



THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH ASIA AFTER AFGHANISTAN

ALEXANDER EVANS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

December 2012

Asia Society
Advisory Group on U.S. Policy toward South Asia

AsiaSociety.org/USandSouthAsia

© 2012 The Asia Society. All rights reserved.

For electronic copies of this report, please visit www.asiasociety.org/policy/publications.

Asia Society

725 Park Avenue

New York, NY 10021

Phone: 212-288-6400

Fax: 212-517-8315

Email: globalpolicy@asiasociety.org

www.asiasociety.org

FOREWORD

WITH THE 2014 MILITARY DRAWDOWN in Afghanistan approaching, the second Obama administration faces a vast array of challenges in South Asia. As Afghanistan prepares for a critical transition, it is beset by insecurity, corruption, drug trafficking, and political instability. Rising militancy and extremism in Pakistan threaten regional stability. Poverty and corruption in India have the capacity to undermine economic growth in the region's most vibrant democracy. The advancement of economic and political development in Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka will depend in large part on the success of efforts to foster greater interconnectivity among economies in South Asia and throughout Asia. At the same time, China's ascent as a powerful regional player with a growing range of interests in South Asia is making relations between Washington and Beijing all the more complex.

The United States will need to adopt a fresh approach to South Asia policy if it intends to forge relationships throughout the region built on trust and mutual interests, while also maintaining a broader long-term strategic vision toward Asia. *The United States and South Asia after Afghanistan* seeks to pave the way for a robust and forward-looking U.S. policy toward the region—one that suits the complex realities of the day and ensures that both the United States and the countries of South Asia will be better equipped to handle future uncertainties.

This report reviews U.S. policy toward the region since 1947, drawing on a range of declassified documents, firsthand accounts from American practitioners and their Indian and Pakistani counterparts since the mid-1990s, and more than 90 interviews conducted between August and November 2012. One key conclusion drawn from this review is that the United States has missed crucial opportunities to define and pursue its interests in South Asia.

Through an examination of the actors who drive South Asia policy, the report offers recommendations on how decision making can be more effectively coordinated with the aim of developing strategies that are both long range and decisive. In doing so, the report focuses on the ways in which the United States can improve its processes to make better policy choices, rather than outlining specific policies Washington should adopt toward the region.

Alexander Evans, the report's author and Asia Society Bernard Schwartz Fellow, led this ambitious project, which was informed by his experience in the region and knowledge of U.S. foreign policy making. On behalf of Asia Society, I would like to thank Alexander for dedicating his energy and impressive skills to this effort. The project also benefited from the expertise provided by the members of the Asia Society Advisory Group on U.S. Policy toward South Asia, as well as the individuals who participated as interviewees. I am grateful to all of them for generously giving

their time and informed perspectives. My thanks also go to Johan Kharabi for overseeing the many aspects of this project, Atefa Shah for research and drafting assistance, and to the rest of Asia Society's Global Policy Programs team for lending support to the project in New York and Washington, D.C.

Suzanne DiMaggio

Vice President, Global Policy Programs, Asia Society

December 2012

PREFACE

A STABLE AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH ASIA is important to the interests of the United States and to the future of Asia as a whole. U.S. policy toward the region has had its share of successes and missed opportunities. One of the former is the significant uplift in U.S.-India relations since the 1990s. The latter are the casualties of either too little attention to underlying issues in the region or the by-product of excessive focus on one issue alone.

If the United States is to play a positive role in facilitating a better future for South Asia, it needs a clear understanding of how U.S. policy has evolved over time. Only then can it take the steps necessary to adapt to current realities and meet the wide range of future regional challenges. Afghanistan is not the only interest that Washington has in the region despite its being the immediate focus of much press and policy attention over the past several years. While the United States has made significant progress since 1947 in forging effective bilateral ties with countries across South Asia, policy has regularly focused on the immediate over the enduring.

The United States has a continuing interest in the stability and development of Afghanistan. However, advancing the valuable bilateral relationship with India, achieving a sustainable and effective policy toward Pakistan, and developing a regional policy that understands how South Asia connects to other parts of Asia are of even greater consequence. The U.S.-China relationship is integral to South Asia policy as well, and U.S. policy toward Asia as a whole must be more fully integrated to reflect this. As the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan continues in the run-up to 2014, this will become more apparent.

The report that follows is timely. Asia Society has interviewed more than 90 current and former practitioners and researched the foreign policy archives to assess how South Asia policy is made and how it could be improved. Interagency coordination has never been easy, but it is absolutely essential if the United States is to adopt a long-term strategy toward the region. Linkages between various policy communities working on South Asia need to be strengthened as well.

Diplomacy is about the art of the possible and is strongly influenced by events. A better prepared, more purposeful, and integrated approach to South Asia policy can help the next administration prepare for the opportunities and challenges ahead.

