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Moving Forward in South Asia

The key to an effective American policy in South Asia is the deepening of Washington's engagement with India and Pakistan. India is an emerging major power and Pakistan, despite its internal economic and political problems, is also a significant state. Besides reengaging these states in strategic terms, Washington should overhaul current regional sanctions policy, seeking in return Indian and Pakistani compliance with missile and nuclear proliferation regimes, and should assist them in reducing the risk of accidental nuclear detonation and missile launches.

The crises in Afghanistan and Kashmir are unlikely to be resolved quickly, but the United States should notch up its level of engagement in these disputes. Washington should work with European and other states on the civil war raging in Afghanistan, and in Kashmir, it should expand its support for informal diplomacy and begin to explore the pros and cons of specific proposals with the concerned parties.

Given the complex relationship between the United States and India and Pakistan, and the delay in appointing an assistant secretary of state for South Asia, the Bush administration's go-slow policy toward the region is understandable. But critical policy questions must be addressed now. A comprehensive policy review currently underway by the administration will take months, but immediate attention should be given to strengthening and restoring relations with India and Pakistan, respectively. India is emerging as an Asia-Pacific power. Pakistan remains an important regional power, despite a lack of popular enthusiasm for its military regime and a weak economy. These two countries are also nuclear weapons states, and each interacts, in a different way, with the Chinese nuclear program. The linked conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir threaten to spill over into nearby regions or trigger a new war between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Solidifying the Relationship with New Delhi

While the last administration's non-proliferation policies angered Indians, and arguably contributed to their decision to test five nuclear devices, President Clinton's highly publicized trip to India in March 2000 did much to restore U.S.-Indian relations. Indians were persuaded that while America and India diverged on some critical issues, there were important common interests, and America did not oppose India's emergence as a major power. A subsequent visit to the United States by Indian Prime Minister

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Vajpayee led to a considerable inflation of the rhetoric of rapprochement, as senior American officials echoed Vajpayee's assertion that the United States and India were "natural allies."

Yet as Clinton left office, there was no agreement on what constituted a "natural" alliance. There was little progress in resolving the nuclear problem, and Indian officials were urging the United States to take a tougher stance against Pakistan on grounds that it had an undemocratic, military regime and that it was supporting terrorism in India and elsewhere.

The most useful result of these visits was an agreement that the two countries would dramatically expand their high-level political, economic, and strategic dialogue. At the very least, the Bush administration should adhere to the timetable set by Clinton and Vajpayee. This would mean a "summit" meeting this year and perhaps a visit to India by President Bush in 2002. Meanwhile, the dialogue between government experts, military officials, and members of each country's legislative branch should move ahead, especially in such areas as trade liberalization and the nuclear and missile policies of both countries.

While the nuclear weapons issue still carries great symbolic and strategic weight in the U.S.-India relationship, there are other issues that are important, although none as pressing. Washington and New Delhi have divergent—but not necessarily dissimilar—views on questions of global arms control, the development of national and theater missile defenses, humanitarian intervention, and India's quest for a permanent UN Security Council seat. There may also be a dispute over trade policy since New Delhi still has some of Asia's highest tariffs. These are issues that cannot be resolved easily, but the administration should take advantage of this newly created framework for dialogue with Delhi, and listen carefully to India's positions.

American investment in India is increasing, and India has established a foothold in the American high-technology sector. These developments, plus the growth of the Indian-American community, have increased the number of groups and individuals on both sides with a stake in good U.S.-Indian relations. There is every indication that this new relationship will be a departure from the past. India and the United States have moved from a near-alliance in the late 1950s, to apathy in the 1970s, to estrangement by the 1990s. The two countries may not be natural allies, but they are now natural friends.

