In a 1983 address to the American people at the height of the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan proposed “a long-term research and development program . . . to achieve our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles.” As Reagan readily acknowledged, atomic weaponry had bequeathed a remarkable equilibrium to the postwar international system. Yet, even when second-strike inventories were impregnable and their associated command and control mechanisms robust, strategic stability ultimately derived from the promise of horrendous retaliation. Calling this fact “a sad commentary on the human condition,” the president challenged the U.S. scientific community to develop the technical capabilities necessary “to intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies.”1 Such an endeavor ought to have been welcomed by a world that had grown increasingly fearful of nuclear war. Instead, Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was derided at home and abroad. Within the United States, it became the subject of a harsh and galvanizing political controversy, and was pilloried on political, technical, economic, and strategic grounds.2 Internationally, it was perceived as an undesirable escalation of the nuclear arms race and received a reception, abetted by the Soviet Union, that ranged from deep skepticism to extreme hostility.3

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India, a leader of the Nonaligned Movement, then comprising close to two-thirds of the United Nations’ membership, joined in this opposition as well. Although Indira Gandhi, the prime minister in New Delhi at the time, had made concerted efforts to mend fences with the United States since 1981, she nevertheless criticized SDI obliquely at the UN General Assembly in September 1983.4 Her minister for external affairs, P.V. Narasimha Rao, was more direct. He “warned that extension of [the] arms buildup to outer space would mean a permanent goodbye to disarmament and peace and [would] plunge mankind into a perpetual nightmare.” The resulting escalation “would either blow up the entire globe to smithereens or reduce humanity to a state of utter helplessness, making it a permanent hostage to terror from within and hegemony from without.”5 Not surprisingly, then, India’s ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament (CD), Muchkund Dubey, formally opposed the Reagan initiative in 1985 at the CD in Geneva and called for negotiations to prevent an arms race in outer space.6 The doyen of Indian defense analysts, K. Subrahmanyam, succinctly summed up the basis for India’s opposition when he wrote, “If till now both sides had only swords to ªght with, now one side is declaring its intent to get itself a shield also.”7

Fast-forward to 2001, when President George W. Bush enters ofªce determined to bring to fruition what Reagan had previously begun. Between these two presidencies, however, the world had changed. The Soviet Union was no more, and the superpower arms race that defined, threatened, but paradoxically stabilized great power competition for close to fifty years was relegated to a memory. Yet the threats to the United States were perceived not to have disappeared but only changed in form and intensity. These changing dangers— “rang[ing] from terrorists who threaten with bombs to tyrants in rogue nations intent upon developing weapons of mass destruction”8—were recognized well before 2001, but it took a revolutionary figure such as President Bush to opt for a solution that was just as controversial as that proposed

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by Ronald Reagan some two decades earlier. In unveiling a “new framework for security and stability” in May 2001, President Bush proposed a course of action that would reduce the size of U.S. nuclear forces; emphasize nonproliferation and strengthen counterproliferation; and, most contentiously, resurrect strategic defenses by discarding the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Noting that the treaty “ignore[d] the fundamental breakthroughs in technology during the last 30 years” and prohibited the United States “from exploring all options for defending against the threats that face us, our allies and other countries,” Bush concluded that the treaty should be replaced “with a new framework that reflects a clear and clean break from the past, and especially from the adversarial legacy of the Cold War.”

Like the SDI of the early 1980s, Bush’s missile defense plans were politically polarizing. Domestically, the plans were criticized as misguided, ineffective, expensive, and destabilizing, in part because they threatened to attenuate the effectiveness of the Russian and Chinese nuclear deterrents. Internationally, the global community—still wedded to the linkage between strategic stability and mutual vulnerability—viewed the Bush initiative as yet another example of American unilateralism, recklessness, and patent disregard for world opinion. There were no endorsements of the plan from the major European and Asian partners of the United States, as all struggled to digest the import of Bush’s intended actions for their own security. Even those sympathetic to the president were wary of the consequences of provoking Moscow and Beijing into a new buildup of strategic offensive forces and possibly competing defenses as well.

This time, however, there was one conspicuous exception to the general opposition: India. After a conversation between National Security Adviser


Condoleezza Rice and Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh, the Indian Foreign Ministry lauded President Bush’s new framework for “seek[ing] to transform the strategic parameters on which the Cold War security architecture was built.” This endorsement by the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee provoked controversy both within the country and the international community, which had grown used to decades of Indian opposition to U.S. nuclear initiatives. Within India, some analysts asked whether the government was proffering “an over-hasty endorsement” of Bush’s plans. Dubey, who had previously expressed Indian opposition to Reagan’s SDI, for example, cautioned that those who support the president’s proposals ought to realize “that ‘rogue states’ and ‘friends’ are flexible categories and the inclusion in and exclusion from these categories will depend upon how far a particular country is subservient to the U.S. interests.” In contrast, Subrahmanyam, who had earlier opposed SDI, now complimented the Indian government’s support of Bush’s ideas, arguing that “there should be no hasty judgments in this country on the nature of the U.S. national missile defense or its further implications.”

This article analyzes the shift in Indian positions on missile defense in the context of the growing transformation of U.S.-Indian relations since the end of the Cold War and particularly since the advent of the George W. Bush administration. In assessing how New Delhi’s earlier opposition to strategic defenses gave way to its current consideration of missile defense as part of its national deterrent, the article suggests that structural factors related to the dissolution of U.S.-Indian antagonism (which previously was provoked by the bipolar configuration of the Cold War) played an important permissive role. However, the growing common recognition of the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles in the hands of hostile states intent on nuclear coercion was also vitally important. Finally, the desire of both New Delhi and Washington to forge a new partnership grounded in democratic values but ultimately oriented toward promoting geopolitical equilibrium in Asia in the face of rising challengers such as China and problem states such as Pakistan, combined with the other factors to produce a dramatic new acceptance of strategic defenses as conducive to stability on the part of New Delhi. What is fascinating about this evolution is the manner in which missile defenses have come to reflect both an example of, and a means toward, the steady improvement in U.S.-Indian ties occurring in recent years.

With an eye to examining this issue in some detail, this article is divided into five sections. The first section describes India’s attitudes toward strategic defenses during the Cold War, when New Delhi struggled to preserve India’s national security amid both superpower competition and its own quest for global disarmament. The second section analyzes India’s views regarding strategic defense in the post–Cold War era, particularly during President Bill Clinton’s administration when New Delhi strenuously sought to preserve its nuclear option amid U.S. nonproliferation pressures and ultimately became a nuclear weapons state as a result of the multiple tests conducted in May 1998. The third section assesses India’s growing interest in strategic defenses against the backdrop of transforming U.S.-Indian relations in the first year of the Bush presidency. The fourth section explores why India eventually committed itself to acquiring missile defenses in the context of the global war on terrorism, Pakistani proliferation behavior, and Islamabad’s attempts at nuclear coercion during the 2001–02 Indo-Pakistani crisis. Lastly, the conclusion suggests likely directions in India’s efforts regarding missile defense in the future.

Indian Attitudes toward Strategic Defenses during the Cold War

The stridency of the early Indian opposition to missile defense was inextricably linked to New Delhi’s attitude toward the global nuclear order of the Cold War, which originated near the time of India’s independence. The attainment of that independence through nonviolent mass nationalism was a formative experience for the first generation of India’s security managers. Their resulting worldview was expressed in such themes as anticolonialism, nonalignment, disarmament, development, and the quest for a new world order. Consequently, postindependence Indian grand strategy exhibited a natural antipathy to bloc rivalries and the resulting arms races that created, in Jawaharlal Nehru’s words, a “crisis of spirit” assaulting human dignity, frustrating economic development, and subverting democratic order.18

This attitude so dominated India’s strategic consciousness that when the country first tested a nuclear device in 1974—more to showcase its advanced scientific capabilities than to develop a nuclear arsenal—New Delhi consciously refrained from weaponization for as long as possible in the hope that national security could still be procured through complete and universal nuclear disarmament. The need for a nuclear deterrent was energetically debated in India since at least the first Chinese nuclear test in 1964. Despite the threat to

Indian security represented by that event, Indian political leaders did not elect to develop a nuclear arsenal. That decision occurred only in 1989, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, responding to the suspected Pakistani acquisition of nuclear capabilities in 1987, authorized the weaponization of India's nuclear device designs—but not before he had made one last-ditch effort at global disarmament through his Action Plan unveiled at the United Nations the year before. The Indian quest for national security through comprehensive global nuclear disarmament, thus, had a long and cherished history.\(^{19}\)

India perceived SDI as undermining this fundamental goal. In New Delhi’s view, it threatened to lead to more expensive and unnecessary arms racing, thus frustrating India’s long-standing quest to transform the postwar international order to the advantage of weaker states. Even worse, Indian strategists feared the new initiative would undermine deterrence itself. Although Indian officials were profoundly uncomfortable with the doctrine of mutual deterrence because of its focus on procuring stability through threats of annihilation, they recognized it as a second-best foundation for global order until comprehensive disarmament could be completed. Any efforts to asymmetrically break out of mutual deterrence were therefore perceived to be deeply problematic since it strengthened, as one Indian analyst put it, “the satanic idea of fighting and winning a nuclear war.” The SDI program was particularly problematic in this context because although it was “presented to the U.S. public as a total astrodome defense of [the] American population,” it made “little sense against a hypothetical full-scale Soviet nuclear attack. It could make sense [however] as a shield against a depleted Soviet attack, after an American first strike. The essence of Star Wars [was] thus to deny the Soviets an ability to retaliate, thus completing U.S. strategic superiority.”\(^{20}\)

New Delhi’s opposition to SDI was motivated also by apprehensions about its effects on India’s own security. A U.S. defensive shield that provoked a countervailing buildup of Soviet offensive forces could precipitate an expansion of Chinese nuclear capabilities, including those aimed at India. More important, however, Indian policymakers saw two practical outcomes ensuing from SDI, both of which were deleterious to New Delhi. If the United States were to succeed in neutralizing ballistic missiles, the resulting defeat of India’s principal superpower patron, the Soviet Union, would undermine the political

\(^{19}\) For a superb overview of this history, see George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). See also the successive statements in Gopal Singh and S.K. Sharma, eds., *Documents on India’s Nuclear Disarmament Policy*, Vols. 1, 2, and 3 (New Delhi: Anamika, 2000).

cover provided by the Indo-Soviet alliance during the latter part of the Cold War. Alternatively, “if the Soviet Union were to succeed in keeping up with the U.S., then the international system would revert to the age of bipolarity of the fifties when the U.S. had to face only the military challenge of the Soviet Union but not the economic and technological challenge of West Europe and Japan and [the] political challenge of the nonaligned [world].”

