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Author(s): Rajesh Kumar

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# US and South Asia in the new Millennium

Rajesh Kumar

Security in South Asia has always been precarious. Given the multiplicity of social cleavages, depth of animosities, and increase in destructive potential of the subcontinent's two largest states, India and Pakistan, South Asia probably ranks among the most insecure of the regions in the world today. Therefore, it is important to examine how relations of India and Pakistan with the United States evolve in the next few years. Such an analysis also assumes importance in view of the changing global, ideological and political situation.

The aim of this paper is to analyze various aspects of the increasing role of the United States in South Asia in the new millennium, in the post - nuclearisation period of South Asia, what would be the American role in South Asia, and how India and Pakistan, the *de facto* nuclear weapon states of the region view such an American role in the region, are questions of our immediate concern. The United States relations with Pakistan got strained during this decade following the stoppage of United States aid under Pressler Amendment. Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapon capability has also become a source of discord between the two countries. For the United States there are no strategic compulsions that would make Pakistan an indispensable ally, compared with the situation that prevailed in the Cold War period or during late 1980s.

However, the United States attention in the region remained intact, particularly in the context of its concern for nuclear non-proliferation. But the United States received a shock when India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, and declared themselves as nuclear states. The United States responded to these tests by imposing a flurry of sanctions against both the countries. The emergence of two more nuclear weapon states, which have a

Mr Rajesh Kumar is Research Scholar, School of International Studies Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

shared history of four wars, in addition to the presence of recognized nuclear weapon states like China and Russia besides the US-UK naval base in Diego Garcia which anchors the United States nuclear submarines, in close proximity to South Asian region, has made South Asia an area of concentration of US diplomacy. At the same time, both countries have been trying to adjust each other's relations vis-a-vis the United States. Therefore, the scope of this paper is limited to analyzing issues that confront the relationship of India and Pakistan with the United States, and focus the divergences in their perceptions of the security environment in the South Asian region. The paper would also focus the issues where there is need to take effective and urgent steps by these countries.

The paper is divided primarily into four sections: past relationship of US with India and Pakistan, the present trends in their relations, the future prospects, and the conclusion of the paper.

Historically, the US policy in South Asia has been based on various interests. A fundamental position was that as long as any other major power remained engaged in the region, US role in the region would remain very active. In this context, the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and the Soviet Naval presence in the Indian Ocean, were considered a threat to US interests in South Asia and the Gulf region. However, the end of Cold War brought a significant change in the strategic environment of South Asia. Greater understanding between the erstwhile Soviet Union and the United States had reduced the importance of Pakistan for the United States significantly. For India, the disintegration of the Soviet Union had provided grounds for improvement of its relations with the United States.

In the past, for many years, the US policy in South Asia was influenced by its larger foreign policy goal i.e. "to create a more secure, prosperous and democratic world." To promote it, the United States acted in favour of deterring aggression, halting nuclear proliferation, advancing arms control and disarmament, combating international terrorism, crime and narcotics trafficking, supporting democracy and upholding human rights.<sup>1</sup>

1. Karl F. Inderfurth, United States Interests and Policy Goals in South Asia. <http://www.state.gov/www/regions/sa/goats>, (Statement before the House of International Relations Committee, Washington D.C., October 22, 1997.

Since 1974, the Indo-US relations has been overshadowed by the nuclear non-proliferation issue. Even though significant improvements have been registered in areas of trade and investment, a number of obstacles hindered defence cooperation between the two countries. The United States put major obstacles to the transfer of high technology to India, which included sale of US Cray Super-computers. However, despite divergence of interests in their bilateral relations, in the present context, the United States may seek India's cooperation in maintaining stability in the South Asian region.

The US was among the 14 countries which had imposed sanctions against India and Pakistan soon after their nuclear tests in May 1998. They had tightened export controls, suspended or sharply curtailed bilateral defense relations, shelved many cooperative ventures and cancelled foreign aid to both India and Pakistan. In the wake of nuclear tests of India and Pakistan, the US effort seems to bring the nuclear competition in the region to the lowest possible level. The US seems to be determined to get India and Pakistan adhere to global Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. According to US Under Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the US cannot concede, even by implication, that India and Pakistan have, by their tests, established themselves as nuclear weapon states, with all the rights and privileges enjoyed by the nuclear weapon states under the NPT.

Such an attitude on the part of the United States has made it difficult for India and Pakistan to concede US demands for signing the NPT or Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Even though eight rounds of talks have been held between India and the United States under the "Strategic dialogue", the dialogue process has not yet brought any fruitful outcome. Neither the US has fully lifted sanctions against India and Pakistan nor India and Pakistan have signed any of these treaties.

