

DEFENSE DOSSIER

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the December 2022 issue of AFPC's Defense Dossier. In this edition, we explore the strategic dynamics in South Asia—a region where the geopolitical status quo is changing markedly.

It has been over a year since the U.S. hastily withdrew from Afghanistan and the negative impacts on the region are worsening. The power vacuum left by the United States has provided an opening that China is deftly exploiting, while America's credibility among its regional allies has declined precipitously. China is not just making gains in Afghanistan, however; the PRC is wielding its economic might to bolster ties with Central Asia States, Nepal, Bangladesh, and—most importantly—Pakistan. Beijing and Islamabad are deepening defense ties, and investing in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), much to the detriment of America's natural regional partner, India. New Delhi, for its part, has straddled the strategic fence rather than aligning with the United States—but that strategy could change amid rising tensions with China and the declining appeal of partnership with Russia.

We explore these and other consequential dynamics in the pages that follow in a quintet of thought-provoking articles. We sincerely hope you enjoy them.

Sincerely,

Ilan Berman
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison
Managing Editor



The Wages of America's Afghan Withdrawal

S. Enders Wimbush

Afghanistan was like the pin in a geopolitical grenade. With the pin secure, the grenade was both an incentive to like-minded allies and a deterrent to unfriendly adversaries in ways that enhanced America's competitive advantage in Eurasia. But when the act of withdrawal pulled the pin, U.S. interests and opportunities were wounded in many ways. Some of these wounds are superficial, and can probably be treated over time. Others, however, are deeper, causing a kind of strategic paralysis that will complicate and slow future U.S. engagement from Europe to Asia. And some are life threatening, perhaps mortal. The last are wounds that will defy currently available treatments, resigning important capabilities and relationships to wither completely unless new remedies are found.

The prevailing official explanation for America's withdrawal—and there have been many—has been that Afghanistan is an expensive stand-alone conflict whose termination will allow the U.S. sufficient resources to “pivot to Asia” fully. However, this thin rationale misses the mark on at least three counts.

First, far from standing alone, Afghanistan is an organic part of the civilization linking the states of Central Asia, through geography, history, culture, ethnicity, religion, and growing economic interdependence, to surrounding states including China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Russia. What happens in Afghanistan, in other words, cannot be isolated from a much larger region.

Second, while the upfront costs of securing a favorable position in Afghanistan were steep, by the time of its withdrawal the United States had already paid them, and ongoing costs had declined to easily manageable levels.

Third, the geopolitical region encompassing Central Asia and Afghanistan is strategically and intimately

linked to the emerging competitions taking place in “Asia” writ large. It is not its own distinct chessboard, but rather the pulsating periphery squares of Asia's main board. Most of Asia's key actors already compete there for energy, transport networks, allies, and influence. This is where, for example, Russia's and China's strategies intersect. It is where the realignment between Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran—all nuclear powers or soon-to-be—is taking place. And it is where India seeks to stave off nefarious combinations of adversaries on its northern frontier. To think of this center of Eurasia as a set of strategic problems divorced from the larger Asian whole reveals a startling geopolitical illiteracy. Exploding the Afghanistan grenade may have relieved the U.S. of having to compete there today, but at the risk that it will have to return in the future.

THE “ENDLESS WAR” THAT WASN'T

Few engagements—especially those as long as the American military's presence in Afghanistan—remain over time what their proponents thought or hoped at the outset they would become. So it was in Afghanistan. What was initially envisioned as a serious but limited operation to expunge the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks morphed into a larger series of initiatives to bring broader political, economic, and social stability to the small but geopolitically pivotal state that harbored them. Evidence that Washington at the time was simply using “nation building” to mask an effort “to establish a military and geopolitical foothold in Central Asia on the very borders of Russia and China,” as one analyst has claimed, is thin and contradictory. No smoking gun has come out of the many exhaustive postmortems—not least, that same analyst admits, because “[t]hat ambition was never nakedly articulated.”¹



The Pentagon never said it, the White House never said it, and no concept of a larger strategy ever reflected it. Indeed, it is not even clear if any broader strategy ever existed. The State Department willfully or ignorantly avoided attaching Afghanistan to any serious or comprehensive strategy for Central or South Asia beyond the boiler plate language of support for more democratization and human rights. American involvement in Afghanistan, in hindsight, appears to have produced lots of programs involving many agencies, but little in the way of strategic vision; hardly the stuff of some neo-imperial nostrum.

By 2021, U.S./NATO military operations had destroyed, depleted, or deterred most of the terrorist activity that had almost brought about Afghanistan's demise as a coherent state. In the 18 months preceding withdrawal, U.S. military operations suffered no fatalities. By 2021, the number of U.S. forces had declined to fewer than 3,000, down from nearly 140,000 at its peak, and included some soldiers of other NATO nations and NATO supporters (e.g., Australia, Georgia). These were sunk costs, and ongoing costs had continued to drop. "We found the proper balance in recent years—maintaining a small force that propped up the Afghan government while also giving us the capability to strike at Taliban and other terrorist networks as needed,"

observed Congressman Dan Crenshaw (R-TX-2nd), who had deployed to Afghanistan as a member of the Navy's Seal Team 3.² Containing terrorism in Afghanistan—and, hence, across most of Central Asia—was now manageable. This was no "endless war."

INSECURITY, LOST GEOSTRATEGIC LEVERAGE AND YAWNING VACUUMS

Sustaining U.S. presence, especially military presence, anywhere will almost certainly change the surrounding geopolitics and, consequently, the strategies of other actors. Strategists from adversarial states surrounding the Central Asian states and Afghanistan could not avoid including the presence of nearby U.S. military forces as a critical—and unpredictable—variable when determining their own objectives and strategies for the region. We may never know how deeply this influence was felt, but one may infer from the accelerated engagement of states like China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey in the Central Asian space on the heels of American withdrawal—or the dismay of allies like India—that it was substantial. Adversaries no longer felt any urgency to incorporate an appreciation of U.S. strategic interests in the region into their own objectives and strategies, or to defer to them. Withdrawal had eliminated this need.

