



U.S Involvement in South Asia till the end of first phase of Cold War

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Abstract

The U.S involvement in South Asia has had a profound influence in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region. From containment of communism to containment of China and from Nuclear non-proliferation to the war on terror, the U.S has navigated its engagements in the region to satiate its cardinal interests in quest of establishing and maintaining its global hegemony. The repercussions of this more or less selfish involvement of U.S in the region have been extremely disquieting and pervasive. Afghanistan has been ravaged and turned into an unending battle ground for proxy wars and regional supremacy. Political stability and democracy in Pakistan has often been disturbed by the U. S patronage and liking of dictators and military rulers in that country. India has not remained immune to the influence of U.S involvement in the region as is evidenced by the frequent aggressions of Pakistan against it during the cold war. Pakistan's aggressive stance against India during the Cold war certainly had an element of U.S support at its back. The present paper is aimed at understanding the key attractions of U.S in South Asia till the initial phase of cold war between the United States of America and the erstwhile Soviet Union. The region being quite rich in natural resources and highly populated, it is assumed that in the absence of U.S geopolitical interests and its obsession with containment of communism, commercial engagements between U. S and South Asia could have thrived and an economically prosperous South Asia might have proved to be an antidote to violence and conflicts in the region.

I. Introduction:

Till World War II, South Asia remained a less significant and largely unattractive region for the United States. Part of this lack of U.S. attraction for the region stemmed from the belief of the US in its traditional policy of 'isolationism' in international affairs, which it had pursued for much of its history after its independence in 1776. But the

Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor – a U.S. naval base – in December 1941 and the subsequent entry of the United States into World War II brought about a tremendous transformation in the United States foreign policy. This transformation is often described as a change from 'isolationism' to 'globalism' in which the United States used its preponderant power to assist itself on the World Stage¹. The attacks forced the United States to abandon its traditional policy of isolationism to increasingly embroil in world affairs in the ensuing years. As a matter of fact, the sub-continent of India also began to find space for American attraction amidst this growing U.S. embroilment in World affairs during World War II. Thus, "the United States' Consciousness in South Asia' as Harold A. Gould puts it is actually rooted in the World War II, considerably prior to the dawning of post war era"².

U.S Involvement in Indian subcontinent in the early phase of Cold war:

Before the World War II, the United States had no substantial contacts with British India. The political relations between the two countries remained virtually non-existent even though just three years after becoming the U.S. President, George Washington had appointed Benjamin Joy as a consul in Calcutta, the then capital of British India³. The Commercial engagement between the two countries also remained limited except for a brief period during Napoleonic Wars when the U.S. threatened British Commercial monopoly in British India.

¹ Brain Schmidt *Theories of U.S. Foreign Policy* in Michael Cox and Dog Stokes, (ed) *the U.S. Foreign Police* Oxford University Press, (2012), 14.

² Harold.A. Gould, *The South Asian Story: The first sixty years of U.S. Relations with India and Pakistan*, (Sage publication India Pvt.Ltd. New Delhi, 2010)11

³ Dennis Kux, *Estranged Democracy*, 3



During World War II, however, British India from which India and Pakistan were carved out later, attracted American attention partly on account of the sacrifices and efforts that the Indian Soldiers made for the Allied powers in the War and partly on account of the intensification that the Indian national movement for independence of India assumed during the height of the war in 1942.

The United States acknowledged the sacrifices and efforts of Indian Soldiers in the war. A huge contingent of two and half million Indian Soldiers had fought alongside the Allied forces led by the United States, Soviet Union, Britain and France to defeat the Axis Powers led by Germany, Japan and Italy in the World War II. "Indian Military forces also played a crucial role for the British and Allied operations in Burma, the Middle East and Italy and India was a critical base for supporting Chinese Armies fighting the Japanese"⁴.

