

## Indian-Americans and the U.S.–India Nuclear Agreement: Consolidation of an Ethnic Lobby?

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The transformation of U.S.–India relations has been, arguably, one of the most significant developments in American foreign policy in the past decade. Both countries' leaderships regard a recent nuclear cooperation agreement as the most important step yet in their emerging "strategic partnership." But the deal is also deeply controversial—critics see it as a major departure from decades-standing nonproliferation norms—and its approval by the U.S. Congress in 2006 was far from assured. This paper argues that an increasingly professional and well-funded "India lobby" among Indian-Americans was critical in pressing members of Congress to support the nuclear agreement. Moreover, this episode may portend its emergence as one of the most important ethnic communities seeking influence over U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century—if it can sustain momentum for its ambitious long-term goals, such as securing a permanent seat for India on the UN Security Council, through the uncertain near-term future of the nuclear agreement itself.

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The transformation of U.S.–India relations has been, arguably, one of the most significant developments in American foreign policy in the past decade. From a prolonged pattern of estrangement during the Cold War and well into the 1990s, the world's most powerful and most populous democracies are now pursuing a "strategic partnership" that encompasses deepening economic ties, unprecedented joint military exercises, and most recently, an exceptional bilateral nuclear agreement that effectively accepts India as a nuclear power outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and allows for nuclear trade previously prohibited under the NPT and U.S. export laws.

This agreement, first announced by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and U.S. President George W. Bush over reciprocal state visits in July 2005 and March 2006, is regarded by both leaderships as the most important step yet in the emerging "strategic partnership" between the two countries. The deal is also deeply controversial; U.S. and international critics see it as a major departure from the "country-neutral" norms that for decades have defined the global non-proliferation regime, and it has faced strong opposition from Washington's formidable nonproliferation specialist community.

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And yet, in approval votes (required under U.S. treaty and export law) the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate registered overwhelming support for the deal (in July and November 2006, respectively), moving the presidential initiative one step closer to policy (aspects still await approval by the international Nuclear Suppliers Group, or NSG, and the Indian government must attend to its own contentious domestic politics). The ringing congressional endorsement was surprising, not only because of the proliferation concerns that opponents raised—and events in Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea in 2004–06 have underscored global proliferation risks—but also because of the particular timing of the bill's passage: in a mid-term election year, as an initiative of an increasingly unpopular President Bush.

This paper will argue that Indian-American citizens' groups in the United States, and the efforts of an increasingly professional and well-funded "India lobby" on Capitol Hill, were critical in pressing members of Congress to support the agreement. Moreover, this episode may represent the consolidation of an "India lobby," and portend its emergence as one of the most important ethnic communities seeking influence over U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century. Existing scholarly literature on ethnic lobbies and American foreign policy typically focuses on communities such as Jewish and Cuban Americans (the "Israel lobby," in particular has been the subject of recent acerbic debates<sup>1</sup>) but Indian-Americans are quickly ascending to prominence as well, with potential ramifications for U.S. policy in South Asia and beyond.

The next section will very briefly review the literature on ethnic lobbies and U.S. foreign policy (some of which is quite normative and polemical; the analysis here will try to align with a more objective approach). Section III situates the U.S.–India relationship in its broader historical and changing strategic contexts. It makes clear that Indian-Americans are far from the only factor pushing the U.S. and India closer. In particular, presidential initiative has been critical, though this itself can be seen as a response to changing strategic circumstances (such as the end of the Cold War, and the continued ascendance of Chinese power). Section IV traces the evolution of the Indian-American community and its patterns of organization, communication, and political activism, especially in the period since the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that greatly increased opportunities for Indian immigration to the U.S. Though some characteristics of the community conform to general predictions about ethnic lobby effectiveness—for example, Indian-Americans tend to have higher than average household incomes, and are geographically concentrated in specific congressional districts—other characteristics would seem to impede policy influence; for example, community organizations until recently were highly segmented along professional or language-cultural lines. Nevertheless, as Section V shows, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw an increasing political activism in the community (especially among the younger generation), an especially keen interest in promoting U.S. recognition of India as "emerging power" on the world stage and a close U.S.–India relationship, and the laying of groundwork for congressional influence through "India Caucuses" in the House and Senate. But for all of the broader international-strategic reasons behind the recent turn in U.S.–India relations, there remain legitimate concerns about some aspects of the partnership—and none more so than the nuclear agreement—such that congressional support was far from assured. Section VI will demonstrate how, against formidable odds,

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<sup>1</sup> The American Israel Public Affairs Committee has been called "the quintessential ethnic lobby in the United States" (Ambrosio 2002a,b:11). In 1998, *Fortune* magazine ranked AIPAC the second-most powerful of all lobbying groups in the U.S. policy process, surpassed only by the AARP and ahead of the NRA and AFL-CIO. Unfortunately, even ostensibly academic discussions of the "Israel lobby" and its influence on U.S. foreign policy have tended to generate more heat than light; see Mearsheimer and Walt 2006.

Indian-Americans organized and rallied support for the draft legislation with such energy and skill that the community can rightfully claim to have “delivered” the landslide votes in its favor. Section VII summarizes the findings, and notes some future challenges facing the new “India lobby.”

What emerges from this account is an argument for paying attention both to the external-strategic environment of international relations—and how it might “open doors” to new directions in U.S. foreign policy—but also to the internal-political factors that can also be critical in pushing policy in a particular direction. In 2006, two historical stories converged: one involving the ongoing deepening of the U.S.–India relationship since 1998, the other a general consolidation of organizational capacity within the burgeoning Indian community in the United States. Without the latter, it is unlikely that the bold U.S.–India nuclear agreement would have made it over the requisite congressional hurdles in 2006. Looking ahead, however, the deal must survive potentially contentious reviews at levels largely beyond the reach of the “India lobby”—among other nuclear states, and within India’s boisterous coalition government. If it were to still fall apart, it could prove very demoralizing both for the U.S.–India relationship itself, and for the presently fired-up Indian-American community that so skillfully steered it through the waters of U.S. Congress politics.

### **Ethnic Lobbies and U.S. Foreign Policy**

Scholars and policy analysts have posited for some time that ethnic identity groups—“political organizations established along cultural, ethnic, religious, or racial lines”<sup>2</sup>—may seek to influence U.S. foreign policy in support of their country of origin or ancestry, and that under certain conditions, such efforts can be quite successful. Against myriad other international and domestic determinants of U.S. foreign policy, such “ethnic lobbies” have occupied a comparatively minor part of the literature, but the past several years have seen increasing scholarly interest. Ethnic lobbies are becoming more visible, and they may be finding more points of access to influence the policy process.

Some analysts are deeply troubled by these developments. Smith, author of a recent book-length study bluntly titled *Foreign Attachments*, argues that “ethnic identity groups play a larger role in the making of U.S. foreign policy than is widely recognized,” and that “at present, the negative consequences of ethnic involvement may well outweigh the undoubted benefits this activism at times confers on America in world affairs” (Smith 2000:1–2). He wonders, “Can the degree of governmental autonomy necessary for coherent and consistent policy conducted for the common good be preserved in the face of these forces?” (Smith 2000:3). Similarly, Alterman (1998:136) cites survey data suggesting that only about 5% of the American public is “active” on any given foreign policy issue (save vital matters of war and peace), and laments that general public disengagement can give small but well-organized and motivated ethnic groups considerable policy influence.

Such anxieties are not new. In 1977, George Kennan, dean of the U.S. grand strategy of “Containment” during the Cold War, regretted that ethnic groups “have proven more powerful and effective as influences on Congressional decisions in matters of foreign policy than the views of highly competent persons of the Executive Branch who, in contrast to the lobbyists, had exclusively the national interest at heart” (quoted in Smith 2000:5). Thirty years later, such a view of the “national interest” may seem quaint (or arrogant), and more recent observers like Smith are less apt to suggest that the national interest is consistently self-evident. But the common denominator to such critiques—past and

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<sup>2</sup> Ambrosio 2002a,b:2.

present—is aptly summed up by Lindsay (2002:40): “Ethnic lobbies have passionate critics because of the lurking suspicion that they put the interests of their ancestral homeland before those of the United States.”

Though his work on the subject often tends toward the polemical and anxious perspective, Huntington has noted some general reasons for and patterns of ethnic group influence:

[T]he nature of American government and society enhances the political power of foreign governments and diasporas. Dispersion of authority among state and federal governments, three branches of government, and loosely structured and often highly autonomous bureaucracies provide them, as it does domestic interest groups, multiple points of access for promoting favorable policies and blocking unfavorable ones. The highly competitive two-party system gives strategically placed minorities such as diasporas the opportunity to affect elections in the single-member districts of the House of Representatives and at times also in state-wide Senate elections. In addition, multiculturalism and belief in the value of immigrant groups’ maintaining their ancestral culture and identity provide a highly favorable intellectual, social, and political atmosphere, unique to the United States, for the exercise of diaspora influence. (Huntington 2004:285–286)

As Huntington would predict, we will see that initial “India lobby” activity indeed did concentrate on the U.S. House of Representatives, starting with members from districts with high local concentrations of Indian-Americans (in states such as New Jersey).

