

THE U.S. ROLE IN SOUTH ASIA

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After years of relative marginalization, South Asia is steadily increasing its influence in international affairs. All major powers, including the United States, European Union, China, Japan, and Russia, are expanding their engagement with the Subcontinent. On the economic front, India's high level of performance in recent years has brought the region into sharp focus. However, such high growth rates are also visible across the Subcontinent, making it the second-fastest growing region in the world — after China. India is now an important factor in managing new international trade, energy, and environmental challenges. On the political front, most major issues that confront U.S. policy — international terrorism, Islamic radicalism, weapons of mass destruction, proliferation, state failure, nation building, and promotion of democracy — are ingrained in the South Asian Subcontinent. South Asia will become increasingly relevant to a number of new challenges confronting U.S. foreign policy, such as Asia's regional balance of power, maritime security, and global warming. South Asia is at the crossroads of a rising Asia, making its geopolitical relevance significant. Strengthening the U.S. partnership with all the South Asian countries is likely to have positive spillover effects in East Asia, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. A strong Subcontinent, in harmony with itself and engaged with the United States, can emerge as a force for peace and stability across the Indian Ocean and its littoral.

Since the late 1990s, the United States has devoted considerable political and diplomatic energies to its engagement with South

Asia, which developed a new intensity after September 11, 2001. These bipartisan efforts have produced a number of positive results — including producing a credible framework for an enduring strategic partnership with India, the centerpiece of which has been the historic civil nuclear initiative. Also, in the last few years, the United States has simultaneously helped to improve bilateral relations between New Delhi and Islamabad, an objective that for decades was deemed impossible. Deliberate American neutrality in the India-Pakistan conflicts has encouraged New Delhi and Islamabad to embark on a bilateral, and rather productive, peace process. Since 9/11, America has been involved in stabilizing Pakistan and Afghanistan against local and trans-national threats of terrorism and religious extremism, while also economically modernizing the region. Consequently, the United States has emerged as the single-most important external partner of the Subcontinent. Although America's recent gains in South Asia are indeed historic, they remain to be consolidated. There also exists the danger that some of the U.S. advances in the region might be reversed in the near future.

This chapter defines five broad objectives for the next administration's approach toward South Asia and 10 specific policy recommendations.

THE OBJECTIVES

1. Regain the initiative in the War on Terror

The principal security threats to the United States today are rooted in the re-entrenchment of al-Qaeda in the border regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The U.S. pursuit of the war against al-Qaeda has been complicated by the emerging instabili-

ties in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Amidst the U.S. difficulties to mobilize a more effective North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) participation in the stabilization of Afghanistan, a strategic failure there is no longer beyond the realm of imagination. The next administration needs to develop a comprehensive strategy that seeks to overcome the many political hurdles blocking success in the war on terror. These challenges include the Karzai government's inability to reverse the Pushtun tribes' disaffection (which contributes to the re-emergence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda), the enduring contradictions between the national interests of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the lack of ownership of the war on terror among the civilian leaders in Pakistan, and the temptation of Pakistan's civilian government to create short-term political deals which can strengthen the militant groups, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda in the long run.

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2. Deepen U.S.-India relations

Recently, improving ties with India has been an important strategic priority for the United States. Washington's bipartisan approach to India is reflected in the Democratic Party's leadership and in the Republican Bush administration's decision to renew civilian nuclear cooperation with India. As the government in New Delhi copes with fierce political resistance from the Indian communist parties to the civil nuclear initiative and the transformation of Indo-U.S. relations, Washington has shown necessary patience. The next administration, however, must resist the temptation to renegotiate the nuclear agreement with India. The original, principal objectives of the nuclear initiative were to integrate India into the management of the global nuclear order, remove the long accumulated mutual political distrust between Washington and New Delhi over the nuclear issue, and create the basis for a stronger bilateral partnership. That precisely is the reason why the Indian communist parties want to see the deal's demise. The next administration must reaffirm the commitment for an early implementation of the civil nuclear initiative with India. Simultaneously, it must find ways to insulate the promising parts of the relationship — especially defense cooperation — if the absence of a political consensus in India delays the implementation of the civil nuclear initiative. The next U.S. administration must persist with the core objectives of transforming bilateral relations with India.

