

**The Bad, The Ugly, and the Good:
South Asian Security and the United States**

Testimony of

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Co-chairs Tauscher and Turner, and distinguished members of the Panel, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the future security threats to the United States that might emanate from South Asia.

South Asia's Recent Threat Trajectory

Fifteen years ago, when the Cold War ended, South Asia was toward the lower end of America's list of priorities and interests. We had lost interest in Afghanistan, it was thought that the Indian and Pakistani nuclear programs could be "capped, rolled back, and eliminated," and there was little awareness of the growing rise of Islamic radicalism.

Since then:

- India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons, declared themselves to be nuclear weapons states, and subsequently hurled nuclear threats at each other during the crises of 1999 and 2002. In the latter crisis the US government ordered the evacuation of American citizens, requiring the Department of Defense to study the problem of airlifting Americans from a nuclear-contaminated zone.
- Pakistani scientists, notably A.Q. Khan, provided direct nuclear assistance to a number of states, including Iran, Libya, and North Korea; there are even allegations that India made purchases from the far-flung Khan network.
- Afghanistan fell under the control of the Taliban, which had hosted Osama bin Laden, and it became a base for terror directed against the United States.
- Islamic radicalism took root in Pakistan. Our embassy and other facilities were routinely attacked by bombs and rockets, and several Americans, notably Daniel Pearl, were brutally murdered.

Additionally, there has been political turmoil in at least two other regional states, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, which potentially could affect the United States (and American citizens) over the next two decades.

With apologies to Clint Eastwood, nuclear/missile proliferation and Islamic terrorism are truly the bad and the ugly, but there is also a “good.” Over the next ten or twenty years, threats to the United States may not continue along this terrible trajectory. Current and prospective leaders of South Asia, especially in India and Pakistan, are not guided by blind hatred or deep anti-Americanism, and there are a number of domestic and regional mechanisms that make worst-case scenarios interesting but unlikely. Furthermore, although I have been asked to deal only with threats to the United States, there are also many opportunities, including a restructured relationship with an old ally, Pakistan, and a new relationship with India, a rising power.

My testimony will begin with a summary description of the threats to the United States that might emanate from South Asia, characterized by severity and likelihood. I will then discuss trend lines of weapons, the nuclear dimension, power projection capabilities, and the intentions of major regional powers, notably India and Pakistan, concluding with a few general observations about perceiving and managing threats from South Asia.

Let me note that I have been asked by staff not to discuss American policy responses to these threats. However, I would be negligent if I did not point out that while I will be discussing military threats, the “weapon of first choice” in many cases is not a military one. This is particularly true of the threat from Islamic radicalism; if you have to use military force to deal with this threat you have waited too long.

Outcomes: A Comprehensive Threat Assessment

In summary form, here are my assessments of the relative risks of different developments that might flow from South Asia.

Table 1: Threats: Probability and Severity

Severity of Danger to the United States: 2005-2025

| Severity of Danger | Low | Medium | High |
|--------------------|---|---|--|
| Probability | | | |
| High | | Attack on US forces, personnel in South Asia, especially Afghanistan, Pakistan | |
| Medium | Greater Indian political and military engagement in Asia Greater Pakistani political and military engagement, especially in Middle East/Persian Gulf | Radical Islamist attacks on Americans in Pakistan, Bangladesh Conventional India-Pakistan limited war Bioterrorism attack against US originating in South Asia Spillover of current India-Pakistan-China strategic rivalries | India or Pakistan nuclear sharing with non-regional or hostile states Hostile Pakistan policy towards US in conjunction with anti-American states, including possible attack on US facilities in Middle East/South Asia |
| Low | Chemical terrorism from South Asia | Joint India-Russia-China alliance directed against the US Hostile Pakistan policy towards US | An active India-China competition, perhaps along their Himalayan border or a rivalry for energy resources in Central Asia and the Middle East South Asia again serves as base for terror attacks against US homeland India-Pakistan nuclear exchange Hostile Indian policy towards US |

Military Capabilities and Trends

The following briefly summarizes the main trends in military and force capabilities in South Asia, and discusses the likely future of certain non-military threats, notably terrorism, political disorder and decay. It also notes the potential role of major outside powers, especially as this affects American interests.

India and Pakistan: the Balanced Imbalance of Conventional Forces

Some commentators have asserted that India is the “dominant” military power in South Asia, having larger conventional ground, air, and naval forces than Pakistan (see Table 2). It is my view that this dominance is more apparent than real for at least two reasons.¹

First, India finds it hard to translate numbers into a decisive advantage on the battlefield. This was the case during several recent crises: the army could not guarantee victory in a major conventional war over a Pakistan that had interior lines of communication. India’s army has since moved to a doctrine of limited war and “cold start,” a euphemism for a first strike, but Pakistan has made adjustments in its own doctrine and deployment. Also, India’s military dominance over Pakistan is also complicated by the fact that it has troublesome borders with a few of its neighbors.

