

POLICY BRIEF

U.S. Policy Toward South Asia: Ideas and Choices for the Next Administration



U.S. Policy Toward South Asia: Ideas and Choices for the Next Administration (2021–2024)

By Hassan Abbas

This report is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Stephen P. Cohen, a leading American scholar of South Asia who passed away on Oct. 27, 2019.¹

Executive Summary

This paper examines the next U.S. administration's foreign policy choices toward South Asia. It argues that the turbulent nature of the entrenched India-Pakistan rivalry and the geopolitical realities of South Asia complicate U.S. policy options. While the United States' national security interests in South Asia are enduring, the nationalist fervor in the region necessitates a rethinking of Washington's policy choices. Analyzing the U.S. South Asia policy through the lens of national security needs, the report emphasizes:

- The dangers of misdiagnosing emerging challenges and a need for contextualizing the demographic, environmental, and socio-economic challenges of the region, especially in the post-COVID world;
- The effects of globalization and nuclearization on U.S. engagement choices;
- The serious potential consequences of India turning away from its secular democratic principles;
- The impact of China's rise as the leading strategic competitor to U.S. global influence on South Asia; and
- The need for a more vibrant and encompassing U.S. regional engagement agenda to support better governance in South Asia by encouraging religious harmony and countering drug trade, human trafficking, and transnational crime.

Contents

Introduction	3
South Asia and its Leading Security Challenges	5
A Brief Glance at the History of U.S. Engagement in South Asia:	7
The 3 Primary U.S. National Security Interests in South Asia, 2021-2025.	9
1. The Prospects of an India-Pakistan War and Nuclear Crisis	9
2. A Resurgence of Terrorism	11
Terrorist Outfits.	12
Religious Extremism and Discrimination.	12
Military vs. Law Enforcement.	13
Contributing Factors to Growing Insecurity	14
Afghanistan in Play	15
3. The China Factor and the U.S. Strategic Alliance with India	15
Analysis and Recommendations.	17
Conceptual Adjustments to Thinking about South Asia	17
Managing the U.S. – India Relationship.	18
Reinventing the U.S. – Pakistan Relationship	18

COVER: Indian Border Security Force (left, in green uniform) and Pakistani Rangers perform the “Beating Retreat” ceremony during a Republic Day celebration at the India-Pakistan Wagah border post on Jan. 26, 2019. (NARINDER NANU / Getty Images)

Introduction

South Asia will continue to demand special attention from the United States in light of its geopolitical dynamics, enormous potential market for goods and services, and security vulnerabilities. The incoming U.S. administration in January 2021 will find it hard, and in fact dangerous, to ignore developments in this region.

The U.S. policy toward South Asia has been in transition for various reasons, including a limited attention span and the imbroglio in Afghanistan. The emerging great power competition in Asia is yet another potent factor at play. The relevance of nontraditional security threats, especially in the post-COVID world, also cannot be underestimated.

The search for a cohesive and sustainable policy approach toward the region is an ongoing challenge. The U.S. South Asia policy is neither properly integrated into the policy for East Asia nor always complementing the U.S. strategy for the broader Indo-Pacific Basin. The strengthening of Pakistan-China ties, the growing India-China rivalry, and developing Indian ties with East Asia deserve better understanding and more attention. Asia is changing at a rapid pace in terms of connectivity as well as trade network integration, and the U.S. policy needs to get up to speed to remain competitive. For Washington, perennial rivalries, contested borders, religious extremism, and underdevelopment produce a set of complex security challenges in South Asia, complicating policy choices.



Representatives from China and Pakistan sign cooperation documents during the ninth Joint Cooperation Committee meeting of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Islamabad, Pakistan in November 2019. China and Pakistan agreed to further their cooperation under CPEC. (AHMAD KAMAL / Getty Images)

The new administration will have to face these daunting challenges as nationalist tendencies, polarizing societies, and governance challenges in South Asia become more acute, alongside a steady onslaught of demographic and environmental changes that affect South Asia. Any misdiagnosis of the emerging challenges can seriously hurt U.S. interests and limit the potential of constructive engagement with Washington's allies and partners. The U.S. investments in the region in terms of both economic and security cooperation, such as financial and military aid to Pakistan since the 1950s and the 2006 U.S.-India Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, have been significant, and it is high time to evaluate the outcomes of these policies. It is equally important to analyze which

aspects of these relationships were flawed and poorly managed.

This report attempts to analyze U.S. policy options in South Asia, primarily focusing on India and Pakistan, through the lens of three primary U.S. national security interests that are discernible from the policies of the last two administrations. Briefly, these relate to prospects of an India-Pakistan war, a resurgence of terrorism, the role of China in South Asia, and the sustainability of the United States' strategic partnership with India. It is crucial to delve deeper into how U.S. interests are framed and defined, and consequently probe whether the time has come to reassess these interests. It is also pertinent to deliberate on how to refine and restate U.S. goals in South Asia's fast-changing socio-political environment.

