



# The U.S. Interests and Policies towards South Asia: From Cold War Era to Strategic Rebalancing

Mehraj Uddin Gojree

Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, INDIA

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## Abstract

*Long considered a "strategic backwater" from the U.S. perspective, South Asia has emerged in the 21st century as increasingly vital to core U.S. foreign policy interests. During the Cold War era, the U.S. regarded South Asia as an area of marginal strategic importance barring to check the communist expansion in the region. However, the recent shifts in global power relationships have made South Asia an important region not to ignore. The situation after September 11 and the Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation have changed the relationship pattern between the U.S. and South Asia. Present involvement of the U.S. in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Indo-Pak rivalry, concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons, combating terrorism, and growing presence of Chinese influence in the region has significantly increased the strategic importance of South Asia in the U.S. policy making circles. It is in this backdrop the paper attempts to examine the U.S. interests and thereby its policies in the region from Cold War era to the recent U.S. Rebalancing Strategy. While doing so, a descriptive-historical method has been used to study and present the facts with optimum level of objectivity.*

**Keywords:** The U.S., South Asia, foreign policy, interests, India, Pakistan, China.

## Introduction

The term "South Asia" is now used for what, in colonial days was commonly recognized as the "Indian Sub-Continent" - a varied blend of British India and a range of kingdoms with varying degree of subservience to the colonial powers<sup>1</sup>. As per the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) definition, the region primarily includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. Lately, in 2005 Afghanistan was also included in this group of nations.

South Asia is a huge land mass home to about one quarter of the world's population. It has assumed 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<sup>2</sup>. 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 sole Super power has some vital interests in this dynamic region.

In retrospect, the U.S. did not see South Asia as an area of strategic importance. Before Second World War, the U.S. interests in South Asia were very limited and were primarily commercial in nature. The American Tobacco Company was making trade with South Asia and many educational, cultural and religious links were maintained between the U.S. and the South Asian region as a whole. After 1945, the U.S. left its traditional policy of "isolationism" and joined the world affairs mainly to check the expansion of Soviet Communism in the

world. Thereafter, the U.S. involvement in the South Asia grew as a result of the political, military, and ideological competition with the Soviet Union. The principle determinant of the U.S. policy toward South Asia was the U.S. perception of region's relevance to the pursuit of its wider global geo-political and strategic goals. The U.S. interests in South Asia were governed by the region's geostrategic location in the proximity of major powers like China and the Soviet Union. This significance was also governed by the fact that South Asia is a region that overlooks the vital sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean where it connects the two politically volatile and economically critical regions of Asia - The Gulf and South East Asia<sup>3</sup>. Thus the U.S. interests in South Asia instead of being direct and economically motivated, were governed by the strategic competition with the Soviet Union and her drive of maintaining superiority *viz-a-viz* the rest of the powers.

Though the U.S. viewed South Asia as an area of marginal strategic importance (other than to check the expansion of communism during the Cold War period), the recent shifts in global power relationships has made South Asia an important region not to ignore. The situation after September 11 and the Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation have changed the relationship pattern between U.S. and South Asia. Present involvement of the U.S. in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Indo-Pak rivalry, concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons, fight against terrorism, and the growing influence of China in the region have significantly increased the strategic importance of South Asia in the U.S. policy making circles<sup>4</sup>. Thus seen in this context, today the U.S. policy interest is not anchored on a single set of issues - but on a set of core issues. These include counter-terrorism

(where intelligence agencies have particular influence), Afghanistan (where military has a significant say), Pakistan (where counter terrorism, Afghanistan and non-proliferation communities converge), India (where commerce and diplomatic interests dominate), and the broader "rebalancing" towards Asia (where the greatest concern comes from China)<sup>5</sup>. A brief description of these issues and also how they affect or constitute the U.S. vital interests, are discussed in the following paragraphs.

