

U.S. Arms Aid to Pakistan and Indo-U.S. Relations

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I

In terms of political and strategic potential, South Asia has all the required characteristics to maintain its autonomy in the global sphere. From strategic point of view, the locational advantage of South Asia is quite favourable – clearly defined by natural boundaries and removed from the line of East-West hostilities. Availability of natural resources is even an added advantage.

Coming to South Asian politics, the political acumen of the major South Asian actors in maintaining their relations with the major power patrons has been noteworthy. Both the major actors in the region (India & Pakistan) could develop relations with the then super powers, without sacrificing their national interest. Pakistan, while developing relations with United States, carefully avoided intense involvement in the super power rivalry; India, despite her closeness to Soviet Union maintained necessary distance from it through its policy of nonalignment.

However, inspite of the ability of the South Asian system to maintain relative autonomy, the influence of external forces could not be checked. Both the super powers, during the Cold war, sought to influence the politics of the South Asian region with their global policy priorities; the Americans wanted to prevent the absorption of the region into the Communist fold while the professed Soviet intention was of “internationalizing communism”. The result had been —throughout these decades —a running conflict between the independent dynamics of regional politics and the strategic manouvers of the Super powers. The super powers with their long-drawn strategy, alternated between indifference and conflict management, partisan involvement and exasperation, and the regional powers oscillated between dependence and independence from outside powers[1].

Immediately after the independence of the sub-continent from the colonial yoke, both the super powers prepared themselves to fill in the vaccum created by the withdrawal of the colonial power and thus establish their control over the region. While pursuing their global strategy, the regional interests and aspirations of the regional powers were pushed to the background. The emergence of communist China in 1949 doubly cautioned America about the possibility of losing the region to the Communists, which, it thought, would create hurdles in the way of achieving its interest in the Middle East.

Hence, keeping with its ‘containment policy’ and “doctrine of collective security”, United States sponsored a chain of security alliances on the periphery of the communist world. In utter disregard to the concern of the regional actors and by putting a premium on the pursuance of its global or grand strategic objectives, America came forward to placate all those regional actors who were

willing to cooperate in its avowed aim of checking the spread of communism. While the entry of superpowers into the region furthered their interests even to the detriment of the region, it however, cannot be denied that they were invited to the region by the regional powers themselves[2].

II

U.S. Aid to Pakistan

Following the partition of the subcontinent, America offered India to join in its mission of containment. The refusal of the same by the latter, which followed the policy of nonalignment, obviously hurt America, which, as an alternative, subsequently roped in Pakistan.[4] Washington's decision to arm Pakistan as a part of its "grand design" to contain the spread of communist forces was clearly spelt out in its South Asia Policy in 1954. This was the major turning point in Indo-US relations[5]. There have been complications, intensive and more obvious at particular periods, notably in the halcyon years of the Pak-American Military alliance of 1959; the Sino-US rapprochement in early 1970s and Indo-Pak war of 1971, when the Nixon Administration dispatched an aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal at the height of the third Indo-Pakistan War. All these contributed towards estranged Indo-US relations on one hand and cemented Indo-Soviet ties on the other[6].

The chilling impact of the Cold War was clearly felt in the South Asian region in 1954 when Pakistan and America entered into the mutual Defence Assistance Agreement. India lodged strong protest against the decision of the Eisenhower Administration to supply arms to Pakistan as per the agreement, on the ground that India would be the victim of these arms and there would be acceleration of arms race in the region. Though Eisenhower assured that the military aid to Pakistan was not to be used against India, he, however, could not dispel the Indian apprehension. The Indo-US relations further deteriorated when Pakistan joined the American sponsored SEATO & CENTO and signed the bilateral defence agreement on 5 March 1959. It thus became a member of full-fledged military alliance led by America.

Indian suspicion regarding the misuse of American arms aid got confirmed during both 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars. India protested in strong terms to the United States about the use of American arms against India, reminding it about the earlier assurances of Eisenhower. The Johnson Administration, as a result, cut off its aid to both Pakistan and India. The decision was resented by India as it was treated at par with Pakistan, the aggressor.

The 1970s continued to be a phase of low-key relations between India and United States. The controversial despatch of "Enterprise" during the Indo-Pak war of 1971 was considered a blatant display of intimidation. The Nixonian "tilt" towards Pakistan created an aversion towards the US in the Indian mind[7]. However, in the late seventies, there was some improvement in Indo-US bilateral relations as a result of the reciprocal visits of Morarji Desai and Jimmy Carter; but in no time the relations took a downward slide with the refusal of the United States to supply enriched Uranium to Tarapore Plant violating the treaty of 1963. The downfall of Shah of Iran in 1979, followed by Soviet intervention in Afghanistan later that year induced a sense of failure in the US and as a corrective, the US intensified its containment strategy in the region. During this period the

US was on the look out for a client state, and Pakistan, ruled by a military dictator (General Zia ul Haq) was more than eager to oblige the US in this respect. As a consequence, Pakistan again emerged as a “frontline State” in US strategy. Though the Carter Administration earlier decided to suspend US economic and military aid due to the clandestine efforts of Pakistan to build up nuclear weapons, it had to sanction a \$1.6 billion package of arms aid later, which among other sophisticated arms and appliances included forty F-16 fighter bombers.

