



Interview by Chetan Sharma of Headlines Today

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

Roosevelt House
New Delhi, India
October 21, 2005

QUESTION: Indo-U.S. ties couldn't have got better. In fact, we are now awaiting one of those historical moves. More so after the July nuclear pact. The question, then, is what's the road ahead from here? Perhaps we should be asking Nicholas Burns, U.S. Under Secretary of State, who is right here with us and, of course, he is the one point person as far as America is concerned and its relations with India. Your visit -- welcome first of all to Headlines Today and to India.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be with you.

QUESTION: Your schedule this time, of course, is very tight, but what's really on the agenda?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, what's on the agenda is to take the agreement that Prime Minister Singh and President Bush had in July and make it work, implement it. This is a vast agreement. We have decided that India and the United States together undertake cooperative ventures in agriculture, education, in science and technology, space launch. We have agreed to put an Indian into space with American space shuttle astronauts. We have got cooperation on trade and economic issues and, of course, we have a civil nuclear agreement, which is historic -- a landmark agreement that will completely change the way that our two countries are working together. So, we are on the verge of great and truly historic partnership. We are the two largest democracies in the world, and two of the countries that we believe will be critical to a future of peace in the world. So it's a very exciting time.

QUESTION: Sir, you have also gone on record to say that the President Bush, of course, once he comes here -- that's in the early winter 2006 -- you are very confident that both the countries will be able to meet their commitments and, of course, take the process forward. It's very reassuring but what makes you so sure?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, the agreement that we launched together on July 18th is very specific. It has obligations that the United States has committed to undertake, and for the Indian side, obligations that India has to make this agreement work. Both of us have started to fulfill the obligations. The United States is now consulting with our Congress about a change in our legislation which may be few months away. But we are consulting, and I think the soundings are good.

The United States also is trying to convince the rest of the world to do the same thing that we are doing -- to engage in civil nuclear energy cooperation. Just this week at the Nuclear Suppliers Group in Vienna we lead a discussion in favor of cooperation with India. And I know that the Indian government is working very hard: they passed an export control law, on weapons of mass destruction. They are now working on how India will separate its civil and military nuclear facilities. It is a very complex issue. So I think both of us are marching along. I had an excellent day today with Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and his delegation. We think we made progress, but there is more to do. It is a complex and difficult issue, but we should be successful.

QUESTION: You think this is going to go through the Congress?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It has got to go through the Congress in our system. Yes.

QUESTION: What happens in case if it can't? And, of course, we have got a one-stage President Bush making a commitment? Where lies the solution to that problem?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I wouldn't want to predict. I wouldn't want to anticipate somehow it not being a success. But we will have a success. Most members of Congress understand the strategic importance of India. They understand that we have to be working with India in a new way. But they also want to see the results of the agreement that we have signed. They want to see India making the commitments that were made, as well as my country -- we made our own commitments. We are few months away. This is such a complex issue and elaborate undertaking. It will take a little while to implement this deal. We should talk about early 2006.

QUESTION: Sure, but there is also a question mark over whether President Bush has the legislative authority really to sell nuclear reactors to India?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know, I think that Indians understand that the United States has a very different form of government. President Bush does not sit in our Congress. He is not a Prime Minister. He doesn't lead his party in the Congress. He is the President. He is in a separate branch of government. In our system the President directs and executes our foreign policy. And he doesn't pass the laws. That job is Congress'. And we are going to ask Congress to change an American law. Between the 1970s and the present time it has not been possible for American companies to work with India in civil nuclear energy because of the sanctions that were put in place by prior U.S. Governments. President Bush is going to ask our Congress to overturn that, and ask our Congress to enact new legislation that will make all this possible. That's the job of the Congress. Therefore, the Congress is a very important part of this process. The concerns of Congress have to be met.

QUESTION: There are concerns as far as India is concerned, as well, and you would, of course, presumably realize that the separation of the civilian and military facilities is not a one-shot affair. It's going to be happening in a phased manner. It's going to take some time. Do you still have a timetable of about 2006 - so you feel that it will happen?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think our test would be: can India agree on a plan to separate its military and civilian nuclear facilities? Can that plan be credible and transparent? And can that plan be at the beginning of its implementation phase? That should be possible in five or six months time. That timetable should be possible. It's not guaranteed though, but I hope it would happen. And we very much remain committed to this agreement. We think it's in our best interests. And it is in India's best interest as well.

