

How Obama Can Get South Asia Right

One of the major contributions of Barack Obama's presidential campaign during 2007–08 was his political success in shifting the focus of the U.S. foreign policy debate away from Iraq and toward Afghanistan. The reversal of fortunes in the two major wars that President George W. Bush had embarked upon during his tenure (a steady improvement in the military situation in Iraq during the last two years of the Bush administration and the rapidly deteriorating one in Afghanistan) helped Obama to effectively navigate the foreign policy doldrums that normally sink the campaigns of Democratic candidates in U.S. presidential elections. Throughout his campaign, Obama insisted that the war on terror that began in Afghanistan must also end there. He attacked Bush for taking his eyes off the United States' "war of necessity," embarking on a disastrous "war of choice" in Iraq, and promised to devote the U.S. military and diplomatic energies to a region that now threatened U.S. interests and lives: the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The foreign policy debate between Obama and his Republican rival Senator John McCain often focused on their differences in how to deal with the situation in Afghanistan and what kind of pressures must be brought to bear upon Pakistan. Obama talked of bombing the al Qaeda bases in Pakistan if there was actionable intelligence that Islamabad refused to act on. McCain underlined the need for a sophisticated handling of Islamabad, the most critical ally in winning the war on terror in Afghanistan. The public sparring on whether to bomb Pakistan or not, however, masked a far more significant framework that Obama was developing for the entire South Asian subcontinent. Put simply, Obama was calling for an integrated approach toward the region as a whole, taking into

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The Washington Quarterly • 32:2 pp. 173–189
DOI: 10.1080/01636600902775656

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account the complex intraregional dynamics in addressing the mounting security challenges to the United States from the faltering war in Afghanistan. In other words, Obama's promised South Asian approach marks a major departure from the Bush administration's seemingly successful dehyphenation of U.S. policy toward India and Pakistan.

Obama's promised new framework for South Asia, however, has several negative consequences for the region in general and U.S. policy in particular. What sort of strategic and

diplomatic framework can be developed that will not only bring about an integrated approach to the region but also harmonize Indian and U.S. interests?

Obama's "New" Framework

Quite early on in his campaign, Obama outlined the interconnection between the developments on Pakistan's western borderlands and its problems on the east with India. Obama and his advisers on South Asia made a bold leap in underlining the need to address Pakistan's larger security dilemmas in resolving the U.S. problem in Afghanistan. By 2007, U.S. decisionmakers began to appreciate the challenges in Pakistan, a country that is simultaneously a U.S. forward base and a strategic rear for al Qaeda and the Taliban in the Afghan theatre. They also saw that the Pakistani Army and its intelligence arm, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), were playing both sides of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Washington also struggled to cope with the internal political dynamics in Pakistan that acquired a new democratic edge in 2007 and further complicated the successful pursuit of al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Obama sought to break through this problem by focusing on Pakistan and looking at its security politics in an integrated manner. In the very first articulation of his world view, Obama argued:

I will join with our allies in insisting, not simply requesting, that Pakistan crack down on the Taliban, pursue Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants, and end its relationship with all terrorist groups. At the same time, I will encourage dialogue between Pakistan and India to work towards resolving their dispute over Kashmir and between Afghanistan and Pakistan to resolve their differences and develop the Pashtun border region. If Pakistan can look towards the east [India] with confidence, it will be less likely to believe its interests are best advanced through cooperation with the Taliban.¹

Many Indians were quick to sense the potentially dangerous shift in U.S. policy toward New Delhi and the unacceptable linkage between Pakistan's dispute with India on Jammu and Kashmir and the situation in Afghanistan. Put simply, Obama appears to be offering U.S. diplomatic activism on Kashmir in return for Islamabad's cooperation in fighting al Qaeda and the Taliban.²