## Counter Terrorism

In South Asia, terrorism and the related violent activities are not new phenomena. In fact, various groups have been using terrorism as an instrument to advance their respective causes such as national self-determination, separatism, militant religious extremism, so on and so forth. However, it is the increasingly global nature of terrorism that is playing a significant role in altering the rhetoric and challenges in South Asia<sup>6</sup>. Every state in South Asia is currently a victim of or has fallen victim to the terrorism related activities. In this regard, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are presently affected by terrorism and extremist violence on their soil<sup>7</sup>. Other regional states like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka also face the nuisance of terrorism either in the form of ethnic turmoil and religious or political schism<sup>8</sup>.

The region of South Asia is Indo-centric and all other South Asian states are located around India. Due to this close geographical proximity between South Asian states, the terrorist groups are exploiting cross-border ethnic ties, globalised financial networks, and widely available communication technologies to advance their influence beyond the local to the national, regional, and even international levels. The lack of governmental capacity to check the menace of widespread corruption and socio-economic inequality makes South Asia a fertile breeding ground for terrorist organizations. Furthermore, mistrust, suspicion, and hostility that characterize the political relationship between states have been a major hurdle in the way of effective regional cooperation in South Asia.

Although, the SAARC has endeavored at several occasions to create regional responses to common challenges posed by terrorism, its efficacy is often held hostage to the political hostility between the two main South Asian actors - India and Pakistan. Since the initiation of 'War on Terror' by the U.S. in Afghanistan, South Asia has become a breeding ground of international terrorism. It can be asserted without any doubt that the emergence of terrorism as a destabilizing factor in South Asia has put in danger the whole quest for peace and progress<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, the menace of terrorism and terrorism related activities will remain an important threat to the U.S. interests in the region and also to the South Asian states. In this context, the U.S. has a long term interests and strategy in the region regarding the threats posed by terrorist organizations.

## Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Nuclear non-proliferation has been a cornerstone of the U.S. foreign policy and this policy has somewhat engaged the U.S. in South Asian affairs. In South Asia the main concern comes from the tensions between India and Pakistan (potentially leading to nuclear attack), and the way nuclear energy and weaponry are developed, stored, transported, and used<sup>10</sup>. On 11 and 13 May 1998, India conducted five underground nuclear tests and on 28 and 30 May 1998, Pakistan followed the suit 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<sup>11</sup>. However in the subsequent years, these sanctions were lifted as they could not persuade India and Pakistan to halt their nuclear weapons program.

The issue of nuclear proliferation in South Asia is part of a chain of rivalries wherein India is trying to attain deterrence against China, and Pakistan seeking to achieve an "equalizer" against a traditionally stronger India. The U.S. considers the current arms race between India and Pakistan very dangerous as there is every possibility that it can end up in the nuclear confrontation between these two South Asian rivals. In a statement on 12 November, 1998 the U.S. Deputy Secretary, Strobe Talbot presented following three concerns of the U.S. government. i. To prevent the nuclear and missile race in the region, ii. Making the global non-proliferation regime more strong; and iii. Promoting the good relations between India and Pakistan and the resolution of Kashmir issue<sup>12</sup>.

A nuclear attack by one side or the other would be devastating to regional peace and security which has raised the worries of U.S. in the region. Moreover, the U.S. concerns about nuclear weapons in Pakistan are focused not only on preventing their intentional or accidental use against India but also on Pakistan's security structures and controls of those weapons. This is because of the fact that Pakistan was identified as a source of nuclear proliferation when in December 2003 A.Q. Khan (the father of Pakistan's atom bomb) and his associates were alleged to have sold nuclear secrets to Iran, Libya, and North Korea<sup>13</sup>. Later on, in an article published in January 2006 entitled, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons", former high ranking U.S. officials William Perry, George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, and San Nun asserted that "the world is entering into a new nuclear era, with nuclear know-how proliferating and non-state terrorist groups seeking to obtain and use weapons of mass destruction<sup>14</sup>." Thus the prevention of the proliferation of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) weapons and material, and the prevention of nuclear attack (intentional or accidental) between the two nuclear powered states in South Asia - India and Pakistan, is the vital interest of U.S. policy makers in the South Asian.