Ambassador John D. Negroponte

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NEXT YEAR PRESENTS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY for the second Obama administration to forge a more strategic, integrated, and successful policy toward South Asia. This report looks back in order to look forward, and draws on lessons from the history of U.S. South Asia policy to make recommendations for the future. Many of these recommendations focus on how the United States should improve South Asia policy making rather than setting out detailed policy prescriptions.

U.S. policy toward South Asia since 1947 has been thoughtful, rooted in expertise, and sometimes successful. But the growing importance of the region since the late 1990s has also led to two strategic disconnects:

- Those working on South Asia have not connected closely enough to those dealing with East Asia. The ties that now exist need to be strengthened.
- The focused policy agendas on counterterrorism, Afghanistan, and India have been conducted in parallel rather than in concert. These policy communities and agendas could be better connected. This does not require re-hyphenating India and Pakistan, but it does mean reconnecting the different parts of regional policy—and expanding them into an Asia-wide and global framework.

The Obama administration has set out an economic vision for the South Asia region—the “New Silk Road.” Trade is already growing among these countries in what has been the least economically integrated region in the world. For these positive changes to be truly transformative, they need to be underpinned by sustainable political change as well.

Four principles should inform a fresh approach to South Asia policy:

- **Avoid hyphens.** “Indo-Pak” was offensive to New Delhi and encouraged a perception that U.S. policy would be animated by equivalence, not autonomous judgment, when Washington responded to developments in relations between India and Pakistan. “Af-Pak” was offensive to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Kabul resented the implied exclusive linkage to Islamabad along with any suggestion of being a junior partner. Islamabad resented Pakistan being tied to Afghanistan, given the different trajectories of both countries. The future risk is not a return to either of these outmoded hyphens, but of a new and singular hyphenation based on “China-India.” Relations between China and India will be enormously important in the decades to come, but the Beijing-Delhi relationship alone will neither define Asia’s future nor capture all the regional South Asia issues that deserve attention.
- **Think regionally.** This should build on the successful focus on the New Silk Road, as advanced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Ambassador Marc Grossman, the U.S. special representative

for Afghanistan and Pakistan. A regional perspective should include actions as well as speeches and expand beyond an exclusive focus on economic and social development. It must address political and security challenges, including sensitive issues like counterterrorism; deterrence stability; and potential crisis management among India, Pakistan, and China. Each country deserves individual attention within a broader perspective and policy framework. This should connect all the regions of Asia: South, Central, East, and Southeast.

- **Integrate South Asia into an Asia strategy.** A holistic approach is essential. Many, if not all, functional challenges cross the traditional South and Central Asia/East Asia divide. Asian states see Asia as a geopolitical and economic space. U.S. policy makers on South Asia need to do likewise. China is a South Asian foreign and economic policy actor; a close political ally of Pakistan; and deeply engaged with Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. U.S. policy makers need to stretch their vision beyond the boundaries of geographic bureaus at the State Department. Principals in the George W. Bush and first Obama administrations moved toward this: transformational diplomacy followed by the pivot, and now rebalancing, toward Asia. Only in parts has the foreign policy bureaucracy kept pace.
- **Connect policy agendas.** Interagency coordination is always difficult. Coordinating foreign and security policy strategy is even harder. But contested policy agendas in South Asia need not mean a divided approach to policy. Effective U.S. policies in the region will be advanced when the interagency process properly evaluates the competing demands of different policy agendas, establishes realistic goals, and recognizes the load-bearing capabilities of key U.S. bilateral partnerships in South Asia.

Important lessons can be learned from the past, as the history of U.S. South Asia policy demonstrates:

- **A strategic opportunity for recalibrating South Asia policy was lost at the end of the Cold War. It should not be lost again as Afghanistan and counterterrorism no longer dominate available policy bandwidth in Washington.** The problem is not the lack of expertise or, necessarily, strategic capability. It is the relentless focus on the immediate and the urgent—and the lack of properly constituted time to establish a longer-range strategy.
- **A longer-range strategy can deliver, as U.S. India policy has from the 1990s.** The India strategy introduced in the 1990s and advanced since has worked. It was successful because it was bipartisan, sustained over a series of administrations, and delivered tangible benefits for both countries. Successive presidents and secretaries of state nurtured it. The relationship has prospered because it is not limited to U.S.-India bilateral issues.
- **For all that Afghanistan matters, it is not the most vital U.S. national interest in South Asia.** In past decades, immediate policy priorities have dominated. Examples include the 1980s Afghan war, regional wars, crises between India and Pakistan, and nonproliferation. The challenge for strategic policy is to clearly identify core U.S. priorities in the region both now and for the future. The stability of Pakistan is one such example.