One of the main reasons for the dramatic transformation of Indo-U.S. relations has been Washington's policy of treating India and Pakistan on their own merit and in separate boxes. The premises behind the two policies were indeed different. While Pakistan holds the key to the success of the U.S. war on terror in Afghanistan, India seems to be the natural partner for the United States in managing the Asian balance of power and a range of other global challenges as a rising power. As a consequence, the Bush administration achieved the seemingly impossible: simultaneous improvement in U.S. relations with both India and Pakistan.³ While the public attention around the world was focused on Bush's historic civil nuclear initiative with India, his determined neutrality on the Kashmir question and his refusal to interpose the United States in this long-standing Indo-Pak dispute was critical in winning India's trust of the United States. Obama, however, was signaling the prospect of a change in this policy by a renewed U.S. emphasis on Kashmir, which inevitably always led to the deepening of the Indo-U.S. divide.

Nevertheless, Obama persisted with a consistent articulation of the linkage between Afghanistan and Kashmir. His argument was simple: U.S. success in Afghanistan depends on fixing the problems in Pakistan. Those in turn depend upon ending Pakistan's insecurities vis-à-vis India, especially on Kashmir. Obama does seem to believe that a comprehensive normalization of Indo-Pak relations will help stabilize and accelerate India's own rise as a great power. He also senses a rare diplomatic opportunity to forever transform Indo-Pak relations that would in turn serve U.S. interests in the region and believes it can be pursued by appointing a special envoy to South Asia.

While recognizing that Kashmir is "obviously a potential tar pit" for U.S. diplomacy, Obama mused about a fundamental change in the regional dynamic. He said "working with Pakistan and India to try to resolve the Kashmir crisis in a serious way" is one of the "critical tasks" for his administration. Saying that Kashmir is now in an "interesting situation," Obama said it might be worthwhile "to devote serious diplomatic resources to get a special envoy in there, to figure out a plausible approach." Obama lays out the kind of reasoning the special envoy could use in New Delhi and Islamabad. According to the new U.S. president, the envoy needs to ask the Indians why do they "want to keep on messing with this [Kashmir]" when they are on the brink of becoming an economic superpower? To the Pakistanis, the envoy could say, "look at India and what they are doing, why do you want to be bogged down with this [Kashmir]"

U.S. neutrality on the Kashmir question was critical in winning India's trust of the United States.

particularly at a time where the biggest threat now is coming from the Afghan border?"⁴

As Indian anxieties mounted at the prospect of Obama appointing a special envoy on South Asia and Kashmir, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee in New Delhi was compelled to reject any mediatory effort by the United States.⁵ While the Indian reactions were entirely predictable, Obama gathered considerable support for his ideas in Washington. A number of reports from the U.S. strategic community that came out at the end of 2008 strongly endorsed Obama's ideas on

an integrated approach to South Asia, addressing Pakistan's sense of vulnerability and the resolution of Pakistan's disputes with both Afghanistan and India.⁶ The terrorist aggression against Mumbai at the end of November 2008 and the Bush administration's effort to defuse yet another South Asian crisis seemed to reinforce Obama's case. In an interview with NBC in early December 2008, the president-elect reaffirmed:

As I've said before, we can't continue to look at Afghanistan in isolation. We have to see it as a part of a regional problem that includes Pakistan, includes India, includes Kashmir, includes Iran . . . We can't solve Afghanistan without solving Pakistan working more effectively with that country. And we are going to have to make sure that India and Pakistan are normalizing their relationship if we're going to be effective.⁷

A few dissenting voices in Washington, however, cautioned against the dangers of being sucked into the Kashmir dispute, as many U.S. administrations had during the early years of the Cold War. According to one analyst, Lisa Curtis, "Raising the specter of international intervention in the dispute could fuel unrealistic expectations in Pakistan for a final settlement in its favor. Such expectations could encourage Islamabad to increase support for Kashmiri militants to push an agenda it believed was within reach." Calling for a wider view of the region's challenges, Curtis argues that a more effective approach "would recognize that Pakistan's focus on Kashmir is a symptom of broader issues, including the impact of India's emergence as a global power and the Pakistan Army's continued domination over the country's national security policies."⁸

Writing about the Mumbai terror attacks, a former senior official of the Bush administration wrote about the lessons learned from the September 11, 2001 attacks:

