

American Interest towards South Asia

Abstract

The American perception of its regional strategic interests and policies pursued to protect self-interest has varied according to the predictions of the political party in power and shifts in the choice of the American electorate. But the succeeding Democratic administrations downgraded the military pacts and wooed the leading non-aligned nations. Similarly with the inauguration of the Nixon administration, South Asia began to be characterized as an area that was marginal to US security interests. But when Soviet forces intervened in Afghanistan the Reagan administration accorded high priority to the region. In order to analyse the parameters conditioning U.S. interests and involvement, one must analyse primarily the U.S. policy towards South Asia, one has to take an overview of its policies. For this purpose, we are dividing it into two parts, first after the World War II, Cold War and Second, Post-Cold War period.

Keywords: Superpowers, Nuclear, Proliferation, Terrorist, South Asia, Taliban, Consequences, Paradox, Pakistan, Simultaneously, Modernization, Territorial

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Introduction

There have been changes regarding the importance of South Asia to the United States. The US interests and stakes in South Asia were largely dictated by its global strategy that witnessed shift and departures in accordance with the response and reaction of the USSR and China to the development in the region.¹ The pace, degree and direction of US presence building in South Asia depends largely on diplomatic strategic moves of the monolithic Russia and China.

Just how important to the United States is the subcontinent? Is it vital national security that the subcontinent not be hostile toward the United States? Or, at the other end of the spectrum, is such a development really a matter of indifference? Or does the answer lie somewhere in between, namely, that the area is important, at least in certain respects? If so, why and in what respect is it important? Unfortunately there is no way of answering such questions with great precision. This is partly because of the nature of the area. But the fact that precision about the importance of the subcontinent is impossible does not mean that no judgment can be reached on the matter. Governments must make such judgments-implicitly if not explicitly -- as a basis of their policies.

From the point of view of the theory of international relations there is no unanimity on why one nation gets interested in the affairs of another. Theoretical paradigms range from the outrightly cynical to being foolishly altruistic. The national interest paradigm, which is the oft-cited explanation closer to Cynical model than to the altruistic model.²

A nation's vital interests are those for which it is prepared to undertake a serious economic, political and military action irrespective of the cost involved.³ Preservation of such interests is accorded so high a priority that even military action is regarded as a legitimate act. Perhaps that is why aggression has often been justified by its perpetrators as absolutely necessary for the security of the nation. However, it needs to be mentioned here that a superpower's perception of threat is not merely confined to an attack on home territories, but may include threats that are much more distant in space.

However, threats to the source of important raw material, supply lines, and allies could constitute a threat that warrants a firm response from a superpower. The nature and degree of response depends on the thinking of the incumbent administration. The agreed response is then translated into what is commonly referred to as strategic objectives which, in fact, is more specific goals calculated to serve those vital interests. Strategic policy presupposes certain interests and objectives. We will attempt to determine these interests and objectives so as to focus on the evolution of

American policy in the region. Any outline of the interests of the United States in brief would stress the preservation of the American nation, especially its economic, political and cultural ideals.

The South Asian region has always received a low priority in the US foreign policy formulations in the post world war-II period, compared to other regions of the world, especially Europe, West Asia, Southeast Asia and the Far East.⁴ This is because, according to Robert L. Hardgrave, "South Asia is not a strategically vital area for the United States and the latter's involvement in this region has been episodic and derivative" of other interests, such as containment of communism, protection of oil in the Persian Gulf and access through the lanes of the Indian Ocean. The main consideration governing its South Asia policy stems from global pursuit and interest. And the area's importance has fluctuated in rhythm with the shift in America's global policies.⁵

of course, the denial of the region to the adversary (former USSR) forms an important part of American calculations; but of greater importance in a more immediate sense has been American concern in the two neighboring regions; South East and South West Asia⁶ and the Indian Ocean. American commitments in South East Asia have historical antecedents in the nineteenth century. US trade and economic ties with that region gained importance. In addition to this South East Asia is also a source of supply for certain strategic minerals like tin, columbium, tantalum and tungsten. Equally important is the fact that ideologically, South East Asian countries are closely aligned to the US and their preservation serves the Long-term national interests of the US in more ways than one. And, South West Asia, the other area flanking South Asia and of enormous concern to it has in fact one single natural resource of vital importance to the US –oil-- the engine of industrial society.

In contrast to these two regions, certainly in strategic terms South Asia does not command the importance of the Mediterranean region which constitutes the vital under-belly of Europe. Nor does it possess natural resources such as those of the Persian Gulf area, which are vital to the economic life not only of American allies in Europe and Japan but also to that of the United States itself. It also does not have the economic muscle of Japan or the military muscle of China to be perceived either as a pole of attraction or as a threat.

