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South Asia: Back to Basics

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Conclusions

- South Asia, with a quarter of the world's population, a demonstrated weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability, great economic potential, and chronic instability, can no longer be regarded as peripheral to U.S. global interests.
- Achieving peace and stability, particularly in and between India and Pakistan, is the overarching U.S. interest in South Asia, and we need a well-considered, long-term strategy to pursue it.
- The United States needs to avoid the episodic, single-issue pattern of its past interaction with South Asia.
- Sustained, broad-based engagement, based on a thorough review of U.S. interests and regional realities, will preserve and enhance U.S. interests.
- A presidential visit to all the major countries of the region could signal our commitment to long-term engagement focusing on Indo-Pakistani rapprochement, good governance, economic advancement, and sane management of the region's nuclear capabilities.

With President Clinton's visit to South Asia, the forthcoming transition in the White House, and Indo-Pakistani relations in near crisis, a review of U.S. policy toward that region and options for the future is warranted. We need to reevaluate what our fundamental interests in South Asia are, because they have changed significantly from what they were when these countries gained independence at mid-century and especially since the end of the Cold War. South Asia is hardly a vital U.S. interest, but it has become much more important. The unchecked Indo-Pakistani arms race poses risks of nuclear conflict and undermines nonproliferation regimes in other regions; Afghanistan and Pakistan are grappling with forms of militant Islam that have global reach; and the stability and development of the region have an important impact on U.S. interests in China, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia. We have to honestly assess where we have been right and wrong—know the history but not be its prisoner. The days are gone when we can afford to view the subcontinent as a backwater in our global strategy.

U.S. Interests in South Asia

The bedrock U.S. interest in South Asia has been and will continue to be peace and stability within and between the nations of the region (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Maldives). If peace and stability prevail, the United States can make progress not only on nonproliferation, economic reform and development, trade liberalization, democracy/ governance, human rights, narcotics, terrorism, and World Trade Organization issues—indeed, on all of these issues, with enormous benefit for our vision of a prosperous, democratic South Asia integrated with the global economy. Without peace and stability, little can be accomplished on any front.

South Asia Realities

By focusing serially upon the Cold War, the green revolution, the quest for global and regional nonproliferation, and the importance of human rights over the last fifty years, we have had a distorted perception of the realities on the ground. The absence of an across-the-board approach has hampered the development and implementation of a coherent, successful policy in pursuit of U.S. interests.

In any reconsideration of U.S.-South Asia policy—it is important that we begin with a reality check.

- Tensions between the region's two largest countries, India and Pakistan, are high. Hostility over Kashmir—three wars in 52 years—holds the region hostage. Resolving Indo-Pakistani tensions is the sine qua non of long-term peace and stability. Both nations have nuclear weapons and delivery systems; neither will give them up. A confrontational approach by the rest of the world demanding renunciation of nuclear capability only aggravates the problem of achieving restraint, as demonstrated by our unsuccessful nonproliferation efforts set against the realities of internal and regional politics.
- Internal strife in Afghanistan and Kashmir, stirred by Pakistani-supported militant Islam, exacerbates regional tensions, encourages the expansion of Islamic radicalism beyond South Asia, and threatens to destabilize Pakistan, itself. Terrorist movements and heroin producers who operate internationally from Afghanistan threaten U.S. interests directly.
- South Asia is important geographically to East Asia and to the Gulf and offers Central Asia potentially huge markets for natural gas and an alternative to continuing dependence on Russia.
- South Asia's desperately poor population of roughly 1.5 billion is almost a quarter of the world's population; its social indicators—life expectancy, literacy, health, income, etc.—are among the lowest in the world; its economic footprint on the world economy and the United States is negligible. (Despite India's great potential, its two-way trade with the whole world is only \$80 billion a year. By comparison, the General Electric Company's world-wide revenues in 1998 were \$100 billion, and our trade deficit with China was \$60 billion.)
- Leaving aside Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives—and since October 12, 1999, Pakistan—the countries enjoy some form of democratic rule. A very much open question is whether any of them enjoy what we would call good governance or great leadership.

U.S. Policy

Over the 52 years of their independence, the nations of South Asia have never had the sustained attention of the U.S. Government. Yes, we cared about starving India, supplied food and sponsored the green revolution. We paid attention during the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Indo-Pakistani Wars of 1965 and 1971, and the Kargil intrusion of 1999. We objected to the Indian nuclear demonstration in 1974 and to Indian and Pakistani tests in May 1998. We cared very much about and invested a great deal in defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan, for which Pakistan was the indispensable base—then forgot about both countries after victory was achieved. In short, our policy engagement in South Asia has been driven by the Cold War or a particular crisis or a single issue; otherwise, the region has been off our screen.

