



U.S.-India Relations

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QUESTION: Tell us a little bit about what the main sticking points were in the meeting with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice with Mr. Mukherjee.

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well, first of all, I'm surprised to hear you begin by describing it as "sticking points." You know the Minister had a good visit here. It was part of a series of consultations that we have regularly between senior officials in India and senior officials in the United States. It was really an opportunity to talk about the whole range of issues in US-India relations: the civil nuclear initiative, of course, but not just the civil nuclear initiative. Our defense cooperation, economic cooperation, and cooperation on regional issues, including, as the Secretary said yesterday, on Tibet and Burma as well.

QUESTION: But the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal is one thing which has been followed very closely by a lot of people, and the question that comes up very often is, you know, just what the U.S. stance and what the State Department's stance is on some of the delays that are taking place right now with regards to the deal being right now in India's court.

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think I would repeat what the Secretary said in her press event yesterday: we're absolutely committed to this initiative. We think the initiative is good for India. It's good for the United States. It's good for the global proliferation regime. But it's also good for energy development in India.

So we've been following very closely the progress of political discussion in India, political debate in India. India still has some steps to complete with the IAEA, so we're following that very closely. But essentially what I would say to you is what the Secretary said yesterday: we're ready to move, and when the Indian government is ready to move we'll be ready to move as well. We're hoping to do that this year. We're committed to doing it this year. And so we look forward to hearing from the Indian side how they plan to proceed with the IAEA.

QUESTION: Given just how important this deal is, and the U.S. government has talked often about why it's important, is there ever a sense of impatience or frustration with some of the delays that have been happening in Delhi which are out of your control, which are, you know, which are totally India's internal issue? What is the stance, then, of the U.S., or of the Secretary of State, or of the State Department?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think, as I said, we respect the democratic process in India. So these are issues that India's going to have to work out for itself. We've worked on the American end. We've done some consultation with Congress. I think there are still a lot of steps to complete. There are steps with the IAEA, with the Board of Governors. There are steps in the Nuclear Suppliers Group. There will be steps with Congress. And so with all of those steps yet to complete, we are ready to move forward.

Senator Biden, you know, was in India several weeks ago and he talked a little bit about the constraints of the Congressional calendar. And Senator Biden is the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee – in many ways he's really the authoritative voice on that. So we're mindful of those constraints. We think our Indian colleagues are mindful of those constraints as well.

But as I said, we look forward to trying to complete the initiative this year, and we think it's a good initiative for both sides.

QUESTION: You talked about the Congressional calendar. If this deal isn't introduced to Congress, say, by June, July, August, what do you think is likely to happen?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I don't really want to get into hypotheticals. I think what I'd say again is that Senator Biden has been clear on what he sees as the constraints of the Congressional calendar. And we'd like to try to move it forward this year.

It's interesting you used the word "consequences." I think we're not really thinking about it that way. We're thinking that this is a very important initiative, but one of many initiatives in the U.S.-India relationship. It's really from our perspective a very exciting time for U.S.-India relations. There's a lot happening between students, between businesspeople – India's one of our fastest growing export markets. We're doing things in many ways that were unthinkable several years ago. And it's partly a reflection, and really a recognition by the United States but also people in India, of how much the world has changed. You know the world of 2008, it's not the world of 1948. And so India really has the capacity, and we think the interest, to work with the United States and other partners on a variety of issues of global and regional scope.

But, as you say, the nuclear initiative is an important initiative. We've put a lot of investment into it, and so we're hoping to move forward on it.

QUESTION: Can you give us any sense of the meeting yesterday that took place also between President Bush and Mr. Mukherjee? Any sense of what President Bush might have conveyed to Mr. Mukherjee, specifically on the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: You know, I think I'll leave it to the White House to characterize the meeting. I would say that they discussed a range of issues in U.S.-India relations. But more, they discussed really very positive cooperation between the two sides.

QUESTION: Now you mentioned the U.S. Congress previously and we have heard, you know, a little bit about – a little of the frustration that the U.S. Congress has with the deal in terms of them putting in so many meetings and hearings on the deal and then to have – again, again to face these delays in Delhi. What do you tell the U.S. Congress as, you know, as the State Department on where the deal stands?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well we've been very clear on our general feeling about the deal. We've had a lot of consultation with members of Congress throughout this process, going back more than a year. You know former Undersecretary Nick Burns, when he was working on this initiative, spent a lot of time talking to members of Congress. So has the Secretary, so have others. So I think the broad parameters of the deal are well understood in Congress. There are people in Congress who follow this issue very closely.