But the Indian nationalist movement, for the independence of India, which had by this time entered into a critical phase was viewed with somewhat ambivalence by the United States despite President F.D. Roosevelt's seemingly anti-colonialist predilections. Roosevelt, a new deal liberal had also expressed his commitment to support the cause of freedom and self-determination of colonized peoples of Africa and Asia in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. Moreover, he was convinced in the Indian case that "his support for the Indian Freedom movement would boost American prestige in Asia, increase Indian enthusiasm in war effort and bring an end to the British Imperial Preferential Trade Agreement"⁵, which had been halting American Commercial expansion in India⁶.

Emboldened by the weaker position of Britain because of its total involvement in World War II, and induced by the optimism of U.S. support to Indian Freedom movement, that President Roosevelt's liberal attitude and his anti-colonialist predilections offered, the Indian nationalists decided

to bring impetus in their efforts for pressing the British to concede their demands for greater self – determination. As a matter of fact, "prominent Indian nationalists like M.K. Gandhi and J.L. Nehru made direct personal appeals to F.D. Roosevelt for U.S. involvement in India's freedom struggle"⁷. Roosevelt was caught in a dilemma of whether to support or not to support the Indian Freedom movement. It was difficult for him to support the Indian demands for freedom without annoying the British – a vital war ally. It was equally difficult for him to ignore the appeal of Indian nationalists without undermining his own liberal disposition and without damaging the hopes of forging good ties and expanding U.S. Commercial relations with India. Nevertheless Roosevelt did raise the question of Indian Freedom on more than one occasion with Winston Churchill, the then Prime Minister of Great Britain. On every occasion, however, Winston Churchill, known for his imperialistic proclivities, rejected Roosevelt's proposals and he along with his elite administration became increasingly suspicious of American motives in India. He blamed Roosevelt led United States for "using its idealistic rhetoric as a means of advancing American economic and commercial interests in India at the expense of British interests"⁸. The Quit India Movement which M.K. Gandhi launched in August 1942 at a time when the British were completely gripped in by the World War II, only played into the hands of the British and made it "increasingly difficult for F.D. Roosevelt to lobby for M.K.Gandhi and India with Winston Churchill"⁹. The ill-conceived timing of the movement also drew scathing criticism from the American press¹⁰. In spite of all these difficulties, Roosevelt tried to lend his support to the Indian demands for 'self-determination' one more time in 1943 when he sent William Philips, his personal representative to India. However, the effort also failed as William Philips made highly impractical and radical proposals after meeting several Indian

⁴BruceRidel, *Avoiding Armageddon: America, India and Pakistan to the Brink and Back*, HarperCollins publishers, India, (2013),P.11

⁵The agreement pledged the United Kingdom to allow the continued free entry of most imperial goods and to impose new tariffs on certain food and metal imports from foreign countries.

⁶ Auriol Weigold, *Churchill, Roosevelt and India Propaganda during World War II* 9 New York, Routledge, 2008), 29

⁷Kanishkan Sathwasiam, *Uneasy Neighbours, India and Pakistan and US foreign Policy* (London, Routledge, 2005),59

⁸Ibid, 59

⁹ Riedel, *Avoiding Armageddon; America, India and Pakistan to the brink and back*, 42

¹⁰ Chopra, V.D. *Pentagon shadow over India*, (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1985).61



nationalist leaders from both congress and the Muslim League. He “urged F. D. Roosevelt to convene a conference of Indian Politicians to establish an all-party, Muslim and Hindu administrative body to prepare to take over governance of India after war”. The proposal was too bewildering for Roosevelt to act over it and he did not take up the issue of Indian freedom with Roosevelt afterwards¹¹. In 1945 Harry Truman replaced Roosevelt as the next President of United States. Unlike his predecessor, Truman was more a believer in power politics, who announced his hard lining stance shortly after assuming U.S. Presidency with his decision to drop atoms bombs on the twin Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Within just three years of his term as the President of the United States, the World witnessed two momentous developments in the form of (i) emergence of ‘Cold War’ that went on to engulf nearly the entire World and (ii) partition of British India that had a strong regional implication for South Asia in the years to come. The partition of British India was done on the basis of ‘Two Nation Theory’ advocated by the M.A. Jinnah led Muslim League after Clement Atlee led British liberal government decided to leave British India in Aug 1947. On the other hand, the emergence of ‘Cold War’ – a term used by Walter Lipmann to explain the rivalry and hostile relations between the US and the USSR in the immediate aftermath of World War II – was preceded by the victory of Allied Powers led by the US, USSR, Britain & France over the Axis Powers led by Germany, Japan and Italy. The ‘Cold War’ was marked by the existence & crystallization of deep suspicion and rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union – two Super Powers that emerged from World War II. The Cold war, however, did not result in a direct fight between the United States and the USSR; rather the two countries sought to weaken and undo one another by forging Alliances and counter Alliances and by expanding their respective spheres of influences and interests in as many parts of the world as they could, depending on the strategic importance of the areas they wished to include into their spheres of influences¹². (Ref.....) At the heart of ‘Cold War’ lay the U.S. fear vis-à-vis the