US relations with India and Pakistan after the nuclear tests are based on the belief that an intensified, nuclear arms race in South Asia would be a tragedy. Besides, the prospects of terrifying threats of an accident or outbreak of war, and emphasis on high-tech nuclear and missile competition can greatly strain the economies of both countries. The United States holds the view that both India and Pakistan should demonstrate a strong commitment to

nuclear and missile restraints and to reducing regional tensions. The actions envisaged in this context include signing and ratifying the CTBT without conditions, refraining from missile tests, and agreeing not to weaponise or deploy missile systems, halting the production of fissile material, and participating constructively in negotiations towards a fissile material cut off treaty, formalizing existing pledges not to export or transfer nuclear and ballistic missile technology or expertise, and, for the sake of regional stability and prosperity, resuming direct dialogue between India and Pakistan to address the root causes of tensions, including Kashmir.<sup>2</sup>

It seems very difficult for the present government in India to sign the CTBT because of its potential dangers to its indigenously built nuclear installations are as per the intrusive verification clauses of CTBT which will allow international inspection teams of CTBTO or International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to carry out “intrusive” inspections and bring them under IAEA safeguards.

However, in India since elections for the Lok Sabha are still in progress, any decision on signing the CTBT can be taken only by the new government, which would be formed only in October 1999, much after the CTBT deadline of 23 September 1999. For Pakistan, it may not sign the CTBT partly due to domestic pressure and partly due to India’s non-signing of the Treaty.

If this is going to be the case, India’s relations with the United States are likely to suffer in future, as it is likely to come into conflict with the IJS goals of (1) preventing escalation of nuclear and missile competition in the region; (2) strengthening the global non-proliferation regime; and (3) promoting a dialogue between India and Pakistan on the long-term improvement of their relations, including the subject of Kashmir.<sup>3</sup>

India has been trying its best, especially through the process of strategic dialogue with the United States, to maximise the strategic advantage if it has to accede to the CTBT. This involves a larger strategic partnership that recognizes India as a nuclear weapon state. There can be a possibility that the US accept a compromise solution with India that stops short of demanding the

2. Karl F. Inderfurth, “US Relations with India and Pakistan after Nuclear Test”, 98/980626 — [inderfruthpressclub.htm](http://inderfruthpressclub.htm).

3. Strobe Talbott, “US Diplomacy in South Asia: A Progress Report”. USIS. Official Text. November 13. 1998, p.3.

“freeze”, roll back and elimination of nuclear weapons material and expertise.

The new tone of US in South Asian region was reaffirmed by Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Karl Inderfurth. While speaking to the Foreign Policy Association, he said: “India is the largest, strongest and indeed the dominant player in the subcontinent and, as such it commands a corresponding level of thought and care.”

Such views of the United States assume significance since Washington has come to accept the fact that the Indian decision to test nuclear weapons was driven primarily by its multifaceted concerns about China (including China’s relations with Pakistan and the United States). US negotiators also recognize that the Indian concerns about the security implications of the CTBT for India are genuine and are tied especially to nuclear asymmetry between India and China. A realization is there, that India’s concerns need to be addressed in such a creative way as to permit India to sign the CTBT without giving up its minimum nuclear deterrent capability.<sup>4</sup>

The change in US perceptions of India, even in the post -nuclearization period could be attributed to relations between United States and China, which have become severely strained due to unpredictable events and differences in strategic outlook and ambitions. For example, Beijing’s sense of insecurity is increased by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO’s) decision on out-of-area operations; the prospects of US Theater Missiles Defense (TMD) in East Asia; the reaffirmation of the US-Japanese security alliance; arms sales to Taiwan; general suspicions of American containment strategies aimed against China; and apprehensions of perceived American “hegemony” in the Pacific and beyond.

On the other hand, Washington is also disturbed by the prospects of a Sino-Russian entente and the Chinese acquisition of Russian advanced conventional weapons; China’s steady conventional and nuclear force modernization; China’s activities in South China seas; China’s threatening posture towards Taiwan and its troublesome weapons proliferation activities in South Asia and the Middle

4. Mohammed Ayoob, “Nuclear India and Indian-American Relations”, *Orbis*, (Philadelphia) Vol.43, No.1, Winter 1999, pp.70-71.