Another of Huntington’s points we should consider is that “ethnic lobbies” effectively may be proxies or agents for the governments of their home countries. Both sides might wish to obfuscate such a relationship, to avoid extensive disclosure requirements under the Foreign Agents Registration Act and other U.S. statutes. Walt, a leading International Relations theorist and a critic of ethnic lobbies (in particular, the “Israel lobby”), explicitly links Indian-Americans with New Delhi. He cites a 2002 report by a Government of India commission that remarked, “Indo-Americans... have played a crucial role in generating a favorable climate of opinion in the [U.S.] Congress... *The Indian community in the United States constitutes an invaluable asset in strengthening India’s relationship with the world’s only superpower*” (Walt 2005:212).<sup>3</sup> Noting also that the Indian government permits Indians overseas to maintain dual citizenship, he concludes that Indian-Americans are regarded by New Delhi as a “potent political weapon” in a strategy of “domestic penetration” aimed at favorably influencing U.S. policy toward India (Walt 2005:211–212).

What such an analysis misses, however, is the high degree of “agency” among Indian-Americans: despite obviously overlapping interests, they are generally quite independent from official Indian influence, and the community’s perspective can differ significantly from New Delhi’s official line. This has become increasingly evident with respect to the nuclear agreement discussed here, as Indian-Americans have tended to evince a keener appreciation for how accommodative of Indian interests the U.S. already has been, whereas Indian government officials have remained more uncompromising with respect to certain aspects of the deal that they still regard as potentially impinging on India’s sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, to

<sup>3</sup> The emphasis is Walt’s. Original source: *Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora* (Government of India, 2002:xx–xxi).

<sup>4</sup> Lindsay (2002:40) is rare among analysts in suggesting that ethnic identity groups in the U.S. may also influence international relations in ways favorable to U.S. interests: “The transmission belt that enables ethnic lobbies to inject foreign perspectives into American politics also operates, perhaps even more strongly, in the opposite direction... ethnic lobbies are instrumental in disseminating American values and interests in their ethnic homelands. They frequently press ancestral governments to accommodate themselves to American political realities and hold them to American standards on everything from human rights to good governmental practices to economic policy.”

regard the Indian-American community as a mere tool of the Indian government is to miss a long-running process of organization and politicization within the community itself—as we will examine—which has unfolded with practically no direction from New Delhi.

Against the more normative and polemical approach to the subject, this paper aligns with a more descriptive and explanatory literature. It does not take a position on whether ethnic group influence in general, or Indian-American influence in particular, is beneficial or harmful to U.S. national interests. As Lindsay (2002:40) argues, “The national interest and the best means for promoting it are not objective facts” in a pluralist democracy. Rather, the more modest aim here is simply to understand the conditions—historical, circumstantial, group-specific, issue-specific—that have enabled Indian-American organizations to influence congressional support for an exceptional and controversial bilateral nuclear agreement between the U.S. and India. By tracing the historical evolution of Indian-American political organization over the past several decades, alongside the changing international context of U.S.–India relations, this investigation advances scholarly understanding of how “ethnic lobbies” can take shape, and the external conditions under which they might influence the policy process.

Scholars generally agree that ethnic lobbies have evolved through several stages. Any starting point for such a history is somewhat arbitrary, but analysts typically point to the early 20th century incorporation of increasing numbers of Irish, Italians, Germans, and various northern and central European immigrants into American society. Smith sees immigrants from Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, and Italy “acting as a drag on American involvement in world affairs” during the 1910s to 1930s, though he acknowledges that such influence is difficult to parse from a broader American isolationism of the period (Smith 2000:47). On the eve of American entry into the first World War, DeConde (1992:82) describes a “lobbying battleground between rival interest groups emotionally entangled in” the conflict: on the one hand, Germans and Irish seeking American neutrality, and on the other hand, Italians, English, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and others seeking earlier and deeper U.S. intervention.

The next historical phase usually emphasized is the Cold War, though here too it becomes difficult to distinguish ethnic lobby influence from more general structural influences on U.S. foreign policy. Ambrosio (2002a,b) suggests a role for groups such as the Assembly of Captive European Nations (ACEN), in “shaping and reinforcing” the increasingly interventionist Containment strategy of the period, and perhaps Kennan had in mind groups such as Greeks and Turks in helping to advance an ever-expanding view of his original “vital-interests” version of Containment, first through the Truman Doctrine and later the more sweeping strategy of communist “rollback” in the NSC-68 document of 1950.

Again, though, if broader structural influences and specific ethnic interests are both pulling U.S. foreign policy in the same general direction, the independent causality of ethnic lobbying is difficult to distinguish. Garrett (1978), writing on the role of Eastern European groups in the American foreign policy process, expressed particular skepticism. In his view, the U.S. foreign policy establishment was fairly exclusive and insular, the executive branch tended to dominate, and policymakers were generally wary of overt efforts by ethnic identity groups to influence foreign policy. Ultimately, he argues, clear geopolitical interests—structural, systemic imperatives of bipolarity—generally accounted for U.S. foreign policy choices.

Several scholars suggest that the end of the Cold War created a more permissive environment for ethnic lobby influence. The passing of the bipolar conflict with the Soviet Union, Smith argues, meant weaker structural determinants of U.S. foreign policy. Ambrosio (2002a,b:9) suggests that “the proliferation of ethnic conflicts around the world”—in which specific U.S. interests may be difficult

to prejudice, as in the Balkans—“has also heightened the stakes for many ethnic identity groups,” who may be much more motivated to persuade policymakers. Ambrosio also argues that demographic change in the U.S. polity has led to a generally greater public acceptance of ethnic lobbies, as earlier norms of assimilation have given way to greater emphasis on distinct identities. Alterman (1998:141) notes that the Council on Foreign Relations, which he calls “the historic bastion of the foreign policy establishment,” in the mid-1990s sponsored a supportive conference on “Minorities and U.S. Foreign Policy.”

Perhaps most critically, the late Cold War saw expanded congressional oversight of executive foreign policy initiatives—largely a legacy of the Vietnam war—and this move to a “more open, contentious, and pluralistic system” has given interest groups of all kinds greater points of access to influence policy. Increased congressional oversight may benefit ethnic lobbies: in an oft-quoted statement, Congressman Lee Hamilton (D-Indiana) told *The Washington Post* in 2000 that members of Congress “don’t see much difference between lobbying for highway funds and slanting foreign policy toward a particular interest group” (cited in Mufson 2000).

Haney and Vanderbush (1999) comb the literature on ethnic lobbies for commonly proposed explanations of their effectiveness. Many of the factors are intuitive, and among the most important, they cite (paraphrased):

- The *organizational strength* of the ethnic community;
- The *cohesiveness, geographic distribution, and electoral turnout* rate of the community;
- The *saliency and resonance of the message* that the community offers to policymakers on a particular issue (which can depend on the community’s ability to “frame” their message in ways that conform to policymakers’ prior mental schema, ideologies, or stances on linkable issues);
- The “*push on an open door*” of a policy establishment predisposed to support a group’s cause, perhaps owing to broader international circumstances; and
- The strength of an organized *opposition*—perhaps from a rival ethnic lobby, or from business or citizens’ associations—to the community’s efforts.

Some of these factors have played a role in Indian-American influence on Congressional support for the U.S.–India nuclear deal, as the discussion below will show. Additionally, the *economic profile* of an ethnic identity group might affect the support it can garner from legislators; Indian-Americans—like some other communities frequently linked to powerful ethnic lobbies, such as Jewish and Cuban-Americans—have an average household income that is significantly higher than the average for all U.S. households (see below).

Asian-Americans in general, and Indian-Americans in particular, have received strikingly little emphasis in the “ethnic lobby” literature until very recently. Alterman’s extended 1998 discussion of the topic does not mention Indians at all. In his 2000 monograph, Smith declared, “No group of Asian Americans today has an important place at the table in foreign policy discussions as an ethnic constituency” (Smith 2000:3). A 2001 history of Indian-American political organization—by a group of Indian-American scholars—characterized the community as “seen, rich, but unheard” (Khagram, Desai, and Varughese 2001).

The community’s profile has recently and rather rapidly ascended, however. In a 2002 paper for the Brookings Institution, Lindsay anticipated:

One [immigrant group] likely to be active in coming years is Indians. Not only does India face military threats—from both Pakistan and China—but Indian Americans are one of the most affluent ethnic groups in the United States. They have become active in politics, contributing an estimated \$8 million to federal election campaigns over the last three elections. Congress has taken notice...

Not only are [Indian-Americans] affluent and interested in India, but China's rising power and India's decision to move toward a market economy means their calls for a more "India friendly" foreign policy are likely to meet a receptive audience in Washington.