¹¹ Bruce Riedel, *Avoiding Armageddon; America, India and Pakistan to the brink and back*, 42- 43

¹² Cold War, Encyclopadaea Britannica, available at <https://www.britannica.com/event/cold-war>, (accessed on July 26, 2016)

aggressive expansion of Soviet Communism. Overawed by this fear of what George Kenan referred to as the “specter of Communism; the United States responded by devising what came to be known as the policy of “Containment of Communism” “Containment of communism became the guiding principle of American foreign Policy and the U.S. grounded its international engagement on the principle of “Containment of communism’ throughout the cold war from 1945 to 1989¹³. President Harry Truman Sought to concretize the “Containment Doctrine” by advocating ‘Truman Doctrine’ with a view ‘to support free peoples resisting Communist Subversion and aggression’, and ‘Marshal Plan’ to rebuild Western Europe with a view to render it irrelevant to Communist attraction¹⁴. Truman was also instrumental in creating NATO and initiating U.S. alliances with Japan, Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific for promoting containment.¹⁵

Cold war in South Asia and the U.S engagements in the early phase:

Initially cold war remained confined to Europe, “where the first major confrontation of cold war took place over Berlin in 1948”. To a lesser extent, the cold war also spread to Middle East during its initial years. But South Asia remained outside the domain of cold war for a brief period until the fall of China to Communists under Mao Zedong in 1949 and the breaking out of war between China backed North Korea and South Korea in 1950. The two events i.e. the fall of China to communist in 1949 and the Korean War of 1950 raised alarms in the United States vis-a-via the spread of communism to Asia¹⁶. The establishment of Communist government in China, in particular, hastened the necessity of Super-powers extending their influence to the sub-continent of India. As a matter of fact the U.S. sought to strengthen its relations with both India and Pakistan – “the two states whose combined population and resources could nearly match those of China” – to

¹³ John Dambrel, *America in the 1990s searching for purpose*, in Michael Cox and Dog Stokes *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 2nd Edt; Oxford University Press, 2012, p.82

¹⁴ Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, Palgrave,

¹⁵ Bruce Riedel, *Avoiding Armageddon; America, India and Pakistan to the brink and back*, 48

¹⁶ John Baylis, Steve Smith and Owens Patricia(ed) *Globalization of World Politics*, p.



counterweight the latter¹⁷. Thus, the United States involvement in India and Pakistan was conditioned by its global strategy to contain the spread of communism. The innate strategic importance of India and Pakistan had hardly any role in enticing the United States to search for forgoing ties with India and Pakistan. Nevertheless, for the first five years that followed partition of British India, the United States, relationship with both India and Pakistan got off to a reasonably positive start¹⁸. But as soon as cold war settled in the Sub-continent India refused to be a part of any alliance that emanated from cold war calculations. The partition had left India with an 'abiding distaste for power politics and it had infused a determination into the ranks of Indian-nationalist leaders to adhere to an independently framed foreign policy that focused on local and developmental aspirations of India. The policy of non-alignment and neutrality was primarily the outcome of this distaste. On the other hand, partition left Pakistan a weaker and more vulnerable state, more often in bitter rivalry with larger India and therefore, it was in need of an 'alliance or partner' to counter balance Indian preponderance¹⁹. As a matter of fact, Pakistani leaders had from the very beginning adduced confidence in forging ties with the United States and the West to mitigate Pakistan's vulnerability vis-à-vis India. Jinnah had said, "Pakistan is a democracy and communism does not flourish in the govt. of Islam. It is clear, therefore, that our interest lies more with great democratic countries namely United Kingdom and the United States of America, rather than with Russia"²⁰. In Oct. 1949 J.L. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India visited USA on the invitation of President Harry Truman. During this visit his views on 'Foreign Affairs' and his ambivalence towards the U.S. Foreign Policy did not impress the Americans. Moreover his suggestion that the West should be more reasonable in dealing with Russians and should recognize the communist China" did not go well with the Americans²¹.