## Specific U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives for Key Actors in the South Asian region

**India:** During the period of Cold War, the U.S. perception about India was very low and therefore, often ignored it. The closed and weak economy of India gave it little influence in global markets, and its non-aligned foreign policy caused periodic tensions with Washington<sup>15</sup>. However, today with its billion-plus population, democratic institutions and values, steady growing economy and substantial defense establishment, India represents a partner of great value. In few years, it will become one of the world's largest economies, and an important factor for the region's security and stability<sup>16</sup>. In this regard, the U.S. key interests in India include: i. Supporting India as counterweight to China by deepening strategic ties with it. ii. Supporting the emergence of India as a pro-Western regional power. iii. Strengthening India's "Look East" policy and its presence in East Asia. iv. Seeking India's support for a prolonged U.S. presence in the region. v. To gain more and more access to India's markets and other sectors.

**Pakistan:** The U.S.' main strategic objectives in Pakistan are to make Pakistan a stable and strong state which remains in control of its territory and nuclear capabilities, and also averts the export and development of extremist elements/organizations. The U.S. also expects that Pakistan should improve its relations with India in a comprehensive manner so that both the states could focus their attention on the socio-economic development of their respective countries. More broadly, the U.S.' interests in Pakistan include:

Supporting secular and democratic governments in Pakistan with a pro-U.S. outlook. Working with Islamabad to: i. Save Pakistan from becoming a base for terrorist organizations. ii. Defeat, dismantle, and disrupt al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations. iii. Working with Pakistani government to meet its social, political, economic, and military needs for reducing the inclination of masses towards violence. Making Pakistan's nuclear arsenal safe and secure from extremists. Seeking Pakistan's support in maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan.

**Afghanistan:** In Afghanistan, the U.S. has tried to improve the capacity and legitimacy of Afghan state and institutions, both military and civilian, as part of an overall effort to foster stability, reduce extremism and defeat Taliban. In this regard, the U.S. interests in the region are based on the two pronged strategy, such as:

First, fight against terrorism: The main reason for entering Afghanistan, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. soil, will remain the main motivation for continuing to engage with Afghanistan as long as there is possibility of return of international terrorists. Though, the U.S. does not face defeat in Afghanistan, but at the same time, there has not been any concrete political and military success so far.

Second, preventing state Failure: Today the U.S. is much more concerned about the possible effects of armed violence on the stability of Afghan state. The U.S. has worked to build Afghan government's capacity, legitimacy and good governance. In all these fields, progress has been significant, but not strategically decisive. Thus, the main challenges for the U.S. strategists remain shaping the future of Afghanistan, protect gains made in nation building, and preventing a return to civil war fuelled by Afghanistan's neighbors as was the case in the early 1990 when the Soviet Union left Afghanistan.

**China:** Though China is not located in South Asia, but it is always there due to its alliance with Pakistan and its rivalry with India<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, China shares borders with five (Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan) out of eight South Asian states, making it an integral part of South Asia<sup>18</sup>. In this context, China perceives South Asia as its natural dominion where it is destined to play a crucial role and has therefore, taken dynamic steps to enhance its role as an influential actor in the region.

China's main strategic interests in the region of South Asia consist of gaining access to markets and raw materials, securing safe Sea Lanes of Communications (SLC) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) where bulk of its oil passes, and preventing the region from emerging as a source of anti-China activities (implicitly or explicitly by the Indo-U.S. nexus)<sup>19</sup>.

