

United State-India Strategic partnership: A new course in the Asian balance-of-power politics

Abstract

The long record of U.S. strategic engagement in South Asia can be classified in three phases. First phase contains the Cold War period, second deals with the post-Cold War era and third segment is related to the post-9/11 years. The U.S. interests in South Asia always mainly rested upon stability of the region. Exerting predominantly the U.S. policy in South Asia on U.S.-Pakistan-India triangular relationship, the Americans realized that divided and security deficit region by deepening hostility between India and Pakistan, could have never been suitable for their purposes.

During the Cold War in 1950s, the U.S. intensions to put together a non-communist military coalition in Asia were supported by Pakistan while India sternly opposed the idea. Pakistan became a part of the U.S. plan in the West and East Asia regions. Pakistan joined the U.S.- sponsored military arrangements and faced severe criticism, mainly from India and Soviet Union. The Americans were pleased over Pakistan's joining of anti-communist strategic coalition but India's decline to the U.S. strategic agenda for South Asia had depressed them. The U.S. policy was not to deal with the security matters of Pakistan only, but it coped with the overall security of the South Asian region. United States wanted support from both India and Pakistan to its security plans. The U.S. policy makers had visualized that the military counterweight against communist forces in Asia could not become effective until South Asia region resolved its conflicts, especially those between India and Pakistan. So the Indian factor was never excluded from the Washington's strategic plans in South Asia. Accordingly the Indian factor was also not absent in U.S.-Pakistan relations.

Since the Cold War ended, the US-India relationship got a new momentum and rapidly both countries are charting new course of balance of power for containment of China. This paper explores approaches and ramifications of US-India strategic partnership.

To keep India and Pakistan on board so that a security deficit South Asia could turn in to a peaceful and stable area, United States urged them to decrease hostility and start a new era of co-existence with harmony and understanding. The U.S. crisis preventive diplomacy successfully functioned on a number of occasions to deescalate the conflicts between the two belligerent neighbours that could heave South Asia to a horrible battle.

* Dr. Ahmad Ejaz, Assistant Professor, Pakistan Study Centre, Quaid-i-Azam Campus, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Conflicts between India and Pakistan mostly originated to Kashmir dispute that is considered as a central point of hostility between them. Both countries have never proceeded towards a common approach to seek some equitable resolution of the dispute. United States limiting its operation ever used its influence to urge both countries to solve the dispute. The Kashmir is not important for the United States but rather due to the fact that it involves two main nations of the region that have a strategic value for the U.S. interests.

The U.S. has not taken a definitive stance on the dispute. The U.S. Kashmir policy took different postures in different phases convening to the U.S. security interests in the region but the dominant factor remained as the reality that the Kashmir is a flash point, some time with international implications. During the Cold War period, the dispute was viewed within the context of Cold War controversies in South Asia. India's close relationship with China and Soviet Union in particular, and close geographical proximity of Kashmir region with these two communist countries had increased the U.S. concern that Kashmir could be turned into a backyard for communist political and strategic accomplishments. Thus Washington's anxiety pushed it to advocate for a peaceful settlement of Kashmir dispute, through the UN resolutions emphasizing the engagement between New Delhi and Islamabad. The U.S. stand that time was in support of Pakistan's position on the issue. Soviet Union did not accept Kashmir as a disputed area and called it an integral part of India. Inside and outside the United Nations, United States made diplomatic maneuverings to seize a significant role for an equitable solution of the matter. Steadily in view of lessening in the US-USSR animosity and increasing bitterness between India and China, Cold War polemics took new direction. Accordingly India's significance was on increase for the American policy makers. There was a great opportunity for Washington to further its long cherished wish that New Delhi should stand up to Beijing. The Americans also took soft stand on India's nuclear programme and upheld Indian approach on Kashmir through supporting Indian election exercise in Indian occupied Kashmir, refuting UN resolutions on Kashmir and backing bilateral talks to seek a settlement of the issue. Thus the American tilt towards India hurt Pakistan, and estrangement surfaced in their relations. Ultimately alliance began fading and Pakistan moved close to China.

