

Stephen P. Cohen

A New Beginning In South Asia

Since the end of the Cold War American policy towards South Asia has been overshadowed by more troublesome or more economically significant regions. The dominant American objective in South Asia has been to prevent India and Pakistan from acquiring nuclear weapons, although this policy was dramatically defeated in May 1998, when each exploded a number of nuclear devices.

A U.S. policy that responds only to the region's development of nuclear weapons and the risk of nuclear war will fail, and forfeit other important American interests in the process. A heightened engagement with India and Pakistan, dealing with the causes of regional conflict and not only its symptoms, might not only reduce the risk of war but also could promote important American economic, strategic, and humanitarian interests. Such a fresh start in South Asia would accord India a more important place in America's world-view, but would not ignore Pakistan. It could begin with a high profile visit by the U.S. president to the region, an institutionalization of the strategic dialogues between Washington and New Delhi, and the strengthening of economic and strategic ties between the two democracies. As for Pakistan, which faces the prospect of instability to the point of chaos, the United States should take the lead in helping develop its civilian institutions by responding positively to the new Pakistani government's efforts to eradicate corruption, reform its economy, and over time restore democracy.

Beyond the Cold War

For more than 40 years, American policy toward India and Pakistan was shaped by the Cold War. But when the Soviets left Afghanistan early in 1989, the dominant American policy became one of preventing New Delhi and Islamabad from "going nuclear" and on two occasions, in 1990 and 1999, managing regional crisis. While the second Clinton administration made an attempt to engage India over a broader range of interests, nonproliferation issues still dominated American policy. It was assumed that the president would visit India and Pakistan once they adhered to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), now signed by over 150 countries and ratified by fifty, although not by the United States itself.



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The United States, India and

This expectation was dashed by a dramatic series of events. First, in 1995, the Indian government retreated from its earlier support of the CTBT, and in 1996 rejected the treaty. Then, in May 1998, India and Pakistan declared themselves nuclear powers and proved it with a series of underground atomic weapons tests. Finally, a trip by India's prime minister to the Pakistan city of Lahore in February 1999 held out the promise of regional rapprochement. But this hope dimmed when severe fighting, initiated by Pakistan, broke out in the Kargil region of Kashmir four months later. In October 1999, Pakistan's already enfeebled democracy was swept away by a military coup.

These developments underscore the need for a fresh look at U.S. policies in South Asia. It is clear that pursuing ambitious non-proliferation goals without a full appreciation of regional interests and dynamics has not worked, as both India and Pakistan have demonstrated an ability to resist outside pressures perceived as inimical to their vital interests. Washington's policymakers need a better understanding of both the opportunities for and the limitations on American power in the area. New thinking is called for on four issues: the spread of nuclear weapons, the India-Pakistan conflict, India's emerging stature as a major power, and the dilemma of coping with a potentially chaotic Pakistan.

Handling a Newly Nuclear Region

The development of Indian and Pakistani nuclear programs raises three immediate and one long term concern for the United States: 1) that the two nations not use their nuclear weapons in a crisis; 2) that their nuclear weapons not add to regional instability or figure in an inadvertent detonation; and 3) that the technology to produce these weapons not be transferred to any other nations or non-sovereign rogue groups. Implicit in this enumeration is a recognition of the fact that nuclear disarmament is not a realistic option in South Asia.

In the last decade, India and Pakistan have had two serious crises, and in both cases the United States played an important role in defusing the tension. The first incident (in Kashmir) occurred in 1990, when each of the two countries possessed a few unassembled nuclear devices, and American diplomacy helped calm the situation. Then, in the Summer of 1999, India and Pakistan engaged one another in a short but bitter war in the Kargil region of Kashmir. Once more the United States intervened diplomatically, urging both sides to forgo military escalation and resume their political dialogue. Washington demanded that Pakistan withdraw its forces from positions it had seized on the Indian side of the "Line of Control" (the line that separated the two armies in Kashmir when their 1971 war ended). The United States also urged India to refrain from crossing the Line of Control or attacking Pakistan elsewhere.