This would force New Delhi into a tighter embrace of Moscow than it desired; reduce the number of rising powers that could extend India political, military, and technological support; and undermine the evolution toward multipolarity that could make India a pivotal power.

India therefore opposed SDI, just as it had resisted various earlier doctrines of nuclear deterrence. Although the Reagan initiative could have, if successful, avoided the problem India found most troubling—the preservation of international stability through the threatened murder of innocents—such benefits, which were not assured to begin with, came with other high costs, including a continuing arms race between the superpowers; a further movement away from the ideals of disarmament; increased pressure on its superpower patron, the Soviet Union; a potentially expanded nuclear threat from its key Asian rival, China; and a threatening shift toward unipolarity or further tightened bipolarity. Consequently, New Delhi took a position opposed to that of the United States at the very time when Washington was proposing new ways of breaking out of the nuclear trap that India had traditionally denounced and when New Delhi was in fact trying to improve bilateral relations with Washington.

Throughout the 1980s, while the United States pursued various SDI initiatives, India focused on its own nuclear weapons program at two levels. Overtly, Indian diplomats sought to draw international attention to Islamabad’s steady new acquisition of nuclear capabilities, while seeking to prevent the emergence of international political or legal restraints on India’s right to develop a nuclear arsenal. Covertly, given growing evidence of both continuing Chinese proliferation of nuclear weapons technology to Pakistan
and Islamabad’s progress toward acquiring nuclear weaponry, Indian nuclear research and development turned toward completing the preparatory work necessary to weaponize India’s 1974 device design.24

Preservation of Strategic Options in the Post–Cold War Era

India’s 1989 decision to weaponize its nuclear capabilities occurred when its strategic circumstances were on the cusp of a shattering transformation. With the end of the Cold War, India lost its principal foreign protector. The demise of the Soviet Union also undermined the capabilities and readiness of the Indian armed forces, which had come to rely on East bloc military equipment. During this same time, the country was racked by a major financial crisis that nearly depleted its foreign exchange reserves and left the state on the verge of default. All of these factors, as well as the ascendance of Pakistan and China after the fall of the Soviet Union, increased India’s reliance on its newly, albeit covertly, weaponized nuclear capabilities.25

Further complicating matters for India were its changing relations with the United States. At one level, the demise of bipolarity meant that U.S.-Indian relations could improve free from superpower rivalry. This led the United States and India to seek the rapprochement that eluded them in previous decades. Diplomatic dialogue picked up; a modest effort at defense cooperation was initiated; and efforts to expand the relationship in new spheres began to receive attention on both sides. As economic reforms progressed, India began to be viewed as a “big emerging market” worthy of new U.S. consideration and respect.26 Yet this positive attention was increasingly overshadowed, from New Delhi’s perspective, by two problematic elements in U.S. foreign policy: the Clinton administration’s efforts to constrain Indian nuclear and missile programs and its plans to develop a missile defense system. These policies were animated by concern over regional military conflicts, state failures, ethnic or religious violence, humanitarian catastrophes, and above all, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, a problem that would come to dominate U.S. foreign policy toward South Asia by the mid-1990s.27

To New Delhi, this growing American concern about proliferation implied

24. From Surprise to Reckoning, p. 205.
25. For an early view of India’s problems at the end of the Cold War, see Ross Munro, “The Loser: India in the 1990s,” National Interest, No. 32 (Summer 1993), pp. 62-69.
an increasingly hostile U.S. attitude toward the Indian, and Pakistani, nuclear weapon programs when both states had become increasingly dependent on these capabilities. India’s worst fears were confirmed when the Clinton administration formally embarked on an effort “to cap and reduce and finally eliminate [the] nuclear and missile capabilities” of both South Asian states.\textsuperscript{28} In the face of this objective, which Washington pursued through constant diplomatic haranguing and sharply constraining the dual-use technologies available to New Delhi, India became even more intent on preserving its covert strategic capabilities. Consequently, successive Indian governments found themselves enmeshed in a frustrating altercation with the United States about the goals and direction of India’s nuclear weapons program as well as the deleterious consequences for India of various U.S.-led international technology control regimes.

Time, however, was not on India’s side. As part of its effort against global proliferation, the United States managed—to New Delhi’s surprise—to indefinitely extend the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1995. This extension implied that India would forever be outside the elite group of treaty-legitimized “nuclear weapon states.” Indefinite extension also meant India lost the bargaining power embodied in its covert nuclear weaponry: because all the signatories unanimously agreed to the NPT’s indefinite extension in its original form, India could no longer threaten to demonstrate its nuclear assets to secure its inclusion among the legitimate nuclear weapon states.\textsuperscript{29} When the United States decided to pursue the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), India, spurred in part by a change of government, finally shed its nuclear ambiguity. Although the Congress government of the early-to-mid 1990s contemplated resuming nuclear tests, the 1998 victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—dominated National Democratic Alliance finally led India to a series of nuclear tests that startled the international community. In retrospect, the successful conclusion of the CTBT negotiations had ironically accelerated the Indian decision toward renewed testing.\textsuperscript{30}

India also observed with interest the emerging U.S. debate about the necessity of missile defenses in the post–Cold War era. The new era, many observers


\textsuperscript{29} For a systematic examination of why the traditional Indian posture of “keeping the option open” could not survive the various political developments of the 1990s, see Ashley J. Tellis, \textit{India's Emerging Nuclear Posture} (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001), pp. 168–211.

argued, brought with it new and growing dangers to the American people from ballistic missiles armed with nuclear, chemical, or biological warheads. The threat posed by terrorists, rogue regimes, and failing states armed with WMD-tipped missiles was exacerbated by weak command and control systems in established nuclear states such as Russia and China. The Clinton administration was criticized for delaying the deployment of antiballistic missile defenses, even though such systems were well within the technological grasp of the United States.31

The Clinton administration responded to such concerns haphazardly. It first focused on ballistic missile threats posed by rogue regimes and weak command and control systems in established nuclear powers. It then shifted its research and development efforts to an emphasis on theater—rather than national—missile defenses. This occurred in part because the administration’s political discomfort with missile defense as a strategic solution was complemented by its appreciation of the enormous technical and operational challenges confronting the successful deployment of any national missile defense system. The Rumsfeld commission, a congressionally mandated expert group set up to examine ballistic missile threats to the United States, issued a report that jolted this concentration on theater defense systems.32 Concluding that the global proliferation of long-range ballistic missiles was not only a growing threat but also materializing at a rapid and unseen pace, the report fueled congressional and elite pressures that compelled the Clinton administration to again reemphasize defenses against long-range missiles.

New Delhi’s perceptions of Clinton’s missile defense plans were affected by several considerations. The emerging U.S. missile defenses could influence the prevailing offensive-dominant character of the global nuclear regime, in turn having important implications for the size, shape, and technical character of the nuclear forces that India might develop for its own security. Although the United States was never imagined to be the target of India’s nuclear weapons, its missile defense decisions were viewed as important to the survival of the offensive-dominant global nuclear regime on which India relied for the continued effectiveness of its small deterrent. With relatively survivable delivery forces and reasonable warhead yields, India’s small nuclear forces could function as highly credible deterrents in South Asia—as long as the prevailing offense-dominant nuclear regime remained intact. If the U.S.-led transition to

defense dominance gathered steam, India would need not only to increase the size, diversity, and technical effectiveness of its offensive forces but also to obtain missile defenses of its own.33

U.S. missile defense plans were also likely to evoke counterresponses from Russia and China. An Indian analyst, Brahma Chellaney, noted that India would be affected first by the new arms race in Asia that would be occasioned by U.S. missile defenses, second by the increased threat from China’s buildup of nuclear and missile armories, and third by likely Chinese sales of its older missile systems to Pakistan.34 Many Indian analysts, accordingly, decried the newest U.S. plans for missile defense,35 but some recognized advantages accruing to their country. As Chellaney argued, any U.S. effort that helped “limit China’s growing power and arrogance should aid India’s interests,” and so India, “with its growing friendship with the United States, should not in principle be opposed to NMD.”36

What was most intriguing to New Delhi about American plans was the possibility of a missile defense umbrella being extended to friends and allies. If this idea were to advance, even as part of a strategy to cement U.S. hegemony globally, India could “avail itself of such benefits and reduce its burden of developing appropriate countermeasures against a burgeoning Chinese missile might.”37 Even if a missile defense system were not deployed over India, U.S. efforts to develop one would still affect Indian strategy. If Washington, for example, were to develop a ground-based terminal defense for the continental United States, such a capability would provide few positive externalities that could be exploited by countries such as India. The deployment of complex layered defenses that included airborne or space-based boost phase interceptors, airborne lasers, and sea-based theater missile defenses, however, could make a significant political difference to countries such as India because a potentially aggressive future Chinese (or Pakistani) regime might have to confront these capabilities being made available to neutral or friendly powers. Because such systems need not be transferred to a protected nation or even deployed to that nation’s territory, their development could allow Washington to influence proliferation decisions in many countries as well as crisis stability in war-prone regions such as South Asia.

