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South Asia Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns

*A Framework for U.S. Policy
and Strategy in South Asia, 2014–2026*

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation*

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Acknowledgments

This report originated with a desire to understand the U.S. policy priorities, strategic concerns, regional dynamics, strategic constraints, and opportunities in South Asia within a broader regional context. The resulting study was based on discussions with experts and stakeholders in the U.S. government, a series of ten papers commissioned specifically for this report, three workshops to review and discuss those papers and preliminary findings, and a review by the authors of other key documents. The result is not a set of specific policy recommendation but rather a framework on which the United States may base the development of policies and strategy in South Asia for the next 12 years, beginning in 2014.

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1 | Strategic Framework for South Asia, 2014–2026

The United States has a number of interests and values at stake in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, or “South Asia” for the purposes of this analysis. But it also has a broader set of such concerns at stake regionally (in the greater Middle East, Eurasia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia)—and, of course, globally as well. Any long-term policy or strategy framework for South Asia needs to be built around the global and regional concerns that are most likely to persist across multiple changes in U.S. political leadership regardless of political party.

This report presents the results of a study of U.S. strategic concerns in South Asia and the regional dynamics and priorities that are likely to influence U.S. policy there over the next 12 years. What issues are likely to be of enduring concern to U.S. policymakers between 2014 and 2026? What dynamics are likely to affect the ability of the United States to achieve its policy priorities in South Asia over that period? The answers to these questions should serve as a framework for a U.S. strategy in South Asia for the next 12 years. The results of this study derive mainly from workshops, document reviews, and an analysis of 10 background papers (available at <http://c3.csis.org>) that were commissioned to examine the key trends, relationships, concerns, and likely behaviors of China, Iran, the Gulf states (mainly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar), Central Asia, Russia, Turkey, Europe, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

While the United States and its coalition partners have focused primarily on Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past 12 years, we found that the strategic dynamics most likely to be relevant over the next 12 years will probably be clustered around relationships linking Pakistan, India, and China. We therefore propose a strategic framework for U.S. policy in South Asia centered around that cluster rather than the more common cluster of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

By clustering Pakistan and India with China rather than Afghanistan, we do not argue that dynamics in Afghanistan are irrelevant to U.S. interests or regional stability. But instability in Afghanistan is almost certain to be a lower priority for U.S. leaders than extremism and instability in Pakistan will be over the next 12 years. And progress in Pakistan will contribute more to stability in Afghanistan than vice versa (even though Pakistanis are concerned about armed groups based in Afghanistan). We also do not argue

that other regional relationships are irrelevant. Certainly Russia, Iran, and to a lesser extent the Gulf states will play important roles in the region, as the framework we present recognizes. But the paths to stability leading through China and India are more promising than those leading through Russia and Iran.

Finally, we do not argue that humanitarian and development concerns in the region are not relevant to the United States. On the contrary, improving the lives of people subjected to poverty and abuse is something Americans have long valued, and our proposed framework acknowledges that development and humanitarian progress are critical to long-term stability. But a strategic framework intended to survive multiple changes in U.S. leadership should prioritize efforts according to the broadest concerns that U.S. leaders are likely to have. We believe this report captures the way U.S. interests and values will most likely be balanced in the region in the future.

India is more strategically focused on China than on Pakistan and is building its conventional military capabilities accordingly. Pakistan is still strategically focused on India (whose conventional buildup therefore seems threatening) and is building its nuclear weapons capabilities accordingly. If this dynamic continues, it increases the risk of accidental use of or loss of responsible control over nuclear weapons. And if Pakistan's responses to concerns over India continue to divert attention and military capabilities from fighting domestic extremists and eliminating their safe havens, it will be difficult to protect regional stability and encourage peace.

Through diplomacy, security cooperation, trade, and development assistance, the United States can contribute to a peaceful South Asia, at the heart of which lies better cooperation between Pakistan and India, a lessening of tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and a reduction of internal threats in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Given the nature of China's relationships with India (a military competitor and economic partner), Pakistan (a military and economic partner), and Afghanistan (an economic partner), these objectives are best pursued through a strategic framework that gives due attention to China and is modest about what the United States can achieve on its own.

Our strategic framework for South Asia is intended to cover the period from 2014 to 2026 (i.e., the current and next three U.S. presidential administrations). The framework is structured around priorities to pursue (elaborated in Chapter 2), contingencies to avoid (Chapter 3), and dynamics to engage (Chapter 4). The priorities, contingencies, and dynamics are all identified as being primary or secondary to indicate the order of precedence we expect they will take in the future. (Tertiary priorities are identified as well.) The remainder of this chapter presents the framework.