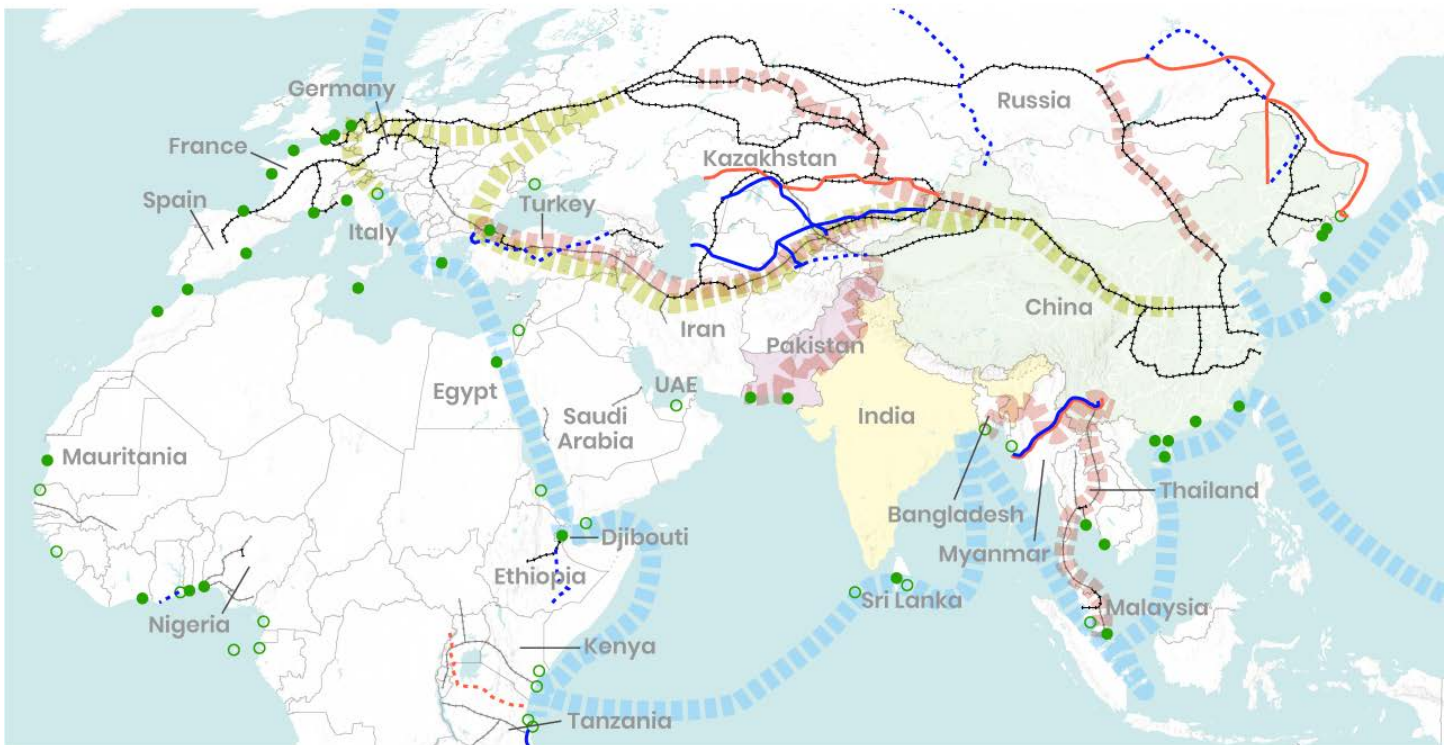
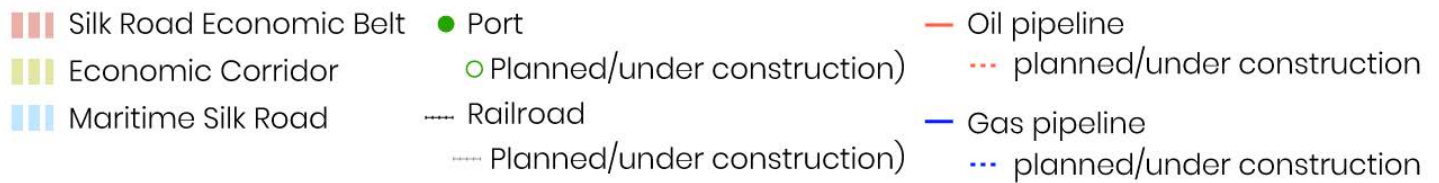
The general nature of South Asia's challenges is relatively well known. However, for Washington, the unanswered question is whether it truly cares, keeping its core interests in mind.² And if it is concerned about the consequences of such lingering problems, what does "care" really mean in terms of cooperation, collaboration, and assistance? Additionally, the policy challenge and how the U.S. views itself in terms of its global status

and attendant responsibilities are intertwined. Is it about stability and terrorism threats, or the strategic need to compete with China in South Asia that drives primary U.S. interests? Is it purely about economic interests and access to trade and commerce? Or is it a function of Washington's capacity as it confronts other global issues?

This report finds that U.S. security interests in the region present

policy challenges with unprecedented challenges. Demographic trends such as exploding population growth, worsening socioeconomic patterns, nationalist fervor, and exclusionist tendencies impinging on minority rights and democratic norms not only exacerbate social fragmentation and radicalization risks, but also increase the threat of military escalation between India and Pakistan. The U.S. role as a crisis manager in case of a

South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies

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“South Asia ought to have a more prominent role in the United States’ grand strategy than it currently enjoys.”

military confrontation in South Asia is important but insufficient for any long-term contribution toward peace building. South Asia ought to have a more prominent role in the United States’ grand strategy than it currently enjoys.

To discuss these issues, it is crucial to analyze the major themes and nodes of the current U.S. security policy in the region to set the stage for analysis. In short, it will be of some value to gauge where South Asia stands in the broader U.S. grand strategy and evaluate whether it is placed appropriately. The brief concludes with a set of recommendations keeping in view the more general policy goals.

South Asia and its Leading Security Challenges

South Asia is loosely defined as a region comprising eight nations – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepal – bounded by the Indian Ocean and the Himalayan mountain range.³ The region serves as a crossroad to the Middle East, Central Asia, and vitally as ground zero for the great rivalry between the two Asian giants: India and China. It is highly diverse in terms of language, culture, and religion, as well as its topography and geography. It occupies just 3 percent of the world’s landmass yet holds 24 per-

cent of the global population (nearly 2 billion today).⁴ Aside from being one of the world’s most densely populated areas, it also hosts a very high number of malnourished and illiterate people. For instance, according to one estimate, 400 million people in South Asia live in abject poverty; furthermore, the region also contains “the world’s largest conflict-affected population, about 71 million people.”⁵

South Asia’s share of the global impoverished increased from 27.3% to 33.4% between 1990 and 2013.⁶ In India, 21.2% of the population is living below the international poverty line of \$1.90 US per day. Although non-military threats such as poverty, social vulnerability, or ecological damage are seldom seen as comparable to military threats in a conventional sense, there is an increasing recognition that military and non-military threats are linked inextricably to each other. For example, South Asia is home to almost 30 percent of the entire world’s youth population (aged between 15 to 29 as per standard definition). The median age in India is around 26 years, and in Pakistan around 23 years. Research shows that “states with a large youth bulge were nearly 2.5 times as likely to experience an outbreak of civil conflict as other states.”⁷ It could, however, serve as a demographic dividend, too, provided education and health investments are made. The dynamism of youth can play

