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Indo-US Strategic Ties – OpEd

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The US tilt in South Asia is not a sudden development, in fact, after the demise of the Soviet Union there has been a gradual convergence of interests between New Delhi and Washington. Before the Cold War any alliance between the US and India remained out of the question due to Nehru's policy of nonalignment. However, the US always recognized India's regional importance. The first step towards India came when General Claude Kicklighter visited India in 1991. Subsequent agreements that took place to develop the joint training exercises marked the first military-to-military cooperation between United States and India. Immediately thereafter, high level discussion on strategic interests took place in January 1992 in New Delhi. At that meeting, India was considered as the only country that could act as a regional stabilizing force against the spread of "Islamic fundamentalism".

In 1995, cooperation was further strengthened by Secretary of Defense William Perry's visit to India, where he and his Indian counterpart agreed to move beyond bilateral military issues to encompass a wide range of military, security and strategic interests. These advances were however imperiled by India's 1998 nuclear tests when sanctions were imposed by United States.

However, the trend of coming closer to India again started during the second term of President Clinton, who during the Kargil War of 1999 not only pressured Pakistan to withdraw its troops, but also chided Pakistan for its role in promoting terrorism. In the 2000, President Clinton's visit

to India was the turning point in the Indo-US relationship. During his visit, President Clinton admitted that the US had ignored India in the preceding 20 years and indicated that it would end the passive impact caused by nuclear issues in future.

Previously US interests in South Asia had been important, but were never vital. However, its War against Terrorism in Afghanistan brought the region into focus. Considering the US interests in the region, the US approach to relations with India needs to be seen in the context of several identifiable areas in South Asia during the post-Cold War period: first, eliminating terrorism and curbing Islamic extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan; second, development of a strong economic and strategic relationship with India for possible containment of China; and lastly, preventing a potentially dangerous nuclear arms race on the subcontinent.

In early March 2006, President Bush made a three-day trip to India. In a speech preceding his trip, the President called India a “natural partner for the United States” and identified the broad areas of bilateral cooperation as: counterterrorism, trade promotion, environmental protections, energy initiatives.

On December 2006, Congress under Bush administration passed the historic Henry J. Hyde, “United States-India Peaceful Atomic Cooperation Act”, which allows direct civilian nuclear commerce with India for the first time in 30 years. The very next year, on July 27, 2007, the US and India reached an agreement on civil nuclear deal known as the 123 Agreement. Americans have termed it as the “symbolic centerpiece of a growing global partnership between the two countries. This agreement governs civil nuclear trade between the two countries and opens the door for American and Indian firms to participate in each others civil nuclear energy sector.

After taking the charge of the presidential office, President Obama made two visits to India. On January 26, 2015, he visited India as the chief guest at India’s 66th Republic Day celebrations. During his visit he opened up more doors of bilateral cooperation between the two, including in the nuclear sphere.

To sum up, the US unprecedented tilt towards India in the post Cold War era, even after the Indian nuclear test in 1998, has seriously undermined the cause of peace and stability in this region. Presently, the US is hewing the NSG membership for India which will have serious implications for the stability of the region. The military relationship between the US and India has added a new dimension to Pakistan’s security equation – thereby aggravating its security perceptions. By cultivating India for any balancing role in Asia US would endanger Pakistan’s security environment and destabilize the region. Unless this impact is contained, it could aggravate the strategic milieu of Pakistan. The US should understand the gravity of the damage they are committing to the cause of peace and stability by giving India country-specific special treatment by improving India’s position in the South Asian region that would ultimately disturb the regional equilibrium.