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Roundtable Interview of the President by Indian Journalists

The Roosevelt Room

1:49 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Quick statement. I'll be glad to answer questions. I am really looking forward to my trip. It's the first trip to India for me and my wife. We had a great dinner here with the Prime Minister. I found him to be a very decent, honorable person with whom we established warm relations. And he -- I just can't tell you how -- what a kind person he was, and at the same time represented his great country's interests very well.

I do want to make something clear in the speech I gave today. I said that -- as to the Kashmir interest -- issue, America supports a solution that is acceptable to all sides. As you might recall in my remarks, I said, "to both sides." I would like the record to be so that the world hears me say, "all sides." I fully understand that the deal has to be acceptable to the Indians, Paks, as well as the citizens of Kashmir.

Okay?

Q Yes. Mr. President, how and why has India come front and center to U.S. strategic thinking now after being on the margins for so many years?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, as you know there was a history, particularly during the Cold War, that made it difficult for our countries to establish a close relationship. However, things change in the world. And as the post-Cold War thaw developed, as -- attitudes began to shift.

Secondly, the Indian economy, as a result of more transparency and openness and trade, began to change. And as the Indian economy changed, it changed the commercial relationship between the United States and India.

Thirdly, there are some common threats that make it in our interests to work together -- namely terrorism. As I said in my speech today, the United States has been attacked, but India certainly understands what it means to have suffering as a result of terrorist activities. And so there's common interests that have helped to change the relationship. And I intend to seize those interests, as does the Prime Minister, in order to foster what we've called a strategic relationship.

And in my speech today, I made it clear to the American people that this relationship is in our interests. And I described the various ways it was in our interests. I think the evolution of the relationship goes to show that the world is -- changes, and it's never static. And so thank you for the question.

Q Mr. President, if India's credentials are so good, why isn't the U.S. backing its candidacy for the U.N. Security Council?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let me make one other point, if you don't mind, that I should have made in my speech today, and that is that there are a lot of Indian Americans who made a tremendous contribution to our country, as well. And there are a lot of -- over the last -- as the high-tech boom helped transform our society, a lot of the brain power behind that boom have been Indian Americans, as well as Indians educated here in America. And so the American people, as well, have begun to get kind of a different perspective on the great contributions that India can not only make to our own country but can make to the world.

Our position on the United Nations Security Council has been very clear. First, we support a U.N. Security Council reform, but we think it ought to happen after other institutions within the United Nations become reformed. What I was always worried about is that we would focus on the U.N. Security Council and nothing else would happen. And so we have -- we have said to all parties concerned, I fully understand the Indian position, just like other nations, that we will take your case under consideration, but first things first.

And a classic case of the reform I'm talking about is the Human Rights Commission. It needed to be reformed. And what I was, again, worried about is that we'd miss opportunity while focusing on the U.N. Security Council.

Q Mr. President, when do you intend to take the U.S.-India nuclear deal before the Congress, and before the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which is part of the U.S. obligation?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, it is. As we speak, Nick Burns, of the State Department, is discussing this vital issue with Indian counterparts. We are working through what has been -- as I said in the speech, a difficult issue for the Indian government, as well for the American government. To change the past, the ways of the past can be difficult at times.

I appreciate the Prime Minister's courage last July of laying out a way forward, which I support. And so first things first is to go to India and hopefully reach an agreement on separation, and then bring that agreement back and start selling it to the Congress. It's -- but we can't bring anything back until we've agreed to the agreement. And that's what's happening now. There's a spirit of goodwill and cooperation.

It's in our country's interest, by the way, to encourage India -- and aid India in its development of a civilian nuclear power program. The American people are beginning to see high prices of energy, but so are the Indian people. And the reason why is, is that there's growing economies -- ours, India's, China's -- which is adding to global demand for energy. And demand is outstripping supply, and then what happens, you see price.

And one way to help deal with price here at home and/or with India is to develop alternative ways to power homes and businesses, as well as automobiles. I was sincere in my speech today when I said that we're dedicated to research and development to come up with alternative ways to use automobiles, and want to share that technologies with other nations, particularly a nation like India, which has got huge potential and vast room for growth.