According to *China White Paper on National Defense 2002*, China has done following activities to counter the Indo-U.S. influence in the South Asia: i. Increase the People's Liberation Army's (PLAs) activity in the IOR by constructing ports, establishing electronic intelligence facilities, and ship visits for securing the SLCs, ii. Strengthening Pakistan's nuclear and missile arsenals, and also helping to make Pakistan's military and defense capabilities more robust and dynamic. iii. Enhancing military relations with Nepal by supplying arms and other defense equipments. iv. Strengthening military cooperation with Myanmar by developing Myanmar's overland transport and maritime sectors. v. Enhancing defense cooperation with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and developing strategic ports there and vi. Intensify the efforts to make diplomatic relations with Bhutan normal.

All these assertive moves by China in South Asia are a cause of concern for the U.S. strategists. Just as the U.S. policy towards China will have consequence for U.S. relations with South Asian states, China's policy towards South Asia will have consequences for Washington's interests. Thus the U.S. interests in South Asia as far as China is concerned include: i. To working with China in maintaining regional and global security (but not at the expense of the U.S. interests or strategic dominance). ii. To enhance Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) with Chinese military, but also acting to contain its military expansionism (perceived or actual).

## U.S. Policy towards South Asia

**Cold War Period:** There are several factors that affect the conduct of the U.S. foreign policy in any particular region. These factors include the level of continuity of the U.S. interests, the attention, amount and quality of information available at various levels of government, the constraints that exist on the U.S. government and the constraints that exist with the region, and the type of influence and number of non-governmental interests that are found in the region<sup>20</sup>. In this framework, the U.S.' South Asia policy can be termed as a series of ups and downs or a periods of engagement and periods of disengagement. These patterns have been based on different calculations of what constitutes the U.S. interests.

In the post Second World War period, the U.S. does not have vital interests in South Asia unlike the U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf, the Caribbean or in East Asia where oil, geographic proximity or enormous trade defined U.S. interests. South Asia does not possess the resources, location, or markets vital to the U.S. interests<sup>21</sup>. Thus, during the Cold War, the U.S. trading and investment involvement in the South Asian region was negligible. The principle determinant of U.S. policy towards South Asia as mentioned earlier was the perception of region's relevance to the pursuit of its wider global geopolitical and strategic goals. The major U.S. interest was to prevent the absorption of the area into the communist orbit. Former Secretary of Defense Mc Namara, for example remarked:

"South Asia has become with a combination of circumstance and geography a vital strategic area in the present context between expansionist and non-expansionist power centers. In friendly hands or as non-alliance states, South Asia can be a bridge between Europe and the Far East and a major physical barrier to the southwest expansion of China and the Soviet Union. In the hostile hands, it will seal the long term hope of building a free Asian coalition able to provide adequate counterweights to an expansionist China<sup>22</sup>."

Due to this only geostrategic significance at the initial phase of Cold War, there was some degree of the U.S. involvement in the South Asian regional security environment. In this context, India's image in the eyes of U.S. policy makers was that it was not capable of providing leadership to South Asia in the fight against communism. Pakistan in their perception appeared well placed to deal with this problem because of its religious affinity with Middle Eastern Muslim countries, its geographical closeness to oil rich Persian Gulf and to communist adversaries like Soviet Union and China, and more particularly its willingness to balance India influence was indeed tempting in the eyes of the U.S. policy makers<sup>23</sup>. Subsequently, the military alliance of U.S. with Pakistan was perceived in India 'as a friend of Pakistan and opposed to India.' The U.S. military aid to Pakistan alienated India and pushed it towards the Soviet Union.