The more we learned about jihadist ideology—that of al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba and others—the less likely it appeared that India could free itself of terrorist attacks

simply through territorial compromise with Pakistan over Kashmir. Jihadist leaders declare that the aim of their holy war is not to alter specific policies of their enemies, but rather to establish a universal Muslim state . . . The carnage in Mumbai will prove a setback for jihadist extremists if it motivates the Obama team to intensify strategic cooperation with India, and helps initiate a proper strategy to defeat our terrorist enemies ideologically.⁹

There is no doubt that India will not accept any direct U.S. mediation in Kashmir.¹⁰ New Delhi is, however, bound to review the fundamentals of its policy toward Pakistan after the terrorist attacks by groups and agencies based in Pakistan against India's embassy in Kabul in July 2008 and in Mumbai in November 2008. Until these two events, India could claim that it was doing reasonably well with Pakistan on its own and it did not need any third-party involvement. After all, the peace process launched in January 2004 had been one of the most productive and sustained in the history of a dismal bilateral relationship. This process has seen significant expansion of bilateral trade, improved people-to-people contact, a ceasefire on their borders, the implementation of a number of confidence-building measures in disputed Kashmir, and above all a serious back channel negotiation on the Kashmir question. India has also been pleased to hear the newly elected civilian leadership of Pakistan, led by Asif Ali Zardari, talk of a bold transformation of bilateral relations and call for open borders and free trade.

Yet, India has also found it difficult to believe that the civilian leadership is capable of reining in anti-India terror groups based in Pakistan and their supporters in the Pakistani security establishment. The Kabul and Mumbai attacks have shattered one of the basic premises of the peace process: that Islamabad would ensure a violence-free environment. Whether New Delhi likes it or not, achieving that condition demands a fundamental change in the internal and external orientation of Pakistan, which cannot come about without broader cooperation from the United States and the international community.

Why Obama is Right . . . Partly

In terms of pure analytics, the idea of a comprehensive approach to South Asia is an appealing one. For too long, the U.S. approach to the region has been segmented and tactically oriented. An integrated approach might bring back both history and geopolitics into the contemporary understanding of the region, its fault lines, and global effects. Ever since Alexander the Great showed up at the Indus in fourth century BC, the trans-Indus territories have posed the principal source of external threat to the subcontinent. Even when sea power became important, the importance of trans-Indus territories remained as one of the principal routes for external aggression against India. These regions were always restive, and the three great unifying empires that emerged in India—the

The challenge for Washington is to find ways to effectively promote a nascent regional framework.

Mauryan, Mogul, and the British—constantly struggled to maintain firm control over the trans-Indus territories. A reasonable balance around this region could be maintained only when there was a strong and cohesive subcontinent.

This traditionally difficult framework got further complicated with the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The new state of Pakistan found itself at odds with both its neighbors: Afghanistan to the west, demarcated by the

Durand Line that remains an unresolved source of friction between the two countries, and India to the east. British India's unique administrative arrangements in its western borderlands left behind ungoverned (in a modern sense) territories that continue to haunt the world today. In the east, the bitter legacy of partition left Jammu and Kashmir as an enduring source of conflict between India and Pakistan. The promotion of jihad, with Pakistan as the staging post, against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan by Saudi Arabia and the United States during the 1980s legitimized a new wave of religious extremism in South Asia and resulted in the creation of the Taliban. Meanwhile the globalization of the last two decades seemed to reconnect the subcontinent to the Middle East and the various extremist ideologies and their use of terror as a political tool.¹¹

