

Is US's Nepal policy Indo-centric?

A recent write-up by Bipin Adhikari in the Spotlight weekly was provocatively entitled — U.S. and South Asia: Seeing Through The Indian Window.

That article had focused on a recent Asia Society report on South Asia, following a sponsored visit by a number of prominent American public figures to some of the countries in the region, including Nepal, several months ago.

In his piece, Adhikari, a constitutional lawyer, concluded that the Asia Society Study Mission report "points at the possibility of maintaining status quo regarding what is called 'the Indian hegemony in South Asia.'"

BEG TO DIFFER: Indeed, Adhikari's main thrust appeared to be that "the United States does not want to support the cause of these (small South Asian) countries who are claiming unfair deal by India in every aspect of their concern."

He then went on to say: "U.S. policy as we understand here ignored the hassles between mighty India and these small countries and appears determined not to touch any issue...at the cost of India."

With regard to the Asia Society document, Adhikari disclosed with an obvious sense of irritation if not frustration: "The report which argues to 'avoid 'tilts' in U.S. dealings with South Asia', also instructs it to give 'due recognition to the size and potential of India in the region and beyond.'"

Since this columnist has not had the benefit of perusing through the Asia Society report, obviously he cannot comment on its contents though he did briefly interact with Asia Society Study Mission members during their sojourn in Kathmandu several moons ago.

While freely acknowledging the important difference between an informal group report on South Asia, no matter how distinguished its membership, and official American policy vis-a-vis that region, I must confess considerable sympathy with many of the sentiments that have been expressed by Adhikari.

However, I must also add that from recent public policy statements by high

ranking American officials, as well as in several personal encounters with them, the impression I have gathered is not quite as pessimistic as has been pointed out by Adhikari, specially as far as American policy towards Nepal is concerned:

To establish that such is possibly the case, let me draw your attention, for starters, to how Ms Robin Lynn Raphel, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South Asian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, reacted to my question at a Kathmandu press conference on March 30 asking her whether Washington's viewed Nepal through New Delhi's lens.

NOT AT ALL SO: Raphel's immediate, emphatic response was that Washington's Nepal policy "has nothing to do with India." She had prefaced that pointed answer with a reference to the establishment in 1992 of the Bureau of South Asian Affairs. She then declared that, as with other countries in South Asia, the United States had "warm and cordial" relations with Nepal too.

Significantly, that response was backed not only by her high-visibility visit to the Bhutanese refugee camp in Belgandi in Jhapa a few days earlier but also by her disclosure to the Nepali press corps that, in her meetings with Indian officials prior to her five-day Nepal visit, she had discovered that Delhi "did not take the responsibility" for the movement of Bhutanese refugees to Nepal through Indian territory.

She also made it plain that for her part the United States was well aware that Bhutanese refugees entered Nepalese territory through — and only through — Indian territory.

Scribes present on the occasion had noted that, despite massive publicity accorded to Raphel's visit to India last March, revealingly not a single word had been published in the well endowed Indian media about her having taken up the question of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal with the Indian government.

Since it has become a staple of Indian foreign policy to profess an intriguing

inability to do anything about the Bhutanese refugee problem, despite her very special relations with Bhutan, the import of Raphel's visit to the refugee camp and her disclosure that the United States had taken up the Bhutanese refugee issue in the Indian capital was not lost on the news persons present on the occasion.

In fact, the impression that the United States had finally woken up to her self-arrogated responsibility to prevent human rights abuses the world over was quite pronounced, even in the Bhutanese case where India is perceived as the repressive Thimphu regime's protector or guardian angel.

Incidentally, such a perception was further underlined by American ambassador Sandy Vogelgesang — altogether different from her high-flying predecessor Julia Chang Bloch — who made it a point to visit a Bhutanese refugee camp in Sanischare on May 7, almost immediately after presenting her credentials.

The fact that Vogelgesang's trip was timed only five weeks after the Raphel visit and on the eve of Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's "working visit" to the United States was not lost on diplomatic watchers in Kathmandu. Indeed, even yours faithfully had commented in the People's Review of May 12, thus: "Washington has transmitted a loud and clear signal that cutting the Gordian Knot of the Bhutanese refugee tangle is high on its South Asian agenda."

NOW A BHUTAN TRIP: However, to update ourselves: Raphel, in Kathmandu for 4-days in early October in connection with an "in-house" meeting of US officials and chiefs of mission in South Asia, flew to Thimphu from Kathmandu in what she confirmed to this columnist indeed represented the highest level visit by a U.S. official.

But, even more than that, she disclosed to this and another newsman at a reception that it was "only natural" that she would discuss the Bhutanese refugee issue with the concerned

authorities in Thimphu.

At another similar encounter the following day, the senior State Department official was even more frank. Thus, in response to my query whether she was not concerned that her visit to Bhutan might be taken amiss by a Delhi that considered Bhutan virtually its own backyard, she laughingly remarked that if so that would be unfortunate but would make little difference.

In other words, there has been a sea-change in the U.S.'s position vis-a-vis the Bhutanese situation. And this now apparently includes not being overly concerned about Indian "sensitivities" about treating Bhutan as if no other country save India had any right to maintain contacts with Thimphu.

Raphel's comments on August 11 at a Washington hearing are also worthy of special note as far as determining whether, as Adhikari fears, the U.S. favours "Indian hegemony" in South Asia or not.

Though she did state that Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka must pay close attention to relations with India, she also bluntly remarked: "India, given its sheer size and extensive human and other resources, has a special obligation to ensure that its smaller neighbours feel they are treated fairly."

No less revealing was her observation that water allocation, power generation and refugee flows were among the significant issues between them which called out for resolution sooner rather than later. Clearly, then, neither Washington's policies or priorities in South Asia coincide with Delhi's.

Thus, although Washington places Delhi at the top of the South Asian pecking order — and that's only natural given India's size and population — it does not appear to me that Washington does not view Nepal from Delhi's perspective. Neither, thank the Almighty, would it appear that the United States has accepted that an Indian Monroe Doctrine holds good in South Asia, whatever the Asia Society Study Mission report might have to say.