Lindsay also notes Pakistan's disadvantage in the competition to court lawmakers:

Pakistani Americans no doubt will try to prevent a tilt toward India, and the war in Afghanistan has given Islamabad renewed geopolitical importance in Washington. But Pakistani Americans will labor under two disadvantages—they are only one-tenth the size of the Indian-American community, and Pakistan's military government maintains close ties to China. (Lindsay 2002:38–39)

We will turn shortly to the story of how these discerning predictions are coming to pass, but first, it is important to recognize the broader international-strategic context that has created a positive momentum in U.S.–India relations and put in place permissive conditions for "India lobby" influence.

### **The Strategic Context of U.S.–India Relations: "Leaning on Open Doors"?**

It would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that congressional support for the U.S.–India nuclear agreement owes only to Indian-American efforts. A balanced analysis must also consider the changing global-strategic environment, and recognize that a momentum for transformation has been building for 7 or 8 years, as a belated response to the end of the Cold War, economic liberalization by successive Indian governments, the rise of China, and a reconsidered Bush administration approach to India that has sought to downplay traditional opposition to India's nuclear program. Notwithstanding the emphasis on Congress here, much of the impetus for a new "strategic partnership" has come from the executive branch, beginning in the second Clinton term and continuing and deepening during the presidency of George W. Bush.

#### *"Estranged Democracies"*

The history of U.S.–India relations from the 1940s to the 1990s has been told as a tale of two "estranged democracies" (Kux, 1992) and the phrase is appropriate, as circumstances both in the region of South Asia and in the broader East-West conflict conspired to put the world's two largest democracies in a posture of mutual suspicion. India, having just secured its political and economic sovereignty after nearly a century of direct British rule, was wary of the ascendancy of U.S. power. Indian leaders were also wary of Soviet power, but some—especially Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1947–64)—also admired the Soviet achievement of rapid industrialization, and looked to central planning to put India on track toward becoming a modern industrial power, with contemporary world influence befitting its historical–civilizational importance. The U.S., for its part, questioned the authenticity of India's "non-alignment" in foreign policy, and was wary of its pretensions to leadership of the emerging "Third World." By contrast, India's rival Pakistan went to great lengths to cultivate a close Cold War alliance with the United States. Pakistani pledges to stand as a bulwark against communist expansion in South Asia and the Middle East may have deliberately overstated the Soviet threat (Haqqani 2005), especially during the early Cold War, but U.S. leaders became increasingly receptive as they were led by the surprise and difficulty of the Korean conflict to a more expansive interpretation of Containment. As a testament to its perceived pivotal importance, Pakistan in the mid-1950s became a member of both the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO, or "Baghdad Pact").

During the mid-1960s, the U.S.–India relationship strained over India’s criticism of U.S. policy in Vietnam, and U.S. criticism of India’s economic policies amid deepening Indian dependence on American and World Bank aid. In 1966, the fledgling Indira Gandhi government, yielding to World Bank advice and Johnson administration pressure, devalued India’s rupee for the first time since independence, but after meeting sharp domestic criticism, backed away from liberalization and instead leaned farther toward protectionist socialism.

The U.S.–India relationship became increasingly tense during the Indira Gandhi years over other issues, as well. In 1971, Nixon and Kissinger, seeking a *rapprochement* with China, cultivated Yahya Khan’s military government in Pakistan to serve as an intermediary for such diplomacy. That same year saw a hardening of superpower alignments in the subcontinent, as India signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Soviets, and Nixon ordered a nuclear carrier group led by the *USS Enterprise* into the Bay of Bengal during a third<sup>5</sup> Indo-Pakistani War (sparked by India’s support for the Bangladeshi independence movement in East Pakistan) in a show of solidarity with America’s faltering Pakistani ally. In 1974, when India conducted a “peaceful nuclear test” as a nonsignatory to the NPT, it drove the U.S. and India further apart; the following year, when Mrs. Gandhi declared a state of “Emergency” and suspended a number of press and civil liberties, the estrangement appeared complete.

When Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan in December 1979, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) turned to Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as a key conduit for support to the anti-Soviet *mujahideen*, and Pakistan’s role as the indispensable regional ally was cemented in a way that necessarily limited the scope for a genuine U.S.–India *rapprochement*. Still, the 1980s saw a slight improvement in relations—particularly in the context of tentative economic liberalization in India under Rajiv Gandhi (who took over after his mother’s assassination in 1984), and a reasonable personal rapport between Mr. Gandhi and Ronald Reagan.

It would take the end of the Cold War to set the stage for a more fundamental improvement of relations. The early 1990s also saw the launch of more far-reaching market reforms in India. Even so, India did not register as a high U.S. priority for most of the decade. Bill Clinton expressed some interest in visiting India—Jimmy Carter had been the last American president to do so, in 1978—but he did not do so until the waning months of his presidency, despite a record-setting rate of foreign travel. A continuing source of strain in the relationship concerned India’s apparent continued pursuit of nuclear weapons capability, and its unwillingness to sign either the NPT or 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which were top Clinton administration priorities.<sup>6</sup> In May of 1998, India’s round of nuclear explosive tests (followed days later by Pakistani tests) dealt a new blow to the relationship, and the U.S. immediately enacted wide-ranging economic sanctions against both India and Pakistan (as required by the 1994 “Glenn Amendment” to the Arms Control Export Act and the 1945 Export-Import Bank Act) (Rennack 2003).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Earlier wars in 1947 and 1965 were fought largely over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

<sup>6</sup> After India voted against the CTBT in the UN General Assembly on September 11, 1996, U.S. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns warned, “We would advise those countries that are holding out against the will of the international community to think very carefully: do you really want to be the sole countries not in favor of the CTBT?... I am speaking particularly about... the Government of India which has taken such a difficult position against the will of the international community” (quoted in Gopalan 1997). The U.S. Congress would fail to ratify the CTBT in late 1999, with India’s holdout status figuring strongly in members’ position statements.

<sup>7</sup> Under the 1985 “Pressler Amendment” to the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, Pakistan had already seen a restriction of U.S. military assistance owing to its nuclear weapons program; these sanctions were now expanded to include nonmilitary foreign assistance. The sanctions for both India and Pakistan were gradually relaxed during the remaining years of the Clinton administration (somewhat more so for India than for Pakistan), and finally lifted altogether by the Bush administration in late September, 2001.

*From Estrangement to Engagement*

The dialogue that would become the most significant and sustained in the history of U.S.–India relations did not begin auspiciously. Strobe Talbott, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, was made the Clinton administration’s “point man” for India in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests. Talbott initially saw his task as trying to salvage some Indian support for U.S. nonproliferation goals, even in the aftermath of the 1998 tests. It was a thankless proposition—misunderstood, Talbott has said, as “trying to put the genie back in the bottle” (though there is probably some truth in that formulation). Eventually, the administration would have to settle for a more sober (if somewhat vague) policy of finding “ways of increasing the safety of [India’s nuclear program], then of the subcontinent, and of the world” (Haniffa 2004b).

Talbott’s dialogue partner was Jaswant Singh, the foreign minister in the Indian government led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that came to power shortly before the 1998 tests. In fourteen meetings across seven countries over a period of two-and-a-half years, Talbott and Singh established a close personal rapport, and Singh led Talbott to a much broader view of the U.S.–India relationship—and the complexities of India’s democratic politics and international interests—than the administration’s initial nonproliferation “lens” had permitted. As Talbott put it in a memoir of the dialogue,

Sometimes a negotiation that fails to resolve a specific dispute can have general and lasting benefits, especially if it is a dialogue in fact as well as name. Diplomacy that meets that standard can improve and even transform the overall quality of relations between states. It can make it possible for governments to cooperate in areas that had been previously out of bounds and, at moments of crisis, enable their leaders to avert catastrophe... [The Talbott-Singh dialogue] is the story of the turning point in U.S.–Indian relations. (Talbott 2004:5–6)

Talbott (2004:4) also held a series of talks with Pakistani officials, but in his recollection, “that exercise... barely qualified [as] a dialogue”. Increasingly, it seemed, U.S. interest in South Asia lay more in advancing the dialogue with India than in retaining the Cold War partiality for Pakistan. U.S. officials began to talk about the need to “de-hyphenate” their policy toward South Asia from an “India-Pakistan” formulation, and put the relationship with the two countries “on separate tracks.” The scales tilted to the extent that when Pakistani military forces crossed the Line of Control (LoC) separating Pakistani- and Indian-administered Kashmir in the remote mountainous region of Kargil in the summer of 1999, Clinton pressured Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif—who had traveled to Washington seeking intervention—to order Pakistani forces back to their own territory (this retreat, deeply resented by elements in the Pakistani army, was a key impetus to Sharif’s expulsion in a coup the following autumn). By contrast, Clinton applauded India’s restraint in not sending its own troops to penetrate Pakistani positions across the LoC, called Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to offer support, and expressed his interest in finally visiting the region (BBC News Online, 1999).

