

U.S. Interests in South Asia and Its Impacts on Regional Stability

Asif Farooq

HEC Scholar for Ph.D.

Department of Political Science,

University of the Punjab, Lahore

Muhammad Rashid

M.Phil Scholar,

Department of Political Science & I.R.,

G.C. University, Faisalabad

ABSTRACT

United States has a significant involvement in the regional affairs of South Asia since 1947 and this region remained an area of interest and priority near West due to its momentous geostrategic and geopolitical importance. United States has forged effective bilateral bonds with countries across South Asia, however, its policy has regularly concentrated on the immediate over the enduring. United States policy toward the region had seen many ups and downs and had segments of successes and missed opportunities. The U.S. has to adopt a renewed policy towards South Asian states if it needs to forge interactions with this region built on mutual interests and trust, although preserving an enduring strategic approach towards Asia, so that both the U.S. and the South Asian countries will be better prepared to deal future uncertainties.

Keywords: *United States, South Asia, Regional Stability, Policy Choices, China.*

Introduction

During Cold War Pakistan served as an ally of United States versus close nexus between India and Soviet Union in Asia. Formerly, South Asia remained an area of low priority in U.S. policy. However, U.S. has to focus again on this region due to three events in the late 1990s. First, the two historical rivals of the region, Pakistan and India confirmed their nuclear capability in May of 1998 and U.S. entailed sanctions on both the countries. Then there was a limited scale war in Kargil in 1999 between these two new atomic powers. Third was the overthrow of elected political government and military takeover in Pakistan on October 12, 1999 (Javaid & Fatima, 2012).

Stability and prosperity in South Asia is much important near U.S. to follow its interests in this region and in Asia in future. Historically, there are different phases of convergence and divergence between them. To play a better role for the prosperous and peaceful South Asia in the future, U.S. has to understand that how its policy has evolved over the time. Furthermore, United States is pursuing its extended interests in a stable and developed South Asia particularly the Afghanistan. Also developing strong bilateral relations with New Delhi, following an effective and sustained policy for Islamabad, including a generalized regional strategy that how to connect with South Asia and other Asian states. From which, it is apparent that U.S. desires to establish fortified interactions with China in near future and it is an integral part of its policy for Asia.

After the U.S. decision of military drawdown, Afghanistan preparing for a critical transition which is plagued by insecurity, political instability, drug trafficking, and corruption. The regional stability is threatened by rising extremism and militancy in Pakistan. In India, poverty and corruption are the two big challenges that can undermine economic progress of the most vivacious democracy of the region. The political development and economic advancement in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan and the Maldives will largely depend on the efforts in fostering the interconnectivity and economic integration among major South Asia states and throughout Asia. Parallel to this, Chinese ghost which has exorcised from nap and has become a powerful and responsible regional stakeholder perusing a range of interests in South Asian states, resulting in souring the already complex relations between Washington and Beijing (Evans, 2012).

Presently the U.S. and South Asia have to pave the way for a vigorous and advanced U.S.

policy toward this region, which accommodates the complex ground realities instead of day dreaming and confirms that both the Washington and the South Asian states will be better equipped and collaborate enough to handle future regional challenges. Further, this study focuses on the ways how U.S. can improve and adopt better policy choices rather than adumbrating outdated and traditional approaches towards this region.

Pre-9/11 Relations with Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan: The Baseline

At the time of incident of 9/11, security ties between South Asia and United States were very limited or about to non-existence. Afghanistan regime under Taliban leadership was also not acknowledged by American government. Due to nuclear achievement and support for Taliban, Pakistan was also not in American good books. On the other hand, America was also not happy with India due to its nuclear programme, however, it was the linchpin of U.S. policy in Southern Asia. Both countries collaborate with each other on trade and their strong bilateral relations has been boosted up with the passage of time (Polly, 2005). Ironically, U.S. has always pursued 'need based' relations with South Asian states and has never tried to maintain an enduring relationship with this region. History shows that United States has also followed dual faced policies for two major regional actors i.e. Pakistan and India. A biased and discriminatory U.S. approach generated the sentiments of mistrust among Pakistani nationals.

During Cold war, USA introduced SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) and CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) pacts to counter communist pressure in Asia. These were purely military and security alliances. Newly born Pakistan, threatened by Indian belligerent intensions, immediately joined these alliances to secure its boundaries from any foreign aggression. However, United States did not provide any support when Pakistan had to face a surprise invasion from India in 1965 and same in 1971 resultantly Pakistan had to lost its Eastern part. In 1974, India's first time explosion of nuclear device resulted in disturbance of power equilibrium in South Asia. Threatened to a great level Pakistan also pushed up its own nuclear programme to maintain a balance of power maintaining the regional harmony and steadiness.