3. Respond to China's rise in South Asia

American primacy on the Subcontinent is in danger of being compromised by the steady expansion of Chinese influence in the region. For example, U.S. trade with India grew from US\$14 billion in 2000 to US\$41 billion in 2007. In the same period, China's trade with India grew from US\$3 billion to nearly US\$38

billion. This trend applies to China's trade with the entire region; Beijing is likely to emerge as the largest trading partner of all South Asian nations in the near future. For nearly a decade, China has relentlessly pressed ahead with a grand plan to link western China with the Subcontinent through rail and road networks. This overland effort comes at a time when China is seeking to expand its maritime capability and is actively involved in constructing maritime infrastructure in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (formerly known as Burma). South Asia and its waters have become critical for Beijing's strategic calculus on energy security and the development of its Western regions. A purposeful U.S. policy toward South Asia would not only constrain Chinese plans to convert its new economic presence in the region into strategic clout; but also help restore the Subcontinent's influence in China's Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan provinces, which traditionally have been parts of the Subcontinent's hinterland.

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4. Promote regional economic integration

The core of any U.S. strategy toward the region must be a commitment to accelerate the unfolding integration of the South Asian economies. After years of lackadaisical regionalism, South Asia is now moving toward the implementation of a free trade area, signaling its new outward orientation. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Subcontinent's only collective forum, has recently admitted the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union as observers. The SAARC has also admitted Afghanistan as a full member, in an expansion of its regional footprint. It is in the U.S. interest to see the rapid emergence of an economic community in South Asia that could eventually rival China's size, dynamism, and global impact. A strong and economically integrated South Asia can reclaim its historic role in promoting stability and the balance of power in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Working with Japan and the European Union, the United States should encourage SAARC initiatives on global warming, energy security and efficiency, and education.

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5. Leverage American soft power

Given its recent preoccupation with the global war on terror, the United States has tended to undervalue its broader range of equities on the Subcontinent. Despite resentment in many quarters about the recent thrust of its policies, the United States has nonetheless developed a huge reservoir of goodwill in the Subcontinent. The United States needs to find ways to synergize its pursuit of its interests with its enduring cultural attractiveness on the Subcontinent. Promoting democracy has been a major thrust of U.S. policy in recent years, but democracy's implementation in the Subcontinent has been beset with multiple contradictions. For example, the U.S. has demanded the complete isolation of the military rulers in Burma; yet in Pakistan, the U.S. has wavered between its commitment to promoting democracy and retaining its leverage with the Pakistani Army, which has traditionally dominated the polity. In Nepal, the U.S.'s narrow emphasis on counter-terrorism has overlooked the Maoists' importance as a political force representing long-overdue social and political modernization. Since 1996, the Maoists have taken arms in demanding various reforms, which included the replacement of the monarchy with a republic. While their use of violence against innocent people in pursuit of their political aims were among good reasons for the United States to label the Maoists as a terrorist organization, there is also the larger imperative of drawing them into the political mainstream. The Maoists emerged as the single-largest political formation in the elections to the Constituent Assembly in early 2008.

More broadly, the South Asian political elites admire the core political values of the western world — including the tradition of common law, administrative systems, financial and banking cultures, and the English language. These intellectual bonds distinguish the Subcontinent from much of East Asia and the Middle

East. U.S. foreign policy needs to take full advantage of this shared culture by significantly expanding its public diplomacy in South Asia. Easing the U.S. visa regulations for South Asian professionals will help build lasting ties between America and the Subcontinent.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Unveil a long-term military commitment to Afghanistan

