear accommodation with India is nothing short of apostasy--the start of a slippery slope toward an atomic Armageddon in which everyone from Japan to Saudi Arabia to Liechtenstein will end up with ICBMs.

In fact, the deal with India *does* establish a double standard. But as Robert Kagan has pointed out, the Nonproliferation Treaty itself established a double standard long ago, and "a particularly mindless kind of double standard" at that. The NPT, after all, is "not based on justice or morality or strategic judgment or politics but simply on circumstance: Whoever had figured out how to build nuclear weapons by 1968 was in. At least our double standard for India makes strategic, diplomatic, ideological, and political sense."

The histrionic claims about Iran and other rogue states are considerably flimsier. Tehran has a nuclear weapons program because--surprise!--it wants nuclear weapons, and specifically the freedom of action they will grant the regime against its adversaries. The deal with India may give the Islamic Republic a talking point or two at the U.N., but it will not sway the behavior of any country engaged in the real world struggle with Iran, or the regime itself. That dispute is being shaped by hard-nosed, and often crude, calculations of national interest and power, not what happens between the United States and India.

That said, the nuclear deal with India does contain risks. As Henry Sokolski, director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center and the most incisive critic of the agreement, has warned, it's certain to push Pakistan toward further development of its own nuclear arsenal, aided and abetted by China. It may also provoke China into overt nuclear competition with India, laying the groundwork for an arms race in Asia.

But this critique--in framing the nuclear deal as a choice between a destabilizing arms race and a benign status quo--fails to consider two questions: Is it in the U.S. national interest to keep India in a position of permanent strategic weakness vis-à-vis China? And, in the absence of the nuclear deal, is a rising India itself likely to accept a position of inferiority?

The answer, in both instances, is no. Like it or not, Asia is going to be the scene of geopolitical competition in the twenty-first century. The issue at

hand is how intelligently the United States can manage it.

To its credit, the White House seems to grasp the importance of the regional dynamic in pursuing its entente with India--although, for obvious reasons, it cannot make too much of it publicly. As Ashley Tellis, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment and an architect of the nuclear deal, has argued: "If the United States is serious about advancing its geopolitical objectives in Asia, it would almost by definition help New Delhi develop strategic capabilities such that India's nuclear weaponry and associated delivery systems could deter against the growing and utterly more capable nuclear forces Beijing is likely to possess by 2025."

Ditching the agreement would not make Indian nuclear weapons or the prospect of Indo-Chinese rivalry go away. Instead, it would align Washington with Beijing in its bid to confine and contain Indian power--a very strange position for the United States to be in. India, meanwhile, would no doubt seek out other patrons to protect its national interests. It's no coincidence that Jacques Chirac was in Delhi a week before President Bush this spring, touting the benefits of Franco-Indian nuclear cooperation.

The Bush administration's proposed deal, moreover, would not only strengthen India's geopolitical position in Asia, but also provide Washington with new opportunities to influence New Delhi's strategic calculus, both in the short and long term.

The recent confrontation with Iran over its own nuclear program at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) provides a case in point. India has long hoped to build a 1,700-mile gas pipeline from Iran to satisfy its rising demand for energy. Despite pointed threats from Tehran, however, Delhi voted twice with the United States against Iran at the IAEA. It did this precisely because the prospect of the nuclear agreement with the United States outweighed its interest in placating the mullahs. India, incidentally, was the only member of the nonaligned movement to do so.

Much of the leverage that the nuclear deal would afford the United States would come in subtler forms. As America and India became accustomed to working closely together, each government would have a greater incentive to consult the other, both to preempt and defuse disagreements, and to identify and exploit new fields of cooperation. Strategic partnership thus becomes self-reinforcing.

Public perceptions can play an important role in this process. It's notable that, over the past few years, India has bucked the global trend toward anti-Americanism, with more than 70 percent of its citizens expressing a favorable view of the United States. That's up from 54 percent in 2002 and the highest U.S. approval rating in any country polled by Pew. On Iraq, India is the only country other than America

where a plurality believes the removal of Saddam Hussein has made the world safer.

Statistics like this are important not only because they validate the Bush administration's outreach efforts, but also because, in a democratic polity such as India, pro-American views can help empower pro-American governments. And as the Indian public increasingly sees the United States as a friend and ally, they are likely to be more willing to listen to Washington's arguments on topics where we do not immediately agree.

Americans, of course, are accustomed to thinking of alliances as quid pro quo arrangements: You give us basing rights, we put you under our security umbrella. You give us access to your markets, we give you access to ours. But this kind of analysis works poorly with a rising power like India.

Rather, the institutional framework that the Bush administration is constructing with Delhi is best understood as a long-term investment in a stock that is going to appreciate in the years ahead. As one U.S. military officer observed, "The costs of building a relationship with India today are significantly lower than the costs of facing India as a spoiler in the future. Moreover, the costs of building a relationship with India will probably increase over time."

So let´s assume that the Bush administration succeeds in pushing through the nuclear deal in more or less salvageable form. What then?