Second, both sides know that any major ground or air war between the two sides, which saw the prospect of an Indian victory, might unleash a Pakistani tactical nuclear response and then, *in extremis*, strike on Indian cities. Even if India establishes total air superiority, Pakistan will retain a powerful missile force, enough to deliver a devastating nuclear blow. Uncertainty of Pakistan’s response is likely to make any future Indian leadership cautious before it embarks upon a military confrontation. One imaginable scenario for such a confrontation would be a grave provocation—perhaps the assassination of a leading Indian figure, or an attack on the Indian parliament—which was traceable back to Pakistan, or which appeared to have Pakistani origins. Another might be the eventual acquisition, by India, of a missile-defense capability (now the subject of discussion between Indian and American officials), which might degrade a Pakistani nuclear attack. Still, given the short distances and the notorious unreliability of medium-range missile defense systems, India will probably be self-deterred by the

¹ Because of the very short notice to prepare this testimony the following does not rest upon a fresh analysis of the likely force levels and force projection capabilities of India and Pakistan. For my summary views see Chapter 7, “India as a Military Power,” in Stephen P. Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), and the studies noted in Appendix A. It is possible that the new US-Indian defense agreement will change the projected balance, but the presence of nuclear weapons will remain a limiting factor in any Indian-Pakistan confrontation or one between India and China. Brookings intends to shortly launch a long-term project on Indian military effectiveness.

prospect of even a few weapons slipping through its missile-defense shield, or delivered by other means, such as a civilian ship sailing into an Indian harbor.

Table 2: Current India and Pakistan Force Levels

| | India | Pakistan |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Overall Defense budget | \$19.1 bn | \$3.3 bn |
| Percent of GDP spent on defense | 2.9% (2003) | 4.4% (2003) |
| Size of military (manpower) | 1.33 million (active) | 619,000 (active) |
| Air Force combat aircraft | 679 | 415 |
| Nuclear Capable missiles, medium range | +/- 160 | +/- 170 |
| Number of nuclear warheads | 40+ | 40+ |
| Major warships | 24 | 7 |
| Submarines | 16 | 11 |
| Aircraft carriers | 1 | 0 |
| Paramilitary forces | 1.09 million (active) | 289-294,000 (active) |

All figures are from the IISS *Military Balance 2004-2005*. Unless stated otherwise all figures are from 2004.

India and Pakistan: Regional Nuclear and Missile programs

Public estimates of Indian and Pakistani nuclear forces range from 40 to 100 deliverable warheads, of the range of 15-20 kt. Both states have adequate missile and air-delivery systems for this number of warheads, and both are steadily increasing both the

numbers and quality of each. In twenty years, unless they decide to limit their production of fissile material, their nuclear inventories could be in the many hundreds.

By that time they will have probably actually *deployed* their weapons to bases around the country, and even at sea. At the moment neither side acknowledges such a deployment, but this is unverifiable, and during one or more of the recent crises, warheads may have been mated with delivery vehicles.

Terrorism

Islamic terrorist threats to the United States, both at home and to American facilities and bases abroad, will come from two sources. The first would be a rerun of the Afghan scenario, in which a primitive peasant Islamic group such as the Taliban comes to power, and allows a more sophisticated entity, such as al Qaeda, to operate from its soil. Afghanistan itself will not serve as such a base as long as American and allied forces are present, and as long as a reasonably moderate Afghan government remains in control of its own territory. As difficult as the war in Afghanistan has been, I do not see Washington (or our NATO) allies again retreating from Afghanistan and leaving a vacuum that will be filled by an al Qaeda replica.

A more likely source of Islamic terrorism directed against the United States would come from a Pakistan that itself slipped into political chaos, or a Bangladesh that seems to be unsure of its identity.

As for Pakistan, I disagree with the view that President Musharraf's government is now threatened by Islamic extremists, and with such fanciful scenarios as Islamists seizing Pakistani nuclear weapons; but, taking the long-term view, if Pakistan does not cohere as a modern, more or less centrist state, if the Army loses its grip, and if regional separatist and radical Islamists grow in influence, Pakistan could become a grave threat to the United States and to its neighbors, including Iran, China, Afghanistan, and India. There are enough "ifs" in this sentence to indicate that the problem is not immediate, but it is one that deserves close, continuing and high-level attention. Military-to-military relations, and especially our relations with the Pakistan army, are elements of our Pakistan policy, and are partially under the purview of this Committee.