Throughout South Asia, there is widespread political assumption that the U.S. commitment to nation building in Afghanistan is, at best, a short-term one. This, in turn, leaves no real incentive for key players in the region to take political decisions that conform to U.S. objectives. The new administration needs to lend some teeth to its 2005 declaration on a strategic partnership with Afghanistan by unveiling a bilateral defense treaty. This would signal a significant American military presence for the foreseeable future. If the United States prepares to draw down its forces in Iraq in the coming years, it should be in a position to enhance U.S. troop presence

in Afghanistan. A stronger U.S. military commitment, however, is not enough. It must be supplemented by a range of other measures that streamline the current chaotic international involvement in Afghanistan and enhance Afghanistan's national capacity to sustain its own military and police forces. Instead of the current emphasis in Washington on the scale, scope, and depth of NATO's commitment to Afghanistan's stabilization, the United States should concentrate on altering the regional political dynamic in and around the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

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2. Engage the Pushtun tribes

The most important terrorist threat to the United States stems from a single ethnic community, the Pushtuns, who straddle across the Durand Line – the 1893-drawn border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There are nearly 25 million Pushtuns in Pakistan and 15 million in Afghanistan. Without significant cooperation from the Pushtun tribes on both sides of the Durand Line, the United States will find it near impossible to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda. A counter-terror strategy focused only on hunting extremists by attacking Pushtun territories is likely to inflame anti-American sentiment among the tribes and draw them closer to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The United States must undertake a significant effort to win political support among the Pushtun tribes, sep-

arate them from al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and make them stakeholders in the war against terror. The United States must help the Pakistani and Afghan governments strengthen the traditional Pushtun tribal structures. The United States also needs to recognize how deeply the Pushtun question divides Pakistan and Afghanistan. To prevent Pushtun ethnic nationalism from undermining Pakistan's territorial unity and integrity, Pakistani governments have long promoted religious radicalism in the tribal areas. The U.S. interest, on the other hand, is to separate Pushtun tribes from extremists. This core contradiction between the interests of Washington and Islamabad cannot be resolved without addressing the Pakistan-Afghanistan dispute over the Durand Line.

3. Transform the Durand Line

Since Pakistan's birth in 1947, Kabul has been at odds with Islamabad. Afghanistan refused to recognize Pakistan as a successor state to the British Raj and the Durand Line as the legitimate border. That the British drew the Durand Line across Pushtun territories and imposed it on a weak Kabul is a major national grievance in Afghanistan; no political formation in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, is willing to accept the Durand Line as the legitimate border with Pakistan. Islamabad, on the other hand, cannot afford to redraw the boundary with Afghanistan. Any long-term reconciliation between Pakistan and Afghanistan would necessarily involve a broad understanding on transforming the Durand Line without redrawing it. The United States can do this by getting Islamabad and Kabul to accept a new set of principles — which meets Pakistan's desire for a secure western frontier and Kabul's demand for an end to Pakistan's forward policy in Pushtun areas — through helping to create cross-border institutions that facilitate greater cooperation among the Pushtun tribes. Agreements between Kabul and Islamabad, supported by

Washington, must include a commitment not to change the Durand Line by force, facilitate easy movement of tribes that overlap the border, and mutual cooperation to prevent hostile movement of extremists. The United States also needs a bold plan that builds on the current initiatives for a joint trans-border *jirga*; military consultations between international forces, Afghan National Army and Pakistani security forces; and plans for cross-frontier reconstruction opportunity zones. This would involve a more ambitious strategy for the development of tribal areas on both sides of the Durand Line. Such a strategy must recall the traditional role of the Pushtun lands as a bridge between the Subcontinent on the one hand, and Central Asia and the Gulf on the other. Any restoration of trans-frontier commerce in the region would mean supporting a framework for trilateral cooperation between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

