

Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South Asia

India's Role

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Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South Asia: India's Role

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This background paper was prepared as part of a study of U.S. strategic concerns in South Asia and the regional dynamics and priorities that are likely to influence U.S. policy there between 2014 and 2026. It is one of 10 such papers covering the relevant internal dynamics, trends, relationships, and scenarios in China, Iran, the Gulf States, Central Asia, Russia, Turkey, Europe, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The final report, South Asia Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns: A Framework for U.S. Policy and Strategy in South Asia, 2014–2026, by Robert D. Lamb, Sadika Hameed, and Kathryn Mixon, is available at <http://c3.csis.org> and includes a framework on which the United States may base the development of policies and strategy in South Asia over the next 12 years.

India's Relations with the United States

The United States actively encourages India's rise as a global actor and as a potential counterweight to China in Asia. India sees a growing role in the world for itself, and welcomes defense supplies and technology transfer from the United States. But India's commitment to a policy of strategic autonomy and policy differences with the United States on economic and political issues make the partnership as much rhetorical as practical. A regionally-assertive China in the future is one variable that could bring the United States and India closer.

One major problem in the relationship was removed with the 2005 signing of the U.S.-India nuclear agreement which supported India's civil nuclear industry despite Delhi's refusal to adhere to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. India's overarching diplomatic goal, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, got President Obama's oral support in 2010. However, the likely absence of any practical steps on our part toward Security Council reform could become a new irritant.

India no longer sees the United States as an ally of Pakistan but has been frustrated by our extensive support to their military during the war in Afghanistan. On the other hand, U.S.-India counterterrorism cooperation has been more fruitful, since both countries see a shared threat from extremist groups based in Pakistan. Periodic U.S. efforts to promote a Kashmir settlement have been an irritant.

India's new focus on its under-resourced military, with its emphasis on maritime security in the Indian Ocean, is a promising area of U.S.-India cooperation.

Internal Trends and Dynamics

The relationship between India and Pakistan, marked by three wars since partition in 1947, will continue to be a source of instability and conflict in South Asia. Both countries' overt nuclear status since 1998 has introduced a significant new factor in the calculus. Their conflicts now come with the dangerous risk of nuclear escalation, though the prospect of that escalation may limit provocative behavior on both sides.

Terrorism is the single greatest danger to peace. High-profile attacks by Pakistan-based terrorists on the Indian parliament in 2001 and on Mumbai hotels in 2008 led to

cross-border mobilization but no conflict. Nonstate actors play a dangerously destabilizing role. A future Indian government might respond militarily to a high-casualty attack, whether or not the Pakistani government was directly implicated.

The legal status of Kashmir is the major territorial dispute between India and Pakistan. It is conceivable, but not likely, that the two countries could acknowledge the current line of control as the actual boundary, thus significantly lowering the level of cross-border tension. Water scarcity could also lead to conflict in coming years; water sources for both countries rise in Kashmir; their division has, so far, been governed by the Indus Waters Treaty and would be unaffected by a Kashmir settlement. But the treaty is threatened by increasing demand in both countries. Hydropower projects on the Indian side threaten to lower the downstream supply in needy agricultural areas in Pakistan; this will only be exacerbated in the years ahead.

Increasing trade, travel, and communication between India and Pakistan is a trend that could lead to lower tension.

India will seek to deepen its relations with Afghanistan as the United States draws down its military presence. If the country deteriorates to civil war, India would likely once again support the non-Pashtun ethnic groups against the Taliban. If there is relative peace, India will continue its economic assistance, in health and infrastructure. India's ability to play a major role in Afghanistan will be constrained by Pakistan which is intensively suspicious of India's activities there, and can limit India's access. Transiting Iran is a viable alternative, especially given the likelihood that the two countries' goals in Afghanistan will coincide if the Taliban appear to be in the rise again.

Key Influencers

India's Westminster-style democracy features a ceremonial president and gives the prime minister and his cabinet executive authority. The prime minister specifically has his hand on the nuclear trigger but in recent years has consulted a subset of the Cabinet, the Security Committee (ministers of defense, external affairs, finance, and home), on military matters.

The uniformed military, by tradition and in fact, is subservient to the political leadership and does not generally play a policymaking role. India's senior military leadership is, however, influential in the government's internal deliberations on policy toward its neighbors, especially Pakistan.

