

POWER & POLITICS

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WHO GOES there? Friend or foe? Indo-US relations have been on the up and up ever since Atal Bihari

Vajpayee went on an official visit to Washington in September 2000. Just a few months back, the world's two largest democracies celebrated the special friendship as President Barack Obama hosted the first state dinner of his administration at the White House for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursharan Kaur. But now there are signs of the relationship turning sour. The UPA government and the Congress party are now deeply divided on the issue of dealing with the United States vis a vis Pakistan.

As a cynic observed, the Obama administration's mantra seems to be: words of wisdom for India and weapons for Pakistan; treat India as a market to be conquered and Pakistan as a mission to be accomplished. There are red faces in South Block over the red carpet reception given to Pakistan Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi and his delegation.



Chidambaram

There's much haggling over Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement that Washington had opened up a "strategic alliance" with Islamabad and her remark that "Pakistan's struggles are our struggles". It has upset even those in the UPA who have traditionally been in favour of strengthening Indo-US ties, whatever the political cost involved.

The prime minister and most of his senior cabinet colleagues like Pranab Mukherjee, Sharad Pawar, P Chidambaram, Kapil Sibal, Kamal Nath and Anand Sharma have been advocates of stronger strategic and economic ties with the US which they think is India's best long term ally. Under US prodding, the UPA government tried to push through the Nuclear Liability Bill which later had to be abandoned following stiff resistance from the opposition benches. With the US now bending over backwards to accommodate Islamabad's demands for more financial and military goodies, even the pro-US lobby in the government is beginning to have a rethink. Despite its public censures of Pakistan for holding terrorist training camps within its territory, the Obama administration seems to be following Richard Nixon's path: Pakistan is in the wrong, but they are our friends.

Our ministers are not in the habit of indulging in plain-speak on matters relating to ties with friendly countries, but trust Chidambaram to call a spade a bloody shovel. On an official visit to London last week, the home minister minced no words when he squarely put the onus

of taming Pakistan on the US and Britain. In an interview to the BBC, he virtually accused Washington and London of doing nothing to force Pakistan to close the terror camps operating in the country. "Certainly we (in India) have not been able to persuade Pakistan. It's Pakistan's friends, mutual friends who have to put the pressure", he said before signing off with a warning: "Don't think India alone is under threat. Once you allow these terror groups to train, recruit and be able to build capacity to strike, they can strike in India, they can strike in UK, they can strike in Denmark as they were planning out of the Karachi project".

New Delhi is also livid with Washington for its tepid response to Indian requests for the interrogation of David Headley who confessed to US authorities of his role in the 26/11 attack. There have been contradictory signals from the Americans, with the visiting U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake saying in New Delhi last week that Indian investigators could be given access to Dawood Sayed Gilani aka David Headley, only for the US Ambassador in India Timothy Roemer to state two days later that Washington was yet to take a decision on the matter.

Party insiders say the leadership is now convinced that India

could do without such one sided friendship. Don't be surprised if India starts cosy up elsewhere. Recently, Manmohan Singh, while welcoming Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin, described Russia as a "tried and tested friend" that has stood by India in "times of need". It was the second meeting between the two in less than three months. Three months ago, Manmohan was in Moscow. He is due to fly to Washington next month. If Obama again mouths those platitudes about "great democracies and shared values", the prime minister should simply turn around and tell the president what he thinks about him.



US doesn't want you

Crackdown on brokers

IT IS nearly a quarter century since Rajiv Gandhi delivered his inspirational speech to "rid the country of middlemen and powerbrokers" at the Congress Centenary celebrations in Mumbai. But they continue to thrive. Visit any of the bhavans in Lutyen's Delhi that house key ministries and their presence is overwhelming. This despite the Prime Minister's Office and the cabinet secretariat regularly issuing circulars to all ministers and senior bureaucrats to stay away from these parasites and every now and then, the CBI compiling and circulating a list of "Undesirable Elements" — people who are persona non grata.

