



Challenges and opportunities in India-United States relations

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Abstract

India's relations with the US have always been a roller coaster. Needless to say, over the years, one has also noticed the role of the interacting variables in India-US relations. The nature and content of relations between New Delhi and Washington have been an enigma and a paradox over the last five decades. Pakistan has projected itself as a "moderate democratic Islamic state" to confront the forces of Islamic fundamentalism in the Indian region. Differences over the nuclear issue have greatly complicated the course of India-US relations and reflected the discordant aspect of their relations. In US - India relations, the nuclear divide may be treated as either a dependent or an independent variable. The Clinton Administration has recognised India as a major player in the economic field. The USA is the largest trading partner with India.

Keywords: India, USA, challenges and opportunities between India-USA relations, etc

Introduction

The India-USA relations between have been quite complex. Thus, much remains to be understood about the different sources of conflict in their relations between India and United States and how they have interacted over different periods of time and in divergent policy-making contexts. Any attempt to do this would require an inquiry into the situational and personal variables, cultural influences, the impact of constituents on the negotiation process and other related aspects. Needless to say, over the years, one has also noticed the role of the interacting variables in India-US relations. The nature and content of relations between New Delhi and Washington have been an enigma and a paradox over the last five decades. India's relations with the US have always been a roller coaster.

A former Indian Ambassador to the US termed the relations as "a pattern of misunderstanding, miscalculations and missed opportunities". Dennis Kux has called India and the US "Estranged Democracies." The love-hate syndrome haunts relations between the two countries. Differences in our backgrounds, resources, attitudes, perspectives and priorities were clearly reflected during the Cold War. The characteristic American hostility towards India was particularly visible during the Dulles period, when a country that did not toe the American line was considered to be against it. The battle lines got hardened during the Cold War when the differing world views of the Indians and the Americans came into sharp focus. Both New Delhi and Washington have viewed their national interests vis-a-vis the world at large in divergent ways.

The United States and India have learned a great deal from each other. When the Cold War came to an end, there were many reasons to look ahead with hope. The end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the consequent eclipse of

Pakistan's strategic importance to the US, and the invocation of the Pressler Amendment on Pakistan were all seen as healthy signs towards improving India-US relations. In spite of the Cold War having come to an end, the basic parameters remain largely unchanged. Washington now realises that it has to reckon with New Delhi's views on regional as well as global issues. The swings and shifts in India-United States relations have largely been the result of the clash of US global strategic interests, concerns and priorities as opposed to the regional security interests, priorities and concerns of India. During the Cold War, for example, Washington was concerned about the global threats to the region from international Communism (Venkataramani, 1982) ^[1].

The Pakistan Factor

In spite of the Cold War having come to an end, the US has renewed its need of Pakistan as an ally to pursue its strategic objectives vis-a-vis Iran in particular, the Gulf region as a whole and Central Asia, i.e. at the trijunction of South Asia, Central Asia and the Gulf. In this context Pakistan has projected itself as a "moderate democratic Islamic state" to confront the forces of Islamic fundamentalism in the Indian region. It may be recalled that throughout her trip to the US in April 1995, Benazir Bhutto pressed for a "new geostrategic contract" with the US.

The larger question that has been raised is whether Islamabad will be able to use the Brown Amendment as a springboard for developing a deeper strategic relationship with Washington. It would seem that the old geo-strategic calculations have resurfaced. Though technically, the Pressler Amendment has not been annulled by the Brown Amendment, there is no denying the fact that Pakistan would try its best to capitalise on the Brown Amendment for a new take-off in its ties with the

US. It may be recalled that under the Pressler Law, the Bush Administration had in October 1990 banned American military and economic aid to Pakistan because of the latter's nuclear weapon programme.