However, the U.S. involvement in the South Asia began to change in the late 1960s as a result of global changes and developments within the region leading to reassessment and shift from a period of engagement to disengagement. The most important global factors were the development of Sino-Soviet rift, the emergence of oil diplomacy, and the Vietnam War. In line with its disengagement from the region, the U.S. adopted a neutral stance between the Indo-Pak Wars in 1965 and 1971. Greater challenges to the U.S. neutrality occurred during the Indo-Pak War in 1971, because the Soviet-India Partnership and the Treaty of 1971 successfully neutralized the U.S. and China. It was during this time that the Sino-U.S. rapprochement occurred due to the efforts of Pakistan. Moreover, there were several other factors that reinforced those who argued for policy of disengagement from the region. The feeling was that the U.S. interests would be served by the situation that existed and therefore, the U.S. should maintain a low profile politically, economically, and militarily because: i. Politically, the argument was that the Soviet Union has assumed a basic responsibility for India's security and this would help to contain Chinese pressure but this in turn would also create problems for Sino-Soviet relations which as far as the Americans were concerned was all to the good. ii. Economically, the argument was that South Asia was of little economic importance as there was very little by way of trade, investment or other such factors and those development problems in South Asia were so enormous that the U.S. no matter what its resources would not be really effective. iii. Militarily, there was also criticism that the arms that had been supplied had been used by countries within the region against each other rather than to check the communist expansionism within the region.

These three factors compelled the Americans to reassess their policies towards South Asia which subsequently led her to disengagement from the region. However, this process of disengagement was brought to a sudden halt when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The advent of Soviets in Afghanistan renewed the fear of Western countries led by U.S. about the menace of communism in South Asia. Pakistan once again emerged as a frontline state in the U.S. policy making circles to check or overthrow the communists from Afghanistan.

Thus from the above description it can be asserted that the U.S. policy towards South Asia during the Cold War period has been basically inconsistent, confused, and reactive rather than a long term and calculated one. The continued absence of direct material interests has helped to limit the U.S. involvement in the region. Instead, the U.S. has been guided in its South Asia policy by its global interests and has, therefore, tended to view regional conflicts largely from global perspectives.

## Post Cold War Period

In the post Cold War era, things again began to change, and there was a reassessment of the U.S. policies in the late 1960s which led to a process of engagement to a process of

disengagement, in the 1990s there was a renewed assessment and again events developed which led to a new assessment about engagement and disengagement. The end of Afghan War in 1989 and the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 have all combined to alter the U.S. global, regional, and bilateral relations not just with South Asia, but with the entire 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 witnessed with the collapse of Soviet Union and the end of Cold War<sup>24</sup>.

According to Guihong, with the end of Cold War, the U.S. has to change its South Asia policy in two ways. First, the Soviet Union was no longer a decisive factor in its policy formulation toward South Asia; instead the U.S. started to perceive the Sub-Continent from a regional context and began to treat India and Pakistan differently. Second, the U.S. held that the threats to its interests in South Asia came from within rather than outside the region. Non-proliferation, economic liberalization, and promotion of democratic values became impotent U.S. policy goals in South Asia<sup>25</sup>.

More broadly, 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: i. Developing a strong economic and strategic relationship with India. ii. Preserving the integrity of Pakistan. iii. Curbing Islamic extremism. iv. Containing terrorist activity in Pakistan and Afghanistan. v. Preventing a potentially dangerous arms race on the Sub-Continent. vi. Promoting peace process between India and Pakistan relating to Kashmir issue<sup>26</sup>.

Thus, in the post Cold War period the significance of South Asia for the U.S. increased. It was in this context that the South Asia Bureau was formed in 1992 through legislation supported by Steven Solaez (Congressman) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Senator) to focus more and more on this vital region in the Department of State (DoS)<sup>27</sup>. Responsible for the U.S. relations with South Asian countries, the Bureau coordinated the initiatives that expanded the U.S. involvement in the region. In early 1997, a National Security Policy Review of South Asia was conducted, which culminated with the U.S. president's historic visit in March 2000, the first presidential trip to South Asia in over two decades.

It must be mentioned here that President Clinton initially did not consider South Asia as an important area. However, from 1994 onwards, he readjusted the U.S. policy towards South Asia. Along with Pakistan, he enhanced the economic and military relations with India. Like the previous administration, Clinton also tried to check India and Pakistan from acquiring nuclear weapons and to reduce the tension between them over Kashmir issue.

