

---

# The US Presidential Elections 2008: Impact on the Indo-US Nuclear Deal

Rudra Chaudhuri

## Introducing the Debate

For almost a year, the debate on the 'N' deal has made clear the polarised, and sometimes wavering, positions held by the three most significant sub-cultures of India's national body-politik. These include the Left, who oppose the operationalisation of the 123 Agreement; the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which, according to party head L K Advani, will consider supporting the Congress only if certain laws are amended to prevent the Hyde Act from applying to India;<sup>1</sup> and the deal advocates, the Congress, which is currently busy calming the Bush Administration's growing irritation with an issue that the Americans believe should have been welcomed, even debated, but certainly not rejected by one or any of India's more important political actors.<sup>2</sup>

In the public domain, the deal proponents have been found to push the time-bound argument — sign the deal now or expect to remain outside the nuclear mainstream for another few generations. Deal opponents seem to have adopted what in military terms is sometimes referred to as “classical dead-ender strategy” — withstand the pressure to surrender by keeping the issue alive, even though the merits of the war were lost some time ago. The narrative on either side of the political spectrum has been dominated by what could be called extremist views, with little, if not scant, attention to what is actually in store for India under a McCain, Obama, or Clinton Administration. If the opponents win, will this deal, as well as all prospects of closer India-US relations, wither away into a non-retractable abyss, or is the time bound-thesis propaganda to create a pressure cooker atmosphere with all the consequences of the whistle blowing?

---

Rudra Chaudhuri is a Research Associate in the Asia Studies Programme, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), London.

A close look at the positions held by the US presidential candidates on India seems to suggest that the answer lies somewhere in-between. If the deal does not receive the support it needs in the Lok Sabha, it will hardly affect the prospects of closer US-India relations. Deal or no deal, there is enough support on Capitol Hill and within the demographic make-up of the three candidates' prospective Administrations to foster stronger ties with India. However, if this deal does not go through in the next six months, post-2009, the terms of leverage between the US and India will favour the US rather than India. Debates on The Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the settlement of the Kashmir dispute are issues that are likely to occupy greater attention than the current Bush Administration has cared to popularise – much to India's advantage. This article will extrapolate each of the three presidential candidates' position on India, provide a potential prescription of what might be expected in 2009 if this deal fails to get the nod it needs from the Left; and lastly, draw attention to the US candidates' wider foreign policy views that will have a bearing on India's interests both in the short and long term.

### **India in the US Presidential Race**

The attention to the nuclear deal and a growing strategic relationship with the US in India is hardly reciprocated in the American Press. Many might dispute this viewpoint, especially those who for long have waited for the US to recognise and endorse the merits inherent in India's democracy and geo-strategic position – a stable regional actor with a credible and safe nuclear deterrent. However, if the foreign policy issues debated in the US campaign race are anything to go by, there is little reason to believe that India belongs somewhere at the top of the agenda. India is not even mentioned in the 'issues' and foreign policy section of the three candidates' official websites.<sup>3</sup>

From the outset, this is certainly disturbing. How could India, a state whose economy boasts 8-10 per cent growth and houses one of the largest and most effective fighting forces in the world, not be discussed? This is surprising, particularly in the context of the US, a nation whose elite is obsessed by the appearance of democratic norms, particularly if these are found to exist in the Third World. In addition, India is a burgeoning economy that can be used to hedge China; and an arms consumer, which of late has indicated its desire to prepare adequately to fight the next Great War. The answer lies in the fact that 'issues', at least in the foreign policy context, have come to refer to countries and regimes that threaten, rather than complement, the so-called American way of life. Hence, India being a non-issue, should be regarded positively, not as a sign

of neglect, but of acceptance. The countries that hog the American headlines or merit a passing reference are those that are either in the midst of sectarian violence and political collapse (e.g. Iraq) or feared for hosting an “Islamic bomb” in what is increasingly seen to be the “most dangerous place on earth” (e.g. Pakistan). India, for good reasons, does not fit this bill. On the periphery of the bigger issues, each candidate has, at some point, although with little clarity, indicated what his/her position vis-à-vis India might be.

