

## **UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY IN SOUTH ASIA**

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This is a brief review of United States Foreign Policy in South Asia. Its purpose is to set out a structure of the main lines of such policy and to trace the different phases of policy. American foreign policy is not made only in the White House or the State Department inner offices. In a democratic society like the United States, policy reflects the congressional views, public opinion, business interests, NGO views etc. In a democratic system many persons have something to say about foreign policy and Congress listens carefully to these views. The Executive of the Government also has many organizations concerned with foreign policy. Relations between states are increasingly very complex affairs. However, our focus here is not on the complex detail but the main direction of policy, largely driven by national security concerns.

There are numerous ways to structure the motivations of foreign policy. The approach used here is a straightforward one to differentiate between the “realist” and the “liberal” views of foreign policy. By “realist” I mean policy based on a short run, self-evident expression of interest, particularly with respect to national security. The realist’s view is more inclined to use military power, while less concerned with the quality of association with other countries. The liberal view finds merit in long term objectives and in the case of the United States, extends support to the spreading of American political values of democracy and human rights to other countries. The realist’s view is that foreign policy must further, in the short run, the interest of the nation in dealings with other nations. The emphasis is on the short run since prediction is so difficult. The liberal stance, when a nation takes on a role of promoting vaguer, more long run objectives, is based usually on dominance seeking to achieve objectives that are not immediately in the interest of the nation. For example, the UK in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in maintaining a balance among European powers to limit war; the Soviet Union in the post World War II period spreading communist ideology as the right way to organize society; Rome for several hundred years after the establishment of the Empire and the Chinese Kingdom at various periods over the past thousand years in both cases to maintain an Empire with internal peace and harmony while holding the barbarians at the

wall. During the 1990s United States foreign policy followed a strong liberal position moving away from the prior cold war realist emphasis. These two are not exclusive and in the case of the United States both are at work in the world and in South Asia. Furthermore, there is no idea that liberal foreign policy is not based on an interpretation of self interest and objectives that may or may not be good ones. Liberal objectives are characterized by a wider application over several countries, and a longer run view of what might happen. Two examples come to mind: the current U.S. effort to stop human trafficking and the British 19<sup>th</sup> century effort to stop the slave trade. Stopping the international trafficking in people is an objective that presumably benefits many nations, but is not really a critical national security issue for the United States. Most such trafficking does not involve the United States. Britain's stoppage of the slave trade was driven by a liberal view of morality and responsibility that extended far beyond a narrow realist view. The tension between realist based and liberal based objectives is a continuing theme in foreign policy debates in the United States.

One good but startling example of the 'realistic' vs. the 'liberal' is changing American policy towards Iraq in the 1980s and the 1990s. During the 1980s Iran and Iraq fought a long bitter war. Iran was the larger and more powerful country and once Iraq failed to win in its initial attack the position turned and Iran began to gain the upper hand. The United States realpolitik view was to encourage the two to fight to a stalemate. Hence the United States provided help to Iraq to balance the conflict. The continuation of the war resulted in wearing down both sides, forced them to sell oil to finance the war, and kept Iran from becoming a dominant power in the Middle East. There are no democratic or human rights objectives here. Instead, we have a hardheaded assessment of US interests. Now one may disagree with that assessment but for the realist you must argue in their framework. The realist view also resulted in holding back from the complete destruction of the Iraq army in 1991, again to insure Iraq could stand up to Iran.

During the 1990s the USA developed a liberal policy towards Iraq, culminating in a long run humanitarian view that aimed at a change in regime to improve the life of the Iraqi people! Iraqi oil sales were restricted raising the price of oil! There is no clear realist approach here. Indeed a realist argument might have been to support Iraq in return for removing its potential threat to Kuwait, the Gulf States, and Saudi

Arabia and holding down the oil price. Realists are quite willing to work with and support very nasty people. This liberal policy continues in 2003. The real justification for going to war is to free the Iraqi people from a terrible dictatorship. The concern with “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq is an illusion. The realist may well argue that it is none of the USA’s business what kind of Government rules in Baghdad. Indeed we may see secular Iraq as a better long term ally than fundamentalist Saudi Arabia or Iran in the war against terrorism.

Foreign policy objectives are usually vaguely defined. Objectives are not meant to be truly measurable since sensible, responsible diplomats do not really want precise evaluation of matters much of which is beyond their control. Thus “how democratic is a society?” is not simple to answer. Rather, foreign policy positions provide broad perspectives and directions that are formulated to be used as guidelines. So long as there is no dramatic change in the international environment, this works. But when dramatic unexpected events occur, then this formal policy is of limited relevance. We divide post WW II American policy towards South Asia into three phases: Pre 1990, the 1990s, and post Sept 11. There are rather dramatic swings from one phase to the next. We review these and then return to the realist-liberal dilemma.

### **Pre 1990**

South Asia’s role in American foreign policy has been quite complex. The main themes, until 1990’s, were dominated by the cold war. We summarize these briefly by country. These are perhaps rarely stated so sharply but this represents what really happened. South Asia’s importance in the cold war was largely centered in Afghanistan but every country was involved to some extent.

South Asia presented surprising choices to the United States. The evolution of the cold war along the borders of the communist Eurasian countries can be summarized as follows: After World War II the Soviet Union’s expansionary policies in Eastern Europe and Iran, followed by the Korean war, led the United States to develop an alliance system to “contain” the expansion of the communist states. While the European conflicts quickly became political and then with the Western European countries firmly anti-communist, a stalemate emerged. The conflicts shifted elsewhere. Much of the effort of communism was built on