East. The recent Cox Committee Report has only exacerbated concerns about China's strategic intentions.<sup>5</sup>

All such actions of both the countries indicate that the United States and China are likely to be slowly embarking on their versions of Cold War in the Pacific. In the light of such potential differences, the views of US experts are important where they want that the United States must adopt a policy of strategic realism to successfully close this gap in strategic perceptions while protecting and advancing its interests in Asia.<sup>6</sup>

According to one expert, "If China should attempt to use military intimidation to expand its regional influence, the United States should deter Chinese efforts through graduated improvements in security cooperation with other Asian States. The resulting network of formal and informal security ties would constitute a virtual alliance capable of coordinating response to aggressive Chinese actions."<sup>7</sup>

If the above premise is accepted, the United States may cooperate with India and Southeast Asian countries in developing effective balance of power vis-a-vis China. Both countries may also cooperate in ensuring India's good neighbourly relationship with all South Asian countries including Pakistan. Even Kashmir problem could be solved if there is a constructive approach and use the good offices of countries like the United States to find an enduring solution to the Kashmir problem between India and Pakistan. Situations like the Kargil crisis could be prevented through US cooperation in having equipment placed there for effective monitoring of borders.

US took a great deal of interest in the whole issue of Kargil conflict. The role of the US President has been important as the signing of agreement, on 4 July 1999, between President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif brought an end to the conflict. Since then, the US stand has been, as stated by US Secretary of States Madeline Albright, on 20 July 1999, "We hope very much

5. Peter T.R. Brooks, "Strategic Realism, "The Future of US-Sino Security Relations". *Current History*, Vol.XXVII, No.3, Summer 1999, pp.53-55.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Robert G. Sutter, "China Policy: Crisis over Taiwan, 1995—A Post-Modern", CRS Report 95-1173 F, 5 December, 1995, cited in Phillip C. Saunders, "A Virtual Alliance for Asian Security", *Orbis*, Vol .43, No.2, Spring 1999.

that India and Pakistan will resume their dialogue under the Lahore process".<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after nuclear test, Clinton Administration was orchestrating an international campaign of condemnation against India. But during the Kargil conflict, India drew a lot of praise from the United States for its restraint, and it was Pakistan which was criticized.

After initially promising public neutrality, Clinton Administration at a later stage increased its pressure on Pakistan to pull back intruders to their side of Line of Control (LoC). President Clinton also persuaded the G-8 countries to include, in their final communiqué from Cologne, Germany, a statement condemning the "infiltration of armed intruders" and demanding "full respect" for the *de facto* border i.e., LoC. Such views of the United States should be considered, not in isolation to the Kargil crisis, but as part of its concerns on global terrorism. It was Pakistan, this time, which was accused for proxy war.

The Kargil crisis of May 1999 not only exposed Indian military and political weaknesses in the new era of South Asian nuclear weaponisation, the development was important also because of the continuity and substantial content of US involvement in the national security related affairs of India and Pakistan. President Bill Clinton's promise, during his joint statement of 4 July 1999 with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, to take personal interest, "in encouraging an expeditious resumption and intensification" of bilateral efforts to resolve "all issues dividing India and Pakistan, including Kashmir," indicates the US intention to actively assist the process.

India's apprehension is that the external, US led pressure on India to do something about its unresolved dispute with Pakistan on the future of Kashmir, is likely to intensify in the post-Kargil conflict period.

For Pakistan, agreeing to the joint statement of 4 July 1999 could be seen as a step not only to end its international isolation over the Kargil issue, but to make sure that US lifts permanently the sanctions imposed on Pakistan, apart from seeing that the Kashmir issue gets internationalized. Such war like situation has added to the US belief that security situation in the subcontinent

8. *Official Text*, USIS, New Delhi, 21 July 1999.



is likely to deteriorate, hence the United States must pursue its non-proliferation goals effectively. However, the fact that the United States did not side with Pakistan could have been guided by its stand on global terrorism.

The US stance on Kargil appeared to be prompted by its apprehension about the subcontinent's becoming a nuclear flash-point, than due to any new beginning in the relationship between India and the United States.

An Indian scholar Kanti Bajpai, is of the view that "Washington's reaction to Kargil is basically concerned with stability in the region. It wants to ensure that the conflict should not snowball into full-fledged war in which either side might opt to use nuclear weapons."<sup>9</sup>

However, the US actions could be construed as ones recognizing India's important role in maintaining stability in the South Asian region. In addition, India offers world's second largest potential market to the United States, which could prove mutually beneficial to both the countries in the new millennium.

Notwithstanding the fact that US has appreciated India's restraint from crossing the LoC and leading a full-fledged war with Pakistan, the US role during the Kargil crisis, or even in future, was not to allow Pakistan to collapse, or even to come under the shadow of a militarily dominant India. Therefore, any US mediator role is likely to safeguard or protect Pakistan's interests vis-a-vis India.