4. Promote India-Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation

Pakistan's sense of a rivalry with India in Afghanistan has been an enduring element of Islamabad's security anxieties. Mutual antagonism toward Pakistan has tended to draw New Delhi and Kabul closer over the decades. The United States has an opportunity to break this old pattern. Since 2004, India and Pakistan have sustained a productive peace process, which provides a new basis for ameliorating India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. India is increasingly aware that it cannot sustain its activism in Afghanistan in the face of Pakistan's hostility. Islamabad, on the other hand, needs to acknowledge that it cannot unilaterally shape the political evolution of Afghanistan. Washington should support the idea of an annual trilateral summit between the top leaders of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to focus on economic cooperation and counterterrorism. The United States should encourage all three countries to negotiate a liberal trade and transit treaty that will allow Kabul

access to the larger Indian market, New Delhi to gain overland access to Afghanistan and Central Asia via Pakistan, and Islamabad to benefit from large volumes of transit trade. The regions between Kabul and Delhi were once part of a single economic space. Its reconstitution will provide a regional core that could complement U.S. objectives of stabilizing and modernizing the north-western parts of the Subcontinent.

5. Support India-Pakistan reconciliation in Kashmir

Promoting India-Pakistan reconciliation and encouraging a solution to the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir has been a longstanding objective of the United States. However, attempts by the United States to directly impose itself between the two have tended to be counterproductive. A more detached U.S. policy toward the Kashmir question in recent years, however, has created the space for India and Pakistan to embark on a substantive dialogue on the intractable dispute. While the two sides have made considerable progress in drafting a new framework for the resolution of the Kashmir question, Islamabad's inability or unwillingness to restrain the Kashmir militants based on its soil may yet lead to an unraveling of the peace process. Just as the United States is concerned with Islamabad's new efforts to placate militant groups, India too is apprehensive that Pakistan might be backsliding on its commitment to control cross-border terrorism. It is in the U.S. interest that the civilian leaders of Pakistan stay the course laid down by President Pervez Musharraf on restraining cross-border terrorism and taking new steps towards a final settlement in Kashmir. A consolidation of the peace process in Kashmir and tranquility on the India-Pakistan frontier will allow Islamabad to address the new challenges to its security on its western borders and lend more effective support to the U.S. war on terror.

6. Reduce the salience of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal

Pakistan offers two important challenges to U.S. non-proliferation policy. One is A.Q. Khan's proliferation network, discovered earlier this decade. Many in the United States — and the world — remain skeptical over Islamabad's assertion that Dr. Khan was acting on his own and that the network has since been disabled. Recently, Dr. Khan asserted that he was coerced into making his confession and that the Pakistani Army and other officials were involved in the Pakistan-centered proliferation network. The Bush administration has avoided a public debate on the issue. The next administration needs to undertake a comprehensive review of the A.Q. Khan affair and reassess Pakistan's role in the nuclear black market. A second concern for the United States stems from the security and safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal; it appears that Pakistan's Army maintains tight control over it. This, however, could change if Pakistan spirals into an unpredictable crisis. The United States has already taken a number of steps to assist Pakistan in securing its control over nuclear weapons; however, technical solutions to the security and safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal are not enough. As long as Pakistan's nuclear arsenal exists and the danger of state failure in Pakistan seems real, there is no assurance that nuclear weapons will not fall into the hands of extremist groups. Over the longer term, the United States needs to address Pakistan's broader security imperatives that prompted the very construction and maintenance of its nuclear weapons. A consolidation of the India-Pakistan rapprochement, together with reconciliation with Afghanistan, would let Pakistan secure its territorial frontiers and lessen the salience of nuclear weapons in its security calculus. This will involve encouraging the Pakistan Army to rethink its traditional approach to national security. This, in turn, would require a re-definition of civil-military relations in Pakistan in favor of the elected governments.

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7. Seek freer trade with and within South Asia

Amidst an acceleration of region-wide growth and the real prospects for eliminating mass poverty, the Subcontinent needs a strong economic partnership with the United States. With the U.S. becoming an observer at the SAARC, the region's economic expectations of the U.S. have sharply increased. Even the smaller countries in South Asia are no longer looking toward traditional forms of U.S. aid, but want opportunities for trade, foreign direct investment, and open markets. An American drift toward protectionism will harm South Asia's economic growth and push it deeper into China's economic political orbit. Washington can help accelerate the process of regional economic integration by offering preferential tariffs to goods produced across borders in South Asia, and encourage investments by its companies on the Subcontinent. As the region moves toward a free trade area and seeks trans-border connections, the United States can raise its influence in the region by supporting region-wide projects for economic development, energy transfers, and trans-border transportation corridors.