## John McCain and India

### *India Specific Policies*

John McCain, the only serious Republican candidate, has followed President Bush's lead in clearly identifying India as a “natural ally” of the US.<sup>4</sup> Adopting a pragmatic strategy to security-related issues in general, McCain's approach to India promises to continue as well as further strengthen the policies of his predecessor. Like Obama and Clinton, he voted in favour of the US-India Energy Security Cooperation Act of 2006, but unlike the Democratic hopefuls, McCain voted against ratifying the CTBT in October 1999.<sup>5</sup> McCain openly recognises that “power in the world today is moving East.”<sup>6</sup> He might support Japan's desire to occupy a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, but is also in favour of including “leading market democracies” like India in the G-8 and cementing security cooperation efforts and institutionalising economic partnerships with the subcontinent's most populous state.<sup>7</sup>

According to the *Washington Post*, McCain's “informal” advisers include Richard Armitage, Colin Powell, and Henry Kissinger.<sup>8</sup> This is certainly a mixed bag with one commonality —each of these influential foreign policy gurus has at one point or the other supported closer relations with India. Powell and Armitage did so while occupying the positions of secretary of state and deputy secretary of state during President George HW Bush's first term. Even before the September 11 attacks, Powell advocated removing all sanctions against India and pushing forward the so-called normalisation process started with the Clinton Administration.<sup>9</sup> Kissinger, on the other hand, identified within India as playing a somewhat adversarial role in his official capacity as President Nixon's

**Adopting a pragmatic strategy to security-related issues in general, McCain's approach to India promises to continue as well as further strengthen the policies of his predecessor.**

---

special assistant for national security in the early 1970s, has recently come out in support of closer US-India relations.<sup>10</sup>

If the nuclear deal does not go through in the next six months and if McCain wins the presidency, he is more likely to reassert support for the deal without wasting much time in deliberations over whether it is politically wise to wait for the dust to settle in India. The fact that McCain is being advised by deal proponents such as Ashley Tellis is certainly telling. Tellis was the behind-the-scenes point man on the deal during the initial periods of negotiation. He has since supported the passage of this deal in the US Congress.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, with India been given less attention in the American media, the objective conditions exist for supporting the incumbent policies that would otherwise have to be tweaked or even changed because of McCain's desire to distance his viewpoints from those of the less popular Bush Administration.<sup>12</sup>

Having demonstrated that McCain will possibly be amenable to the idea of supporting the deal, it must be borne in mind that McCain is a realist as much as a pragmatist. While his Administration will perhaps not want to change the lettering of the deal itself, there is some possibility that a McCain White House may add a caveat or two if the deal is still in limbo. If it has not yet been operationalised in India, questions with regards to the CTBT and the FMCT may arise. McCain has come out in the open declaring that he will not support the ratification of the CTBT, but that does not mean that he would not want the same for states like India. Early indications suggest that McCain will not use these treaties as leverage, but from the Indian government's point of view, this must not be taken for granted and should be an area of concern.

### *McCain and Iran: A Disastrous Proposition for India*

As the narrative above suggests, McCain has all the makings of an ideal executive from the Indian point of view. However, the major problem with a McCain presidency has less to do with its potential India-specific policies, and more to do with the hawkish, if not dangerous view held by McCain, the individual, on Iran, the significant exception to his otherwise practical approaches to national security. Iran is as essential to India's national security interests as any future relationship with the US – no matter how beneficial it might be or how many G-8 sorts of groupings India might suddenly find itself a member of. Under McCain, there is a good chance that the heated rhetoric between the US and Iran may turn into something a little more decisive. Future talks with the EU-3 and further deliberations between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are not going to change this

president's image of Iran – as a state destined to wreak havoc for Western civilisations, which, of course, includes Israel. Consistent with the position held by his predecessor, he is willing to act outside of the UN framework through a group of “like-minded countries”.<sup>13</sup>

McCain does not hesitate to label Iran as “the world’s chief state sponsor of terrorism.”<sup>14</sup> Iran is viewed as a state that has actively supported the Shia militia in southern Iraq. Iran’s alleged role in Iraq, as well as the friction in US–Iran relations due to Iran’s alleged desire to build nuclear weapons, provides someone like McCain good reasons to attack Iran. The nature of the attack could range from selective strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities to heightened military presence on the Iran-Iraq border region. In either case, action against Iran will have a devastating impact on India.

In the present strategic context, widespread instability in western Afghanistan, where Iranian influence is well established, rising oil prices and a forced disruption of container transport through the Strait of Hormuz will almost immediately follow. This does not bode well for India. Particularly at a time when world oil prices, expected to shoot up to \$ 200 a barrel,<sup>15</sup> have increased the cost of trade and transport, much to the disadvantage of developing states. Within India, it is a fallacy to think that a US-led attack against Iran could be treated as an issue external to India’s relations with the US or Iran. Existing Indo-Iranian relations, not to speak of energy cooperation and technological exchanges between the two countries, already comprise a major issue in both Houses of the US Congress. McCain is as hawkish as practical. If his Administration decides to attack Iran, there is no reason to believe that the US will not attempt to force India to cut off relations with Iran. This request might not find expression in the ‘*with us or against us*’ rhetoric, but the suggestion itself might be enough to distance Iran, at least temporarily, from India’s strategic domain.

