

India-US Ties Poised for Radical Re-orientation

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The new US Secretary of State, Ms. Condoleezza Rice, made her first halt in New Delhi on March 16, 2005 during her whistle-stop tour of Asia that took her across the continent to Japan and China, among other countries. The symbolism of identifying Delhi as her first destination reiterates the determination of the Bush team to consolidate the relationship with India and realise the potential hinted at during the first term, and this was emphasised by Rice during her visit. She noted that the foundation to the bilateral relationship was “the fact that we share common values, and there are no stronger relationships than those that are based on common values.”

This assertion is a marked contrast from the abiding pattern of the India-US relationship during the Cold War decades and the Clinton years, when despite the convergences in the value systems – by way of the commitment to the plural democratic principle – the world’s oldest and largest democracies were often at odds with each other. This may be attributed to the existential realities of the prevailing international strategic systemic during the Cold War and both nations had divergent perceptions about their respective security interests – particularly regarding the contentious nuclear issue and the nature of the US-Pakistan relationship. The general refrain in both New Delhi and Washington was that ‘other’ was acting in a manner detrimental to the strategic concerns of the former.

The Indian nuclear tests of May 1998 lanced the festering boil that had bedevilled the bilateral relationship and towards the end of the Clinton presidency, a reasonably robust framework was in place, though the manner in which the differences over the nuclear issue (CTBT, for instance) would be resolved still remained blurred. However, when the Bush team came to power in early 2001, one of the first major decisions taken was to reverse the Clinton initiative on nuclear testing and set the CTBT aside. This decision was taken to safeguard US interests as perceived by the Bush team but the collateral was to remove one of the stumbling

blocks in the India-US relationship. The events of 9/11, no doubt, overtook all other foreign policy priorities for the Bush team but by January 2004, the US had agreed to a new relationship with India – what is referred to as the NSSP, the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership. The elements of this new framework (which incidentally the US has not yet extended to any other country) include cooperation in civilian nuclear energy, space, hi-tech commerce and a dialogue on missile defences.

The Rice visit in March noted the need to take the NSSP forward and reference was made to Phase II “which we look forward to having completed very shortly.” More than the tangible elements of the NSSP, Rice hinted at an intangible aspect apropos the perception about India in the emerging US security calculus and added, “we respect the possibilities that the United States and India enjoy for global partnership.”

Perhaps the import of this assertion was not adequately noted during the Rice visit but events clearly moved much faster than anticipated and on March 25, 2005 the US unveiled what appears to be a radically new policy towards South Asia. The gist of this was conveyed by US President George Bush to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the more visible strand in this was the US decision to supply F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan; a decision that had been kept on hold for almost 15 years. India conveyed its ‘disappointment’ since the F-16 has acquired a certain symbolism in the US-India-Pak matrix but this was muted. Later, it was added that as part of the new US policy to the region, similar offers on a much wider spectrum would be made available to India as well and the details of this were spelt out in a background briefing provided by the US State Department.

A review of the fine-print in this document indicates that the Bush team has outlined an ambitious policy towards South Asia and that the India-US relationship is poised for a radical re-orientation in terms of its strategic underpinning. For the first time, Washington has identified the South Asian region as being “vital to the future of the US” and, more importantly, it has asserted that the US “will help India become a major world power in the 21st century.” This aspect was further elucidated by US officials: “We understand fully the implications, including the military implications of that statement... that’s not just F-16s. It could be F-18s. But beyond that, the US is ready to discuss even more fundamental issues of defence transformation with India, including transformative systems in areas such as command and control, early warning and missile defence. Some of these items we may not be willing to sell Pakistan.”

There are many contradictions in the details of this new policy and on the face of it, the Bush team has been castigated by the liberal spectrum within the US for its double standards. This contradiction is most vividly reflected in the fact that the White House is staunchly supporting a military ruler in Islamabad even while being committed to the return of democracy in Pakistan by 2007 and is willing to live with the AQ Khan iceberg even though addressing nuclear transgressions are on top of the Bush priority list. Some have interpreted this initiative as a case of starting an arms race in the region but it may be averred that notwithstanding these contradictions, the US has for the first time crafted a comprehensive policy towards the region that is cognisant of the past and the mismatch between the short-term goals and long-term objectives that Washington has pursued.

While the F-16 has become the more visible issue, it would be misleading to associate the March 25th initiative only with the resumption of arms supplies to Pakistan. The F-16 deal has been in the pipeline for almost 15 years and has been withheld for various nuclear and other transgressions, including a coup by the Pakistani military. It is true that there has been no change of circumstances or behavioural pattern by Islamabad in that the military is still in power, the AQ Khan episode remains to be investigated and Islamabad's support to religious radicalism and jihadi terrorism continues in a selective manner – albeit against India.

