Estrangement seems to be the natural pattern and state of relations between the United States and India with the past decade of engagement, seemingly apparent in 2014 as an aberration, largely so, because the United States reduced it to a mercenary relationship concentrating on defence deals and letting US geopolitical expediency predominate its prism on India.

“United States-India Strategic Partnership: The Advent of the Inevitable” was the heading of my paper in 2001 exuberantly written buoyed by elated optimism as one then believed that the United States had finally turned the corner in a realistic appraisal of India’s true geopolitical worth in relation to United States continued embedment in Asia.

However that euphoria lasted for the first few years only as post 9/11 events brought about a relapse and reversions to its hyphenated South Asian foreign policy. The US-India Nuclear Deal was a brief encouraging interlude but that too fizzled out soon due to non-materialisation of heightened expectations from both sides.

Rhetorical flourishes at the official levels in both the United States and India could not blur the optics that US-India Strategic Partnership was on the down slide in the second half of the last decade and this evolving phenomenon stood reflected in a number of my Papers US-India relations thereafter.

Once again “estrangement” in US-India relations was creeping in with US displeasure noticeable when India awarded the contract for 126 Fighter Aircraft to France despite high-voltage canvassing by US dignitaries.
India’s follow-up gestures of awarding 10 billion transport aircraft and helicopters to mollify US bruised mercenary feelings failed to arrest the downslide in relations. More so, because concurrently and increasingly noticeable at this time was that the United States policy primacies once again reverted and rested more on Pakistan and China.

It was for nothing that the United States had advocated that China could undertake the responsibility of ‘policing’ South Asia and later seemed to be caving in to China’s advocacy of a new bipolar global order resting on US and China.

Estrangement in US-India relations came to the fore with the recent Khobargade diplomatic harassment and embarrassment incident which enraged Indian public opinion. But the Khobargade incident was not the sole case generating US-India estrangement. It was only the “tipping point” where the downslide in US-India relations which had set in four to five years earlier came into the public domain more forcefully.

Reviewing the past decade of US-India relations in which two different political dispensations in power in New Delhi invested so heavily, what emerges is that the United States by the same token was niggardly in a matching strategic investment on India.

Out of the two Indian political dispensations in power in New Delhi the present Prime Minister Dr Man Mohan Singh would be the most disappointed as he made a massive personal investment in US-India relations to the extent of a rare staking of his premiership on the successful culmination of the US-India Nuclear Deal.

Such was the unwarranted primacy given by the present Indian Government to United States strategic sensitivities in Indian policy formulations that it led to many strategic and political analysts charging that India had “outsourced” its foreign policy conduct to Washington.

There was much truth in the above when India’s foreign policy of appeasement towards Pakistan’s military regime and thereafter factoring-in that the Pakistan Army Chief General Kayani was United States poster-boy in Pakistan under a civilian regime, and that India needed to continue to defer to the same appeasement under US pressures.

Same was the case with China where Indian foreign policy was of even greater appeasement as by the second half of the last decade India ruefully realised that the United States was no “countervailing power” against China which was implicit in the forging of the US-India Strategic Partnership. India resultantly had to tone down its firmness in facing China strongly due to its woefully neglected war-preparedness.

The key to a substantial US-India Strategic Partnership would have been a strong set of “strategic convergences” on Asian and South Asian security and stability. Regrettably, that is not visible or better still said to be absent, as in US strategic perceptions China and Pakistan figure higher than India in terms of utility to US strategic interests.

A media report yesterday reports that the United States in discussions with India remains silent when China is drawn into discussions as it
believes that US-China relations are on a different footing. What are the underlying motives? Whatever they may be the fact is that it raises suspicions in US intentions on a lasting strategic partnership with India.

The US differs widely in perceptions and strategic convergences with India over Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and now Bangladesh unmindful of the fact that India has a natural geopolitical predominance in South Asia.

Further afield in terms of the Asian security environment, the United States is equally unmindful of India’s strategic sensitivities thereby negating the very essence of a vibrant US-India Strategic Partnership.

Sadly, the last decade witnessed India under the present Government jettisoning its privileged strategic relationship with Iran under US Administration and US Congress pressures without the United States even making a semblance of matching revision of US foreign policy primacies on China and Pakistan, in which the United States triangular relationship of the aforesaid three impinges on India’s national security.

In the economic and trade relations many differences and irritants exist between United States and India and there is constant complaining from the American side at multiple levels.

One wonders how many have noticed that when US officials talk about the US-India Strategic Partnership the emphasis is on improving defence-to-defence relations and not on improvement of political relations or convergences on strategic and security issues.

Obviously, the above arises from US mercenary instincts to carve a defence sales market out of the sizeable defence purchases hat India proposes to do so in the next decade. But then India also needs to factor-in that the United States is not a reliable supplier of weapons and defence equipment to India in light of the past multiple sanctions and embargoes it has imposed on India. India regrettably has yet to learn that arms orders to the United States should be contingent on extraction of geopolitical concessions from the United States as a ‘quid pro quo’.

In 2014 the US-India Strategic Partnership appears frayed and what I wrote in a SAAG Paper sometime back so entitled that the “US-India Strategic Partnership: Neither Strategic Nor a Partnership” holds good.

Can the US-India Strategic Partnership be retrieved and restored to its earlier original flavour? I am afraid the answer to the preceding is a big NO.

The simple reason being that the United States Administration under any political dispensation is prone to sub-serve its foreign policies towards India and Japan also, to US political and strategic expediencies dominating its China-policy approaches. In the process it disregards the strategic sensitivities and security concerns of the two main Asian power contenders, namely, India and Japan at the expense of its
China policy.

The major problem in US foreign policy conduct, and which I emphasised in my SAAG Papers at the time of the controversial passage of the US-India Nuclear Deal was that the US Congress and its Administrations have yet to come out of their Cold War fixations and learn to deal with major Asian powers democracies like India and Japan with "strategic equitability" as it practises towards China.

Contextually, not much optimism is discernible on the horizon that the swing-back of even normal US & India relations as opposed to the concept of US-India Strategic Partnership is possible in the foreseeable future.

US & India relations seem destined for "Estrangement" for the long haul.

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