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## India: Wary on Obama

By Stanley A. Weiss

NEW DELHI — Leaders here can't get enough of the American president. He's "the best president vis-à-vis India in the past 50 years," said a former diplomat. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told him, "the people of India deeply love you." One official proposed awarding him the Bharat Ratna (Jewel of India), the country's highest civilian honor.

Another nation in the throes of Obamania?

In fact, the president beloved by the Indian elite is George W. Bush, credited with "de-hyphenating" Washington's longtime "India-Pakistan" policy and championing last year's landmark U.S.-India civilian nuclear deal. Indeed, this may be one capital where Barack Obama finds George Bush a hard act to follow.

Obama has pledged that deepening ties with India are a "first-order priority for me," and Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon told me he was confident "that we'll take this relationship forward rapidly."

But behind the platitudes, New Delhi is nervous.

Discussions with political, security and business leaders here confirmed widespread worries that, in the words of Saurabh Shukla, senior diplomatic editor of India Today, "while it is unlikely that Obama administration will consciously reverse the policy of greater engagement with India, it has certainly raised doubts about the U.S. as a dependable strategic ally."

Though welcoming Obama's regional approach to Afghanistan, many here worry that the administration is going too far by including disputed Kashmir, claimed by both India and Pakistan. Indians recall Obama's campaign comments that Pakistan would be "less likely" to cooperate with terrorists if it could look east "with confidence" toward India. And though his portfolio no longer includes India, Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special representative for the region, has spent two visits here trying to reassure officials that Washington won't pressure India on Kashmir.

Still, "India sees a re-hyphenation of U.S. policy towards India and Pakistan," Patwant Singh, a prominent historian, told me. "New Delhi is very concerned by the administration bringing up Kashmir, which has little to do with Afghanistan."

In fact, many Indians see Obama's strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan as a threat to India — in both its means and ends. While welcoming Obama's pledge that U.S. aid to Pakistan won't be a "blank check," Indians fear that U.S. military hardware in Pakistani hands will be aimed at India.

Obama's openness to reconciliation with supposedly moderate elements of the Taliban has unnerved Indians, who object to what they call a false distinction between "good" and "bad" Taliban. "India has a Muslim population of 150 million," says Narendra Singh Sarila, a former Indian diplomat, "and if even 10 percent get swayed by the Taliban's perverted form of Islam, we would be in dire straits."

Likewise, some wonder about America's deepening economic dependence on China, which maintains claims on Indian territory and, some fear, plans to encircle India with military facilities — a "string of pearls" — across the Indian Ocean. It did not go unnoticed here that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who has declared U.S.-China ties "the most important bilateral relationship in the world," made her maiden Asia trip to Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul and Jakarta. But not New Delhi.

Finally, Indian officials wonder if its nuclear deal with the United States will be fully implemented under Ellen Tauscher, Obama's pick for his top arms control official and one of the agreement's staunchest critics in congress. Moreover, the president's nonproliferation agenda — ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, achieving a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty and obtaining Indian agreement to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — is likely to put new pressure on India to curtail its nuclear ambitions.

The bottom line? Shyam Saran, the prime minister's special envoy, recently declared that U.S. goals in the region are a "possible threat to India's interests" and, given America's "diminished predominance" in the world, New Delhi should pursue "hedging strategies," including partnerships with multiple countries. In diplomatic speak, that's a warning shot.

Obama should move quickly to shore up a relationship that is vital to so many U.S. goals. As soon as possible, he should name a new U.S. ambassador with a proven track record of strengthening U.S.-India ties, and dispatch Secretary Clinton to New Delhi to reaffirm America's strategic partnership with India, separate from Pakistan. She must make clear that U.S. aid to the Pakistani military depends on an end to its support — overt and covert — for terrorist groups that target India.

After India's current elections, when a new government is in place, Obama should add New Delhi to his expected Asia trip later this year. Claiming inspiration from Gandhi and embodying the multi-ethnic society that India celebrates, Obama — the first American president to mention "Hindus" in his inaugural address — should receive a hero's welcome among ordinary Indians.

To win over Indian elites, he should embrace India as a natural partner — not a problem — in nuclear energy, nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament, and support India's goal of a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council.

Following November's murderous attacks in Mumbai and last month's attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Pakistan, Indians know that nothing, not even their beloved cricket, can be taken for granted. Unless Washington moves quickly, Indians will be feeling the same about their once beloved American partner.