



RESEARCH PAPER

**United States Foreign Policy towards South Asia: A Critical
Analysis**

Dr. Muhammad Muzaffar ¹ Erum Hanif ² Imran Khan ³

1. Assistant Professor , Department of Political Science , GC Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
2. M. S Scholar , Department of Political Science , GC Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Ph. D Scholar , Department of Political Science and IR , Govt. College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

PAPER INFO ABSTRACT

Received:

October 04, 2018

Accepted:

December 21, 2018

Online:

December 30, 2018

Keywords:

United States

South Asia

Foreign Policy

Interests

Corresponding

Author:

erumchoudhary

@hotmail.com

This paper examines the United States interests and its strategies in South Asia. The region has emerged as progressively vibrant interest to United States foreign policy in the 21st century. During the Cold War era, the U.S. interests were to save the region from communist expansion. But, the recent changes in global power affiliations have made South Asia an important region. After September 11 tragedy and the Indo-US strategic collaboration the situation have changed the framework of relationship between the United States and South Asia. Present involvement of the U.S. in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Indo-Pak contention, concerns about the proliferation of nuclear armaments, struggle with terrorism, and rising of Chinese influence in the region has considerably increased the importance of South Asia in the United States policy making. United States must enhance the strategic partnership with the countries in the South Asian region for peace and stability.

Introduction

South Asia consists of seven countries Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Lately, Afghanistan has also been included in the regional grouping SAARC as a member. However, this article will focus on Pakistan and India, with peripheral references to Afghanistan, as and where needed, mainly because the United States looks at Pakistan and India as the principal players in the geopolitical construct of this region. Secondly, it will elaborate the United States concern of South Asia after the end of the Cold War and subsequently, in this way, extending history as and where required rather than make a historical survey from the time of the emergence of these states as independent nations. South Asia is a vast land and consists of one quarter of the world's population. It has much importance in international politics today.

Strategically located at the cross roads of Asia, this region lies on the perimeter to China. It is separated by a narrow strip of Afghan territory (the Wakhan) from Central Asia (Welcome to South Asian Regional Development Gateway November 21, 2008). Furthermore, it links the Middle East with South East Asia and forms the most important strategic area bordering the Indian Ocean. In this context, the U.S. as the Super power has some vital interests in the region. In reconsideration, the U.S. did not see South Asia as a region of strategic importance. Before Second World War, the U.S. interests in South Asia were very partial and were mostly commercial in nature. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991 changed the global strategic landscape in favor of the United States. The United States adopts its foreign policy in a way to fulfill all its interests and rule the world. Thus the two main concerns of United States in the region are Counter Terrorism and Nuclear non Proliferation.

Counter Terrorism

The menace of terrorism and terrorism associated activities will continue a vital threat to the U.S. interests in the region and also to the South Asian states. In this perspective, the U.S. has a long term interests and strategy in the region regarding the threats posed by terrorist organizations.

Geopolitically, South Asia represents a unified security zone, with India in the middle. That's why the region of south Asia is called Indo centric. Terrorism and political violence are not new challenges in South Asia. They have long been used by groups supporting a wide variety of causes, including national self-determination or separatism for both right- and left-wing politics, and militant religious extremism. In many cases, the delicacy of somewhat young political systems and emerging democracies has also generated an accommodating environment for the use of political violence. In addition, militant religious groups are exploiting local grievances and drawing on international events to promote radical and extremist causes, though the underlying objectives of many of these groups remain the capture of state power and the transformation of systems of government (Akhmat. et al,2013). All these factors make South Asia a fertile ground for terrorist organizations. Moreover, suspicion, distrust, and hostility that describe the political relationship between states have been a major obstacle in the way of operative regional collaboration in South Asia.

The efforts of SAARC cannot be ignored in this regard to tackle common challenges posed by terrorism, its efficacy is frequently held hostage to the political hostility between the two main South Asian actors - India and Pakistan. Since the beginning of 'War on Terror' by the U.S. in Afghanistan, South Asia has become a breeding ground of international terrorism. It can be declared without any doubt that the occurrence of terrorism as a threatening factor in South Asia has put in danger the whole quest for peace and progress (Ishtiaq July 12, 2011).