¹⁷R.C.Gupta, *U.S. Policy towards India and Pakistan*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi 1977, p-2.

¹⁸Harold A. Gould, in *Making of U.S. Foreign Policy*, P. 104

¹⁹Bruce Ridell, *Avoiding Armageddon*, P. 28

²⁰Minutes of Cabinet discussion, September 9, 1947, 845 FOO/9-247 DSR, NA, Quoted in Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000; Disenchanted Allies*, Oxford University Press, (2001), p. 20

²¹Dennis Kux, *Estranged Democracies*; P. 70

During the summer of 1950, Pakistan's first elected Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was also invited to the U.S. for an official visit. In contrast to Nehru the Pakistan P.M. made an excellent impression by unequivocally voicing his country's support for U.S. foreign policy. At the same time he urged the U.S. to provide military assistance of Pakistan. Though there was no immediate payoff for the Pakistani, the Korean war which started on 25th June 1950, when Liaquat was still in America spurred American interest in containing the Soviet threat through a chain of Security alliances, involving Pakistan as well"²²

Pakistan America Military Alliance and its Repercussions

Liaquat's visit convinced U.S. policy makers that Pakistan could be a reliable ally in South Asia for the pursuit of the US interests in the region. Consequently the U.S. Policy towards Pakistan was formally launched during the Presidency of D. Eisenhower in May 1954, when the two countries signed "Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement". Pakistan went on to join SEATO in 1954, and Baghdad Pact, in 1955, later known as Central Treaty organization (CENTO 1958). By signing these alliance, Pakistan, the "most allied ally" provided a critical South Asian link in a global chain of alliances stretching from Norway to Japan and encircling the Soviet Union.²³ Under Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement, U.S. provided over \$ 900 million worth of Military equipment to Pakistan²⁴. The inclusion of Pakistan into a security alliance with the U.S. had been a military and intelligence priority of the U.S. at least since 1948 owing to its contagious borders with the Soviet Union and its proximity to Persian Gulf. These two strategic considerations of Pakistan- its contagious borders with Soviet Union & its proximity to Persian Gulf -were considered impeccably useful for serving as U.S. bases and for defending the vital oil routes²⁵. However, the attempt to forge a strategic relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan did not translate into an enduring one because it was the two countries sought to achieve diametrically opposed goals from the alliance. "From the U.S. point of view, a Pakistan Alliance was intended to

²² Ibid, p. 84

²³ Bruce Ridell, P.55.

²⁴MDAA, 1954 by Tariq Ali, available at History Pak.com/mutual-defe-Asst-Agra-1954/accessed on 19.04.2015

²⁵Farzana Khan, *Making Sense of Pakistan*, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd. U.K., (2009) P.192