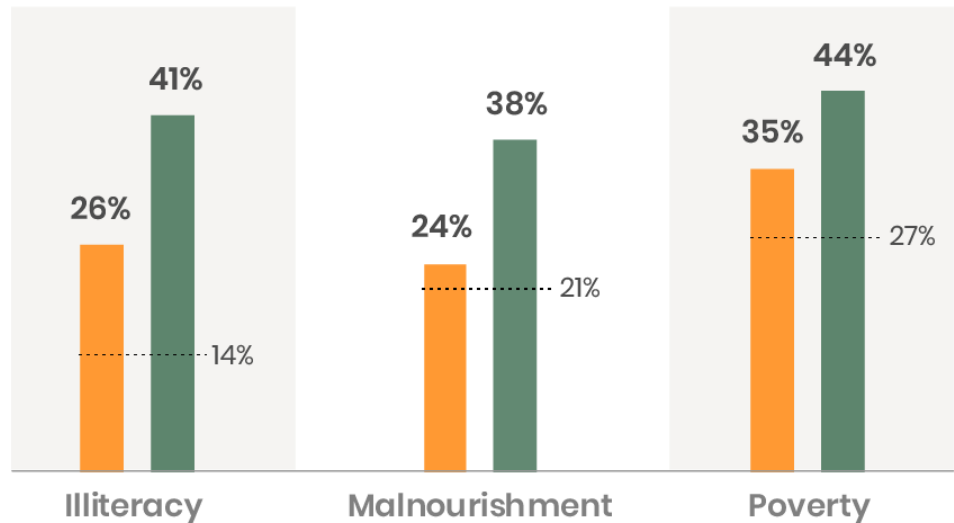
a crucial role in development, but it can also become a liability if countries do not capitalize on it in a timely manner.

Environmental challenges serve as a major critical threat to South Asia and are, perhaps, not receiving enough attention. According to a World Bank study, global warming creates a frightening risk for South Asia in terms of ecological disruption, environmental degradation, loss of habitats, and severe threat to the livelihood of over 800 million people.⁸ Another dimension of this challenge relates to Pakistan’s dependence on water sources that originate outside its borders, complicating its security dynamics. This is likely to emerge as a significant challenge in the coming years.

Pakistan is one of the most water-stressed states in the world, and as former Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari emphasized: “The water crisis in Pakistan is directly linked to relations with India. Its resolution could prevent an environmental catastrophe in South Asia, but failure to do so could fuel the fires of discontent that may lead to extremism and terrorism.”⁹ What is also important to recognize is that Pakistan’s outdated irrigation system and failure to build needed water reservoirs reflects its poor priorities when it comes to water management in the first place. Water scarcity in India, for instance, depleting groundwater

India, Pakistan Human Development Rates

■ India
■ Pakistan
--- World



Sources: World Bank, UNICEF, UNDP

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supplies in the Indian state of Punjab – is also expected to worsen with time. Around 1,000 farmers in Indian Punjab commit suicide every year under debt stress, mostly linked to the high cost of pumping groundwater.¹⁰ The issue is progressively becoming a major regional threat.

The human development data for South Asia is a bit scary. According to World Bank Chief Economist Shantayanan Devarajan, “South Asia has some of the world’s worst levels of human deprivation. India’s child malnutrition levels nearly double those of sub-Saharan Africa.”¹¹ According to the United Nations Development Program, 45 percent of Pakistani children under age 5 are malnourished, 43 percent of Pakistanis over 15 are illiterate, and just 46 percent of children are receiving secondary education.¹² These health hazards and poor education policies are bound to have a lasting impact on internal security. We have already witnessed the adverse effects of these trends in the form of social

unrest, increased crime levels, and expanded violence.

Human development is a key indicator of future progress, and South Asia is lagging behind in this crucial sphere. Disputes have left regional cooperation in the educational, scientific, and trade sectors with tremendous unrealized potential. South Asia is among the least integrated parts of the world, as the contentious India-Pakistan relationship serves as an insurmountable barrier for trade between the two countries. Even a shocking COVID-19 challenge that has badly jolted and disoriented the world has not convinced the two states to postpone their enmity and cooperate to address the public health emergency. It does not bode well for the future of peace in South Asia.

In the traditional sense of security, threats in South Asia have also evolved. Tensions between India and Pakistan have escalated in recent years, due partly to the freezing of bilateral dialogue and heightened military tensions linked

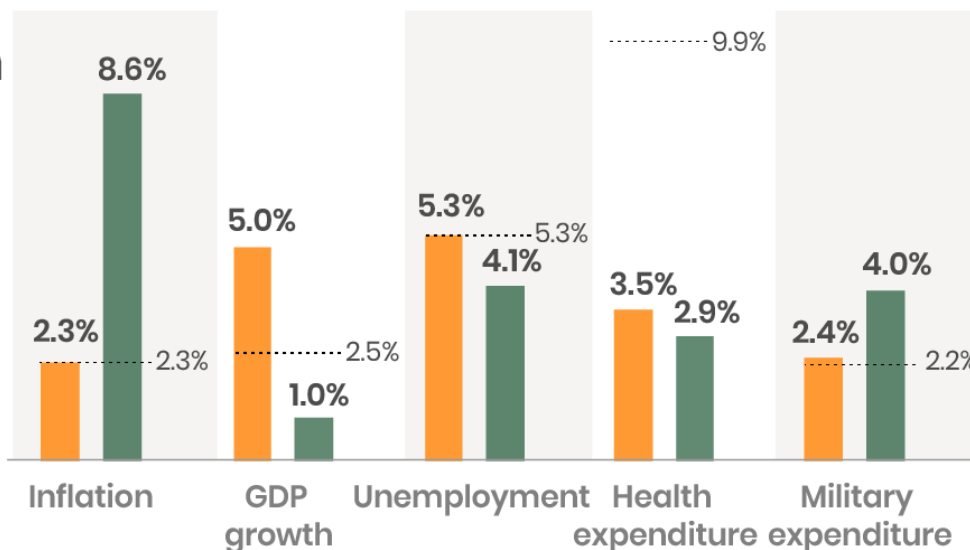
to the Kashmir dispute. The rivalry extends to Afghanistan, where both nations pursue different and often conflicting goals. In a policy reversal of sorts, India’s input into the policy conversations appears to have significantly reduced as the U.S. has searched for a hasty exit from Afghanistan with Pakistan’s help.