The geopolitical vacuum created by withdrawal largely fulfilled the recommendation of one critic of America's presence: to simply allow regional geopolitics to take over.³ And it didn't take long. China moved to engage Central Asia more fully as soon as two weeks after the withdrawal began, undoubtedly anticipating this delicious opportunity from the proclamations of two American presidents. Going forward, China's focus would be on "build[ing] a community with a shared future between China and Central Asia," and it dangled cooperation in agriculture, technology, industrial modernization, 5G and AI, and connectivity via China-sponsored

Putin was not the only one emboldened by America's Afghan exit. Xi Jinping and China's "wolf warriors" ratcheted up their pressure on Taiwan following America's dash for the door in Afghanistan, Iran moved eagerly into the Central Asian space, and Turkey and Russia embarked upon a mutual courtship. We may not know precisely how much the withdrawal from Afghanistan stimulated these and other unwelcome strategic dynamics across Eurasia. Pure coincidence, however, should be heavily discounted.



railways as lures.⁴ Withdrawal, observed strategist and counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen, “creates incentives for enhanced security cooperation between Kabul and Beijing,” and “deepen Afghanistan’s already substantial economic relationship with Iran as part of a regional trading, energy and transport system that is increasingly China-centric.”⁵ American leaders justified withdrawal as a way to enhance the U.S.’s ability to compete with China. But, Kilcullen noted, “the Afghan withdrawal may simply cement China’s role in the region,” while underlining America’s decline.⁶

With the Americans gone, Russia also redoubled its efforts to create a Greater Eurasian Partnership centered in Central Asia. The Kremlin initiative envisions joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor by merging the existing Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union with China’s Belt & Road Initiative. This bold vision, notes one analyst, is intended for “improving connectivity with Iran, India and Southeast Asia.” This will “boost Sino-Russian cooperation and brighten prospects for economic integration in the region” while providing security against turmoil from Afghanistan arising from the American departure.⁷ The withdrawal of the United States has thus incentivized its adversaries to realign and combine in ways that challenge American interests.

Withdrawal also torpedoed the original mission of the U.S. intervention, shamefully nullifying the costly investment of lives and treasure that had been made in the preceding two decades. Islamic terrorist organizations reconstituted and resurfaced almost immediately in the wake of the American withdrawal, assisted by the Taliban’s release of hundreds of *jihadists* from Afghanistan’s prisons. Efforts to sustain political stability and social progress effectively stopped. Today, the internecine conflict among these many groups once again threatens to engulf Afghanistan in unending civil war by enflaming the ethnic and regional divisions that have characterized the country’s politics for centuries. Imagining an Afghan nation amid these deep divisions has always been a stretch. Now, it has become even harder to conceive of Afghanistan as a viable state.

UNDERMINING ALLIES

The deterrent effect of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan on adversaries’ strategies was enhanced by the

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has slowed, even perhaps reversed, the building consensus among Central Asian states, including Afghanistan, for closer cooperation on regional security and economic integration.

support it provided to emerging strategic partners like India—for which Central Asia is an organic component of its strategy of balancing China’s regional influence and, consequently, preventing “encirclement.” This U.S.-India strategic linkup, in turn, was seen by many Indians as a powerful check on the machinations of the region’s big players, including China, Iran, Pakistan, and even Russia, as well as an attractive strategic magnet for other states seeking realignment opportunities. Beyond these favorable outcomes, this cooperation improved prospects for a U.S.-India partnership in addressing convergent interests in Asia.

Since the late 1990s, successive U.S. administrations had sought to engage India in a more cooperative strategic arrangement, despite lingering skepticism, and occasionally open hostility, to the U.S. among Indian elites. But progress had been made in building a modest version of a “strategic partnership.” The U.S. flight from Afghanistan stunned and angered India. “For India,” wrote that country’s former national security advisor, M.K. Narayanan, “the virtual retreat of the U.S. from this part of Asia; the growing China-Russia-Pakistan nexus across the region; and an Iran under a hardliner like Ebrahim Raisi, all work to its disadvantage. A great deal of hard thinking is needed as to how to retrieve a situation that for the present seems heavily tilted against India.”⁸

Most of all, however, there was the opportunity that the U.S. withdrawal afforded to Beijing. A noted Indian geostrategist advanced what would become a persistent refrain in Indian security discussions: the American withdrawal would empower China to draw all regional powers into its strategic orbit, “thereby altering the geopolitical and geoeconomics foundations of the re-



gion,” to India’s deep disadvantage. “The lesson for India,” he concluded, “in the wake of these developments is clear: It will have to fight its own battles. So it must make enemies wisely, choose friends carefully, rekindle flickering relationships, and make peace where it can.”⁹

India’s recent refusal to support sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine is plausible evidence that it is rekindling its flickering relationship with Moscow while carefully keeping the United States at some distance.

MISUNDERSTANDING CENTRAL ASIA’S STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has slowed, even perhaps reversed, the building consensus among Central Asian states, including Afghanistan, for closer cooperation on regional security and economic integration. America’s presence had largely been welcomed by the post-Soviet states of Central Asia because it represented a range of choices absent unwanted political pressure from Moscow and China’s aggressive economic opportunism. Trade relations between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan had grown markedly as a result of the American presence. Uzbekistan, on Afghanistan’s border, had long been supplying power and essential goods to the Afghan people resisting the Taliban. Trade turnover between Afghanistan and Kazakhstan exceeded \$400 million in 2019.¹⁰ These positive trends had continued to grow up until the time of withdrawal.

Of particular importance, Afghanistan offers the landlocked Central Asian states an overland pathway to seaports and markets in Pakistan, Iran, India, the Middle East, and beyond. As such, American withdrawal “extinguished the hope of opening southward trade routes that would give the Central Asians direct access to the Indian subcontinent and the booming economies of Southeast Asia.”¹¹ Withdrawal reversed the Central Asian states’ impressive gains since independence. “The importance of that potential ‘door to the south’ cannot be overestimated,” observes the scholar S. Frederick Starr. “Without it, all Central Asia would be left under Russia’s economic and political thumb and unable to constrain China’s economic incursions. Only with such a corridor to South Asia would these countries

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be able to affirm their own sovereignty and independence while at the same time establishing balanced and constructive relations with all the major political and economic powers.”¹²

Central Asia, including Afghanistan, had been emerging as a coherent geopolitical region on an important competitive landscape with a coalescing strategic identity highly favorable to the United States and its allies. Withdrawal undermined this historic transformation, though not its logic. Efforts to recover American footing in the region will be difficult; indeed, it is not yet clear that the United States envisions serious attempts to do so.

INCENTIVIZING DANGEROUS ADVERSARIES TO ACT

Historians ultimately have the final say on what triggers geopolitical change, conflict, and realignment—usually after the memoirs are written and security agencies have opened their files. Yet it would be more than conjecture to assume that withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan, closing down most of the non-military efforts to transform Afghan society, and fleeing in haste emboldened Vladimir Putin to accelerate his plans to restore imperial Russia, with Ukraine being the obvious target. Russia had begun its accretion of Ukrainian territory many years earlier, but it had been a slow-motion absorption, characterized by (badly) disguised troops and (implausible) deniability.

