

NOTE

No Public Accountability

Usha Ramanathan writes :

On the day that [US President Goerge W] Bush was visiting Delhi, banners strung across the city's arterial roads warned: 'Avoid India Gate - Connaught Place - Ram Lila Grounds on 2nd March 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.'

This was the Delhi Police, with their motto 'We want you safe', telling Delhiites to stay away from Mr Bush's route or else face the inconvenience and delay that heightened security would inevitably bring with it. If this seems a contrast to a time when the people of a city were encouraged to come out in large numbers and to wave a welcome to visiting heads of state, so indeed it is.

The streets teemed with the tens of thousands who had congregated to protest the Bush visit. Distrust of the American establishment's motive in placing India on its policy map was reinforced when Mr Bush declared: 'Men and women from North Korea to Burma [Myanmar], to Syria, to Zimbabwe, to Cuba, yearn for their liberty... We must stand with reformers and dissidents...'

The attempt to draw India into a friendly fold where American judgment of the wrong, the unlawful and the evil would tutor Indian perceptions was received with unease, and embarrassment, by the Indian leadership. Yet, it was the silence of politeness and not a rebuttal signifying difference and distance from the US position which followed the President's sweeping statement identifying their villains. Popular opinion, in contrast, was forthright in its condemnation of US unilateralism.

The Indian government's unwillingness to cry foul in the face of US unilateralism is, though, easily explained. The Indian nuclear establishment, valiantly backed by the political bureaucracy, was banking on the US to step out of line to create a capacity to access fuel to keep its nuclear programme on the rails. Separating the nuclear weapons programme from its civilian uses, and placing the latter under the safeguards regime, was projected as an advance in the cause of nuclear safety and responsible use.

Of course no one is fooled when a country which has entered the nuclear weapons race is lent a legitimacy after having had sanctions imposed on it when it conducted nuclear weapons testing less than six years ago. The timing is not lost on anyone either: when Iran is being targeted and threatened for its nuclear programme, India, it would seem, is being rewarded.

Bush visit and the nuclear deal speak equally of a distortion of democracy and a choicelessness of risk.

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