



South Asia and the Obama Doctrine

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There has been much talk about the “pivot to Asia” as if it is something novel or new. In truth, however, U.S. foreign policy has been engaged in a pivot to Asia ever since Commodore Perry sailed under orders given to him by President Millard Fillmore in 1853 to open up Japan. Missing in the current approach, however, has been discussion about South Asia, except when South Asian states (namely Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh) intersect with issues related to Central Asia and the war in Afghanistan.

That represents a serious error. The United States will need to successfully navigate long term interests in South Asia in order to successfully have a grand strategy in the 21st century. Although the smaller states of South Asia pose potential security concerns for the U.S. insofar as rampant poverty, corruption, and civil war threaten to turn them into failed states, the primary foreign policy and national security issues in South Asia are concerned with Pakistan and India. Issues between the United States and the region can be primarily divided into short to mid-term strategies and problems, and those related to long-term grand strategy that will last much of the century.

America's approach

The national security strategy of the Obama administration has mixed and matched the weakest aspects of three past administrations. This new doctrine channels Nixon to achieve his burden-sharing, colloquially known today as “leading from behind.” It invokes Carter’s multilateralism for the sake of the same, and as a counter to charges of American Exceptionalism. From the Clinton years, the Obama administration has summoned a risk-averse policy, while placing its faith in globalization and its worship of technocracy over ideals. The key to the Obama Doctrine is the need to “rebalance American commitments,” code for managing our decline. The Obama doctrine is more about process than strategy.[1]

Short to Midterm

In the short- to mid-term, America’s primary concerns relate to terrorism and religious extremism. The Obama administration has attempted “to advance regional security and stability” by supporting “... the development of sovereign, stable, democratic nations, integrated into the world economy and cooperating with one another.”[2] Through programs like the Counterterrorism Finance (CTF) unit and The Regional Strategic Initiative (RSI), the Obama administration has attempted to assist both India and Pakistan in combating terrorism and enhancing cooperation among law enforcement and intelligence agencies. However, the real core issue is Islamic extremism in and around Pakistan.

The Obama administration’s primary response to this has been drone strikes, which are designed to decimate high value terrorist targets and degrade their leadership and operational capability. According to the New America Foundation, there have been 428 drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004, killing up to 3,251 terrorists.[3] The fantastical quality to this whole situation is the inability and unwillingness of the Pakistani government to crackdown on the myriad of Islamic extremist groups, such as the Haqqani network that aids and assists the Taliban and groups linked to al-Qaeda. Since 2007, these groups have formed an umbrella organization under the name Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and they are estimated to have thirty to thirty five thousand militant members. [4] Moreover, as documented by veteran reporter Bob Woodward in his book, *Obama’s Wars*, there are 150 known terrorist training camps inside Pakistan that the United States has yet to destroy.[5] The ability of the Taliban to find safe havens in Pakistan has blunted any gain that might have existed from the limited “surge” that President Obama ultimately agreed to in December of 2009, right at the time that he issued the date of withdrawal from the country.

A greater problem than perhaps even the Islamic Extremist groups is the scandal- ridden Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI. It would be difficult to find another intelligence service upon which the United States has had to rely that is more pernicious and duplicitous than the ISI. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into all the intricacies of the ISI, but it is unquestionably part of the strategic equation for the United States in the region. In plain language, the ISI, the “state within a state” in Pakistan, is an intelligence service that has sponsored and continues to sponsor Islamic extremism to meet the goals of the Pakistani state. The U.S. has been forced into a partnership with this organization to fight the very extremists that elements of the ISI supports. Likewise, the ISI impedes democracy in Pakistan by exercising exponential power over the state that it is supposed to serve.[6]

Long Term

The long term strategic problem for the United States in South Asia, by contrast, lies in two realms. The first concerns the nuclear arsenals of Pakistan and India, and the second is over great power conflict in and around the Indian Ocean. The Obama administration has failed to understand that successful foreign policy and national security can only be conducted with a comprehensive and long term approach to grand strategy. As a result, the Obama administration has sent two signals that may impede successful American grand strategy in South Asia. The first is the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Regardless of the debate about the invasion and counter-insurgency itself, there is a separate question of how the withdrawal affects great-power relations. America's impending withdrawal indicates an unwillingness to see the problem toward its desired ending: stability in Afghanistan. This is particularly worrying to India, which has long been a victim of Pakistani-sponsored extremism. The second is great concern, in India in particular, is that the Obama administration has leaned too far toward China.[7]