Our episodic involvement with South Asia and the lack of sustained engagement across the broad range of U.S. interests in the area have not only diminished U.S. influence but also turned off the key players—India and Pakistan—who for a variety of reasons/shared interests should be natural friends of ours.

The lack of sustained, broad-based engagement has left the door open to what one South Asia watcher described as the South Asian region being treated as "a theme park for the functional bureaus." What he meant was that the issue of the day—nonproliferation, democracy and human rights, counternarcotics, terrorism—pushed by Congress and nongovernmental organizations can dominate (and distort) our overall approach to South Asia. But does sanctioning Pakistan for transgressions against democracy and nonproliferation add or detract from our capacity to influence its government's policies? The same question can be asked about our various sanctions on India over its nuclear policy.

Of particular importance recently has been the nonproliferation group. Dating from the Indian test of 1974, their quite laudable goal in South Asia has been to "cap, rollback and eliminate" the potential to acquire nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Nonproliferators had some success in delaying the Pakistani and Indian nuclear programs; but ultimately, as the tests of May 1998 demonstrated, they failed. Missile programs also have continued to advance, accelerated by Pakistan's turning to China and North Korea when the U.S. arms embargo of 1990 vitiated its conventional defense capabilities. One could argue that the nonproliferation community failed because its approach was conceptually flawed from the outset. Nonproliferators believed—or wanted to believe—that jawboning and sanctioning could convince India and Pakistan to drop their programs, despite perceived vital security needs due to the continued high level of tension and distrust between them and between India and China. They thought they could convince two sovereign countries to compromise vital national security interests for the sake of better relations with the United States, but without security guarantees. No country would do that, and neither did.

The Clinton administration in the first half of 1997 engaged in a major South Asia policy review to break out of the single-issue trap. It resulted in a very sensible decision to broaden U.S. engagement with the countries of South Asia. Nonproliferation would no longer be the sole issue. From July 1997 until May 1998, the new approach was actively implemented, with one near-term objective being preparations for a presidential visit to the region—the first since 1978—as a means of encouraging progress on many issues. Alas, the May 1998 tests turned the clock back—and nonproliferation again became pretty much the sole U.S. interest.

The tests generated the most sustained series of high-level U.S. discussions with India and Pakistan in the history of our relationship. Unfortunately, the focus of Deputy Secretary Talbott's talks was almost exclusively on nonproliferation, and the approach was still more one of rollback than of pursuing new formulas for regional stability and for an accommodation between the global nonproliferation regime and irreversible regional reality. The mutual trust and understanding that had developed with the United States did at least indirectly contribute to the meeting of the Pakistani and Indian prime ministers at Lahore in 1999 to declare a new start to removing old antagonisms, even Kashmir. However, the foundation of trust between the two countries was too weak to support a real peace process.

The disastrous Pakistani incursion at Kargil ended the Lahore process, and the intense Indian distrust of Pakistan it generated was reinforced in October 1999 by the military's assumption of power from a badly flawed Pakistani civilian government. Since then, deep-seated tensions between the two countries over Kashmir have grown substantially—to a greater level than at any time since 1971. Rebuilding confidence for a renewed dialogue is essential for stability but will be difficult and time-consuming. The United States can be helpful only if it rebuilds its own relationship with Pakistan's embattled military and civilian authorities and helps them work through huge problems. Whereas the United States appears to barely tolerate Pakistani authorities, we retain a good relationship with the principal figures in India, who are back after recent elections and appear disdainful of the need to reestablish a serious dialogue with Pakistan.

Looking Forward

A year-and-a-half after the South Asia nuclear tests, it is time that the Executive Branch take a fresh look at South Asia policy. Our understandable pique over the testing has had its day. It is now time to return to a policy built on a realistic calculation of our interests and available policy tools.

It is important to keep our thinking, our objectives, and our rhetoric in balance. We must neither undersell nor oversell the importance of South Asia. Let us not dream our way into irrelevance—and let us stop talking endlessly about emerging great powers or getting carried away by our goals of enlarging democracy when good governance is the most immediate priority.

Let us start by agreeing within the United States Government that South Asia is going to be much more important to us and to the rest of the world in this century of global integration and interaction. Whatever happens there, for better or worse, will affect U.S. interests far more quickly and directly than in the past.

Let us also see if agreement can be reached on prioritizing our interests in the region with peace and stability agreed as overarching. Without it, there is no way South Asia can begin to recognize its potential, and U.S. interests stand a very good chance of being negatively affected.

