

The United States & India: Convergent And Divergent Interests

A public lecture by the Prof. Stephen P. Cohen was organised by the Centre for Security Analysis on 27 August 2003. Prof. Cohen Among the participants was Dr. Richard Haynes, the Consul General of the US Consulate General in Chennai.

The President of the CSA, Lt. Gen. V.R. Raghavan (Retd) welcomed the gathering. Dr. Gopalji Malviya, Honorary Treasurer of the CSA and Head, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, University of Madras, introduced the speaker and the topic and chaired the meeting.

Dr. Cohen began by saying that Indo-US relations today are much better than what we would have predicted ten years ago. India and the US may not see eye to eye on all issues, but then the US has divergences even with close allies like France and Germany. There are long-term trends in Indo-US relations that are important.

From the American point of view, the following have been major interests vis-à-vis India. During the Cold War period the strategic interest dominated over ideological interests related to democracy. Both in the case of India and Pakistan, the US relations were driven by external factors, namely the containment of the USSR and China, and that explains the ups and downs that these two countries have had with the US. But with the end of the great power game, the US is beginning to appreciate the success of democracy in India.

Secondly, the US has had an economic interest in India. It was not much during the Cold War period but that is changing view and growing. Another US interest in India has been people. There are almost two million Indians who have made the US their home. This population carries a lot of political weight in the US.

The further interest has been proliferation, which, until recent times, was the dominant theme. But the US was wrong in trying to cap and roll back the nuclear programme in India as well as Pakistan. In fact this accelerated the nuclear programme in India. Since 1998, proliferation has taken a proportionate role and the primary concern now is to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons from South Asia to other countries.

Terrorism has emerged as a new issue in Indo-US relations. However, the US is more concerned about terrorism that threatens the US than about terrorism that threatens India and that is why Pakistan becomes a contentious issue in this context.

From the Indian point of view, equitable economic growth has been an issue for all governments that have been in power. In that context the US and American investment were seen as an economic threat to Indian industries than as a friend, which was a mistake. But the US was involved in Indian economy and development in some significant areas such as agriculture and advanced education. Indian policies have changed now and American investment is welcome now.

Secondly, Indian interest has been that of preserving democracy and a free society. In this context, the Indo-American community is active in politics with India as well. It

is not as significant as in Pakistan, though, where quite a few national legislators were US green card holders.

There is a growing cultural interest now after the earlier, misguided, Nehruvian ideological influence, which did not find any interest or value in American culture. Indians have become more receptive to American culture and are using it to transform themselves.

Thirdly, India has been very concerned about maintaining its strategic autonomy vis-à-vis America. India cannot and will not become a subordinate, junior partner of the US and has its own independent strategic policies. In the past India had been concerned about the US-Pakistan-China partnership while there has been a strategic rethinking in recent years. Today Pakistan is concerned about the US-India partnership.

Finally, there is a personal connection. Every single political or cultural figure in India has some American connection. An increasing number of Indians educated and trained in America are coming back to India to invest and set-up businesses. These people constitute a unique bridge between India and the United States.

If we analyse the important long-term trends it is clear that India and the US have come closer to each other. The common, overlapping interests are growing. Over the years, Americans have learnt to listen more and their Indian counterparts have learnt to argue less. But there are important differences and divergences of interests. There is a big power disparity between the US and India. The US is used to be dealing with weaker countries as subordinates while India is used to be dealing with other countries as equals.

There would also be a strategic divergence as India will put its interests first and America will put its interests first. There is still trouble in understanding and communicating to each other. One example would be the Indian case for a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations where the perceptions between the two countries differ.

There are also differences and divergences within the two countries as crucial issues such as China which are more important than the differences between the two countries. There are no permanent interests but only permanent friends in international relations. There are debates within both the United States and India over relations with China. Similarly, there are internal debates over Pakistan as well. Within the US industry and business community, there are divides over outsourcing and call centres in India. The Bush administration came to power with a revolutionary foreign policy and the 9/11 events have accelerated that policy. But the opposition to that policy has emerged strongly and the battle lines are drawn clearly. In India there was a strong debate over sending troops to Iraq. Therefore, there are debates and divergences within both the US and India which are more important than the differences between the two countries.

There was a question-answer session that followed the lecture. Some of the highlights are given below:

In response to Prof. J.K. Jha's point that earlier India's relations with the US were one-sided as India depended on the US while today there is an interdependence as both the countries needed each other, Prof. Cohen pointed out that in India there is still an incomplete understanding of how the Presidential System works in the US and how policies are made.

In response to other questions Prof. Cohen brought out the role played by lobbies in the US policy making as well as their limitations. He pointed out the Indian desire for strategic independence. India will not allow itself to be dictated to by any other country.

India has become more powerful as a result of acquiring nuclear weapons as well as less powerful as it now faces new threats from other nuclear powers. India has to back up its nuclear and military power with economic power, which it is doing now. If India could avoid a conflict with Pakistan and continue with its liberalization and economic growth it could transform itself in ten years.

Some of the divergences between India and the US are fundamental and based on different perceptions of History and Justice. For example, the US prevented India from acquiring cryogenic engine technology from Russia which is rooted in such differences.

The US has two foreign policies towards South Asia. Its India policy is based on the premise that India is a major, rising power in South Asia. Its Pakistan policy is based on the premise that Pakistan is a critical military ally in the war against terror. In the US perception, Pakistan's support is critical for operations in Afghanistan. It must be kept in mind that Pakistan is a nuclear power with tremendous capabilities. In the long run it is possible to de-militarise Kashmir and both India and Pakistan have a role to play in this.

On the issue of terrorism, the President of the US has perhaps wrongly used the term, "war on terror". The Indians feel that because the US has declared war on terror, it includes the terrorists in India also. But that is not true. The terrorist problem for the US is different from the terrorist problem for India.

On the possibility of Russia, China and India coming together, the three powers had their own individual goals to pursue and it did not bother the United States at this point of time.

Prof. Cohen's concluding remark was that he had expected the US to react more strongly towards the events in Gujarat and the US proximity with the BJP Government perhaps prevented them from doing so.

Dr. Lawrence Prabhakar, Secretary of the CSA, proposed the vote of thanks.
