

## U.S.-India Relations: Stuck in a Nuclear Narrative

by Satu P. Limaye,  
Director of Research, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

“The successful defusing of bombs,” Michael Ondaatje writes in *The English Patient*, “ends novels.” In the troubled saga of U.S.-India relations, however, attempts both at defusing and detonating nuclear bombs form an on-going narrative, one that now overshadows and constrains the development of other possible plot lines. As then-U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering told a Washington audience in April 2000, “[e]ven as we seek to build a new and qualitatively closer relationship with India, that relationship cannot realize its full potential without further progress on non-proliferation. We also cannot and will not be able to concentrate on military issues until there is substantial progress on non-proliferation.”

Though the nuclear narrative emerged early in the bilateral relationship (and with surprising twists, as declassified documents show), India’s detonation of a nuclear device in 1974 increased its resonance. And India’s 1998 nuclear detonations and self-proclamation as a nuclear weapons state (NWS) brought this plot line to the forefront of the U.S.-India story. In 2000, two significant events for U.S.-India relations occurred. In March President Bill Clinton made a spectacular visit to India, the first by a sitting U.S. president in 22 years. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee toured the U.S. in September, addressed a joint session of Congress, and was the chief guest at the largest-ever state dinner hosted by the U.S. Media cooing about U.S.-India relations “coming in from the cold” also created a generally upbeat mood and many pundits either heralded or recommended substantially enhanced ties between the two “estranged democracies.” Still, relations did not move markedly beyond the nuclear tension.

### **The U.S.-India Nuclear Narrative in 2000**

The unresolved tension in the nuclear narrative is summed up in the U.S.-India joint statement of March 2000: “The United States believes India should forgo nuclear weapons. India believes that it needs to maintain a credible minimum nuclear deterrent in keeping with its own assessment of its security needs.” Nuances, however, were evident before and after the president’s visit. In January 2000, then-U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the administration’s key interlocutor with India on nuclear issues, told an Indian newspaper “facts can neither be undone nor done away with.” He also stated that the administration is “well aware of the view of the Indian Government on the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] and...recognize[s] fully that only the Indian

government has the sovereign right to make decisions on what sorts of weapons and force posture are necessary for the defense of India and Indian interests.” President Clinton, in his address to the Indian parliament, said “[o]nly India can determine its own interests. Only India can know if it truly is safer today than before the tests. I do not presume to speak for you or to tell you what to decide.” But the divergent concerns and sensitivities just below the surface of this apparent accommodation on India’s possession of nuclear weapons were made clear when President Clinton declared the subcontinent “the most dangerous place” in the world--only to be rebuffed publicly by Indian leaders.

Efforts to shift attention away from whether India ought to have nuclear weapons to achieving progress on security and non-proliferation goals of their bilateral dialogue met with little success. In the March joint statement, both countries reiterated their “respective voluntary commitments to forego further nuclear explosive tests” but pointedly refused to make any firm commitment to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Both promised to “work together and with others for an early commencement of negotiations” on a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) knowing that the prospects for even the start of such negotiations are bleak, and India did not join the U.S. in declaring a voluntary moratorium on fissile material production. Some progress, though, was made on tightening Indian export controls. The non-deployment and non-testing of missiles or nuclear weapons was not directly addressed in the joint statement, though India pledged to “build confidence and reduce the chances of miscalculation,” “act in a restrained and responsible manner,” and “not engage in nuclear and missile races.” India’s test of the Agni missile in 2001 did not suggest progress on this issue. As for talks sought by the U.S. between India and Pakistan to reduce tensions, they were and still are a non-starter. However, the announcement of an Indian ceasefire in late November 2000, and its three subsequent extensions, offers a ray of hope for a restart of the dialogue.