Thus, it is valid to ask if Pakistan is being rewarded despite its deviations from the core principles now being pursued by the White House, more so when the track record suggests that the Pak military leadership has always acted in an adventurist and belligerent manner when it has been enabled by Washington by way of military equipment – the 1965 Indo-Pak war is case in point. However it appears that this time, Washington is following a very carefully crafted carrot-and-stick policy by way of dealing with Islamabad.

The US administration is fully aware of the many 9/11 related terrorist leads that point to Pakistan and the current turbulence in that society and its deep anti-US orientation. The roots of the current terrorist activity are deeply embedded in the Pak polity and the US had noted this in December last when it passed a law that requires the executive to report to Congress the progress made in the transformation of Pakistan. As part of the 9/11 Recommendations Implementation Act passed by the US Congress in December, sections 4082 and 4083 are Pakistan specific. The former refers to the US Commitment to the Future of Pakistan and the latter is regarding authorisation to the US President to exercise waivers in respect of earlier sanctions imposed on Pakistan. Section 4082 is wide in scope and seeks to 'de-jehadise' Pakistan and encourage the emergence of a moderate

Pakistan. This in many ways corresponds with the Indian long-term objective as well but there are divergences in the means adopted by the US.

As of now, 4082 states that it is the sense of Congress that the US should “over a long-term period, help to ensure a promising, stable and secure future for Pakistan” and in particular provide assistance to Islamabad in eight areas that include, inter alia, commitment to combating extremists; resolving outstanding difficulties with neighbours; fully control its territory and borders; become a more effective and participatory democracy; modernise its economy; halt the spread of WMD; reform the education system; and, implement a strategy of moderation.

More importantly, the law requires the US President to transmit to Congress a detailed strategy within 180 days about the nuts and bolts of how the objectives in 4082 will be achieved. Thus, by about mid June 2005, the US executive branch will have to inform the Congress about the progress made in this regard and from all accounts the Bush-Rice team are determined to keep the focus on democracy and genuinely representative governance as a core principle for compliance by Pakistan. There is little dissent that this will finally enable the beleaguered Pakistani civil society to reclaim the political space appropriated by the Pak military and the strengthening of the moderate, civilian political constituency will be in the true long-term interests of the Pakistani people.

Thus, while the F-16 has become the lightning rod in the Indian public perception about a shift in US policies, it is in many ways the less important issue. The more strategic and long-term policy assertion by Washington is about the transformation of Pakistan to becoming a more moderate state and society. This is an ambitious goal and history tells us that no military that has seized power has ever returned to the barracks in a voluntary manner. Whether General Musharraf will be the exception thanks to the Bush-Rice prescription remains to be seen and the future of the composite dialogue with India will be linked with the choice made by the Pakistani military leadership. The core issue essentially is the orientation of the GHQ in Rawalpindi and how they respond to the new US policy about democracy in Pakistan.

As far as India is concerned, the contours of the new US South Asia policy augur positively for the bilateral relationship and India’s aspirations in the emerging regional and global systemic. The manner in which cooperation in civilian nuclear issues and some weapon-related strands has been outlined has the potential to positively transform India’s status in the management of the emerging nuclear challenges. In like fashion, space is the next major domain for exploration and

innovation with identifiable correspondences in the defence and development spheres.

Above all, it is significant that Washington has stated that a strong and credible India is in the overall US strategic interest in the post-9/11 global systemic. Whether India has a similar or empathetic perception about how to engage with the US is still moot. Deep reservations still exist in India about perceived US perfidy and these would have to be both acknowledged and assuaged in the ethos of a plural democracy. The areas and manner in which India wishes to deepen this relationship will have to be carefully analysed and a calibrated approach is called for. Some tension and frustration is inevitable in this dialogue for India and the US represent two very different and divergent strategic cultures and to-date their experience is more in managing estrangement than in engagement. There will have to be considerable learning on the job – the window of opportunity is brief and any major progress will have to be made within the first two years of the second Bush term.

There is little doubt that even if it is not stated explicitly, the US focus on democracy and the concert that has been identified in Asia – namely India, Japan and South Korea – will cause deep anxiety in China. The new US policy has been announced on the eve of the Chinese Prime Minister's visit to India in April, which will be followed by that of the Japanese PM. Now more than ever India will have to retain its non-aligned posture and acquire the ability to improve bilateral relations with the major Asian powers individually even while allaying any anxieties about band-wagoning against one or the other.

If this US policy is realised on all fronts, two areas of abiding strategic concern for India – namely the nuclear and related hi-technology areas and the transformation of Pakistan – may be advanced in a manner that is favourable to India's aspirations and principles. In such an exigency, history may well note March 25, 2005 as a major milestone in the evolution of India-US relations and the impact this has had on the regional strategic grid.

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