



# Conference Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College,  
the Asia/Pacific Research Center, and  
the Center for International Security and Cooperation,  
Stanford University*

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## **South Asia 2020: Future Strategic Balance and Alliances**

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### Conclusions:

- September 11 presents an opportunity to improve South Asian security relationships.
- An economically strong and politically stable South Asia is in U.S. national interests.
- Resolving Indo-Pakistani tensions is critical to ensuring regional stability; Kashmir is a key issue that must be addressed.
- The United States must remain engaged in South Asia even after the conclusion of hostilities in Afghanistan.
- The United States should maintain robust military-to-military relationships in South Asia.

The U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute and Stanford University's Asia/Pacific Research Center and Center for International Security and Cooperation cosponsored a conference in Palo Alto, California, on January 4-5, 2002. Its purpose was to examine the current situation in South Asia and to sharpen understanding of the longer-term assumptions, players, and events that will shape the future strategic environment in the region and to offer policy considerations. The focus was mainly on India and Pakistan, with some attention on China. There were approximately 75 participants, including former policymakers, uniformed and civilian members of the DoD, the intelligence and diplomatic communities, business world, and academia. This brief highlights the main points raised and discussed.

### **Challenge for U.S. Policy.**

Participants agreed that recent world events only serve to demonstrate that an economically strong and politically stable South Asia is vital to international security and U.S. interests. Several consequences resulted with the establishment of the coalition against the War on Terrorism. Pakistan's perceived status was elevated commensurate with its importance relative to Afghanistan and to the Islamic world. Indo-Pakistani tensions over Kashmir increased, and the wider dangers of the Indo-Pakistani conflict became more apparent.

Historically, the United States has had limited involvement in South Asia. During the Cold War, the United States established a security relationship with Pakistan. American interest in Afghanistan and, hence Pakistan, was high during the period of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal and in response to congressional legislation aimed at averting a Pakistani nuclear weapons program, the United States withdrew support for Pakistan. Concern about security in the region heightened with the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998, but even then Washington did not pay concentrated attention until September 11. Participants agreed that the events of September 11 are likely to influence U.S. policy on engagement with South Asia, but the directions of this policy are still being developed. Although there is cause for optimism, the opportunity to shape the regional security environment is fleeting.

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## **Future Scenarios.**

One speaker suggested three possible scenarios for South Asia's future. In the first and least-desirable scenario, the region reverts to pre-September 11 conditions. Pakistan is preoccupied with India, but India is not nearly as concerned with Pakistan because it believes that time is on its side. According to this speaker, Pakistan concludes that brinkmanship is the most effective way to bring attention to its high priority issues, so it will tend to play the "crisis" card. Most agree that any clash could escalate to the nuclear level.

A nuclear exchange in South Asia would cause a major jolt in great power relations and exacerbate problems between the West and the Muslim world. This scenario portends the most dangerous outcome, but it may be difficult to prevent reversion to pre-September 11 assumptions and the old status quo as the furor of the War on Terrorism diminishes.

In the speaker's second scenario, the United States would involve itself in Asia intensely but intermittently. Taiwan would remain the key flashpoint between the United States and China. Japan will want to avoid involvement but would be forced to from time to time. The United States would try to have positive relations with Russia and India, while China and Pakistan would remain allied. Economic aid would help bind Pakistan and Indian policy to patrons, and the patrons would push Pakistan and India to resolve Kashmir. This scenario would be less dangerous than the first.

The most benevolent but least probable scenario would be a configuration of the United States "plus eight." A U.S.-led coalition of Russia, China, Japan, India, Brazil, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom would assume a mandate independent of the U.N. Security Council, especially regarding terrorism. One focus of this coalition could be the reduction of tensions in the Muslim world.

## **Trends.**

Several speakers discussed economic development, political dynamics, and demographic trends that will have a

significant impact on future scenarios for South Asia in 2020. Pakistan's and India's economic growth has slowed in recent years, Pakistan's much more so. Both countries realize that, without growth, their ambitions to join the international elite will not be achieved. This will put considerable pressure on both countries to resolve their disputes and focus resources on economic growth.

The exigent political landscape of India is one of coalition building and rebuilding. This dynamic political structure is characteristic of a distant central government and makes national level policymaking a very tough proposition.

At the same time, Islamabad is struggling to manage economic development while deterring perceived aggression from India, both of which compete for scarce resources.

Most participants agreed that population growth rates will continue to be complicated to manage. Age distribution will have a very deleterious effect on Asian societies. The "graying" of the labor force will create problems in economic productivity and social security. One speaker contended that World Bank statistics fail to take into account sex ratios resulting from population control measures such as selective abortion. This has profound implications for future marriage trends in family-centric Asian cultures.

## **Nuclear Weapons.**

Participants agreed that India and Pakistan can take two paths in the future: pursue an arms race or concentrate on economic development under an arms control regime. The large scale use of nuclear weapons on the subcontinent would be a humanitarian disaster of monumental proportions. A nuclear exchange would also have a strong negative impact on U.S. efforts to curb global proliferation, since other nuclear states may feel compelled to break out of nonproliferation regimes.

The realm of nuclear security programs is one area where there might be an opportunity for the United States to initiate tangible cooperation. Pakistan is very open to the idea of learning about critical aspects

of America's nuclear security such as the Personnel Reliability Program (PRP). Several participants agreed that the United States at times has acted in a condescending manner, and that feasible mechanisms to share ideas versus patronizingly doling out assistance exist. Others argued that the United States could be seen rewarding those who acquire these weapons.

