

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Bushwhacking in South Asia

New Delhi puts a premium on actions, not words, when it comes to U.S.-Asian relations.

Two hours of private discussion at the head-of-state level can have a significance beyond the words exchanged, when mutual understanding of respective perspectives and policies on major issues is deepened. When Indian Prime Minister Gandhi and U.S. Vice-President George Bush met the second week in May, the East-West impasse over European missiles, the Middle East, southern Africa, the Iran-Iraq war, Afghanistan, China, and U.S. relations with India's South Asian neighbors figured on everyone's list of talking points.

Over the coming weeks, it will be possible to infer the substance of the talks or measure their concrete achievements. In his public statements beginning with his airport arrival on May 12, Bush made plain his aim to reassure India of America's support for its territorial integrity and its leading role in Asia and the world. The United States, he said, wants to see a strong and united India at peace with its neighbors.

Despite the fact that the visit was preceded by an unusually favorable press build-up—which emphasized the official view that Bush was not only a good listener but a skilled and intelligent individual, and no mere figure-head in President Reagan's set-up—by the time he left for Islamabad on May 15, Vice-President Bush had been virtually eaten alive in every section of the English-language press. To what extent this reflects on the official view of the visit is open to question. Probably, in the absence of anything but words that have been heard before, the

press simply took up its usual “guilty until proven innocent” posture vis-à-vis the United States.

It is characteristic of Indian attitudes that the meeting Bush held before his departure with selected members of the press was focused almost entirely on local and regional elements of America's presumed destabilizing role.

The fact is that U.S. Pakistan policy, initiated by Henry Kissinger and pursued with a vengeance following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, is the touchstone for paranoia in India concerning U.S. relations with South Asia and China as well. It is widely recognized that the \$3 billion worth of sophisticated arms the United States is pouring into Pakistan are not likely to stop any determined Soviet drive south from Afghanistan. Instead, these dangerous toys, in the hands of an unstable military regime in a country that has gone to war with its neighbor India on three occasions in the past 37 years, have served to bind India more tightly to its “tested” friendship with the Soviet Union.

Commentators here have recently pointed out that the only viable way out of this “superpower trap” in the subcontinent is for India to pursue a strong bilateral relationship with Pakistan. This is not easy in light of the accumulated prejudices and aggravations at all levels on both sides of the border. India has in fact been pursuing this approach, tough rhetoric notwithstanding, and the United States could certainly use its influence in Islamabad to help this process.

Talks between India and Pakistan at the foreign-secretary level are due to resume on May 19, with the respective proposal for a “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” and a “No-War Pact” on the agenda.

A curious counterpoint is the bilateral economic relationship between the two countries, which is steadily picking up steam. The United States is now India's number-one trading partner with a total trade turnover of \$4 billion annually. This year, that included a \$400 million balance in India's favor—not an inconsequential sum since it represents net foreign-exchange earnings. Moreover, industrial deals between Indian and American firms continue to increase. Accounting for fully 1,200 of the 7,000 collaborations approved by the Indian government since 1957, American technical ties have topped the list in every recent year (See *EIR*, May 22).

Prime Minister Gandhi is responsible for taking the technology input and investment liberalization measures which have facilitated this collaboration, and has spoken out to encourage it at every point. There is a general recognition here that the kind of technology India needs for its modernization can only be obtained from the West and Japan.

But U.S. opposition to India's \$1 billion loan request from the Asian Development Bank is indicative of the constraints. More broadly, as Bush made clear during the press conference (reflecting discussions on the subject in the experts' group meeting that paralleled the Bush-Gandhi talks), the United States continues to oppose international monetary reform, and in particular, the Non-Aligned Movement's proposal for a conference on money and finance for development for which India is now preparing some new initiatives.