

Indo-US ties: Important, not urgent

25 Nov 2009, 0502 hrs IST, Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar, ET Bureau

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While the US needs Pakistan to target the Taliban and China to protect the dollar and sustain recovery in the short term, it sees India as a long-term ally against Islamic terror and an ambitious China, says Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

After reading the McChrystal Report on the Afghanistan issue and watching President Obama's visit to China, dismayed observers complain that the US views Pakistan and China as more important partners than India.

The truth is more complex. There is certainly a strong urgency to US relations with Pakistan and China right now. By contrast, ties with India are important, but not urgent. This raises short-term worries, yet bodes well for the future.

US casualties in Afghanistan are rising, and the Taliban looks stronger than ever. The US urgently needs Pakistani help in Afghanistan. It is getting a mixture of help and sabotage.

Pakistan is cracking down on the Pakistani Taliban, and this diminishes the urgent threat from the Afghan Taliban too. However, the US knows that Pakistan would like to have the Taliban back in Afghanistan eventually, which is why it gives the Afghan Taliban leadership protection to stay in Quetta.

The US lives with this manifest duplicity since it urgently needs at least partial cooperation from Pakistan. Yet, Pakistan's unreliability as a long-term ally is well understood in Washington. The latest Pew Global Attitudes report shows that only 22% of Pakistanis think the US takes their interests into account when making foreign policy decisions, essentially unchanged from 21% since 2007.

Fully 64% of the Pakistani public regards the US as an enemy, while only 9% views it as a partner. So, while the US-Pakistan partnership has an urgent short-term basis, its longer-term prospects are poor, and both sides know it.

A recent report of General McChrystal, US military commander in Afghanistan, has one section that has raised concerns in India. This states that "increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani counter-measures".