Putin must have relished witnessing how the with-



drawal had thrown NATO into consternation and uncertainty, while world public opinion hammered the United States. He could not have missed the American government's doubling down on its faulty "endless wars" narrative, NATO members publicly airing doubts about the organization's unity and purpose, or allies wondering aloud and in major media what American commitments to them were worth. And scarcely six months later, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin could only have seen America's fumbling in Afghanistan as a flashing green light. (He may have miscalculated in his aggression against Ukraine, but that misses the point. Ironically, American resolve in Ukraine may owe much to the Biden administration's forceful efforts to expunge some of the dishonor it earned at Kabul's airport.)

Putin was not the only one emboldened by America's Afghan exit. Xi Jinping and China's "wolf warriors" ratcheted up their pressure on Taiwan following America's dash for the door in Afghanistan, Iran moved eagerly into the Central Asian space, and Turkey and Russia embarked upon a mutual courtship. We may not know precisely how much the withdrawal from Afghanistan stimulated these and other unwelcome strategic dynamics across Eurasia. Pure coincidence, however, should be heavily discounted.

LOSING THE NARRATIVE

Withdrawal from Afghanistan caused the United States to suffer a major defeat in the battle of narratives. Peasants and shepherds with video-capable iPhones crowd-sourced in graphic detail clips of young boys falling from the wings of ascending airplanes; public executions by the Taliban of its opponents; the panic and turmoil of thousands of families attempting to flee Afghanistan; the closure of educational institutions and their subordination to Islamic dogma; the overnight reversal of years of progress on women's rights; and the murder of America's treasured Marines, among other disturbing episodes. These images and sounds sailed digitally around the globe—fueled substantially by social media and the United States' own media networks, such as the *Voice of America*.

On the basis of this evidence, observers around the world were quick to condemn the febrile claims of American leaders that we have positioned political and economic freedom, human rights, national self-determination, democracy, women's empowerment, and other bromides on the tip of America's Grand Strategy spear. For many, the withdrawal had eviscerated America's story about itself. And who could gainsay them? The evidence was voluminous, graphic, easily shared, and free.

Is this damage repairable? Familiar national narratives may no longer work in this transparent ether. Indeed, they may backfire when so exposed. After Afghanistan, gauzy claims of high principle will fare worse in the competition with adversaries whose narratives stress the benefits of economic assistance and institutional support against the exploitative West—think China—or those of jihadist terrorists who emphasize persistence in the face of an irresolute America. The tumultuous withdrawal from Afghanistan should be a wakeup call for us to rethink narrative strategy, as future conflicts will depend heavily on winning and or controlling this space.

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A (STILL) UNFOLDING DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

Additional after-effects of this calamity will yet emerge, as other actors seize opportunities to enhance their own competitive positions through new alignments, strategies, and capabilities they might not have sought or achieved when American military presence was nearby. The geopolitical vacuum across Central Asia created by withdrawal has accelerated and empowered adversary strategies and endangered the interests of American allies. Central Asian states will remain landlocked in the foreseeable future without a pathway through Afghanistan to global markets. When and if that pathway becomes available, it will likely be attached to China's and/or Russia's strategic visions. Withdrawal from Afghanistan compromised America's values-based story about itself across the world. And the implicit message of the withdrawal—that America is weak, tired, irresolute, internally divided, distant from our allies, self-isolating—likely triggered a number of other actors to pursue hitherto unachievable objectives that threaten U.S. interests.

But perhaps the most damaging consequence is this: the United States willingly gave up its pivotal position at the nexus of both adversary and allied strategies for Eurasia after having paid substantial upfront costs. On the larger map of America's future competition in Asia, this amounts to surrendering powerful influence over a vast geopolitical space stretching from Europe to Asia where U.S. interests will be increasingly challenged. Going forward, shaping the objectives and strategies of the region's pivotal actors in ways that favor U.S. interests will be much more difficult and costly to do from afar.

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Unpackaging Pakistan Politics and Their Regional Implications

Aparna Pande

Pakistan's politics in 2022 reflect much of what has ailed the country for the last 75 years. They include civilian political parties trying to govern amid polarization and constant infighting, an all-powerful military-intelligence establishment that retains political control by switching its support from one interest group to another, an increasingly radicalized society, and a flailing economy.

The regional context, meanwhile, makes Pakistan's situation all the more challenging. Afghanistan under Taliban rule has only increased Pakistan's security dilemma. The United States now views India as its strategic partner of choice in the region, putting Pakistan at a disadvantage. Historical ideological allies like the Gulf Arab countries, too, have drawn closer to New Delhi—primarily for economic reasons. And China, still the partner of last resort for Pakistan, is increasingly voicing concerns about domestic developments in the South Asian state.¹

BORN OF CRISIS

Pakistan's current crises are the culmination of decades of fraught policies. The desire to combat a perceived existential threat from India has resulted in over seven decades of unsustainable military expenditures that rested upon foreign (primarily U.S.) support—support obtained by making promises that Pakistan's leaders did not keep. The loss of foreign support in recent decades experienced by Islamabad because of changing geopolitics has been worsened by a refusal on the part of the Pakistani state to abandon ruinous, decades-old policies.

For Pakistan, adopting the model of a rentier state in which it leveraged its geostrategic location to obtain military and economic aid from bigger powers (the U.S. for several decades, and China more recently) went

hand in hand with underinvestment in human capital and social development, to the detriment of the national economy.² The use of Islamist parties and militant groups for unconventional warfare with India, and against domestic opponents, has resulted in a radicalization of Pakistani society.

Right from the start, democracy in Pakistan faced a challenge, as the country inherited a large army but lacked a national political party with grassroots support. The military's political role expanded as it came to view itself as the only national institution that could manage the contending ethnic and regional aspirations of Pakistan's provinces. Four military dictatorships and behind-the-scenes political maneuvering by the army throughout have now permanently skewed civil-military relations.

Pakistan's army leadership has never trusted civilian politicians, and so has repeatedly intervened to remove civilian leaders through judicial or military coups. The army has also used its Islamist allies to pressure civilian parties and prevent them from undertaking policies that would be in Pakistan's interest.

The army likewise wants to ensure that no politician or political party is able to build a nationwide grassroots base. Politicians often remain dependent on the army to stay in power. Every few years, army leaders have promoted the fortunes of a particular politician in the hope that they would become the civilian face for the military's agenda of permanent conflict with India, dominance over Afghanistan, and a more centralized Pakistani state.

Thus, the military backed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1960s, Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s, and tried to do the same with Imran Khan over the last decade, only to turn on them all when, after becoming popular, the politicians attempted to act independently. But repeat-



ed political engineering by the military has only made Pakistan more unstable.