During Prime Minister Vajpayee’s state visit to the U.S. in September 2000, little further progress was made on nuclear weapons issues. Indeed, in two important respects, the September joint statement suggested a widening of U.S. and Indian differences. On its voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing, India qualified its adherence “subject to its supreme national interests.” Moreover, no mention was made in the September statement about missile testing or deployment. In a speech to a joint session of Congress, Prime Minister Vajpayee mentioned only a shared “commitment to ultimately eliminating weapons” (designed, one suspects, to remind the U.S. that not much has been done to that end) and mutual “voluntary moratoriums on testing.” The prime minister appealed for an accommodation, saying: “We do not wish to unravel your non-proliferation efforts. We wish you to understand our security concerns.” The nearly irreconcilable objective of the narrative suggests how difficult the tension will be to ease.

A relatively minor tension of the nuclear narrative, the sanctions imposed by the United States on India after the nuclear tests, also remains unrelieved. In March 2000, the U.S. *Federal Register* published the removal of 51 Indian entities from a list of nearly 200 Indian entities under sanctions, but no progress was made on formally lifting a broad array of other sanctions.

## **The Jawan and the GI: Defense Cooperation**

As former Under Secretary of State Pickering's remarks noted above indicate, U.S.-India defense cooperation too is hobbled by the shadow of the nuclear narrative. But this is not an entirely new situation. Historically, several factors have inhibited such cooperation, including: close Indo-Soviet relations, India's espousal of nonalignment and refusal to join U.S. alliance arrangements during the Cold War, U.S. military assistance to Pakistan, divergent security and strategic perceptions, conditions of weapons and technology transfers, and differing expectations about the purpose of defense cooperation. In essence, there has been a mutual reluctance to engage in defense cooperation. What is noteworthy is that beginning in the mid-1980s, the U.S. and India sought to increase defense and related technology cooperation and fitful efforts to this end persisted until India's 1998 nuclear tests.

Following the tests, and in keeping with U.S. laws, even these limited links were cut. In 2000, efforts to revive them have met only marginal success. The first break in the current impasse came in late 1999 when India's Chief of Army Staff, General Ved Malik, visited Washington and met with General Henry Shelton, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, among other officials. General Malik also attended the Chiefs of Defense Conference hosted by the United States Pacific Command. This marked the first and only visit of an Indian Service Chief to the U.S. since the nuclear tests.

In mid-January 2000 and again in September, Admiral Dennis C. Blair, USCINCPAC, traveled to India for security-related discussions and to pursue increased military engagement in the areas of peacekeeping operations, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, and environmental security. These "non-controversial" fields of military cooperation were all that the relationship could sustain amidst unresolved nuclear issues. Subsequently, a number of high-level American and Indian officials exchanged visits to try and give substance to this menu for cooperation. For example, Mr. Gary Vest, Principal Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Environmental Security lead a delegation to Delhi in October to explore military-to-military engagement on environmental security. In early November the first meeting of a Joint Working Group on UN Peacekeeping Operations took place in Delhi, and late in the same month U.S. Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy James Bodner visited India.

Both difficulties confronting U.S.-India defense cooperation and the possibilities for indirect compromise are reflected in a curious incident at the end of 2000. On December 27, an Indian Navy Sea King helicopter medivaced a U.S. officer from the USS Hewitt off the Mumbai coast. Many of these helicopters, purchased by India from Britain, are grounded due to a lack of spare parts that, because they contain U.S.-origin components, cannot be transferred to India due to U.S. sanctions. In the event, a day before leaving office, the Clinton administration, responding to a British entreaty, signed a one-time

waiver relaxing restrictions on the spares' transfer. After a review by the incoming Bush administration, the decision was upheld and formally announced on February 1, 2001.

In a different, but notable vein, the U.S. military responded helpfully to India in the wake of the tragic January 26, 2001 earthquake. U.S. Pacific Command deployed a six-member response team to evaluate Department of Defense support requirements, eventually leading to the dispatch of four C-17 aircraft loaded with relief supplies. The USS Cowpens also delivered relief supplies while in Mumbai for India's first international fleet review in February 2001.