Throughout the last six decades, it has not been possible to construct a framework of stability and balance in the trans-Indus territories. Some scholars attribute it to the collapse of the so-called "India centre" that was at the very heart of the British system of imperial defense in the Middle East and Southwest Asia.¹² The various attempts at devising a regional security system, such as the Western debates on the "Northern Tier" and the formation of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in the 1950s, proved to be ineffective mainly because they lacked the full and direct military involvement of the world's largest military power, the United States. We are now beginning to see the limits of U.S. effectiveness in the Gulf and southwest Asia. When the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan, Sir Olaf Caroe, who served for many years in the North West Frontier Province and was British India's last foreign secretary, reminded the world of the region's structural problems inherited from India's partition. So long as British India was a cohesive force, it had the military power to stabilize southwest Asia and the many sub-regions of the Indian Ocean littoral. Once those military energies were turned inward to the post-partition conflict between India and Pakistan, a power vacuum had been created in southwest Asia. Caroe argued it was bound to be filled one way or another.¹³

Given the burden of this history, the case for a comprehensive regional approach is a sound one. Whatever might be India's immediate negative reaction to such an approach promised by Obama and his advisers, New Delhi's own foreign policy increasingly points to a greater emphasis on regionalism and a comprehensive approach to its northwestern neighborhood. While its policymakers have increasingly talked about the urgent need to construct a "peaceful periphery," for many of its leaders an integrated northwestern region of the subcontinent was a living memory.¹⁴ None exemplifies this better than Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India, whose family lived in the northwestern parts of what is now Pakistan and migrated to India after partition. In early 2007, speaking on India's relations with its neighbors, Singh mused on his aspirations for restoring these historic connections:

I sincerely believe . . . that the destiny of the people of South Asia is interlinked. It is not just our past that links us, but our future too. India cannot be a prosperous, dynamic economy and a stable polity if our neighborhood as a whole is also not economically prosperous and politically stable. Similarly, our neighbors cannot prosper if India does not do so as well. There are enormous opportunities for promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in South Asia. To exploit these opportunities, the nations of South Asia have to work sincerely to control the scourge of terrorism and extremism . . . I dream of a day, while retaining our respective national identities, one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul. That is how my forefathers lived. That is how I want our grandchildren to live.¹⁵

Beyond a mere expression of its aspirations, India actively pressed for Afghanistan's inclusion in South Asia's only regional forum, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Despite Pakistan's diplomatic resistance, India succeeded in achieving Afghanistan's full membership in SAARC, though New Delhi had to pay a price by agreeing to let China into SAARC as an observer. India partly compensated by making sure that both Japan and the United States were admitted as observers as well.¹⁶ These developments implied that India is keen on expanding the geographic conception of South Asia and is gearing up for a larger global standing by giving up its own version of the Monroe Doctrine for the subcontinent. Pressing for an overland transit to Afghanistan has also been a major element of India's diplomatic engagement with Islamabad and Washington. While Pakistan's military has been opposed to granting India transit rights to Pakistan, its current civilian leadership under Zardari seems to be more willing to consider it in a positive light. Zardari's decision to expand overland trade with India on the Punjab border in a September 2008 meeting with Singh was welcomed by India as the first step toward such a transit arrangement, but was severely criticized in Pakistan as a major departure from traditional policy.¹⁷

Singh and Musharraf agreed on a broad set of ideas for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

Zardari is clearly prepared to consider what has been a strategic taboo in Pakistan. Since taking charge as president he has sought to develop working relationships with both Afghanistan and India. While his ability to pursue both are in doubt, he has certainly affirmed the importance of a regional approach in his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2008: "India and Pakistan must accommodate each other's concerns and interests. We must respect and work with each other to peacefully resolve our problems and build South Asia into a

common market of trade and technology. Better relations between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India would help create the regional environment that is more conducive to reducing militancy in our region."¹⁸

Meanwhile, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan himself has sensed the importance of the transition to a civilian government in Pakistan. After two years of intense public sparring with Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Karzai came to attend Zardari's swearing in as president and repeatedly reaffirmed the possibilities for improved relations with Pakistan under the new civilian government.