The opposition party, currently the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has to be reckoned with, because it could again be the ruling party (elections are due in 2014) and because it has a reputation and history focused on Hindu nationalism, often expressed in a harder line toward Pakistan. The BJP's past experience as a ruling party suggests that its ideology will not automatically mean a more antagonistic approach to Pakistan. Its last prime minister, Atul Vajpayee, made a strong bid for reconciliation in the late 1990s. However, a group associated with the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is a very well-organized and disciplined "Hindu army" that has exacerbated Hindu-Muslim tensions in the past.

India's 160 million Muslims constitute a significant voting bloc; their potential reaction is always on the minds of policy-makers focused on the next election.

The press is independent and a powerful influencer of public opinion. It is not monolithic. The English-language press (and television) is influential with policymakers in Delhi and Mumbai. The Hindi-language newspapers (and to a lesser extent those in

other national languages) are more widely read and tend toward sensationalism. After a terrorist attack, much of the Hindi press will call for strong retaliation. The Urdu-language press is influential among the Muslims of north and west India; it is suspicious of the West and equally scandal mongering but is carefully patriotic and often equally vitriolic toward Pakistan.

Public opinion, increasingly expressed in urban areas in the form of social media like Twitter, is a growing influence on policy, especially among politicians looking to the next election

India's biggest business houses and families (Tatas, Birlas, Ambanis, Mahindras, etc.) are influential in Delhi as a source of funds for the national parties and as economic drivers throughout India. They have traditionally focused on encouraging domestic and regional stability (key to their prosperity) and détente with Pakistan, where they see an increasingly promising market for their products.

Regional Relations

Relations with Afghanistan

India sees for itself an important role in Afghanistan. Its primary strategic goal has been a government in Kabul that is not beholden to Pakistan. In recent years, that has meant an active policy of opposition to the Taliban.

Before 2001, India had close ties and provided covert support to the Northern Alliance, led by Uzbeks and Tajiks opposed to the Taliban. In recent years, India has pursued close links with President Karzai and has a very large diplomatic, assistance, and presumably intelligence presence throughout Afghanistan. Cut off physically from Afghanistan through Pakistan, India has helped to construct an alternate entry point—a road through southwest Afghanistan that links up with the Iranian road network and to the Persian Gulf port of Chabahar. There are air links from Afghanistan to India. India's financial assistance to Afghanistan includes medical help (doctors and hospital support) and road building.

India also trains Afghan police and recently the military in India. It has so far not provided arms to the military; both Afghanistan and India have in the past thought that such a role would be too provocative toward Pakistan.

There is widespread support within India for a strong relationship with Afghanistan. The only dispute would be how actively to engage and with what political and diplomatic tools. The intelligence community, with its history of covert funding of the Northern Alliance, will be an important player, post-2014. The Ministry of External Affairs, with its five consulates in Afghanistan, and its oversight of assistance programs, is also an important current and future voice on Afghan policy.

Relations with Pakistan

India's relationship with Pakistan is complex. The linguistic, cultural, and social ties are great. But the legacy of partition in 1947 left enormous scars, including the territorial dispute over Kashmir, and led to three wars and near-constant border tension.

India's predominant goal with Pakistan is to end any potential Pakistani threat to its national security.

The transition to overt nuclear weapons status by both countries in 1998 complicated those efforts and has leveled a military playing field that was previously

weighted toward India's superiority in conventional weaponry. Indian uncertainty about Pakistan's redlines for responding to an Indian military incursion may have prevented border tensions in 1999, 2002 and 2008 from escalating to cross-border combat.

In recent years, the threat emanating from Pakistan has not been tanks across the border but rather terrorists whose ties to the Pakistan state and military have been disguised. The attack on India's Parliament House in December 2001 and the attack on Mumbai targets, including hotels and the central railway station, in November 2008 both led to calls for retaliation against Pakistan. But in both cases, after military mobilization and angry rhetoric, India declined to respond militarily.

Future terrorist attacks, conducted with or without the assistance and knowledge of the Pakistani state, may well play out differently. Hindu nationalists in India led by the RSS could mount an inflammatory campaign backed by their allies in politics and the media to carry out a punitive attack on Pakistan, perhaps an air strike on one or more of the militant campaigns in the Punjab.

