

Bush high on India, backs common fight against extremism

Backing a place for India in the UN Security Council, former US president George W. Bush Saturday said he was 'incredibly optimistic' about the future of bilateral ties and stressed that the two countries would together fight 'an ideological battle against extremism'.

Almost a year after he left the White House after helping transform the world's once estranged democracies into engaged partners, Bush turned on his charm offensive and said his admiration for India, 'a modern and vibrant nation', had only grown stronger.

'Life has changed, but some things haven't changed like my respect for India,' Bush said at the Hindustan Times leadership summit.

In a speech punctuated by witticisms that drew laughter from the audience, Bush underlined that common interests and values of democracy and freedom bind the two nations and said he had come to India as 'a pilgrim and an admirer'. 'America feels special kinship with the people of largest democracy.'

On his first major visit abroad since his retirement, Bush confessed his admiration for India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, with whom he struck a landmark nuclear deal that was to liberate the two countries from a past marked by mutual suspicion.

'I really, really like your prime minister. He is a wise leader and really good man and I am proud to call him a friend,' Bush said. Describing Bush 'a great friend of India', Manmohan Singh had Friday hosted a lunch at his residence for him and thanked him for bringing the nuclear deal to fruition.

'(By signing the deal) the US recognised India's nuclear weapon's programme. It is India's passport to the world,' Bush said, while describing the accord as 'historic'.

Bush, who was here on a two-day visit, left soon after his interaction at the summit.

Underlining his confidence about the course of the relationship under the Barack Obama presidency, Bush said the US and India should have one of the best relationships in the world.

Looking relaxed, Bush, who was at his humorous best, said the global recession occurred when 'the Wall Street got drunk and we got the hangover'. He added that India was leading the world out of recession.

He backed India's claim for a seat in the UN Security Council, but indicated that it's going to be a 'complicated process' due to global politics.

'We must see the possibility of a seat for India in the United Nations Security Council. India has arrived as a strong democratic country in the world. It is a tolerant, peaceful and multi-religious democracy.'

He, however, added that before India's case is considered, fundamental questions about the nature of change and the future composition of the council need to be addressed.

After helming the US for eight long years, Bush defended the war on Iraq and Afghanistan that created much hostility against the US in the Muslim world, saying it was 'an ideological struggle' between extremism and terrorism on the one hand and freedom and democracy on the other.

India and the US need to work together to win the battle against extremists in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Bush said, adding that it was an ideological struggle against people who murder the innocents.

He said 9/11 in US and 26/11 in India were both moments of 'clarity', impelling the two nations tackle such acts of terror. 'The extremists hate our vision of human rights, prosperity and peace,' he added. 'Both our nations are engaged in an ideological struggle.'

The two countries sought 'to advance our values of liberty, tolerance and hope'.

Recalling how one-time enemy Japan became an ally of the US, Bush said he was confident that the Middle East would also go the same way one day.

Responding to a question about his unpopularity in the Muslim world, Bush said he would appeal to Muslims not to let 'the propagandists hijack their religion to murder innocent people'.

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