Well before Obama and his advisers discovered the virtues of a regional approach to the security challenges in the subcontinent, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have been probing its prospects. The Bush administration had, conceptually at least, seen the importance of integrating Afghanistan into a wider region. It decided at the beginning of its second term to separate the Central Asian countries from the old European bureau and integrate it with the South Asia bureau. It undertook a few tentative initiatives to promote economic integration between South and Central Asia. These failed to take off amidst the deteriorating security problems on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the slow pace of normalization of Indo-Pak relations, stalled repeatedly by major terrorist attacks against India. Bush also held joint summits with Karzai and Musharraf. More recently, Turkey brought Karzai and Zardari together for a summit meeting in Istanbul in December 2008. Put simply, the idea of a regional approach has been gaining ground for a while. The challenge for Washington really is about finding ways to effectively promote such a framework.

Assuring Pakistan's Security

New Delhi does not disagree with one of the central propositions of the new thinking in Washington, which consists of providing secure and legitimate borders to Pakistan and credible international guarantees on preserving its

territorial integrity. Promoting an early settlement of the Kashmir question between India and Pakistan is among the top U.S. priorities identified in Washington. Many of these recommendations, however, ignore the significance of the back channel negotiations between India and Pakistan since the middle of 2005 on Kashmir, the first such negotiations since 1962–63.

Pakistan's internal political instability has so far prevented consummating these negotiations.

Build on the Back Channel's Success

At their April 2005 meeting in New Delhi, Singh and Musharraf agreed on a broad set of ideas for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. This in itself was a continuation of the important conversation that Musharraf had begun with Singh's predecessor, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The back channel established by Musharraf and Singh worked on a five-point framework for resolving the Kashmir question: no change in the territorial disposition in Kashmir; making the borders irrelevant between the two parts of Kashmir administered by India and Pakistan; autonomy or self-rule for the two Kashmirs; the creation of a joint consultative mechanism involving the representatives of the two Kashmirs; and progressive demilitarization of the province in tandem with the reduction of terrorism and violence.¹⁹

Despite repeated terrorist attacks against India during 2005–06, which cast a shadow over the peace process, all indications were that these negotiations had made considerable progress. But the internal political instability in Pakistan that began with Musharraf's confrontation with the judiciary in March 2007 prevented consummating these negotiations. While India was hopeful that the new civilian government might be able to advance these negotiations, it has yet to confirm its commitment to the framework agreed with Musharraf. Further, the attacks on the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008 and Mumbai in November 2008 have raised questions in New Delhi about the capacity of the Zardari government to enforce the central organizing principle of the peace process, which calls for sustaining a violence-free atmosphere in return for a purposeful negotiation on Kashmir.

The task before the Obama administration, then, is not about nudging India to negotiate on Kashmir, but to help create the conditions in Pakistan for clinching the negotiations that have already taken place. Any high-profile intervention, either directly by a U.S. special envoy or an international contact group authorized by the UN Security Council (UNSC), would be unacceptable to New Delhi. India's long unpleasant memories of past U.S. diplomatic activism in Kashmir, from the Truman years to the Clinton administration, and the unhappy experience of taking the Kashmir question to

the UNSC in the late 1940s are solid obstacles for New Delhi's acceptance of any third-party or international initiative. It is evident that the Bush administration's refusal to interpose itself in the Kashmir dispute allowed not only a dramatic improvement in Indo-U.S. relations, but also created a basis for a purposeful bilateral negotiation with Pakistan. It boggles one's mind why the United States would want to inject itself into the Indo-Pak bilateral process and undermine it, as well as shake the basis for the Indo-U.S. security cooperation. The last time the United States made such a high-profile intervention was under the Kennedy administration, which paved the way for a prolonged estrangement between New Delhi and Washington, pushed India and Pakistan toward yet another war, and allowed China to create a new strategic space in the subcontinent.²⁰

For many in New Delhi, some of the new arguments in Washington on an integrated regional approach to the subcontinent sound naïve at best and self-serving at worst. Obama's lofty idea that a Pakistan secure in the east would accommodate U.S. interests in the west translates somewhat differently in the policy domain: India must make concessions to Pakistan to enable Islamabad to work with the United States in Afghanistan. That India will outright reject this proposition is the least of the problems. The U.S. error is more deep-rooted and located in a fundamental misreading of Pakistani interests.