**Within India, it is a fallacy to think that a US-led attack against Iran could be treated as an issue external to India’s relations with the US or Iran.**

---

## **Hillary Clinton and India**

Hillary Clinton should have been the top American candidate from the Indian point of view. She is popular amongst the Indian-American community, so much so that the Obama campaign even referred to her as the Democrat from Punjab — (D-Punjab).<sup>16</sup> She co-sponsored, and currently chairs, the Senate India

caucus in the US Senate.<sup>17</sup> Her campaign is widely funded by rich second and third generation Indians living in the US.<sup>18</sup> As first lady, she has travelled to India on two occasions, and is familiar to India's political elite. For a country that is less mentioned in the issues debates in the US, what more could India ask for? Here is a candidate with some working knowledge of India, at least when compared to McCain, or her Democratic rival.

However, when it comes to Clinton, there are also multiple problems that cannot be overshadowed by a caucus that is barely functional and past experience which might just go against India's interests than support them.<sup>19</sup> If Clinton becomes president, and if the nuclear deal is still in limbo, there is a significant possibility that the Clinton Administration will want to push the deal issue to the backbench, at least for some time. This will not mean the eventual downfall of the deal—it will be intended to give the Democrats a little more time to figure out a strategy for India. In this time, the focus will be shifted to three issues, albeit with differing amounts of pressure being placed on the Indian government. The first two will revolve around the CTBT and the FMCT, and the last, although less publicised, the issue of Kashmir. The terms of debate between the US and India will not be very different to those discussed between Strobe Talbot and Jaswant Singh at the close of the last century. The Clinton Administration will almost certainly revert to a leverage-based policy on India, something along the lines of *accept our benchmarks and the US will make sure that the nuclear deal continues to receive the support it deserves*.

Amongst these benchmarks, Clinton will make it clear to India that the existing lettering of the deal will remain somewhat intact if India agrees to sign the CTBT and may be even the FMCT. Clinton's position in this regard will be difficult to fend off for one good reason. She will assert her position in the early days of her presidency to convince the US Congress to ratify the CTBT,<sup>20</sup> which has been pending the nod ever since President Bill Clinton signed the treaty in 1999, but failed to convince a Republican Congress to ratify it. Until the US Congress actually ratifies the CTBT, India will be able to maintain the position adopted by the Vajpayee government between January and October 1999 – to wait and see. However, if the US Congress does ratify the CTBT in 2009, there will be no option for India but to sign the treaty. If India refuses to sign the CTBT, the nuclear deal will simply no longer be available to India. In addition, and depending on the political mood within the non-proliferation lobby, many of whom are ardent Democrats, there is fair reason to believe that some of the advantages currently guaranteed to India in the deal might risk review. The Democrats might insist on an inspection regime that covers all 22 military and

civilian reactors, rather than the 14 civilian reactors agreed to by the Republicans and the IAEA.

### **Barack Obama and India**

Barack Obama has all the makings of a president that arouse enthusiasm amongst those tired of old school politicians and desperate for “change”. In India, the New Delhi elite are certainly impressed by Obama’s desire to work with new ideas. However, Obama’s position on India seems far more rigorous and less understanding than McCain’s. From the

outset, this is worrying. However, as this section will explain, if Obama wins the presidency, there are reasons to believe that his Administration will be a force for good as far as India is concerned. This does not mean that India’s apparent and immediate interest — the passage of the nuclear deal—will be guaranteed with all the existing terms intact but it does mean that under Obama, the region, and the world as a whole, will witness a degree of stability creeping back into a somewhat disaccorded international system, much to India’s strategic advantage.

With regard to the nuclear deal, Obama’s position has been a little bit more extreme, or perhaps conventional, than Clinton’s. While he voted for the US-India Energy Security Cooperation Act of 2006, he was a strong advocate of stopping India from accumulating fuel for imported reactors. His objections took the form of what is often referred to as the Obama Amendment inserted in Title I of the Senate Bill.<sup>21</sup> If the nuclear deal is still in an indeterminate state by the time Obama enters the White House, there should be no reason to believe that his Administration will allow India to continue to debate the deal in its present form. An Obama Administration will work hard to amend parts of the deal whilst making its passage conditional upon India signing the CTBT, and to a lesser degree, the FMCT. Also, a potential problem with Obama is his stated position to resolve the dispute over Kashmir.<sup>22</sup> US involvement in a potential Kashmir settlement dialogue will reverse rather than inflate the limited goodwill between India and Pakistan, making it even more difficult to reach an arrangement that is acceptable to both nations. No matter what the next US Administration’s approach to the Kashmir question might be, any attempt, overt or otherwise, to facilitate a settlement dialogue will inadvertently lead to a rise

**An Obama Administration will work hard to amend parts of the deal whilst making its passage conditional upon India signing the CTBT, and to a lesser degree, the FMCT.**

---

in tensions between these two states. If Obama becomes the next US president, the Indian government will have to constantly be wary of the Kashmir question in any dealings with the new Administration.