President Regan continued the initiative of his predecessor. Exempting Pakistan from the Symington Amendment, he decided in 1986 to increase the military aid from \$3.2 billion in 1981-86 to \$4.02 billion in 1987-93. The irony is that the much-emphasised nuclear nonproliferation principle at that juncture was thrown to the winds. It was an open secret that Pakistan had acquired nuclear capabilities by then. The public statement by the nuclear scientist of Pakistan, Dr. Abdul Qadeer, about the nuclear capability of his country to build a weapon within two years was not taken note of[8]. Even after the information of the American intelligence and arrogant admissions by Pakistan’s high officials, Regan Administration went ahead with the aid package.

With the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US pressure on Pakistan to give up its nuclear programme increased, and the Bush Administration linked arms aid to nuclear nonproliferation. As a result, \$600 million worth of arms and economic aid for 1991-92 were cancelled. However, in September 1995, the United States Senate relaxed the Pressler’ Amendment that banned aid to any country engaged in nuclear proliferation and terrorism. The clearance Pakistan got from the American Senate through the Brown Amendment in 1995 is no doubt a reward for Pakistan’s diplomacy. It nevertheless created many holes in the fabric of growing Indo-US relations.

III

Indian Concerns

India has good reasons to be concerned about the arms package to Pakistan. The argument stands valid on the ground that the erstwhile communist threat has disappeared after the end of the cold war with the disintegration of USSR and craze of the successor Russian leadership for liberalising the economy on the model of Western Capitalism. Secondly, the Afghan problem does not have the same consideration after the dismemberment of USSR. Hence, the Indian argument is that when there is conclusive information regarding Pakistan’s nuclear capability, the US being the votary of nuclear nonproliferation, should not have relaxed the Pressler restrictions.

India is doubly concerned about the fact that whenever there has been supply of sophisticated arms through aid package to Pakistan, there were misadventures by Pakistan against India. One learns from history, that the first US military aid to Pakistan encouraged Ayub Khan to launch “operation Gibraltar” which escalated into the 1965 war against India. In 1969-70, the US again supplied arms to Pakistan. This time the military aid prompted Gen. Yahya Khan to unleash genocide in the erstwhile East Pakistan culminating in the 1971 war[9].

Now again the US has approved the new military package inducting massive military equipment into Pakistan’s arsenal, which may encourage Islamabad to indulge in another misadventure

against India. The United States may justify its supply of arms to Pakistan as a part of its “strategic interests”. As such, the US pressures on India not to induct the indigenously built 150 kms range battlefield missiles like Prithvi and Agni into her defence forces, reveal the contradictions in the US policy towards the region.

In concluding his book *India and the United States*, Dennis Kux observes that the past fifty years have witnessed a frequently estranged relationship with brief intermillent periods of sharper hostility and the root causes of this are the diverging national security interests[10].

However, in recent years, Washington and New Delhi have initiated defence cooperation under the “kicklighter proposals” in 1991 and the relations in the field of defence further improved with US Defence Secretary Perry’s visit to India in January 1995. Needless to say, that the initiatives are “littered with blocks and shadowed by the past.”[11] Nevertheless, for its part, Washington has revised its previous assessment of India as a Soviet ally and has started viewing it as an independent power in Asia. This changed perception has been possible due to the changed global scenario and stimulated by US strategic planners who have started feeling that a co-operative relationship with a regional power like India could be mutually beneficial in the long run.

IV

In the past, Indo-US relations have always been linked to the Pak-US military alliance and US arms aid to Pakistan. This has created suspicion and sometimes antagonism between the two. Further, policy of the American “Containment” leading to liberal arms aid to Pakistan not only accelerated arms race in the region but also encouraged Pakistan to indulge in two futile armed aggressions against India in 1965 and 1971. The US arms aid on the other hand sharpened the differences between India and America during the Cold War era and even after it.

However, the changing power equations during the post cold war period have changed the dimensions of security. Security is no longer viewed in military terms alone. Economic competition and the urge to expand space for national business in the global economy has occupied the central stage. Economic considerations have become more important in this over dependent world order.

Given India’s tense relation with the two neighbours—Pakistan (having the proven nuclear capabilities) and China (the giant rival for leadership in Asia), the withdrawal of Moscow’s security umbrella, the need for capital for investment and the search for sophisticated technology, India has to develop close links with the West and especially with USA. The past should not overshadow the future. Further, the end of Cold War has opened up new vistas for India and it is poised to emerge in the new era as a far more important influential power in the Indian ocean region. India is all set to rise to the occasion and thus it is showing increasing concern in the equally major global issues and is getting ready to take up a new role. With its geo-strategic location coupled with its vast under-exploited market, India has all the necessary potential to become a major power in the immediate future.

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