The Indo-Chinese tensions, which are worse now than they have been in decades, are likely to simmer for a while. India and China were good at finding ways to get along, but now they are finding it harder to resolve tough issues. For the United States, its top rival clashing with its top partner in the region has policy implications.

Nonetheless, a significant number of threats in South Asia are now internal. They range from religious extremism and constricted space for religious and ethnic minorities to internal displacement and growing public disenchantment with existing governance models.¹³ Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are

India, Pakistan Economic Development Rates

■ India
■ Pakistan
--- World



Sources: Globalization and Health, International Labour Organization, World Bank, National Center for Biotechnology Information, UN,

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also reeling under similar stress though less acute.

The crux is that democracy in South Asia is under increasing threat, and almost every country in the region is feeling the heat of rising public expectations. This has opened the door for greater authoritarianism. Pakistan has curbed media freedom while minority rights have been attacked through constitutional manipulation in India. Autocratic ascendance in South Asia could intensify social instability through increasingly violent crackdowns on dissent, rising communal and sectarian violence, and public protests. India and Pakistan are already witnessing some signs of these trends which, unless reversed, will only exacerbate the security problems in South Asia.

A Brief Glance at the History of U.S. Engagement in South Asia:

South Asia has transformed massively over the years both economically and socio-politically, and its security predicaments and geopolitical pressures have transmuted in parallel. From the rise of globalization and nuclearization to the emergence of terrorism as a major threat alongside substantial technological advancements, many new opportunities and challenges arose for the U.S. In a broader sense, U.S. interests started converging more with India's after decades of "estrangement" between the world's two largest democracies – especially since the Indian

notion of "nonalignment" and its reputation for pursuing "strategic restraint" is no longer in play.¹⁴

Even during that estrangement, India was receiving U.S. aid (which helped its Green Revolution), and Washington had supported New Delhi with military aid after its defeat at the hands of China in the Himalayas, but India's relationship with the former Soviet Union was stronger.¹⁵ A deepening strategic and defense cooperation with Washington is steadily replacing New Delhi's Cold War-era closeness with Moscow. It is worth noting, though, that Russia remains India's top arms supplier for its army, and analysts view the India-Russia relationship as "resilient and deepening."¹⁶ It is clear that New Delhi continues to see Russia as a "time-tested partner."¹⁷ The

U.S.-India relationship, on the other hand, lacks operational military cooperation and is affected by unsatisfied expectations.¹⁸

At the same time, after many highs and lows the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has become increasingly unpredictable. It was toxic in the late Obama and early Trump years but improved in the past couple of years.

Whether it was a “deadly embrace” for the U.S. or a consequence of Pakistan’s “magnificent delusions,” the history of misunderstanding between the United States and Pakistan is long and complicated.¹⁹ For a considerable period of time, India viewed the U.S. as being too sympathetic toward Pakistan, while Pakistan considered the United States as too deferential to India. Mainly driven by economic interests, India changed its perspective on the relationship, enabling its ties with the United States to grow. However, Pakistan’s worldview, mostly inspired by its security concerns, showed little flexibility, resulting in deteriorating relations with the United States.

For the United States, India and Pakistan remain important partners for different reasons; nevertheless, Washington’s attempts to balance its relations with the two South Asian rivals have had mixed results at best. The policy of de-hyphenation or decoupling, meaning the U.S. relationships with India and Pakistan as distinct strands of policy, is a superficial proposition. Subordinating concerns about India-Pakistan relations to U.S. bilateral ties with New Delhi and Islamabad would be impossible in

practice.²⁰ As Stephen Cohen had argued, “we can’t de-hyphenate the two countries, which are each other’s worst enemies.”²¹ In some areas, such as trade and economic ties, the relationship indeed can be compartmentalized, but the two states are intrinsically linked to each other when it comes to regional security, given the Kashmir dispute, the extremism problem, and the nuclear competition in South Asia. Viewing and judging the two states through varying standards will hamper U.S. leverage in South Asia.²²

A glance at some statements and analyses made by reputed South Asia experts reflect the historical context and the nature of the United States’ challenges in South Asia today:

■ Pakistan’s former Ambassador and analyst Touqir Hussain: “The U.S.-led Afghan Jihad against the Soviets, assisted by Pakistan, ended up as a bittersweet victory as it laid the foundation of a deadly extremist religious infrastructure that started beating to the rhythm of global Islamic revivalism unleashing the forces of radicalism. [...] The Americans departed following their victory over the Soviets but left behind a broken Afghanistan, [...], and an embittered Pakistan abandoned and sanctioned. There was an exponential rise in anti-Americanism among the close allies of Washington, like the army.”²³

■ After President Bill Clinton visited India in 2000, becoming the first U.S. president to visit India since 1978, India’s finance minister at the time, Yashwant Sinha, said: “Clinton swept away 50 years of misper-

ception, and that the two countries appeared to be on a path of realistic engagement.”²⁴












■ In his 2019 publication covering U.S.-Pakistan relations, Atlantic Council’s Distinguished Fellow Shuja Nawaz recognized that the U.S. government fails to fully appreciate Pakistan’s existential struggle against hostile and much larger India. He argued that U.S. built short-term alliances with often autocratic and corrupt Pakistani leaders and thereby estranged the Pakistani population over time. He additionally acknowledged that “Pakistan tends to treat the U.S. as a gullible partner that can be fooled to part with its money in return for vague promises that may or may not be fulfilled.”²⁵

■ French scholar of South Asian studies, Christophe Jaffrelot, analyzed in a 2019 piece the future of secularism in India. He argued that “The political dominance of the BJP’s brand of Hindu nationalism since the 2014 election has called into question the future viability of the country’s secularist tradition and commitment to diversity.”²⁶

■ Stephen Tankel, a professor at American University in DC, while discussing the U.S. negotiations with the Taliban, maintains that Pakistan has “long since attempted to simultaneously downplay their support for the Taliban while trying to argue that any deal with the Taliban has to go through them. [...] And judging by Imran Khan’s reception at the White House [2019], it certainly seems that at least some in the Trump administration have embraced that sense that Pakistan is critical to any deal.”²⁷