The Brown Amendment sought to ease the Pressler sanctions to provide embargoed arms worth \$370 million to Pakistan and instead of handing over the F-16 aircraft to Pakistan, it envisages a third party sale of the aircraft with the proceeds going to Islamabad. Whether the US will succumb completely to Pakistani blandishments for a strategic tie-up is still not clear at this stage. The US has to look beyond the military and strategic advantage that any country can give it. The least that Washington can do in the short term is to stop arming Pakistan and also start appreciating the genuineness of India's regional security concerns. Pumping in military aid now or in the future will go against the peace and security interests of India in this part of the world (Mansingh, 1984) ^[2]

Economic Ties

An analysis of India-US relations will not be complete without the inclusion of the economic interests and concerns of the two. There are tremendous possibilities in India-US economic ties, which could even make India the focus of Washington's South Asia policy. As India gets enmeshed in the global financial system, one can expect a growth in economic relations between the two countries. The Clinton Administration has recognised India as a major player in the economic field. South Asia as a whole is increasingly becoming a region of intense growth and development. The economic liberalisation policy of the Government of India has now paved the way for unprecedented trade and investment between India and the US. India is on the US Commerce Department's top ten "big emerging markets". The Clinton Administration has recognised India as a major player in the economic field.

The US is the largest trading partner with India. The total volume of bilateral trade is now in the range of nine and ten billion dollars. India has a favourable balance of trade with the US, with a trade surplus of nearly \$500 million to \$1 billion. The US is now the single largest investor in India accounting for almost billion \$4 out of a total of about \$12 billion worth of foreign investments have been cleared by the Government of India since 1991. Being the largest foreign investor in India, the US accounts for about half of all foreign equity. Much as exports to the US are important for India, the US also needs the Indian market in a global market that is increasingly becoming competitive. India-US relations in trade and commerce should be facilitated on the basis of bilateral economic equations. The tremendous increase in India-US economic cooperation is the cornerstone of the new relationship between the two countries (Travis, 1986) ^[3].

Kashmir Issue

Kashmir has bedevilled India-US relations in recent times. It has been on the high priority list of successive US Administrations, and particularly the Clinton dispensation. US Congressman Lee Hamilton, for example, once described the Kashmir issue as the "single most contentious issue disrupting India-US relations". A lot of heat was generated in India when

in October 1993 the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Robin Raphel, stated that the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir is disputed. In the words of Ms. Raphel: "We do not recognise the Instrument of Accession as meaning that Kashmir is an integral part of India...the people of Kashmir have got to be consulted in any kind of final settlement of the Kashmir dispute". The general picture that emerged was that the US questioned the very accession of Kashmir to India and the situation in Kashmir was even compared to the civil war in Afghanistan. Needless to say, a damage limitation exercise was undertaken by Ms. Raphel during her visit to India in March 1994 with the primary objective of removing whatever misunderstandings had been created over her statement. Besides, the differences over the human rights situation in Kashmir continue to be an irritant between the two countries (Indian Express, April 30, 1994) ^[4].

There were some who believed that Ms Raphel's statement reflected the antipathy of the middle-level bureaucracy in the State Department towards India. These statements clearly further strained India-US relations, which India perceived as interference in its internal affairs. Former Indian Foreign Secretary J.N.Dixit opined that never since the Nixon-Kissinger 'tilt' of the early Seventies, had India-US relations deteriorated to the extent they did following Ms Raphel's statement. India has so far not accepted any third party mediation to resolve the issue. New Delhi basically considers Kashmir to be a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan that should be resolved within the framework of the Simla Agreement.

A good starting point would be for Washington to clearly spell out its stand on the territorial integrity of India. Any attempt to push India into making concessions on Kashmir could only be counter-productive. It will be in the interest of both India and Pakistan and external powers like the US to follow a policy of least provocation and try and build mutual trust. This trend has to be consolidated in the years to come in the interest of regional and global peace. The US needs to encourage a solution to the Kashmir dispute based on the existing territorial and ground realities. There is need for greater pragmatism on all sides, and a sense of realism has to go into the entire exercise. The need of the hour is for India and the US to reflect a certain confidence in their bilateral diplomacy (Times of India, October 30, 1993).