Nuclear Non Proliferation

The non-proliferation issue did figure prominently in The US regard of South Asia at this time nuclear non-proliferation has been a keystone of the U.S. foreign policy and this policy has to some extent engaged the U.S. in South Asian affairs. In South Asia the main concern comes from the stiffness between India and Pakistan (possibly leading to nuclear attack), and the way nuclear energy and weaponry are developed, stored, transported, and used (Lamb Robert D 3, 2014) In May 1998, India conducted underground nuclear tests and on 28 and 30 May 1998, Pakistan followed by conducting six nuclear tests. These tests created a global storm of criticism, and a serious setback for prolonged U.S. nuclear non-proliferation efforts in the region. On 13 May, 1998 the U.S. president Clinton imposed military and economic sanctions on India, mandated by section 102 of the Arms Export Control Act (AECA), and on 30 May the same sanctions were extended to Pakistan (Blood 2002). However in the next years, these sanctions were lifted as they could not convince India and Pakistan to stop their nuclear weapons program. A nuclear attack by one country or the other would be shattering to regional peace which has upraised the concerns of U.S. in the region. Moreover, the U.S. worries about nuclear weapons in Pakistan are intensive not only on preventing their intentional or accidental use against India but also on Pakistan's security structures and controls of those weapons. Thus the stoppage of the proliferation of all type of Nuclear weapons and material, and to stop the nuclear attack between the two nuclear states in South Asia - India and Pakistan, is the vital interest of U.S. policy makers in the South Asia.

United States Foreign Policy

There are a few factors that influence the direction of the U.S. foreign policy in a specific region. These elements incorporate the level of progression of the U.S. interests, the consideration, and nature of information accessible at different levels of government, the limitations that exist on the U.S. government and the imperatives that exist with the region and the kind of impact and number of nongovernmental intrigues that are found in the region (Kochanek. S. A,1993). In this structure, the U.S.' South Asia policy can be termed as a progression of ups and downs. These examples have been founded on various calculations of what constitutes the U.S. interests.

Post-Cold War period

In the post-cold war period things began to change. The end of Afghan War in 1989 and the demise of Soviet Union in 1991 have led to change the U.S global, regional, and bilateral relations not just with South Asia, but with the whole world. The post-Cold War period was marked with the remarkable shift in the patterns of relationships among the nations in international politics. Thus a new strategic scenario was viewed with the collapse of Soviet Union and the end of Cold War (Crockatt.R, 1997). According to Cohen and Dasgupta,' the U.S. had several

identifiable interests in South Asia during the immediate phase of the post-Cold War era. These were:

- Developing a strong economic and strategic relationship with India.
- Preserving the integrity of Pakistan.
- Curbing Islamic extremism.
- Containing terrorist activity in Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Preventing a potentially dangerous arms race on the Sub-Continent.
- promoting peace process between India and Pakistan relating to Kashmir' (Cohen Stephen P 2, 2001)

So, in the post-Cold War era the importance of South Asia for the U.S. increased. At first President Clinton did not consider South Asia as an area of importance. But from 1994 onwards, he settled the U.S. policy towards South Asia. He improved the economic and military relations with India and Pakistan. Clinton also tried to check India and Pakistan from obtaining nuclear weapons and to reduce the tension between these countries on Kashmir issue.

After 1994, the Clinton administration takes many steps to improve their relations with India. There were many reasons for the President Clinton to develop relations with India like; the dissolution of Soviet Union had devastated the base of India's foreign policy and defense. India could no longer use Soviet Union as a counter weight to Washington. The strategic value of Pakistan in the U.S. eyes also declined after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Indian economic reforms during 1990s have transformed her economy.

United States considered India as a major power in Sub-Continent so; India became center of attention to the U.S. for maintaining regional peace and stability. Finally, geopolitics concerns were also taken into account in Clinton's policy towards India (Indo-U.S Relation during the Clinton Administration: Upward Trends and Uphill Tasks Ahead February 9, 2018). Though he promoted a strategic partnership with China, yet at the same time he considered India as a counter weight to China.