Lessons can also be gleaned for the future by looking at who has made South Asia policy in the past:

- **An effective interagency process is crucial.** The National Security Council (NSC) needs to be staffed with officials who have the authority, capacity, and reach to advise, coordinate, and assess policy delivery. Priority countries need to have champions. A reliance on NSC or State Department mid-level staff is not enough.
- **Personal relationships with South Asian leaders matter.** A repeated theme from declassified U.S. foreign policy records is an understanding of this in principle but a failure to operationalize it. Relationship management cannot be subcontracted to ambassadors alone, neither is it about the volume of shuttle diplomacy. Relationships between principals matter and are a measure of the sustained quality of engagement. Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott's dialogue with Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh after 1998 is one successful example.
- **A focus on crisis management is not enough.** There must be longer-range strategy, regardless of where this is situated across government. The majority of those interviewed for this report argued that strategy toward South Asia is underdeveloped and a recurring challenge. Some interviewees questioned this, suggesting that the problem is not a lack of strategy, but a lack of implementation.
- **The challenge is not necessarily one of expertise. It is how to sustain and utilize expertise to inform strategic and operational foreign policy.** Could the difficulties generated by the initial language of a “pivot” to Asia have been avoided? Could the U.S.-India relationship have advanced further during the Cold War with a more nuanced American diplomatic tone? Could the supply lines for Afghanistan have reopened earlier had Pakistan been better understood following the November 2011 cross-border raid by U.S. forces in Afghanistan?

Finally, this report makes seven specific recommendations for the incoming U.S. administration to bolster processes needed to create longer-term, strategic South Asia policy:

Recommendation 1: Improve the capacity for U.S. strategy toward South Asia.

An enhanced approach to regional strategy that incorporates South and East Asia is needed. It also needs to incorporate smaller states in the region. Policy should be “coordinated with, not subcontracted to, India” (as stated by an interviewee from the region). It could be placed in the NSC, with the advantage of being at the center but at the risk of being overwhelmed by operational detail. It could lie within Policy Planning at the State Department, although this may be too distant from current policy issues. This report recommends either an informal or institutional uplift within the regional bureau responsible for South and Central Asia. The informal model takes after Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell's creation of a front-office regional strategy team for East Asia, providing strategic policy advice directly to the assistant secretary. An institutional model would establish strategic policy as a specific responsibility of one of the deputy assistant secretaries for South Asia, ensuring that he or she dedicates at least 50 percent of his or her time to this role.

Recommendation 2: Better connect East Asia and South Asia policy, both through cross-postings and by establishing a mechanism for cross-bureau Asia policy.

Career incentives should be introduced to encourage diplomats to serve in China and South Asian states (e.g., by valuing this experience when selecting Foreign Service officers for senior appointments). Progress should be made on the positive work already underway that sees the assistant secretary for South and Central Asia lead talks in Beijing and the assistant secretary for East Asia and the Pacific lead talks in New Delhi. South Asia policy needs to nest within a strategic Asia policy, as well as inform it. This report does not suggest how this should be done, rather that it needs to be pursued within the bureaucracy. This should be a high priority for the second Obama administration.

Recommendation 3: Continue to bet on India, while managing expectations.

India requires sustained high-level attention, but also a structured U.S. approach to the bilateral relationship. This approach needs to accurately judge how much U.S. and Indian interests will converge and how best to manage the tone of political and diplomatic engagement. As Secretary of State Clinton has said, the United States is making a strategic bet on India's future. In an interview for this report, a former assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs suggested that U.S. and Indian interests "will not always be aligned although they can operate in parallel." The United States needs a realistic discussion of how quickly the relationship can move forward, particularly on global issues for which India does not always adopt a similar position to that of the United States. The public tone of Washington's messaging on the relationship needs care. As one interviewee noted, the United States does not need to highlight the value of Indian security cooperation versus that of China.

Recommendation 4: Develop a realistic, medium-term Pakistan strategy.

The greatest policy challenges lie in the U.S. relationship with Pakistan, including vital national interests for Washington. Fundamental to the success of any future approach must be some deeper work to understand how Pakistan's own governance works, and a greater willingness to work with other states and international organizations. An overly heavy bilateral approach to Pakistan can reinforce some of the negative tendencies in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. As former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Nicholas Platt underlines, the United States "needs a patient policy toward Pakistan." In the short term, Washington needs to continue to work with Islamabad on counterterrorism and the drawdown in Afghanistan. In the medium to longer term, the United States needs to establish an approach to Pakistan that delivers on vital U.S. interests. Whether the administration opts for a cooperative or a confrontational approach to Islamabad, policy will depend on a clear-headed understanding of the art of the possible.

