

# South and Central Asia

Richard A. Boucher



U.S. Department of State

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs

Last year Secretary Rice decided to consolidate policy responsibility for the South and Central Asian nations into one bureau. This change makes good sense, because South and Central Asia should be dealt with as a unit. In addition to deep cultural and historic ties, our major policy goals for the 21st century, such as winning the war on terror, finding outlets for energy supplies, achieving prosperity through economic cooperation, and exploiting democratic opportunities, are of central importance in all the countries of this region. At the same time, in each country—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—we encounter unique and challenging issues with which to deal.

Our success in South and Central Asia is critically important to our national interests. September 11th cemented our realization that stability in the region was ever more vital. What the United States seeks in the region is a continuing spread of democratic stability. We are helping regional states find peace and prosperity through the virtuous combination of political

and economic freedom. We seek to champion change and reform to produce a more stable, prosperous, and integrated region. This is in line with a central objective of American global foreign policy as articulated by President Bush: “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

The United States will work with the governments and peoples of South and Central Asia, practicing what Secretary Rice has termed “transformational diplomacy.” She explains that “... transformational diplomacy is rooted in partnership; not in paternalism. In doing things with people, not for them, we seek to use America’s diplomatic power to help foreign citizens better their own lives and to build their own nations and to transform their own futures.”

## EDUCATION, GROWTH, AND COOPERATION

Education, particularly of women and girls, is our strongest foreign policy tool in the region. It is the



Kashmiris unload American-donated relief aid from a United Nations helicopter at Sharda village in Pakistan, following the 2005 earthquakes there.

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energy sources in Central Asia. It's a winning solution for both sides, providing much-needed energy to Afghanistan and serving as a major source of future revenue for countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Generating long-term stability through regional cooperation in energy, trade, and communications is an area where the United States can offer technical assistance. As a government, it is not our role to carry out large-scale energy and infrastructure projects. But, we have a key interest in using our expertise, in combination with other multilateral partners and donors, to stimulate such activities.

Strengthening these ties and helping to build new ones in energy,

foundation for accelerating social, political, and economic development in all areas: reducing infant/maternal mortality and improving health care, basic hygiene, literacy, civic participation, and economic growth, among others. The United States will devote significant resources to educational projects in the region.

Programs to encourage and stimulate economic growth with a broad impact on regional populations, ranging from micro-enterprise development to trade facilitation and custom reforms, are all essential components of creating healthy economies and trading partners. Thanks to reforms and export opportunities, Pakistan and India are both growing at more than 8 percent, and Afghanistan is growing at 14 percent. Kazakhstan's economic reforms and hydrocarbon deposits will soon catapult it into the first ranks of energy exporters.

Promoting closer cooperation in all spheres both within and between South and Central Asia is a high priority. We are fostering Central Asia's natural partnership with Afghanistan and the tremendous potential for cross-border trade and commerce. One important objective is to fund a greatly expanded Afghan power grid, with connections to underutilized

infrastructure, transportation, and other areas will increase the stability of the entire region, but will not be at the expense of already existing relationships. We will continue to emphasize the involvement of Central Asian nations with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Their links with NATO, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and with individual European nations must remain an important part of their future.



Pakistani Joint Secretary Fardosh Alim (center) waves to the crowd at the India-Pakistan joint check post at Wagha, India, on the day a new cross-border service opened as a result of efforts to improve ties between the two nations.

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U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher (right) joins (from left to right) Herve Jouanjean, deputy director-general of the European Union Commission for External Relations; Yasushi Akashi, Japanese peace envoy to Colombo; and Erik Solheim, Norwegian minister of international development, at the start of a meeting about Sri Lanka's peace process in May 2006.

### STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

We are building a global strategic partnership with India, the world's largest democracy and likely to be the most populous nation in 20 years. India and the United States are both multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious democracies with increasingly converging interests on the world's most important issues. Opening new areas to economic cooperation and concluding a civilian nuclear partnership are two of the most important paths we are currently following. We are also looking at all the areas where both of our international interests can be advanced through our partnership. These include agriculture, democracy building, disaster relief, education, and science and technology.

We are continuing America's long friendship with Pakistan, a key ally in the war on terror. President Musharraf has made the important decision to move his country away from extremism and towards a future as a modern democracy, and we fully support this undertaking. We are working with political parties, civil society, and institutions such as the election commission to assure

successful parliamentary elections in 2007, and we continue to make clear that we are deeply committed to helping the Pakistani people recover from the devastating earthquake of last October.

A stable and friendly relationship between India and Pakistan is essential for peace and stability in the region and beyond. We are encouraged by continuing progress in the composite dialogue between India and Pakistan. Confidence-building measures, such as the opening of bus and rail links, are helping to build a constituency for peace in both nations. We will continue to encourage peace efforts between the two countries, including moving toward resolution of the question of Kashmir.