Fear of survival has engendered corruption and dynastic rule within civilian political parties and prevented the rise of newer, broad-based and democratic ones. Suppressing ethno-linguistic nationalism by advancing religious nationalism, meanwhile, has resulted in violent repression of demands for greater autonomy among Pakistan's various ethnicities. The continuing civil war in Balochistan illustrates this problem.

Pakistan's military establishment chooses winners and losers in politics. Cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan was the military's civilian-of-choice and came to power in 2018, after the security establishment winnowed the electoral field for him and provided behind-the-scenes support.³ Thereafter, however, Khan's years in power were marred by poor economic decisions, problematic foreign policy, and ineffective governance.

As Pakistan's economic crisis grew, and tensions between Khan and the establishment deepened, a coalition of opposition parties used the opportunity to push a no-confidence motion against Khan in parliament. The establishment abandoned their support for Khan and the so-called "hybrid regime"—in which civilians and military ostensibly worked together. But instead of facing a no-confidence motion in parliament and accepting defeat gracefully, Khan claimed that his ouster, when it

came, was orchestrated by the United States, with the help of the army leadership. Khan used the army's own playbook against it: he blamed his removal on a foreign conspiracy, used anti-Americanism and pan-Islamism to rally support on the streets, and labelled anyone who disagreed with him—including military leaders—as anti-national.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

It is taking considerable effort by the army to fight an ideology that it itself crafted, and to subdue monsters it had sustained. There were enough people within the lower and middle ranks of the military, in the media, and within the middle and lower middle class in Pakistani society who believed—and some who still do—Khan's narrative, especially as it echoes what is taught through the educational curriculum.⁴

Khan's rhetoric has only deepened the fault lines within Pakistani society and polity. He has used social media and street protests to apply pressure on the government and the military establishment.

As a result, the coalition government of Pakistan's two largest parties—the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—that took power in April 2022 is now finding it difficult to govern. Government leaders are spending most of their time putting out fires lit by Khan and his supporters.

This domestic political instability has made it difficult for the coalition government to implement tough economic decisions that are critical for Pakistan's long-term recovery. In August 2022, Pakistan avoided an economic meltdown and received the next tranche of its bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after drawn-out and exacting negotiations.⁵ But Pakistan's rupee remains one of the world's worst performing currencies, the country's foreign exchange reserves are abysmally low, and Islamabad is finding it difficult to attract foreign investment even from friendly countries in the Gulf.⁶

Pakistan's economic problems are

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structural in nature, and unless and until they are tackled the country will always remain close to catastrophe. To wit, Pakistan's economy is heavily dependent on the export of cotton textiles, with little investment in diversification. The literacy rate, meanwhile, stands at 52 percent, the lowest in South Asia, resulting in an unskilled labor force that migrates primarily to the Gulf and sends remittances back.⁷ Pakistan's tax to GDP ratio is one of the lowest in the world, and key segments of the economy, such as agriculture and some military-run corporations, are exempt from income tax. Instead of raising revenue through taxes, successive governments have preferred to keep providing subsidies to avoid political and social unrest.

Poor management during the Khan era, coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, left Pakistan's economy badly battered. To forestall balance of payments difficulties, in 2019 Pakistan again borrowed from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—its 22nd loan from the institution since 1958. The move was part of a larger pattern; Pakistan has a habit of drawing the initial tranches of an IMF disbursement and then abandoning the program so as to avoid fulfilling stringent conditions for economic restructuring.⁸

But the IMF is not the only entity keeping Islamabad afloat. Since 2018, Pakistan has borrowed \$ 10 billion from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and China. The heavy dependence on external creditors was on display when, soon after the announcement of the latest tranche of the IMF bailout loan, Pakistan stated that it hoped to receive loans from friendly countries as well.⁹

Then there is the issue of Afghanistan. Pakistani strategists had expected the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul to be beneficial to their country. Since independence in 1947, Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has always centered around the India factor, with a pro-Pakistani, anti-Indian regime in Kabul deemed essential for security. Since the 1990s, the Taliban have therefore been Pakistan's partner-of-choice. But the August 2021

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victory of the Taliban has turned out to be a Pyrrhic one for Islamabad.

Devoid of international recognition, and without significant developmental aid, the Taliban have become a burden on Pakistan – one that Islamabad is finding it difficult to carry at a time when its own economy is weak and there is no American or Western largesse flowing. The victory of the Taliban next door has also deepened Pakistan's own security problems by energizing the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), resulting in a resurgence of deadly terror attacks inside the country.

DEAD-END POLICY

Pakistan, a country carved out of British India in 1947, has been in crisis mode for the last 75 years. An ideological state, the country's national identity and foreign policy are centered around a perceived existential threat from neighboring India. A national security state with weak civilian institutions, the Pakistani army has dominated virtually every aspect of state policy. Instead of investing in its people and in building a strong economy, the country's elite has preferred to have it serve as a rentier state for great powers. It is a policy that lies at the core of the country's myriad crises.



To move forward and resolve its domestic economic and political challenges, Pakistan needs political reconciliation at home and better relations with its immediate neighbors – especially its largest neighbor, India. For India, a Pakistan that is politically and economically stable, and which does not use jihad as a lever of foreign policy, would be an ideal end-state.

Pakistan's polity is deeply polarized. Its society has been radicalized further. The economy is weaker than it was four years ago. And the nation is more isolated on the world stage than ever before. Nine months after taking power, the coalition government currently governing Pakistan has been unable to move beyond the country being in crisis mode. Current Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif is a good administrator, but he lacks the political skills of his older brother (and three-time premier), Nawaz. The government also faces the almost impossible task of attracting economic investment from Western countries, especially the United States, and improving Pakistan's image abroad.

In any normal country, the announcement by a terrorist group that it is resuming its campaign of violence would result in introspection.¹⁰ In Pakistan, however, it is simply viewed as the collateral damage of a decades-old policy of diminishing India's preeminence in the neighborhood. Internally, the military-intelligence establishment may admit that supporting the Afghan Taliban was a mistake. But it cannot acknowledge that fact publicly. Similarly, the army's top brass knows Pakistan cannot wrest Kashmir from India by force, but remains unwilling to place the issue on the back burner and allow for trade and normal bilateral relations with New Delhi.

