

U.S.-India Relations: Missing George W.

By David J. Karl

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It is a disconcerting indicator of the condition of U.S.-Indian relations that much of the attention in Washington regarding Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's state visit was focused, first, on the accouterments of the lavish banquet President Obama gave in his honor and, then, on the bizarre exploits of the aspiring reality-TV contestants who managed to slip into the dinner uninvited. In contrast, the substantive agenda of the Obama-Singh summit received very little notice. Indeed, the dinner's five-course menu garnered wider media coverage than the summit's numerous deliverables.

Nearly a year after the Obama administration took office, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that U.S.-India relations are drifting, lacking the focus, momentum and salience they had when George W. Bush occupied the White House.

In terms of high symbolism and rhetoric, the Obama administration certainly pulled out all the stops to gladden the status-conscious Indians, especially since Singh's visit was fast on the heels of President Obama's own high-profile trip to China. Singh's trip was the first official state visit of the Obama presidency and the White House repeatedly took the line that the special honor was purposefully accorded to India. The prime minister had forged a close personal relationship with Bush, even famously telling him that "the people of India deeply love you." Not to be outdone in the bonhomie department, Obama let it be known in the run-up to the summit that he considers Singh and India part of his family.

The administration prepared an elaborate arrival ceremony for Singh on the White House South Lawn, though at the last moment foul weather forced it indoors. At the welcome, Obama spoke of his high esteem for Singh's "wise leadership" and hailed India as "a leader in Asia and around the world." At the joint press conference, Obama assured New Delhi that it has "no better friend and partner than the United States of America" and at several points during the day he called the bilateral relationship "one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century."

The White House's hospitality reached a high point with the state dinner, which The New York Times called "Washington's most exclusive social event this year." The banquet generated a great deal of buzz in Washington circles and the press chattered over who would be on the official

invitation list. The dinner had been planned for months under First Lady Michelle Obama's supervision and, by all accounts, it was an impressive affair. A guest chef was even brought in from New York to ensure that the fare suited prime minister's vegetarian palate. Recalling the words Jawaharlal Nehru used on the eve of Indian independence, Obama in his toast urged both countries to look toward "the future that beckons us now."

Beyond the ceremony and camaraderie, however, the summit failed to live up to the high standard Obama suggested. Rather than give new impetus to relations, the meeting confirmed that U.S.-India affairs are gripped by inertia. The visit did produce a raft of agreements deepening ties in such diverse areas as economic cooperation, clean energy and climate, educational, and health linkages. To be sure, these are laudable endeavors and strengthen the societal bonds that give fuller texture and equipoise to the bilateral partnership than could be hoped to be achieved at the intergovernmental level alone.

But they are also relatively minor accomplishments, the type of things that could have been unveiled during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to India this past summer. The lack of landmark initiatives and attention-grabbing headlines is in stark contrast to Singh's first state visit to Washington in July 2005, when he and Bush launched the path-breaking civilian nuclear agreement that instantly energized bilateral relations.

Unlike Bush, Obama appears reluctant to apply the requisite bureaucratic will or invest political capital in undertaking bold new bilateral projects. Although Secretary Clinton, a staunch India-phile, speaks of taking relations to a higher plane, the administration as a whole has not yet displayed much interest in continuing its predecessor's high-profile engagement with New Delhi.

Indeed, the summit provided fresh evidence that U.S. policy toward India is now subordinate to other priorities. New Delhi had hoped that critical details relating to the implementation of the nuclear accord would be wrapped up by the time Singh arrived in Washington, particularly a spent-fuel reprocessing agreement. Were it still in office, the Bush administration would no doubt have already made greater progress on this front. But the Obama emphasis on containing nuclear proliferation has reportedly played a large role in delaying agreement.

In the final reckoning, major differences in strategic outlook between the Bush and Obama administrations account for the summit's lackluster outcome. Bush saw New Delhi as a key player in the evolving geopolitical equation in Asia and was willing to make extraordinary efforts to assist in the development of Indian national power. To that end, he pushed the nuclear agreement through an often-intransigent U.S.

bureaucracy. But with the Obama administration preferring to emphasize engagement with Beijing on global governance issues, New Delhi has lost its primacy of place in Washington's strategic calculus.

This loss of salience was made plain in President Obama's trip to Asia in mid-November. Much was made in the Indian press about Obama's rather anodyne comments, made while he was in Beijing, about China's role in South Asia. Much more significant and troublesome, however, were his remarks at Suntory Hall in Japan a few days earlier. Vowing to "strengthen old alliances and build new partnerships" in Asia, he failed to mention India even in passing. It was a telling omission and one that Indian leaders, due to arrive in Washington just a week later, must have found glaring.