And so, you know, this process with India – in many ways it's very unique. And because it's very unique a lot of countries in the Suppliers Group, but also individual members of our Congress on the Hill, they'll be asking questions about the deal. We think those are questions that all have good answers, but we need the time to try to be able to answer those questions.

But I think you've heard the comments that people have had on the Hill. It's my sense a lot of people are supportive of this, and so we're ready to move forward, again,

when the Indian government is ready to move forward.

QUESTION: You said the situation with India on this deal is very unique. It's also unique in the sense of some of the exceptions that are being made for India in terms of its previously not being a signatory of the NPT, and yet the U.S. believes that it's important for non-proliferation to have this deal. Tell us why it's important. Why is it important to make an exception in the case of India, not North Korea or Iran, on something like nuclear technology?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think this is something that very senior officials in the U.S. government have spoken to often – the President, the Secretary, Undersecretary Burns in particular. Just speaking very broadly, we think that, frankly, India's a country that's been – it has rapidly growing energy needs. Those energy needs in many ways can be met by clean energy, including clean nuclear power. And so as you know well, and as these other officials have spoken to, the administration has worked to find ways to really bring India into the international mainstream on these things.

We think it's a good deal whether you look at it from an energy angle, but also in many ways India has, you know, has been a responsible steward of nuclear power. It's got a good history in terms of proliferation. So we think it's time to try to find ways to bring India into that mainstream, and that's what this deal is designed to do.

QUESTION: But how do you address the concerns of those who say, yes it's been responsible, but by doing this, by making an exception out of India, for India, and then pushing India to – supporting them at least at the NSG, that you're setting a wrong example, then, for other countries like Iran and North Korea, but not just them, for other countries, too, that they could bend the rules, the treaty rules, to do what they like with nuclear material?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think our view is that things are possible with India precisely because India has been a responsible steward in many ways of nuclear technology. Again, India's energy needs are great, and we think this is an important way to meet those needs.

North Korea and Iran are both important proliferation cases and the United States is working with other partners in various ways to try to work with those countries on their programs. You know, we're working hard on the six-party talks. Assistant Secretary Chris Hill is working hard on that. And we've been working closely with our European Union partners and Security Council partners on Iran as well. But I don't think I want to get into the business of comparing specific cases.

The point is, we think in a lot of ways this deal makes a lot of sense, not just for India and the United States, but it really makes sense both for proliferation but also for the development of clean energy in India at a time when India's economy is expanding rapidly and really its demands for energy are exploding.

QUESTION: In terms of the importance of the deal, is it also important in terms of what President Bush might want to leave behind in his legacy as one of the successes, having this deal? Is that something that's important to you?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think, as I've said, this has been an important part of the rapidly expanding and deepening U.S.-India relationship. And I think, you know – this is a process in the United States and India that goes back for some time and is really reflective of changes in the world, but also changes in both our economies, and in societies as well. This administration has done a lot to broaden and deepen the U.S.-India relationship, building in many ways on developments that took place in the last administration. And I would note, by the way, that in India, two governments now have also been very heavily invested in this process of developing relations with the United States.

So as I said it's really an exciting time and in many ways I think this is one of the most important elements of the administration's legacy. And legacy is – it's not just the nuclear deal, it's this broad, deep, strong, and very productive U.S.-India relationship. But I think what I'd say to you about that also is that, one of the things that's been unique for me in working on this is that it's a relationship that in many ways moves forward not just because of what governments are doing but because of what individuals, groups, and citizens themselves are doing. You know, we have 80,000 Indian students in the United States, more than from any other country in the world. There are close to 3 million Indian-Americans in the United States who represent a kind of living bridge between the two countries.

So to me, what's remarkable is not just what's happened in the last several years, not just what's happened in this administration, but also that it didn't happen much sooner in the history of relations between these two countries.

So I'd say yes, very much, we hope the nuclear deal will be concluded and we think it's an important part of the legacy of both countries. But it's part of a bigger legacy of transformation of U.S.-India relations.

QUESTION: And if it doesn't get concluded, then what? Then, you know, what would be the U.S. viewpoint? And how does this then fit in with the larger scheme and, as you said, the longer-term relationships with India?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. As I said, I mean, we really look forward to trying to complete the initiative this year. We look forward to hearing from our Indian colleagues about their progress with the IAEA on next steps. We'll leave domestic politics in India to our Indian colleagues. We'll do the politics on our side. But as I said, the legacy is a very big one, it's a very productive one, and I think it's really one that's changing the international system in important ways.

So ultimately that's the legacy, and whatever happens with this deal, we're very proud of the U.S.-Indian partnership and we're proud of what's happened the last several years.