To move forward and resolve its domestic economic and political challenges, Pakistan needs political recon-

ciliation at home and better relations with its immediate neighbors – especially its largest neighbor, India. For India, a Pakistan that is politically and economically stable, and which does not use *jihad* as a lever of foreign policy, would be an ideal end-state. However, this would require redefining Pakistan's view of India as an existential threat, of Afghanistan as Pakistan's backyard, of Pakistan as a rentier state for great powers, and of Islamist groups as useful instruments to advance domestic and regional policies. These are redlines that the army is unwilling to allow the country's civilian politicians to cross. And, although bruised, Pakistan's military establishment remains the most powerful institution in the country.

At its core, Imran Khan's skirmish with the army, both while in power and since, has been over who has the right to appoint the next army chief. The PML-N and PPP, along with their other coalition partners, wanted to ensure that they, not Imran Khan, were key to that decision. That decision has now been made, and the current government may survive until the country's next elections, in 2023. But none of this changes Pakistan's defining realities. It remains a nuclear armed state, with a troubled relationship toward *jihadi* groups, that is plagued by chronic political instability and economic chaos.

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China's Shadow over South Asia

Harsh V. Pant and Harris Amjad

The docking of the *Yuan Wang 5*, a Chinese research ship, at Sri Lanka's Hambantota port in August 2022 sent a clear signal to the world. The visit, which took place despite protestations from New Delhi and with the acquiescence of the Sri Lankan government, underscored the larger strategic shift taking place in the region, where China is gaining a growing foothold, and where the Chinese government's strategic ambitions are growing.

AN "ALL WEATHER" PARTNERSHIP WITH PAKISTAN

China's rapidly-growing presence in the region is often portrayed in the context of the PRC's geopolitical competition with an emerging India. Increasingly, smaller nations in the neighbourhood have used the "China Card" to challenge India's traditional pre-eminence, and derive benefits from the competition between the larger powers.

The strategy to pit China against India in the region was pioneered by Pakistan. The "all-weather" friendship between the two countries gained momentum following the 1962 Sino-Indian war, and has been a hallmark of the foreign policies of both sides since. While this alignment continues to be asymmetric in nature—with Pakistan wanting more from its ties to China than it is willing to offer—Beijing's flirtations with Islamabad provide the latter with a key diplomatic tool by which to complicate India's strategic calculus.

Defense ties continue to anchor the larger relationship, with Pakistan receiving some 47% of China's major arms exports. Beijing—Islamabad's biggest arms provider—supplies it with advanced fighter aircraft, warships, submarines, missiles, drones and air-defence systems.¹ This partnership also extends to joint naval² and military³ exercises between the two countries. A similar depth in ties can also be seen on the economic front; Pakistan's exports to China surpassed \$1.6 billion in the first five months of 2022, and bilateral trade was projected to cross the \$32 billion threshold as both sides have looked to extend their

existing Free Trade Agreement.⁴ The growing economic partnership is also visible in Chinese assistance for major infrastructural projects in Pakistan under the aegis of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The most notable of these is the multi-billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which includes the strategically significant Gwadar port, energy infrastructure and several other large connectivity projects.

Without question, the CPEC represents a thorn in India's side. Not only does it provide China with crucial access to the Arabian Sea, but also infringes on India's territorial claims, since a part of the project passes through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. However, bumpy progress on the CPEC,⁵ Pakistan's domestic troubles and a slowdown in the Chinese economy⁶ are all likely to dampen the vibrancy of the partnership in the near term. Nevertheless, Sino-Pakistani ties are likely to grow stronger, given their shared interest in keeping an ascendant India tied down in regional matters.

DHAKA'S MANEUVERS

On the eastern flank, Bangladesh has taken a page out of Pakistan's playbook in its relations with the PRC. However, it has also innovated on Islamabad's strategy, and simultaneously created room for cooperation with India.

That oscillation is a matter of political necessity. A significant segment of the Bangladeshi polity is opposed to deepening ties with India, viewing Delhi as a regional hegemon. As such, a willing and cooperative China is seen as the ideal counterbalance—engagement with which can further the country's national interests.

This view has certainly contributed to India-Bangladesh bilateral ties losing traction under Dhaka's previous government. It is during the rule of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (2001 to 2008) that Beijing made crucial gains in the region with the signing of a "Defence Co-operation Agreement" in 2002 and expanding bilateral coopera-



tion between the two countries thereafter.⁷ Even under the current Awami League government, which is more willing to engage with New Delhi, China has managed to consolidate gains and build a deeper relationship with Bangladesh. This can be seen in the upgrading of diplomatic ties to the level of “strategic partnership” that took place in 2016. Since then, huge Chinese investments and loans have flowed into Dhaka, particularly the country’s energy sector; 90% of energy projects in the pipeline in Bangladesh are funded by China, with assistance and investments in green energy transition also in the works.⁸ Additionally, Beijing is providing funding to develop the country’s Chattogram port, and linking it to its Yunnan province through a highway via Myanmar. Over the past decade, Bangladesh has also engaged in several defense equipment purchases from China, totalling \$3 billion.⁹ All these developments have taken place against the backdrop of steadily growing bilateral economic trade.

Increasingly, smaller nations in the neighbourhood have used the “China Card” to challenge India’s traditional pre-eminence, and derive benefits from the competition between the larger powers.

OTHER PLAYERS

A similar narrative can be seen emerging in Nepal as well, permitting China to capitalize on domestic political trends. By supporting Nepal’s position during most of its disputes with India, China was able to project itself as a benevolent power—and draw a contrast with India’s often supercilious attitude toward its smaller neighbours. Chinese assistance has likewise arrived in the forms of significant foreign direct investment (FDI) and cooperation in railway building, hydroelectricity, agriculture and water resources. The unstable politics of the Himalayan Kingdom have also overtly highlighted Beijing’s influence within Nepalese political circles.¹⁰

Beijing’s influence doesn’t stop there, however. By opening several China Study Centres to promote Chinese values, the PRC is employing “soft power” mechanisms to promote Chinese perspectives on key issues within Nepal.¹¹ As such, Beijing will be keenly awaiting the

outcome of the country’s elections, taking place this Fall. China would clearly like to see the return to power of the political coalition led by KP Sharma Oli, since Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has shown more eagerness to improve ties with both India and the United States.

In the case of Sri Lanka, too, China has been proactive in extending support—and gaining leverage—when the country’s ties to India soured over Colombo’s handling of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) terrorist group. China’s assistance, which involved military training, arms transfers, and supporting Colombo’s position in international forums, was extremely significant in the all-out war against the LTTE. By comparison, India’s lack of support for Sri Lanka’s fight, a function of domestic political constraints, and its subsequent backing of UNHCR resolutions against Sri Lanka, had the effect of pushing the nation further toward Beijing. In the past couple of decades, China has emerged as the single largest source for

FDI in Sri Lanka, and has provided loans for several projects such as the port in Hambantota, a new terminal at the port of Colombo, Sri Lanka’s first four-lane expressway and a new national theater, among others.