And it's in our mutual interests -- I also made it clear that it's in our interests that the Indian economy prosper. And it's a very simple reason why. One, a prosperous country is one that is -- particularly one that has shown its capacity to deal with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society -- it will give India more opportunity to lead, particularly in parts of the world where people need to see how democracy can work and function in a proper way.

And secondly, the American people have got to understand a prosperous India is advantageous to our own industries. I mean, we want people buying American products, Indians want Americans buying Indian products, and that exchange of trade in a free and fair way is beneficial for workers and consumers.

And I said an amazing statistic today -- at least I thought it was -- 300 million middle-class citizens in India. That's larger than the population of the United States. And so we shouldn't fear relations with India -- matter of fact, we ought to welcome them and work on ways to strengthen them. That's really what the purpose of the trip is.

Q Do you consider India to be a responsible nuclear nation?

THE PRESIDENT: I do, particularly when they signed the IAEA safeguards, and they have a separation between their military and their civilian nuclear parts of their government.

Q Mr. President, would the United States have a problem if India continued to source oil and gas from Iran?

THE PRESIDENT: I think people are going to have to buy their energy where they can get it. On the other hand, I do want to make it clear to the Indian people and the Indian government that an Iran with a nuclear weapon will destabilize the world, and that those of us who are for peace and stability must work in concert. So there's a difference between energy supply and working closely to achieve a very important objective.

And we will discuss this issue carefully with the Prime Minister. There is a consensus in the world, and that consensus is that an Iranian government that has declared its -- has said that Israel shouldn't exist, for example, and if it were to have a nuclear weapon, would be a danger to all of us. And I will continue to make that point with the Prime Minister.

Q Why has the U.S. not questioned A.Q. Khan, whose activities intersect proliferation and terrorism?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we were the nation that exposed the conspiracy to deal with -- more than the conspiracy, the activities, let me rephrase that -- we were the nation that exposed the activities of sharing technologies, sensitive technologies, nuclear weapons-related technologies. And we, of course, want to know as much about the A.Q. Khan network as possible. But had it not been for U.S. intelligence, coupled with British intelligence, this network never would have been exposed. And the light of day helps understand proliferation.

Q Mr. President, why does India have to jump through the hoops to get a civilian nuclear agreement when its energy requirements are similar to China, another big, growing economy?

THE PRESIDENT: There are the nuclear supplier group, and the IAEA -- in other words, the world has signed on to this. We think it's in India's interest to do so, as it pertains to its civilian nuclear power industry. It will give confidence to people. It will make it easier for the United States to work with India. This will be a confidence-building measure that we don't believe is an unrealistic request. And we do realize there will be separation between the military side and the civilian side. What we're working on is the civilian side.

Q Is the U.S. more comfortable dealing with dictators and monarchs?

THE PRESIDENT: Do what now? Do I feel comfortable doing what?

Q Dealing with dictators and monarchs?

THE PRESIDENT: Do I feel comfortable dealing with them?

Q No, the U.S.

THE PRESIDENT: The U.S. feel comfortable with dealing with dictators?

Q And monarchs.

THE PRESIDENT: And monarchs? Well, I mean, I've got a great relationship with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of Great Britain. (Laughter.) She's a lovely lady and a great figure in a country that's an important ally. And, of course, that monarchy is very supportive of a free and open and democratic system.

You must take the words that I said in my second inaugural address very seriously, in that we must end tyranny in the 21st century. It's a goal that all of us can work on. India has got a unique role to play. I mean, when you really think about troubled spots, these are countries many times that are having difficulty dealing with what it means to honor minority rights and welcoming different religions within kind of a social and civil fabric.

And India has done a magnificent job of showing the world how democracy can work. And it's -- India is -- I'm confident the country will play a constructive role and can do so in a much better way many times than the United States can. I mean, after all, there are 150 [sic] Muslims living within the Indian democracy. We got a lot of Muslims in the United States, as well, which shows the world that it's -- your capable of honoring -- worshiping God as you see fit, and you can do so in a free way, and at the same time, be a productive citizen of a state.