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8. Support transregional infrastructure projects

The United States formally supports South Asia's integration with its abutting regions, especially Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Yet, the U.S. has come down hard against the region's expanding economic cooperation with Myanmar and Iran. The U.S. needs to rethink this policy. Traditionally, both these nations were very much part of British India's sphere of influence. Encouraging an India-led SAARC to regain a measure of influence in both Myanmar and Iran might be in the longer-term interests of the United States. Stronger cooperation between South Asia and Burma will serve to balance China's expanding influence there. That greater external pressure might only harden the xenophobic attitudes in Myanmar has been confirmed by the regime's refusal to allow substantive international assistance to the victims of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. A more credible strategy toward Myanmar might involve Western reassurances on the unity and territorial integrity of the nation and promises of significant international assistance in stages in return for a genuine road-map on internal

political liberalization. The United States must encourage SAARC and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to nudge Myanmar to open its economy and society by becoming a land bridge between the Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

As the next administration reviews its policies toward Iran, Washington must either lift its opposition to the India-Pakistan-Iran (IPI) pipeline or propose alternatives that will allow South Asia to meet its energy requirements. One alternative to the IPI pipeline is the Asian Development Bank-funded TAPI pipeline involving Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The other involves the construction of an underwater pipeline from the Arab Gulf to the Subcontinent. To manage the rising influence of Iran, the United States also needs to encourage stronger economic, political, and security cooperation between SAARC and the Gulf Cooperation Council. As Iraq slowly stabilizes, the United States should welcome greater South Asian participation in the country's economic reconstruction.

9. Strengthen civil society in the region

Unlike some parts of East Asia and much of the Middle East, the Subcontinent is defined by an irrepressible civil society. Across the Subcontinent, non-governmental organizations thrive to provide a measure of balance against excessive dominance by state structures. Any long-term U.S. strategy that aims to leverage its soft power in the region must focus on engaging civil society. It would involve a renewed outreach to South Asian Muslims, who have traditionally been moderate in their political orientation and deeply embedded in the eclectic culture of the Subcontinent. American engagement with South Asian Muslims is crucial as 40 percent of the world's Muslims live on the Subcontinent. While the Indian diaspora has made its mark in the western world, the diasporas from Pakistan,

Bangladesh, and elsewhere are equally accomplished and provide an important link between the United States and South Asia. South Asian elites, as well as many in the lower middle class, highly value modern education as a critical resource for their future generations. The U.S. needs a massive public-private partnership between American institutions and those in South Asia to meet the huge shortfall in the supply of education and training at all levels. The U.S. should avoid visa restrictions against South Asian middle classes that are natural allies of the west.

10. Expand India's role in global governance

Recent U.S. efforts to transform relations with India are driven by larger considerations of global governance. The United States recognizes the importance of a rising India in the reconstruction of international institutions. While the U.S. has often talked about making India a full partner in the management of the global order, it is yet to take definitive steps. The expansion of the permanent membership of the United Nations no longer seems a practical proposition in the near term. The next administration must initiate immediate steps to make India a full member of the G-8 group of advanced nations. On new global issues that confront the world today — such as controlling carbon emissions or the management of the challenges on energy, resource, and food security — India has now emerged as a decisive player. Any attempt by the United States to force India to comply with a new set of norms might be counterproductive. No government in India would be prepared to abandon the objective of promoting the economic well-being of its billion-plus population.

For the United States, the operative principle is a simple one: to think and travel together with India in the construction of a new international system, rather than demanding that New Delhi

“prove” itself to be a stakeholder. This would mean making India a full partner in the writing of new rules for institutions that accommodate a rapidly changing world.

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