Policy Reversal - 9/11 and Consequences for South Asia

South Asia served as baseline for war on terrorism started by President Bush after 9/11. United States restructured relations with the region. Now once again Pakistan became an important regional actor in US led War on terror, so America started strengthening its ties with it and approved aid for it. However, Pakistan offered for absolute cooperation in US led war against terrorism, prodigiously accrued it to the status of 50's front line ally. Parvez Musharraf, Chief Executive of Pakistan, identified four basic reasons based on Pakistan's benefits: security of the country was the foremost priority, economy, securing the strategic assets and Kashmir cause the later ones (Kroonstad, 2008).

In this war against terrorism, Pakistan titled as front line ally. The basic target of America in this war was Al-Qaeda under the shelter of Taliban regime in Afghanistan. After the incident of 9/11, Pakistan took U turn and diminished its support for Taliban, resultantly United States waived the sanctions imposed on Pakistan after the February 28, 1998 atomic explosions and the military takeover of October, 1999. A large amount of US aid and assistance for Pakistan was granted including the status of Non-NATO ally in 2004 in reward of its efforts and collaboration with America in the war against terrorism (Javaid & Fatima, 2012).

Operation Enduring Freedom – War in Afghanistan

After 9/11 attacks of terrorist on World Trade Centre in America and due to so called involvement of Al-Qaida in these attacks, Afghanistan, the host country of Al-Qaida leader Usama bin Laden, became the first battleground to initiate War on Terror, lately called Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). On the 20th day of same month, president Bush demanded Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan. Furthermore, he asked Taliban to release all hostages and allowed America to demolish all jihadi training camps. (Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012).

Taliban refused to admit the U.S. claim that Usama bin Laden is involved in aforesaid attacks. Resultantly United States launched a military action called "Operation Enduring Freedom" against Taliban in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 (Javaid & Fatima, 2012). In the result of this operation Taliban regime was almost finished in Afghanistan and a U.S. approved democratic government was established in Afghanistan. This war destroyed the complete infrastructure of Afghanistan and rehabilitation programme was started with the help of United States government. However, this region has not achieved full scale peace and have to face insurgent attacks on U.S. army and other government officials.

Global War on Terror and Pakistan

United States led GWOT in Afghanistan could not have started without Pakistan's support and Pakistan's help is required for maintenance of peace process and stability there. So, USA required Pakistan's help to win this war in Afghanistan. Due to shared culture and borders between Pakistan and Afghanistan and having friendly relations with Taliban regime before 9/11, Pakistan can also provide very important intelligence information about this region which may serve as decisive in American military operation in Afghanistan (Hussein, 2010).

Pakistan was become the most important country in this region during this war and rewarded as biggest receiver of foreign assistance in this region. It was also proclaimed that American aid sanctioned for Pakistan was more than that of India's. Pakistan after promising for full support of America in Afghan war, was entitled for massive aid and debt write off. At Camp David presidents of Pakistan and US met and declared the five year \$3 billion aid programme for Pakistan. In spite of that several types of military aid and equipment purchase deals including F-16 planes were also approved (Javaid & Fatima, 2012).

The U.S.-India Strategic Partnership

After the visit of President Clinton to South Asia in March 2000, there was a big change in United States policy towards this region establishing strong ties between Washington and New

Delhi (Bukhari, 2011). President Clinton described that "the US had ignored India over the preceding 20 years and indicated that it would end the passive impact caused by nuclear issues in future" (Qidwai, 2005). This US-Indian relationship continued to transform under the Bush Administration (Guihong, 2003). Under the new US policy towards South Asia, the sanctions on India was also ended which was imposed under Bush administration. Moreover, America also recognized India's status of atomic power and signed a civil nuclear deal with it in 2005 and negotiation on technology transfers (Evans, 2012).

There was a mutual understanding on the use of space technology for peaceful purpose. It was declared in July 2005 to have collaboration and assistance in space navigation, launching of satellite and space exploration. India was also given the opportunity to sell out high technology goods to trusted buyers and it had no need to have a separate license in this regard, as India was declared as best country to be nominated for "Validated End User" programme. Trade and economic ties were also strengthened between two states (Javaid & Fatima, 2012).