Recommendation 5: Better integrate counterterrorism and regional policy through cross-posting officials between the two areas.

A specific focus on counterterrorism is crucial to protect the United States. However, counterterrorism policy needs to integrate regional policy perspectives. This applies to the way in which to work with regional partners and when and how to pressure them. The more that agencies leading on counterterrorism can draw on regional expertise, not least to think through the consequences of different actions, the better integrated foreign and security policy can be.

Recommendation 6: Establish a formal “South Asia cadre” of Foreign Service officers.

A longer-term focus on South Asia is one integral part of a rebalancing toward Asia. As this report shows, the historic challenge has not been a lack of expertise. Although the policy bench was sometimes thin, a larger challenge was that South Asia work was not highly valued within the Foreign Service. Establishing a formal South Asia cadre in the Foreign Service in which officers can formally declare a career interest in the region would provide the South Asia policy leads in the State Department with a defined community of officers. These officers would continue to be generalists in their respective policy cones (like political or economic work) but should expect to build South Asia experience during the course of their career. This may help establish a discrete community of regional diplomats in a region where language training—unlike the guild identity of those who work on China or the Arab world—does not play a leading role in creating a distinctive social network.

Recommendation 7: Create a South Asia–specific Presidential Management Fellowship.

Establishing a South Asia Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF) is crucial. One appointment should be made each year for a two-year term across the interagency. Like regular PMFs, these positions should allow the officer to rotate through a series of details—six months in the State Department, six months in Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy, and so on. Unlike regular PMFs, who can serve on a range of issues, this position should be limited to South Asia policy roles across the interagency. The criteria for recruitment should include at least a year spent in South Asia beforehand and graduate study with at least a 30 percent focus on South Asia. This role would cost relatively little, but it would advance interagency connections on South Asia and create a visible and valued position on South Asia. If the individual left government to join a think tank or academia afterward, the broader field of external experts would be enriched—with an individual versed in government. If the individual stayed on, either through joining the Foreign Service or taking up a civil service role, the U.S. government would gain a further regional hand. This recommendation could be achieved through amending the current PMF program.

ADVISORY GROUP ON U.S. POLICY TOWARD SOUTH ASIA

Project Director

Alexander Evans, Bernard Schwartz Fellow, Asia Society; Senior Fellow, Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, Yale University

Members

Hassan Abbas, Senior Advisor, Asia Society; Professor, College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University

Kanti Bajpai, Professor and Vice-Dean (Research), Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

Wendy Chamberlin, President, Middle East Institute; Former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan

Suzanne DiMaggio, Vice President, Global Policy Programs, Asia Society

Asad Durrani, Former Director General, Inter-Services Intelligence; Former Director General, Military Intelligence of Pakistan

Leslie H. Gelb, President Emeritus and Board Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations; Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State

Hameed Haroon, CEO, Dawn Media Group

Karl F. Inderfurth, Senior Advisor and Wadhvani Chair, U.S.-India Policy Studies, Center for Strategic & International Studies; Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs

Jehangir Karamat, Former Chairman Joint Chiefs and Chief of Army Staff, Pakistan; Former Ambassador of Pakistan to the United States

Amitabh Mattoo, Director, Australia India Institute; Professor of International Relations, University of Melbourne

C. Raja Mohan, Head of Strategic Studies and Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation; Member, National Security Advisory Board, India

Cameron Munter, Visiting Professor, Columbia Law School; Former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan and Serbia; Former Director for Central Europe, National Security Council

Vali Nasr, Dean, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University; Former Senior Advisor to the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan

John Negroponte, Vice-Chairman, McLarty Associates; Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State; Former Director of National Intelligence

Philip Oldenburg, Research Scholar, South Asia Institute, Columbia University

Pramit Pal Chaudhuri, Foreign Editor, *Hindustan Times*; Global Council Member and Former Bernard Schwartz Fellow, Asia Society

Bhojraj Pokharel, Former Chief Election Commissioner, Nepal; Former Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, Nepal

Christina Rocca, President, CBR Strategies, L.L.C.; Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs

Teresita Schaffer, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; Former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs; Former U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka

Farooq Sobhan, President and CEO, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute; Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh

Vikram Sood, Vice President, Center for International Relations, Observer Research Foundation; Former Chief, Research and Analysis Wing, India

Ashley Tellis, Senior Associate, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Former Senior Advisor to the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs

Steven Wilkinson, Nilekani Professor of India and South Asian Studies, Yale University

Frank G. Wisner, Foreign Affairs Advisor, Patton Boggs; Former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt, India, the Philippines, and Zambia; Former U.S. Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs; Former U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Project Staff

Johan Kharabi (Project Manager), Senior Program Officer, Global Policy Programs, Asia Society

Bibi Atefa Shah, Research Associate, Asia Society