The strategic nuclear question is paramount. Pakistan possesses between 90 and 110 nuclear weapons and has likely been a nuclear state since the early 1990s thanks to the efforts of its most notorious nuclear scientist, AQ Khan. Khan was also responsible for nuclear proliferation to North Korea, Iran, and Libya.[8]

The next long term issue concerns great power conflict. There are a multitude of scenarios that presage potential unrest. The unsettled border between China and India continues to be a source of skirmishes and tension between the two, with China being ever- more aggressive in its claims.[9] Disputes over the Line of Control and tensions over Jammu and Kashmir between Pakistan and India make a South Asian solution to Islamic extremism unlikely. But the area where the United States could find itself in direct strategic conflict is the Indian Ocean. Some have even suggested that India may use its rise to naval greatness as a way to cut off China from oil supplies by creating a "metal chain" to lock shut the western entrance of the Strait of Malacca.[10]

The military equation is complex—and troubling. India has five primary naval bases in the Indian Ocean region: Mumbai, Karwar, Kochi, Visakhapatnam, and Port Blair (Andaman Islands), and currently deploys one aircraft carrier with a plan for two more.[11] Pakistan has one primary naval base in the Indian Ocean region near Karachi. There are several Chinese-built ports and refueling stations in the Indian Ocean region: Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Sittwe (Burma/Myanmar). The United States, meanwhile, has one primary naval base in the Indian Ocean region: Diego Garcia (British Indian Ocean Territory).[12] The U.S. Fifth and Seventh Fleets dominate this area of operations. The potential for conflict here is immeasurable, especially in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. This could prove even more dangerous should the Chinese become more aggressive in their claims in the South China Sea.

Navigating the region

The U.S. Maritime strategy of 2007 states, "Credible combat power will be continuously postured in the Western Pacific and the Arabian Gulf/Indian Ocean to protect our vital interests, assure our friends and allies of our continuing commitment to regional security, and deter and dissuade potential adversaries and peer competitors."

[13] In order for this President Bush-era declaration to have teeth now and in the future, however, a series of micro and macro decisions need to be made, most of which are not in line with the Obama Doctrine. These include deeper involvement on countering Islamic extremism in the region, and most of all greater coordination with South Asian states in maintaining security in the Indian Ocean, the geopolitics of which increasingly have become affected by China's regional rise and associated instability.

The stakes are high. If South Asia becomes another in a series of Obama Doctrine failures, it will only be one of many, the legacy of which will be costly to repair.

[1] For more, see Lamont Colucci, *The National Security Doctrines of the American Presidency, How They Shape Our Present and Future* (Praeger Security International, 2012).

[2] Robert O. Blake, "The Obama Administration's Policy on South Asia," Remarks before the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, September 9, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2009/128753.htm>.

[3] New America Foundation Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative, "The Year of the Drone," n.d., <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>.

[4] Jayshree Bajoria and Jonathan Masters, "Pakistan's New Generation of Terrorists," Council on Foreign Relations, September 26, 2012, http://www.cfr.org/pakistan/pakistans-new-generation-terrorists/p15422?breadcrumb=%2Fbios%2F13611%2Fjayshree_bajoria%3Fgroupby%3D1%26hide%3D1%26id%3D13611%26filter%3D456.

[5] Woodward, Bob, *Obama's Wars*, (Simon and Schuster, 2010)

[6] Stratfor, "Pakistan: Anatomy of the ISI," August 11, 2008.

[7] Evan A. Feigenbaum, "India's Rise, America's Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2010, <http://m.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65995/evan-a-feigenbaum/indias-rise-americas-interest>.

[8] Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Pakistan – Nuclear," February 2013, <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/pakistan/nuclear/>.

[9] Gardiner Harris and Edward Wong, "Where China Meets India in a High-Altitude Desert, Push Comes to Shove," *New York Times*, May 2, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/world/asia/where-china-meets-india-push-comes-to-shove.html?_r=0.

[10] Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Random House, 2011).

[11] Greg Waldron, "India Nears Catapult Decision for Second Indigenous Carrier," *Flight*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/india-nears-catapult-decision-for-second-indigenous-carrier-379825/>.

[12] "World Military Guide," *globalsecurity.org*, n.d., <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/>.

[13] United States Navy, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," n.d., <http://www.navy.mil/maritime/>.