Cooperation in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean, based on trust, could have stabilising impact on Central Asia and the Gulf region. A moderate Islamic State, Pakistan, and a convincingly secular state, India, could join hands to make a major contribution to peace and security not only in their own but in the neighbouring region of Asia as well.<sup>10</sup>

A reduced threat of conflict in the South Asian region, a possible settlement of the Afghan conflict and an economic opening up of Central Asia, lowering of tensions between India and Pakistan could permit both sides to reduce defense expenditures, develop

9. *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 13 June 1999.

10. Weick, Hans Georg, "India's Policy of Good Neighbourly Relation", *Aussenpolitik* (Hamburg), Vol.48, (291-300), Third Quarter 1997, p.10.

trade relations and improve their economies, for the benefit of all the people.

US must look forward to a more developed set of consultations with India on matters of regional, indeed global, security concern. US should leave South Asia alone so that countries, through dialogue and arrangements, could build and shape regional cooperation in the region. US should support to get the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) strengthened and become a very effective institution in the region for cooperation among countries, as European Union (EU) has been able to remove the centuries old fears of Germany and France.

The US, on its part, will have to make clear that it has reconciled to India-Pakistan's acquisition of the nuclear weapons and avoid policies suggesting that it still harbours the "roll back" objective. In particular, the US would have to end its ban on the sale of nuclear reactors to India and restrictions on US cooperation with India's civilian nuclear programme, even if it becomes necessary that Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act, 1978 (NNPA) is amended."<sup>11</sup>

For, India, the principal test of the American desire for friendship has been whether the United States finally ends its pro-Pakistan tilt, the United States unambiguously made it clear that the termination of Cold War has nullified the rationale for US military aid to Pakistan and makes it clear that it will henceforth refrain from new attempts to orchestrate the balance of power between India and Pakistan and work for attaining balance of power between India and China. It is possible when US lifts economic sanctions, allows transfer of dual technologies, create an environment so that measures of various export controls regimes should not impinge upon India's programmes of self reliance in areas of defence and space technology.

In meeting South Asia's challenges, India, as the region's largest and strongest state economically as well as militarily, will have to make use of its power in a constructive way rather than generating fear and resentment in the neighbourhood. It must use its strength wisely and not to promote for narrow national advantage. India could help allay misplaced apprehensions by providing an ex-

11. Selig S. Harrison, *The United States and South Asia: Tapped by the Past?* *Current History*, Vol.96, No.614, December 1997, p.405.

planation of its purpose and intention to its neighbours as well as others who have legitimate interests in the region. India has been able to adjust its relationship with Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Bhutan. If such are the goals, it may not come into conflict with the US goals of peace and stability in the region, except on issues like non-proliferation.

To eliminate the bristling feeling from their bilateral relations, the United States and India will have to show greater sensitivity and forbearance. Washington should realize that it cannot cling on, forever, to its self appointed role as the "only superpower", and India will have to recognize that political and economic accommodation with the United States is necessary for its own achievement of a superpower status.<sup>12</sup>

In the new millennium, the US must recognize that it lacks the power and influence to unilaterally order the security affairs of South Asia, in ways only compatible with its own interests, and that India bears the principal responsibility for the development of a South Asian system that fits comfortably into the larger international system.

If the report of well known US think tank, the Rand Corporation, is to be believed, it has made a forecast of the relative decline of the western economies and military power over the next two decades. The report said bluntly, "Non-European economic powers display economic growth and prominence relative to those of Western Europe." It has made a forecast that India, Brazil and Egypt would gain in relative power and influence, besides Japan and China.<sup>13</sup>

India's national interests are linked to the stability of the South Asian region. India constitutes the chunk of South Asia, and its *status quo* interest in the region is a force for stability in a major political theatre of the world. According to A.P. Rana, an Indian scholar, the United States may eventually need to depend on a regional stablizer, through a policy of delegated peace (the "pax delegata") to tackle its world-wide stability problem. He holds the view that in the absence of the will effectively to intervene, this

12. Selig S. Harrison, *op.cit.*, p. 401.

13. Cited in K. Subrahmanyam, *Security in a Changing World*, (New Delhi: BR Publishing Co., 1990), p.139.

problem becomes more manageable if US count on regional stabilizers to undertake this for her. India may constitute such a stabilizer for the United States in South Asia, additionally so because India's own concerns for stability as a *status quo* power in this area are probably even more cogent. Thus, there is in this local and global situation, a congruence that makes partnership between India and the United States a natural consequence of shared national interests.<sup>14</sup>

14. A.P. Rana, "India and the United States: Towards 'Partnered Co-existence'," in Nancy Jetly, ed., *India's Foreign Policy. Challenges and Prospects*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing Co, 1999), p.258.