exclude Soviet Power and influence from the sub-continent, prevent intra-regional conflicts (primarily over Kashmir) and promote economic growth in the sub-continent through market economy. From the Pakistan point of view, the Alliance was perceived as means to strength Pakistan's military capacity vis-à-vis India, enhance international diplomatic support for its claims on Kashmir and to stabilize the authoritarian political system which the feudal land lords/ British trained officer corps/ bureaucratic elite were busily attempting to establish by systematically undermining the initial attempts made by Muhammad Ali Jinnah to create some form of broadly representative democracy in Pakistan²⁶. The tension that naturally stemmed from the pursuit of divergent goals by the two countries from the Alliance haunted the two for decades.²⁷ The Alliance reflected a lack of regional expertise and historical depth behind the Eisenhower administration and it seriously dented U.S. policy expectations in South Asia. The Americans failed to decipher that the actual regional threat in South Asia was not communism but a contemporary manifestation of a centuries old pattern of ethno religious enmity²⁸. Secondly, the U.S. underestimated the effects that the alliance was likely to have on Indo-American relations even though the U.S. was looking to build stronger ties with a big democratic India since the former's independence. Thirdly, the steady militarization of Pakistan left India with no choice but to approach Soviet Union in strategic terms to offset American support for Pakistan. This in the course of time enabled the Soviet Union to penetrate the region and influence the outcome of events there²⁹. Fourthly, 'the militarized grand strategy' that was implemented in South Asia at a time when democratic process in Pakistan was being marred by the military-bureaucratic-landlord nexus, made the U.S. an enabler and a facilitator in the process of political perversion that was taking place. Practically every measure that American officials took or failed to take, from 1951-1969 strengthened and legitimized the anti-democratic machinations of these classes³⁰. Even within the official family misgiving about the Pakistan relationship eventually surfaced and affected President Eisenhower himself. When Governor General Ghulam Mohammad sacked Prime Minister Nizamuddin in 1951 and

arbitrarily dissolved the constituent Assembly the following year, it set off alarm bells. The U.S. voiced objections to these measures but could not muster the courage to overcome the compulsion of treating the emerging U.S. Pakistan alliance as a Crown Jewel in its 'southern tier strategy' for protecting the Middle East and South Asia from Soviet encroachment.³¹ President Iskander Mirza and Defence Minister Ayub Khan's coup d'état in 1958 brought to power the man who embodied all of the illusions that dogged and eventually doomed the U.S. Pakistan Alliance. Within three months after the coup took place, Ayub had forced Mirza out of office and assumed complete control of the country. Later as McMohan contends "Ayub Khan's use of American Military equipment in 1965 to attack India dealt a death blow to whatever chances were left to the U.S. to play an impartial and constructive role in South Asian affairs. The event demonstrated American's failure to control the forces it had unleashed in the subcontinent. According to him it was a "water shed event in the history of American relations with the Indian Sub-continent. The U.S. condemnation of Pakistan attack and the corresponding embargo of Arms shipments shocked Pakistan's leaders into a realization that the purpose for which they had entered the alliance with the U.S. had essentially failed to fulfill their expectation. Despite all of the substantive benefits that had accrued to Pakistan from this relationship, the Pakistani officials began to look elsewhere for Political succor. The attack itself convinced the Indian leaders that they had been right all along about the U.S. The outcome of this event so badly shook the U.S. policy makers; however, that essentially they capitulated to it, stepped aside and gave the Russians free reign to broker a peace agreement at Tashkent³². Thus nearly twenty years of U.S. involvement in sub-continent to check the Soviet encroachment had failed.

II. Conclusion:

South Asia could not remain unaffected by the Cold War rivalry of the U.S and the USSR despite India's bold attempt to negate its influence in the region with the pursuit of a non-alignment policy in its foreign relations. Pakistan's quest for acquiring a military parity with India motivated its leaders to join the U.S led western camp in the hope of expanding its military wherewithal. This hasty decision of Pakistan to ally with the U.S brought

²⁶ Making of U.S. Foreign Policy P. 113

²⁷ Bruce Ridel, P.41

²⁸ The South Asian Story P. 35

²⁹ Ibid, p .38

³⁰ Dennis Kux, p.55

³¹ Making of U.S. Foreign Policy P.126

³² Ibid; P. 128



about a fundamental change in the geopolitical landscape of the region. The animosity between India and Pakistan that was triggered by the partition of India, now aggravated to new levels. Militarization and Arms procurements conveniently figured as the topmost priorities of the two nations while the most impending cause of socio-economic development of the region was firmly relegated to background. The U.S engagements in South Asia were more often based on its own geopolitical gains to the utter neglect of the intricacies of this region. Had Washington's policies towards South Asia given a sufficient space to the inherent interests and intricacies of this region, the precariously placed South Asia might have unfolded into a more stable region.