New violence inside Indian-controlled Kashmir could also be a catalyst for new India-Pakistan tensions; in recent years those tensions have been focused on the line of control rather than spreading to the international border in more heavily populated Punjab.

A moderating factor is the interest by the political and economic leadership of both India and Pakistan to reduce tensions and move toward more normal relations. Both national political parties in India have reached out to Pakistan in recent years. Increases in cross-border trade, travel, and cultural and sports exchanges all point to increased contacts and more investment by both sides in peace and normalcy rather than war.

Other Relationships

India-China

India's political relationship with China is dominated by two factors—the dispute over the border (including parts of Kashmir which Pakistan has ceded to China) and the perception in Delhi that China is a strong supporter of Pakistan and a continuing supplier of weapons and technology. In recent periods of India-Pakistan tension, however, China has played a more balanced role, reflecting its interest—shared with the West—in a stable and peaceful South Asia. China's diplomacy, while carried out in secret and not in coordination with the United States, can nevertheless be helpful in tamping down tension during future crises, especially given China's significant influence in Pakistani political and military circles. Indian and Chinese official dialogue now encompasses Pakistan, with Beijing eager to reassure Delhi that it is not seeking to foster conflict in the region.

An alternate, but less likely, scenario in the future is closer Chinese collaboration with Pakistan against India, perhaps triggered by Sino-India tensions over their disputed border.

India-Bangladesh

Bangladesh, which broke off from West Pakistan in 1972 with considerable help from India, is not a direct participant in Indo-Pakistan border tensions. However, the intelligence services of both countries operate in Bangladesh. When tensions erupt along India's northeast border, India—rightly or wrongly—sees the hand of the Pakistani

intelligence services and could view such actions as justification for increased pressure on the Pakistani border.

Conflict Scenarios

Scenario: Afghanistan Stability

India will continue active involvement with the Karzai government and any successor elected government in Kabul, with the goal of ensuring a political class and a government sympathetic and beholden to it more than to Pakistan. India's diplomatic and development assistance will continue and expand in areas where security permits. India's large business houses will look for commercial opportunities, but these will be limited by the continued likely prohibition on land access across Pakistan. India's security assistance and training may increase significantly as U.S. and NATO police and army training wind down.

Also to be expected is active Indian covert involvement with the non-Pashtun groups of northern Afghanistan, especially the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. Arms for the warlords as well as monetary assistance to those competing in elections would continue India's pre-2001 support for the Northern Alliance.

All of these activities will be endorsed by Indian stakeholders with the military and intelligence establishments likely to be the most active supporters.

The consequence of these increased efforts by India will be Pakistani concern and suspicion about India's efforts and its plans to use Afghan territory against Pakistan. These concerns will persist even if Delhi and Islamabad resolve other differences in the years ahead.

One channel to ameliorate such tensions would be projects in Afghanistan which would benefit both countries. The most prominent such project is the long-proposed, but never realized, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline to bring Central Asian natural gas to energy-starved South Asia. Only in a stable-Afghanistan scenario could this proposal receive the commercial and ADB financing that would allow construction to begin.

Scenario: Afghanistan Instability

An outright civil war in Afghanistan will significantly alter Delhi's calculations. It is likely to end most diplomatic and assistance activities, since India has no way to provide security within Afghanistan for its diplomats and aid workers.

India will perceive the Pashtun/Taliban insurgency to be funded and fully supported by Pakistan. India will take any action it practically can to prevent a Taliban government from being reestablished in Kabul and throughout Afghanistan. The covert assistance (money and arms) to the non-Pashtun warlords of the north and the west is likely to increase significantly. India will depend on its friends in Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) to facilitate movement of such assistance. India is likely to turn to Iran as well, since Iran is likely to have a similar incentive to support the non-Pashtun communities against the Sunni Taliban. Iran can provide access through its Chabahar port and across the border into Herat.

While widespread civil war will be disastrous for (multi-ethnic) Kabul and throughout Afghanistan, it will also significantly exacerbate Indo-Pakistani tensions. Pakistani and Indian proxies or even nationals of their countries will be fighting and dying in Afghanistan. Media and public opinion attention in India to the conflict in

Afghanistan and Pakistan's role there will lead to pressure on the government to put on hold or reverse any efforts to improve ties with Islamabad. Terrorism originating from Pakistan, whether its source be government or militant group, will be met by a much more jingoistic and aggressive attitude than we saw in 2002 and 2008, with obvious possibilities for escalation.