Rebuilding Ties with Pakistan

While America should pursue an "India First" policy in South Asia, this should not become an "India Only" policy, nor should India be given a veto over American relations with

the Bush Administration

Islamabad. Pakistan, once an important American ally, now under three layers of sanctions, remains one of the freest of the Islamic states, and many among its elite are open to relations with the West. Further, Pakistan is now a nuclear weapons state and will, in a few years, be the world's fifth most populous country. It is likely to revert soon to a civilian government, although the military will remain the most powerful political force for the foreseeable future.

The Bush team has a chance to advance important American interests vis-à-vis Islamabad, but must act quickly and creatively. There are several ways the United States can rebuild its relationship with Islamabad regardless of the nuclear question. First, it should renew contacts with those Pakistanis who share Washington's concern over the spread of radical Islam. These include some of the Pakistan army's officer corps, many Pakistani intellectuals and professionals, and most of the business community. The American military training programs for Pakistanis that were terminated nearly nine years ago should be immediately revived, but for every dollar spent on them, Washington should spend several times that amount to rebuild its contacts with Pakistani civil society. The United States cannot transform Pakistan, but American help for Pakistan's civilian institutions and western-oriented middle class may slow the country's descent into chaos and extremism, and it could be decisive if Pakistanis themselves restart the process of institutional and social reform.

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Washington should also vote favorably on International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans as Islamabad reforms its economic infrastructure, and the United States should make a long-term commitment that would allow Islamabad to restructure significant parts of the economy without triggering significant political resistance at home.

Finally, both the official and strategic dialogues that were so helpful in addressing U.S.-Pakistan differences in the past should be revived. As the army hands power to a nominally civilian government and reform efforts continue, high-level visits and ties with Pakistan should be resumed.

The Nuclear Conundrum

Indian and Pakistani nuclear policies are driven by calculations of national security and pride, and it will take more than lectures, the blunt application of sanctions, or the example of other states which have chosen not to build nuclear weapons, such as South Africa or Argentina, to significantly influence them.

The Clinton administration developed four benchmarks regarding the Indian and Pakistani programs. These demanded adherence to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), movement toward a fissile material production cutoff, a ban on nuclear technology exports to other states, and restrictions on nuclear deployment. A fifth benchmark—that the two states resume talks on Kashmir—was subsequently put in place. The "prize" for adhering to these benchmarks would be the lifting of sanctions, although there would still be limits on the sale or transfer of civilian nuclear technology to both states and, in the case of Pakistan, sanctions on economic and military assistance because of its military coup.

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The Clinton administration's approach was too narrowly drawn. The benchmarks should be dismantled and replaced with a cluster of incentives that would give the United States greater leverage in the negotiations that lie ahead.

Washington might begin by attempting a fresh start in the area of greatest concern: the spread of nuclear expertise, fissile material, and missile technology from South Asia to other states. In this area, also important to many U.S. allies and friends, Washington should be willing to offer significant inducements if both states are willing to participate in various nuclear and missile control regimes, separate their civilian and military nuclear programs, and allow international inspection of the civilian programs. The most effective inducement would be a reversal of past American policy limiting the transfer of civilian nuclear technology to India and Pakistan. This does not mean condoning these countries' weapons programs, but it does separate military and civilian uses of nuclear energy, thereby strengthening their mechanisms of control.

As India and Pakistan begin the process of separating their programs and allowing full-scale inspections of the civilian side, Washington should start to provide information on nuclear safety and specific assistance concerning the (often unsafe) nuclear reactors operated by both states. Over time, this might even lead to other assistance to the two states' civilian programs or the sale of nuclear power reactors, although the latter would require a change in U.S. law.

Avoiding a Nuclear Accident

The second most critical regional nuclear problem is the lack of reliability and safety of regional nuclear weapons themselves, and the risk of accidental nuclear war or detonation. Here, too, American policy should change. Some have proposed that Washington might provide safety devices for Indian or Pakistani bombs, but this is neither feasible nor necessary, since both countries are able to fabricate these devices. In any case, neither would want a foreign government to have access to its designs, and such assistance could be construed as a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which bans the transfer of such technology. However, it is not a violation of the treaty to take steps that would reduce the risk of war triggered by an accidental detonation, a false radar signal, or bad intelligence.