37. Ibid., pp. 150–151.
The official Indian response to the U.S. missile defense debate in the 1990s was therefore relatively muted. Although Indian officials remained concerned about the impact of U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) programs, their opposition was couched in very general terms. In part, this reticence was conditioned by international and domestic political concerns. The demise of the Soviet Union, its erstwhile protector, made the Indian government more reluctant to pick rhetorical fights with the United States when India was also facing great economic stress, various secessionist pressures, and a concerted U.S.-led international nonproliferation campaign. India was concerned about how the American missile defense efforts might affect its strategic environment, but as it moved toward unveiling its own nuclear capabilities, it was careful not to become overly disputatious about U.S. missile defense programs or to dismiss strategic defenses that might eventually help ameliorate its own security predicament.38

Such delicate approaches were swept away by the international outrage to India’s 1998 nuclear tests. Led by the United States and China, the permanent five members of the UN Security Council sought to roll back the Indian (and Pakistani) nuclear weapons programs, leading to UN Security Council resolution 1172 calling on both India and Pakistan “immediately to stop their nuclear weapon development programmes, to refrain from weaponization or from the deployment of nuclear weapons, to cease development of ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons and any further production of fissile material for nuclear weapons,” and “to become Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty without delay and without conditions.”39

Dealing with an unenforceable UN resolution was not particularly difficult for New Delhi. More burdensome were the international economic and trade sanctions that followed, particularly those imposed by the United States. The increased Indian presence on the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Entity List, which grew from a handful of institutions before 1998 to some 200 strong after the nuclear tests, was particularly painful. These institutions, which were now subject to stringent licensing regulations that limited their ability to import American dual-use technologies, included all the crown jewels of the Indian “strategic enclave,” major private and public sector companies, and entities

38. It is remarkable that as detailed an anthology as Singh and Sharma, Documents on India’s Nuclear Disarmament Policy, has virtually no documentation suggesting any concerted Indian opposition to U.S. missile defense programs in the 1990s, other than the ritual incantation decrying the militarization of outer space in various UN bodies.
associated with the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO), the Department of Atomic Energy, and the Indian Space Research Organization.

In the aftermath of these tests, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh engaged in a lengthy dialogue.\footnote{For details, see Strobe Talbott, Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2004).} This conversation, animated by a desire on both sides to resuscitate the improvements in the bilateral relationship that were interrupted by the nuclear tests, came to naught after Indian policymakers privately decided that they could not accept three of the five “benchmarks” proposed by Washington: signing the CTBT; accepting a moratorium on producing fissile materials; and avoiding nuclear weaponization and further missile development, testing, and deployment.\footnote{For a discussion of India’s approach to these benchmarks, see Ashley J. Tellis, “The Strategic Consequences of a Nuclear India,” Orbis, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 13–46.}

For the remainder of Clinton’s second term, India warded off U.S. pressure on its newly demonstrated strategic capabilities even as it sought the administration’s help to beat back Pakistan’s ill-conceived military aggression at Kargil, and used the occasion of President Clinton’s wildly successful March 2000 visit to India to rebuild ties with his administration. On the few occasions that Indian policymakers mentioned U.S. BMD programs during this period, they were generally disapproving. In July 2000, for example, Minister of Defense George Fernandes, when asked about American plans for national missile defense, argued that “the U.S. should give up this whole exercise as it will lead to far too many problems than we can visualize now.”\footnote{Quoted in “India Asks U.S. to Give Up Missile Testing,” Hindu, July 4, 2000.} Nevertheless, just a few days later, Fernandes was more ambivalent, noting that missile defense had the potential to undermine the concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD)—which presumably was beneficial given India’s long-standing opposition to this concept—but “more importantly, would not affect India’s nuclear program.”\footnote{Quoted in “U.S. Missile Test Won’t Affect Indian Nuclear Plans,” Hindu, July 10, 2000.}

Minister for External Affairs Singh, when asked that same month for his thoughts on U.S. missile defense, similarly averred: “We have consistently held a view that opposes the militarization of outer space.... We cannot support this development.”\footnote{“Interview with the Minister of External Affairs Mr. Jaswant Singh,” Times of India, July 24, 2000.} Indian strategic analysts discussing U.S. national missile defense programs were divided in their assessments. While many were cautiously critical of Washington because of their fears that American deployments would cause China to expand its missile inventory, others...
such as Brahma Chellaney contended that American BMD programs had no
direct relevance to Indian security in part because New Delhi did not pose any
military threat to U.S. interests in Asia.45

There are several noteworthy elements in these responses. First, although
India’s lack of enthusiasm for U.S. missile defense programs is pervasive, stri-
dent opposition like that evoked during the SDI debate is absent. In fact, the
most interesting characteristic of the Indian response is its ambivalence, re-
fecting the dilemmas of policymakers struggling to protect their own visions
of order amid a rapidly changing global nuclear regime. The equivocation of
these analyses also reflected fears over Beijing’s nuclear modernization cou-
pled with a realization that missile defenses might help mitigate any new
Chinese threats. Second, these responses reflected concern over the effects of
U.S. missile defenses on nuclear disarmament. In some ways this appears to be
quaint, given that in its 1998 nuclear tests India exploded the venerable dream
of comprehensive and total disarmament. Yet the concern about denucleariza-
tion endured as India, alone among the nuclear states, retained the distinction
of pleading for complete nuclear abolition even at the very moment it an-
nounced it was acquiring these weapons. Third, New Delhi’s responses re-
lected simultaneous efforts to defend India’s right to produce an effective
nuclear arsenal and to improve relations with the United States. The tensions
inherent in these responses could not be resolved, but they helped blunt what
might otherwise have been shrill Indian criticism of the United States. All told,
the diminution of U.S.-Indian estrangement after the Cold War, the desire of
both Washington and New Delhi to forge new beginnings despite repeated
interruptions, and the recognition in India that the United States was the
sole surviving superpower, all combined to attenuate Indian opposition to
American plans for strategic defense even when there was great uncertainty
about the implications of these initiatives for India’s own security.

Although India’s security managers did not convince the Clinton adminis-
tration to waive the post-test sanctions entirely or to pare down the Entity List
to its pre-1998 levels, they did succeed in protecting their options to develop a
nuclear deterrent by declining to sign the CTBT, eschewing a moratorium on
fissile material production, and refusing to halt nuclear weaponization and

45. For a survey of the Indian debate about missile defense during this period, see Arvind Kumar,
“Missile Defense and Strategic Modernization in Southern Asia,” in Michael Krepon and Chris
Gagné, eds., The Impact of U.S. Ballistic Missile Defenses on Southern Asia, Report No. 46 (Washing-
ton, D.C.: Henry L. Stimson Center, July 2002), pp. 29–44; Rajesh M. Basrur, “Missile Defense and
South Asia: An Indian Perspective,” in Krepon and Gagné, The Impact of U.S. Ballistic Missile De-
fenses on Southern Asia, pp. 1–20; and Green and Dalton, “Asian Reactions to U.S. Missile Defense,”
pp. 53–55.
Although U.S.-Indian relations improved despite these facts, bilateral ties could not be released from the nonproliferation straitjacket that had condemned all attempts at rapprochement since the initial Indian nuclear test in 1974. As one observer put it, the United States and India remained “stuck in a nuclear narrative” since the Clinton administration adopted the position, in the words of Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering, that the “new and qualitatively closer relationship with India . . . cannot realize its full potential without further progress on non-proliferation.”

Strategic Defenses and the Transforming U.S.-India Relationship

The first successful steps in breaking out of this constriction would have to await the Bush administration in 2001. George W. Bush stepped into office determined to consolidate U.S. primacy in the face of prospective geopolitical flux caused by new rising powers in Asia such as China. With a worldview shaped greatly by the imperative of successfully managing great power relations, Bush and his advisers saw the necessity for a transformed relationship with India. A friendly India would not only be an important balancing partner vis-à-vis a rising China, but it could also assist the United States in managing proliferation, enhancing security in the region, and spreading democracy in the developing world. With an unprecedented clarity, Bush signaled his intent to consolidate this new relationship on several occasions, even before his election. In a major 1999 campaign speech, he argued that “this coming century will see democratic India’s arrival as a force in the world. . . . India is now debating its future and its strategic path, and the United States must pay it more attention.”