It's Not About Kashmir, or Even India, Anymore

The proposition on "west for east" on Pakistan's security has been further accentuated by an uncritical acceptance of the now fashionable notion of an Indo-Pak rivalry in Afghanistan. Although there is deep discomfort in Pakistan at India's post 2001 economic profile in Afghanistan, it is incredulous to suggest that India is an important, let alone the principal, threat to Islamabad on its western borders. A number of factors, however, suggest that competition between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan is a mere sideshow.

For one, the lack of geographic access prevents India from emerging as a significant strategic force in Afghanistan. Even the India-friendly Bush administration was never eager to see India expand its security role in Afghanistan and constantly reminded New Delhi of Islamabad's concerns, making it quite clear that India should limit itself to economic reconstruction. Even a modest U.S. interest in New Delhi's security role in Afghanistan would have seen significant Indian contributions over the last few years in the training and equipping of the Afghan National Army and the police. Nor is India unaware of its own limitations in protecting various economic projects in Afghanistan that have come under repeated attacks from the Taliban, most notably the July 2008 bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul, apparently with support from Pakistan's ISI.²¹ That bombing was about reminding India of its

vulnerabilities in Afghanistan. To be sure, India could play a powerful role in Afghanistan, though that would only be possible if India acts in concert with the United States and in partnership with Pakistan.²² On its own, there is no way India can neutralize Pakistan's geographic access to Afghanistan.

Pakistan has many problems on its western borderlands but India's alleged support to Baloch insurgency, its four consulates, and its desire to construct a two-front problem for Islamabad are at best a nuisance for Pakistan, not a strategic challenge. There is no way India can overcome Pakistan's strategic advantages, and problems, that arise out of an open unregulated frontier with Afghanistan that runs for nearly 2500 km. Pakistan's troubles with Afghanistan began from the very moment it emerged as the successor state to British India in the north west of the subcontinent in 1947. Afghanistan was the only country that opposed Pakistan's entry into the United Nations (UN). And no government in Kabul, not even that of the Taliban, which owed so much to Islamabad, has been willing to acknowledge the Durand Line as a legitimate border with Pakistan. For Afghans of all stripes, it is a matter of conviction that the Durand Line was part of a larger bargain with British India, and that bargain no longer exists. Through the 1980s, Pakistan was on the offensive in Afghanistan. From the late 1980s until the September 11, 2001 attacks, Pakistan virtually had a free hand in Afghan affairs. The near elimination of the Indian presence in Afghanistan during that period was of no great help to Pakistan in consolidating its hold over Kabul.

Instead of viewing Islamabad's current Afghan difficulties through the prism of an Indo-Pak rivalry, we need to remind ourselves of three structural problems that confront Pakistan on its western borderlands. One is the attempt by Islamabad to persist with the Raj legacy of treating Afghanistan as a "protectorate," without the national resources to do so. Pakistan is not seeking merely good neighborly relations with Kabul, but a friendly regime that was beholden to its eastern neighbor and agrees to keep other major powers out. This is an effort that mimicks the unsustainable British system of building buffers and protectorates all around India. But it is a deeply held faith in the Pakistani security establishment that constantly articulates this in terms of "strategic depth."

The second is the fear of Pashtun nationalism. With more than 40 million Pashtuns straddling the contested but unregulated Durand Line, any assertion of their ethnic identity threatens the very territorial integrity of Pakistan.

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Promoting Pashtun religious extremism as an alternative to ethnic solidarity makes sense from Pakistan's point of view. This, however, threatens other ethnic groups in Afghanistan as well as its neighbors. And the alliance between the religious extremists among the Pashtuns and al Qaeda threatens the United States and the West. Resolving this problem on Pakistan's west needs a lot more than a trade-off between Afghanistan and Kashmir; it demands the construction of a whole new set of arrangements across the Durand Line.

