



'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 consensus 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, onward 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 mistaken 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 transformation 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 education, 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 further 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 intensify 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 energy 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 upcoming 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 communities... I have no doubt that our strategic dialogue will intensify 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 ultimately there would have to be a political solution, we also believe that this should not become an over-riding objective 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

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As the Obama administration tries to impress upon India and other nations 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 Ambassador 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 followed her keynote address, Rao said, 'We are in touch with the US government and of course, closely monitoring the developing situation concerning Iran. Iran is an important source for our crude petroleum imports. These imports have declined a little — 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-à-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 country. India works with the rest of the international community to...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 economy. 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 confrontation. 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 community clearly on this issue. Things should



Indian Ambassador to the US Nirupama Rao

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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 (*nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty*) member, it (*Iran*) has certain rights to develop its nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. But it has to work with the International Atomic Agency and the rest of the international community to assuage the concerns that have been raised so that we can move forward hopefully to a situation where tensions 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 conscious 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 facilitated in a smoother way and in the region of Jammu and Kashmir, we have consciously worked on putting in place confidence building measures that enable trade across 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.'