Some Indian newspaper commentators read much into small incidents, suggesting that they were the first steps toward resumption of formal defense cooperation. But these high hopes are unfounded given the controlling influence of the nuclear narrative. Moreover, in 2000, new irritants have been introduced into the U.S.-India defense picture, such as U.S. opposition to military collaboration and sales between India and Israel.

### **Cowboys and Indians: The Bush Administration and India**

The advent of a new Republican administration in Washington at the beginning of 2001 raised hopes in New Delhi that relations would further improve. These hopes rest on a number of factors. First, Secretary of State Colin Powell's expressed misgivings about the efficacy of sanctions have created expectations Washington will soon lift its sanctions against India. Indian newspapers also have featured views by U.S. legislators supporting the lifting or relaxation of sanctions. However, the repeal of legislation underlying current sanctions will not be achieved by wishes or words. The Bush administration, as any other, would need to commit time, energy, and capital to this end. Given a number of more pressing priorities and wide-ranging support for tough non-proliferation legislation, a formal repeal of sanctions soon is unlikely. More likely is a steady dilution of sanctions through piecemeal legislation as well as administrative and other means. If sanctions end, it will be with a whimper, not a bang.

A second reason for high Indian hopes is that the Bush administration, seeing China more as a strategic competitor than a partner, will have a less Sino-centric policy and be more receptive to India, among other countries in Asia. At a minimum, think Indians, the U.S. under a Bush administration, unlike a Clinton one, will not issue joint statements with China pledging collaboration to stem nuclear proliferation in the subcontinent. The latter is likely an accurate assessment, but the benefits to India should not be exaggerated. China will remain crucial to U.S. policy in Asia while. For now, India's economic and security importance to the U.S. will pale in comparison. India's relevance to handling trouble with China will be peripheral. A third reason for high hopes is that Indians expect less pressure to sign the CTBT from a Bush administration known to be leery of this and other arms control agreements. This is undoubtedly true. But the nuclear narrative with India will not entirely dissipate either. Indeed, the salience of nuclear and missile proliferation is increasing, especially for an administration that has pledged to build a national missile defense system to deal with such proliferation. And finally, the Bush

administration is expected to be less keen on attaching environmental and labor conditions to trade agreements.

While it is too early to tell whether relations between the U.S. and India will improve appreciably because of these and other factors, the early signs do not suggest a dramatic, sustainable change in the current nuclear-dominated narrative. This assessment is buttressed when one asks, in the absence of a nuclear narrative, “where’s the beef”?

### **“Where’s the Beef?”**

If the tension of the nuclear narrative could be defused, would other, more productive story lines between Washington and Delhi develop? Would “estranged democracies” become “engaged democracies”? Would the “shadow of hesitation” be removed from the “joint vision”? Are the United States and India really “natural partners”? There are good reasons to be cautious. Economic ties between the two countries, though growing, are marginal and remain fractional, even compared to U.S. trade and investment in other Asian countries, much less North America and Europe. Second, shared perspectives on a range of regional and international security issues are few and thin. On Burma, for example, Delhi has flip-flopped to pursue engagement with the Rangoon regime while so far the U.S. continues to focus on human rights and democracy. With Iraq, India is seeking to assure oil flows and a share of business while the U.S. seeks to maintain refined sanctions. India seeks a multipolar international order; the U.S. wants one in which it is *primus inter pares*. These are just a few divergences between Washington and Delhi.

Even expected areas of agreement such as human rights and democracy maintain lukewarm cooperation. Human rights abuses by Indian security forces in Kashmir remain a matter of concern to Washington, as is evident in the most recent annual State Department report. But Delhi rejects these reports. India, unlike the U.S., has also hesitated to take a formal role in promoting democracy. (At the Warsaw gathering of the “Community of Democracies” in July 2000, the U.S. supported and India opposed the showing of a videotaped message from Burma’s opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi). Even the effort to cooperate on terrorism is playing on a potentially sticky wicket. There is the risk for the U.S. that, in the context of the subcontinent, anti-terrorism initiatives with India could get caught in the net of narrow India-Pakistan hostility rather a wider, shared objection to the taking of innocent lives through terrorist acts. The potential is evident in Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes’ early January 2000 comment that “when it comes to [Osama] bin Laden, the United States fires not one but scores of missiles with high-precision technology. What the United States and the world need to realize is that terrorism understands no country borders. To overlook what is happening across the borders in India at the hands of Pakistan is not addressing the question.” India, meanwhile, is pushing a United Nations Terrorism Convention partly to place Pakistan on the defensive, and partly because it wishes to avoid dependence on the U.S. to take anti-terrorism stances with which Delhi agrees.

