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Event Report

of the
International Conference
on
**“Changing Contours of India-US Relations: Perceptions,
Continuity and Change”**

Organised
by

BITS Pilani, K K Birla Goa Campus, Goa

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BITS Pilani Goa Campus organised an International Seminar to discuss the topic, “Changing Contours of India-US Relations: Perceptions, Continuity and Change.” The aim of this three day conference was to evaluate India-US relations in the present international context and objectively examine the future trends, when it is being said that the two countries share ‘good relations’. The three day conference was largely divided around the themes of international relations and strategic studies, and economic and cultural relations shared by the two countries. The focus of the conference was to ensure that India’s rise in the international political arena is not viewed as a security threat. It also sought to explore ways and means for India to become more active in global politics and be able to balance her relations with the giants such as US, China and Russia. The third aim of the seminar was to explore the role of culture in cementing this relationship further.

Ambassador Prabhat P Shukla, in his keynote address, spoke of the historical differences between the two countries, but he also pointed to the moments of convergence. He stressed that the Sino- India war changed the spectrum of relations in the region with India accepting the Soviet support and the administration of President Johnson reversing all the pro-India policy initiated by President Kennedy. He pointed that by mid 1960s there were various issues, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) between the two nations that became additional irritants in the relationship. He stated that the initial years after the end of the Cold War were years of trial and error for the two countries. India’s withdrawal of support for refuelling US war planes during the First Gulf War, due to domestic pressure, reinforced the idea of India’s unreliability in US mind. Similarly, India was unable to seize the opportunity to build closer relations, when the US applied sanctions on Pakistan under the Pressler Amendments. Today, however, the relationship has changed with the realisation in the US that China’s growth is a future threat and India’s growing importance can be an important asset for the US. He stressed that if India wants to cement its position in the global order, then it has to appoint an officer in the CENTCOM to influence and rectify US defence policy towards India. India has to be more forthcoming on the issue of ‘rebalance’ and trade issues such as TPP. He stated that there are a number of positive political cooperation areas where the two countries have to deliver now.

The first distinguished lecture was delivered by Dr Rahul Mohan on ‘How relevant are the Polar Regions for our climate?’ It was pointed out that the Polar Regions are very

important for weather in the global context. The thick ice cover ensures adequate reflection of the sun's rays that, in turn, ensure that the ice does not melt quickly. It assists in precipitation, which leads to rain fall. It also allows the slow melting of glaciers in the Polar Regions, which are the largest reservoir of fresh water. It was pointed out that, at present, both old and new ice is melting in the Polar Regions, which would have detrimental effect on the sea levels and could submerge a large number of coastal regions. This could cause a humanitarian problem with the displacement of people. For heavily populated countries like India, this is a major cause of concern. Apart from the internal displacement of people, the Arctic Region is a contributor to the monsoons in India. Temperature difference in the Arctic region would have direct impact on rainfall, which will impact the agricultural output of the country. To study these phenomena and find ways to ensure that the habitat of the Polar Regions is not affected, India, along with a few other countries, has established scientific study bases in both the Arctic Region and the Antarctica.

The second speaker was Prof Aswini Mahapatra, who elaborated the 'US-Middle East Policy: Implications, Continuity and Change'. He stated that there were three phases of the US policy towards Middle East. During the Cold War, the Middle East was important with a view to the containment policy followed by the US. While this containment was targeted at the Soviet Union, it was also used to contain Iran and Iraq. During the 1990s, the Middle East became important for the US as a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the war that was to follow. The third phase is the current phase that is against terrorism and the idea of promoting democracy in the States of the Middle East. US interest in the Middle East during the Cold War was primarily because of the Soviet Union, however, support to Israel and protection of its energy interest have been continuing motivations. To this, the US has added democracy promotion and the removal of rogue States and autocracies. The consequences of US involvement in the region have caused both economic and political instability and volatility there. The US has committed these blunders as a result of lack of knowledge about the region. Firstly, the US has to realise that Islam fuses both political and religious discourses in these States. Thus, it is both used and misused by the regimes. Second, there are cultural reasons for the instability. There is a Persian vs. Arab divide and competition between countries. Third, one finds the rise of organisations that want to rebuild the 8th Century Caliphate. The structural factor of instability is the fact that the State system was imported, with the

imperialist imposing their will. The State does not have the support of the people; they have to coerce this support from the citizenry. They have ideological divide; pan-Arabism vs. pan-Islamism. This negates democracy and political legitimacy. And lastly, the region has always witnessed the involvement of the great powers. In the future also, the US will continue to be involved in the region, as it has removed the dictators, who were the stabilising force there.