Clinton’s belated visit to South Asia in March 2000 crystallized the new U.S. approach. Just two weeks before the trip, Clinton had piqued Indian leaders’ displeasure when he called South Asia (and specifically the LoC in Kashmir) “the most dangerous place in the world today” (quoted in Marcus 2000). But in his five-day visit to India, Clinton sought to accentuate the positive in an itinerary that showcased a “new India,” by visiting places such as Hyderabad, the “high-tech city” of India’s southern Andhra Pradesh state. By contrast, Clinton spent a mere five hours in Pakistan on his way home. After an elaborate security routine involving a decoy of Air Force One and a motorcade that had the president greeting

mostly empty streets in Islamabad, Clinton stayed just long enough to appear on state television to warn Pakistanis against the dangers of violent extremism and to instruct the country's new military leader, General Pervez Musharraf, on the importance of returning to democratic government as swiftly as possible.<sup>8</sup>

But despite the sea change in South Asia policy that the Clinton administration was steering, the region remained largely off the radar for the larger foreign policy establishment. Clinton's trip merited little attention in the U.S. media, possibly because it coincided with a trip by John Paul II to Jerusalem: while most television networks covered "the Pope in the Holy Land," ABC's Peter Jennings was the only high-profile correspondent to follow Clinton's South Asia visit. In Congress, according to one aide, most legislators still had "an understanding of Kashmir that is about one sentence deep," and "wouldn't know India or Pakistan if they came up and bit them on the ass" (Hathaway 2001:22).

After George W. Bush assumed the presidency in January 2001, the new administration seemed to appreciate the changes in South Asia policy that had been taking place under its predecessor, but it did not seem poised to place a major emphasis on the region. Candidate Bush had floundered in November 1999 when, in a gotcha-style "foreign affairs pop quiz" by a television journalist, he could not name the leaders of India or Pakistan (Corn 1999). None of Bush's key foreign policy advisors had experience or expertise pertaining to the region, though Condoleezza Rice in a *Foreign Affairs* article suggested that the U.S. should pay greater attention to India as it looked for ways to maintain a balance of power in Asia, especially in the context of a rising China:

There is a strong tendency conceptually to link India with Pakistan and to think only of Kashmir or the nuclear competition between the two states. But India is an element in China's calculation, and it should be in America's, too. India is not a great power yet, but it has the potential to emerge as one. (Rice 2000)

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S. abruptly thrust South Asia into the spotlight. Within days, India quietly offered the U.S. access to several of its military bases to stage strikes on suspected terrorist sites in Afghanistan (Chandrasekaran 2001), but the U.S. favored the closer proximity of Pakistan. From today's vantage point, however, it is clear that the Bush administration skillfully adjusted to post-9/11 strategic imperatives while still maintaining the Clinton administration's emphasis on putting relations with India and Pakistan on "separate tracks." The resumption of the U.S.–Pakistan alliance has not triggered a zero-sum impairment of U.S.–India relations. To the contrary: in 2004, the U.S. and India announced plans for continued cooperation—under the "Next Steps in the Strategic Partnership" (NSSP) framework—in civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programs, high-technology trade, and other forms of military and economic cooperation (U.S. Department of State 2004). Not long after, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell announced that Pakistan would be upgraded to "major non-NATO ally" to allow for closer military cooperation; India was initially displeased, but gave no sign that this surprise would jeopardize the NSSP framework. When Bush traveled to South Asia in March 2006, the centerpiece of the India visit was the announcement of a nuclear agreement—offering the tantalizing possibility of finding common ground on the single most divisive issue in the relationship.

That the dramatic improvement of U.S.–India relations has been robust to changes both in U.S. administrations and in Indian governments—and the major impact of 9/11 on U.S. priorities—clearly shows that it is not simply the product

<sup>8</sup> Musharraf, a key architect of the Kargil War, led the coup against Sharif in October 1999.

of a domestic “Indian lobby” pushing policy in its preferred direction. Presidential initiative has been a key driver, with Clinton laying the groundwork, and Bush pushing even further with an explicit policy of “encouraging India’s rise.” Certainly the interest of both administrations in democracy promotion has been a major factor, and the Bush administration’s acceleration of U.S.–India friendship has been made possible by its different attitude toward nuclear issues, greater emphasis on unilateral action or country-to-country agreement than on multilateral regimes, and warier regard for the rise of Chinese power. Formerly disinterested members of Congress have begun to warm to the view that long-term U.S. goals might be advanced by a closer relationship with India. Washington’s interest has further intensified as India’s GDP has grown at annual rates of over 8% in 2004–06.

Even so, strategic “self-evidence” does not account fully for the surprisingly high levels of congressional support for the nuclear agreement, especially given the deal’s historic break with the NPT and recently heightened proliferation concerns relating to North Korea and Iran. Not only did the agreement face strong principled opposition, but the Bush administration was rather clumsy in teeing it up for congressional approval: it came as much as a surprise to many members of Congress as it did to incredulous nonproliferation specialists in Washington, and it came up for a House floor vote just months ahead of the 2006 congressional elections, with Bush’s public approval ratings in free-fall over the Iraq war. To fully understand the groundswell of pro-India sentiment on Capitol Hill, then, we must turn to the efforts of the Indian-American community, which has lately become much more politically active following a two-generation process of gradual organization.

### **Asian Indians in America: A Brief History and Profile**

Indian immigrants have both a longer historical presence and record of political activity in the United States than are commonly recognized. In the early 20th century, though, the community’s numbers were quite small, and its politics centered around mainly unsuccessful efforts at expanding Indians’ economic and civil rights in their adopted country. Indian immigrants, which were initially concentrated on the west coast, frequently met with hostility from white Americans, who tended to view them as competition for scarce employment opportunities in farming and manufacturing. Indian immigrants suffered such indignities as pro-white Asian Exclusion Leagues, frequent denial of citizenship and property rights, deportation or imprisonment for suspected “seditious” activity (often at the behest of British authorities), restrictive immigration quotas, and even a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1923 that persons of Indian origin could not be regarded as “Caucasian” under U.S. citizenship laws (Khagram et al. 2001: 262–263).<sup>9</sup>

In the 1940s, the situation began to improve. Franklin D. Roosevelt was keenly interested in the cause of Indian independence—especially given U.S. concerns about Japan’s imperial ambitions in Asia—and he was generally sympathetic to the Indian nationalist leadership. He refrained from pressing ally Winston Churchill (who remained contemptuously dismissive of the subject) too firmly on India’s independence. But as freedom for the “jewel in the crown” of Britain’s empire appeared increasingly imminent—especially after the Conservative Party’s upset defeat in Britain’s 1945 election—the United

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<sup>9</sup> This ruling effectively ended the creative effort of some Indian immigrants to escape the kind of racial discrimination routinely practiced against Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian immigrants in the early 20th century by taking shelter behind a rather academic understanding of “Caucasian” identity as including descendants of the Aryans, an Indo-Persian people who probably migrated to the Indian subcontinent in 1500–1200 B.C.

States became more interested in cultivating good relations with India's leaders-in-waiting. The international context created a more permissive environment for groups such as the India League of America to lobby for reforms to discriminatory laws and regulations, and in 1946 the Luce-Cellar Act partly relaxed country quotas on Asian immigration, and permitted Asian Indians to apply for naturalized citizenship.

*The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act: A Turning Point*

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act amendments expanded greatly the number of Indians permitted entry to the U.S. The Act also gave preference to immigrant "professionals, scientists, and 'artists of exceptional ability,'" and to "workers in occupations with labor shortages." Under a set of "family reunification" clauses (Le 2007), children under 21, spouses, and the parents of U.S. citizens were exempted from the quota system, and special consideration was also given to siblings (and their families) of naturalized immigrants. Le (2007) notes that the 1960s and 1970s saw an expanding cycle of "chain immigration and sponsorship: initial Asian immigrants (many of whom came as professionals or refugees) would attain permanent resident and later citizenship status and would sponsor family members and relatives. After these family members and relatives arrived in the U.S. and became permanent residents and citizens, they in turn would sponsor their family members and relatives, and so on."

Such a pattern was by no means unique to the Indian community in America—other Asian communities also experienced significant growth and diversification after the 1965 legislation—but several factors gave Indians particular incentives and advantages. One was the peculiar success of independent India, under the industrialization policies of Nehru and the ruling Congress Party, in building world-class institutions of higher education such as the vaunted Indian Institutes of Technology (or IITs), even as it lagged in primary education, and as professional advancement opportunities in India remained limited owing to modest economic growth and traditional forms of social discrimination. Another key factor was the facility of India's educated classes with the English language.

U.S. Census Bureau data reveal the profound impact of the 1965 Act on the size of the Indian population, as well as its broadening geographic distribution across the country. In 1965, 582 new immigrants to the U.S. claimed Indian origin. In 1966, the number jumped to 2,458, and by 1970, consistently exceeded 10,000 newcomers per year, according to Census Bureau figures (cited in Shukla, 2003:269).<sup>10</sup> Between 1960 and 1980, the Indian population in the United States soared from under 9,000 to more than 387,000, then jumped further to over 815,000 in 1990 and to 1.7 million in 2000.