All of this is not to suggest that U.S.-India relations did not improve in 2000. They did, even if largely in atmospherics and tone. The effort launched during President Clinton's visit to "institutionalize dialogue" between the two countries on matters ranging from energy to terrorism to trade and finances is welcome, useful, and necessary to both. What is needed is an appreciation that for now at least, the nuclear narrative will overshadow and constrain movement towards fundamentally new, positive directions in bilateral relations. And even if the tension of the nuclear narrative is finessed, U.S.-India relations will confront a range of challenges. But such a development, were it to occur, would at least mark a fresh narrative.

### **Chronology of U.S.-India Relations May 1998-April 2001**

**May 11 and 13, 1998:** India conducts five nuclear tests.

**Nov. 1998:** The first round of consultations specifically on weapons of mass destruction export controls, part of the broader U.S.-India security and non-proliferation dialogue, is held.

**Feb. 20, 1999:** "Lahore Summit" between Indian PM A.B. Vajpayee and then Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif is held.

**Mar. 1999:** The second round of U.S.-India discussions on export controls is held.

**May 5-July 4, 1999:** India and Pakistan engage in an undeclared war in Kargil.

**Oct. 12, 1999:** A Bharitya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government returns to power in India.

**Oct. 12, 1999:** Lt. Gen Pervez Musharraf overthrows Nawaz Sharif's government in a bloodless coup in Pakistan

**Nov. 1999:** General Ved Malik, Chief of the Army Staff, visits Washington, meets with General Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and attends the Chiefs of Defense Conference at USPACOM headquarters. This is the first (and to date, only) visit of an Indian Service Chief since the nuclear tests.

**Dec. 15, 1999:** U.S. Commerce Department announces it will remove 51 Indian entities from the list of entities under sanctions for India's nuclear tests.

**Dec. 25, 1999:** Indian Airlines flight 184 is hijacked en route from Kathmandu to New Delhi.

**Jan. 9-12, 2000:** CINCPAC Admiral Blair visits India to discuss sanctions, threat perceptions regarding China, and the possible renewal of defense ties.

**Jan. 18-19, 2000:** 10<sup>th</sup> round of talks on security and non-proliferation are held between Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in London. The two sides agree to form a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism.

**Feb. 7-8, 2000:** First meeting of the U.S.-India Counter-Terrorism Working Group is held in Washington, D.C.

**Feb. 20, 2000:** PM Vajpayee issues a statement criticizing U.S. and UK air strikes on Iraq saying “India has consistently opposed unilateral imposition of No-Fly Zones upon Iraq.”

**Mar. 19, 2000:** On the eve of President Clinton’s departure for India, 65 members of the House of Representatives in an unprecedented joint effort, write a letter to the president urging him to “publicly acknowledge the strength of India’s claim to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council.”

**Mar. 21-25, 2000:** President Clinton is first U.S. president to visit India in 22 years; addresses a joint session of the Lok Sabha (India’s parliament). During the visit, the U.S. and India issue a joint statement on relations entitled “A Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

**Apr. 2000:** Indian Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha visits Washington and signs an agreement with Treasury Secretary Summers setting up the India-U.S. Financial and Economic Forum.

**Apr. 4-7, 2000:** U.S. FBI Director, Louis Freeh, arrives in India as part of efforts to increase law enforcement cooperation and to share information, exchange experience, and coordinate approaches regarding international terrorism.