Pakistan: A Fresh Start

This diplomatic effort succeeded because the United States had established intimate dialogues with both India and Pakistan after their 1998 nuclear weapons tests. The eight rounds of talks between Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and the Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh were the longest sustained discussions ever conducted between U.S. and Indian government officials. Later, when President Bill Clinton met with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during the latter's emergency visit to Washington in July 1999, Clinton kept Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee informed by telephone.

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In addition to urging restraint during a crisis, there are other ways to reduce the risk of accidental or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. Some are technical: better command-and-control arrangements would enhance Indian and Pakistani confidence that nuclear weapons would be used only when intended. The best arrangement (from the perspective of crisis stability) would be if neither actively deployed its nuclear arsenal, perhaps by leaving warheads unassembled and separated from their delivery systems. The United States should be prepared to share its experience in developing command and control arrangements and nuclear doctrine to assist the two states in maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent with the fewest number of weapons and the highest level of stability.

Stabilizing the India-Pakistan nuclear relationship is all the more important since in a few years both may have medium-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching other countries. There is also an American interest in making sure that these new nuclear systems not interact with those of other Middle Eastern or Asian powers—Israel and Pakistan, for example, or India and China. The United States must also remain concerned about the transfer of nuclear weapons expertise, fissile material, and whole devices from South Asia to other states, legitimate or rogue. While both India and Pakistan have pledged to enforce legislation prohibiting such transfers, the fact is that four of the world's five declared nuclear weapons states (Britain being the exception) have assisted one or more other countries with their nuclear programs.

These wide ranging problems call for a strategy that moves beyond one of mere prevention of South Asian proliferation to one that enlists India and Pakistan in limiting the further spread of weapons of mass destruction and the problems raised by the introduction of ballistic missile systems. This strategy will have to combine incentives with sanctions.

One incentive is status. India, in particular, craves a seat at the nuclear "high table," and both that nation and Pakistan want the legitimacy of their nuclear programs to be recognized. However, neither can be members of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) which

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defines a “nuclear weapon state” as a country that tested nuclear devices before 1967. Nor should either be included in strategic nuclear reduction talks. That said, both India and Pakistan should be associated with the various international nuclear and missile control regimes and the larger effort to contain weapons proliferation, and the United States should be prepared to discuss with the Indian government various ideas for promoting nuclear stability, including a greater role for defensive systems and India’s stated preference for the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons.

Another incentive would be the provision of civilian nuclear technology to these energy starved states. It would not be a violation of the NPT to assist South Asian countries with their civilian nuclear programs, once the civilian programs are separated from military nuclear programs. The U.S. did this in the case of an NPT violator, North Korea. Affording India and Pakistan such assistance could also be part of a tradeoff that brought them into the various international nuclear and missile control regimes and encompassed the larger effort to contain weapons proliferation. Finally, the prospect of a continuing positive relationship with the United States provides another incentive for these states to restrain their military nuclear programs and join in global non-proliferation efforts.

Prospects for Peace and War in Kashmir

Kashmir is widely regarded by senior U.S. officials and intelligence analysts as the world’s most likely flashpoint for a nuclear war. The conflict over Kashmir dates back to 1947-48, when Britain departed South Asia, leaving behind the dominions of India and Pakistan. The hundreds of residual princely states were to choose between joining India or Pakistan, taking into account geographical proximity as well as the religious makeup of the state’s population. The Hindu ruler of the largely Muslim state of Jammu and Kashmir toyed with declaring independence until raiders from Pakistan invaded his territory, leading him to opt for India and its military protection. At the time, New Delhi said that Kashmir’s accession would be conditional, promising the United Nations it would hold a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri people. To date that vote has not been held, as India argued that Pakistan first had to vacate its portion of the state and, more recently, that its 1972 Simla agreement with Pakistan provided a new mechanism for settling the dispute. Then as now, a plebiscite probably would result in a vote for independence—an outcome opposed by both Pakistan and India.