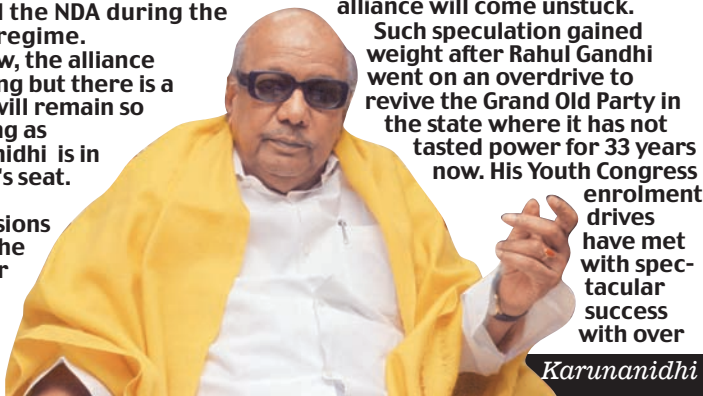
But circulars alone cannot keep them away. Things have got so bad that a handful of ministers handling key infrastructure ministries have decided to crack down. Shipping Minister GK Vasan has told officers of his ministry that any official found liaising with such people would be immediately suspended.

As Health Minister, Gulam Nabi Azad has to deal with hundreds of private medical colleges that are mushrooming across the country. Promoters of many of them are hard-boiled businessmen who are in it for the money and wouldn't bat an eyelid before cutting corners. Azad recently sent letters to Vice Chancellors and Deans of medical colleges warning them to keep away from people making promises "of getting things done by proclaiming themselves to be close to me". Azad's letter is as tough a warning as can be. While reiterating his intention to maintain absolute transparency in the functioning of his ministry, he has threatened colleges that engage middlemen with stringent action including withdrawal of recognition and even banning new admissions for a year or two.

Considering that some colleges charge up to Rs one crore for a seat, it is hoped that the promoters of these institutes will think a dozen times before letting the parasites loose in the corridors of power.

HERE'S something to scotch unending speculation that the Congress and the DMK, allies both at the Centre and in Chennai, are drifting apart and will go their separate ways before next year's assembly elections in Tamil Nadu. The alliance has always been an uneasy one and in the last thirty years, both parties have swapped partners. The Congress has been in alliance with Jayalalithaa's AIADMK while the DMK had embraced the NDA during the Vajpayee regime.

Right now, the alliance looks strong but there is a feeling it will remain so only as long as M Karunanidhi is in the driver's seat. There are apprehensions that once he hands over the baton to one of his sons, the



Karunanidhi

Cong & DMK take to stamp diplomacy to boost ties

alliance will come unstuck. Such speculation gained weight after Rahul Gandhi went on an overdrive to revive the Grand Old Party in the state where it has not tasted power for 33 years now. His Youth Congress enrolment drives have met with spectacular success with over

two lakh youngsters joining the party on one day in big cities like Chennai and Madurai. Rahul's initiatives are his own and alarmed seniors in both parties who feel his revival offensive will harm relations between the two parties. So how do you mend the rift?

A bit of stamp diplomacy would do, feels the DMK's Union Communications Minister A Raja. He has decided to issue a stamp in honour of C Subramanian, former AICC chief who was also the Union industry and finance minister. The proposal came from Home Minister P Chidambaram and Raja promptly gave his stamp of approval. It's only fitting that the Department of Posts will issue the stamp this year which is Subramanian's centenary year. But in honouring the man who is widely credited as the architect of the Green Revolution and was responsible for Tamil Nadu's rapid industrialisation in the 1960s, the DMK may just manage to wean away some Congress votes.

YOU would be mistaken if you think Rahul Gandhi spends much of his time scouring for Dalit hamlets to sleep in or trying to revive the Youth Congress in states where the party's fortunes are at an all time low. The young man's interests are varied and there is nothing that doesn't arouse his curiosity. Two weeks back, without any of the fanfare that accompanies VVIP arrivals, the young man quietly walked into the India Today Conclave at the Taj Palace Hotel to listen to Professor David Bloom of Harvard University talk about the impact of population on economic growth.

He then stayed on to hear Alan Mullaly, CEO of Ford Motor Corporation of the USA tell the audience about how his company beat the economic downturn and thrived. The grapevine has it that apart from meeting political scientists and thinkers, Rahul has also been meeting up with some renowned religious scholars of all faiths, including Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. One of them is Dr Karan Singh, whose interests range from art and culture to music and literature and who has authored several books on Hinduism. I understand that Rahul frequently drops by at Singh's place. He merely sits back and is all ears as Singh extols the teachings of the Vedanta and the Upanishads. Hindutvites, please note. You may be in for some serious debate.