The Clinton administration also tried to stop the proliferation of Weapons in South Asia. On 11 May, 1998 India conducted nuclear tests using China thereat as an excuse. On 28 May, Pakistan also claimed that it had set off five nuclear devices; followed by further tests on 30 May. On 15 July, 1998 the Congress passed the India-Pakistan Relief Act, commonly known as Brownback Amendment that relaxed sanctions on both of these countries (India-Pakistan Nuclear Tests and U.S Response February 10, 2018).

Thus the Clinton administration's nuclear policy towards South Asia was not so operative that it could check the further nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in future. Then the two newly nuclear armed states move toward another conflict in Kargil from May to July 1999. Third, another military takeover occurred in Pakistan in October 1999. A new set of sanctions were enforced on Pakistan for violation of a US law Whereas India was perceived as an opportunity, Pakistan was considered to be a threat and concern. It was weak and politically unstable. It was also alleged to be an increasingly fundamental Islamic state and having relations with the isolated Taliban regime in Afghanistan. After the Kargil chapter and the subsequent military coup in 1999, the United States considered Pakistan as worrisome, whose internal instability was to be expected to have unsafe repercussions in the region. Pakistan at that time was seen by United States under two considerations, weapons of mass destruction(WMD) and perceived links with terrorism.

The US moved its focus from the strategic necessities of the Cold War era to problems like terrorism, non-proliferation and drug trading. Hence during the last decade of the 20th century, the most imperative policy of the US toward South Asia related to the control of deadly weapons by both India and Pakistan and avoidance of both countries from any action that would destabilize regional security and global stability. This primary aim was stated in a report presented to the Congress of United States entitled 'A National Security Strategy for 'a New Century'', January 2000 (News Archive 2018).

The Report made the following observations: 'The development of Indian and Pakistani nuclear programs raise three immediate and one long term concern for the United States, that the two nations do not use their nuclear weapons in a crisis; that their nuclear weapons not add to regional instability or figure in an Inadvertent detonation; and that the technology to produce these weapons not be transferred to other nations or non-sovereign rogue groups'.

Post September 11 strategy

The terrorist attacks on the twin towers of World Trade Centre and Pentagon on 11 September, 2001 transformed the U.S. global strategy. The global war on terrorism became the first strategic priority for the U.S. policy makers and all other priorities were left behind to secondary status. The top U.S. foreign policy goals in the South Asian region would be fighting terrorism and the eliminating situations that breed terror in the frontline states of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These terrorist attacks changed the situation of regional security in South Asia and Pakistan became front line ally to US. There were two factors behind this status of Pakistan. First, Pakistan had close geographical link with Afghanistan. Second, in the U.S. eyes Pakistan itself has two major security dangers: WMD and the perceived links with terrorism. Pakistan supported the US action and the sanctions those were imposed on India and Pakistan removed by US and got Economic Support Fund.

The global war against terrorism started and US invaded Afghanistan in order to take over the Taliban regime due to its support for Al-Qaeda leaders. Gen. Pervez Musharraf agreed to give full support for the new war. The United States close cooperation with Pakistan has led to trouble the Indo-U.S. relations for the short span of time. But, this bitterness between the U.S. and India over Pakistan were not to affect a long term interests. The United States communicated to India that it would have to reset primacies to meet the new challenges but also gave hint that, once the immediate threat in Afghanistan was handled, India's concerns would also be addressed.

On January 2004 an Independent Task Force that is sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and Asian society brought out a report entitled "South Asia: US policy towards India, Pakistan and Afghanistan" which suggested that the US and India must (1) develop political, military and intelligence cooperation, (2) increase dialogue on trade and economic issues, and (3) assign a trade agreement on services. And US should (1) ease restraints on India in respect to collaboration in the civilian satellite sector; (2) grant India "friendly" country status and (3) ease restrictions on the export to India. As regards to Pakistan, the Task Force report noted that US-Pakistan relations had much improved since 9/11 because of Pakistan's role in the "war against terrorism" but felt that the interests of the two countries "coincided only partially". It mentioned different insights of the two countries about freedom fighters and militants in Kashmir, as well as Pakistan's reluctance to restrain Taliban elements in Afghanistan from using its tribal territories as safe sanctuaries. It also revealed US worry that continuing India- Pakistan disputes May badly affects US relations with India' (Task Force Report 2004 on U.s, India and Pakistan Relations Febraury 10, 2018).

