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Event Report



School of Social Science, Guru Nanak Dev University

Amritsar

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The School of Social Science, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar organised a one day national seminar on the topic, 'Indo-US Relations: The Road Map Ahead'. The aim of the seminar was to examine India-US relations in the present international context and objectively examine the future trends. The warm relations shared between the two heads of government, the successful visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the arrival of President Barak Obama as the guest of honour at the Republic Day parade have been viewed as indications of a growing India-US relationship. It is with this background that the seminar aimed to highlight issues that would be pivotal to chart the road ahead by these two nations. It also sought to explore ways and means for India and US to engage with each other while maintaining their independent policies on relations with China and Russia or the evolving situation in the Middle East. The seminar was divided into paper presentations followed by a panel discussion. An essay competition as part of the ICWA Foreign Policy Awareness programme was organised on 27 March on the topic 'India and Major Powers: U.S./China/Japan/Russia'.

The first speaker of the inaugural session was Dr Stuti Banerjee, from ICWA, who spoke on the topic 'India: US relations: A Few Mileposts Ahead'. Keeping in mind the theme of the seminar, she highlighted three areas of convergences that would help the relationship move forward. She pointed out that it is not necessary to view the India-US relationship from the prism of the differences that could act as roadblocks, but it could also be viewed from the perspective of areas in which cooperation would be vital and not contentious. Stating that the road ahead lies in not just covering issues of economy and polity or defence, but also the less discussed, but equally important issues. Giving examples to support her statement, she highlighted the need to work on the issues of climate change, where the two nations have to find a solution, which would allow India to achieve its economic goals without harming the climate. She pointed out that related to the issue of climate change was the collaborations between the two nations in the energy sector. But this cooperation is not just limited to nuclear, it is also present in renewable sources, for example, the US is very active in solar energy development in India. The second area of convergence, according to the speaker, was in the education sector, which should not be limited to just higher education, but should also

include primary and school level education. It should foster an environment of research and development in both natural and social sciences. She pointed out that educated citizens would be instrumental in developing the Indian economy further and making it robust. Further, to ensure that the educated citizen has proper infrastructure, cooperation in the future should be in building better cities, a project that is at the heart of the Indian government's development plans. And lastly, she pointed out that health care is a sector in which the two nations could seek future cooperation. She concluded by stating that the relationship needs to be guided by realistic aims rather than by unrealistic expectations. The relationship should be based on mutual interest and mutual benefit, the interest of both nations has to be served for the relationship to thrive.

Professor Chintamani Mahapatra, in his keynote address, alluded to the history of India-US relations. He stated that without understanding the history of the relationship, it would be very difficult to chart the future course. He pointed out that the relationship was largely guided by the principles of the Cold War politics. The US viewed India as a Soviet supporter and with Pakistan's joining most of the US sponsored groupings, the US trust on Pakistan increased. The detente with China, of which Pakistan was an important element and the support the US got during its operations in Afghanistan, meant that India did not get much attention from the US. Post Cold War, the relationship changed with the Indian economy's liberalisation process. Nonetheless, the US remained suspicious of India and its aims. This was a time of great international upheaval, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of a number of new nation states on the international arena, the gulf war, etc. In the midst of this, India tested its nuclear devices in 1998. The immediate nuclear tests by Pakistan let the US to comment that India had started a nuclear arms race in the region and Kashmir was a flashpoint. India was placed under sanctions with the relations becoming stagnant. However, towards the end of President Bill Clinton's term, it was realised by the US that India has been able to absorb the impact of the sanctions economically; the US had not been able to isolate India politically on the international arena. In view of this, the US decided to amend its relationship with India and President Clinton visited India. The situation changed completely with the events of 9/11. The war on terror once again shifted the focus on Pakistan, but the US did not ignore India. Keeping in mind India's rising stature, the US has actively engaged with her. The civil nuclear deal has been called a landmark event and it changed the way India-US

relations were viewed. Since then, the India-US relations have been termed as strategic partnership between two natural allies, who share common interests and face common threats. However, a number of analysts have cautioned India to balance its relations with the US. The US policy of 'pivot to Asia' is largely viewed as aimed to arrest the rise of China. But the US has enormous economic interests in China. On the other hand, India-China economic relations are comparatively less substantial, but one that India wants to expand, and for this, it is engaging China for its own economic development. In such a situation, India-US relations have to move forward balancing the two nation's relations with China, respectively. Russia and US relations have deteriorated over the past few years and the Ukraine crisis has brought this to the forefront. India-Russia relations have developed over decades and continue to be strong. India would have to ensure that its close relationship with Russia continues to strengthen and does not become a cause for differences with the US. On Pakistan, he said that the US has accepted that Pakistan is the centre for not just terrorist groups that operate against India, but also against the US and other nations. Terrorism and the cooperation between the two countries to defeat this menace is an important aspect of the relationship. Nonetheless, he pointed out that India has to accept the fact that US-Pakistan relations would remain a part of US policies towards the region. In conclusion, he stated that he agreed with the first speaker that India and the US have to chart their future road map based on issues on which they cooperate and can move ahead together, but it was equally important to note the issues of difference and plan strategies on how to overcome them.

The Presidential Address was given by Professor (Dr.) Ajaib Singh Brar, who pointed out that India and the US have developed close cooperation in the field of natural sciences. This cooperation could be replicated in other subject areas to enhance cooperation in the education sector. He was optimistic that with greater number of exchange programmes between Indian and US universities, not only will the students be able to explore new techniques of research, but also help develop understanding of each other's cultures. It would also help in strengthening people to people contact.

The inaugural session was followed by five paper presentations exploring the relations between the two countries. The paper explored the relations between the two countries in the Middle East to China and the South Asia region. 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 rising tension in the Middle East and the rise of the ISIS. It discussed the need to build an international consensus against the terrorist groups in the region and aid the UN and its agencies in providing humanitarian assistance. India's interest in the region, especially the large number of India workers trapped in the hostile environment, was discussed. It was noted that India has to be cautious of the spread of the ISIS into its neighbourhood. It was noted that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted a number of terrorist organisations, to publically state that they would now shift their focus to Kashmir.

Keeping these views into focus, during the panel discussion, questions were raised on the role of Pakistan and the need for the US to exercise pressure on the nation to prosecute terrorists and ban such outfits. China and its growing influence in the region, its implications for India and if India's partnership with the US would harm its long terms prospects were other issues that were discussed. It was pointed out by the panellists that China's growth has caused concern not just among the neighbouring States, but also the US. The US is the predominant power in the international arena and it would not like China to displace it from that position. With the pivot policy, it has tried to engage with partner nations, such as India and strengthen its allies, such as Japan as a counterbalance to China. However, they all noted that US' trade relations with China were extensive and that China held large volumes of US treasury bonds. These two points made it very difficult for the US to antagonise China. It was, therefore, building its relations with other nations of the region to arrest the rise of China. The panellists were of the view that India should continue to deepen its engagement with China, especially in view of the fact that the present government has made development the priority of the country.

The Valedictory address was given by Professor R. S. Yadav, who congratulated the university and its students on a well organised seminar. Bringing the seminar to a close, he spoke about the need for India and the US to play a greater role in the region. He pointed out that both the nations are building this relationship to try and combine their own strategic interests. India is an emerging power and with the governments stress on development along with the predictions of the international financial organisations, that state that the Indian economy will grow in the coming years, the US will want to deepen its engagement with India to protect its own interest. He pointed out that the road ahead for the two nations lies in cooperating with each other in all sectors and not just be limited to economics or security.

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