In 1980s the United States-Pakistan engagement achieved its targets in Afghanistan. Pakistan's tremendous contributions in Afghan war helped United States achieve its strategic interests in the region as well as a landmark victory in the Cold War. While Pakistan's gains were minor, limited to Pakistan's army and Zia regime. Pakistan's national interests, Pakistan's stand on Kashmir issue and Pakistan's nuclear option in particular were dispirited. Pakistan also faced repercussions of War, in terms of Afghan refugees, weapons, drugs, and militancy that swiftly dragged Pakistan in to crisis. With the end of Afghan war, Cold war was over, and Soviet Union was disintegrated, and U.S. packed up and left the region. Walking away from Pakistan, United States highlighted Pakistan's nuclear programme as dangerous for peace and stability of South Asia, and put economic sanctions on Pakistan under Pressler Amendment. Pakistan's actions in support of Kashmir insurgency were also seen as to be promoting terrorism and destabilizing India.

With the end of Cold War, the world political and strategic scene had been transformed. Radically changed global political, strategic and economic settings set new notions that international players pursued. At this juncture, India got prominence in Asia-Pacific rim, mainly based on its secular democracy, economic liberation, and expanding military potentials. The transformation of bilateral relations between United States and India has put the two countries on a verge to work closely, as the Americans believe, to defeat terrorism, halt nuclear proliferation, promote democracy, and preserve a stable balance of power in Asia for a long term.

The new framework of U.S. policy in the region within the parameters of U.S.-enacted World Order viewed India as a counterweight to increasing economic and military prominence and power of China, in order to preserve the balance of power in the Asian continent and sustain peace and stability in the Indian Ocean littoral. Thus in order to reinforce its position with China, United States sought to establish close ties with India. On the other hand, observing the warmth of China's rise on its borders, and extension of Chinese influence in Asia and the Indian Ocean in particular, India was also increasingly convinced of the need to balance China. Consequently the reorientation of U.S. interests in post-Cold War period altered its relations with India and Pakistan. The U.S. relations with India routed to strategic partnership and its relations with Pakistan moved on a slippery ground, ranking Pakistan as a nuclear proliferator and sponsor terrorism.

The globalization and new strategic environment since the end of Cold War has opened vast opportunities for China. China's economic progress and its emergence as a military power is a central event in the existing geopolitical scene of Asia-Pacific. The Americans see that China's rise will reorder the regional strategic and political settings. Thus the U.S. key intention in the region is to promote its interests and prevent China from dominating the region. In December 2000, the U.S. National Intelligence Commission released a report that said, "...if China becomes stronger, it will then seek favourable rearrangement of power in the Asia-Pacific and may engage in conflicts with its neighbours and some outside forces. As a rising power, China will keep on expanding its own influence without considering the U.S. interests."¹

Speaking at Sophia University, Tokyo, on March 19, 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said:

Knowing that China is a new factor, knowing that China has the potential for good or for bad, knowing that it will one way or another be an influence, it is our responsibility to try and push and prod and persuade China toward the more positive course.... I really do believe that the U.S.-Japan relationships, the U.S.-South Korean relationship, the U.S.-Indian relationship, all are important in creating an environment in which China is more likely to play a positive role than a negative role.²

Chinese analysts have voiced their greatest apprehension about the increasing military strength of United States in Asia, as well as about US-sponsored strategic ascension. Chinese President Hu pointed out the anxieties about U.S. encirclement of China. He said:

The United States had strengthened its military deployments in the Asia-Pacific region, strengthened the US-Japanese military alliance, strengthened strategic cooperation with India, improved relations with Vietnam, inveigled Pakistan, established a pro-American government in Afghanistan, and increased arms sales to Taiwan, and so on. They have extended outposts and placed pressure points on us from the east, south, and west. This makes a great change in our geopolitical environment.³

Beijing is very anxious regarding the swelling Indian naval potentials, which will create a perilous challenge to China's power in the Indo- Ocean region. The Chinese are worried that the Indian dominance on the Strait of Malacca and Indian Ocean can threaten the China's oil supply route.⁴ Thus the strain between the maritime strategies of the two countries has become acute, as Beijing and New Delhi seek naval power that is deemed indispensable for protection of their growing interests far from their shores.

