

The Dynamic U.S.-INDIA Relationship

An Interview with Ambassador DAVID C. MULFORD
By LAURINDA KEYS LONG



Ambassador David C. Mulford came to India 15 months ago excited about the opportunity to be “engaged at the cutting edge of history,” looking forward to working with people in the Indian government and private sector to transform relationships between the two countries.

Now, he says, “The transformation is taking place so quickly that it’s a little bit hard for people to keep up.”

Driving that change has been President George W. Bush’s clear declaration that the U.S.-India relationship is of key strategic importance for the United States and that he wants that relationship to grow and develop into a truly comprehensive one, says Ambassador Mulford.

“A wide variety of positive things have happened that have strengthened and diversified and extended the relationship,” the ambassador says. Among them is the NSSP, Next Steps in Strategic Partnership, launched in January 2004, with the Phase I agreement concluding after nine months, despite the change in the Indian government. “Both the BJP-led government and the Congress-led government have, while in power, indicated that they want a strong strategic relationship with the United States. So that represents a very broad political consensus in India, which has been a very positive and exciting proposition,” he says.

Other developments are signing of the Open Skies agreement in April and “a highly positive visit” in March from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, which “moved the U.S.-India relationship into a whole new level.”

Responding to views of some analysts that India does not need

or want American help to become a major world power, Ambassador Mulford says, “There is a lot of ‘old think’ around in...circles in India, just as there is some ‘old think’ around in the United States....But these are people who, in part at least, are living in the past.”

Ambassador Mulford himself was surprised “that the views on Pakistan among Indians generally were much more constructive and much less sensitive than I had been led to believe by my briefing in Washington before coming out....I found the general public wanting to see the two countries get together and cooperate economically and restore their relationship and move forward.”

This atmosphere has enabled him “to take a much more confident position with regard to establishing the proposition that the United States has a freestanding bilateral relationship with India, which has its own vision of the future as a regional and

Ambassador Mulford says results of the visit are:

- ★ We have now indicated, as a matter of policy, that the United States wishes to help India achieve its vision of being a world power in the 21st century.
- ★ We are establishing a special energy dialogue where we will look into the key energy issues that challenge India, including civil nuclear, clean energy and nuclear safety issues.
- ★ We have extended and broadened our military relationships. We have authorized U.S. companies to participate in the tender for 126 multi-role fighter aircraft.
- ★ We have agreed to establish a new space initiative.
- ★ We have indicated that we wish to conduct with India a strategic dialogue on global as well as regional political issues.



world power, with whom we have very special interests.” Pakistan also has a freestanding bilateral relationship, with a different vision for the future, he notes.

“We are no longer in the mode where every single action is viewed through the prism of the other country’s relationship. That has to be constructive and, in my view, marks real progress during the course of the last year,” the ambassador says.

He and his wife, Jeannie, have visited most of the major regions of the country, finding that “India is a truly diverse democracy, which practices tolerance and is an enormously active and vibrant society, filled with movement and color, culture, all kinds of interesting things.” It’s been an important part of his job to understand this, Ambassador Mulford says, “but it’s also been deeply pleasurable, lots of fun.”

His disappointments are focused in the area of economic reform in India, which “wants to integrate itself, to some extent, with the world economy,” but is cautious about ensuring that the benefits of that process are spread through Indian society. “I quite understand that,” he says. “On the other hand,...there are some areas where it seems to me that it’s absolutely essential that they adopt a more aggressive stance. One of those is infrastructure. If they don’t create a world-class infrastructure relatively quickly, in my view, it is going to be a major constraint on growth.”

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“Secondly, I think they need to face the reality that their financial system needs very significant further liberalization to open up the banking sector so that it becomes more efficient, more competitive and serves the needs of the economy more effectively, and also that they encourage in a more forceful manner the creation of a long-term capital market,” he says.

Although the United States and India still have serious work to do in moving their relationship forward, he says one impediment has been removed, namely in the defense field.

“We are now authorized to compete for major military platforms here and we have said, very significantly, that we are prepared to look into co-production, technology transfer,...which should be of very great interest to India because India is looking to expand those segments of its economy.”

Among the challenges, he lists

Left: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at Roosevelt House in New Delhi with Ambassador and Mrs. Mulford.

Above right: Ambassador Mulford during a Delhi Little League baseball game at the Embassy’s Leo Flanagan Field in New Delhi.

Right: Ambassador Mulford cuddles a baby during a visit to a New Delhi polio clinic.

improvement of the foreign direct investment climate in India, and coping with restrictions in U.S. law on technology transfer and high tech exports because of the nuclear non-proliferation commitments of the United States.

And what does the United States need to work on?

“We need to figure out a way to deal more efficiently with this huge visa demand, and in particular to be more sensitive to the needs of Indian companies that need faster and more efficient visa service in order to move their employees to the United States for training and business operations, quite apart from the general visa demand,” Ambassador Mulford says. “Waiting periods for an appointment are too long, despite a major investment by the United States in terms of people and visa windows and equipment.”

He emphasized that the Embassy and the consulates in Mumbai, Chennai and Calcutta are constantly reviewing the visa waiting times, have added to the resources dedicated to streamlining the process and are engaged in creative thinking to resolve the difficulties.

He explains that the aim is to improve the security of the United States without closing the country off to foreign visitors. “We don’t want students, for example, to get frustrated and decide to go to other countries for their education because they think it’s too difficult to get a visa,” he says.

Ambassador Mulford is convinced that “the U.S.-India relationship 20 years from now will be one of the most important and enduring relationships in the world because of the way the two countries are, in a sense, comfortable in themselves, with each other’s basic values, society, form of government and general approach to things.”

The large Indian population in the United States is well educated, articulate, successful, friendly, contributive, he says. “They don’t live off the system and they stay in close touch with their past and their families,” he says.

They are becoming increasingly politically active in the United States, he notes, “which means there’s going to be a very significant definition of U.S.-India relations and what our interests are in India by people who are ‘of the place.’ This is a unique feature of the relationship at this point and will have an impact as we look into the future.” □

“One of the most enduring relationships.”



VIKAS NARULA



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