To address this problem, the United States should offer to provide hitherto unavailable information to India or Pakistan if they took steps to control or restrain their nuclear deployments, and to make such deployments as non-provocative as possible. The information could relate, for example, to the origin of undeclared missile launches or the origin of a nuclear detonation on their territory.

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Under such an agreement, the principle of proportionality should apply: America should assist India or Pakistan in developing secure communications systems and verifying accidental nuclear detonations or unannounced missile launches only to the degree that each country cooperated and made their respective systems more reliable and stable.

In this case, there is a strong incentive for both states to participate in the arrangement because an uncooperative country might be viewed as a nuclear renegade. On the other hand, a regional verification system might well be linked to the recently opened U.S.-Russia joint warning system, and could eventually include China. Indeed, it might be part of a larger Asian verification system to supplement weak or non-existent national technical means of detecting the origin of a nuclear blast or the trajectory of unannounced missile launches.

The United States should recruit other states in coping with these new nuclear programs. The most important partner would be Japan, and its assistance should be nurtured through intelligence sharing and working-level policy coordination. The horrors of nuclear war and its cost to society should not be a main theme of the official American dialogue with India and Pakistan, but private groups, including the newly-established Nuclear Threat Initiative, in Washington, D.C., should be encouraged to engage in dialogue with regional experts and influential elites about the dangers, costs, and responsibilities of possessing nuclear weapons. The goal should be to bring both countries into de facto adherence with critical provisions of the NPT, the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), and the CTBT.

Such adherence is within reach, and would be preferable to the approach taken by Iraq and North Korea, each of whom signed the NPT and then violated it. Formal Indian or Pakistani compliance with the MTCR and CTBT also cannot be ruled out, and should be sought by the Bush administration.

Other Regional Tensions: Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Kashmir

South Asia is home to three of the world's most intractable ethnic-domestic conflicts: Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka. Because each is different in both the nature of the conflict and its importance to U.S. interests, each requires a different policy approach.

In Sri Lanka, India no longer supports the Tamil Tiger separatists and has allowed the island's capital of Colombo to receive military aid from many countries (including the

United States). The war could conceivably end if the grip of the Tigers loosened and if the Sri Lankan government agreed to significant political concessions to the Tamil community.

This is not the case with the Afghan and Kashmir conflicts. They threaten to spill into nearby regions and raise deep concern in China, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. Kashmir is also a possible trigger point for an India-Pakistan nuclear war. Pakistan is the link between the two disputes. Islamabad supports the Taliban government that controls most of Afghanistan as well as the radical Jehadis in Kashmir, some of whom are veterans of conflicts in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Chechnya. As long as Pakistan continues this support, the risk of an expanded conflict in both regions remains high. Washington should make a serious attempt to work with Islamabad, reserving the option of developing a more confrontational policy if cooperative efforts fail.

The United States has had no serious peace proposal for Afghanistan in many years but is wrong to dismiss this torn country as irrelevant to American interests. If the Afghan conflict continues, then some of the region's border states (including Iran, India, Russia, the Central Asian republics, and China) might expand their support for the anti-Taliban factions and Pakistan would increase its own commitment to the Taliban. The war in Afghanistan could escalate, turning the country into a battleground and flooding neighboring countries with radical Islamic movements and terrorism.

Several European states and the European Union have been searching for ways to reduce the level of violence in Afghanistan and undertake its reconstruction. The United States should encourage these states to take the lead in finding a resolution to the Afghan crisis, an effort that might also garner support from China, since it is concerned with the spread of extremist Islam in its western provinces. A collaborative effort that included Pakistan might bring about a ceasefire between contending Afghan groups. Such a policy will need to be reviewed in a year or so, if it does not lead to the prospect of a ceasefire and the moderation of Taliban policy.