After 1994, the Clinton administration initiated various measures to improve the relations with India. There were a

number of reasons for the Clinton administration to advance relations with India which David S. Chou has categorized as follows: i. The disintegration of Soviet Union had shattered the foundation of India's foreign policy and defense. India could no longer use Moscow as a counter weight to Washington. ii. The strategic value of Pakistan in the U.S. eyes also declined after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. As the predominant power in Sub-Continent, India became more important to the U.S. for maintaining regional peace and stability. iii. So far as shared values are concerned, the U.S. had a closer resemblance to India than to Pakistan. iv. The India's economic reforms during 1990s have changed her economy from central planning to market one. Washington viewed India as a vast future market for the U.S. goods, capital, and technology. v. Finally, geopolitics considerations were also taken into account in Clinton's policy towards India. Though he promoted a strategic partnership with China, yet at the same time he considered India as a counter weight to China<sup>28</sup>.

All these factors compelled the U.S. policy makers to lean more towards India *viz-a-viz* Pakistan. Moreover, the Clinton administration also tried to prevent the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) 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. Responding to these tests, the U.S. administration under Clinton instantly extended military and economic sanctions against both these countries. However, since there was no impact of these sanctions on the mind set of India and Pakistan to change the nuclear policy, the Clinton administration had to back down. 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. Thus the Clinton administration's nuclear policy towards South Asia was not so effective that it could check the further nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in future.

When G.W. Bush was elected as the U.S. president in late 2000, his administration began to take an "India First" policy like the previous administration of Clinton. It was because of the fact that India has emerged as a rising world power with great potential for emerging as global market. Thus, it was within the context of these developments that the Republican administration tried hard to improve and upgrade its ties with India.

Unlike the Clinton administration who sought to forge a friendly relationship with China, the Bush administration instead of calling China as a strategic partner, began to treat it as a strategic rival. His administration believed that China was the future challenger to the U.S. in Indo-Pacific region. That is why, China was treated as an important part of Bush's policy towards South Asia. It was widely recognized that only India could serve as a counter weight to China. The border issues are still alive between China and India on which they have already fought a

war in 1962. Under these circumstances, it was natural for the Bush administration to fortify strategic relations with India so that it can act as a counter weight to China. Bush also down played the cornerstone of Clinton's non-proliferation policy in South Asia. For cementing the strategic relations with India, the Bush administration sought to lift the sanctions which Clinton administration had imposed on India and Pakistan in 1998. Thereafter, the U.S. enhanced the military cooperation with India in a comprehensive way.

### Post September 11 Period

The terrorist attacks on the twin towers of World Trade Centre and Pentagon on 11 September, 2001 altered significantly 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 receded to secondary status including the "China threat". For example, Christina Rocca the Assistant Secretary for South Asia told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2004, that the top U.S. foreign policy goals in the South Asian region would be fighting terrorism and the eradicating conditions that breed terror in the frontline states of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These terrorist attacks changed the dynamics of regional security in South Asia by bringing Pakistan to the centre stage and putting parts of the Indo-U.S. agenda on the hold. In this regard, two factors contributed to Pakistan's renewed significance in the U.S. eyes. i. First, Pakistan had close geographical affinity with Afghanistan and at the same time has cultivated diplomatic relations with the Taliban government. ii. Second, in the U.S. eyes Pakistan itself combined the two major security threat: WMD and the perceived links with terrorism.

The U.S. and Pakistan diversified their cooperation which included supporting and strengthening Pakistan's law enforcement agencies and countering terrorism capabilities, coordination of intelligence agencies in tracing out of al Qaeda members and other terrorists within Pakistan, and more particularly coordinating with military and law enforcement agencies along the borders of Afghanistan. Thus, by resorting Pakistan to frontline status in a "War against Terrorism" after September 11, challenged the Clinton's policy of treating Pakistan as a failing state and recognizing India as the hegemonic state. Soon after September 11, in its war against terrorism in Afghanistan, the Bush administration restored Pakistan to its role as a frontline state<sup>29</sup>.