Scenario: India-Pakistan Instability

The realization of India's great economic potential depends on stability and relative peace with Pakistan. Specifically, its effort to return to annual growth rates of seven per cent and greater, necessary to meet India's demographic challenge, cannot be met in an environment of significant, ongoing conflict with Pakistan. Its efforts to play a leading role in Asia and on the world stage (including hopes for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council) cannot be met without relative peace and stability in South Asia.

The worst-case scenario, a nuclear exchange, is by most estimates very unlikely, but hardly impossible. Attacks by terrorists on Pakistani military bases, so far unsuccessful, have raised Indian concern about a seizure of nuclear materials. Equally worrisome is Indian and Pakistani misunderstanding of what constitutes their respective redlines for a nuclear response. If Pakistani leaders, for instance, perceived that a conventional conflict was threatening the unity or existence of the nation, they might resort to a nuclear warning shot.

Conflict with Pakistan spells disaster for India's hopes for the near future. Wars in the past (against China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 and 1972) have stirred patriotic and nationalist fervor. A new war may not follow the same path. The Indian economy, increasingly interdependent with Asia and the West, would suffer a sharp and immediate blow at a time of conflict. The economic plight of the relatively poorer Muslim community combined with a Pakistan war could produce India's ethnic nightmare—a radicalization of elements of that community with some turning to domestic terrorism.

This scenario is the most likely to lead to regional instability and conflict. India has been a force for stability in the region but increased violence and terrorism at home—with dramatically lowered economic growth—is a recipe for a more jingoistic and aggressive government, supported by Hindu revivalists and an angry and aggressive civil society.

Conclusions

India will remain a noisy, partisan, participatory and diverse democracy for the foreseeable future. But if economic growth does not keep pace with the demographic bulge, that democracy will produce a disaffected unemployed and underemployed class that is connected with social media, painfully aware of the progress in the outside world, and increasingly discontented with its own society.

Instability in India will produce seeds of instability in the whole region. While this study has focused on Pakistan and Afghanistan (where the possibility of armed conflict is most real), we need to watch Bangladesh closely as well for its Islamist groups and its proxy role for the Indian and Pakistan intelligence establishments. Nepal depends heavily on the Indian economy as the safety valve for its unemployed youth. An economic crisis or return to civil war there could send millions of migrants across the open border into India.

The India-Pakistan conundrum, which has bedeviled South Asia for 65 years, will not be solved soon; it must be managed. Generations of Western policymakers have

sought to facilitate reconciliation, to little avail and with periodic damage to American and British good offices in the region. But Indian politicians, the business community, and civil society all see the benefits of Indo-Pakistan stability, and—barring widespread terrorism—will be a force for peace on the border and (relative) stability in the region.

About the Author

Donald Camp is a retired senior Foreign Service officer whose career was divided between East and South Asia. He was most recently senior adviser on South and Central Asia at the U.S. mission to the United Nations in 2012. He was senior director for South and Central Asia on the National Security Council staff through August 2009. Prior to that, he was principal deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia. Mr. Camp was foreign policy adviser to the chief of naval operations from 2006 to 2007; deputy assistant secretary and then principal deputy assistant secretary for South Asia at the Department of State from 2001 to 2006; and director of South Asian affairs on the National Security Council staff from 1999 to 2001. He has also served as director of the Office of India/Nepal/Sri Lanka at the Department of State, as well as deputy director for Pakistan/Afghanistan/Bangladesh. He has served as political officer in the U.S. embassy in Sri Lanka. In the East Asian field, he was consul general at the U.S. consulate in Chengdu, China, from 1992 to 1995, and he served at the U.S. embassy in Beijing, following two years of Chinese language study at the Foreign Service Institute. He also worked as foreign affairs legislative aide to then-Senator Paul Simon. Prior to entry into the Foreign Service, Mr. Camp was a student of South Asian studies at the University of Chicago and was a Peace Corps volunteer in South India. He graduated from Carleton College.