The Nuclear and Missile Issue

The nuclear issue between India and the US remains as hot as it was 22 years ago when India conducted a peaceful nuclear explosion. Differences over the nuclear issue have greatly complicated the course of India-US relations and reflected the discordant aspect of their relations. In US-India relations, the nuclear divide may be treated as either a dependent or an independent variable. All the same, it has acted as a factor further complicating ties between the two countries. Both the countries do not hesitate to hide their basic differences over the issue. The US sold the idea of a regional nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty with India. For a time, even Kashmir was seriously perceived by Washington as a flashpoint for a possible nuclear conflict. Consistently attempts were made by the Clinton Administration to link Kashmir to non-

proliferation, missile technology and arms control issues. India's missile programme has been another contentious issue in Washington's perspective. The medium range Prithvi and long range Agni missile programmes are perceived by the US as potential systems that can deliver nuclear warheads. The US feels that Prithvi's induction will encourage the deployment of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent. Constant pressure has been brought to bear on India not to deploy the Prithvi missiles and to stop testing of the long range Agni missiles. Even the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) members have applied pressure both collectively and individually. In short, the US perceives India as "part of the problem" of missile proliferation, and "not as a partner" in its solution. Washington perceives any attempt by New Delhi to deploy the Prithvi as a watershed in the South Asian strategic environment. Hence, Washington sees the MTCR as a key instrument in the battle against missile proliferation.

It may be rather simplistic to treat the issue of ballistic missiles in terms of the South Asian region alone. Needless to say, South Asia does not exist in a geo-strategic vacuum, and missiles which have the range to target the subcontinent cannot be ignored. China has deployed hundreds of missiles on its territory, and is even reported to have supplied M-11 missiles to Pakistan in the early 1990s. Besides, Pakistan has also been developing the 600+ km range Hatf-3 missile. Any attempt to understand the problem of ballistic missiles in South Asia will also have to take cognizance of those missiles that are targeted towards the subcontinent. Missiles deployed in countries like China, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and the Central Asian region become significant in this context. Saudi Arabia, for example, has acquired many 2,700-km range CSS-2 ballistic missiles from China since 1988, after the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) came into effect. The need of the hour is to work towards a comprehensive and universal regime for the control and management of ballistic missiles.

It will perhaps be unrealistic to expect India to conform to the one-sided stipulations of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). Besides, as the former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev put it: "If the US sells arms to Pakistan, it should not be surprised why India responds by testing missiles". India has thus far rejected the US call to halt testing of the Prithvi missile. New Delhi contends that deployment of Prithvi would depend on the threat perception and the security situation prevailing at a particular point of time. To quote from the Carnegie Endowment Report prepared in 1993 by Selig Harrison and Geoffrey Kemp: "The Indian security perspective is dominated by the perceived threat of Chinese power, both conventional and nuclear, including alleged Chinese intermediate-range missiles emplacements in Tibet and Sinkiang, and by a desire to maintain what New Delhi considers an acceptable safety margin of military superiority over Pakistan". (Deccan Herald, February 12, 1996) [6]

Defence Cooperation

India-US relations transcended to a new level of understanding when in 1991 it was decided to expand strategic cooperation between their defence forces. The kind of strategic dialogue and defence cooperation that is now being envisaged has never

taken place in the past between the two countries. In the past, India was particularly sensitive to the perception that Americans either wish to ignore it or to attach unfair restrictions on its legitimate defence needs. Collectively, the various proposals were called the Kicklighter proposals after Lt Gen Claude Kicklighter, who was in Hawaii as Commander of the US Pacific Army. The Kicklighter proposals were drawn from existing Army programmes with other countries. In fact, it was the US Pacific Command which first mooted the possibility of greater cooperation with India in the region. It may be noted in this context that the US Pacific Command is responsible for American security in both the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean regions.