QUESTION: Now, of course, if we talk about India's best interests, I guess it is important. But America says, Nicholas Burns says, that America is sensitive to India's needs. India needs energy. India is trying to source it from Iran. America doesn't want that to happen. Is that appropriate?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first, there is no question that India, just as my country, or any country, needs energy. And it makes sense for India to develop its nuclear energy, civil nuclear energy program, because that's clean energy. You have to develop that energy. That energy will give India clean energy to help fight global climate change, global warming. I am not aware that India and Iran have actually agreed to any deal. There has been a lot of talk about it, but there's been no consummation of the deal. I wouldn't be a very good diplomat if I came to Delhi and started criticizing deals that haven't been made yet. So I'll leave it up to the Government of India to decide what it wants to do, and the United States might have a reaction to that. But I am not going to react to something that hasn't happened yet.

QUESTION: You would play along if the deal happens? It wouldn't be a problem?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: You know I think it's not wise or appropriate to answer hypothetical questions. It hasn't happened. The fact is that India has a lot of different energy needs, and it can be met in a variety of ways, and Iran is not the only source of energy in the world. But I am not going to try to criticize the Indian government for something that may or may not be in the planning stage and certainly not implementing.

QUESTION: Of course, coming to events like, currently, the earthquake, a huge tragedy which shook both India and Pakistan, with thousands of lives being lost. Indian troops went across into Pakistan to help their neighbors. We had a lot of terrorist camps being destroyed, even after that we have had a spate of killings. How do you, how does America view this as far as India-Pak relations are concerned? We thought it was going to be a step forward. Perhaps now it could be a step back.

(cross-talk)

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first let me say how sorry we are about the earthquake and extend our condolences on a personal basis from the Americans to the Indians. The fact that Indians lost more than 2,200 of its citizens in Jammu and Kashmir, the fact that Pakistan has lost so many thousands more -- it is really one of the great modern tragedies, and one of the most significant and horrible earthquakes in history. We've tried, in our small way, to be helpful to both Pakistan and India. We've got American military helicopters trying to bring assistance to people in Pakistan. We just now spent an additional \$500,000 in assistance to Indian nongovernmental organizations and the American ones trying to bring help to the survivors of the earthquake.

We also hope that out of this tragedy might come up something good, and we hope that relations between India and Pakistan continue to improve. They have been improving. It's obviously, on a humanitarian and moral basis, it is obviously a very decent thing for India and the Indian Army to help Pakistan in its hour of need. And India and Pakistan are two great countries, and they'll have to work out their own problems. You don't need countries like the United States coming here to be a mediator. That is not who we are, that is not the role we are trying to play. But our best wishes go to both countries as they try for the future to have a better relationship.

QUESTION: For some reason you are assuring that America's relations vis-à-vis India and Pakistan have been completely de-hyphenated.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I think they have. It is a long...it is time that we did this. For so many decades American governments in the past have carefully measured what they did with India vis-à-vis Pakistan. In the modern world, the 21st century, we can't hold back the U.S.-India relationship. We need to have a normal relationship with Pakistan, as well.

India, I think, will become one of the most important partners to the United States in the future because we have so much in common. We are both democratic countries, we are both great countries with long histories. You have a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious population, and so do we. In fact, our two countries are the personification of globalized societies, and we both want to fight terrorists, and we both want to promote democracy, we both want to find peace. And your country has a great role to play on the global stage.

QUESTION: And yet having said that, we don't find a place as a permanent seat in the UN Security Council?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Oh, you know I think that...I will tell you what Condoleezza Rice said, our Secretary of State, when she was here in Delhi. She said that India is such a rising power, that it is playing a greater and greater role in some of the multilateral institutions like the United Nations. And those institutions need to begin to adjust to the growing role of India. I think that is where the future is headed for. And we look forward to working on a closer basis with India in the UN, as well as in other organizations. It is in both of our interests.

QUESTION: Look forward to it as well. Thank you, sir.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Pleasure. Thank you very much.

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