In the case of Bangladesh, we have seen a striking rise in Islamic extremism, and numerous terror bombings and assassinations, although few have targeted the United States. As a state, Bangladesh is doing better than the “basket-case” scenario projected for it in the 1970s but it still suffers from divided leadership, a growing radical Islamic presence, and chronic suspicion of India. A saving grace, ironically, is Bangladesh’s dependence on foreign aid—here the NGO community and foreign donors have considerable influence. The greatest danger to American interests in the case of Bangladesh (and to a lesser degree, Nepal and Sri Lanka), would be a scenario involving state failure, a bungled Indian intervention, and the growth of anti-Americanism among the educated youth. So far, Bangladeshis (like Indian Muslims) have not been recruited to radical Islamist causes, but over a twenty-year period that might change. Again, as noted above, any Indian, American, or other military response at this point would be evidence of a grave policy failure.

Power Projection from South Asia

Both India and Pakistan are in the process of acquiring more sophisticated submarines and surface vessels, and the Indian Navy has conducted exercises with numerous states in the Indian Ocean region, ranging as far as Japan. In 2004 it joined with the United States in extensive tsunami relief operations, and Indian Navy and Coast Guard units performed at a very high level of professionalism throughout the Indian Ocean. India will probably acquire two small aircraft carriers, and might soon purchase additional ships from the United States. In twenty years, if present trends continue, it will have a fleet that could intervene throughout the Indian Ocean, and even further afield.

India also demonstrated (in the run-up to the 1991 war with Iraq) a capability of surge airlift, as it withdrew approximately 100,000 Indian citizens from Iraq and nearby countries. Drawing upon its government-owned air fleet, a growing number of military transports, and a rapidly expanding civilian fleet, it might soon be able to move a brigade or more of troops to a hotspot in the Indian Ocean region or Central Asia—and much further if assisted by a major power. It demonstrated that it could move a battalion very quickly during a coup in the Maldives in 1988.

India's growing naval and airlift capabilities are primarily used as visible reminders of Indian power, for the occasional intervention (as in Sri Lanka and the Maldives) and to balance out Pakistan and China. In the past, India was obsessed with the presence of US naval forces in the region, but several years of joint naval exercises and closer political ties seem to have transformed relations between the two navies.

The Broader Nuclear Threat

At one level, the steady increase in Indian and Pakistani nuclear capabilities only strengthens a situation of mutual assured destruction. However, the presence of very large arsenals raises the possibility of India or Pakistan sharing their nuclear weapons with other states, perhaps by extending a protective umbrella over them (as the US umbrella was extended to close allies), or simply giving them to other states. This was Pakistan's policy for several years, and it could return to such a policy in the future, just as India might find it useful to extend its nuclear umbrella over another state.

To put this development in context, there is now a potential nuclear necklace stretching from the Middle East to Northeast Asia, with Israel, Iran, Pakistan, India, China, Taiwan, Japan and North Korea as potential or actual nuclear powers. In twenty years each might possess nuclear weapons, and each might also possess missile delivery systems that enabled them to reach not only current rivals, but states that are very distant. For example, Pakistan's missiles, now able to reach almost all of India, could cover much of the Middle East and if based in Saudi Arabia, parts of Europe. India has announced a program to build a ship-borne nuclear delivery system, as the third leg in its "triad." Such vessels could, theoretically, sail into the Pacific or Atlantic oceans, covering the coastal United States as well as Eastern China. Parenthetically, India's very active space program could easily be turned to military purposes beyond those of reconnaissance, such as blinding American satellites.

If India or Pakistan wished to project their nuclear power by cooperation with other states, who would be the likely candidates? Certainly, Saudi Arabia has a historically close relationship with Pakistan, and in the case of India, one could imagine New Delhi sharing its nuclear capabilities with a state threatened by an aggressive China.

Intentions

If nuclear proliferation, the leakage of weapons, and even nuclear war are the bad, and if Islamic terrorism is the ugly, then the generally sound judgment and moderate tendencies of all regional governments (excepting for the moment, Nepal) are the “good.”

India’s democracy has many flaws, not least very high rates of corruption, widespread abuse of human rights, and a seemingly intractable problem of coping with separatist and violent groups in Kashmir, the Northeast, and Eastern India. Despite this, the system moves forward, slowly, and is largely internally oriented and self-regulating. Indian democracy provides so many checks and balances, so many competitors for power, that at only one point in its history did the country slip into authoritarianism (under Mrs. Indira Gandhi). The Indian voter is the ultimate guarantor of good Indian government behavior, and for the foreseeable future the United States is likely to be understood and admired, if not always followed. Unlike the 1970s, when Indian strategic elites imagined an American-China-Pakistan axis aimed at cutting India down (a theory that, we now know, was promulgated by Soviet disinformation campaigns), Indians today have a realistic assessment of American interests, and seek to benefit from a closer relationship with Washington without subordinating any vital Indian interests along the way. India seeks to be one of the world’s four or five major powers; conflict with the United States for the foreseeable future (even twenty years out), would be self-defeating.