The stage also is set for greater trilateral strategic cooperation between India, Japan, and the United States. The three countries have held a trilateral naval exercise in the Pacific that aimed at enhancing maritime cooperation and interoperability among the three navies. India and Japan are embroiled in territorial disputes with China and share worries about Beijing's military ambitions. Uday Bhaskar, a former Indian naval officer and defense analyst said that this joint naval exercise "is a reflection of the new strategic environment where there is a degree of unease in India and elsewhere over Chinese activities. To deal with the rise of China, India is now seeking to shape the environment by building collective capability."⁵ The U.S. Defence specialist Ashley J. Tellis recommended that deepening and expanding relations of India with Japan, and other main allies in Southeast Asia could possibly craft organizational restraints to plaid the abuse of Chinese rising potentials. "Even as Washington attempts to preserve good relations with Beijing– and encourages these rim land states to do the same– cultivating ties with these nations may be the best way to prevent China from dominating Asia in the long-term."⁶

The strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi has major implications for Beijing. It has triggered alarm bells in Beijing. It aims at putting China in a secondary position in the region. In the China's threat perceptions, a substantive United States –India strategic partnership transmits with it the potential for U.S.-India containment of China and use of Tibet as a strategic pressure point.

The Chinese strategists affirm that U.S.-India strategic partnership and related alliances with other countries like Japan, Australia would bring a major shift in the balance of power in South Asia-Indian Ocean region. They consider Indian Ocean as an arena in which the U.S. would attempt to contain China's larger aims. The White Paper on China's National Defense 2008 described that the "U.S. has increased its strategic attention to and input in the Asia Pacific region, further consolidating its military alliances, adjusting its military deployment and enhancing its military capabilities."⁷

India's grand strategic aspirations motivate it to move beyond Southern Asia and assert itself in Asian settings. Given to this, India referred China as a threat to justify its aim to balance the China's might. George Fernandes was the first Indian Defence Minister to have gone on record in describing China as India's "potential enemy no. 1."⁸ India now is strengthening enormously its defence capabilities vis-a-vis China and has set to spend at least \$15 billion for China-specific military activities by 2017. The Chinese remain alert over disputes along China's shared border with India and are also concerned with the strategic ramifications of India's expanding economic, political, and military power. Though the volume of trade between the two neighbours has been expanding, the bilateral trade cannot be any insurance against military and foreign policy threats. In an attempt to counter the India-U.S. influence in the South Asian region, Beijing has floated a new strategy - good neighbourhood and peaceful co-existence - to pursue its relations with South Asian nations. This policy implies for 'mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and collaboration.' India is against the Chinese policy of expanding relations with South Asian countries and envisages it as a meddling in the South Asian affairs.⁹

China's enhanced relations with South Asian neighbours are manifold. The Chinese massive investment in Nepal and active military cooperation between the two countries, including supply of arms and an intelligence sharing have initiated new channels of friendship. Similarly the growing trade between China and Srilanka, and huge Chinese investment and maritime cooperation has brought the two countries more close. China -Bangladesh relations set a unique example of bilateral ties. Bangladesh obtains massive military aid, military training, technology and equipment from China. The two countries signed the defence cooperation agreement in 2002 and 2004 to strengthen their military ties. The year 2005 was declared and celebrated as 'China-Bangladesh Friend Year'. China is the largest trade partner of Bangladesh. Bilateral trade amounted to US \$ 7 billion in 2010. China has also taken the initiative to develop natural gas resources and nuclear power plants in Bangladesh. China is also Myanmar's largest trade partner and supplies the bulk of weapons to the Myanmar Armed Forces. China strives hard to explore and develop relations with Bhutan.¹⁰

China steadfast economic and military relations with Pakistan are an irritating point for India. China-Pakistan military collaboration, mainly in missile and nuclear fields, are not acceptable to India. The Indians have looked at the China's access to the Gwadar deep sea port in a very perilous way. They believe that the Gwadar will provide a unique opportunity to China to "take a giant leap forward in gaining a strategic foothold ... to monitor the U.S. naval activity in the Persian Gulf, Indian activity in the Arabian Sea and future U.S.-Indian maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean."¹¹ The Gwadar project will also provide China "a transit terminal for crude-oil imports from Iran and Africa to China's Xinjiang region. The network of rail and road links connecting Pakistan with Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics is envisaged as an important part of the Gwadar development plan to provide Beijing an opening into Central Asian markets and energy sources. It will also help stimulate the economic development of China's backward Xinjiang region."¹²

First true sustained strategic engagement of the U.S. officials with the Indian leaders took place after Indian nuclear blasts in May 1998. It was exercise of 14 rounds of talks between the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh. The talks continued for two and a half years. President Clinton during his landmark visit to India in March 2000 laid the foundation of the U.S.-India strategic partnership. President George W. Bush built rapidly and effectively on that foundation. Obama administration has been carrying on its predecessors' India-centric policy.