Bush’s future national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, further clarified the geopolitical foundations beneath his thinking when she insisted that the United States “should pay closer attention to India’s role in the regional balance.” Chiding the Clinton administration for “connect[ing] India with Pakistan” and thinking “only of Kashmir or the nuclear competition between the two states,” she noted that “India is an element in China’s calculation, and

it should be in America’s, too.”49 The necessity for renewed U.S.-Indian relations would also figure—for the first time—in the Republican Party’s 2000 election platform and would find strong affirmation from Colin Powell, the incoming secretary of state.50 The Bush administration had served notice that developing a new relationship with India would be a priority and that such a relationship would be intense and multifaceted, going beyond the issue of nonproliferation.

India was most receptive to this message. Like the Bush administration, which sought to distance itself from the liberal internationalism of the Clinton era, the new BJP-dominated Indian government sought to overthrow the old Nehruvian framework of nonalignment in favor of selective strategic partnerships that enabled India to rebuild its national strength and take its place among the great powers.51 The Bush campaign’s frequent references to India as a rising power were sweet for a party that explicitly sought to resurrect India’s ancient greatness. Consequently, by the time President Bush unveiled his “new framework for security and stability” in May 2001, his administration found a government in New Delhi more receptive than even Washington had originally expected. Policy approaches alone, however, did not account for the positive Indian response to the speech. The personal touch made an important difference. When Foreign and Defense Minister Jaswant Singh visited Washington earlier in April that year, he was met not only by his counterparts Secretary of State Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld but also by National Security Adviser Rice and, in an unexpected courtesy, by President Bush himself. Singh interpreted this presidential gesture accurately when he later noted, “The meeting showed that [Bush] attaches the highest importance to India not just for the region but as a factor of stability and peace.”52 Rice’s decision to include Singh on her short list of counterparts who would be informed personally in advance of the president’s May 2001 speech only further confirmed the administration’s intention to treat India respectfully as a partner and as a rising power. It was the first time in many years that Washington considered New Delhi important enough to merit those courtesies reserved for major traditional allies. Such respect appeared to persuade Singh

to reverse his own previous opposition to U.S. missile defense programs, which he had publicly expressed barely a year earlier.53

The Indian response to the president’s new strategic initiative was exuberant in form. The Ministry of External Affairs press release issued after Singh’s May 1 conversation with Rice, stressed that the colloquy “was part of an information and consultation process with India, among other countries,” and praised the president’s speech for “seek[ing] to transform the strategic parameters on which the Cold War security architecture was built.” In language that confounded critics both at home and abroad, the statement went on to say, “India, particularly, welcomes the announcement of unilateral reductions by the U.S. of nuclear forces, as an example. We also welcome moving away from the hair-trigger alerts associated with prevailing nuclear orthodoxies. India believes that there is a strategic and technological inevitability in stepping away from a world that is held hostage by the doctrine of MAD to a cooperative, defensive transition that is underpinned by further cuts and a de-alert of nuclear forces. . . . India has always stood for a multilateral compact that result[s] in an elimination of all nuclear weapons globally.”54

This statement quickly evoked controversy in India and abroad. One Indian commentator, comparing New Delhi’s response with that of other American allies, noted that it “delighted and even amazed United States diplomats,” given that “even steadfast allies of America, including Japan, have been more skeptical, if not critical.”55 Other leftist analysts, frustrated by the BJP’s right-wing politics and its earlier decision to reorient India’s nuclear posture, excoriated the Vajpayee government for not only betraying the cause of disarmament but also being overly eager to seek the favor of the United States. Some foreign observers were equally critical of the Indian government’s attitude. Steve LaMontagne of the Council for a Livable World Education Fund, a Washington, D.C.–based arms control advocacy group, writing in the Hindu, argued that support for Bush’s missile defense programs would “slow India’s rise” as a great power and warned that “any potential benefits of curry[ing] favor with the U.S. will be washed out by the long-term consequences of a U.S. anti-missile system.”56 Others in the Indian establishment were more positive. C. Raja Mohan, a leading realist in India’s foreign policy debates, wrote an article where, while refuting another editorial writer’s condemnation of the gov-

53. “Interview with the Minister of External Affairs Mr. Jaswant Singh.”
54. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Ministry of External Affairs, press release, New Delhi, May 2, 2001.
ernment’s “irrational exuberance,” he concluded that “for once the Indian establishment might have got it right in sensing the importance of responding positively to the U.S. proposals on NMD. . . . It is time for New Delhi to experiment with new ideas on the foreign policy front.”

In all the controversy about the shift in Indian policy, most Indian and international commentators missed one critical fact: Jaswant Singh, in particular, and the Vajpayee government, in general, had not supported the president’s plans relating to missile defense, at least not during the May 1 conversations and certainly not in the press release issued the following day. This detail was overlooked because of the artful language in the Indian statement. The widespread international opposition to the Bush initiative also had the effect of elevating India’s unexpected support to greater prominence than it might otherwise have received, while obscuring key particulars in the Indian formulation. Over the course of the next two years, India would support the president’s missile defense initiatives and would seek access to U.S. missile defense technologies as well—but not on May 2, 2001, when Indian attentions were focused far more on its traditional interests than Singh’s critics in India and abroad recognized at the time.

The May 2 press release clearly corroborated this. The only initiative the government of India explicitly endorsed—from all the ideas presented in the Bush speech—was the one that took the global system closer toward the traditional Indian dream of a “multilateral compact that result[s] in an elimination of all nuclear weapons globally,” namely, the president’s commitment “to move quickly to reduce nuclear forces.” Implicitly referring to other allusions in the speech—for example, to the end of the United States’ Looking Glass missions—the Indian statement commended the president for “moving away from the hair-trigger alerts associated with prevailing nuclear orthodoxies,” even though the U.S. Air Force had retired the Looking Glass contingent almost three years earlier and American nuclear forces still remained technically on hair-trigger alert. This endorsement, therefore, had little to do with the revolutionary element of missile defense but revolved primarily around the old Indian themes of moving toward disarmament and mitigating the pernicious aspects of nuclear deterrence such as hair-trigger alerts, which supported those “prevailing nuclear orthodoxies” such as mutual assured destruction that only recently had been condemned by the government of India in its legal

59. “Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University.”
submission before the International Court of Justice as “abhorrent to human sentiment.”

The Indian position in the May 2 statement on missile defense itself was complex. Recognizing that the Bush administration was intent on jettisoning the ABM treaty if necessary to develop strategic defenses, the press release noted with deceptive calm that “India believes that there is a strategic and technological inevitability in stepping away from a world that is held hostage by the doctrine of MAD to a cooperative, defensive transition that is underpinned by further cuts and a de-alert of nuclear forces.” This was a pregnant sentence with multiple components. In affirming the “strategic and technological inevitability” of moving away from MAD, India recognized the Bush administration’s larger intentions on missile defense—even if it chose for the moment to be silent about its appraisal of that choice—and endorsed the rejection of MAD. This action perpetuated the stance adopted by previous Indian governments that also criticized that doctrine for both moral and strategic reasons—while appealing to the United States in an understated way for a “cooperative,” rather than unilateral, defensive transition accompanied by nuclear inventory reductions and a decrease in the readiness of all standing nuclear forces.

If many missed it, National Security Adviser Rice did not. Commenting on the Singh statement, Rice astutely noted that India “has not said that it supports missile defense.” Nonetheless, it had shown it was “prepared to think differently.” When asked whether India’s position on this issue really mattered given the importance of persuading Europe, which was far more relevant to the implementation of the new initiative, Rice noted, “The President doesn’t see it that way. . . . India counts,” adding that the administration saw the initiative as a way of ensuring that “peace-loving countries . . . have the capabilities against ballistic missiles” that may be directed at them by “rogue” states.

This shift in Indian attitudes toward the United States, particularly as represented by the May 2 statement and the subsequent conversation with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage on May 11, materialized for three different, but related, reasons. First, the Vajpayee government was determined to forge the new relationship with the United States that had eluded both sides

62. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Malini Parthasarathy, “We Welcome India’s Thinking Differently: U.S.,” Hindu, June 20, 2001.
during the Cold War. During President Clinton’s visit in March 2000, Vajpayee said the two countries “have all the potential to become natural allies.”

Taking their bearings from this objective, Vajpayee and Singh recognized early that the new strategic framework was dear to President Bush, who had spoken about it on numerous occasions both during the campaign and after he took office. Many of the ideas inherent in the framework were also congenial to Indian policymakers. Accordingly, Bush’s initiative was worth India’s early support. It offered the promise of adding a strategic dimension to New Delhi’s rapidly improving relationship with Washington; it functioned as a device by which India could distinguish itself in American eyes; and it could eventually open the door for a reversal of the U.S. technology denial policies directed against India since 1974 as well as a gradual acceptance of New Delhi’s nuclear weapons as necessary for a stable balance of power in Asia.