Thereafter, parallel sessions were conducted. The author of the report attended the session on Strategic Security, Perceptions and Projections. There were eight paper presentations in the session exploring the relations between the two countries ranging from counter-terrorism operation to cooperation in the Indian Ocean region to nuclear power. The speakers of various papers presented during the session highlighted the fact that Indo-US relationship has travelled a long distance to begin a new era of cooperation in the region of South Asia. The beginning of 21st century marked an important development for Indo-US relations, which initially started with President Clinton's visit to India, followed by positive focus of President Bush's administration and culminated into the strategic partnership between President Obama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the global level. This strategic partnership is broad based and covers various issues, which include economy, trade, investment, space, nuclear, missile technology transfer and, particularly, green partnership to further validate and strengthen bilateral relations. The session also addressed the important issue of the Indian Ocean becoming a vital area of maritime security. India and US relations have also taken due note of the need to evolve a policy to protect their interests in the Indian Ocean. The US should pay closer attention to India's role in the regional balance. India is an element in China's calculation, and should be in America's too. India is not a great power, but it has the potential to emerge as one. The US has selected to harness India's apparent strategic weight for its own geopolitical aims.

The International Relations: Concepts and Empiricism session explored ideas related to the combined capability of India as an emerging power in the 21st century. The main argument presented in the session stated that India is an emerging power in this present international structure. It has a significant role in the present international political structure. It pointed to a visible shift from the 'American Century' to an 'Asian Century'. The uni-polar world allowed the US to loom largely unchallenged for many years and resulted in a peaceful and stable world order. However, with the recent rise of new powers, such as the BRIC

countries – Brazil, Russia, India and China – the world is moving towards a multi-polar international system. Global governance has become, on the whole, more diverse, more democratic, more complex, and more competitive. Militarily, the US may still remain the preponderant power, but its relative political influence will be weaker than today. It is this diplomatic space that is being filled by China to check American power. In such a situation, it is imperative that India starts increasing its diplomatic influence.

On day two, the author chaired the second session on the theme of Strategic Security: Perceptions and Projections. The session highlighted that since the end of the bipolar schema in world affairs and through the onset of the 21st century, India-US engagement has been in significant transformational mode. The speakers were trying to comprehend and locate the precise coordinates of the New Delhi-Washington track, both in terms of the intrinsic Agenda governing the bilateral relationship, as also mapping its stature and heft, within the shifting geopolitical and strategic landscape across the expanse of Asia and beyond. The speakers discussed the role of India in Afghanistan; an extended neighbourhood that shares an important historical-cultural similarity with India and is situated at the crossroad of three important strategic regions, South, Central and West Asia. Under the NATO security umbrella, India engaged in reconstructing the war torn Afghanistan and succeeded in creating a pro-India constituency through its assistance. Afghanistan has seen the best example of Indo-US reconfigures for the geopolitics of Asia, but it does not mean that there are no difference between the two on the US's policy on the future of Afghanistan. The other important sector to be discussed by the participants was defence modernisation. The sector is the priority of the present government and US can certainly help in this direction. Nonetheless, given the sensitive nature of the projects undertaken and their ultimate aim, there are various obstacles in Indo-US defence industry cooperation and it needs to be analyzed in spite of policy changes. During the concluding session, it was agreed by the participants that the Indian strategic community cannot ignore that strategy is a function of factors, such as geography, culture, historical experiences and knowledge and that it is now time for India to build a 'grand strategy' to project its idea on the global platform.

The author also chaired the second session on the theme International Relations: Concepts and Empiricism. The session discussed the history of the relationship between the two countries. Despite the fact that the two countries believe in similar values of multi-ethnic,

multi-religious, secular democracies, they did not have harmonious relations during the Cold War years. During the Cold War period, New Delhi-Washington relations were viewed through the prism of their association with and support towards their respective rivals – Islamabad and Moscow. However, a word of caution was also sounded while discussing the present relationship between the two countries. It was felt that the importance of India to the US offshore balancing would compel the US to try to calibrate India towards being a net security provider in the region. Preponderance Strategy would invest equally in the growth and development of India as a check on China, but would not necessarily emphasize India's role as a net security provider. The difference between the two would lie in the degree to which the US would like to see India actualize its economic power into active military power. It was felt that as the US had created a conceptual and actual 'China card' to balance the Soviet Union and, subsequently, a 'Japan card' to check China, there seems to be an element of 'India card' in the present discourse. India has to ensure that it is able to play its role as a balance of power in the region, while not being passive in achieving its own national security. An area of security that is common to both India and the US is counter-terrorism operations. The two countries are building mechanism to share intelligence and develop expertise to deal with the rise of terrorist groups.