Beyond the worries arising out of Obama's position on the 'N' deal as well as Kashmir, there are good reasons to believe that an Obama Administration will work hard to assist India's political and strategic growth. In this context, and with reference to India's core interests, it is necessary to appreciate what might be referred to as the second layer of analysis – looking at the policies of those in the Obama campaign who will matter if he is elected president. One such person is Bruce Riedel, Obama's point man on South Asia, and the man in-charge of President Clinton's visit to India in March 2000. Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer and National Security Council staffer for Near East and Asian Affairs, not only understands India but, more importantly, seems to appreciate the Indian point of view on contentious issues. For instance, reflecting on the Talbot-Jaswant Singh dialogue in 1999-2000 Riedel recognised the "irony" of asking India to sign the CTBT when the Senate refused to ratify it.<sup>23</sup>

On the nuclear deal, Riedel's position is fairly clear. In a paper recently written with Karl Inderfurth for the Brookings Institution, both authors advocate continuing the engagement practices of the former Clinton and present Bush Administrations. They recommend implementing the nuclear deal as well as supporting a permanent Indian seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>24</sup> Riedel has clearly and unequivocally stated that "India is a nuclear weapons state, and the wise policy is to accept that and move on." He has argued that despite the politics surrounding the deal there will be no "roll back" to a "pre-1998-standard". In the next stage of India-US relations, a stage referred to as "policy-continuity-plus" by Riedel and Inderfurth,<sup>25</sup> India will be better served by a US president with a strong pro-India Administration, like Obama's, that is forward looking and accepting of the individual relationship shared between the US and India.

Outside of India's immediate security interests, President Obama can be expected to work hard to de-emphasise America's post 9/11 war-like approach to international problems. This will help in reducing tensions between states like Iran and the US, much to India's advantage. Obama appears to support the sort of diplomacy that engages rather than isolates actors that are seen to deviate from the established norms of international relations. His approach to Iran leaves hope for dialogue without pushing too hard on the "all options are on the table" line.<sup>26</sup> Under Obama, the US will most likely be partial to a

European approach to international politics, which believes in reconciliation and engagement, rather than the use of force as a primary agent of coercion. Such an approach will come in handy when the US finally decides to settle its differences with Iran, something Obama can be expected to work towards. This will help India to continue dealing with Iran, as it has for centuries in the past, without having to risk compromising relations with the US. Given this general inclination in Obama's approach to international politics, his policies can be expected to be less jagged than those adopted by McCain. Under Obama, India will still be expected to provide a soft balance vis-à-vis China, but not the sharp hedging expected by McCain. This is important. While the Indian government in itself would have fended off a harsher approach to China, especially if it were forced onto India by the US, under Obama, an atmosphere of engagement will help distance the strong balance of power rhetoric from the region, assisting China and India to work out the pressing border problems without any worry of interference from outside.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, on the issues that most concern India, McCain will perhaps prove to be the most useful US president for Indian strategic interests. However, as a growing power, it is important to look beyond what happens within our own borders or in immediately neighbouring areas. As discussed, an attack on Iran will have tangible, immediate and negative ramifications for India. As for the Democrats, while Obama is the better choice, there is little doubt that issues relating to the nuclear deal will be reviewed, bargained, and the eventual progress of the deal itself will be left an open question. These are the various perspectives amidst America's future presidents. In India, every sub-culture needs to understand the merits or the demerits of this deal, as the case may be, from the perspective of the future. The options are clear – support it now and the concessions will be minimal. In addition, the Kashmir issue will not be brought into the fray, Pakistan will remain isolated from a growing Indo-US friendship, the current strategic deterrent and oversight of our reactors will not risk review, and the bargaining position in future years will be more equitable than if we choose to postpone the passing of this deal.

Conversely, if India is to wait, for whatever ideological or political reasons, the advantages cited above will no longer be certain. No matter how we identify with the current conditions of the deal, these are advantages when compared to what could be expected in the fairly near future. If the deal does not go through now, there is little probability that the deal will die or that future US

Administrations, Republican or Democratic, will permanently backbench it. This deal, one way or the other will be passed by India and the US, either in the next six months, in January 2009, or perhaps a little after. The question surrounding the deal no longer hinges on whether or *if* it should be passed – it relies on what form it will be passed in.