Growing U.S.-India nexus in South Asia and strategic concerns for China

USA's policy towards South Asia principally pivots upon challenging interests with China as a proactive contestant to its universal hegemony, fighting terrorism, nonproliferation, opening large consumers market and guaranteed access to riches of Gulf, Central Asia and Caspian Sea resources. In this milieu, USA finds India as a natural ally. Through this strategic partnership with India, USA is trying to build her as a balancer to China in Asia. US interests in South Asia, when combining with her strong backing of anti-China drives of Taiwan and reassurance of Japan to militarize and may deploy forces in Iraq ventures, present hard scenarios for China. India can play a role of front line ally for US interests in this region, to balance Chinese influence, as most of Indians think that China's influence in Southern Asia is at their cost (Saleem, 2013).

China showed concerns over growing India-US nexus. United States too have apprehensions over excellent Chinese rise but not over India's. Now China concerns more that how to avoid Indo-US ties from transforming into a formal coalition in Southern Asia like the Japan-US cooperation in Eastern Asia (Xun, 2005). Increasing convergence of United States and Indian concerns in regional security is seems that this cooperation will serve as most efficient and effective

U.S. Interests in South Asia and Its Impacts on Regional Stability

component of their bilateral relations in coming decade. Although there are ideological differences on nuclear policy between both, US and India, however they have shared interests in security aspects and against domination of single power of the region, which significantly means to counter China.

Short Term Divergence, Long Term Convergence

There is short term Indo-US divergence during US-Pakistan ties over war on terrorism after 11 September, which does not mean to override their commercial interests, security cooperation etc. Both India and America consider China as a major and potential threat of the future. Thus there is a possibility to establish a strategic relationship between them to counter China by using the other as a basic element to balance Beijing, as each of them has trouble with China (Guihong, 2003).

United States is the sole superpower of the world till date and India is the most influential country in its region. Geostrategic and geopolitical importance of the region, increasing threat of terrorism and growing Chinese involvement in regional affairs and its growing image of next superpower of the world became the reason to bring America's attentions towards South Asia.

India having hegemonic attentions in this region, took China's rise as a threat and have an alliance with United States to contain China.

On the other hand, China too found Indo-US nexus as a threat to its peaceful rise, which resulted in China's leaning attitude towards Pakistan, all weather friend of China and wary with India, to counterweigh New Delhi. However, it has no revisionist or imperial aims in this regard. The Chinese establishment knows that its interests could only be protected by the way to have its own voice in rule making process through influential institutions on regional and international level (Xun, 2005).

New Chinese Perspective towards India

"Only when China and India develop well, can one claim that the century of Asia has come. If China and India strengthen cooperation, Asian unity, stability and prosperity will be very hopeful; the world will be in peace and make more progress" (Kulshrestha, 2012).

Deng Xiaoping

In 1950s, there was a period of Indo-China honey moon, a well-known phrase was commonly used both in China and India "Hindi-Chine bhai bhai", elaborating their close relation. Then, in 1962, there was a border clash between them (Rendezvous, 2016), the slogan was forgotten and swapped with "Hindi-Chine bye-bye". After China's adoption of new economic policies in 1978, there was again a modification in the previous phrase "Hindi-Chine buy buy", following with growing trade contacts between New Delhi and Beijing.

Then, there is again a turn in their relationship. China is not ready to consider India as a regional power and took it as a non-friendly state, but on the other side a partner in shaping "Asian Century". From the beginning of 21st century, both countries have collectively made efforts to shorten the distance between Beijing

and New Delhi including the freezing position over Himalaya Mountains emerged after nuclear exposure in 1998 has been liquefied.

New Phenomena of the Emerging Era

In 2005, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao paid a visit to India, both countries decided to enhance strategic cooperation and mutual partnership for regional peace and prosperity. Then in 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao also visited India, a joint statement was issued to have a focus on 10-points policy to speed up their shared interests. Hu was the first ever Chinese president visiting India, which worked as a breakthrough for solidification their relations in coming era (Hailin, 2008).

The economic and trade ties between India and China become more significant and it is not wrong to say that India has become the largest Chinese trade partner in this region. In 2010, there was more than 20 billion US\$ trade volume which is not a small piece to be easily underestimated. In spite of the getting better on economic grounds, there are many other issues which require a keen observation and settlement for prosperity of the region (Indian Express, 2005).

High-level meetings between the leadership of China and India have worked to slowly refining the bilateral relations. The development in the area of trade and commerce has been boosting, but it has not stimulated well in other areas, especially to settle the unresolved border dispute between two states. On December 2011, there was fourth round of defense dialogue between China and India in New Delhi. In this dialogue, Chinese delegation was supervised by

Ma Xiaotian a Lieutenant General of People's Liberation Army (PLA) and India's by Defense

Secretary Shashi Kant Sharma (Sen, 2011). The main purpose of such meetings would absolutely be helpful to elucidate unresolved issues between the two nations and to fortify the bilateral relationship.