And India can help a lot. I was very impressed by its contribution to a new democracy in the neighborhood, and that's Afghanistan. India has provided \$565 million of cash, recently pledged an additional \$50 million to build the Afghan National Assembly building. And that's responsible -- a responsible nation does that. And it's a -- it goes to show -- at least says to me that India understands that a democracy in our neighborhood will help yield peace, because if you study the history of the world, regions that had been in turmoil are now peaceful as a result of the evolution of democracy.

And one of the points I made in my address to the Asia Society is that there are -- there's more democracies now in the region, which will make it easier for a current Prime Minister, future Prime Minister of India to help achieve the vision that we all want, which is a peaceful world.

Q Mr. President, in this era of free flow capital, why would -- why are there so many restrictions about inflow of talent -- human capital to the United States, who probably add wealth and knowledge --

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate that question. I am -- you're talking about visa restrictions for highly educated citizens. I am for lifting those. I think we ought to raise the level of those who are either educated here and stay here and/or come meeting high -- with high skill levels. It's in our interest. I've always been a proponent of that.

And likewise, I would hope that India would lift its investment caps. In other words -- and part of the trip is to kind of work on ways to continue to develop this strategic relationship in a constructive way. It's a -- you know, I said something interesting -- at least I thought it was interesting -- in the speech. I said, for a period of time, if you're a friend of Pakistan, you couldn't deal with India, and if you're a friend of India, you couldn't deal with Pakistan. And we have tried to change the relationships so that people recognize it's in their interest that the United States is a friend of Pakistan's, and people in Pakistan recognize it's in their interest that the United States is a friend of India's to help, if need be, reduce tensions.

Right now, the level of tensions are, relatively speaking, down. I can remember when I first came into office. You might remember there was a series of incidents that got everybody quite nervous, and we had shuttle diplomacy -- Colin Powell. And it seems to me that there is a renewed commitment to resolving problems. I thought it was very interesting that trade between the two countries has doubled, that there's, you know, new transportation hubs. That's all very positive in terms of resolving issues.

You asked me about the relationship, how it's evolved, and I mentioned to you that as time passes sometimes, and circumstances change, relationships are able to develop a new dynamic. I would hope that time and circumstantial change is enabling India and Pakistan to develop a new dynamic. It appears to be that way.

Final question.

Q Between a cricket match and a Bollywood movie, what would a --

THE PRESIDENT: Cricket match and a --

Q You like watching?

THE PRESIDENT: What was the second?

Q It's between a Bollywood movie and a cricket match.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm a cricket match person. (Laughter.) I appreciate it. As I understand it, I may have a little chance to learn something about cricket. It's a great pastime. (Laughter.)

Q But Mr. President, you're going to India, but you're not visiting the Taj Mahal.

THE PRESIDENT: I know. It means I'm going to have to --

Q Have you broken a promise to the First Lady?

THE PRESIDENT: No, it means I'm going to have to come back. It's a -- I am disappointed with that. People who have seen the Taj Mahal say that it's -- pictures don't do it justice. It's one of the great magnificent sites of the world. And look, if I were the scheduler, perhaps I'd be doing things differently. But you want me doing one thing. I'll be the President, we've got the scheduler being the scheduler. I'm going to miss a lot of the really interesting parts of your great country. I know that. I would hope that I would be invited back sometime after this trip.

Q You could be in trouble with the "Desperate Housewife."

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Well, she's certainly the star of the family. She's really looking forward to going with me.

Q Mr. President, what is your earliest memory of India.

MR. McCLELLAN: We've got to go to the next one.

Q What is your earliest memory of India and Indians?

THE PRESIDENT: My best memory?

Q Earliest.

THE PRESIDENT: At least memory?

MR. McCLELLAN: Earliest.

THE PRESIDENT: Earliest. (Laughter.)

Q Earliest.

THE PRESIDENT: Ghandi. It's my first memory, as I think about India. You know, a person who was so spiritual that he captured the imagination of the entire world. He's proof positive that -- throughout history there have been individuals that have had the capacity to shape thought and to influence and -- beyond border. And he did that.

Q You watched the movie?

THE PRESIDENT: I watched that, too. But that's -- but my memory was earlier than that.

Thank you.

Q Thank you, very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Enjoyed it.

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