## Notes

1. L K Advani, "Walk the Talk with Shekhar Gupta," *Indian Express*, March 31, 2008. Available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/story/290274.html>
2. Notably, during a visit to Washington in the end of March 2008, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee could offer no concrete assurances of the deal being accepted by the Indian Parliament. "US-India Nuclear Deal's Future Uncertain," *The Boston Globe*, April 4, 2008. Available at <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5hjHnPz7XX0WpdjPiswhHLvaXj0pAD8VR0NLO0>
3. See (1) Hillary Clinton's official campaign website: <http://www.hilaryclinton.com/issues/> (2) John McCain's official campaign website: <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/> (3) Barrack Obama's official campaign website: <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/>
4. Note: For McCain, 'natural allies' also include Japan, South Korea, Australia, Israel, Turkey, South Africa and Brazil. See M K Bhadrakumar, "Travelling with the McCain Presidency," *Indian Express*, April 2, 2008.
5. For a brief comparative analysis of the US presidential candidate's stance on India, see: "The Candidates on US Policy Towards India," *Council on Foreign Relations* Available at: [http://www.cfr.org/publication/14750/usindia\\_policy.html?breadcrumb=%2F](http://www.cfr.org/publication/14750/usindia_policy.html?breadcrumb=%2F)
6. John McCain, "An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom: Securing America's Future," *Foreign Affairs*, 86:6, November/December 2007: 27
7. Ibid.
8. A list of advisers for each candidate can be found at "The War Over the Wonks," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2007. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/opinions/documents/the-war-over-the-wonks.html>
9. The Bush Administration's early endeavours to forge closer relations with India have been summarised in Colin Powell. "A Strategy of Partnerships," *Foreign Affairs*, 83:1, January/February 2004.
10. "Don't Delay, Seal Deal Quickly: Kissinger to India," *Indian Express*, October 30, 2007.
11. For details on Tellis' role, see: (1) "People Behind the Deal," *The Times of India*, March 3, 2006; (2) "Those Who Made the Deal Happen," *Indian Express*, March 4, 2006; (3) "All the PM's Men," *Hindustan Times*, March 5, 2006.

12. Something that was recently publicly acknowledged by President Bush. See Toby Harnden, "President Bush Says Goodbye at the White House Correspondents Association Dinner," *The Telegraph* (London), April 29, 2008.
13. McCain, "An Enduring Peace," p. 22.
14. Ibid.
15. For details, see Nader Elhefnawy, "The Impending Oil Shock," *Survival*, 50:2, April/May 2008, pp. 38-66.
16. "D-Punjab—Funny Dig or Low Blow," *Chicago Tribune*, June 15, 2005. Available at [http://blogs.chicagotribune.com/news\\_columnists\\_ezorn/2007/06/dpunjab\\_funny\\_d.html](http://blogs.chicagotribune.com/news_columnists_ezorn/2007/06/dpunjab_funny_d.html)
17. Details of Hillary Clinton's role as an advocate for Indian Interests can be found in Aziz Haniffa, "Hillary Pledges to Strengthen US-India Ties," *Rediff India Abroad*, February 24, 2008. Available at: <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/feb/04hillary.htm>
18. For details, see Josh Gerstein, "Clinton Taps Newly Active Indian Donors," *The New York Sun*, June 12, 2007. Available at: <http://www2.nysun.com/article/56332>
19. For a brief of the Friends of India Caucus, see Ramtanu Maitra, "China's Shadow over India's US Lobby," *Asia Times Online*, September 13, 2005. Available at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/GI13Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/GI13Df01.html)
20. Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Security and Opportunity for the Twenty-first Century," *Foreign Affairs*, 86:6, November/December 2007p. 12.
21. "Senate Panel Nod for N Deal," *The Hindu*, June 30, 2006.
22. For details on Barack Obama's policies, see Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4, July/August 2008.
23. For details on Riedel's position on post-Pokhran II India, see Bruce Riedel, "South Asia's Nuclear Decade," *Survival*, 50:2, April-May 2008, pp. 115-123
24. Bruce Riedel and Karl Inderfurth, "Breaking New Ground with India Builds a Valuable Indo-US Strategic Partnership," Brookings Institution, April, 2008. Available at: [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/0408\\_india\\_riedel\\_opp08.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/0408_india_riedel_opp08.aspx)
25. Riedel & Inderfurth, "Breaking New Ground with India."
26. Obama, "Renewing American Leadership." Also see Riedel, "South Asia's Nuclear Decade."