Second, the Vajpayee government recognized that although the Bush proposal would at some point run up against the ABM treaty, India did not have a dog in this fight. As Jaswant Singh’s special adviser on defense, Arun Singh, pointed out in a series of confidential government of India memoranda, the ABM treaty remained the cornerstone of a regime that excluded India from the category of “legitimate nuclear weapon states.” This had the unfortunate effect of denying New Delhi everything from international respect to high technology, thereby weakening it vis-à-vis its principal regional rival, China. As C. Raja Mohan articulated this view publicly, “There is hardly any reason why India should be shedding tears at the demise of the old nuclear order. President Bush’s plan, which opens the door for a rewriting of the rules of the nuclear game, offers India a chance to be part of the nuclear solution and not the proliferation problem. It makes all sense for India to lend a helping hand to the United States to dismantle the current nuclear regime, which New Delhi has long called “discriminatory.” The opportunity to become part of a new international nuclear order was thus too tempting to pass up. Consequently, it became one of the key motivations that allowed the Vajpayee government to countenance the supercession of the ABM treaty, even when it was not entirely clear what exactly would replace it, so long as deep cuts in existing nuclear ar-

65. The author is deeply grateful to Arun Singh for sharing the substance of these documents in a series of meetings in August-September 2001 in New Delhi.
senals occurred; the transition to a defense-dominant nuclear regime came about through negotiations and not unilateral acts; technological cooperation among friendly states took place as part of the new regime; and India was treated as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem of nuclear proliferation.67

Third, a quintessential attraction of President Bush’s new strategic framework was the promise of technological cooperation, which to India was critical. The president’s promises here were indeed breathtaking. Bush insisted that his proposal to reorder the international nuclear regime was intended to reflect “a clear and clean break from the past, and especially from the adversarial legacy of the Cold War.” The technologies and procedural systems that would be developed as replacements “should be reassuring, rather than threatening.” They would exemplify “openness [and] mutual confidence,” and would embody “real opportunities for cooperation, including [in] the area of missile defense.” They “should allow us to share information so that each nation can improve its early warning capability, and its capability to defend its people and territory. And perhaps one day, we can even cooperate in a joint defense.” Although many specifics in this statement were directed immediately at Russia, the president left no doubt that his proposal was intended for all “friends and allies” with whom the administration would be immediately consulting.68 India, although not an ally, was clearly a friend—a fact confirmed by the administration’s announcement that Deputy Secretary Armitage would be proceeding to New Delhi for the consultations promised by the president.

The government of India had no illusions that Washington would quickly provide it with missile defense systems because of its support for Bush’s initiative. In fact, it was not even certain at that point whether ballistic missile defenses were appropriate to its circumstances or that missile defense would work as advertised. Rather, Bush’s conviction about the necessity of missile defense was seen as presenting a chance to strengthen U.S.-India relations at relatively low opportunity costs and to enhance the prospects of integrating India into a new global nuclear order.69 The Vajpayee government also hoped for concomitant benefits including economic contracts (particularly those relating to software development); political access; and technological know-how

68. “Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University.”
69. The attempt to use the Bush administration’s interest in missile defense to strengthen bilateral relations with the United States was not unique to India. For a survey of how various European countries approached missile defense from this perspective, see Nicole C. Evans, “Missile Defense: Winning Minds, Not Hearts,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Vol. 60, No. 5 (September/October 2004), pp. 48–55.
from the research, development, test, evaluation, and acquisition activities related to Bush’s initiative. Still, even if such benefits were forthcoming, the operational advantages to Indian defense would remain quite meager for a while, because the most India could hope for at that time was to eventually become part of the global missile launch early-warning network then being discussed in the United States.\(^{70}\) Such participation could open the door to U.S. transfers of BMD technology to India—if that was indeed what New Delhi might want in the future. Indian interest in this was understandable, given its traditional desire to acquire advanced technology and the ever-present need to hedge against emerging security threats. As one Indian editorial concluded, “India cannot effectively counter a nuclear attack from either Pakistan or China. . . . Since we are, as yet, unsure as to how we might pull the nuclear trigger should the need arise, it is reassuring to know we can be part of [a] plan that will prevent the trigger happy from pulling theirs.”\(^{71}\)

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs’s May 2 press release thus marked a further evolution in India’s attitudes toward missile defense. In contrast to the expressed opposition to Reagan’s SDI proposal in the early 1980s and the discomfiting anxiety felt about U.S. plans to resurrect missile defenses throughout the 1990s, the Vajpayee government exhibited a de facto—yet constrained—acceptance of U.S. missile defense plans. New Delhi did not yet support U.S. efforts to shift toward a defense-dominant nuclear regime, but its recognition of the “strategic and technological inevitability” of such a transformation, given Washington’s intentions, presented a further shedding of Indian ambivalence on this issue. A residue of indecision remained because of the government’s continuing uncertainty about whether this transformation would benefit India in practical terms and, more important at that point, because of considerations involving Russia, which was still viewed as a special friend vehemently opposed to abrogation of the ABM treaty.\(^{72}\)

In fact, barely 48 hours after Bush made his landmark speech, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov arrived in New Delhi for consultations aimed at clarifying India’s controversial support for the U.S. initiative. The day-long discussions yielded a further amplification of the Vajpayee government’s posi-

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As C. Raja Mohan phrased it in a contemporaneous report, “Pressing ahead with its latest diplomatic rope trick, India today dispelled apprehensions that its strong support of the [U.S.] National Missile Defense plan may undermine its traditional partnership with Russia. The Government, which stunned the world with its enthusiastic welcome to the U.S. proposals for nuclear reductions and missile defenses earlier this week, today reassured the visiting Russian Foreign Minister, Mr. Igor Ivanov, that India remained empathetic to Moscow’s security concerns.”

Although this passage captured precisely the general public perception of India’s maneuvering between the two great powers, it was not entirely accurate. As previous discussion elaborated, New Delhi had not endorsed Bush’s plans for missile defense, although it was appreciative of other elements in the president’s strategic framework. Consequently, it did not find itself in a position where it had to either explain away its presumed support or condemn the president’s intention to build missile defenses. Accordingly, it did neither. Instead, emphasizing a point of process over substance, Jaswant Singh welcomed the Bush administration’s decision to “engage Russia in a dialogue” on missile defense and simply declared that the ABM treaty “should not be abrogated unilaterally.”

Given that Russia itself had earlier proposed building a defensive umbrella with the Europeans and craved the deep cuts proposed by Bush for its own economic reasons, Ivanov could not have expected any more from New Delhi. Singh’s views about altering the ABM treaty became official Indian policy when the prime minister later declared that any modification to the agreement should occur through “mutual consultations and understanding.” This position allowed New Delhi to enjoy the best of both worlds. It still remained, strictly speaking, agnostic about the worth of missile defenses but, while recognizing their inevitability in the new strategic circumstances, simply preferred that the United States and Russia dissolve their treaty constraints through bilateral coordination rather than through ex parte actions. Singh formally reiterated this argument in the May 10 consultations with Deputy Secretary Armitage. As the press release issued the following day stated, “As a departure from the norms of the Cold War, the proposed new Strategic Framework, based upon consultation and cooperation rather than confrontation, is a welcome development. . . The EAM [external affairs minister], while discussing these issues emphasized the need to not unilaterally abrogate bilateral

74. Ibid.
75. Quoted in ibid.
compacts like the ABM Treaty of 1972 or other similar international commitments. It is India’s expectation that the United States will continue to be guided by this spirit of dialogue, consultation and cooperation.”

Coming Full Circle: India Commits to Missile Defense

The transformation in U.S.-India relations gathered steam after the Armitage visit. Partly as a result of President Bush’s interest in forging new ties with the world’s largest democracy, and partly as a way to recompense India for its public support, the United States moved quickly to resume the bilateral defense cooperation interrupted by the 1998 nuclear tests. The administration accelerated the pace of defense engagement by authorizing the first ever visit by a chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to New Delhi. The subsequent July 2001 visit by Gen. Henry Shelton occurred amid a flurry of activities that were unprecedented in pace and scope, including high-level bilateral consultations and other joint meetings on peacekeeping operations, search and rescue, disaster relief, and environmental security. In all these consultations, the issue of missile defense figured prominently both because of its centrality to the administration’s priorities and because it cut across a range of Indian interests, including acceptance in the new global nuclear regime, achievement of equilibrium in U.S.-Indian-Russian relations, and enhanced technology cooperation between India and the United States.

Two important bureaucratic events that would affect India’s access to—but not its decision about—missile defense cooperation with the United States also occurred in the latter part of 2001. First, Robert Blackwill arrived in New Delhi as U.S. ambassador. Blackwill, a member of Bush’s foreign policy team during the 2000 election campaign, received a direct mandate from the president to transform U.S.-India relations, a task he would pursue over the next two years with feverish energy and stunning success. “The Vulcan has landed,” the Times of India triumphantly exulted when Blackwill, reaching the city in the wee hours after midnight on July 29, 2001, promptly conducted an inspection of the long visa queues snaking around the U.S. embassy in anticipation of its opening the next morning and vowed to end these oppressive procedures within thirty days. Within a few months of making good on that promise, the new ambassador and his mission launched the most persistent bureaucratic cam-

77. A survey of these activities can be found in Satu Limaye, “U.S.-India Relations: Visible to the Naked Eye,” Comparative Connections, Occasional Analysis (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2002).
campaign in the history of U.S.-India relations to convince Washington to accommodate India in the international nonproliferation regimes managed by the United States.\textsuperscript{78} This endeavor, which Blackwill intended as part of the larger effort to forge a durable strategic partnership between the two countries, focused initially on removing U.S. policy impediments to cooperation in civilian nuclear energy, civilian space programs, and high-technology commerce. Blackwill’s efforts had borne enough fruit by November 2001 that when President Bush met with Prime Minister Vajpayee in the White House, both sides announced agreement to evaluate “the processes by which we transfer dual-use and military items, with a view towards greater transparency and efficiency. In addition, the United States and India have a mutual interest in space and have agreed to initiate discussions on civil space cooperation.”\textsuperscript{79} By the time Blackwill departed his post in August 2003, U.S.-India cooperation had expanded to include missile defense as part of a new “quartet” of bilateral activities that in January 2004 were formally recognized as “next steps in strategic cooperation” (NSSP).\textsuperscript{80}