India, Pakistan Military Might

As of 2018

		Category	India	Pakistan
BUDGET	₹	2018 military budget	4 trillion rupees	1.26 trillion Pakistani rupees
		■ In 2018 U.S. dollars	58.4 billion USD	10.2 billion USD
		■ Percent of GDP	2.10%	3.60%
ARMY		Personnel	1.2 million	560,000
		Tanks	3,565	2,496
		Armored personnel carriers	336	1,605
		Artillery guns	9,719	4,472
NAVY		Submarines	16	8
		Frigates	13	9
		Combat capable aircraft	75	8
		Patrol, coastal combatant vessels	106	17
AIR FORCE		Personnel	127,000	45,000
		Combat aircraft	814	425
		Nuclear warheads	130-140	140-150

Source: Times of India, Reuters

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■ Ashley Tellis, who holds the Tata Chair for strategic affairs at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, deftly summarizes the challenges faced by the U.S.-India relations. “In a noticeable departure from the strategic altruism displayed by the George W. Bush and Obama administrations toward India, Trump has pursued a more transactional approach, attempting to coerce India into complying with U.S. demands on a variety of issues ranging from market access to relations with third world countries.”²⁸

The 3 Primary U.S. National Security Interests in South Asia, 2021–2024

1. The Prospects of an India-Pakistan War and Nuclear Crisis

Relations between India and Pakistan, neither healthy nor friendly to begin with, have considerably deteriorated during recent years. Events

have brought them to the brink of war on many occasions. Cease-fire violations across the Line of Control in Kashmir have become a routine exercise profoundly impacting ordinary lives on both sides. Both states have threateningly reminded each other that they possess nuclear weapons, and their threshold for using these weapons could be modified. This escalation is relatively new. For instance, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh made a statement in August 2019 about the Indian nuclear doctrine

“Pakistan does not have a ‘no first use’ policy for its nuclear weapons, which makes India’s recent signaling of potentially renouncing its ‘no first use’ policy all the more alarming.”

of “no first use”: “What happens in the future depends on the circumstances.” This comment created a stir in Pakistan, where many security experts interpreted it as an Indian move to abandon its “no first use” policy.²⁹

Meanwhile, Pakistan continues to invest in developing and refining its short-range, tactical nuclear weapons, attempting to match India’s second-strike capabilities. The repercussions of these developments are worrying; Debak Das, MacArthur Nuclear Security fellow at Stanford University, aptly maintains that, “each country’s new tactical and strategic weapons systems pose serious challenges to regional stability. Not only has this new weaponry exacerbated the arms race, but it also raises serious problems about nuclear command and control.”³⁰

India’s controversial decision to change the constitutional status of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (revoking its special autonomous status under Article 370) in late 2019 has led to worsening relations with Pakistan and thus increased the risk of war because Pakistan claims rights over the Indian-controlled Kashmir area. A “Line of Control” divides Indian controlled side of Kashmir from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir (known as Azad Jammu & Kashmir). A U.N. Military Observer Group in

India and Pakistan continues to monitor and observe the cease-fire line.³¹ Even though the area is considered disputed, both Kashmir regions have operated under the sovereignty of the two states for over 70 years now.

In a country with more than 200 million Muslims, Jammu and Kashmir is the only state with a Muslim majority (the Jammu area is Hindu-dominated, but Kashmir as a whole is majority Muslim) – thus its importance to India’s image as a diverse country. India revoked the state’s autonomy while separating it from its Buddhist-dominated Ladakh region and converting these into union territories directly ruled from the capital. The purpose of India’s move is to fully integrate Kashmir into the Indian state. While Ladakh and Jammu residents largely feel satisfied with this new arrangement, most Muslim Kashmiris are outraged.

After revoking Article 370, New Delhi imposed a digital siege and communications blackout alongside a curfew in the Kashmir area to impose its will on the people. Thousands of Kashmiris, including pro-India politicians, were arrested without charge, and thousands of more security personnel were deputed to enhance the clamp-down.³² Public reaction in Kashmir was only further delayed through such extreme measures. The New

York Times reported in September 2019: “Almost Kashmir’s entire leadership class – democratically elected representatives, teachers, students, intellectuals, and prominent merchants – is now behind bars... The arrests and the blockade have left Kashmiris feeling unsettled, demoralized, and furious.”³³ The Kashmir street remains bitterly angry and frustrated.

Quite expectedly, Pakistan reacted angrily to this turn of events. For Pakistan, “the Indian action constitutes a grave violation of the U.N. Security Council resolutions on Kashmir and bilateral Pakistan-India agreements, such as the 1972 Shimla Agreement and the Lahore Declaration.”³⁴ While India argues that the new arrangement will facilitate better governance and help it manage the simmering violence, it is more likely preparing for the departure of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. In India’s view, this may reactivate militants and jihadists of all stripes in Pakistan and Afghanistan to refocus on Kashmir.³⁵

Pakistan’s history of supporting militants to serve its goals in Kashmir haunts India. Pakistan can exploit any renewed violence in the Kashmir valley to discredit India and shore up Pakistan’s case. In contrast, India is likely to shift all the blame to Pakistan for triggering disturbances through its proxies in Kashmir. Aware of the active, Kash-

mir-supporting militancy network of the Pakistani groups Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan warned his countrymen against any bid to “wage jihad in Kashmir.” According to him, “Anyone, who thinks that he will cross the border to join the Kashmiris [fighting for their right], is a big enemy of them and Pakistan.”³⁶ This blame game continues while ordinary Kashmiris are going through hell.

The resolution of this conflict appears increasingly difficult in the presence of nationalist fervor on both sides. The conflict over the Kashmir region could trigger a conventional war at any time, potentially igniting a nuclear exchange. The history of wars between the two rivals and persistent mutually aggressive military posturing indicate a trend that is hard to ignore. During the 2019 Pulwama/Balakot crisis, India and Pakistan both demonstrated their willingness to use conventional military force under the nuclear umbrella, exposing the region to a new level of escalation risk.

Except for the hope of a third-party (read U.S.) intervention for crisis management, the absence of any credible bilateral escalation control mechanism reflects the challenge’s nature. The United States has a vital national security interest in preventing the situation from moving toward a war that would be disastrous for South Asia.