For Sri Lanka, however, the costs of this engagement have been steep. China’s loans and the resulting projects have failed to generate any significant profits for the country. Rather, they have landed Colombo in a deep—and deepening—debt trap. Approximately 10% of the island nation’s current \$51 billion foreign debt is owed to China, as the country grapples with a severe economic crisis. This has provided Beijing with considerable political leverage and allowed it to strong-arm Sri Lanka on occasion. However, China’s close ties with the Rajapaksa clan, which is viewed to be responsible for Sri Lanka’s woes, are working to the detriment of this role. The current climate has allowed India to regain some good faith from the government in Colombo, and showcase its credentials as a reliable partner.

Beijing’s growing encroachments in other smaller South Asian states like Bhutan and Maldives are also a topic of concern for India. The 2017 Doklam standoff between India and China over violations of Bhutanese territory by the latter is a glaring example. While Bhutan and China have made some progress toward the peaceful settlement of their border dispute since, India remains wary of any solution that threatens to reduce the buffer between India and China. On the other hand, the Maldives has piqued the interest of the Chinese due to the country’s proximity to vital sea lanes of communication. Under the current



By opening several China Study Centres to promote Chinese values, the PRC is employing “soft power” mechanisms to promote Chinese perspectives on key issues within Nepal.

government, Male has realigned toward an “India-first” policy, but this could change in the future. Meanwhile, Chinese assistance in the form of economic relief packages, as well as investment in infrastructure and developmental projects, has raised the stakes and made it harder for India to court the Maldives.

SHARPENING STRATEGIC COMPETITION

The increasing trust deficit between India and China has exacerbated this strategic tussle for influence in the South Asian region.¹² While India would like to solidify a *status quo* in which it is dominant in its geopolitical backyard, China is eager to tap into the large regional market for its own economic growth. Additionally, Beijing is keen to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean to deter chokepoint blockades and solve its “Malacca Dilemma”—its fear of a maritime blockade at the Straits of Malacca through which more than 70% of the PRC’s petroleum and LNG exports are shipped.

The resulting regional order is likely to be one rife with strategic competition. Neither nation gives any indication of backing down. For the smaller states of South Asia, this provides plenty of opportunities to rope in favorable financial incentives for their own developmental agendas.

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India: A Geopolitical Assessment

Rehna Sheth

India is on a path to become one of the world's next superpowers—if, that is, it plays its cards right. Yet part of New Delhi's success will hinge on defining its partnerships in the 21st century with the utmost care.

Since the early 1950s, India has doggedly clung to the principle of “Non-Alignment,” and through it has managed to simultaneously foster relationships with both Russia and the United States. More than half a decade later, India's growing economic, military, and political power has positioned it to become a global leader. But Russia's war in Ukraine has exposed the contradiction inherent in India's foreign policy, which is focused on short term gain rather than longer term benefits. In addition, China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific poses a serious threat to India's future prospects.

All of which raises the question: can India continue to grow in a changed global environment without choosing sides? More and more, the answer to India's future prosperity appears to hinge on aligning more closely with the United States.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As the world's largest democracy, with over 1.3 billion people, India is now the 5th largest economy in the world, and is on track to become the third largest by 2030. India's economic boom can largely be attributed to its growing working-age population, a well-educated middle class, investment in IT and pharmaceuticals, and potent economic liberalization policies. But this densely populated country also faces domestic issues such as poverty and high unemployment, social and ethnic division, and poor infrastructure that must be resolved if Delhi is to achieve sustained success. Additionally, India continues to be plagued with ongoing border disputes with China, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan,

heightening military tensions in South Asia.²

On the international stage, India plays a delicate game, benefitting from its connection to two of the most powerful nations in the world while never achieving its full potential with either due to its double-dealing behavior. This duality can be traced back to the Cold War, when a fledgling India joined the “Non-Aligned Movement” in 1961 to avoid a costly conflict and having to alienate potential international partners. That decision had momentous consequences; to this day, “non-alignment” has enabled India to concurrently carry out trade, and maintain defense partnerships, with both Moscow and Washington.

Yet that status has become a significant obstacle. Nearly a year after the start of the Ukraine war, India is caught in a Catch-22 in which its longstanding (and still ongoing) relations with Russia are running counter to the country's ambitions grow economically, militarily, and politically.

A PASSE PARTNERSHIP WITH RUSSIA

To be sure, New Delhi's ties to Moscow run deep. In India's early independence, land disputes over Jammu and Kashmir led to many wars with Pakistan, and the Soviet Union was one of the first countries to publicly declare support for India's claims to these disputed regions.³ The USSR likewise became one of the largest contributors to India's development, assisting with the construction of steel and manufacturing plants, power equipment, and coal mining machinery.⁴ The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of India and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, signed in 1971, promoted trade, diplomacy, peace and a joint opposition to military aggression between the two nations.⁵ It also had the effect of deepening India's military dependence on Russia—a



situation which continues to this day, with at least 60-70% of India's contemporary arsenal consisting of Russian equipment.⁶

Russia has been a supplier of energy to India as well, and that role has expanded dramatically since the start of the Ukraine war. Since February, India has chosen to take advantage of heavily discounted Russian energy, purchasing more than ten times as much oil and four times as much coal from Moscow than it did the previous year.⁷ Russia is also a key partner in India's civilian nuclear program, assisting with the construction of six nuclear reactors on Indian soil.⁸

But Russia's growing partnership with China is beginning to jeopardize India's security in the Indo-Pacific. Back in February, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin signed a cooperation agreement solidifying a "no limits" partnership, and cooperation between the two countries is intensifying despite the Ukraine war and Russia's growing international isolation. As evidence, bilateral trade between China and Russia increased by 29% in the first seven months of 2022.⁹ However, this new dynamic between Moscow and Beijing runs counter to India's once strong Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Kremlin, as Sino-Russian cooperation increasingly endangers India's sphere of political and military influence.

On the international stage, India plays a delicate game, benefitting from its connection to two of the most powerful nations in the world while never achieving its full potential with either due to its balancing.

INDIA'S NOT-SO FRIENDLY NEIGHBOR

For many years, China and India were expected to grow closer and closer together, and nourish Asia in the process. Instead, these two nations, which were once interconnected and prospered together prior to colonial

times, have morphed into rivals, resulting in several border skirmishes over the last half century. Following the 1962 Sino-Indian war, centuries of collaboration and respect began to dissolve as tensions over border disputes, competition for economic markets, China's role on the UN Security Council, and Pakistan's role in exacerbating Sino-Indian relations took their toll. Today, the bilateral relationship has shifted to one of intense competition over economic markets, international political affairs, and border disputes.

