‘We are also a victim of our own success’

AZIZ HANIFFA

India’s Ambassador to the United States Nirupama Rao last week tried to counter the growing consen-
sus among policy wonks in Washington and Delhi that there is a perceptible drift in the envisaged US-
India strategic partnership.

She was delivering the keynote address at ‘India as a
Global Power: Contending Views from India’, a conference
organized by the George Washington University’s Sigur
Center for Asian Powers and the Washington, DC think
tank Center for a New American Security. Rao argued that
the US-India relationship ‘has transformed in a dramatic
way and in a very short time. In this context, I might add
that we are also a victim of our own success. While we may
all want it, it is also true, however, that we will not always
have ‘big bang’ initiatives or cut red ribbons at all times.’

She argued: ‘Our multi-faceted partnership — covering
almost every field of human endeavor — is now on a steady,
upward course. Our governments are committed to further
deepen and expand the horizons of our partnership and to
realize its enormous promise, bringing our two peoples
closer and achieving our shared aspirations and goals. But
sometimes a few observers tend to mistakenly view this as
a slowdown of our relationship. On other occasions a dif-
ference of views on some of the global developments is mis-
taken as a sign of discord or a reflection of ‘old habits’ on
India’s part. This to my mind is not only incorrect, but also
unhelpful. Such characterization also obviously ignores the
fact that fundamental reasons that have led to transforma-
tion of our ties — our converging security and economic
interests, vibrant ties between our peoples and mutually
beneficial connections among our entrepreneurs as well as
our faith in ideals of democracy, individual liberty, rule of
law — not only still remain in place but have actually
become more compelling. As my friend, Ambassador Karl
Inderfurth (former assistant secretary of state for South
Asian affairs) noted recently, we need to consolidate, we
need to implement. Our development partnership in edu-
cation, health, in agriculture, science and technology, and
clean energy must be strengthened. Ties between our states
should be consciously promoted. Our Homeland Security
Dialogue must be further consolidated. Our dialogue on
export controls and high technology trade must gather fur-
ther momentum and show results.’

On the US-India civilian nuclear deal, which has
remained in limbo in the wake of the nuclear liability law
passed by India’s parliament, Rao said, ‘We need to inten-
sify our efforts in the working group that has been set up to
deal with liability issues so as to enable the early activation
of the agreement and the participation of US nuclear ener-
gy companies in this sector that is so important for our
energy security.’

She was hopeful that ‘the discussions on the bilateral
investment treaty will move forward,’ and that ‘the upcom-
ing March visit of Commerce Secretary (John) Bryson to
India is targeted at enabling the realization of commercial
opportunities for US companies in the infrastructure space
in India, covering roads, railways, airports and energy.’

Indian companies, Rao pointed out, ‘are already investing
in a growing number of US states, bringing value, creating
jobs for Americans, and integrating with local communi-
ties... I have no doubt that our strategic dialogue will inten-
sify further, particularly in regard to regional issues and the
situation in Asia, and that it will provide an impetus for
peace and stability, and economic growth. Our External
Affairs Minister (S M Krishna) looks forward to the next
Strategic Dialogue meeting with Secretary (of State
Hillary Clinton) here in Washington this summer.’

On Afghanistan, Rao said, ‘While we agree that ultimate-
lly there would have to be a political solution, we also
believe that this should not become an over-riding objec-
tive that needs to be achieved at all costs for that would risk
the prospect of the victory of the dark forces of terrorism
and extremism that have plagued the region for long.’

Trying to reduce dependence on
Iranian oil:
Nirupama Rao

AZIZ HANIFFA

As the Obama administration tries to
impress upon India and other na-
tions to join in the United States-
led sanctions regime against Iran to isolate
that country for its alleged nuclear
weapons program and reduce energy
dependence on Tehran, India’s Ambas-
sador to the US Nirupama Rao noted that
New Delhi’s imports of Iranian oil have
been on the decline.

In the question and answer session that fol-
lowed her keynote address, Rao said, ‘We
are in touch with the US government and
of course, closely monitoring the develop-
ing situation concerning Iran. Iran is an
important source for our crude petroleum
imports. These imports have declined a lit-
tle — not very much, but a little — over the
last couple of years, the last two years or so,
and we probably...we’ll have to see... Given
the sanctions and given the difficulties in
operating banking channels vis-a-vis Iran,
obviously the volume cannot be expected to
go up in such a situation. It may well be
that there may be a further decline.’

India, she argued, ‘is a responsible coun-
try. India works with the rest of the inter-
national community...we abide by the
rules obviously. We don’t play outside the
system on these issues. But it must be
remembered that the (Persian) Gulf region
is terribly important for India — we have 6
million Indians working there, and their
remittances come home to their families,
(and) they are important for our econo-
y. It’s a source of our energy imports — India
is basically an energy importing country.’

She noted that the Mangalore Refinery
and Petroleum Chemicals Ltd was ‘geared
just to work with Iranian crude — about
110,000 barrels a day or so. So, it’s going
to take some time to re-adjust and see how we
can move away from the old patterns of
how we operate on these issues... We are
not for military hardware from Iran. We
would not like to see the situation escalate
to a point of no return, and I think these
avenues of diplomacy and statecraft have
not been exhausted.’

She acknowledged: ‘Definitely, Iran has
to hear the voice of the international com-
munity clearly on this issue. Things should
not come to a pass where it becomes very
difficult to retract positions. As far as Iran’s
nuclear program is concerned, we’ve said
very, very clearly that we don’t want Iran to
weaponize — we don’t want Iran to go
down that path at all. As an NPT (nucler
Non Proliferation Treaty) member, it
(Iran) has certain rights to develop its
nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. But it
does have with the International Atomic
Agency and the rest of the international
community to assure the concerns that
have been raised so that we can move for-
ward hopefully to a situation where ten-
sions are eased.’

Earlier, responding to a question on the
continuing frustration with Pakistan on
Capitol Hill, Rao acknowledged she was
aware of growing angst in Congress.

Rao said, ‘We are engaged in a very con-
scious effort — a sincere, honest effort — to
try to see how we can reduce the trust
deficit in our relations with Pakistan.’

She acknowledged that ‘this is not going
to be easy... But the fact is that people on
both sides realize there is need for trade
and business ties to grow. There is need for
travel between the two countries to be facil-
itated in a smoother way and in the region
of Jammu and Kashmir, we have con-
sciously worked on putting in place confi-
dence building measures that enable trade
to cross the Line of Control... We have
sought to stress and emphasize to Pakistan
that there is need for them to act on the
issue of terror. It threatens to destroy the
fabric of life in Pakistan itself today. I think
they realize that.’