Continued U.S. concerns about Pakistan’s vertical and horizontal nuclear expansion, coupled with nuclear safety issues in South Asia, add to the list of major challeng-



Indian security personnel are shown near the site of a clash that killed two suspected militants in the Barzulla neighborhood of Srinagar in the India-controlled Kashmir region on October 12, 2020. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) Commander Saifullah was among two militants killed in the operation. (WASEEM ANDRABI / Getty Images)

es for Washington’s South Asia policy.³⁷ As an academic workshop deliberating on nuclear dangers in South Asia concluded, experts in both India and Pakistan “tend to advocate a belligerent, expansive nuclear arsenal and postures, based on conservative readings of classic Cold War American nuclear strategic texts, and oppose disarmament and arms control measures.”³⁸

For Pakistan, knowing well that it seriously lags behind India in economic growth terms, nuclear weapons offer a poison pill defense against what they view as Indian hegemonic designs and a potential conventional attack to dismember the country. To talk Pakistan out of this severe threat assessment is extremely difficult, and recent developments in India offer little help in this direction. Lastly, it is import-

ant to note that Pakistan does not have a “no first use” policy for its nuclear weapons, which makes India’s recent signaling of potentially renouncing its “no first use” policy all the more alarming.

Stability in South Asia in this scenario is understandably a major U.S. goal. As for conflict resolution, international relations research teaches us that it is geostrategic interests and the domestic power calculus of leaders in both India and Pakistan that can create a path toward peace building.³⁹ Outsiders can only facilitate once there is an opening.

2. A Resurgence of Terrorism

South Asia tops the list in regions most affected by terrorism, according to the 2019 Global Terrorism

Index. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are among the top 10 countries most affected by terrorism worldwide.⁴⁰ Besides al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Khorasan chapter of Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan, various smaller ethnic and local terrorist organizations ranging from ultra-left Maoists to the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Baluch Liberation Army to the anti-Shiite Lashkar-e-Jhangvi continue to operate in the region. Overall, despite terrorism-related deaths and incidents being on the decline in Pakistan and India, the ongoing violence in Afghanistan impacts the whole area.

Terrorist Outfits

It is notable that Pakistan's counterterrorism policy has successfully targeted groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and other al Qaeda affiliates in the Pakistani-Afghan border areas. However, there are concerns that Tehrik-i-Taliban elements are still operating from some sanctuaries in Afghanistan and that some of its splinter groups are coming together with renewed vigor. This does not augur well for Pakistan or Afghanistan. The international Financial Action Task Force also continues to be concerned about Pakistan's links with terrorism financing and money laundering, even though Pakistan has recently made progress through legislation and other administrative measures to deal with the objections raised by the international body. U.S. security experts are convinced that Pakistan has yet to decisively move against various Kashmir-focused groups operating from Pakistan, such as Jaish-e-Mohammad and

Lashkar-e-Taiba. Arresting or confining these organizations' top leadership does not amount to dismantling them.

Religious Extremism and Discrimination

Religious minorities in Pakistan continue to be at the mercy of religious extremist groups, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which recommends Pakistan to be designated as a "country of particular concern continuously."⁴¹ Recent upsurges in sectarianism, and especially a major show of street power by anti-Shiite organizations in Karachi in September 2020, reflect a negative trend in this context. Deradicalization efforts remain limited and dominated by the military, while investment in police organizations' capacity building to tackle extremism continues to be highly inadequate.

A major Pakistani project to encourage religious pluralism and create an opening for peace with India is the Kartarpur corridor – a 4-kilometer (2.5-mile) pathway connecting two sacred locations for members of the Sikh faith across the Indian-Pakistani border in Punjab.⁴² This passage allows Sikh pilgrims from India to visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan without visa restrictions. South Asian media hailed the road link as a "corridor of peace." The optimism generated by this opening in November 2019 has yet to take root, however. Indian concerns about how Pakistan may use this opportunity to make further inroads among the Indian Sikh community to trigger or support

something like the 1980s Khalistan movement is a factor in play.

As a follow-up to the provocative changes in Kashmir's legal status. India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, undertook yet another controversial move: amending the country's citizenship law to offer accelerated citizenship status to migrants from the neighboring countries except for Muslims. For 200 million Indian Muslims, this amounts to marginalization and an effort to turn India into a homeland for Hindus – a step challenging India's tradition of secularism. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michele Bachelet, called this move "fundamentally discriminatory," undermining India's commitment to international law and its constitution.⁴³ Furious public protests erupted, muted only by the COVID-19 crisis.⁴⁴ Electronic and social media widely reported incidents of Hindu mobs killing Muslims.

As former Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells, contended in her testimony to the U.S. Congress in December 2019, "incidents of violence and discrimination against minorities in India, including cow vigilante attacks against members of the Dalit and Muslim communities, and the existence of anti-conversion laws in nine states are not in keeping with India's legal protections for minorities."⁴⁵

Consequently, USCIRF listed India as a "country of particular concern," and its representative expressed serious concern about amendments in citizenship laws, maintaining that, "this potential-

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor



ly exposes millions of Muslims to detention, deportation and statelessness when the government completes its plan for a nationwide, national register.”⁴⁶ These increasingly majoritarian and communal policies in India are likely to push some elements among disenfranchised Muslims toward radicalization and extremism, exacerbating India’s internal security challenges. Besides the potential for creating

extremism, India’s cohesion and the rule of law may be at stake.

Military vs. Law Enforcement

In Pakistan’s case, law enforcement and security agencies are more active against terrorist outfits. Yet, according to a study by the U.S. West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center, the Islamic State’s Khorasan chapter “has been successful in reinforcing its orga-

nizational capacity in both Afghanistan and Pakistan by fostering partnerships with regional militant groups.” Its findings suggest that an agile Islamic State-Khorasan network in the region can pose significant security challenges.⁴⁷

In both India and Pakistan, civilian law enforcement and police institutions are struggling due to lack of funding, which in turn, is an indication of a lack of awareness about



Pakistani policemen stop a procession of supporters of the hard-line Islamist party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. The September 2020 protest was in reaction to Charlie Hebdo's (a French satirical magazine) reprinting of a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammad. Charlie Hebdo reprinted the cartoons to mark the start of the trial of alleged accomplices in the 2015 massacre at the magazine that followed the original printing of the cartoon. (AAMIR QURESHI / Getty Images)

the need for modernizing criminal justice systems. The growing terrorism-crime nexus and expanding networks of transnational organized crime in South Asia are significant problems that deserve far more attention than either are receiving at present.⁴⁸ In both countries, military budgets take undue priority, which puts civilian law enforcement at a disadvantage. Since 9/11, Pakistan received from the U.S. over \$23 billion in security assistance for its role as a counter-terrorism partner but very little of that was actually channeled to its civilian law enforcement

agencies even when specifically allocated for civilian law enforcement purposes.⁴⁹

Tommy Ross and Stephen Tankel aptly argue for retooling U.S. security sector assistance in a recent article where they also share that the State Department assistance to civilian security forces in partner nations 'overemphasizes building tactical capabilities for law enforcement (that is, training small operational units on narrow capabilities like interdicting narcotraffickers or conducting counterterrorism raids) at the expense of the administra-

tive capacity and professionalism of these forces and institutions.⁵⁰ This explains a policy challenge that deserves special attention.