This also means that President Clinton and future presidents must mandate a sustained, coordinated, broad-based, and high-level engagement. For example, in the present situation in Pakistan, while not in any way lessening our commitment to democracy, we should focus less on elections and more on governance issues. Moreover, we must reengage with the Pakistan military, the sole institution in that country with any domestic respect, international credibility, or power to correct very serious internal problems.

Let us recognize that much patience and sustained, broad-based engagement over many years will be required. Helping India and Pakistan achieve real peace is the key issue for the region. It is as worthy of our effort as is our engagement in Northern Ireland or the Balkans.

In the meantime, we should engage where we can do so with some effect on our other priority issues, recognizing in the case of nonproliferation that Indo-Pakistani accommodation is a prerequisite for genuine progress.

We will have to prove to South Asians our sincerity, our genuine interest. Call it "building trust," which isn't there now. We need to be consistent, and our engagement must be across-the-board. We can't afford to ignore our whole range of interests just because two countries have crossed the nuclear threshold.

Set forth below is a partial list of specific issues that warrant thorough consideration now by policymakers:

- **Presidential Travel** — A presidential trip to the region should include all of the major states. It should not be a trip to make up for past neglect; rather, it should be a signal that in the 21st century the United States is going to be broadly engaged with the region and bilaterally with all of the countries. No overly ambitious, specific objectives (like brokering a Kashmir settlement) should be set; it should be long on engagement and dialogue and short on deliverables, although there are possibilities of fostering Indo-Pakistani dialogue and launching bilateral and regional initiatives on law enforcement and other governance issues.

- **Indo-Pakistani Tensions** — If President Clinton's visit stimulates reconciliation, we can perhaps enhance our dialogue and diplomacy on South Asia with others, such as China and the European Union, to revive the Lahore process or a similar initiative that could develop into a more formal peace process.
- **Kashmir** — While Kashmir is the most important and emotional issue dividing India and Pakistan, it is also the least susceptible to short-term resolution. Perhaps the wise course is to encourage continued dialogue and Track II efforts—and play it long term.
- **Strategic Perspective** — We need to think through how South Asia relates to the larger 21st century strategic perspective. Developments in South Asia affect our interests in the Middle East/Persian Gulf, East Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and China. Does the fact that India and Pakistan are nuclear and ballistic missile capable encourage other, less responsible states, to follow suit? Should this influence our approach to these two countries? How do we/should we differentiate? Where do India's great power aspirations fit in? How should we respond to Pakistan's slow drift away from secularism toward a more militantly Islamic form of rule?
- **Pakistani and Indian Nuclear and Missile Programs** — Beyond counseling restraint and encouraging India and Pakistan to make full use of existing confidence building measures, is there anything else that we should be doing? Should we, for example, seek exemption for Pakistan and India from U.S. nonproliferation legislation, leaving it in place for other would-be proliferators? Should we accept the reality of their nuclear status and carve out a South Asia regional subset within the global nonproliferation regime—one that accepts the reality and enhances prospects for restraint on further development and proliferation? While such an approach would have its risks, continuing the current, unsuccessful policy has even greater risks.
- **Jihadism** — This nonstate phenomenon afflicts Afghanistan and increasingly spills over into Pakistan, Central Asia, and Kashmir. Combating it clearly is in the interest of the United States and of all the nations of Central and South Asia. How best to do it is the question. Secular Islamic states such as Turkey, Egypt, and Morocco may be able to play a constructive role.
- **Conventional Forces** — What are the consequences—both security and economic—of India's stated intention to dramatically increase spending on strategic and conventional forces? A nearly bankrupt Pakistan will probably rely even more on its WMD capability as a deterrent. Should we resume supplying arms to Pakistan to limit this dependence?
- **Governance** — The absence of good governance is a deficiency that afflicts all of the nations of South Asia. Governance encompasses a multitude of issues—law and order, rule of law, corruption, human rights. Are there bilateral or regional initiatives we could take that would help?
- **Economics, Liberalization, and Development** — What can and should we as a government do in South Asia to accelerate what is already underway in India? One step would be to assist with the major effort required to rehabilitate Pakistan's political, judicial, and economic institutions.
- **Military-to-Military Relations** — The army in Pakistan will continue to be a major political force across the breadth of society. In India, despite its size, the army has had a minimal role in policy, but this is changing somewhat since the 1998 nuclear tests and the Kargil intrusion. We should expand opportunities for both countries to participate in U.S. foreign military officer training programs—at a minimum, increase International Military Education and Training—and seek more military exercises with both. Repairing deteriorated military-to-military relations with India and Pakistan is a long-term investment with a minimal cost and a high return.

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