Wars have been waged over Kashmir in 1947-48 and 1965, with additional skirmishes in 1971. The Kashmir crisis took a new turn in 1989 when a popular separatist movement challenged Indian rule in the prized Valley. This raised Pakistani hopes that India could be pressured into serious negotiations over Kashmir, ultimately resulting in a war in Kargil—with more than a thousand casualties—in the summer of 1999.

What makes Kashmir such a difficult issue is that it is not only about contested territory and populations, but because it also touches upon competing national identities: India as a secular state, Pakistan as an Islamic one. Settling the Kashmir problem means, ultimately, dealing with these larger issues, a task which is well beyond the reach of any outside power.

There has been no broad U.S. initiative on Kashmir since the early 1960s. For years the situation was seen as both intractable and marginal to American interests. This lack of interest in Kashmir satisfied the Indian government, which strongly opposed any outside intervention, but it disappointed Pakistan. However, Pakistanis have proved even more reluctant than Indians to discuss solutions other than a plebiscite leading to accession to Pakistan.

America's engagement in the dispute over Kashmir needs to be raised several notches, while avoiding intruding too far into an issue that can only be settled by the parties involved. The following is a guide to such an engagement.

First, U.S. officials should continue to publicly exhort both countries to resume their dialogue on Kashmir.

Second, Washington should privately but actively work towards a resumption of talks, perhaps by serving as an informal channel of communication between Delhi and Islamabad.

Third, there are aspects of the Kashmir conflict that are more amenable to solution than the core problem, the final status of the Valley and its inhabitants. These include a reduction of incidents across the Line of Control, withdrawal of forces from the frozen wastes of the Siachin Glacier, and improving economic ties between both parts of Kashmir. The United States can provide its good offices, and even technical assistance that may facilitate agreement on these issues.

Fourth, a special American coordinator for Kashmir should be appointed. The coordinator should not attempt to mediate the dispute, but he or she could harmonize American policies with those of other states, serve as a clearing house for ideas and policies, and promote Track II diplomacy—unofficial but informed dialogues between Indians and Pakistanis. If the American experience in other regions is a guide, this coordinator's role will extend over several administrations; just the appointment would convey the impression that a process leading to the resolution, or at least amelioration, of the Kashmir problem had begun.

India as an Emerging Power

There is little reason to doubt that India is emerging as a powerful state that will dominate South Asia politically for some time to come. India's economic growth underlies its enhanced significance. Following the implementation of economic reforms in 1991, India has reached respectable growth rates of 6 to 7 percent, which, if sustained, will give New Delhi

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considerably more weight in the region and abroad. Although its national economy will remain much smaller than China's for the foreseeable future, India's sizable middle class—estimated at between 200 and 300 million people—and its requirements for several hundred billion dollars in foreign investments make the subcontinent a market not to be ignored.

In addition, the prospect that India might be torn asunder by ethnic, regional, or religious conflicts has receded. India is a socially complex federal system, with pragmatic coalitions functioning at both the state and national levels, with all of the problems and virtues of such systems. Yet each national election—and there have been three in the last three years—has shown that Indians are capable of managing coalition governments.

The stage is thus set for an important change in U.S.-Indian relations. Differences remain, but there are common interests as well. India needs American investment and technology, which it is likely to get as it becomes a more attractive market for American businesses as well as a critical supplier of software and other computer products. There may even be a convergence of views on Pakistan. Indians came to appreciate the balanced and effective U.S. diplomacy that helped end the 1990 and 1999 crises. While India certainly doesn't want a powerful, aggressive, military-ruled Pakistan on its border, a weak and unstable neighbor teeming with threats from loose nuclear weapons, Islamic terrorism, and a potential flood of millions of migrants is not in New Delhi's best interests either.

America's new approach to India should operate at several levels: strategic, operational, and economic.

