

AMERICA'S MOMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

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America's moment in South Asia may be drawing to a close, based on two entirely different factors. Firstly, the worsening situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and the inconclusive nature of the global war against terror is preventing the Bush administration from focusing on South Asia. Secondly, developments in India and Pakistan suggest the two countries are less likely to be seeking an American solution to resolving their conflict.

With his job approval rating now down to 41 percent, President George Bush is fighting for his political life in a tough re-election campaign that is getting dirtier by the day. Thus far, 800 US service personnel have been killed in Iraq and more than 4,500 wounded. Wartime expenditures continue to mount and the US House and Senate are increasingly reluctant to hand a blank check to the Bush administration all in the name of fighting terror. Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, was grilled extensively on the Hill when he appeared to ask for an extra \$25 billion in funding for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Under pressure, he was even unable to recall the number of American uniformed personnel who had been killed in Iraq.

The Bush administration's Iraq policy is under increasing attack from a slew of ex-military stalwarts, such as Marine General Anthony Zinni, former head of US Central Command. Zinni, a Republican who was the Bush administration's emissary to the Middle East, has just released a book, *Battle Ready*, with veteran military writer Tom Clancy. Zinni takes the administration to task for fighting a war that was completely unnecessary, and then for fighting it with the wrong strategy. He places the blame squarely on the civilians who are running the Pentagon, from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on down.

Not surprisingly, the air has gone out of Washington's South Asia policy. Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution quotes an unnamed government official as telling him, "We have a Pakistan policy and an Afghanistan policy, but as far as India is concerned, I don't think we'll have time to spare for the Indians." Of course, the administration faces a major challenge in developing links with the Congress party in India. Dealing with the Congress, which has some strong anti-American voices among potential cabinet appointees, could come as a culture shock to Washington, says Cohen.

The Congress' Common Minimum Programme (CMP) seeks to restore a sense of balance in Indian foreign policy by stressing that India's strategic interests are better served by striving for a multi-polar world rather than identifying with the unilateralism of the Bush administration. The language and tone of the foreign policy section is nuanced, but the shifts in emphasis are unmistakable. Relations with the US are given the importance they deserve - the CMP commits the new government to pursuing "closer engagement" with Washington - but the document promises that "the independence of India's foreign policy position on all regional and global issues" will be maintained.

It is evident that the Manmohan Singh government is likely to be far less enthusiastic than the Vajpayee government about certain US programmes - like missile defence or the Proliferation Security Initiative - since it regards them as having the potential for destabilising the world.

Seeking to counter the impression that Washington has lost New Delhi, White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan quipped recently, "We have strong relations with India, and the President expects that going forward, working with Prime Minister Singh, we will continue to have a dialogue to move forward on reducing tensions in the region."

US officials insist that during the five-year-long BJP era, they maintained contact with the Congress and are well placed to engage the Singh government. However, Husain Haqqani, currently a visiting fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, and a former Pakistani ambassador to Sri Lanka, challenges this view. Haqqani believes the Bush team was “too invested in personal relations with the BJP leaders and many of them have not interacted at a very high level” with Congress leaders. He says the business community and India’s civil bureaucracy will ensure US-India economic relations continue to boom but political ties “will take some time to rebuild.”

A similar view is put forth by Ashley Tellis, also of Carnegie and a long-time analyst at the RAND Corporation who also served as adviser to former US ambassador Robert Blackwill in New Delhi. Tellis says there is a growing fissure in Congress between old-style traditionalists with a “nonaligned view of the world” and “new pragmatists” who recognise that India needs strong relations with the US. He takes the view that through a process of trial and error, “US-India relations will come closer to where the BJP left them when it left office, but it is going to be a long learning curve.”

For entirely different reasons, US influence in Pakistan is also waning. Pakistani liberals are unhappy at Washington’s continuing support for an increasingly repressive military dictatorship in Islamabad, while it continues to push for democratic reform in war-torn Kabul and Baghdad. They are unhappy at Musharraf’s about-face on his commitment to retire from the army in December this year and are incensed at reports of abuse coming out of US prison facilities worldwide.

These concerns are highlighted in a recent Amnesty International report. The highly respected organisation says, “The US government, as the dominant player on the world stage, simply must right its wrongs or it will be too late to regain the trust of its allies and too late to exercise moral persuasion on the world stage. The Bush administration has lost its moral compass at a time when [human rights] violations are rising around the globe.”

Pakistani conservatives are not happy with Musharraf for his continued pursuit of policies that only appear to be doing Washington’s bidding, such as the failed military operation in Wana. Like the liberals, they too are incensed at Washington’s treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, Washington’s failure to be an honest broker between the Israelis and the Palestinians serves to remind them that America does not really have Pakistan’s true interest at heart.

It may be too late for the Bush administration to regain influence in South Asia. In a sign of its priorities, Robert Blackwill, the former US ambassador to New Delhi and a close confidante of President Bush, is in Baghdad these days, helping to form the new interim government. Things may change if and when a Kerry administration takes over in Washington.

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