The objective of the Kicklighter proposals was to pursue a common policy of gradually strengthening ties towards expanded cooperation and partnership by the end of the decade. Since then, defence ties have evolved gradually without so much disturbing the balance of power in the subcontinent. India-US service-to-service cooperation saw joint naval drills being conducted in the early part of 1995. Washington even fielded two nuclear powered submarines in these exercises. The US has also expressed its desire to practise with aircraft carriers. Besides, the US is also keen to reach an agreement with India for US naval ship repairs to be undertaken at Mazagoan Docks, and making Goa and Cochin permanent port of calls for the US Navy deployed in the oil rich Persian Gulf. However, it is unlikely that India will accept this. (Hindu, August 14, 1995) [7].

The enthusiasm shown by the service chiefs about the prospects in India-US relations has at times been in stark contrast to that of the politicians or the bureaucrats. Some scholars like Selig Harrison have even spoken in terms of the need for an "India-centered" policy, given a scenario wherein India "will gradually grow into an economic and military power, whatever the US does." As part of India's new military cooperation with the US, the larger question that has been raised is whether India would participate in a structure of "cooperative vigilance" in the region. India is basically looking for hi-tech from the US. But it has to try and do this without having to make major concessions in terms of its national interests. Needless to say, New Delhi would like to build defence ties in other areas only if Washington parts with advanced know-how. The closest the US came to this was when the US Ambassador, Frank Wisner, in an interview to Span magazine in August 1995 stated that the US recognises the right of India to have a strong national defence. In other words, the limits to India-US military cooperation have to be recognised, and one is not quite sure at this stage whether Indian and American geo-political interests and perceptions will converge in the future. (Deccan Herald, June 13, 1992) [8].

Partnership of 21st century

Outgoing Obama Administration today identified strengthening of India-US relationship as one of its top accomplishments in foreign policy and defence sector, with Secretary of State John Kerry articulating that the US should continue to work with India to expand the vast areas of cooperation between the two nations and its peoples. "This (India-US ties) will be one of the defining partnerships of the

21st century, and the United States should continue to work with India to expand the vast areas of cooperation between our nations and our peoples”, Kerry said in a White House exit-memo on State Department’s accomplishments over the eight years of Obama Administration.

Similar documents by other Cabinet members have been written and released at the direction of outgoing President Barack Obama. Under eight years of Obama Administration, the United States has ‘deepened’ its cooperation on commerce, defence, global health, counter-terrorism, education, medicine, cyber security, climate and much more with India Kerry wrote. “As the world’s oldest democracy and the world’s largest democracy, the United States and India share common values that bind us together, and our relationship has evolved from one with great potential to one that is achieving great things for both countries and the world” said by Kerry. (Press Trust of India, January 5, 2017)^[9]. The US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, in the Defense Department memo, also highlighted the progress made in India-US relationship in the defence sector, noting that the Obama Administration established ‘closer ties’ with India. During this period, India has been named ‘a Major Defense Partner’ and has established the Defense Technology Trade Initiative, he wrote. In a letter to fellow Americans, accompanying these exit-memos, Obama writes that by so many measures, the United States is stronger and more prosperous than it was when he started eight years ago. He described the current situation as one he is ‘proud to leave for my successor’. A spiraling financial crisis threatened to plunge an economy in recession into a deep depression. The very heartbeat of American manufacturing - the American auto industry - was on the brink of collapse. In some communities, nearly one in five Americans was out of work. “Nearly 180,000 American troops were serving in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the mastermind of the worst terror attack on American soil remained at large. And on challenges from health care to climate change, we'd been kicking the can down the road for way too long,” Obama wrote.

Analysis

A US-India Commercial Alliance has been established to promote greater interaction between the private sectors of the two countries. Being the largest foreign investor in India, the US accounts for about half of all foreign equity. Much as exports to the US are important for India, the US also needs the Indian market in a global market that is increasingly becoming competitive. India-US relations in trade and commerce should be facilitated on the basis of bilateral economic equations. The tremendous increase in India-US economic cooperation is the cornerstone of the new relationship between the two countries. . US Congressman Lee Hamilton, for example, once described the Kashmir issue as the "single most contentious issue disrupting India-US relations". It is necessary to be open and critical and also exhibit a more knowledgeable interest in each other. There is need for greater resilience in order to deal with the challenges of the future.

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