The second bureaucratic development that increased India’s access to missile defense cooperation with the United States was the decision to revive the Defense Policy Group (DPG), the apex body that provides political direction to defense activities between the two countries. This group, which had not met for many years, reconvened in December 2001 in New Delhi. Cochaired by Yogendra Narain, defense secretary to the government of India, and Douglas Feith, undersecretary for policy in the U.S. Department of Defense, the meeting provided both sides with the opportunity to jumpstart activities pertaining to military-to-military exercises, defense sales, and new subject matter exchanges.\textsuperscript{81} Most importantly, it provided an opportunity for Feith, one of the most ardent advocates of missile defense in the United States, to have an intense and focused conversation with his Indian interlocutors on the subject. While Feith explicated the administration’s rationale and plans for missile defense, Narain elaborated how the government of India’s own thinking on this matter had led to Jaswant Singh’s May 2, 2001, statement and subsequent

\textsuperscript{78} For his own description of this effort, see Robert D. Blackwill, “The India Imperative,” \textit{National Interest}, No. 80 (Summer 2005), pp. 9–17.


high-level discussions on this subject. As the joint statement issued at the end of these discussions noted succinctly, “They discussed the contribution that missile defenses could make to enhance strategic stability and to discourage the proliferation of ballistic missiles with weapons of mass destruction.”82

While U.S. policymakers were absorbing the changes in official Indian attitudes toward Bush’s new strategic framework through the DPG discussions, Ambassador Blackwill’s conversations with the Indian political leadership, and his embassy’s engagement with the Indian civilian and military bureaucracy, the Indian DRDO and the Indian armed services had already begun considering how missile defense could advance Indian security much earlier. These activities occurred both autonomously and as part of the broader process of defense procurement. In the late 1990s, DRDO had initiated a variety of conceptual studies to define notional Indian missile defense needs, given the perceived threats to the country at that time. The Indian military similarly had numerous parleys with both Russia and Israel about upgrading the country’s air defense systems to include possibly acquiring airborne early warning and control systems, missile warning and tracking radars, and new surface-to-air and antitactical ballistic missile (ATBM) systems.83 These discussions exemplified an interest in missile defense primarily at the level of defense technologists, professional military officers, and mid-level bureaucrats but not yet a political commitment to missile defense by India’s civilian security managers, including elected leadership and the senior bureaucracy concerned with national security. That commitment would evolve slowly during the latter half of 2001 and through 2002, driven by three important developments that cumulatively had the effect of transforming India’s position on missile defense.

The first development stemmed from the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and President Bush’s subsequent decision to eliminate the compact between the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The administration’s ultimatum to Islamabad to support the United States in this conflict or be treated as an adversary compelled Gen. Pervez Musharraf to reluctantly renounce his country’s long-standing support for the Taliban and to offer Pakistani bases in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. These decisions sparked great controversy in Pakistan, given the progressive Islamization that had occurred in the previous two decades and the military regime’s shaky legitimacy.84 This, in turn, raised international fears about the safety of

82. Ibid.
84. For an overview of the genesis and problems associated with Pakistan and the global war on terror, see Walter K. Andersen, “South Asia: A Selective War on Terrorism?” in Ashley J. Tellis and
Islamabad’s nuclear arsenal—concerns so strong that senior U.S. policymakers became obsessed over whether Operation Enduring Freedom might trigger a bigger set of problems in Pakistan, including the loss of control over its nuclear weaponry.  

Major organs of the Western press, including the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Times* (London), and the *Washington Post*, quoted U.S. and British intelligence officials on the vulnerability of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and warned about the danger of these weapons or other strategic materials falling into the hands of the Taliban and al-Qaida. The plausibility of these fears was corroborated by later news reports that two former senior Pakistani nuclear scientists, Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Chawdry Abdul Majid, had in fact been detained and interrogated by the government of Pakistan for alleged links with the Taliban. Most ominously, Seymour Hersh, writing in the *New Yorker* and drawing on fragmentary information about highly classified military planning, had reported that the United States was developing contingency responses for neutralizing Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities should those be at risk of compromise.

The Vajpayee government feared that India would be a likely target for attack were Islamabad to lose control over its nuclear arsenal. Consequently, it asked for, and received from the Bush administration at the highest levels, assurances concerning the security of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. Although these were deemed satisfactory for the moment, the issue of how to deal with the problem of “loose nukes” in South Asia never dissipated. The evolving Indian nuclear force was not designed to address this contingency. New Delhi’s nuclear capabilities were intended to checkmate calculated threats by a state adversary through the promise of massive retaliation. Such a deterrent would have little or no effect on rogue actors that might threaten the use of nuclear weapons. In such circumstances, Indian policymakers would be left with three rather unpalatable choices: a preemptive counterforce attack to destroy


The author is deeply grateful to a personal confidant of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who has requested anonymity, for having shared the substance of U.S.-Indian discussions on this issue. On November 5, 2001, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, at a news conference with Defense Minister Fernandes in New Delhi, spoke publicly on this matter when, in response to a question about the safety of Pakistan’s arsenal, he obliquely stated: “I do not personally believe that there is a risk with respect to countries that have nuclear weapons. . . . The countries that have nuclear weapons have a healthy respect of the power, and lethality of these weapons and they take steps to manage their safe handling.” See “Rumsfeld Says U.S. Not Worried about Pakistani Nuclear Weapons,” *Hindustan Times*, November 5, 2001.
these assets before launch if possible; a mindless retaliation on the state whose territory was used for launching the attack; or a pliant surrender that entailed absorbing the attack without meting out retributive punishment. How the nuclear weapons in question were delivered would affect Indian choices, but the Indian nuclear deterrent then under development would have to be supplemented by some insurance mechanisms, including missile defense, if New Delhi was to avoid such distasteful alternatives in responding to a “loose nuke” threat in South Asia.\

The second driver that forced India to contemplate acquiring strategic defense capabilities materialized subsequent to concerns about the security of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons: Operation Parakaram, the virtually yearlong Indian military mobilization against Pakistan. Since the early 1980s, New Delhi had confronted the specter of strategic coercion by Islamabad. Ever since nuclear weapons appeared within its reach, Pakistan was further emboldened in its strategy of supporting insurgencies within India to settle outstanding political differences or to wear down its larger neighbor. This exercise of power sought to exploit India’s weaknesses as a state and operated on the premise that Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities placed it in a position of immunity because New Delhi could not retaliate in any meaningful conventional way lest it spark a nuclear holocaust. Under the umbrella of its nuclear assets, Islamabad thus deepened its support for a variety of insurgent and terrorist groups within India, including major Kashmiri terrorist groups battling New Delhi since at least 1994.

In the aftermath of the December 2001 terrorist attack on its Parliament House, India mobilized its armed forces in a huge exercise of countercoercive diplomacy. Claiming the attack was conducted by the Lashkar-e-Taiba with Islamabad’s support, Indian policymakers demanded that Pakistan permanently end its support for terrorism in India or face military action. The resulting standoff witnessed sharp and hostile rhetoric on both sides, two close brushes with major war, repeated diplomatic interventions by the United States and others, strong international pressures on Pakistan, and promises by

88. For this and other reasons pertinent to India, see Basrur, “Missile Defense and South Asia.”
89. For more on this Pakistani strategy, see Ashley J. Tellis, Stability in South Asia (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1997), pp. 5–54; and Praveen Swami, “Failed Threats and Flawed Fences: India’s Military Responses to Pakistan’s Proxy War,” India Review, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April 2004), pp. 147–170.
91. This mobilization has been described in V.K. Sood and Pravin Sawhney, Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), although many of its details about Indian military objectives and dispositions during the two crisis spikes are still uncertain.
Musharraf to eschew state support for terrorism before India began demobilizing its forces in late October 2002. New Delhi’s military mobilization, however, failed to accomplish its goal of eliminating Islamabad’s support for Kashmiri terrorism.92

Even worse, the dynamics of generalized nuclear coercion that reinforced Pakistan’s abetting of terrorism were only exemplified by instances of specific coercion during the crisis. Describing one incident in December 2003, a major Pakistani newspaper reported, “President Gen. Pervez Musharraf said on Monday that the Indian government had starting pulling back its troops due to his various covert messages to the Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, that if a war was imposed on Pakistan it would not remain a conventional one.”93 Other similar threats—coupled with other significant risk-laden strategic actions—forced Indian officials to conclude they had no option but to respond with corresponding initiatives of their own. The crisis taught senior decisionmakers in New Delhi that Islamabad would not abandon the option of brandishing nuclear arms to defeat India’s counterthreats of conventional punishment, even though these were precipitated by Pakistani-supported terrorism to begin with. Not surprisingly, Indian policymakers began to look for new countervailing strategies vis-à-vis Pakistan, including the acquisition of missile defenses. The presence of such capabilities in the Indian inventory could provide a means of defeating Pakistani nuclear coercion without forcing India to contemplate changing its traditional nuclear posture of a force-in-being or altering its preferred strategy of delayed retaliation.94 Missile defenses would provide an additional layer of reassurance and protection: they could help neutralize some forms of nuclear blackmail without undermining the safety ultimately offered by India’s own nuclear reserves.