Strategically, the United States should regard India not as another South Asian state comparable to Pakistan, but as a player in the larger Asian sphere. India may not be China, but neither is it an insignificant "Third World" state. A presidential visit in the first half of 2000, the first since 1978, would go a long way toward acknowledging India's growing importance.

An altered strategic relationship between the U.S. and India also implies a reexamination of basic policies. There are important differences in their strategic world views, but both countries are essentially status quo powers, and should try to coordinate their views on issues such as nuclear proliferation, coping with the new military government in Pakistan, terrorism, and dealing with larger issues of Asian stability and order. As for terrorism, both the United States and India have been singled out as enemies by Osama Bin Laden.

This recognition of overlapping interests requires practical application. A small start was made recently with the first consultations ever held between the United States and India over the Afghanistan problem. But Washington and New Delhi need to get into the habit of regular

consultation over a range of issues. It would be well to expand the frequency of meetings of American and Indian defense experts, policy planning staffs, terrorism and arms control specialists and parliamentarians in both countries to break down prevailing misperceptions and stereotypes.

As for economic ties, these will eventually provide the ballast for a more stable U.S.-Indian relationship because the economics of the two countries are complimentary. But because the economic relationship is still fraught with distrust (on the part of India) and irritation (on the part of the United States), both countries should support and fully utilize the conflict resolution procedures available in the World Trade Organization. These can help resolve differences between the two states over allegations of discriminatory tariffs, unfair trade practices, and violations of intellectual property rights.

Pakistan: Rebuilding Democracy

Pakistan is not a failed state, but its political and social institutions have been in decline for some time. The recent military coup is another “last chance” for Pakistan, an opportunity to move its institutions toward social and economic reform and political coherence. Unlike Mohammad Zia ul-Haq’s coup in 1977, the 1999 army takeover was popular. Yet Pakistan’s generals would be wise to plan on an early withdrawal, although they will likely retain a formal role in a successor civilian government, possibly along the lines of Turkey’s National Security Council. If the present Pakistani military leadership fails to manage this transition, it is not likely to be replaced by a more liberal group. The prospect of the situation turning far worse has tempered American, Chinese, Iranian, and even Indian reactions to the coup. It is in every country’s interest to see Pakistan hold together, although it is in no one’s interest to see it challenge India again, serve as a base for radical Islamic movements, or become an unstable entity armed with nuclear weapons.

The United States should institute three major policy initiatives toward Pakistan. All would aim to help stabilize Pakistan by restoring a more effective civilian government that would be compatible with improved U.S.-Indian relations.

First, the United States should focus on the reconstruction of Pakistan’s civilian institutions. There are considerable opportunities for American foundations, universities, and other public and private entities to expand their support for the institutions that sustain democracy in Pakistan. Care should be taken to ensure that sanctions against Pakistan do not restrict such support.

Second, the United States should restore U.S.-Pakistan military training programs. These programs send Americans to study at Pakistani military schools and bring Pakistani officers to the United States. Studying in an American institution does not ensure democracy, but the

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Brookings gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the Cabot Family Charitable Trust and B. Francis Saul II for their support of the Policy Brief series.

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overall record shows that Pakistani officers who have been trained in the United States or Great Britain have a more balanced perspective on the role of the armed forces, a more secular outlook, and a better sense of the changes occurring in the wider world.

Finally, the United States should judge Pakistan's present regime on its merits, not its uniform. To the degree that Islamabad's military rulers move to reform the political system, root out corruption, restrain extremists, and pursue a conciliatory policy on Kashmir, there should be proportionate symbolic and material support for Pakistan. If Islamabad moves in this direction it should also receive high level, even presidential, attention in 2000. While no U.S. president has visited India in over 20 years, none has gone to Pakistan in over 30 years. India has been neglected by American policymakers, but correcting that error should not mean neglecting Pakistan, which is not only nuclear-armed, but by 2002 will be the world's sixth largest state, and perhaps once again its fourth largest democracy.

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