

Wanted: better South Asia experts for the US

There is an urgent need for better South Asia experts to advise the next US government, says former American diplomat Robin Raphel.

'We used to have experts - thinktanks, students, professionals or diplomats - who could move around and work. Sadly, that's not the case any longer,' said Raphel, former US assistant secretary of state for South Asia.

'One of the tasks of the new US administration will be to rebuild the cadre of South Asia experts,' Raphel told a London conference on India and Pakistan organised by the Tehelka media group.

Raphel was the US administration's point person for South Asia during the first four years of the Clinton presidency and was seen by some Indian lawmakers at the time to be tilting towards Pakistan.

Raphel, who now works for the Washington-based political consultancy firm Cassidy and Associates, told an audience that included distinguished commentators and civil servants from India and Pakistan that Washington needed to 'listen' more.

'We need to listen to local people. Sometimes we don't listen enough,' she said.

Raphel said there was an urgent need to address the lack of 'quality South Asia experts' in the US government.

'We don't have people speaking the languages any longer, particularly Urdu and Pashto,' Raphel told IANS.

'There are two ways to remedy the situation: by training, and by bringing in experts to the US.' But she said 'the security element to working in the government' needed to be overcome before experts could be imported from South Asia to Washington DC.

Raphel made her comments in the context of the broad US strategies towards India and Pakistan.

Regardless of who won the next general election, she said, the US is in a 'long-term relationship' with India. 'It is a strategic and broad partnership based on equality and mutual respect,' she added.

In contrast, her comments on Pakistan pointed to an element of equivalence with Afghanistan.

She said US ties with Pakistan would be guided by Islamabad's role in the war on terror because 'post-9/11, the US has finally recognised the centrality of Pakistan and Afghanistan to US security'.

The US was expected to make 'major increases in economic development and military assistance' to Pakistan, said Raphel, who launched the Congressionally mandated South Asia Bureau at the State Department in 1993.

In his acclaimed book, 'Taliban', Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid writes of Raphel's repeated unsuccessful attempts in the 1990s to draw the attention of US secretary of state Warren Christopher

towards terrorism in Afghanistan.

In May 1996, Raphel told the US Senate - prophetically as it turned out - that 'Afghanistan has become a conduit for drugs, crimes and terrorism that can undermine Pakistan, the neighbouring Central Asia states and have an impact beyond [Europe](#) and Russia.'

But, Rashid wrote, Raphel's entreaties only led to 'patchwork diplomacy' because of the lack of response from the State Department.

Raphel began her US government career as an economic analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency, focusing on the oil-rich state of Indonesia. She later joined the Department of State as a foreign service officer, working on deputation to USAID as an economic and financial analyst in Pakistan.

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