The third factor that made missile defense more attractive to New Delhi was Pakistani proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies. Although public attention to this matter first concentrated in early 2004 with news about the A.Q. Khan network, Indian officials had long known that Pakistani nuclear scientists and entities had proliferated nuclear weapon technologies and equipment to at least Iran and North Korea.95 For many years, Indian policymakers were

95. During the September 2002 visit of John Wolf, U.S. assistant secretary of state for
content to keep silent about Pakistan’s role in international proliferation because of their judgment that Washington had effectively acquiesced to it. Nearly a decade earlier, Indian security managers had watched China blatantly transfer M-11 missiles to Pakistan, an action that did not evoke any U.S. sanctions because the State Department claimed the transaction could not be independently verified by multiple sources. Consequently, whenever the issue of Pakistani proliferation came up in U.S.-India discussions, Indian officials monstred against the inequality in American nonproliferation policy. Such inequality, New Delhi complained, led successive administrations to ignore Pakistani misbehavior while constantly penalizing India, despite its good proliferation record, through continuing technology denial. This argument was made most insistently in 2001 and 2002 when numerous Indian government representatives sought to address U.S. proliferation concerns in discussions about what would later be called the NSSP.

New Delhi viewed the activity of A.Q. Khan and his cohorts as directly contributing to the deterioration of India’s security. Not only had it resulted in Pakistani acquisition of long-range missiles aimed deep into India but, more problematically, it created an international black market diffusing nuclear materials and delivery systems to substate groups that could eventually threaten India. India’s nuclear weapons capabilities would probably be inadequate to the task of defending against threats from such sources; in an offense-dominant environment, a substate actor armed with WMD capabilities has critical advantages over even a nuclear-armed state. This was no longer a national problem simply of concern to some advanced Western powers but a real challenge in South Asia. Developing some capacity for strategic defense remained the only alternative. While the international community slowly recog-
nized the necessity of developing “supply side” solutions to this crisis, India explored its own solutions to mitigate its defenselessness. These considerations, inter alia, undergirded Indian military interest in missile defense systems during the late 1990s.

Although Pakistani proliferation by itself would not have pushed New Delhi to consider missile defense, this problem provided additional impetus to Indian policymakers who were already concerned about the safety of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and the necessity of neutralizing Islamabad’s nuclear coercion. These concerns peaked in late 2001 and early 2002 at the height of the Indo-Pakistani standoff and pushed India further toward endorsing strategic defenses for its own security. At the fourth DPG meeting in May 2002, Indian Defense Secretary Narain had another intense discussion with Undersecretary Feith on the issue. Most significantly, he indicated that the Indian leadership was slowly accepting the view that missile defense could help solve some of the strategic conundrums facing the country. Accordingly, the Ministry of Defense would henceforth consider the issue not as one of global arms control—as the Ministry of External Affairs had previously done—but rather as an antidote to the emerging problems confronting Indian security. Both sides discussed how the United States might assist India particularly with missile defense requirements analyses, agreeing to make this the subject of a workshop in New Delhi the following year. The Indian delegation also committed itself to attending a BMD tabletop exercise in Colorado Springs later that month, participating in the June 2002 missile defense conference in Dallas, and observing the June 2003 Roving Sands missile defense exercise in New Mexico.99

After the June 2002 peak of the Indo-Pakistani crisis, tensions in South Asia gradually wound down, with India announcing general demobilization starting in October. The lessons of the standoff, however, were being slowly absorbed by the national leadership, with three important issues becoming the subject of great scrutiny within the government of India: developing a long-term strategy for dealing with Islamabad and Pakistani terrorism; constructing an alternative military strategy for defeating Pakistan that did not require lengthy mobilization and redeployment; and formally reviewing and promulgating India’s nuclear doctrine and command and control structures. The official nuclear doctrine and command arrangements were announced via a brief press release on January 4, 2003. This press release summarized many,

though not all, of the relevant elements of New Delhi’s doctrine and strategic posture, but remained silent on many details, including the role of missile defense in India’s evolving nuclear strategy.100

When in fulfillment of the May 2002 DPG discussions a U.S. delegation led by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy David Trachtenberg and an Indian delegation led by Ministry of External Affairs Joint Secretary for Disarmament and International Security Affairs Sheel Kant Sharma met in New Delhi to discuss missile defense in January 2003, Sharma formally informed the United States of his government’s decision to integrate missile defense into India’s nuclear posture. The wheel had turned full circle. From its early opposition to strategic defenses first articulated at the time of Reagan’s SDI, India had—because of changes in its strategic environment—finally accepted the necessity of missile defenses for its own national security four and a half years after it had decided to become a nuclear weapons state. This had been a tumultuous interregnum: it involved a limited war with Pakistan at Kargil; it witnessed the Bush administration’s decision to deploy missile defenses even as it initiated a global war on terrorism that would engage both India and Pakistan; it would involve the most serious Indo-Pakistani military standoff short of war in the history of relations between the two states; and it would witness an unprecedented strengthening of U.S.-Indian relations with an intimacy not experienced since the 1962 Sino-Indian war. From the perspective of India’s nuclear posture, however, it ended just as it began: with a sharp shift in strategic direction, now represented by a quest for missile defense in contrast to the earlier turning point that embodied a formal alteration of India’s entitative status.

100. Ministry of External Affairs, press release, January 4, 2003, “The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Operationalization of India’s Nuclear Doctrine,” http://meaindia.nic.in/prhome.htm. The government of India has not formally enunciated the relationship between missile defense and India’s nuclear strategy to this day. But the interaction between these elements and India’s new conventional military strategy, dubbed “Cold Start,” has raised fears that New Delhi might exploit the protection offered by future missile defenses to embark on offensive operations that emphasize either first-strike counterforce attacks on Pakistan’s nuclear forces or high-intensity assaults on its conventional formations. Both of these fears are exaggerated. India currently lacks the technical capabilities to conduct “splendid first strikes” on Pakistan’s nuclear reserves; further Indian missile defenses—if and when acquired—would consist primarily of terminal defense systems that could not immunize the vast Indian landmass against the fearsome retaliation that must be expected in the event of any initial attacks by New Delhi. Because Indian missile defenses will remain limited in capacity and spatial coverage, they would not be able to provide India with any “astrodome” type of protection that would make New Delhi eager to employ even its conventional forces against Pakistan. What missile defenses in India’s armory will do instead is to offer New Delhi limited but important forms of insurance against a small set of catastrophic contingencies—against which India is currently defenseless—in the event of a major crisis. The logic, effectiveness, and limitations of India’s prospective missile defense acquisitions are examined in detail in Ashley J. Tellis, India and Missile Defense (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, forthcoming).
New Delhi’s decision to formally seek missile defense cooperation with Washington, which occurred against a backdrop of growing U.S. sympathy for India’s predicament vis-à-vis both Pakistani-supported Islamist terrorism and Islamabad’s attempts at nuclear coercion, spurred a series of complex reactions within the American national security bureaucracy. At the U.S. embassy in New Delhi, where Ambassador Blackwill had initiated a campaign to consummate a new level of bilateral collaboration, expanding missile defense cooperation became a natural extension of his original advocacy. His mission’s effort at convincing Washington to accept this enlarged menu of transforming activities received strong support from Undersecretary Feith at the U.S. Department of Defense, who believed that appropriate missile defense cooperation activities with India would be conducive both to regional stability and to strengthened bonds between the two countries. On this question, Defense was often opposed by State, which as usual was a house divided. Although the State Department’s South Asia Bureau held views close to those of the Defense Department, it was often unable to convince the Nonproliferation and Arms Control Bureaus, which opposed expanded strategic cooperation with India because of its nuclear status and supposed imperfections in its proliferation record.

Over time, the rationale for U.S. cooperation with India on missile defense also changed. What started out initially as a simple effort to transform bilateral relations—consistent with President Bush’s original intention—mutated as the United States began to rely more heavily on Pakistan for prosecuting the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and as the 2001–02 Indo-Pakistani crisis itself evolved. During this time, missile defense began to take on additional significance: it became a means of both demonstrating U.S. solidarity with India in its own struggle against Pakistani-supported terrorism and keeping New Delhi involved in the global war on terror; it functioned as an instrument for underscoring Washington’s recognition of the need to defeat Islamabad’s nuclear coercion without endorsing an Indian recourse to offensive military strategies; it represented corroboration of the view that the United States did not see India exclusively through the prism of Indo-Pakistani relations but rather as a global power able to contribute to stability in Asia; and it reinforced the U.S. interest in being perceived as a reliable supplier of high-quality military equipment to India.

While the salience of each of these rationales changed over time, the larger campaign that Blackwill had initiated in New Delhi and Feith had champi-
oned in Washington continued to work its way through the interagency process throughout 2003. When American (and particularly Defense Department) attention was later absorbed by complications in Iraq, Undersecretary of Commerce Kenneth Juster took the lead, and despite opposition from various sources, successfully stewarded the process to its conclusion, particularly after Blackwill’s departure from New Delhi in August 2003. Despite much anxiety, hesitation, and missteps on both sides during this period, President Bush finally announced the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership—Blackwill’s great legacy to the transformation of U.S.-Indian relations—in January 2004. Among other things, it declared that the United States and India had agreed “to expand our dialogue on missile defense,” which implied a willingness to transfer missile defense systems to India at some point in the future.