### **Influence of Strategic Culture.**

Strategic culture—core interests, motivations, and how security policy-making elites of states act in international and regional environments—offers an analytic framework to understand how countries view the utility of force and how they develop their security strategy. Regional players have difficulty understanding each other's world views and cultural milieu. Deciphering the differences between perceptions and reality is tough.

According to one participant, China perceives itself as always acting in a defensive manner, and tends to be somewhat "tone deaf" to contrary perceptions of Beijing's actions by its neighbors. China perceives India to be a rival great power aspirant, belligerent and expansionist, and will likely continue to be unwilling to confer great power status upon it.

Another participant explained that India has three distinct schools of thought that cover a broad range of concepts of the utility of force and the nature of its adversaries. On the one side is the Nehruvian approach, which tends to be patient and believes that war is only one choice in a range of choices that includes cooperation and compromise. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the nationalist approach that views war as a constant shadow and a natural and important tool of statecraft. The more moderate neo-liberal approach considers force to be of declining utility, while economics and trade have more credibility as instruments of national power. This wide spectrum of approaches, coupled with India's fluid domestic political scene, makes it difficult to predict how India may act toward China or Pakistan.

Most participants agreed that Pakistan suffers from an acute sense of insecurity and a strong distrust of India. Islamabad has a tough balancing act. How can it allocate enough resources to the military to enable it to withstand attack, while steering a course toward sustainable development? Its strategy is to gain external support against an adversary it considers stronger. Pakistan saw the U.S. response in Afghanistan as posing both a threat and an opportunity. The threat was American hostility if it did not cooperate with the U.S. effort; the opportunity was economic and political support from it. The cost of not joining the coalition would have been prohibitively high.

### **Future Alliance Politics in Asia.**

One participant explained that a multiplicity of forces and powerful trends will continue to affect the patterns of alignment and antagonism in South Asia. Liberalization and other market mechanisms will help mold the dynamics of power politics.

Participants examined three prospects for alliance relationships involving South Asia. An Indo-Russian alliance would be unlikely due to Russia's preoccupation with domestic issues, and it wouldn't make sense for India to ally with a debilitated partner. Russia's possible unreliability, if faced with pressure from China, is particularly troublesome.

An alliance between India, Russia and China focused against the United States seems improbable, even though these countries share common grievances. China would be reluctant to accord India great power status, and India would find it difficult to overlook its border disputes with China. In contrast, Indo-U.S. relations may improve dramatically in the years ahead. Both are wary of China; India is seeking to promote economic development, and the United States is the principal source of foreign investment in India. Both sides would need to get beyond their history of strained bilateral relations. Nonproliferation issues are not wholly resolved, and the United States must strike a balance to preserve good relations with Pakistan and India.

Conference participants felt that China will likely maintain its long-standing relationship with Pakistan. Pakistan is weak and values support from China, and China values having a friendly neighbor in Pakistan. Supporting Pakistan also helps to counter India as a competitor (although the Chinese have made it evident they do not want to get involved in an Indo-Pakistan war). An enormous range of possible futures in South Asia exists, but a key constraining factor will be overlapping networks of pressure and influence by outside powers.

### **U.S. Military Perspectives.**

The key national security interests for the United States in South Asia are access to the area for the global War on Terrorism and stability operations; elimination of terrorism within the region and beyond Afghanistan; and prevention of the use of weapons of mass destruction.

Participants agreed that U.S. military-to-military engagement in the region supports these interests. It reassures our allies, makes it disadvantageous to compete against the United States or its allies, deters potential enemies of the United States or its allies, and it could be instrumental in decisively defeating our enemies. More generally, military-to-military engagement provides access to decisionmakers via the influence of the military as well as opportunity to improve interoperability and mutual understanding in bilateral military relationships, thus avoiding strategic miscalculation. Military-to-military engagement also provides long-term exposure to American values and provides opportunities for functional exchanges that will benefit both the United States and partner countries.

In the view of several participants, the U.S. military can play a more active role in promoting stability and regional security. Military-to-military engagement is not a zero-sum game, all players can benefit. The U.S. military needs to design a new paradigm of engagement encompassing the whole spectrum of military-to-military activities, including foreign military sales, military-to-military exchanges, Interna-

tional Military Education and Training (IMET) and humanitarian assistance cooperation. The enduring relationships established at the military service schools go a long way toward fostering high-level relationships as the officers advance through the ranks to positions of influence. Severing military-to-military ties as a punishment is at best ineffective, at worst counter-productive and damaging to U.S. interests.

### **Conclusion.**

War in South Asia is not in the interests of any country and would be disastrous for all concerned. Not only would large scale use of nuclear weapons be a humanitarian disaster of monumental proportions, but also would have a negative impact on U.S. efforts to curb global proliferation. Most participants were fairly optimistic that the events of September 11 have presented India, Pakistan, and the international community a chance to shift the regional security environment in South Asia for the better. However, the opportunity to effect this change may be fleeting. The War on Terrorism has implications for Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and may exacerbate India-Pakistan tensions in the short term. The international community must seize the opportunity to help advance rapprochement between India and Pakistan. For significant progress to be made, the issue of Kashmir must be addressed.

Washington must resist the temptation to cite the military successes in Afghanistan as constituting a resounding victory in Phase One of the War on Terrorism, shift focus to another region, and place South Asia on the "backburner" once again. The window of opportunity to shape the future of South Asia may be fast closing.

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