Moreover, from its concentration on the west coast in the early 20th century, the community fanned out to other regions (Leonard 1997:70). As the population grew and spread, significant concentrations developed around New York City (400,194 in 2000, according to Census data), Chicago (116,868), Washington-Baltimore (88,211), Philadelphia (52,380), Houston (51,959), Dallas-Fort Worth (49,669), Detroit (45,731), Boston (43,732), and Atlanta (37,162), in addition to sizeable west coast communities in Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and Seattle. As we shall see below, this pattern of geographic distribution—encompassing key electoral districts in some of the most politically important states in the country—has encouraged the recent Indian-American activism on Capitol Hill.

<sup>10</sup> Indians scored an important victory in 1970s, led by the Association of Indians in America (AIA), to create a U.S. Census category of "Asian Indian" (Shukla, 2003:66).

*The 1970s and 1980s: Patterns of Community Association and Organization*

A number of Indian-American organizations emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, but their profile attests to the community's segmentation along various dimensions, including profession, region and language of origin in India (which also can imply significant variations in customs and traditions, even among Hindus—a large majority of the U.S. population).

In line with their economic incentives for immigration, the early post-1965 cohort showed a predilection for organizing along professional–occupational lines, as in the Chicago-based American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (AAPI, founded in 1984), or the Atlanta-based Asian American Hotel Owners Association (founded in 1989), both of which today claim more than 8,000 members nationally. From their inception, political activism was an important part of these organizations' missions, and it has become even more important in recent years—through, for example, annual legislative conferences in Washington, which U.S. lawmakers are invited to address (Hathaway 2001:24). Originally, their political agendas were oriented specifically toward their profession or industry, as when AAPI sought greater access for foreign medical graduates to U.S. physician residency and training programs. In the early 2000s, however, AAPI in particular developed a much broader political program, encompassing general support for improved U.S.–India relations—including cooperation in the area of nuclear technology.

Indian-Americans also formed a number of regional and language associations—replicating in the U.S. collective sub-national identities that were becoming increasingly salient in India's own society and politics—such as a network of Maharashtra Mandals (Marathi language and cultural associations), the Federation of Kerala Associations of North America (FOKANA), and the American Telugu Association. Such associations began to hold annual conventions, generally around cultural programs, but during the 1990s they increasingly took up political issues as well (Anderson 2006b).

The development of news media catering to Indians in the U.S. reflects many of the community's key demographic and organizational trends, and mirrors the evolution of its social and political concerns. Probably the most important publication is *India Abroad*, founded in 1970 in New York. Early print editions of the newspaper mainly covered local community events, but an increasingly prominent theme of its feature articles concerned how immigrants could adapt to life in the U.S. without losing their sense of “Indian-ness.” According to Shukla (2003:191), *India Abroad* became a key site of exchange for ideas and information, both reflecting and shaping the dynamics of identity formation among the broader community: “In many ways the newspaper functioned best... around the broader identity of the nonresident Indian: a migrant culturally and socially connected to his Indian homeland and intent on fostering a deeper... relationship with the nation-state”. Its circulation and focus spread far beyond the New York area, through subscription as well as distribution via community associations and businesses such as Indian grocery stores. In the 1990s, it went online, and launched electronic services in several Indian languages.

As the format and reach of *India Abroad* changed, it also became increasingly oriented toward an interest in “India's political position in the world, particularly as that was understood to impact the received images of its far-flung citizens” (Shukla 2003:188). The paper encouraged its readers to take an interest in India's status in international politics, supporting the line consistently taken by India's political leaders that the country did not receive the attention and respect that it deserved as one of the world's oldest continual civilizations and the largest modern representative democracy. For the Indian community in the U.S., publications like *India Abroad* encouraged a view that Americans' images of

India, as a country, were closely linked to Americans' attitudes toward its diaspora in their own country.

Such attitudes had remained somewhat ambivalent as the Indian-American community's numbers and economic footprint expanded during the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand, there emerged the image of the "model minority": Indians were high achievers in critical medical and scientific fields, and increasing numbers of Americans developed contacts with members of the community as family physicians, workplace colleagues, and professional consultants. On the other hand, less flattering stereotypes persisted with respect to Indian immigrants from working-class backgrounds, often reflecting an underlying anxiety about the competitive threat they ostensibly presented to "American jobs." In the 1980s, organizations such as "Dotbusters,"<sup>11</sup> in Jersey City demonstrated the resentment—sporadically carried to physical violence—that some working class whites harbored toward the community's forays into service sector employment (Shukla 2003). In turn, such racist mobilization—an echo of the anti-Asian groups of the early 20th century—spurred Indians on in their own organizing and asserting of their rights and identities.

#### *The Late 1980s and 1990s: A "Second Generation" Comes of Age*

Beginning in the late 1980s, and accelerating in the 1990s, the "second generation"—the children of the early post-1965 wave of immigrants—came of age, and this cohort's ascendance has carried important implications for the community's self-image and integration with the broader American society. Whereas their parents had formed more partial and conditional ties to America through professional associations and marketplace contacts, the younger generation was more self-consciously "Indian-American": many were U.S. citizens by birth and grew up in American schools and neighborhoods, even as they also retained "Indian-ness" by speaking an Indian language in the home, socializing with other Indian families in local communities, attending religious and cultural functions, and perhaps traveling periodically to the subcontinent.

Their images of India, even when they were informed by such direct experience, might also have been colored by parental nostalgia and pride. But it is also significant that, like their fellow age cohort in India itself, this generation had been born well after the dust of the Indian independence struggle had settled. Gurcharan Das (2004), the former CEO of Procter & Gamble India and an author and commentator, has written of the "decolonized" mindset evident among increasing numbers of young people in India during the 1990s, and argues, "This mental liberation is a powerful force in national regeneration." Moreover, even as younger Indians might share their parents' keen interest in India's international standing, their outlook is less tempered by any wariness left over from the Cold War estrangement between the U.S. and India.

As they passed through American universities in the late 1980s and 1990s, Indian students formed campus organizations around Indian or South Asian identities. Professionally, the second generation has continued to enter engineering, medical, and scientific fields, but it is increasingly moving into law, business administration, education, and other careers, as well.

### **Getting Political**

In recent years, generational factors have converged to encourage an unprecedented degree of Indian-American political activism. In the latter 1990s, as

<sup>11</sup> The epithet refers to the *bindi*, a typically red decorative dot on the center forehead, traditionally worn by married Hindu women.

second generation Indian-Americans were becoming established in their various careers, some began turning their organizational and communications skills toward politics—even as members of their parents' generation were nearing retirement age, with greater leisure time and often disposable income to pursue political interests.

One early (unsuccessful) sign of the community's increasing political engagement emerged in the surprising form of a South Dakota election for the U.S. Senate in 1996—described by Huntington as a “proxy war”... “as much a contest between Indians and Pakistanis as between Republicans and Democrats.” According to Huntington (2004:290), “Each candidate ardently solicited the support of a diasporan community. Indian-Americans contributed about \$150,000 to Senator Larry Pressler's reelection campaign because he supported limits on U.S. arms exports to Pakistan... Pressler's defeat [by Democrat Tim Johnson] produced elation in Islamabad and dejection in New Delhi.”

Implying a proxy war trend, Huntington (2004:290) also notes the unsuccessful 2003 campaign by Indian-American Piyush Darbash “Bobby” Jindal, a Republican, for the governorship of Louisiana: “He was enthusiastically backed by Indians and Indian-Americans and vigorously opposed by Pakistani-Americans, who contributed substantial sums to his opponent.” But this analysis overstates the strength of the Pakistani-American community, and overlooks other factors that might have contributed to Jindal's loss—to a Democrat and incumbent lieutenant governor, in a state with a very strong Democratic Party establishment.

Moreover, Jindal quickly recovered: in 2004, he ran for the U.S. House of Representatives from the 1st Congressional District of Louisiana, raised over \$1 million in campaign funds early in the race (much of it from Indian-Americans), and won with 78% of the vote. Jindal, a Hindu who converted to Catholicism as a teenager, campaigned on a socially and fiscally conservative platform. His victory made him the only Indian-American in the House, as well as one of the chamber's younger members: 34 at the time of his swearing in. Jindal's status as elected Freshman Class President of the 109th Congress, Vice-Chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Prevention of Nuclear and Biological Attacks, and appointment to committees including Homeland Security and Education have helped boost the political visibility of the broader Indian-American community.<sup>12</sup>

As a direct entrant to congressional politics, Jindal is only the highest-profile example of the increasing Indian-American activism—a complement to, and perhaps culmination of, more general trends. His campaigns have become *causes célèbres* well beyond the Indian community of Louisiana, attracting national interest and financial backing through Indian-American networks simply on the basis of identity, whether or not supporters tilt Republican (the community's partisan profile will be discussed below).