Contributing Factors to Growing Insecurity

The nature of security threats in South Asia is changing due to rapid demographic and climate changes. These dynamics are likely to take center stage for policymakers in South Asia in the coming years. British environmentalist Norman Myers argues that security "amounts to human well-being:

not only protection from harm and injury but access to water, food, shelter, health, employment, and other basic requisites.” This definition must figure prominently in any nation’s view of security.⁵¹ While analyzing prospects of the transformation of South Asian security considerations through environmental factors, Prof. Adil Najam, Dean of Boston University’s Pardee School of Global Studies, aptly argues that “the environment demands a politics of consensus and cooperation. A new approach to security would stress the need for cooperative management of shared environments rather than adversarial contests over scarce resources.”⁵² A sustainable U.S. push for peace in South Asia cannot ignore this crucial arena anymore.

Afghanistan in Play

Many South Asians are legitimately concerned that a successful U.S. settlement with the Taliban in Afghanistan would open up doors of power-sharing (or total dominance) for the Taliban in Kabul, which may empower other religious extremist groups in the region.⁵³ In such an eventuality, the Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal belt, may again serve as a sanctuary for regional and global terrorist outfits from where these groups can launch global attacks against the United States and its allies. This potential remains a significant concern for the U.S. counterterrorism policy in South Asia. Pakistan’s decision to incorporate the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas into its Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, thus bringing it into the mainstream, is a much delayed but positive development in this context. The transition,

however, has been marred by exclusionist policies, lack of engagement with youth in tribal areas, and military dominance.

The elusive peace in Afghanistan, if achieved, could benefit South Asia in more ways than one. Besides shrinking the space where militants of all stripes can operate freely, a peace arrangement will also disarm the India-Pakistan proxy warfare in Afghanistan. As Professor Ali Jalali, the former Interior Minister of Afghanistan, maintains, “cooperation, not competition is the keyword to stave off the fallouts of the great power and regional actors’ competition and avoid third-party influence over bilateral relationships with Afghanistan.”⁵⁴

The U.S. had helped midwife the 2010 Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit trade agreement but did little to build on that effort, which was spearheaded by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. There are many possibilities for building connections between the countries, ranging from investing in the rebuilding of regional trade routes to medical facility corridors in border areas, serving millions of people in need.

3. The China Factor and the U.S. Strategic Alliance with India

China has developed a huge infrastructure building capacity, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reflects that. South Asia serves as a critical node of the BRI. India had decided not to join the initiative. For Sri Lanka and Maldives, the promise of economic benefits even at the cost of some security vulner-

abilities (such as controlling influence over port operations), was too hard to ignore, and Pakistan offers the BRI a valuable platform.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, benefitting from a Chinese investment of around \$25 billion (out of planned \$65 billion) extends the land and maritime routes that connect the two countries through Gwadar port and a network of approximately 2,000 miles of railways, roads, and pipelines. However, the Chinese military sees the two countries’ military ties as the backbone of the bilateral relationship.⁵⁵ With deft handling of both economic and security policy tools, China has cultivated an increasingly dependent ally in Pakistan while establishing a sprawling communication network across the Indian Ocean. The grand project, however, is facing some challenges leading to its downscaling in certain sectors.⁵⁶

On the U.S.-India front, besides cooperation in maritime security, conducting joint naval exercises and intelligence sharing for counterterrorism in the early 2000s, the real breakthrough came in the shape of the 2005 Civil Nuclear Cooperative Initiative. This framework lifted a three-decade U.S. moratorium on nuclear energy trade with India. For this agreement to bear fruit, India agreed to separate its civil and military nuclear facilities and to bring its civil nuclear infrastructure under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. Congressional approval took three years (until 2008), but it was a significant development in building a new and sustainable foundation for bilateral relations.

Kashmir's Geopolitical Divisions



As articulately framed by New York University's Professor W.P.S. Sidhu, for India, "The principal driver behind the transformation of its relations with Washington lies in the Indian ambition to become the world's third-largest economy by 2025 and, consequently, also

emerge as one of the key global political and security actors."⁵⁷ He adds that, "New Delhi grudgingly recognized that a partnership with the United States was indispensable to attain these twin external conditions." The relationship moved in this direction quite well for both

sides with enhanced cooperation across a range of economic and political areas.⁵⁸

As an explanation of the dynamics involved, S. Ganguly and S. P. Kapur, two accomplished scholars of India in the United States,

posit that deepening U.S.-India ties are a product of a realization “that this military and diplomatic cooperation, which would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, will be indispensable to them as they hedge against the dangers of rising Chinese power in the future.”⁵⁹

The prevailing India-U.S. bilateral relations are considered a “global strategic partnership” and projected in India as *Chalein Saath Saath* (Forward Together We Go) and *Sanjha Prayas, Sab ka Vikas* (Shared Effort, Progress for All) – initiatives adopted during 2014-2015 meetings between the heads of states.⁶⁰ But the relationship also has its challenges. Recent bilateral trade disputes and India’s inclination to purchase the S-400 air defense missile system from Russia are testing the vigor of this relationship. Strengthening the U.S. relationship with India remains an important strategic goal for U.S. policy in the Asia Pacific region.

