

The nuclear bill was our bill of acceptance in America. This was our defining moment

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas is a nice way of thanking folks, of making us feel that Mother India respects us

They say nobody can count on the US. That's not true. The US is a great ally

## Ramesh V Kapur

The founder president of the Indian American Security Leadership Council spoke to Deputy Managing Editor Ramananda Sengupta

Ramesh V Kapur might be an influential Democrat, but that doesn't stop him from giving the credit for the new-found India-America friendship to the Republican Party led by President George W Bush.

In Delhi to attend the 5<sup>th</sup> Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, Kapur's outfit, the Indian American Security Leadership Council, played a key role in the passage of the legislation on civilian nuclear cooperation with India.

**To what would you attribute this sudden surge in India-America relations?**

Personally, I think what triggered it was the taking of an American spy plane by the Chinese in April 2001. This was during the first year of the George W Bush Presidency. That was what triggered it. There is always been this moving towards India, yet somehow it never went over the hump. I believe that incident was what got the Bush administration to look at India not just in terms of lip service but as more of a strategic ally.

**What about then President Bill Clinton's visit to India a year earlier?**

I've been a Democrat for years. While I would like to credit for it, that was more of a feel good trip. It was the end of his Presidency. I was in charge of the ad hoc delegation that came with him, I put it together. But in terms of facts, it was the plane incident. So I believe that maybe the Pravasi award should be given to that Chinese general who made that decision to intercept the US plane.

**What are your personal views on the nuclear deal? Is it really good for both nations?**

Absolutely. There are five groups that are going to gain with this deal the most. First, the Indian-American community is going to gain the most. Because once this is passed, this was also our bill of acceptance and respect in America. This was our defining moment. Like the Blacks had the defining moment with Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech in Washington. The defining moment of the Jewish community was — when (Franklin Delano) Roosevelt was the governor of New York, he brought a lot of Jews into his administration — and then he became a President and went to Washington. That was their defining moment. The defining moment for the Irish was when Jack Kennedy became President. And this was our defining moment, of our acceptance and respect. So that's the biggest gain.

The other gainer, of course, will be the American businessman. There's a lot of trade that will go on, which in turn will create more jobs. The defence trade, the nuclear-related trade. You must remember that part of the reason why the new technology cannot be given to India is because of the NPT laws and other laws that America had. That has now changed. It's a huge thing. Also, because it more of a strategic alliance, there will be more direct flights to India back and forth. There'll be more India-centric news written in smaller papers in middle America, rural America. More Americans would want to read about India, now that it has become important.

They will not look at India the way the average American does now, who think that in India there are cows walking on the streets, and that their jobs are being outsourced to India. They will look at India as a strategic ally. So there's a lot of other things than just the business aspect.

And, of course, Indian businessmen are going to gain because somebody over here has to be involved. So they will create jobs, they will bring more areas into negotiations. More investment coming to India.

And then 300 million Americans are going to gain the most out of this deal because for the first time they will feel that they have a secure Southeast Asia, because India can be one of their allies now after this deal.

**Is that an indirect way of saying that part of the reason for the deal is offset, or balance China?**

Yes, counterweight China in one way, because China would be more careful. That's why four million veterans of foreign wars also came out in favor of this deal under the umbrella of the Indian American Security Leadership Council. They looked at China as a future threat to the US. Which takes me back to my first premise, that what triggered this friendship is the row over the US spyplane.

You need some sort of stability there, because the relationship between Russia and India has changed. It's not as it was. A lot of arms are being sold by Russia to China. So the whole dynamics is changing. India would have been isolated if they had not realized — (then Prime Minister A B) Vajpayee was the first one to realize that, fortunately the Congress party is getting the credit for the result.

Then, 1.1 billion Indians are going to gain from this deal. Because the standard of living will come up, and there will pride in the populace. Everybody these days looks up to the US. The younger generation, which has grown up on CNN and MTV, is excited now that there's an alliance of minds. That whole movement also helped. Because the leaders realized that the whole country was moving towards America, because of the cultural change.