The U.S.' close cooperation with Pakistan has led to bitterness in Indo-U.S. relations in the short term. However, this bitterness between the U.S. and India over Pakistan were not to affect a long term convergence emanating from security cooperation, trade and commercial interests, and democratic values cherished by both the U.S. and India.

### Obama and His Rebalancing Strategy

It is widely believed that the rise of Asia would have profound implications for the future of U.S. That is why the strategic rebalancing initiated by Obama seeks to deepen the U.S. engagement with the region at various important levels. The main purpose of this strategy is to support the rise of prosperous and peaceful Asia. A dynamic and prosperous Asia, integrated with the global economy is central to the U.S. interests particularly to the U.S. economy<sup>30</sup>. In this context, expanding the rebalancing to include South Asia is not just indispensable, it is also vital in the U.S. foreign policy calculations. The significance of South Asia lies in the fact that a peaceful and stable South Asia that joins East Asia's production networks will offer counter point to the predominance of China's economic expansion in the region and produce additional impetus and resilience to Asia's rise. Thus, by extending the strategic rebalancing to South Asia, the U.S. indicates a timely signal to its long term commitment to the region.

### China-India Policy

Under Obama administration, the U.S. policy towards South Asia has displayed more continuity than change. Thus, Obama's stewardship of the U.S. foreign policy is continuing his predecessor's success in maintaining regional stability and the U.S. preeminence in the South Asian region. In line with this strategy, Obama while continues to build a cooperative relationship with China but at the same time hedges against its growing military power, all the while forging a strategic partnership with India<sup>31</sup>.

Obama, like Bush supports the emergence of India as an emerging power. During the term of Bush administration, the U.S. recognized that India would be a major power in 21st century. Therefore, the Bush administration accorded *de facto* recognition of India's acquisition of nuclear weapons and thereafter both the states have diversified the areas of cooperation including defense, security, economics and other areas. Likewise, Obama administration despite focusing on Pakistan as the key partner in the war against terrorism, continues to India as a valuable strategic partner.

### Af-Pak Policy

One of the first foreign policy initiatives that Obama undertook immediately upon his assumption of office in 2009 was to address the deteriorating situation in the Afghanistan and Pakistan border region or Af-Pak. This historically 'wild' area with a porous border has been identified as the safe haven for the Taliban, al Qaeda and similar other terrorist groups. Obama had promised during presidential election to make 'Af-Pak' theater his number one priority, down grading the Iraqi theater of 'War on Terror'<sup>32</sup>. Thus, shortly after President Obama took office, he announced the creation of special envoy for the 'Af-Pak' region. The U.S. also directed a major review of policy and

strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan that 'regionalized' the policy, closely linking the U.S. approach to both<sup>33</sup>. The security agenda are/will remain paramount in the U.S. objectives in this region, and giving the ongoing flow of Taliban and other militants across the Durand Line, will irrevocably bind the two nations together.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAFs) will remain focused on training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) so that they can maintain peace when the international coalition forces led by the U.S. leave Afghanistan. While in Pakistan, the U.S. is increasingly focused on counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and ensuring the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

## Conclusion

Thus from the above description of the U.S.' core interests and policies towards South Asia from the Cold War era to Strategic Rebalancing, it can be asserted that this region has remained a dynamic area where the U.S.' interests and thereby its foreign policy priorities has been oscillating with ups and downs or engagements and disengagements. Nevertheless, it is also observed that the strategic interests have been most important factor for the U.S. policy towards South Asia. Such a policy has remained an important part of the U.S. global strategy that wants to see Europe or Asia free from domination by any hostile power. In the U.S. policy calculations, during the cold war era the Soviet Union was that power and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century China is emerging such a power. Thus as long as the shadow of "China Threat" remains in the minds of the U.S. policy makers; the U.S. will treat India as its mutual partner in the South Asian region. At the same time, as long as the terrorism is not eliminated and Afghanistan is not transformed into a peaceful and stable country free from terrorism, the U.S. will try to maintain its current balanced policy towards India and Pakistan.

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