**Apr. 17, 2000:** The third round of U.S.-India discussions on export controls is held.

**May 24-25, 2000:** U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Pickering visits India for the Foreign Office Consultations and the Asian Security Dialogue.

**June 26, 2000:** U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh meet in Warsaw at the first ministerial meeting of the Community of Democracies.

**July 11-12, 2000:** The Joint Consultative Group on Energy and Environment holds its first meeting in Washington.

**Sept. 6-15, 2000:** PM Vajpayee pays a reciprocal state visit to Washington, addresses a joint session of Congress.

**Sept. 17-18, 2000:** Ambassador Michael Sheehan, Chief Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism at the U.S. State Department, meets with Indian counterparts during a visit to Delhi.

**Sept. 20-24, 2000:** ADM Dennis Blair, USCINCPAC, pays his second visit to India to increase military engagement in the areas of Peacekeeping Operations, Search and Rescue, humanitarian assistance/disaster response, and environmental security.

**Sept. 25-26, 2000:** The second meeting of the Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism is held in Delhi.

**Oct. 15-18, 2000:** Gary Vest, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Environmental Security, leads an OSD/PACOM delegation to New Delhi to discuss environmental security as a venue for military to military engagement.

**Nov. 1-2, 2000:** First meeting of the Joint Working Group on UN Peacekeeping Operations in New Delhi.

**Nov. 15-16, 2000:** U.S. principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy James Bodner visits India, agreement is reached to pursue cooperation in “non-controversial” areas.

**Nov. 19, 2000:** India announces a unilateral ceasefire in Jammu and Kashmir for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan set to begin on November 27<sup>th</sup>.

**Dec. 15, 2000:** Consultative Committee meeting on U.S.-India relations is held in Delhi.

**Dec. 21, 2000:** New Delhi extends unilateral Ramadan ceasefire in Jammu and Kashmir by one month.

**Dec. 27, 2000:** Indian navy helicopter evacuates ill U.S. naval officer from the USS Hewitt for treatment at an Indian hospital. Many of these helicopters are grounded due to a lack of spare parts due to U.S. sanctions.

**Jan. 16, 2001:** At his confirmation hearings, Secretary of State-designate Colin Powell questions the efficacy of sanctions.

**Jan. 17, 2001:** India’s Agni-II, a surface-to-surface missile with a 2,000-km range, is successfully test-fired from the Interim Test Range in Orissa.

**Jan. 23, 2001:** India extends by another month the ceasefire in Jammu and Kashmir.

**Jan. 25, 2001:** State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, states that “[w]e welcome the announcement by the Indian cabinet [to extend the ceasefire for the second time].” He also states that “the peace process would be greatly enhanced if the Kashmiri militant



groups responded positively to India's announcement by taking steps to halt the violence."

**Jan. 26, 2001:** A major earthquake occurs in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The U.S., with the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance taking the lead, responds with the delivery of several million dollars of relief supplies.

**Jan. 30, 2001:** U.S. President Bush speaks by telephone with PM Vajpayee in the aftermath of the Gujarat earthquake.

**Feb. 1, 2001:** U.S. formally announces the relaxation of restrictions on the sale of spare parts for Sea King helicopters that India has purchased from Britain.

**Feb. 2, 2001:** Pakistan Chief Executive, General Musharraf and PM Vajpayee speak by telephone for the first contact in 15 months.

**Feb. 4, 2001:** U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra meet on the sidelines of the 37<sup>th</sup> annual security conference at Munich.

**Feb. 14-19, 2001:** Vice Admiral Metzger, commander of the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet and the guided-missile cruiser USS Cowpens, represents the U.S. at India's first international fleet review in Mumbai.

**Feb. 16-19, 2001:** A four-member U.S. Congressional team travels to India and Pakistan to assess the situation in Jammu and Kashmir.

**Mar. 21, 2001:** The Bush administration announces the nomination of Robert Blackwill, head of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and a former career foreign service officer, to be the new U.S. Ambassador to India.