Shortly after the Task Force report came out, a top level US delegation visited India in June 2004 to hold negotiations with India about transfer of technology associated to the missile defense system. In July 2005, Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh and President Bush met in United States and agreed to work for betterment of bilateral relationship. The two most noteworthy agreements signed in the meeting, within the new structure of the road-map, were about US military sales to India of advanced- tech objects, and a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement. The nuclear cooperation agreement was exceptional, because a NPT-signatory country was offering nuclear technology to a non-NPT signatory country (Afzal 2006). Pakistan also requested to United States for a similar deal but request rejected.

Alternatively, with Pakistan it continues to be a relationship of more of the same as has acquired in the former years. Obviously there is a great emphasis on Pakistan's economic development, with a main element of economic development funds, as against former aid packages of military support. At the same time, the US continued its policy to pressurize Pakistan to deal with terrorism and extremism.

Obama's Strategy

Under President Obama administration, there were no significant change in United States policy toward South Asia it continued to pursue the policies of his predecessor. Obama continue to build a strategic partnership with India (Rahawstri.M, 2010).Obama, like Bush fully supports the emergence of India as an emerging power. During the term of Bush period, the U.S. recognized that India would be a major power in 21st century. Therefore, they supported India in every way. Obama administration in spite of focusing on Pakistan as the key partner in the war against terrorism continues to recognize India as a valuable strategic partner.

The first foreign policy initiative of Obama administration immediately upon his assumption of office in 2009 was to address the worsening situation in the Afghanistan and Pakistan border area. This historically 'wild' area considered to be as the safe haven for the Taliban, al Qaeda and similar other terrorist and militant groups (Ewen M, 2009). Obama had promised during presidential election to make 'Afghan-Pak' theater his number one priority, down grading the Iraqi theater of 'War on Terror'. Thus, shortly after President Obama took office, he announced his policy toward this region of great importance for United States. The security agenda continued to be the supreme objective in this region.

Donald Trump's Policy

As in different parts of the world, Donald Trump's triumph in the November 2016 US presidential race came as a noteworthy shock to Southeast Asia. Barely any eyewitnesses had truly tolerated a Trump win, and what it may mean for Southeast Asia, President Trump's administration has a mixture of change and continuity in the country's foreign and security agenda.

South Asia looks like to be on the top of United States regional concerns and its policy, primarily to secure its enormous interests from this region. Trump's new policy on South Asia has focused on role of India as the main concern state in new policy (Webmaster, ""Indian significance"" Pak Observer (blog) 2017).

President Donald Trump declared to launch the new US policy in Afghanistan and throughout South Asia on August 21. In his speech he said, "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe-havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond. Pakistan has much to gain from partnering with our effort in Afghanistan. It has much to lose by continuing to harbor criminals and terrorists. In the past, Pakistan has been a valued partner. Our militaries have worked to together against common enemies. The Pakistani people have suffered greatly from terrorism and extremism. We recognize those contributions and those sacrifices. But Pakistan has also sheltered the same organizations that try every single day to kill our people. We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars. At the same time, they are housing

the very terrorists that we are fighting. But that will have to change. And that will change immediately. No partnership can survive a country's harboring of militants and terrorists who target US service members and officials. It is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilization, order, and to peace."(Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia 21, Aug)

Donald Trump mentioned the deployment more than 4,000 US troops to Afghanistan, adding to the 8,400 already stationed there. The focus of Trump's new strategy concerns not only for Afghanistan, but South Asia more broadly. Trump nominated Pakistan as a country which provided 'safe haven' to the Taliban and other armed militants who attacked US forces (Pakistan in the Crosshairs of Trump's Afghan Strategy 2018). Yet he also stressed India to provide economic and development support in Afghanistan. Donald Trump needed Indian support to limit Pakistan to stop giving 'safe heavens' to terrorist groups. An explanation of what Trump called the White House's "principled realism" was that America "will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands, or try to rebuild other countries in our own image. ... Instead he states, "We will work with allies and partners to protect our shared interests" (Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia 21, Aug).

