

# George HW Bush set stage for post-Cold War US-India ties

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WASHINGTON: The one-term, four-year presidency of George HW Bush, the 41st US president who passed away on Friday at 94, set the stage for a post- Cold War realignment of US-India relations, his administration navigating through a thicket of contentious trade and commerce issues amid the nuclear weaponisation on the sub-continent.

Bush came to the White House in 1988 even as India plunged into a period of political uncertainty after the Bofors scandal led to the emergence of a National Front government and the emergence of the Mandal and mandir imbroglios. As a former CIA director, US ambassador to China and a two-term vice-president under Ronald Reagan (during which time he visited India to attend Indira Gandhi's funeral), Bush was familiar

with the region. He recognized the decreased salience of Pakistan as a frontline state after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and in his second year in office, he declined to certify that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear weapon, a step that began US downgrading of ties with Islamabad, although New Delhi believed it was too little too late because Pakistan had already crossed the nuclear red line, taking advantage of the Reagan administration's indulgence of it as a front line state against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Still, defense ties between Washington and New Delhi, ramped up during the Reagan era with first visits to India by defense secretaries Caspar Weinberger and Frank Carlucci, began to look up with the visit to US in July 1989 by KC Pant, the first visit

to Washington by an Indian defense minister after YB Chavan in 1964 (current defense minister Nirmala Sitharaman will be in Washington this weekend even as Bush's passing is being mourned). This, despite the usual niggles: The Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) project doddered along and the Bush administration kvetched over the potential misuse of US technologies, including the Cray supercomputer and a Combined Acceleration Vibration Climatic Test System (CAVTS), to enhance India's nuclear weapons program.

It was another matter that Washington had pretty much slept through Pakistan's nuclearisation, mostly through theft and skullduggery. In 1989, Bush sent his national security advisor Robert Gates to New Delhi and Islamabad to defuse a tense military confrontation that Washington believed could lead to a nuclear flashpoint - the only time the US has involved itself directly in an India-Pakistan spat. But the Gates mission also made it clear that Washington no longer backed a UN plebiscite as a preferred way to solve the Kashmir issue, and instead supported bilateral talks in accordance with the Simla Agreement.

Washington and New Delhi continued to squabble on the trade front over sums and issues that a pitiful and trivial in today's terms (although the Trump administration is reverting to the same). In what came to be known as a Super 301 dispute, the Bush administration came down heavily on New Delhi because of its \$ 690 million trade surplus with Washington, clubbing it with Japan (which had a surplus of billions), in the same way the Trump administration often clubs India with China.

But the biggest development on the US-India front during the Bush years was the decision by New Delhi to allow refueling during the Gulf War of US military planes in Mumbai. This went on secretly for several months through the VP Singh and Chandrasekhar governments till a Times of India photographer, Sudharak Olwe, spotted a US plane refueling and the photo made it to the front pages the next day. A political storm broke, and under threat from Rajiv Gandhi to withdraw support to his government, Prime Minister Chandrasekhar ended the refueling access.

Partly as a vote of thanks for this (and also the promise of economic reforms), the Bush administration supported India's application for a large IMF loan to meet the domestic financial crisis caused partly by the Gulf War.