Conclusion

In the spring of 2004, India undertook another periodic, but by now routine, democratic exercise of holding national elections. Buoyed by exceptionally high rates of economic growth the previous year, the Vajpayee government took the decision to hold elections before the end of its constitutionally mandated term in office, hoping to win a large majority and return to power. Despite a heady triumphalist and self-congratulatory election campaign dubbed “India Shining,” the nation’s politically savvy and by now highly expectant masses voted Vajpayee’s BJP-dominated National Democratic Alliance out of office. Through election results that stunned both loser and victor alike, a new Congress-dominated coalition (which included the Communists and other left-of-center regional parties) took over the reins of government with a new prime minister, Manmohan Singh—the original architect of India’s 1991 economic reforms—at its helm. The return of the Congress-Left coalition to power raised again the question of whether India would pursue a course correction and return to the old and hackneyed anti-Americanism associated with its brand of nonalignment seen often during the Cold War.

After a short period of uncertainty, the new Congress-dominated government in New Delhi quickly took the opportunity to inform the United States through multiple diplomatic avenues that it was committed to expanding the transformation of U.S.-Indian relations begun by its predecessor. As Prime Minister Singh would endearingly tell President Bush many months later in their first bilateral meeting in New York on September 21, 2004, “Indo-U.S. ties

102. White House, “Next Steps in Strategic Partnership with India.”
under your distinguished leadership have grown in diverse ways, but I do believe the best is yet to come.”104 This diplomatic effusiveness, however, masked a certain initial discomfort with the United States, an understandable reaction given that the Congress Party’s traditional brand of nonalignment was generally suspicious of U.S. intentions and objectives in international politics. From the time they ascended to power in May 2004, the new civilian security managers in New Delhi pored carefully over the complex, multiphased NSSP that had been agreed to by the Vajpayee government in late 2003 and finally announced by both sides in January the following year. After an exhaustive internal review that lasted four months and included some abortive efforts at renegotiating the agreement, the new Congress-led government accepted the original agreement in toto, including all the elements in the package pertaining to missile defense.105 In retrospect, this outcome is not surprising because, whatever the policy discontinuities between the BJP- and the Congress-dominated governments in India may have been, the original threats that provoked New Delhi’s interest in strategic defenses still subsist unremedied.

The expanded U.S.-India dialogue on missile defense mandated by the NSSP, thus, continues through parallel avenues involving both the U.S. Departments of State and Defense. The former focuses on developing a better bilateral understanding about the structural issues pertaining to strategic stability in a mixed offense-defense regime of the kind that would exist in the subcontinent if India proceeded to acquire ballistic missile defenses, while the latter includes these issues in addition to technical discussions about various missile defense architectures primarily involving “theater” rather than “national” missile defense systems.106 The continuation of this missile defense dialogue does not imply that New Delhi seeks to purchase various terminal missile defense systems—whether from the United States or elsewhere—precipitously. Even the Vajpayee government had no such intention, despite its

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106. From a U.S. perspective, these distinctions are now formally obsolete, but they are still useful ways of describing India’s strategic defense interests. Although New Delhi would prefer to protect all of its national territory if possible, it also recognizes that “national” missile defense will continue to lie beyond its reach so long as the only ballistic missile defense systems available to India are effectively terminal systems capable of intercepting missile reentry vehicles in the (at best) low exoatmospheric or (more likely) high endoatmospheric phase of their descent.
commitment to integrating missile defenses into India’s strategic nuclear posture. The current Congress government has persisted with its predecessor’s caution in almost the same way, articulating its approach to missile defense through three interconnected propositions.

First, strategic defenses, in principle, are fundamentally compatible with India’s current nuclear posture, which consists of de-alerted nuclear capabilities maintained as a force-in-being married to a strict doctrine of no first use. This posture would be strengthened by strategic defenses insofar as they would permit New Delhi to persist with its current low-tempo readiness levels in peacetime, its system of strong civilian control and custody, and its “retaliation only” nuclear doctrine indefinitely. Second, it is still uncertain, however, whether any of the terminal missile defense systems currently offered to India by different countries is individually capable of robustly protecting key national assets against attacks involving a wide range of offensive missiles in various threat scenarios relevant to India. Third, the government of India will therefore persist with its own internal research and development efforts relating to missile defense; explore the synergistic benefits of combining different defensive systems or alternative defensive regimes; and complete its missile defense requirements analyses to better understand the complexity, costs, and technical challenges of integrating different kinds of ballistic missile defenses into its strategic architecture before making any decisions pertaining to the purchase of specific systems.\textsuperscript{107}

Consistent with this approach, India has begun to focus on acquiring specific material components to advance its own domestic research and development endeavors and to fill specific gaps in its current air defense ground environment system (ADGES).\textsuperscript{108} The acquisition of the Green Pine early warning and fire control radar associated with the Arrow II ATBM is an example of the first effort, whereas the acquisition of the Phalcon airborne warning and control system remains a good example of the second. Simultaneously, Indian technologists are addressing key technical challenges that must be resolved prior to incorporating strategic defenses into their existing force architecture, including integrating long-range sensors, surveillance technologies,

\textsuperscript{107} Author’s reconstruction of the Manmohan Singh government’s approach to missile defense based on interviews with senior Indian officials in the prime minister’s office, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and the Defense Research and Development Organization, New Delhi, February 2005.

and external cueing systems; managing information fusing for different levels of threat complexity and defense system interoperability; and developing the requisite kill assessment algorithms associated with intercept endgames. Only after defense planners in New Delhi are satisfied that they have acquired sufficient mastery over these issues and that they fully understand the technical, strategic, and financial implications of incorporating missile defenses writ large—especially their effect on “responsive threats,” 109 which are an adversary’s technical and operational rejoinders to the introduction of missile defenses—is India likely to proceed toward the acquisition of indigenous or foreign missile defense systems. 110

This implies that it will be years before India acquires and integrates an effective missile defense capability. Although the threat is current and arguably growing, strategic defenses as a solution are expensive and may turn out to be limited antidotes, depending on the pace at which adversary capabilities grow and the specific operational goals India seeks to service through the acquisition of ballistic missile defenses. Because Indian defense planners, being sensible and conservative, do not seek facile solutions that may only end up making things worse, they are likely to use the rapidly transforming U.S.-Indian relationship to advance their own technical and doctrinal understanding of strategic defense; bolster their indigenous research and development effort in the near term; and secure U.S. commitments to sell the most sophisticated missile defense systems necessary to neutralize specific missile threats facing India—all while they continue to examine various American, Russian, Israeli, and European missile defense systems and subsystems for their relevance to India’s long-term needs.

This effort has received a strong fillip as a result of recent political developments. On March 25, 2005, the Bush administration announced a major new policy approach toward South Asia, which included the dramatic announcement of its intention “to help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century.” By further asserting that the administration “under-


110. Reporting from India indicates that the Defense Research and Development Organization is focused on developing a terminal defense system intended to protect a 200-square-kilometer enclave against missile attack. The research effort is concentrated on developing three specific components: a long-range phased array radar for detection, tracking, and missile fire control; a battle management system for controlling intercepts; and a high-speed interceptor. For details, see Srinjoy Chowdhury, “Missile Shield Heading for Completion,” Statesman, February 12, 2005.
stand[s] fully the implications, including military implications, of that statement,” senior officials gave notice that the United States would support Indian requests for “transformative systems in areas such as command and control, early warning and missile defense.”111 This commitment, which marks a further deepening of the U.S.-Indian bilateral relationship (now under way since the beginning of George W. Bush’s first term in office), suggests a strong determination to stay the course guided by the president’s understanding of the geopolitical challenges likely to confront the United States in the twenty-first century.112 In this context, assisting the growth of Indian power is judged to be essential to U.S. interests because it permits Washington to “pursue a balance of power strategy among those major rising powers and key regional states in Asia which are not part of the existing U.S. alliance structure—including China, India, and a currently weakened Russia,” a strategy that “seeks to prevent any one of these [countries] from effectively threatening the security of another [or that of the United States] while simultaneously preventing any combination of these [entities] from ‘bandwagoning’ to undercut critical U.S. strategic interests in Asia.”113 As a result of the process growing out of this newest bout of deepened engagement, the United States and India signed a new framework for enhancing defense cooperation on June 28, 2005, that committed both sides to “expand collaboration relating to missile defense.”114 This pledge was exemplified by Washington’s decision to release the Patriot ATBM (PAC-III) for sale to India, even as planning proceeds apace for a series of further bilateral consultations, joint exercises, and technical exchanges on this subject.115

These developments further confirm that although operational missile defenses are likely to be some time away, India is seriously considering integra-
ing some kind of strategic defense capabilities into its national military posture. While the road to this decision has been long and tortuous, and has been shaped by various threats directly impinging on its security, the historical record suggests that New Delhi’s decisions in regards to missile defense have been intimately reflective of, and strongly linked to, the changing character of U.S.-Indian relations. This, in turn, implies that deepened bilateral ties have become part of the larger solution to increasing India’s capacity to defeat those threats requiring active defenses in the future.