More common, and more significant, has been the cultivation of Indian-American ties to a diverse set of Representatives and Senators on an issue-by-issue basis, gradually coalescing into expectations of generalized support for the community—and for India. Tellingly, the formal name of the House body often referred to simply as “the India Caucus” is the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans—a construction that encourages lawmakers to habitualize close mental linkages between policy toward India *as a country* and relations with its diasporants in the U.S. as citizens, voters, and campaign contributors.

The House's India caucus was first organized in 1994, evolving out of a dialogue between the Indian American Forum for Political Education (IAFPE, formed in the late 1980s) and a small group of congressmen including Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), a key congressional champion. The main impetus was IAFPE's

<sup>12</sup> Jindal ran again in Louisiana's 2007 gubernatorial contest, and took office as the nation's first Indian-American governor in January 2008.

deep frustration with the critical views toward India then being expressed by the U.S. State Department, particularly regarding its human rights policies in Kashmir.<sup>13</sup> IAFPE members proposed forming an India caucus along the lines of the Black Caucus in Congress, in order to “educate Congress members on the issues concerning India, so that the Congress could in turn then question the administration and influence policy” toward India (Diwanji 2000). They secured support from Pallone and two other Democratic congressmen from New Jersey—a state with one of the highest concentrations of Indian-Americans, in a few key congressional districts. These three New Jersey Democrats then rallied two other party-mates and one southern Republican, Bill McCollum (Fla.), to convene the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans. Robert Hathaway (2001:28), a former senior congressional aide, notes that publications like *India Abroad* “gave considerable coverage to the fledgling group and encouraged its readers to urge their congressional representatives to join... Seeing no downside to enlisting in the caucus and sensing an easy way to please constituents, House members readily complied.” By 1999, the caucus claimed 115 members—more than one-quarter of the entire House.

The typically more measured Senate, with its larger and more heterogeneous constituencies, did not immediately follow suit, but in 2004 it too formed a bipartisan “Friends of India” group. The initiative this time came from a southern senator, freshman John Cornyn (R-Tex.), who had recently taken a trip to India as part of a delegation sponsored by a U.S.–India business and trade group. In March 2004, Cornyn addressed the Second Annual Capitol Hill Gala Dinner of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, and announced his intention to co-chair “an India caucus in the U.S. Senate, because of the incredible experience I had in India and because of the importance of U.S.–India relations.” Cornyn went on to lament “the accident of history” that had led the world’s two largest democracies to an estranged relationship during the Cold War, and urged, “We have to make up for lost time” (quoted in Haniffa 2004a). As an indicator of the Senate caucus’s prominence, its Democratic founding co-chair was Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.), and its initial membership of 20 also included then Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) (Raghavan 2004). Raghavan also notes that Indian Ambassador Lalit Mansingh played a facilitating and encouraging role in the formation of the Senate caucus, though such official Government of India involvement should probably be seen as a supporting and not driving factor.

It is noteworthy that the burgeoning congressional interest in India and Indian-Americans has been a bipartisan phenomenon. Indian-Americans, as a group, do not obviously lean either Republican or Democratic, and the community finds different strands of support in its relationships with both parties. On the one hand, the high-income and business/professional profile of some Indian Americans might encourage receptivity to traditional Republican positions on tax and regulatory issues. In recent years, Republican politicians also have tended to evince stronger support than Democrats for expanding the number of annual HI-B visas for tech workers, as well as tolerance for “outsourcing” of U.S. service jobs to India and lower-wage countries (both of these issues are of interest to U.S. business lobbies as much as to the Indian-American community).<sup>14</sup> As noted above, the only

<sup>13</sup> Kashmir, of course, has been the subject of a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan since their 1947 partition, and—especially since the late 1980s—a site of internal instability owing to the Kashmiris’ frustration at Indian governance.

<sup>14</sup> In 2004, for example, even as John Cornyn as a Republican senator was calling outsourcing to India “inevitable” and addressing Indian trade and industry groups deeply invested in the practice during his official trip, Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) was attempting to make opposition to outsourcing a major theme in his campaign for the U.S. presidency.

Indian-American member of the United States Congress is a Republican, with conservative economic and social positions.

On the other hand, as an ethnic minority community, Indian-Americans have also identified with the Democratic Party. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), for example, was a key supporter of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act; many in the Indian-American community keenly remember this patronage. On the issue of nuclear cooperation, Republicans have tended to be more supportive given the party's weaker links to Washington's nonproliferation community. Overall, though, as Indian-Americans have increasingly emerged as an "India lobby" on Capitol Hill, they have acted as would any other organization seeking a continual influence on the policy process, cultivating good relations with both parties.

As for the connection between the Government of India and the Indian-American community, it falls far short of a formal principal-agent relationship (as argued above); Indian-Americans have essentially operated on their own motivation, resources, and historical-organizational timeline. Community activists appear intent on developing a long-term influence on the U.S.-India relationship; just as they cannot afford to situate themselves as loyalists of either the Republican or Democratic parties in the U.S., they are mindful of the turnovers in leadership and the contentious coalition politics that characterize democracy in today's India.

The most recent phase of Indian-American political organization has been the formation of lobbying organizations *per se*, the "most active and least factionalized" of which is the U.S. India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) (Anderson 2006a).<sup>15</sup> Sanjay Puri, the CEO of a mid-size information technology company in Northern Virginia, launched USINPAC and an affiliate U.S.-India Business Alliance in 2002 as a vehicle to promote Indian and Indian-American interests in Congress, drawing direct inspiration from a friend with experience in Israeli business lobbying (Carter 2003). In the early post-9/11 context of its launch, USINPAC focused on fostering an image of India and the U.S. sharing a concern with extremist Islam and terrorism (an alignment that Indian officials, too, have emphasized). It also sought to raise official awareness about hate crimes against South Asians in the U.S. in the early wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But USINPAC from the beginning had a broader and longer-term vision for improving and expanding U.S.-India relations; the immediate post-9/11 period simply presented a special opportunity for it to encourage policymakers to pay more attention to India and to appraise anew its strategic affinities with the United States.

USINPAC developed a full-time professional and legislative staff (mostly young, with advanced degrees from elite U.S. universities), and quickly expanded from a mere post office box to occupy prime real estate in the "K-Street" neighborhood that is the heart of the capital's lobbying industry. It hosts regular fundraisers, youth symposia, and receptions on Capitol Hill, and maintains a highly professional World Wide Web site that offers a ready primer to members of Congress on "Indian-Americans: Vital Statistics." This set of data points, which is reproduced in part below, encapsulates many of the reasons for growing congressional interest in the community:

- Over 1.678 million—number of Americans of Indian origin in 2000. This represents a 106% increase over 1990. The community is multi-religious and multi-ethnic.

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<sup>15</sup> Besides USINPAC, the other national political action groups are the Indian American Center for Political Awareness and the Indo-American Friendship Council.

- 7.6 percent—average annual growth rate of the Indian-American community (U.S. Census Bureau). This makes Americans from India and their descendants the fastest-growing ethnic group in the US.
- \$60,093—the median income of Indian-American families, nearly double the median income of all American families—\$38,885 (source, U.S. Census Bureau).
- 200,000—the number of Indian-American millionaires (source, Merrill Lynch).
- 58%—percentage of Indian-Americans over the age of 25 [that] have a college degree (BA or higher).
- 43.6%—percentage of Indian-Americans in the workforce employed as managers or professionals.
- 35,000—number of Indian-American physicians (source, American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin). There are also a disproportionate number of Indian-Americans employed as lawyers, engineers, academics, financiers, and business-owners.
- 10,000—the number of Indian-American medical school students and interns.
- 300,000—number of Indian-Americans working in the high tech industry.
- 15%—percentage of Silicon Valley start-up firms owned by Indian-Americans.
- More than 5,000—number of Indian-Americans on the faculties of institutions of higher learning.
- 74,603—number of foreign exchange students from India studying in the U.S. This represents 13% of total foreign enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities—the highest number from any one country (US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) 2006a).<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere in its section “For Members of Congress,” USINPAC’s Web page continues the numerical show of force, citing \$162,286 that the organization raised for political candidates in 2002–03, and a roster of more than 27,000 “active members.”

### **The Nuclear Deal and Consolidation of the “India Lobby”**

The first official announcement of plans for U.S.–India cooperation in civilian nuclear energy came during a visit by Prime Minister Singh to Washington in July 2005. The legal and technical aspects of the deal are complex and have evolved somewhat since the 2005 summit, and a comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this analysis. But the basic contours of the deal, as it emerged in 2005–06, can be summarized as follows.

India would:

- allow inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to its civilian nuclear facilities (military facilities, which would be separated from civilian facilities, would not be subject to inspection);
- continue its voluntary moratorium on nuclear weapons testing;
- strengthen safeguards on its nuclear arsenal;
- negotiate in good faith for a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty;

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<sup>16</sup> The U.S. Census figures are correct, and other independently sourced data also appears accurately. Un sourced data not has not been verified by the author, but is provided for the purpose of exhibiting how USINPAC presents itself and the Indian-American community to U.S. lawmakers. Though broader strategic and historical reasons for the changing relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan have been noted above, it is worth pointing out that Pakistani-Americans cannot compete with Indian-Americans in terms of community size or wealth: there were only a little over 150,000 Pakistanis in the U.S. in 2000, with a median household income of \$47,241 (data cited in Walt 2005:291*n*; original data from Census 2000, U.S. Bureau of the Census).