Strategic Relationship Among U.S., China and India

After the Cold War, there was a significant change in the relations among the PRC, USA, and India (Detlef, 2012). The rise of these regional powers has led to the establishment of tri-polar relations among China, India and U.S.A. American president Barack Obama met with Mr. Xi Jinping in February 2012 and showed the intentions that the U.S. wants to strengthen ties in U.S. and China through increase in trade and commerce.

President Obama said, China is "a strong and effective partner with the Asia Pacific region...it is absolutely vital that we have a strong relationship with China". President further stated he has "always emphasized that we welcome China's peaceful rise ... we believe that a strong and prosperous China is one that can help to bring stability and prosperity to the region and to the world" (Manyin, 2012). China has emerged as a strong regional power, and thus, it is crucial to make China respect and regard its neighbours and constrain for regional and world peace and stability.

The United States has also fortified its relations with India. The U.S.-Indian relationship has grown much strengthened as Deputy Secretary of State of USA

U.S. Interests in South Asia and Its Impacts on Regional Stability

Mr. William J. Burns, says, “Never has there been a moment when India and America mattered more to one another. And never has there been a moment when partnership between India and America mattered more to the rest of the globe” (Womack, 2009). The aim of United States by strengthening its relations with India is not only to balance China, but also preparing India for the strategic imperative role to be played in global security environment.

United States has established a nuclear deal with India which was finalized in 2008 after final approval from congress. This agreement concreted the way for their strategic cooperation in pursuing common interests like fighting against terrorism, expansion of democracy and human rights, as well as containing Chinese authority in the region. In this regard Charles D. Ferguson, fellow at the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, wisely said, “it is the China’s rise and influence in the region which forced United States to engage with India through a strategic cooperation to counterbalance China” (Bajoria & Pan, 2010). However, experts of foreign relation do not agree that strong U.S.-India relations would be a threat to increasing Sino-Indian economic relationship.

Presently, there are some differences which can be visualized among these three states, especially in the mutual trade imbalance between China and America, value of Chinese currency, status of Taiwan, Sinkiang and Tibet and China’s firmness for “One China Policy” but unfortunately the U.S. is not willing to fully endorse it, unsettled border disputes between China and India, and Chinese territorial issues specially in South China Sea. Increase in military spending shows that there is a race between India and China and between U.S. and China too.

Although United States is far ahead of India and China in military power with developed and advanced technology and equipment, China has launched “first generation multi-purpose carrier-borne fighter jet known as the J-15” which indicates that Chinese army is trying to cover the gap with the U.S. army. However, U.S. has the upper hand in respect of military power for further 15-20 years (Brown, 2012). Still, the U.S., India and China can collaborate in the field of economic growth, including trade and business, while pushing the other issues on the side.

Prospects of Regional Stability in South Asia and the U.S. Role

All the facts, arguments and issued discussed above are clearly indicating that American engagement in South Asia is based on its geo-political interests in this region. Since 9/11, the U.S. has adopted no solid measures for regional stability instead of that showed its concerns regarding the possibility of nuclear war between two South Asian rivals. On the other side, its biased strategic engagement with India has itself disturbed the power equilibrium in the region. Further the U.S. has never done serious effort to solve territorial disputes of India and Pakistan. Even it has deteriorated the situation through nuclear deal with India, equipping it with major weapon system, supporting it for the membership (Nuclear Supplier Group) NSG and as a permanent member of (United Nations Security Council) UNSC. In such a way, the strategic stability and prosperity in South Asia could not be achieved. A balanced, non-discriminatory and cooperative approach is required in this regard. Through this U.S. can influence both the countries to adopt confidence building measures (CBM’s) and ensure regional stability. United States

have to play a role of facilitator between India and Pakistan to bring them on table for nuclear arm control dialogue and to discuss nuclear restraints. Through diplomatic power, United States may also help in bringing economic integration among regional states and to start joint economic projects leading to trust and confidence building among them.

Though, it is not an easy task to initiate and implement all such steps but it is sure that any U.S. effort in this course will not only bring regional stability, but it will also develop an environment of peaceful cooperation among regional rivalries which is necessary for secure, prosperous and stable South Asia.