Then I believe the whole world will be safer with the deal. South Asia will be safer. Because for the first time, India will be part of the NPT umbrella. It will also be proactive in trying to contain proliferation. Which they have always done as a non-aligned country. But now they will be doing it from the inside. Eventually, it might take five or 10 years, India will play a key role in the elimination of nuclear weapons. Because of the Gandhian psyche that India has to give to whole world. Even (International Atomic Energy Agency Director General) Mohammed el Baradei agreed with what I am saying. He was one who first said that this was good for the world. He's a Nobel Prize winner, he is 'Mr NPT', but he thinks this is good.

**What gives the Indian-American community this ability to punch way above its weight?**

The community was always politically active. We needed a defining moment, we needed a history. This was the moment. Already the physicians had done well, the



PARISH GANDHI

hotels/motels had done well, then we had a huge number of PhDs, professors, the IT people and engineers had done well. There were also political groups that had formed different associations. The Indian American Forum for Political Education will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year. We also have TIE, or The Indus Entrepreneurs. I opened their Boston chapter. Whenever you have regular institutions, that is the key to a nation's success, that is the key thing of America's successes. Institutions that are above a one-man thing. So those were there. And then we started philanthropy. All you needed was some catalyst to bring all these things together.

**What kind of purpose do events like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas serve?**

This is a nice way, once a year, of thanking folks or making Indian Americans feel or all NRIs feel that Mother India respects them. I always say that you can take us out of India, but you cannot take Mother India out of us. And this reinforces that, saying we respect you. It also says we want more out of you too.

**What happens to the Indian American community when there is a conflict of interest between the two nations? What about divided loyalties?**

The strain over the years was when India was aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. There was some strain at that time, but again, we always worked to move India away from Russia. We always felt that the US would be better for India, in terms of democracy, people, language, everything. So now if we move this towards a strategic partnership, that will be the glue that will keep the two nations together for the next 50 or 100 years. There will be differences, in terms of personal interests. Iran could be one them. It could be that American businessmen are not too happy because they are not getting as much business as they had anticipated. But the whole thing has changed now. The bigger picture is the strategic relationship. You will see more naval exercises, more military exercises. So all those other things are just going to be little bumps. But the glue has already been set.

**What does India need to do now?**

The biggest thing is now is for India and its political leadership to make sure that they implement whatever they have said they will to implement this deal. The have said that you will have a 100 million dollars

worth of business. Now it is India's responsibility to make sure that this happens. There is the business out there, but it needs implementation. That's what Americans of Indian descent are going to push for too, saying that this is part of the deal. So now the tough part is coming up.

**So the nuclear deal is done. For the US, what's next?**

Military will be huge. Infrastructure will be huge.

**Education?**

There is a lot of movement in higher education. One of the things that the America-India Foundation does is — they have two core programs, one of them is called the digital equalizer. There's this program in the state of Punjab, where the state government is delivering all the computers and the infrastructure. We are going to be bringing in maybe 1.5 million dollars over three years, and we will make sure that all public schools in Punjab are computerized.

**So the relationship is unlikely to falter with a change of government in India or in the US?**

No. See how bipartisan the support for the nuclear deal was. That's a key part. We ensured that there was full support from the Democratic Party too, and it was tougher on the Democrats, because the NPT is a Democratic base, it is my base. It was started by President Kennedy. (Dwight D) Eisenhower started the atoms for peace campaign, where he sold the technology to expand it. Kennedy changed that. It is a big base. So that is a big story, that the Indian community on the Democratic side made the Democrats realize that the Americans of Indian descent are the community of the future, and the NPT is the community of the past.

**We too have the Leftists in India, who have reservations about the deal.**

Absolutely. Look at Pakistan. They say nobody can count on the US. That's not true. Look at it. Till the Cold War was over, Pakistan could count on the US. China could count on the US. The US built China to what it is now. I think it was a strategic mistake by (Henry) Kissinger and (Richard M) Nixon. They should have done that same thing with India. The US would be more ahead now if they made that decision. The US has still stuck with a rogue country like Pakistan. America has history behind it. People get emotional about it, but if you go by the facts, then you will see that the US is a great ally.