Even though President Trump may have had a crash course on the history of Afghanistan and South Asia, It seems US has completely forgot the frontline role played by Pakistan in the war on terror. It was the outcome of this war that has carried the fury of terrorism to Pakistan, and the whole region. The essential support provided by the Pakistan to the alliance forces against the Taliban seems to have fallen on the side. Trump's policy on Afghanistan is based on basic ground realities and not on a time-based approach, which also shows Trump's disposition to stay in Afghanistan for strategic influence. The states in South Asia may observe the policy differently from one another that could intensify the conditions especially between India and Pakistan. on the other hand, it would be good for President Trump to not forget that it is not just American nationalists and soldiers that must be honored, but also the brave soldiers, and civilians - men women and children - in Pakistan that have laid down their lives in a war that was so forcefully imposed on them (Najam R, n.d.).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Hence from the above narrative of the United States main interests and policies towards South Asia after the Cold War era to the present time, it can be proclaimed that this region of the world has always remained a dynamic area where the United States interests and foreign policy primacies has been fluctuating with ups and downs or engagements and disengagements. Though, After the end of cold war US was the unilateral super power of the world that wants to see Europe or Asia free from hegemony by any hostile power. In the United States policy calculations, in the 21st century China is emerging such a power. Hence as

long as the "China Threat" rests in the minds of the United States policy makers the US will treat India as its partner in the South Asian region. At the same time, as long as the terrorism is not reduced and Afghanistan is not changed into a peaceful and established country free from terrorism and militants, the U.S. will try to maintain its current policy. Pakistan as a front line state in so called "war against terrorism" and India as a state of having ability to become a regional power has made this region very important for United States.

Although the United States is the world's leading power, but it cannot act alone and succeed to solve global problems such as worldwide terrorism and the production of weapons of mass destruction. No doubt the United States is in a position to take the lead and to gain all its interests in the region but it is not possible without having the cooperation of two important states of this region Pakistan and India. In reconsideration, the US foreign policy has always remained India first; United States must acknowledge that in this war Pakistan has suffered loss of billions of dollars and human. The long term peace in the region is not possible if South Asia remained to be the 'Great Game' zone of world powers. United States must enhance the strategic partnership with the countries in the South Asian region.

References

- Ahmad, Ishtiaq, (2011). Terrorism in South Asia: Retrospect and Prospect, Paper Presented at *International Seminar on Terrorism in Retrospect and Prospect*, Organized by London Institute of South Asia (LISA) on 12 July.
- Akhmat, G, Zaman k, Tan S, & Sajjad F. (2013). *Exploring the Root Cause of Terrorism in South Asia: Everybody Should be Concerned, Quality & Quantity*. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-013-9941-2>.
- Cohen, Stephen P. & Sunil D.(2001). *U.S.-South Asia: Relations under Bush*, Brookings Oxford, Analttica, 2.
- Crockkatt, Richard, (1997). The End of Cold War, in Steve Smith (ed.), *The Globalization of World Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 89.
- Ewen, MacAskill, (2009 March, 27). Barack Obama Sets out New Strategy for Afghanistan War, *the Guardian*.
- Kochanek, Stanely A. (1993), The U.S. Foreign Policy in South Asia, *Pakistan Horizon*, 46(3), 17-25.
- Lamb Robert D., Sadika Hameed and Kathryn Mixon, 3 (2014) South Asia Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns: A Framework for U.S. Policy and Strategy in South Asia 2014-2026, A Report of the CSIS Program on Crisis, Conflict and Cooperation, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
- Najam Rafique, Trump's New Strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia: A Recipe of Disaster, n.d., 4.
- Peter, R Blood, (2002). Indo-U.S. Relations, *CRS Issue Brief for Congress*, Foreign Affairs Defense and Trade Division.
- Rahawestri, Mayong A.(2010). Obama's Foreign Policy in Asia, More Continuity than Change, *Security Challenges*, 6 (1), 109-120.
- Shaheen, Afzal.(2006).The US-India Nuclear Deal. *Pakistan Vision*, December.7.(2)
- South Asia Regional Overview. South Asian Regional Development Gateway. Accessed on 10 February 2018, Retrieved from <http://www.sardeg.org/marketana.asp>.