To be sure, the raft of programs that the White House and the Singh government have already initiated can keep bureaucrats in both capitals beavering away for years to come. With luck, these linkages will build constituencies, and these constituencies will help sustain the relationship--irrespective of the inevitable changes in national leadership.

In the interim, however, there are several areas where the two governments could still push ahead more aggressively, especially in defense policy. The security of the Indian Ocean is a top concern for both the United States and India, as well as the first object of India's military modernization. Given India's naval assets, the country's integration into a network of Asian-Pacific democracies is an obvious long-term objective.

Central Asia is another arena where Washington and Delhi can work more closely together. From energy security to democracy promotion to the stabilization of Afghanistan, they have a wide range of common interests there. Building a road or railroad into Afghanistan should be an immediate priority. Not only would it undercut the rationale for Indian-Iranian relations, but regional economic integration is also the best hope for success in Kabul. If Washington wants a long-term partner in the transformation of the Hindu Kush, it should look toward Delhi, not Brussels.

There's also much to be gained by deeper military cooperation be-

tween Delhi and Washington. Although there's been progress on this front in recent years, senior policymakers would do well to keep a close eye on the details. Defense-industrial cooperation, managed properly, can do wonders to help secure an alliance; botched, it can inflict irreparable harm.

Although a more sensitive subject, the United States should also be quietly thinking about basing arrangements with India. As Stephen Blank at the Army War College, among others, has observed, "American force posture remains dangerously thin in the arc--many thousands of miles long--between Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and Okinawa and Guam in the Pacific." Given the range of threats that could arise in this region, access to Indian real estate would be very valuable.

The United States should also embrace India's bid for a larger role in international institutions, including seats at the G-8 and on the U.N. Security Council. If nothing else, this would help push India's foreign policy elites to think more like leaders of a great power and less like advocates of the nonaligned movement. A U.N. seat for India, along with one for Japan, would also have the advantage of breaking Beijing's Asian monopoly on the council.

Beyond these bilateral initiatives, a global partnership with India will depend on reforms and policies internal to both countries. For Delhi, this means, above all, good stewardship of its economy. The encouraging news here is that India is booming; its economy is averaging approximately 9 percent growth, the second-highest in the world.

But beyond the headlines, India remains a very poor country, with 25 percent of its population living below the poverty line. Economic development here is not only a moral imperative; it is also crucial for India's emergence as a major power and its viability as a model for other countries to follow.

The nuclear deal would aid that process somewhat by helping Delhi expand and diversify the energy sector on which so much of its growth depends. (India's energy needs are expected to double by 2025.) Even more important are nonnuclear reforms that would improve India's energy efficiency, which is currently abysmal. The United States could help here, with an expanded energy dialogue and technical assistance, but much of the heavy lifting would ultimately fall to India itself.

For the United States, the growing importance of India raises questions about the way our foreign policy bureaucracy is organized. To take one example: In the Defense Department, India is on the periphery of U.S. Pacific Command, while Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia are assigned to U.S. Central Command. This arrangement cuts an artificial seam through the heart of Asia, complicating any attempt to develop coherent strategy toward the whole. Simply put, having the four-star general responsible for

India eight and a half time zones away from Delhi is dangerously dumb.

One solution might be to establish a joint subregional command that would bind together South and Central Asia, and assign it the task of coordinating between CENTCOM and PACOM. The logical place to put this post would be Afghanistan, which is already home to a large American troop presence, not to mention a U.S. subregional command, with Pakistan and Central Asia in its area of responsibility. With NATO expected to take charge in Afghanistan this fall, the Pentagon is going to need to come up with a new framework for the region anyway--and as the British and Russians alike understood a century ago, there's no better back door to India than Afghanistan.

"Five wasted decades." That is how Jaswant Singh characterized U.S.-Indian relations on the eve of President Clinton's visit to Delhi, and rightly so. Six years later, President Bush has done more than any leader since 1947 to transform Washington's relationship with Delhi. The question now before Congress is whether to endorse the partnership that we are at last on the threshold of securing--or condemn it to yet another wasted decade.

To be clear on this point, if Congress rejects the nuclear deal--or allows it to unravel by legislative nitpicking--the result will be a devastating setback to U.S.-Indian relations. Just as the agreement helped spur cooperation on a range of fronts, its collapse would disrupt a range of interactions.

The resistance to the nuclear deal is made all the more ironic by the fact that the White House's Indian diplomacy cuts against many of the stereotypes about President Bush's foreign policy. It is a step toward a long-term alliance, grounded in shared interests and principles, not a temporary coalition of the willing. It is a deliberate courtship of a rising power, not a shotgun marriage with a client state. Most important, it is a rare instance of the White House successfully closing the gap between ambition and implementation that has dogged its initiatives, from democracy promotion to the war in Iraq. If a balance of power in favor of freedom is to come into being, it simply must include India.

Tom Donnelly and Vance Serchuk are fellows at the American Enterprise Institute.