The only exceptions to a likely benign US-India relationship would be a reaction to an American intervention that New Delhi regarded as impinging on its sphere of influence (such as an attempt to force India to accommodate Pakistan on Kashmir), or to another American shift in the direction of Beijing (as occurred in 1969-70), that would force New Delhi to reassess its overall strategic posture. Unlikely for the foreseeable future would be the much-discussed alliance of Russia, China, and India joining to counter the United States, although limited forms of cooperation among and between them are possible.

As for Pakistan, present and future attitudes towards the United States are likely to remain ambivalent. Most Pakistanis resent what they regard as undue American influence in their country even as they seek American economic, political, and military

support and migrate to the United States in large numbers. Pakistanis are caught in an identity crisis both as Pakistanis and as Muslims. My judgment is that this crisis can be resolved in such a way that the state does not take a radical turn; however, radicalism, with or without an Islamic overtone, remains one of Pakistan's possible futures should the present experiment in "enlightened moderation" collapse.

Other Threats

Except as noted, no threat to the United States is likely to emanate from the smaller regional powers, the greatest danger being a botched intervention on the part of an outside state, e.g. India. Chemical weapons are not likely to be important as a threat to the US, and bioweapons seem to have no particular attraction for any regional group. However, it must be borne in mind that South Asia was the birthplace of modern suicide terrorism, and may yet produce some new tactic of terrorism that is used against the United States among other countries.

China

China is not technically a South Asian power, but it does play a major role in that region, having gone to war with India in 1962 and then becoming one of Pakistan's major military supporters. It has also built the port of Gwadar in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. (India in turn) is cooperating with Iran in building a port near the entrance of the Persian Gulf that adjoins the China-Pakistan port). China also has a strong economic and political presence in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. At the moment Chinese civilian leaders seek to play a role in South Asia analogous to that of the United States and other major powers, urging restraint on India and Pakistan, fearful of the growth of Islamic radicalism, and disinclined to intervene in Nepal or other smaller regional states. Of course, China's interests and policies might change, and Chinese military leaders are notably more suspicious of India than its civilians. Over a twenty-year period Beijing might once again become more deeply engaged in South Asia (it still has a contested border with India and claims part of Kashmir as Chinese territory). This could lead to a renewed conflict with India, but this is by no means a foregone conclusion, and in any case would be pursued under the shadow of nuclear weapons. How might this threaten American interests? Such a renewed India-China conflict might see both sides seeking

American help, or at least trying to prevent Washington from tilting one way or another. Of course, a major war between the two runs the risk of nuclear use, again an indirect threat to the United States. A more likely scenario would involve heightened India-China competition for access to energy resources in Asia and the Middle East. This competition has already begun, but has not yet, nor does it seem likely to, assume a military form.

Some Concluding Observations

First, except for terrorism, direct threats to the United States and American interests from South Asia are few and far between.

Second, the most serious threat, but it is very hard to specify, would be the unpredictable consequences of a war between India and Pakistan. A new war could precipitate political turmoil in Pakistan, it might lead to a greater regional role for China, and if it went nuclear, it could set the region back by many decades. These are consequences that do not directly affect the American homeland, but they certainly would affect a number of very important American interests.

Third, the flow from South Asia of growing technical and military capabilities could extend Indian or Pakistani power to other regions where there were important American interests, investments, or base facilities, and over a twenty year period, the United States could come within the range of regional WMD capabilities.

Finally, while unpredictability is not in itself a threat, being taken by surprise may lead to an inappropriate or even self-defeating response. The best guarantee against such a response is to strengthen and deepen our understanding of this very complicated but newly important region.

Appendix A

Sources: The South Asia Military Balance

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Biography

Stephen Philip Cohen has been a Senior Fellow at Brookings' since 1998, where he directs the project on India and other important South Asian states. Before joining Brookings he was professor and founder-director of the Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security at the University of Illinois-Urbana. His first two books were, respectively, on the India and Pakistani armies, and Dr. Cohen has published widely on regional nuclear programs, terrorism, and related issues. He served as a consultant to various foundations and US government agencies, in addition to a two-year term on the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State in 1985-87. Dr. Cohen, and his wife, Roberta, have six children, and have, since 1963, lived in South Asia for a number of years.