- continue to adhere to self-imposed guidelines comparable to those of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and Missile Technology Control Regime for exports of its own nuclear material and missile technology; and
- allow American companies to build nuclear reactors in India.

In turn, the U.S. would largely lift the moratorium, under the NPT and U.S. export laws, on nuclear trade with India, permitting India to buy “dual-use” technology including materials and equipment for uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, and import fuel for its civilian nuclear reactors.<sup>17</sup>

After the announcement of the framework during Singh’s visit, Bush administration supporters of the deal told *The Washington Post* that it was part of a White House strategy to encourage India’s rise as a global power. Nicholas Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, called the agreement “a major move forward” and “the high-water mark of U.S.–India relations since 1947” (Milbank and Linzer 2005).<sup>18</sup> During Bush’s March 2006 visit to New Delhi, further details of the agreement were hashed out, with results even more favorable to India: it could classify some of its reactors as being for either civilian or military use (limiting the inspections regime), and could receive significantly higher quantities of fissile material than administration officials had originally envisioned (VandeHei and Linzer 2006).

In addition to stressing the momentum for continued improvement of U.S.–India relations, supporters argued that the agreement pragmatically reflected the reality of India as a nuclear power, while at the same time rewarding its responsible behavior. India had voluntarily abstained from further testing after 1998, declared a “no first use” nuclear posture, and safeguarded its nuclear assets from international proliferation (in contrast to Pakistan’s murky relationship to the nuclear black market network of A.Q. Khan, its leading nuclear scientist, which came to light in 2004). Supporters also stressed the need for the agreement in light of India’s burgeoning energy demands, which had already emerged as an important factor behind rising global commodity prices (the business opportunities for U.S. companies in nuclear trade with India were an important subtext as well, though one less frequently cited).

Critics, on the other hand, argued that the deal would allow India access to resources that could be used to expand its nuclear weapons arsenal, and more generally, would “undermine decades of nuclear nonproliferation work” (Graham, Tomero, and Weiss 2006). If the U.S. violated the “country neutrality” of the existing nonproliferation regime simply “to help one of its friends,” Milhollin (2006:371) argued, then there would be no reason for China not to drop export controls on Pakistan, or for Russia not to drop controls on Iran. Some critics argued that India had a record of bad faith in past contracts, having used facilities and materials obtained from the U.S. and Canada in the 1960s to develop in secret the nuclear explosive technology that led to its “peaceful” 1974 test and laid the foundation for its weapons program (Graham et al. 2006).

The Bush administration would have to secure congressional support for the agreement, in light of the exemptions to international treaty and U.S. export law that it proposed. Given the objectively mixed picture of merits and risks, there was no assurance that the deal would receive sufficient levels of support when the House and Senate took it up for consideration in 2006. This was especially true in the context of intensifying concerns about the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, and the precipitous decline in public support for the Bush administration’s policies in Iraq, as 2006 moved inexorably toward the autumn

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<sup>17</sup> See Pan 2006 for a general background; Milhollin 2006 for a summary of arguments against the agreement; and Mistry and Ganguly 2006 for a summary in favor.

<sup>18</sup> Burns, as noted above, is the same official who was highly critical of India’s refusal to sign the CTBT during the Clinton administration’s 1996 efforts to rally support.

congressional elections. For members of Congress reflexively opposed to Bush's foreign policies, rejection of the nuclear agreement with India might offer an opportunity to embarrass the administration while assuming a principled stance on proliferation risks to national security.

Indeed, in the spring of 2006, initial reaction in the House to the agreement was sufficiently negative—"dead in the water," as one analyst put it (Anderson 2006b:A12)—that an India Caucus member and sponsor of the draft legislation, Tom Lantos (D-Ca.), recommended delaying a vote. Representative Edward Markey (D-Mass.), a leading opponent, argued that the bill "[would] essentially be granting a blank check to the Bush administration to exempt India from our nuclear nonproliferation laws," and "make a mockery of the congressional oversight process" (Markey 2006). Thus, notwithstanding the generally more favorable congressional views toward India that had developed during the early 2000s, important contextual factors and details of the nuclear agreement itself position it as a "hard case" for Indian-American influence on U.S. policy.

*2005-06: A Defining Year for the "India Lobby"*

Despite the long odds against winning congressional support, the Indian-American community mobilized around the nuclear agreement issue as never before. Walter Anderson, a close observer of Indian-American political activity on Capitol Hill, notes, "This controversial proposal of the Bush administration galvanized the usually fractured Indian American community into united action like no previous issue... [Indian-Americans] played hard ball politics and used sophisticated lobbying tactics to focus community attention on the proposed legislation" (Anderson 2006b:A12).<sup>19</sup>

Using the rubric of a U.S.–India "global partnership," USINPAC spearheaded the national lobbying effort in Washington—preparing widely distributed issue briefs for members of Congress, sponsoring frequent receptions and fundraisers for legislators, and utilizing electronic communications media to mobilize Indian-Americans across the country to sign a petition and to directly contact their lawmakers. In late 2005, USINPAC worked with Eni Faleomavaega (D), the House's nonvoting Delegate from American Samoa and co-chair of a Congressional Task Force on U.S.–India Investment and Trade Relations, to organize a discussion of the nuclear agreement attended by Indian Ambassador Ronen Sen and key members of Congress. At the forum, longtime India champion Pallone remarked, "The agreement strengthens energy security for the U.S. and India, and promotes the development of stable and efficient energy markets in India to ensure adequate and affordable supplies... its implementation is important for U.S.–India relations." Congressman Chris Cannon (R-Utah) was both more expansive and more specific: "I am pleased to stand with you this evening and welcome India as a global partner. I commend my good friend, Sanjay Puri and USINPAC, for their visionary leadership in bringing together the Indian-American community, the embassy, and key members of the U.S. Congress to discuss ways in which we can begin to address issues of critical importance including the civil nuclear cooperation agreement" (quoted in US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) 2006c).

Over the following months, USINPAC convened similar events, and used its website to tally its "progress on obtaining congressional support," offering names of supporters and holdouts. In its literature and talking points, USINPAC did not shy away from recognizing the unprecedented nature of the nuclear agreement, but it took exactly the opposite view of critics with respect to the

<sup>19</sup> Anderson is Associate Director of South Asia Studies at the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies.

likely impact on global nonproliferation efforts: against the “misconception” that the deal would adversely affect the international regime, it argued that by bringing India “into the mainstream,” the agreement actually would *enhance* the international regime.<sup>20</sup>

USINPAC also continued to frame the issue in a way that emphasized its positive linkages to other goals in U.S. policy toward India—in particular, economic and environmental goals. It stressed the trade potential in the civilian nuclear sector, and maintained always that the nuclear deal was part of a broader strategic partnership—suggesting the possibility of issue-linkage and expanded trade in other sectors as well. It also argued that with a freer nuclear hand, India could diversify its energy sources away from coal and petroleum, at a time when its rapidly growing consumer class is contributing to unprecedented demand for global resources. While economic and environmental arguments were placed at the fore, USINPAC also continued to stress India’s solidarity with the U.S. against terrorism. In contrast, it issued statements expressing “strong concern” at the “growing menace of terror outfits based in Bangladesh” (US–India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) 2006b), and—without too directly criticizing existing U.S. policy toward Pakistan—questioning the commitment of Pervez Musharraf’s military government to the “Global War on Terrorism” and reminding lawmakers of the nuclear black market activities of A.Q. Khan.<sup>21</sup>

Other community publications and web sites, such as *India Abroad*, offered extensive coverage of the draft agreement, and also named individual members of Congress who had expressed support or opposition to the bill. Traditionally professional-minded organizations such as the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin got involved, hosting a panel discussion in Washington that featured Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher and other administration officials. AAPI and other community organizations took out a full-page ad in *The Washington Post* on April 5 to champion the draft bill (Anderson 2006b:A12). Bulk emails to legislators and their staffs carried briefs and electronic petitions in favor.

Personal appeals were sometimes very direct: Ramesh Kapur, an activist in the Democratic Party, told an Indian journalist he had attended Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee conferences in California and New York, and privately told then-Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Ca.) that Indian-Americans were “watching the deal.” The message was reinforced when some 95% of the New York meeting’s fund-raising target was met by Indian-Americans alone. Dallas businessman Ashok Mago made repeat visits to legislators from his state—meeting with nine Congressmen in less than three hours one spring day—and claimed to have “delivered” 16 of the of the bill’s original sponsors (Sharma 2006).<sup>22</sup> The flurry of community mobilization around the issue caught the attention of major U.S. media: *The New York Times* carried a front page feature on June 5, and National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition* interviewed USINPAC’s Sanjay Puri on June 19.