The United State and India have been now charting a new course in the Asian balance-of-power politics. During his tour to India in 2006, President Bush asserted that the U.S. and India "are closer than ever before and this partnership has the power to transform the world."¹³

The U.S. relationship with India is fastest-developing friendship. Remarkable measures have been taken to strengthen the partnership, including agreement on civil nuclear cooperation, collaboration on scientific and technological innovation, expanding trade and commercial links, sharing strong linkages in field of education, Joint advancement on health issues, common efforts to prevent terrorism, drug trafficking and nuclear proliferation. The Americans believe that the U.S. partnership with a democratic and increasingly powerful India represents a marvelous positive opportunity to advance the U.S. global interests.

The American policy makers also view India as a stabilizing force in South Asia, assigning it a leadership role. Thus they support Indian policies towards regional matters. The United States also has encouraged India to play an expanding role in Afghanistan. Having a shared vision about stability in this war ruined country, both countries have been working together on a strategy to shape a stable and friendly Afghanistan. Indian role in Afghanistan's economic, political and security matters bloomed over last decade. India has made important contributions in building infrastructure in Afghanistan, including new buildings, renovating and constructing roads, power projects, dams, hospitals, granaries, and schools. The Indians are training Afghan parliamentary officials in governance and parliamentary processes. It is a serious matter of concern for Pakistan. Indian intervening in to the security matters of Afghanistan in particular has been alarming for Pakistan's national security interests. Afghanistan's security agreements with United States and India are extension of U.S.-India's joint strategy for future of Afghanistan.

The triangular nexus of United States-Afghanistan-India had compelled Pakistan, whose foreign policy has always been India-centric and revolves around India-Pakistan security paradigm, to view Afghanistan from an India-centric perspective. The frequent visits of Afghan President Hamid Karazi to India also had given clear sign of Kabul's tilt towards New Delhi. During his visit in 2013, he desired to expand defence ties between the two states in accordance with the strategic partnership agreement signed in 2011. Under this agreement New Delhi agreed to assist in the training and equipping of Afghan security forces. During his visit to India, Karazi presented a wish list of military equipment to Indian leaders, seeking a greater military support to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of

Western forces. It was clear invitation to India to exercise strategic options including boosting of Afghanistan's security apparatus. This undertaking likely sparked anxiety in Pakistan.

After 9/11, United States needed Pakistan's support in its campaign of hot pursuit of terrorists. Islamabad did not disappoint Washington and consequently both countries were tied again in a partnership for an international fight against terrorism. Despite Pakistan's massive sacrifices and contributions in this war, the Americans do not realize the value of this country. It is said that the strategic engagement with Pakistan is temporary for a short period, and there is no question of a permanent partnership with Pakistan because as the U.S. officials argue, both countries do not share common ideas and concerns on many matters. They see Pakistan with suspicious eyes. Mistrust is prevailing between the two sides. Pakistan is still bracketed for promoting terrorism. Pakistan is indicted for providing safe havens to terrorists who operate from there to detriment regional stability.

The Americans always see the core of South Asian security lying in stable India-Pakistan relations. Any development undermining peace and stability of South Asia directly affects the U.S. policy objectives in the region. It is in the strong interest of United States to see the two countries to develop a lasting and productive peace, by resolving the conflict over Kashmir in particular. Though the U.S. transformed its stand on Kashmir within its security interests in the region, it always stressed for a peaceful resolution of Kashmir that is essential to secure the South Asian stability. The Americans maintain that the people of India and Pakistan are ultimately responsible for ceasing their tensions. Thus Washington persistently encouraged New Delhi and Islamabad to reduce strain and helped them in this regard, and motivated them for talks.

The U.S. involvement in Kashmir dispute is rather only to encourage India and Pakistan to work together for a resolution of it. It has no intension to come up with some formula for its settlement. It has therefore ruled out any mediation on the dispute, despite request from Pakistan.

Since both India and Pakistan have strategic value for the United States, it remains concerned about the matter of peace and security in South Asia the region. Its core position on the Kashmir issue in essence is one of a 'hands-off policy,' trying clearly to exercise a balancing act in order not to offend either side. This will most likely continue to be the U.S. position on the dispute, unless an unavoidable deteriorated situation emerges between India and Pakistan or in the region that will seem definitely to make serious damages to the U.S. strategic interests in the area.

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