



U.S. 'Rethinking' its South Asia Policy

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U.S. is currently in the process of re-examining its South Asia policy. After a decade long engagement in Afghanistan, U.S. is now handing over charge of key areas to local Afghan bodies in keeping with the 2014 withdrawal deadline. Post withdrawal, the size of the U.S. force that will remain in Afghanistan is to be announced in mid-2013. They would remain under the U.S.-Afghanistan security agreement and continue to assist the process of 'rebuilding Afghanistan' and deepen the relationship between the two countries.

Nonetheless, the withdrawal has brought into sharp focus U.S. Administration's policy towards South Asia which is shifting the spotlight from the 'war on terror' to a more Asia centric pivot. It is increasingly evident to the Administration that the problems that beset the region range from issues of insecurity, political instability, rising militancy and extremism, corruption, and drug trafficking, all of which have the capacity to undermine economic development and the growth of stable democracies. China's engagement with the countries of the region has not gone unnoticed by U.S. policy makers, making relations between Washington and Beijing more complex. As a result one finds that, there is a lot of emphasis on a strategic approach towards the Asian policy as a whole. It is with this view in mind that U.S. is increasingly looking towards India for a larger strategy for the region.

U.S. and India share similar strategic interest in helping build a political stable and economically viable Afghanistan that prevents terrorists from planning and launching international attacks. It accepts India as an important regional player and has recognised her as an integral part of U.S. policy for the region. This relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships for U.S., with India playing a significant role in global diplomacy. Most importantly India is a stable liberal democracy in a region dominated by political instability. At a recent Round Table with the Indian Media, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, summarised the relationship by reiterating President Obama's words that the relationship between the two countries is "one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century".

U.S. Deputy Secretary Burns also spoke about the challenges in the relationship as well as the areas of convergence. Among several areas of cooperation valued most by the U.S. is the work being done by India in Afghanistan. The U.S. views India as a significant partner in Afghanistan, where it can play a much larger role. India's role in "fostering regional economic cooperation and private sector investments in Afghanistan" has been greatly appreciated by Washington. India has actively supported economic integration of Afghanistan through forums like South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The U.S. is essentially hoping that India will be able to transfer the concepts of democratic processes to the war torn country.

South Asia is of increasing relevance to the U.S. While the U.S. is ensuring that instability and the Taliban do not return, with the acceptance that some coalition forces will stay to conduct "counter-terror operations" and others to support and train Afghan forces (both the Afghan army and police), Afghanistan does not appear to be the focal point of its policies. The focus is on regional stability, which is inclusive of stable India-Pakistan relations as well as a studied understanding of China's relations with these two countries. This was evident when U.S. Deputy Secretary Burns spoke of cooperation between India and U.S. in the sphere of defence, counter terrorism as well as economics and education. U.S. also welcomes India's role in the Asia Pacific region in promoting maritime security and building trade and investment ties. The civil nuclear cooperation agreement which came into force in 2008 has made slow progress. However, the two countries are working to recreate the cooperation that has been witnessed by India vis- a vis similar agreements with Russia and France. It is anticipated that apart from the

Westinghouse Memorandum of Understanding, other agreements such as with GE-Hitachi would be inked soon bringing advanced nuclear technology to India. Nonetheless, a more detailed understanding of the areas of nuclear cooperation along with other issues may be taken up by John Kerry, U.S. Secretary of State, when he comes to India in June 2013 for the U.S. India Strategic Dialogue. The dialogue launched in 2010 is the 'capstone dialogue' between the two countries and provides an opportunity to deepen their strategic relationship.

There is a rethinking among policy makers in Washington on how the U.S. needs to address the dilemmas it faces in South Asia. With its traditional allies-Japan and South Korea-facing political and economic challenges, U.S. is focusing its attention towards India and China. While China is a competitor for both global market share as well as political power, U.S. has to establish a policy whereby India is viewed independent of both Pakistan and China. U.S. has realised that South Asia needs to be treated individually and distinctly and bilateral relations have to be framed accordingly. U.S. is building her relations in the region so that as it withdraws from Afghanistan, countries of the region can fill the void to ensure stability.

For the U.S., India is its best option to help stabilise South Asia. The relations range from economic to security cooperation to shared views on the democracy and justice. A closer relationship would also help India push for more concession as the waiver to import oil from Iran. Similarly, for India, this is an opportunity to strengthen her relationship with not just Afghanistan but also the United States.

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