In the distinguished speakers' session, Prof Chintamani Mahapatra spoke on the 'Complex Dynamics of Indo-US Engagements: Convergence in Generalities and Differences over Specifics'. He pointed out that India is an emerging power and the US needs it to maintain its influence in the region. For both the countries, the relationship is very important. However, if one studies the relationship, it would be found that while the two have convergence of interests on general issues, they have differing views with regard to the details. India and the United States share a number of political values, possess multicultural social fabric, maintain unity in diversity and also have similar stakes over major global issues and concerns. The leaders of both the countries often take pride in their democratic values, rule of law, and have shown interest in the spread of democracy around the world. A large number of English speaking elites in India feel comfortable while interacting with their counterparts in the United States. The economic elites of India have begun investing in the United States to the tune of billions of dollars, although the US foreign investment in India continues to be much larger. More recently, with the slow build-up of a strategic partnership between the two

countries, the US public diplomacy has sought to reach out to Indians in large number. In the matter of defence and security issues, both New Delhi and Washington express their willingness to stem the spread of nuclear weapons, work towards achieving a nuclear weapon free world, combat terrorism in all forms and shapes, take steps to alleviate global poverty and address global health issues. However, these palpable areas of convergence face numerous hurdles when it comes to the question of implementation and sorting out nitty-gritty details. There are differences over the methods and approaches to combat terrorism, dealing with IPR issues, market opening, promoting democracy, and myriad other issues.

The second speaker of the session was Dr Stuti Banerjee from ICWA, who spoke on the topic of 'India and the United States: Reinvigorating the Energy Relationship'. She pointed out that in today's evolving geopolitical sphere, the relationship between India, the most populous democracy and the US, the oldest democracy, is viewed as a key element in the unfolding of international dynamics. The two countries have, since 2004, been pursuing a strategic partnership that incorporates numerous economic, security, and global initiatives. As part of its 'Pivot to Asia' foreign policy, the US is paying attention to the growing capabilities of the Indian economy and defence forces. The US views security cooperation with India in the context of common principles and shared national interests and strategic objectives, such as defeating terrorism, preventing weapons proliferation, and maintaining regional stability. The US is taking a renewed look at its relations with India, which have not progressed as expected since the watershed civil nuclear deal between the two countries. The optimism stems from the stress laid by the Indian government on strengthening India's ties with nations to augment its security interests and economic development by exploring all available energy resources – renewable and non-renewable. Growing strategic relations between the two countries has implications for the energy relation as well. India's continued economic growth and security are intrinsically linked to energy and secure supply of energy resources. While both states are keen to implement the civil nuclear energy agreement, in the past five years, there has been little progress. Much of the interest that it generated has dissipated, especially among foreign policy thinkers within the two countries, who feel that the agreement has failed to meet expectations. Energy and the need to develop sustainable and renewable sources of energy have been part of India's relationship with the United States. As India and the United States move to explore 'non-traditional paths' to strategy, energy security has

become paramount. Ample energy is the prerequisite not just for economic growth, but is a requirement for overall development of any country – for a stable political environment, strong social growth, economic development and robust defence. Thus, an energy strategy is parallel in importance to economic and military strategies.

The conference was concluded on day three with valedictory address by Prof Chintamani Mahapatra. He pointed out that perceptions are important in any relationship. This is true of international relations and the India-US relationship. Giving example, he stated that in 1947, the US perception of India was that of a poor nation with a large number of maharajas, ‘naked fakirs’ and, possibly, snake charmers. India, in turn, during the Cold War years, viewed the US as a hardcore utilitarian, capitalist, and low on moral values nation that valued only money. However, today, those very perceptions are different. The US sees in India a diverse and fantastic democracy, with its billion plus people and hundreds of languages, multiple religions and the fact that both the educated and the uneducated are part of the governance system. The US is the world’s oldest democracy where 40 per cent of the voters, every two years, vote 80 per cent of the same legislatures to power, whereas in India, the voters have changed governments. Today, the US views India as an emerging power. India has also developed confidence in its abilities. While there is some mistrust in the relations, but it is still progressing. These are signs that the two countries are moving beyond their historical perceptions of each other. This is the change that will take the relationship forward.

** Report prepared by Dr Stuti Banerjee, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs.*