China’s rise as the leading strategic competitor to U.S. global influence, impacting South Asia in tangible ways, is indisputable. Besides strengthening its ties with Pakistan, China is “intensely penetrating South Asia and the wider Indian Ocean region at large, seeking to build privileged relations with India’s smaller neighbors in ways that only diminish its local influence.”⁶¹ The massive Chinese investment in South Asia through BRI reflects only one aspect of the Chinese regional approach. New Delhi’s inability to match this Chinese strategy is becoming apparent, and so long as that remains the case,

Washington will be critical to India’s external balancing of Beijing. On Oct 27, the United States and India inked the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement during a visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper. BECA will allow New Delhi access to real-time American geospatial intelligence as part of U.S.-Indian alignment against China.

The India-China boundary disputes include the Galwan Valley on the Line of Actual Control, separating India’s Ladakh region of the Indian-administered Kashmir from China-controlled Aksai Chin. The countries came to blows in June in this area. Relations between the two are also affected by differing conceptions of maritime order in terms of freedom of navigation and international laws, for instance, among other developments. This unambiguously demonstrates that the Sino-Indian relationship is a fiercely competitive one.⁶² It is early to determine what shape the India-China border dispute will take in coming months. Geopolitical analyst Kamran Bokhari with the Center for Global Policy argues that these latest clashes could “embolden Pakistan to take greater risks on the LOC [Line of Control],” which is in the same vicinity, considering it “a historic opportunity that it would want to leverage to the maximum extent possible.”⁶³ It is not to be overlooked that bilateral trade between India and China has been steadily growing despite many challenges, but this has created a trade deficit to India’s disadvantage (over \$50 billion), adding to India’s discomfort.

Analysis and Recommendations

The U.S. policy toward South Asia has not delivered the way it was supposed to, and any meaningful engagement with the region will require empathy for the socio-economic woes and development challenges South Asians face. Additionally, to achieve regional stability and peace, South Asia will have to come to terms with its conflict-ridden past. The United States cannot solve South Asia’s perennial security problems without the regional resolve and wherewithal to make tough political choices. However, the U.S. can nudge, facilitate, and serve as a partner in building peace.

Conceptual Adjustments to Thinking about South Asia

As Arzan Tarapore, a research scholar on South Asia at Stanford University, argues in his *Asia Policy* essay, BRI has effectively shown that the construct of regional boundaries is increasingly irrelevant. Due to a variety of geographical and political dependencies, many states in broader Asia will maintain an ambiguous strategic identity. He aptly concludes, “Washington will only forge new forms of partnerships if it avoids litmus tests of loyalty and grows comfortable with this ambiguity.”⁶⁴ These insights are quite relevant for adjusting U.S. policy in South Asia, making it more flexible as well as inclusive.

“... it is important for New Delhi to understand, as the title of a recent essay from Ashley Tellis warn, that, ‘If India keeps diluting its liberal character, the West will be a less eager partner.’”

Secondly, more emphasis on and investment in partnerships with South Asian states in combating illicit drugs, human trafficking, and transnational crime is both a practical law enforcement capacity-building approach and a way to build trust.⁶⁵ Enabling better governance in South Asia through such collaborations would lead to security and economic progress, which would in turn strengthen ties.

Managing the U.S. – India Relationship

The U.S.-India strategic relationship is growing, with benefits accruing for both sides. However, as concluded by the *Asia Policy*'s special issue on the U.S.-India partnership, “despite a seeming congruence of interests between the two sides, sustaining and developing U.S.-India relations will require considerable attention and imagination in both countries.”⁶⁶ This would include careful consideration of issues such as any disagreements on Iran policy, contentions over trade deals, and visas for highly skilled Indian workers.

Alyssa Ayers, Senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, while assessing the U.S.-India ties, insightfully explains that “the habits of cooperation between both countries do not resemble those the

United States has with other major powers.”⁶⁷ Moreover, as Cara Abercrombie, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia argues, “India’s policy of strategic autonomy, a deliberate decision not to align with any one country, places limits on how closely it will work with the United States.”⁶⁸ The relationship manifestly needs to mature, which will require regular interactions at fairly senior levels (such as the October 2020 ‘2+2 ministerial dialogue’) and building on the momentum of previous years, as India is central to Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet, it is important for New Delhi to understand, as the title of a recent essay from Ashley Tellis warn, that, “if India keeps diluting its liberal character, the West will be a less eager partner.”⁶⁹

Reinventing the U.S. – Pakistan Relationship

The U.S. will have to seriously consider reinvesting in its relationship with Pakistan, despite the hurdles. A cordial interaction between President Donald Trump and Pakistan’s prime minister, Khan, in 2019 – largely an outcome of important security cooperation (Pakistan’s support in the negotiations with Taliban) – shows that cooperation is possible as well as needed, despite severe reservations on both

sides. If there is a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan after a sustainable peace settlement (hopefully) involving all political players in Kabul and the Taliban, U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation will become even more critical for the future.

The United States also needs to devise a long-term Pakistan strategy that takes into serious consideration Pakistan’s insecurity and encourages its positive steps, such as mainstreaming the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas and initiatives like the Kartarpur corridor that promote religious harmony in South Asia. The latter would serve as an effective policy for countering extremism as well. A thoughtful recent report on the U.S.-Pakistan relations by the Middle East Institute’s Marvin G. Weinbaum and Syed Mohammad Ali offers some important ideas, including:

There is a compelling case for sustaining non-security funding to Pakistan, which should continue focusing on gender and economic empowerment and addressing environmental challenges, and create opportunities for smaller business, social impact investments, and social entrepreneurs. ... Security issues will continue to lead in what drives the U.S. and Paki-

stan together. However, security imperatives alone must not hold other aspects of the bilateral relationship hostage.⁷⁰

The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy can be leveraged to expand U.S. investments, especially infrastructure projects, in South Asia – perhaps using new tools like the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation and U.S. Department of State’s Blue Dot Network that aims to “bring together govern-

ments, the private sector, and civil society under shared standards for global infrastructure development.”⁷¹ The purpose may not be to specifically “catch up” to China’s efforts, but it would make a lot of sense for Washington to engage in this space. Any U.S. critiques of Chinese predatory investment models in South Asia will come across as more credible if the United States can actually show concrete evidence that it has something better to offer. In the

same vein, this will require engaging with Iran as well, especially now that the Chinese have played their BRI gambit with Tehran.

The U.S., lastly but importantly, must prepare itself in advance for the next India-Pakistan crisis as it will be expected to play a central role in defusing it as in the past. Should it cede that role to others or leave a vacuum, that should at least be a conscious policy decision. □



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End Notes

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