QUESTION: I just have one or two more questions. But given just how important it is, is there never just a little sense of regret of how much time this has taken? It's been several years now and it does look like it's going to take more time.

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think it's something people felt was important for the United States, for American interests, for India. And so it's something that I know all of the people who've worked on, from Nick Burns to Dick Stratford to Richard Boucher to Secretary Rice to the President of the United States himself, they've all been proud to work on it. And I think people feel it's time well spent, time well invested, in an initiative that's really important in many ways. So, no.

But it's interesting, you know, you're talking as if we're looking back on the initiative and we really prefer to look forward. We want to try to complete this year.

QUESTION: In terms of looking forward, how many days does this deal need to sit in the U.S. Congress, and how many days are really left for this Congress to sit? You know I think – does it need – it is that – I just want to clarify that with you. Does it need to sit in the Congress for at least 90 days, is that true?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: I don't know, I think the authoritative voice on this is really Senator Biden because he's Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. So when Senator Biden was in India he talked about, as I said, some of the constraints on the Congressional calendar, and he talked about July essentially as a time when he personally was looking for Congress to be able to move on the deal. Congress, of course, will have some questions; they'll need to hold hearings. And so given that, the more time the better. The press of other business – that's going to begin to intrude. So the earlier the better. But I would defer to Senator Biden and people on Capitol Hill about Congressional timelines.

QUESTION: Last two questions. But in terms of the U.S. Congress, you said there are going to be Congressional hearings and all of that – is there a way of speeding things up so that they happen by November, or is it – it still has to follow a certain time? And if the U.S. Congress is sort of unanimous in supporting the deal, is it still possible that, say – I know this is hypothetically, but it comes to you by August or September in the Congress, will it still go through, or does it still have a good chance of going through?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think I'd encourage you to put that question to people in Congress. It's a separate branch of government, they have their own prerogatives. I think what's important is just to remember that there are several steps that we still need to complete with the International Atomic Energy Agency, with the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and also with Congress. And so obviously the sooner that we can move forward on those things the better. But I'd let members of Congress characterize the Congressional process.

QUESTION: Last question. You mentioned the talks between Ms. Rice and Mr. Mukherjee were about several different things, not just about the nuclear deal, and they were pretty comprehensive in that sense. Any other things that you think I have not asked you about in terms of those talks? Anything that was specific or something that you think is important for people to know in terms of the talks, not so much with Mr. – President Bush but Secretary Rice and Mukherjee?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Well I think it's important to recognize how much broader the U.S.-India conversation is than it was even just two or three years ago. You know, there was a time in the United States when people thought about India – but they thought about it in terms of foreign policy largely in a South Asian context. And I think in many ways that's really changed in a lot of ways. A lot of people are interested in India, first, at a global level, second as part of a growing interest in an Asia – East, Central, and South – that's in many ways becoming an integrated economic and strategic space.

I'll just give you an example. You know, the global architecture was designed in the 1940's by the victorious powers after the Second World War, and it was designed at a time when countries like China, like India, like Japan, in many ways didn't play the role in the international system that they do today, certainly not economically. So I think in this country there's been a recognition, and it's a bipartisan recognition for awhile, that we, the United States, have an interest in not just working with these new powers, but also in recognizing the capacity they have to help us deal with international problems. And we're trying to find ways to get the international architecture formally to reflect that, working with India and China at a multilateral level, but also in an informal way.

And so the thing that really strikes me, and that I hope you take away from this visit and all of these kinds of visits, including the recent visit by Secretary Gates, is the degree to which the conversation has not just broadened but also it's multidimensional. We talk about security, we talk about economics and trade, we talk about democracy and political development, we talk about energy. But also the fact that the conversation really has exploded the boundaries of South Asia. We're talking about Asia – East and Central. We're talking about the Middle East. And in fact that's something we're hoping to do more of. We'd like to find ways to talk about Africa, to talk about the Persian Gulf, and to talk about the international system with an India that we think has a vital contribution to make to stability and prosperity around the world.

QUESTION: I know that Mr. Mukherjee extended an invitation to Secretary Rice to come down to India and I believe she's accepted. Of course there are not any – there are no fixed dates as yet, but – so do you think we can expect to see Ms. Rice sometime in the future, or before November in India?

DAS FEIGENBAUM: I don't know. I'll leave it to Secretary Rice to answer that. But I know she likes India a lot and she had a very good visit there once before.

QUESTION: Great.

DAS FEIGENBAUM: Thanks very much.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. A pleasure talking to you. Thanks for your time.

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