Kashmir is South Asia's most critical problem. The conflict has generated considerable terrorist violence, and was the cause of several wars between India and Pakistan—the most recent being the limited war fought in the Kargil region in 1999. Pakistan is too weak to seize Kashmir, but is able to stoke violence in the Valley. India is strong enough to retain Kashmir, but has not been able to govern it properly.

The traditional culture of the Kashmiri people cannot survive the present large-scale violence. The Kashmiri leadership is weak and confused, and neither the United States nor the UN can impose a solution. However, the United States can take a number of steps. It could:

- Urge India to start a meaningful dialogue with Kashmiri leaders of all political persuasions.
- Offer assistance to New Delhi to increase counterterrorism.

- Make the case to Islamabad that continued support for non-Kashmiri and terrorist groups will qualify it for inclusion on the list of states that support terrorism.

America should work with allies and friends to prepare for a time when the parties involved in the Kashmir conflict are amenable to outside help. At that point, and with Indian and Pakistani concurrence, discussions over an agreement that could include monitoring and verifications mechanisms could commence, with the goal that all parties would adhere to the final agreement. In the meantime, the United States should actively encourage discussion of alternative solutions to the Kashmir problem, but remain impartial.

In recent years, there has been resistance in Washington to increasing American involvement in either the Afghanistan or Kashmir conflicts. This view is shortsighted. Neither dispute is ready for resolution or for a major American role as mediator or peacemaker. But if the current situation continues, it is likely that other countries will be drawn into the Afghanistan problem, and that the Kashmir dispute eventually will lead to another India-Pakistan war. Besides the obvious consequences for the Afghan and Kashmiri peoples, these disputes affect the interests of a number of important states, and in Kashmir, the conflict carries the danger of a nuclear confrontation.

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American policy should be carefully crafted to permit somewhat greater engagement, with the United States turning first to its allies and friendly powers for partners in an ameliorative diplomacy approach. However, the United States must also be prepared to intervene more weightily in Kashmir if India and Pakistan appear headed for war.

Sharpening the Policy Tools

The Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the National Security Council each handle India and Pakistan differently. The Defense Department, which would like to resume military exercises with India and restore its long-standing and useful relationship with the Pakistan Army, divides them between two regional commands. The State Department unites them in the South Asia Bureau—-the smallest bureau at State and one that was pushed aside during the Clinton administration by other bureaus with greater political clout. The National Security Council has separated South Asia from the office of Middle East affairs, placing it under the jurisdiction of the Special Assistant for Asia. The CIA and Congress also have different ways of allocating responsibility for the two countries.

It is probably impossible to streamline all of the various South Asia policy arms in the executive and legislative branches, but the process can be tightened up in three ways. First, regional economic, arms control, and military issues have been poorly served within the State Department's South Asia Bureau, while the other offices that deal with these issues have in the past regarded the Bureau as guilty of "clientitis," or pursuing regional interests

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ahead of U.S. interests. If the regional bureaus are going to carry more weight in the policy process—as seems to be Secretary of State Colin Powell's goal—then the functional capabilities of the South Asia bureau in particular need to be enhanced.

Second, the South Asia Bureau at the State Department needs to be larger to attract and maintain a core of regional experts. At a minimum, the Central Asian republics should be included in the bureau. It would still be the smallest of the regional bureaus, even though its jurisdiction includes over a quarter of the world's population.

Finally, better interagency coordination is essential. At the policy level, interagency meetings should take into account India's rising economic and strategic influence in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and Pakistan's critical importance in Central and Southwest Asia. Similarly, South Asian experts must be consulted in arms control and strategic policy decisions that affect China.

While it may not be possible to streamline all of these offices and programs, better interagency coordination would go a long way towards enhancing the effectiveness of American policy in South Asia.

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