Afghanistan, at the center of this region, can be a bridge that links South and Central Asia, rather than a barrier that divides them. Stability, democracy, and economic development in Afghanistan remain top priorities for the United States and for our partners as well. The Afghanistan Compact and Interim Afghan National Development Strategy documents unveiled in January at the London Conference on Afghanistan map out specific security, governance, and development benchmarks for

the next five years; our support is vital to achieving these important goals. We must continue to deal decisively with the violent remnants of al-Qaida, the Taliban, and other insurgents that are still at large. The huge opium crop in Afghanistan poses a grave threat to Asia, Europe, and the United States, with the potential to fuel insurgencies, destroy economies, and corrupt governments. Through a five-pillar approach of information, income alternatives, eradication, enforcement and interdiction, and fair application of the law, Afghanistan is moving against the drug trade, and we are helping.

We are working to end strife and promote stability elsewhere in the region. In Sri Lanka, we continue to work with our international partners to preserve a fragile peace process and bring resolution to the violent struggle against the government by Tamil separatists. Nepal also faces a difficult situation. Popular demonstrations forced King Gyanendra to reinstate parliament and acknowledge the people's sovereignty, but the country still faces many challenges on the path to restored democracy, peace, and development, including a continuing insurrection by the Maoists. While the United States is cautiously optimistic, this is the very beginning of a process of entrenching democracy in Nepal, and U.S. and other countries' strong support will be important to ensuring the success of the new government. In Bangladesh, a moderate Muslim democracy recently threatened by political violence and extremism, we are looking forward to free and fair parliamentary elections next year with the full and active participation of all parties.

Central Asian nations are dealing with similar challenges of fighting terror, building sustainable growth, and meeting the demands of their people for economic and political opportunity. Some leaders, such as those in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have responded negatively

and we must manage our relationships accordingly. However, Central Asia is also a region of tremendous promise. Oil and gas production in the Caspian Sea basin, particularly in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, could make a significant contribution to global energy security. Kazakhstan may be emerging as a regional engine of economic growth and reform. Kyrgyzstan is struggling to consolidate democratic gains and keep reforms on track.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the region, traditions of tolerant faith and scientific learning, which stretch back a millennium, provide a shield against imported strains of violent extremism. As we help the governments and peoples of the region to strengthen their institutions promoting growth, peace, and stability, we also seek to encourage those members of society who have begun to reform, to promote change, to open their economies, and to cooperate with their neighbors. With nearly a quarter of the world's population, abundant resources, and a generation of young people with unprecedented dreams, South and Central Asia has great global potential to serve as a democratic and economically vibrant force for positive change. The United States should have a role in fostering such change, in which all in the region can share. ■

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American field specialist for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Matt George makes a cast out of cardboard for a boy in Kashmir.

Pakistani women light candles to mark International Women's Day in Multan, Pakistan, in March 2005.



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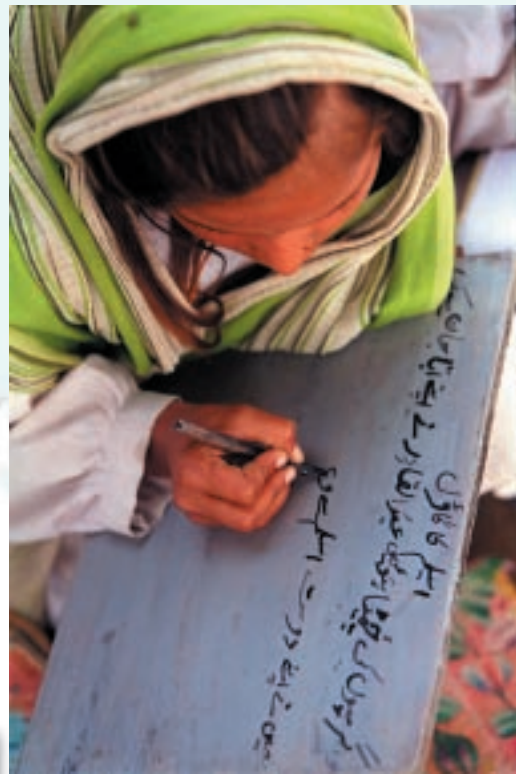
An Afghan election worker counts ballots as observers watch her in Kabul, Afghanistan, in September 2005. Some 12 million votes were cast in simultaneous parliamentary and provincial council elections.

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U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher visits the Salaam Baalak Trust, a shelter for street children funded by the U.S. government in New Delhi, India, in August 2006.

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A girl practices her Urdu writing skills at a village school in Bhair Sodian, in northeastern Pakistan.

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Children play a computer cricket game at “Hole in the Wall,” an informal computer education program supported by the American Embassy School in partnership with the American Women’s Association, an Indian nongovernmental organization (NGO), and the National Institution of Information Technology.

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