Even though it may not compare with the South East Asia or the Persian Gulf, South Asia has a certain inherent strategic importance⁷ by virtue of the size of its area and population, its location astride the Indian Ocean and flanking the Persian Gulf and the straits of Malacca, and in its being centre of some power especially now with the possession of a nuclear explosive device. Highlighting the importance of South Asia, George V. Allen, former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, said: "I need but note its location as a key area, linking the Near East and the Far East. It dominates the vital communication lines between Europe and the Far East. The countries of South Asia

contain almost one fifth of the world's population. They have some 3,000 miles of common border with communist dominated lands of Asia.⁸

The involvement of the USA, arose in South Asia not from an intrinsic interest in the region but principally from its concern about the containment of communism and Soviet expansionism. There appears to be consensus among observers that the US interests in South Asia, instead of being direct and economically motivated, have been a function of its strategic competition with the Soviet Union and the US policy's inherent drive of maintaining its global superiority over other competing and potential powers and interests. Accordingly, the US involvement in South Asia fluctuated, depending upon its intensity and style of competition with other great powers at global level.

The US policy in the region appears inconsistent, confused and reactive rather than calculated, long term, and innovative. While the confusion is influenced by regional dynamics, the inconsistency in the policy is the product of internal American factors including periodic changes in administration. One of the products of the confusion arising out of the internal policy making dynamics in the US with regard to South Asia, is a persisting debate over the past two decades, on the question of the importance that South Asia acquires in the US interests and scheme of priorities. One school of thought accords a very low priority⁹ to South Asia since it is geographically distant and economically uninspiring from the US point of view. The example of very low US interest in South Asia during the later half of sixties and almost the whole of seventies is cited in support of this assumption. However, there exists another shade of opinion in the United States which challenges this view and regards the US involvement in South Asia as being strategically vital and therefore deep and pervasive.

The US perception of its regional strategic interests and policies pursued to protect them has varied according to the predictions of the political party in power and shifts in the 'mood' of the US electorate. For instance US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles viewed nonalignment as 'immoral'. But the succeeding Democratic administrations downgraded the military pacts and wooed the leading non-aligned nations. Similarly with the inauguration of the Nixon administration, South Asia began to be characterized as an area that was marginal to US security interests. But when Soviet forces intervened in Afghanistan the Reagan administration accorded high priority to the region. In order to analyse the parameters conditioning U.S. interests and involvement, one must analyse primarily the U.S. policy towards South Asia, one have to take an overview of its policies. For this purpose, we are dividing it into two parts, first after the World War II, Cold War and Second, Post-Cold War period. So there have been changes regarding the importance of South Asia to the United States. The US interests and stakes in South Asia were largely dictated by its global strategy that witnessed shift and departures in accordance with the response and

reaction of the USSR and China to the development in the region. The pace, degree and direction of US presence building in South Asia depends largely on diplomatic strategic moves of the monolithic Russia and China.

Just how important to the United States is the subcontinent? Is it vital national security that the subcontinent not be hostile toward the United States? Or, at the other end of the spectrum, is such a development really matter of indifference? Or does the answer lie some where in between, namely, that the area is important, at least in certain respects? If so, why and in what respect is it important? Unfortunately, there is no way of answering such questions with great precision. This is partly because of the nature of the area. But the fact that precision about the importance of the subcontinent is impossible does not mean that no judgment can be reached on the matter. Governments must make such judgments-implicitly if not explicitly -- as a basis of their policies.

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However, threats to the source of important raw material, supply lines, and allies could constitute a threat that warrants a firm response from a superpower. The nature and degree of response depends on the thinking of the incumbent administration. The agreed response is then translated into what is commonly referred to as strategic objectives which, in fact, is more specific goals calculated to serve those vital interests. Strategic policy presupposes certain interests and objectives. We will attempt to determine these interests and objectives so as to focus on the evolution of American policy in the region. Any outline of the interests of the United States in brief would stress the preservation of the American nation, especially its economic, political and cultural ideals.¹⁰

The South Asian region has always received a low priority in the US foreign policy formulations in the post world war-II period, compared to other regions of the world, especially Europe, West Asia, Southeast Asia and the Far East. This is because, according to Robert L. Hardgrave, "South Asia is not a strategically vital area for the United States and the latter's involvement in this region has been episodic and derivative" of other interests, such as containment of communism, protection of oil in the Persian Gulf and access through the lanes of the Indian Ocean.

Obviously, the issue of the states in the region going nuclear has been an area of major American concern. Those in the US who have taken up this issue have put forward the possibility of regional conflict between two potential nuclear weapon middle powers that could very well lead to general nuclear holocaust. Besides this, the region

has other strategic assets. It possesses an enormous scientific-technical manpower pool, a reservoir of skilled labour and industrial infrastructures that can have impact in various ways on the world economic system and thus either help or harm the system in which the US has a vital stake. In addition to these human resources, the region has great mineral and other raw material resources which are equally important for the USA.

Conclusion

Thus the US policy in the region appears inconsistent, confused and reactive rather than calculated, long term, and innovative. While the confusion is influenced by regional dynamics, the inconsistency in the policy is the product of internal American factors including periodic changes in administration. One of the products of the confusion arising out of the internal policy making dynamics in the US with regard to South Asia, is a persisting debate over the past two decades, on the question of the importance that South Asia acquires in the US interests and scheme of priorities. One school of thought accords a very low priority¹¹ to South Asia since it is geographically distant and economically uninspiring from the US point of view. The example of very low US interest in South Asia during the later half of sixties and almost the whole of seventies is cited in support of this assumption. However, there exists another shade of opinion in the United States which challenges this view and regards the US involvement in South Asia as being strategically vital and

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