China now presents a serious threat to India's sphere of influence. Through its Belt & Road Initiative, China has built a vast range of military ports and bases strategically placed to encircle the Indian Ocean region, thereby cutting India off from the rest of the world. These ports, in countries such as Djibouti, Pakistan, and Myanmar, are part of a "string of pearls" created by China to secure supply lines, energy resources, and project military power across the Indo-Pacific. However, these military ports and bases are choking-off India off from the rest of the world, endangering India's strategic position. In response, India has built a "necklace of diamonds" consisting of its own military bases around the Indian Ocean—albeit unfortunately nowhere near as robust and effective as China's.

The most threatening arm of China's BRI to India, however, is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a \$62 billion project intended to fuse Sino-Pakistani infrastructure, energy, economic zones, and the military port of Gwadar. The CPEC creates a number of security and sovereignty concerns for India, especially given that its path cuts through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. If the CPEC continues to expand to Afghanistan, as planned, the corridor could also facilitate terrorist activities in the region. Additionally, the simplified flow of raw materials from China to Pakistan could allow Islamabad to become a regional leader in textiles and other sectors that directly compete with both the U.S. and Indian economies. With India's two largest adversaries working jointly to enlarge its control over the Indo-Pacific, India must choose its allies carefully if it wants to maintain its sphere of influence in South Asia.

In addition, unresolved border disputes continue to fan the flames of the now-feuding neighbors.



There are two prominent regions of disagreement along the Sino-Indian border: Aksai Chin in the Ladakh region (the Western territory bordered by Kashmir) and Arunachal Pradesh (the mountainous region Northeast of Bhutan). These two disputed regions were the main cause of the Sino-Indian War in 1962 and have remained sore spots for both the nations. While some steps have been taken to deescalate in the contested region of Ladakh, tensions remain high following a deadly 2020 clash that killed 24 soldiers.

THE LOGIC OF INDO-AMERICAN TIES

Today, the United States and India share a number of values and interests, including upholding democracy and a rules-based international order, countering Chinese aggression, and promoting economic prosperity. Following a gradual decrease in anti-American sentiments in India and a U.S. recognition of India's status as a nuclear weapons state, the two countries formally signed a defense partnership in 2005. Since then, the framework for bilateral defense cooperation has grown stronger via a host of new initiatives, such as 2012's Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), the 2014 India-U.S. Declaration on Defense Cooperation, and a 2015 Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship. These initiatives, in turn, have spawned deeper cooperation on research & development for everything from mobile electric hybrid power sources to aircraft carriers and jet engine technology.¹⁰

Maritime security and naval engagements are a high priority for both Washington and Delhi, especially in the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific, where Chinese expansionism now threatens the sovereignty of many nations. The U.S. and India take part in annual bilateral MALABAR naval exercises to strengthen their ability to counter threats at sea.¹¹ In April of 2022, the U.S. and India signed a new defense arrangement encompassing cooperation on space defense between the U.S. Space Command and India's Defense Space Agency.¹² The

China now presents a serious threat to India's sphere of influence. Through its Belt & Road Initiative China has built a vast range of military ports and bases strategically placed to encircle the Indian Ocean region, thereby cutting India off from the rest of the world.

agreement also strengthens cooperation on cyberspace defense and information sharing.¹³ Additionally, alliances like the Quad, focused on fostering an ongoing strategic security dialogue, and I2U2, an economic cooperation forum, are both collaborative platforms to counter threats (like China) in the Asia Pacific region.

But, while the U.S.-India partnership has unquestionably taken significant strides in the last 20 years, a deeper union will be difficult unless India can continue disengaging with Russia. Here, India's shifting procurement patterns are important. In the last five years, the U.S. has steadily climbed the ranks to become the fourth largest exporter of oil to India—a trend that reflects India's growing alignment with the American economy. In addition, India has taken great pains to diversify its weapons acquisition, purchasing more than \$20 billion worth of American military equipment over the last decade.¹⁴ While it will take time for India's military to replace its arsenal with non-Soviet weaponry, and for the moment Russian equipment still makes up a majority of the hardware used by India's Armed Forces, Delhi is slowly taking the correct steps to slowly detach itself from the Kremlin.

THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

How does India escape its Catch 22? The only way out of Delhi's contemporary predicament is to think strategically, and over the long term. For India to reach its potential as an economic powerhouse and a leader in global politics, it must make a conscious effort to sever its historic ties to Russia and commit to a longstanding



partnership with the United States. The war in Ukraine has cast a shadow over Russia and its allies, and India would be doing itself a disservice if it continues to partner with a country that's fast becoming a global pariah. Put plainly, it's increasingly obvious that Russia is holding India back from growth and success.

Here, a closer partnership with Washington can help. The growing closeness between China and Russia represents a shared threat to the United States and India, and increased joint military coordination between the two countries would reap tremendous dividends in countering the rising influence and aggression of both nations. Another significant common area of interest for Washington and Delhi is countering Islamic extremism. Here, stepped-up intelligence sharing could help to strengthen stability in South Asia. In addition, given India's robust space program and its advancements in scientific research and manufacturing, there is a great deal of room for future collaboration on issues like research & development, technological advancements, cybersecurity, privacy protection, and space exploration. Finally, robust Indian-American cooperation will help ensure that the global economy and the world's supply chains remain secure as China's Belt & Road Initiative continues to expand.

In order for all this to happen, however, both the U.S. and India need to demonstrate that they are ready to make a commitment by distancing themselves from each other's adversaries. If they do, the benefits for the international system will be legion.

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The Case for an India-First South Asia Strategy

Cleo Paskal

Against the backdrop of deepening strategic competition with Beijing, Washington's attention is steadily turning to the need for a comprehensive strategy by which to engage South Asia. Less well defined, however, is what such a strategy might actually look like.

Here, some strategic clarity is needed. If an American strategy for the region is to be effective, it needs to be nested within a coherent, unflinching assessment of the threats to the United States that exist in the region, and to the nation's larger strategic goals. Moreover, a U.S. approach must then be implemented through a redesigned engagement process—one that leverages the whole-of-government to help define for America's regional allies and partners the true implications of the activities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its ruling Communist Party, as well as what the PRC's activities might mean for China itself as well as for the world at large.

