

To Appear in **India Today**  
India's Premier Weekly  
(Special Issue prior to Clinton's Visit)

Clinton in India: A Convergence but not Quite Yet

By

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President Clinton's visit to India is an event that reflects the new reality of improved Indo-US relations, economic and political. At the same time, it is an occasion that can enhance and accentuate that reality. But if it is to do that, it is important for both countries to understand why there is a growing sense of harmony between our two nations and also to see how their remaining differences can be bridged.

The economic dimensions of the new reality hardly need reiteration. For example, the United States is already the biggest foreign investor in India, ever since we moved decisively away after 1991 from our unproductive, inward-looking policies of the previous three decades. But what has really brought this about? And why is this turnaround robust and certain to continue?

First, India has registered a hugely improved growth rate since the 1980s, only a little short of double the 3.5% growth rate over nearly a quarter of a century under economic policies that claimed to be pro-poor but accentuated our poverty instead by seriously impairing the ability of the economy to create better and more jobs, creating a better market for both investment and trade. There is little doubt that, in the 1990s, this high growth rate has reflected the Manmohan Singh-led reforms whereas in the 1980s it reflected an unsustainable spending spree based partly on excessive short-term capital inflows. As the economy opens up with further targeted reductions in import barriers on consumer goods (largely, courtesy of the successful US case

against us at the WTO), our economic efficiency will improve further and so will our attractiveness as a market.

The US, now the dominant player in the world economy, therefore cannot but find India now as a target of opportunity. It is also a country where business (and other) lobbies function so well in Congress in defining policy that a cynic once remarked that a US Congressman would have to serve a Christian missionary for breakfast if a well-heeled cannibal constituent so demanded!

Other factors also propel the two countries together. The United States now has well over a million Indian immigrants. Typically, immigrants act as a major political force, often for their home country's good, when they have citizenship and can vote: a fact of growing importance for the Hispanic immigrants in the US. We are not there yet, since many still hold on to Indian nationality: sadly, we are not allowed to hold dual nationality even though the US poses no barrier to such a possibility.

But our clout comes from the fact that the Indian community constitutes what I call the "next Jews" of America: a highly successful, intellectually eminent and economically prominent, group that has all the networking advantages that a merit-based, immigration-oriented society such as the American offers. Our influence comes through the fact that the eminent intellectuals, artists, scientists, policy specialists and researchers among us interact freely with influential native Americans and through our writings in the media.

And, in a political system heavily reliant on cash contributions, our political influence is steadily increasing also because our businessmen, principally in information technology, are among the new multimillionaires whom Messrs. Clinton, Gore and Bush now eye with respect derived simply from greed! So, when Mr. Kanwal Rekhi gets to the White House --- admittedly

for a still low-level access ---, it is not just his entrepreneurial prowess that attracts the White House; it is the prospect of getting hold of a good fraction of his wealth!

So, between both our own growing shift to openness to foreign trade and investment that makes for a distinct economic interest for the US policymakers in India, and the growing influence of Indians on the US scene that produces an equally marked and increasing political “tilt” towards India in Washington, the Indo-US relationship is now predictably on a path of convergence.

The task of India, during the President’s visit, will be to keep him firmly focused on this central fact. Prime Minister Vajpayee can offer his handshake in a friendship that he can characterize without exaggeration as inevitable. We have the geopolitical rifts caused by the Soviet Union behind us; the anti-US attitudes picked up by our older elite from Oxbridge is giving way to saner pro-US attitudes by the younger elite from MIT, Harvard and Yale; and we are, for reasons I sketched, turning to a thaw that should eventually turn some day into a warm friendship.

The only source of discord has to be President Clinton’s desire to bring the nuclear issue, and the Pakistan question, onto the radar screen. And here, he is dead wrong. It is necessary to understand why.

The sad reality for Pakistan is that it has lost its “special status” in the US just as India has gained in stature and attention. The US domestic scene, inundated by great Indian success with its favourable implications for Indo-US relations, is marked by abysmal Pakistani failure. It is hard to think of almost any Pakistani achievement in the US, making one wonder: why? The answer is straightforward: they have decimated their educational system, surely as good as ours

at Independence, by falling under the curse of two deadly factors: military rule under four dictators over half their history and crippling Islamic fundamentalism.

In turn, these very factors have left Pakistan sullied by genocide in East Pakistan. They have also fed and been fed by hatred of India, sustained by an equally obsessive focus on Kashmir and a desire for “parity” with India which makes little sense for a country that lacks commensurate size and the compensating force of better economic and political performance. It is amusing, yet revealing, that when Ms. Benazir Bhutto was introduced by Senator Jesse Helms to the US Congress, she was described by him as the Prime Minister of India, a fact attributed to his near senility. But the real punch line was that he explained his error by saying: oh, she was talking all the time about India, so I thought she was India’s Prime Minister!

For a failed state that can no longer command US attention because of its virtues, the blandishment of a possible nuclear war in South Asia and flagrant acts and implicit threats of terrorism are all that is left for Pakistan to use to draw the US back like the perennial sucker into its corner. Hence, Pakistan has an incentive to play the rogue to the hilt, even as it has sunk yet again into the quagmire of military dictatorship with the silence and complaisance of its intellectuals (except for a few brave judges and the remarkable human rights activist Ms. Jehangir).

Wrongly advised that he can bring Pakistan back to good behaviour by “remaining engaged”, President Clinton will visit General Musharraf and will play into Pakistani hard-liners’ nefarious strategy, giving comfort to the military rulers and encouragement for their policies. President Clinton will have ignored the principal lesson of the cold war years: dictators do not change their ways when you yield to their threats that “things will get worse if you don’t” or to their promises that “we will change for the better, in due course”.

A clear and firm position against a continuing military takeover, against terrorism and military adventures like Kargil and terrorist training and attacks from Pakistani territory, a credible threat of suspended aid and of declaration as a Terrorist State no better than Iraq or Libya as soon as there is any new violation of such proscriptions, are among the tough messages that need to be conveyed instead by Mr. Clinton to the Pakistani regime. Mr. Vajpayee should not miss the opportunity to educate Mr. Clinton gently thus. Mr. Clinton is a quick study.