The efforts clearly paid off. On July 26, 2006, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 359-69 in favor of the U.S.–India Nuclear Cooperation Promotion Act (H.R. 5682). Supporters offered effusive floor statements, covering such themes

<sup>20</sup> Besides stressing this view in its own literature and communications, USINPAC had successfully sought to have what it described as “pro-India witnesses”—such as Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—to testify at hearings on the issue before the House International Relations Committee (US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) 2005).

<sup>21</sup> In early 2005, USINPAC had urged 20 Congressmen to sign a letter to the White House protesting the proposed sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan, a long-mooted deal held up since 1990 over U.S. concerns about Pakistan’s nuclear program. The Bush administration consummated the F16 deal in 2006 to reward the Musharraf government for its cooperation against terrorism in the region.

<sup>22</sup> One of Mago’s Texas Representatives, who had originally sided with Markey against the agreement, signed on as a co-sponsor (Chaudhuri 2007). On the Mago story, see also Sharma 2006.

as shared U.S.–India interest in democracy, solidarity against terrorism (India had been struck by coordinated bomb attacks on the Mumbai train system just days before the floor vote),<sup>23</sup> and India’s responsible nuclear behavior. There were tributes to Mahatma Gandhi, wisdom from Mark Twain (“India is the cradle of the human race,” the American bard was quoted as saying),<sup>24</sup> and even an expression of “appreciation to India for its hospitality toward His Holiness the Dalai Lama [of Tibet, in exile in India since 1959], a great leader in the world.”<sup>25</sup> Against such rambling encomiums, Faleomavaega, the Samoan delegate, was refreshingly candid. He singled out for praise USINPAC’s Sanjay Puri—“a great leader in our Indian American community, for all he has done to rally support for this bill” (above comments in United States Congress 2006:H H5900-H5907). After the House’s virtual celebration in favor of the agreement, an 85-12 approval by the lame-duck Senate (right after the November elections) of its version of the legislation came as an anti-climax, the House and Senate versions were reconciled with relatively little fanfare, and the act was signed into law by President Bush on December 18, 2006.

The celebratory atmosphere suggested that for most congressional supporters, this deal had ceased to be “about” nuclear issues and had instead become the touchstone for the entire U.S.–India relationship—which, of course, was exactly how the Indian-American community activists wanted them to see it. Consistent with the general literature on ethnic lobby foreign policy influence, the community was highly successful in “framing” the issue for lawmakers, driving home the message of its rising numbers and economic profile, and capitalizing on long-building organizational capacity stretching from the grassroots level to the new professional lobbyists.

In an interview with the author, Sanjay Puri sought to downplay USINPAC’s specific efforts, and to give credit to “the broader community, [which] really cashed in all the chips its members had earned over the years—as doctors, as businessmen, in personal relationships” with individual lawmakers and staffers. The older generation in the community, typically not as active as younger members, “saw the deal as a culmination of the strategic partnership,” and got involved (Puri 2007). Similarly, Anderson argues, “the nuclear issue pushed a number of hot buttons... [it] is an issue that arouses community pride” as a recognition of the importance of India in world politics and as a strategic partner to the United States. Ramesh Kapur, the Democratic Party activist, may have offered an important (if not necessarily intuitive) insight in likening the community’s mobilization to Gandhi’s nonviolent “truth force” movement of 75 years earlier: “We said this is our *satyagraha*, our civil rights movement” (India Lobby Next to Israel on U.S. Clout List, 2006).

This last remark helps to explain why this particular issue had such resonance for so many Indian-Americans. Certainly, the community is diverse, and has its share of critics of the agreement (some of them opponents of India’s nuclear weapons program, others of them aligned with critics in India itself who see the deal as still too intrusive of India’s sovereignty). Much as it was able to frame the issue for Congress as a marker of U.S.–India *rapprochement*, the community framed the issue for itself as the *sine qua non* of India’s rise to global power status. Though proliferation pessimists might want to wish away such a perception, it is powerfully reinforced by history: after all, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council are all nuclear weapons states, and India did get more attention (and eventually, respect) from the United States after its 1998 nuclear tests, even if other factors such as its economic growth have also played a key

<sup>23</sup> Comments of Bobby Jindal (R-La.)

<sup>24</sup> Comments of Daniel Davis (D-Ill.).

<sup>25</sup> Comments of Nancy Pelosi (D-Ca.), Minority Leader.

role. As improbable as it may seem to some observers—to steal a brilliant formulation from journalist Edward Luce (2007), “If Gandhi had not been cremated, he would be rolling in his grave”—for many Indian-Americans, the “struggle” for recognition and respect on the world stage are very much of a piece with the earlier anti-colonial movement. The issue unites both older Indian-Americans, who were children at the time of India’s independence, with their own children—many of whom have grown up with instincts for American politics, but have retained a nationalist pride toward their ancestral land and look toward its “arrival” on the world stage in their own time.

In September 2006, at an Indian-American reception celebrating House passage of the bill, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns summed up the year’s activity with a different civil rights analogy: “This has been your coming out party in our country” (*Hindustan Times* 2006b).

### Conclusion and Looking Ahead

Indian-American mobilization was *the* critical factor behind overwhelming congressional support for the controversial Bush-Singh agreement on expanded U.S.–India nuclear trade and cooperation, which looks set to jettison longstanding restrictions under the NPT and U.S. export law. Had it not been for the energetic efforts of a newly professionalized “India lobby” on Capitol Hill, personal contacts with legislators and staffers by Indian-Americans, and grassroots informational and petitioning campaigns, it is likely that the efforts of the bill’s opponents—especially an established nonproliferation interest community in Washington and their patrons in Congress—would have killed it.

In hindsight, an “India lobby” has been long in the making. The community exhibits many of the general demographic characteristics that scholars have associated with ethnic lobby effectiveness in foreign policy influence—especially wealth and geographic concentration. Historically, though, other characteristics of the Indian-American community—particularly its segmentation into relatively narrow professional associations, or language- and region-specific Indian associations—would have seemed to work against cohesive political mobilization. Recently, though, the pattern of organization has evolved to include more explicitly political groups, and new communications technologies have linked previously cellular community organizations. Generational change has given rise to a younger activist that is increasingly self-confident, interested in India’s global standing, and savvy in the ways of American politics.

Even against this background, clearly something about the nuclear issue itself has been important; there is a reason that the community was “galvanized” into action on this issue as never before. In the view of many community members, it is the most important issue in U.S.–India relations since support for Indian independence 60 years ago; indeed, as the comments of one activist revealed, the community has framed the issue—for itself, as much for members of Congress—as the modern-day equivalent of India’s search struggle for rights and recognition in the international community. It is their *satyagraha*—however un-Gandhian the notion of a nuclear India may strike some observers.

Clearly, the unprecedented mobilization of the community from USINPAC down to the local levels, and the willingness to engage in explicit money politics with members of Congress, suggest that the U.S.–India nuclear agreement may signal a consolidation of the India lobby and the rise of a powerful potential influence on U.S. policy in South Asia and beyond in the 20th century. But it is likely too soon to make such a prediction with high confidence. Though the Bush-Singh nuclear agreement made it through Congress, the initiative still faces hurdles in needing approval of at least one clause by the other “nuclear five” member states of Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and the U.S. and India still

must sign a so-called “123 Agreement” under a section of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act of 1954 (*Hindustan Times* 2006a). Ironically, since its initial announcement in 2005, the nuclear deal has become increasingly contentious within India, encountering criticism from members of the country’s nuclear scientific establishment, from opposition parties, and even from some of Prime Minister Singh’s own coalition partners (particularly the left parties, which seem to regard any cooperation with the U.S. as distasteful, even when it favors India’s strategic interests). This has led to some exasperation among U.S. supporters at “the India that cannot take yes for an answer.” Indian-Americans, for their part, have been somewhat less interested than Indian officials in the details of the deal, and appear generally more content with the American compromises already made. If the deal were to derail, the community might have as much cause for frustration with New Delhi as with Washington.

In other words, the Indian-American community that did so much to spirit the initiative through its months in the U.S. Congress could still stand to be disappointed if the agreement were to break down at other levels (on this possibility, see Cohen 2006). Such an outcome could be dispiriting and demoralizing, and might undermine the organizational achievements of the past couple of years. Already, USINPAC has held workshops for Indian diasporants in other NSG member countries, such as Britain and France, to try to encourage the formation of parallel “Indian lobbies” in those countries around the nuclear issue. This lateral broadening, while imaginative, could end up diluting the group’s efforts closer to home. Moreover, USINPAC’s planned future initiatives suggest highly ambitious goals: chiefly, championing U.S. support for a permanent Indian seat on the UN Security Council. Such efforts—if they succeed at all—will likely not pay off for years, and it could become difficult to sustain ongoing Indian-American community interest, mobilization, and financial support for a protracted campaign of this kind.

Then again, Gandhi’s *satyagraha* persisted for more than three decades.

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