Conclusion:

The growing U.S. interests in South Asia and its regional alliances are based on different philosophies. For instance, U.S. incline towards Pakistan just to curd the evil of terrorism, however the Indo-U.S. alliance is purely based on the concept of building India strategically and technologically to undermine Chinese influence in this region. Further the Sino-U.S. competition, emergence of Chinese ties with Russia and chilled Sino-Indian relations have direct effects on regional political milieu. A better security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan may guarantee the regional stability. Hostile relations between Pakistan and India are also a great cause of instability. The United States efforts for a stable and peaceful South Asia is demoralized by U.S. itself by supplying arms to India worth US \$ 5.5 billion and civil nuclear deal between them have also alarms the regional actors. Now after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan the regional states have to own the responsibility of regional stability and development by interconnecting with each other on strategical, economic, and political grounds. This is the only way through which the foreign power influence may be minimized from this region. As this region is being used as a chessboard between U.S. and China, one is struggling to maintain its hegemony and other trying to gain the status of super power. Both are struggling to reinforce influence in this part and both actors want to woo India.

The United States should have to follow a constructive and balanced approach in South Asia to develop trust and cooperative environment among regional states particularly, India and Pakistan and have not to try exploit their flaws to fulfil its own agenda here. Economic integration among regional states will certainly bring progress and prosperity in South Asia and develop a confidence and trust among them. Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, Iran-Pakistan (IP) Gas Pipeline and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are some aspects of regional integration and cooperation. The United States should help them in such joint ventures instead of using influence against them. In this regard the United States, especially the new leadership, should re-examine its South Asian policy aiming at promoting a stable and cooperative regional environment and not try to make India an arrogant regional player, to decide the fate of South Asia and contain China. The U.S. should also support the efforts of Pakistan to play a positive role in regional stability as an equal responsible nuclear power.

References

- Bajoria, J., & Pan, E. (2010, November 05). "The U.S.-India Nuclear Deal," Retrieved from Council on Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/india/us-india-nucleardeal/p9663>
- Brown, H. (2012, November 19). *America's Trouble with China*. Retrieved from Project Syndicate: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/from-competitiontoconfrontation-for-the-us-andchina-by-harold-brown>
- Bukhari, S. S. (2011). India-United States Strategic Partnership: Implications for Pakistan. *Berkeley Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1)
- Detlef, A. (2012, July 07). Retrieved from Hult International Business School: Retrieved from <http://www.eir.info/2012/07/07/an-analysis-ofcontemporary-us-china-india-relations/>
- Evans, A. (2012). The United States and South Asia After Afghanistan. *The Asia Society*.
- Guihong, Z. (2003). US Security Policy towards South Asia after September 11 and its Implications for China: A Chinese Perspective. *Strategic Analysis*, 27(2).
- Hailin, Y. (2008, October 23). *China and South Asian relations in a new perspective*. Retrieved from <http://yataisuo.cass.cn/English/Articles/showcontent.asp?id=1118>
- Hussein, Z. (2010). *Frontline Pakistan: The Path to Catastrophe and the Killing of Benazir Bhutto*. London: I .B Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Javid, U., & Fatima, Q. (2012). US Foreign Policy Parameters towards Pakistan and India (2001-2008). *Journal of Political Studies*, 19(2).
- Kroonstad, K. A. (2008). Pakistan- U.S Relations. *Congressional Research Services*.
- Kulshrestha, S. (2012, December 03). *India-China Naval Balance*," *Unbiasedjottings*. Retrieved March 2016, from <http://unbiasedjottings.wordpress.com/2012/12/03/indiachina-navalbalance/>
- Manyin, M. E. (2012). *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" toward Asia*. CRS Report for Congress.
- Polly, N. (2005). U.S. Security Policy on South Asia Since 9/11 — Challenges and Implications for the Future. *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*.

Qidwai, M. (2005). US-India Nexus: Implications to China and Pakistan. *Al-Jazeera*.

Rendezvous. (2016, April 17). *India-China Relations*,. Retrieved on March 06, 2016, from <http://www.mbarendezvous.com/postinner.php?id=277>

Saleem, K. (2013). China's Policy Towards South Asia — An Appraisal. *China and Asia Defence Forum*.

Sen, S. R. (2011, December 09). *India China Hold Annual Defense Dialogue*. Retrieved from <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/india-china-hold-annual-defence-dialogue>

Us-India-China: Giants at play. (2005, July 30). *Indian Express*.

Van Linschoten, A. S., & Kuehn, F. (2012). *An enemy we created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Womack, B. (2009). China Between Region and World. *The China Journal*.

Xun, S. (2005). New Nuclear Triangle and China's Role in South Asia. *Regional Centre for Strategic Studies*.