THE CHINA CHALLENGE

When it comes to contemporary threats, the gravest is undoubtedly China. The Biden administration's October 2022 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) makes this clear, laying out that "The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it."¹

The Department of Defense's November 2022 report to Congress on *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* elaborates on that point. "The PRC's strategy entails a determined effort to amass and harness all elements of its national power to place the PRC in a 'leading position' in an enduring competition between systems," it lays out. "[T]he PRC presents the most consequential and systemic challenge

to U.S. national security and the free and open international system."²

The countries experiencing the most intense and overt pressure from Beijing, moreover, are the ones in China's immediate neighborhood. Concern over Beijing's activities in the Indo-Pacific is such that President Biden's first multilateral meeting (albeit virtual) was with the other leaders of the "Quad" grouping (U.S., Australia, Japan, India) and, unusually, the White House released its *Indo-Pacific Strategy* months before releasing its National Security Strategy.³

China has explicitly made today's strategic competition with the United States a contest of systems. Beijing is trying to subvert and control, or else destroy, the international rules-based system in order to bring about an international decision-making structure in which its wishes are the determining reference point. A key element of this strategy is to undermine the U.S. globally, beginning in the Indo-Pacific.

As a practical matter, this means effectively pushing the U.S. out of the Western Pacific, and back toward Hawaii. Some of the ways this could be done are through Beijing's effective and intense political warfare efforts across the region, or through a breaking of the first island chain either via a successful and uncontested kinetic invasion of Taiwan or by the 2024 election in Taiwan resulting in a more Beijing complaint administration. Should this happen, American influence in the region and globally will, at the least, be severely damaged.

As a result, in order to counter the threat, a key goal of the U.S. is to defend its role in the region. The Indo-Pacific is the front line in the battle of systems. Lose there and the U.S.—along with the international rule-based system—will be severely weakened. For the moment, the contestation is largely confined to the realm of political warfare. However, it has already become kinetic in



places—as was seen when China pushed across the Line of Actual Control with India in the spring of 2020, and twenty Indian soldiers were killed by PLA troops.

AT THE CENTER OF STRATEGY

South Asia consists of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. While Afghanistan and Pakistan aren't in the regional security portfolio of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), countries in the region such as India view themselves as part of the Indo-Pacific. China certainly sees Pakistan, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, leading to the port of Gwadar, as a key element of its access to the Indian Ocean.

As a result, a U.S. South Asia strategy should be nested within a broader approach to the Indo-Pacific, which sees the main threat as PRC aggression and has the goal of defending the region's "free and open" economic and political system. In that context, the importance of a strong relationship with pluralistic, democratic, India—a country that values and contributes to the international rules-based order—is of paramount importance. A stable and economically robust India, after all, benefits both its South Asian neighbors and the broader Indo-Pacific. For example, New Delhi's ties with Tokyo are old and deep and bridge the region. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's 2007 speech to the Indian Parliament is often cited as the start of the modern Indo-Pacific conceptualization.

Additionally, especially since the June 2020 PLA attack on its forces, India has been innovating in pushing back on the PRC's political warfare, for instance by putting restrictions on foreign direct investment, seizing tens of millions of dollars through anti-money laundering

investigations into Chinese companies,⁵ and banning scores of Chinese apps, including TikTok and WeChat, on national security grounds.⁶ India is also restructuring its military and investing in infrastructure along the country's *de facto* border with China. It is also the only country that could possibly open up a major land-based second front with China should Beijing, for example, invade Taiwan.

UPGRADING ENGAGEMENT

Given the natural alignment of interests, a closer U.S.-India relationship would seem to be a desirable cornerstone of a South Asia strategy, as well as a larger Indo-Pacific one. Indeed, in the White House's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, India is the only country to get a stand-alone section in the listed ten core lines of effort. But there are serious roadblocks in the U.S.-India relationship today. Among other complaints, detractors have criticized Delhi as not sufficiently supportive on Ukraine, too close to Russia, and too "complicated" to work with. Meanwhile, in Delhi, it is common to hear that the U.S. is an unreliable partner, that it still prefers Pakistan to India, and that American business interests try to hobble Indian competitors (for example as was seen around vaccine manufacturing). The result is a trust deficit, with each side asking whether the other is truly on its side. To this is added a range of third parties keen to block a deepening of U.S.-India ties (including China, Pakistan and Russia, but also allies in other contexts, such as France, who don't want to see their own interests in India undercut.)

Often, strong people-to-people ties can stabilize waxing and waning state-to-state relations. But there are problems here as well. There are currently extremely long wait times for Indians to get visas to the U.S., a situation that affects students, tourists, workers, family reunions and more. Recent wait times in New Delhi for an appointment at the U.S. Embassy for a visitor visa average 833 days.⁷ In September 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken addressed the issue at a press conference with Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, blaming the delays on backlogs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ That explanation, however, rang hollow to Indians, since average wait times for a U.S. tourism

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Given the importance of India's rise and its leadership in the emerging American Indo-Pacific strategy, the U.S.–India relationship is multi-faceted and should be developed across a wide range of departments and sectors in the American government.

visa for most Chinese are under a week. These self-inflicted impediments to vital people-to-people good will highlight a structural issue that affects many aspects of U.S. foreign policy, including the U.S. approach to India.

BUREAUCRATIC HIJACKING

Given the importance of India's rise and its leadership in the emerging American Indo-Pacific strategy, the U.S.–India relationship is multi-faceted and should be developed across a wide range of departments and sectors in the American government. In practice, however, the Department of State tends to see the world and shape foreign policy through the prism of “departmental equities” that often are narrower and more bureaucratic than the broader national interest, including but certainly not limited to relations with India. That is almost taken as a given, and some (especially in State) will even say State alone and exclusively is responsible for foreign policy.

To be accurate, within the executive branch, foreign policy is the responsibility of the President and, on a file as deep, wide-ranging and important as India, there should be much broader interagency mechanisms not controlled by any single department's interagency process or authority. A broader governmental dialogue would eliminate the monopoly of Foggy Bottom over the relationship—which, more often than not prioritizes State Department rather than U.S. government “equities.” Currently, State can, for example, assert its own internal departmental directives such as the Foreign Affairs Manual and C-175 process to determine what other departments and agencies will be consulted

in developing U.S. foreign policy. That allows it to control and manipulate the interagency process. Such a system, however, doesn't necessarily align with the broader objective of optimizing America's South Asia strategy. A broader dialogue within the U.S. government is needed.

Given China's stated ambitions and aggression, as well as the existing tensions in the Indo-Pacific, such an approach needs to prioritize India. For Washington, expanding areas of agreement—and reducing areas of disagreement—with New Delhi is central to a more robust strategy for South Asia. The urgency is clear. Without an effective India strategy, there can be no effective South Asia strategy or Indo-Pacific strategy. And without them, the United States has no effective counter to Beijing's “systemic challenge.”

END NOTES

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