Third, when U.S. analysts talk of Pakistan's security, the underlying assumption is that Pakistan may be a black box. Pakistan has been dominated by its military since independence, and the military in turn has been able to maintain its high position due to its special alliance with religious extremists since the late 1970s.²³ There is a need, however, to differentiate between the national interests as defined by the army and the political classes in Pakistan. While some of the new U.S. analyses recognize the importance of promoting democracy in Pakistan, the real challenge is engineering a power shift within Pakistan away from the army and toward elected leaders. Without such a shift, there will be no fundamental change in Pakistan's external policies, the key elements of which have long been controlled by the army even when it acquiesced its civilian rule. The widespread post-Musharraf revulsion of the army rule in Pakistan has seen the civilian leadership, including Zardari as well as his main political opponent and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, articulate a perspective that is fundamentally different from that of the security establishment led by the armed forces. In relation to India, for example, both Zardari and Sharif have demanded open borders and free trade with India.

In one of his first interviews after his party's candidate Yousuf Raza Gilani was sworn in as prime minister, Zardari downplayed the importance of resolving the Kashmir dispute in Indo-Pak relations and suggested a focus on trade and economic cooperation instead.²⁴ Although he had to backtrack quickly amidst the negative reaction within Pakistan and among the separatist groups in Kashmir, Zardari has preserved the core elements of this radical thinking in his later statements. As noted earlier, Zardari has also sought to end Pakistan's hostility toward Karzai and talk about trilateral cooperation with Afghanistan and India.

In the first months after he took over as president, Zardari has taken a few tentative steps to control the power of the army and the intelligence establishment over policymaking and domestic politics. He disbanded the internal political wing of the ISI, abolished Musharraf's National Security Council dominated by the military, and reactivated the Defense Committee of the prime minister's cabinet. But his ability to take the next logical step of dismantling the jihadi infrastructure constructed over three decades by the army and the ISI has been severely compromised by the Mumbai attacks and the renewal of Indo-Pak

tensions. Not surprisingly, Zardari saw the Mumbai terror as partly directed against his own government, as he argued in an op-ed piece: “The Mumbai attacks were directed not only at India but also at Pakistan’s new democratic government and the peace process with India that we have initiated. Supporters of authoritarianism in Pakistan and non-state actors with a vested interest in perpetuating conflict do not want change in Pakistan to take root.”²⁵

Neither the United States nor India will be able to find a productive framework for engaging Islamabad unless they begin to differentiate between the interests of the army and the civilian rulers of Pakistan. Both will badly falter if they try to construct policies on a framework that is conducive to the interests of the Pakistani Army.

The U.S. should use discreet diplomacy to bring the Indo-Pak negotiations on Kashmir to closure.

Restoring the Subcontinent’s Strategic Unity

Amidst the gathering momentum in Washington for an integrated framework to resolve the problems in Afghanistan, there are bold calls for a grand bargain between competing regional interests and the major powers. Two well-known experts on Afghanistan, Barnett Rubin and Ahmad Rashid, have called for an international contact group authorized by the UNSC to tackle the many challenges in the region head on. It suggests that the contact group include the five permanent members and others, such as NATO and Saudi Arabia, and could:

Promote dialogue between India and Pakistan about their respective interests in Afghanistan and about finding a solution to the Kashmir dispute; seek a long-term political vision for the future of the FATA from the Pakistani government, perhaps one involving integrating the FATA into Pakistan’s provinces, as proposed by several Pakistani political parties; move Afghanistan and Pakistan towards discussions on the Durand Line and other frontier issues; involve Moscow in the region’s stabilization so that Afghanistan does not become a test of wills between the United States and Russia, as Georgia has become; provide guarantees to Tehran that the U.S.-NATO commitment to Afghanistan is not a threat to Iran; and ensure that China’s interests and role are brought to bear in international discussions on Afghanistan.²⁶

Yet, in its conception and operationalization, the Rubin-Rashid proposal misses out on a couple of important elements. Its emphasis on multilateralism may sound right as curtains fall on the “unilateralist” Bush administration, but the United States and its allies have so much at stake in Afghanistan that they may not find it convenient to settle on a committee approach to solve the

The real challenge is engineering a power shift within Pakistan from the army toward elected leaders.

Afghanistan problem. There is no mistaking that India officially will not even receive a delegation from the UNSC contact group if Kashmir is on its agenda. To be successful, any regional multilateral effort must essentially be strategic in its orientation. Equally important, the United States needs a “regional core” that can form the basis for a larger multilateral framework. That core must necessarily be the subcontinent, as it always has been, not the UN. It is one thing to involve all the relevant players, but so long as Pakistan is locked in

confrontation with Afghanistan and India, it is unlikely that any broader multilateral approach will work.

The first task for the Obama administration is to align the interests of Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. The preceding analysis shows that there are many broad trends in the region that make the construction of strategic harmony between the three nations possible. Indian strategic analysts have long sought a restoration of what they call the “strategic unity” of the subcontinent that could approximate the security framework of the Raj. India can achieve that long-term goal only in partnership with the United States and the West. In the nineteenth century, the dominant great power, the United Kingdom, was instrumental in constructing India as the center that stabilized all the volatile regions in the Indian Ocean littoral. In the twenty-first century, the United States must, in its own interests and those of the region, embark on the construction of a similar South Asia center, which will involve significant strategic cooperation between New Delhi and Washington.

During the Bush years, New Delhi and Washington moved toward a harmonization of their strategic interests in the subcontinent, with the sole exception of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Bush dehyphenation of India and Pakistan was indeed critical in transforming the Indo-U.S. relationship, but it also tended to treat the Afghan and Kashmir insurgencies as two different boxes, ignoring their common sources of support in Pakistan, and significantly limiting the prospects for Indo-U.S. cooperation in stabilizing the region between the Indus and the Hindu Kush in general and counterterrorism in particular. On its part, India has begun to recognize that its own aspirations for becoming a great power are intimately tied to the pacification of the trans-Indus territories and finding an enduring political reconciliation with Pakistan.

If the Obama administration recognizes that India can be a partner, and not a piece that can be shuffled around in the Great Game, there are plenty of good

ideas from the United States, as well as the region, that the two sides could build upon in developing an integrated approach to the region. These include discreet U.S. diplomacy to bring the Indo-Pak negotiations on Kashmir to an early closure. The most important breakthrough from these talks, a joint consultative mechanism across the divide in Kashmir, could also form the basis for new trans-border political and economic arrangements that could help legitimize the Durand Line while satisfying the wishes of the Pashtuns, the only community that is involved in the fight against the United States and its allies in Afghanistan.

A regional reconciliation will also allow Afghanistan and Pakistan to emerge as a bridge, facilitating free flow of trade and commerce between the subcontinent and neighboring regions. This after all was the principal function of the territories between the Indus and the Hindu Kush. A resolution of the Kashmir question and the normalization of Indo-Pak relations could lead to a significant reduction of troop concentrations on this border, restore the historic connectivities between Pakistan's provinces east of the Indus and India's western states, and revive the traditionally tolerant South Asian Islam that would act as a bulwark against the spread of extremism.

There is one powerful loser, however, from this appealing agenda that could come out of a joint Indo-U.S. integrated approach toward the northwestern parts of the subcontinent—the Pakistani Army, which has instrumentalized religious extremism over the last three decades, has gained a stronghold on the Pakistani state, and has a veto over its national security policies. Neither New Delhi nor Washington can hope to change the internal power structure in Pakistan in favor of the civilians acting on their own and against each other. They might have a small chance of success if they work together to facilitate full civilian control over the Pakistani armed forces and the intelligence establishment as part of an enduring empowerment of the democratic forces in Pakistan. That in turn holds the key to stability in the region between the Indus and the Hindu Kush.

The early indications are that New Delhi and Washington may surprise the world by embarking on precisely such cooperation. In their very first week in office, Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the appointment of veteran diplomat and trouble-shooter Richard Holbrooke as the Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although their decision not to include India and Kashmir in Holbrooke's formal mandate disappointed many in full range of regional issues relating to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Having won its point in public on Kashmir, New Delhi was quite eager in private to receive Holbrooke on his first mission to the region and make it a success.

Notes

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