Priorities to Pursue

The policy priorities are divided into primary, secondary, and tertiary concerns, with placement depending on judgments about which concerns are likely to take precedence

over the others over the next 12 years. The primary priorities are those that the current and next three U.S. presidential administrations are certain to focus on regardless of other concerns. Secondary priorities will be pursued if diplomatic and security conditions permit or if doing so is considered essential to addressing the primary concerns.

PRIMARY: PREVENTING CBRN PROLIFERATION AND USE

Preventing the use, loss of control, and proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons and capabilities—especially nuclear—has long been a global priority of the United States and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. In South Asia, the main concerns center around tensions between India and Pakistan (potentially leading to a nuclear attack) and the way nuclear energy and weaponry (and to a lesser degree chemical weapons) are developed, stored, transported, and used, especially in Pakistan. A nuclear attack by one side or the other, while a low likelihood, would be devastating to regional security and prosperity. The acquisition of a nuclear or radiological weapon by an extremist group or a rogue unit of the Pakistani military would be extremely dangerous to U.S., regional, and global security as well. All scenarios leading to either outcome will certainly continue to be of grave concern.

PRIMARY: COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Containing the ability of nonstate armed groups to carry out violent attacks, undermine state institutions, and incite sectarian, interethnic, and interstate conflicts has been a global and regional concern for the United States for nearly two decades. The United States, its citizens, and its facilities have been repeatedly attacked by international terrorist groups, and containing the spread of violent extremism has therefore been a high priority, especially since the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. homeland in 2001. Afghanistan had been used as a safe haven by al Qaeda to plan that attack, and subsequently the United States has made it priority to understand where other illicit havens might be worldwide; certainly the border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan continues to be a concern. Violent extremist groups operate in all countries of South Asia, but those operating in Pakistan are of greatest concern: some target Afghanistan, some target India, some target the Pakistani state, and some target ethnic, sectarian, or political rivals. Most are a real threat to regional stability and long-term peace.

SECONDARY: ENCOURAGING ECONOMIC STABILITY AND BALANCE

Encouraging economic stability, the growth of markets for U.S. goods and services, and balanced economic power in the Asia-Pacific region has been a practice of the United States. The domestic priority of creating jobs in the United States certainly drives the search for new markets for U.S. goods and services. U.S. trade with India exceeds \$86 billion,¹ and Pakistan is a large country with a growing middle class and therefore represents potential opportunity. More broadly, however, economics is the main moderating influence for just

1. Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, *Resource Center: India*, <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/south-central-asia/india>

about every country around South Asia: the more economic benefits available to countries trading with South Asian businesses, the more stake they have in stability. This applies most significantly, perhaps, to China, which is an important trading partner with India. But China is also a military competitor of both India and the United States. The stronger India's economy, the stronger the foundation for India's rise as a military power capable of balancing (and conventionally deterring) China in the Asia-Pacific region—a development the United States quietly encourages.

TERTIARY PRIORITIES

U.S. foreign policy often places a high value on good governance, international norms, and human development. These values will probably continue to be pursued to varying degrees in South Asia as long as influential domestic constituents (e.g., development professionals or diaspora communities) advocate for them, diplomatic and security conditions permit, or doing so is considered essential to addressing the primary and secondary concerns noted above. Tertiary concerns will likely include:

- fostering capable, legitimate, and democratic state institutions
- promoting the rule of law, justice, human rights, and formal markets
- supporting human development and institutional capacity in areas such as education, energy, gender equality, governance, health, humanitarian assistance, infrastructure, jobs, poverty reduction, and security

Contingencies to Avoid

The contingencies to avoid are conflict scenarios within South Asia that put U.S. interests and values at risk at the broad regional or global levels, including the primary and secondary priorities noted above as well as U.S. security and the stability of strategically important states more generally. Two such contingencies take primary precedence: preventing a major internal conflict in Pakistan and preventing significant cross-border violence between India and Pakistan. A third contingency gets significantly more attention today than it is likely to a few years after 2014 and is therefore of secondary precedence: a significant escalation of Afghanistan's conflict.

PRIMARY: PREVENTING INTERNAL CONFLICT IN PAKISTAN

Preventing Pakistan's collapse, a major internal conflict, or the mainstreaming of extremists in government and society will continue to be a top priority for the United States. A civil war or insurgency involving extremists or multiple sectarian and ethnic groups, a loss of state control over significant territory, or a fragmentation of the Pakistani military would exacerbate Pakistan's economic stagnation, energy crisis, youth unemployment, human rights abuses, and military dominance over national policy. Such instability could easily spill over into Afghanistan, India, and Iran, which are already challenged by ethnic

and sectarian divisions; would risk enabling combatants or extremist groups to gain control over CBRN weapons or materials; and could spark cross-border violence between Pakistan and India.

PRIMARY: PREVENTING INDO-PAK CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT

Most countries in the world place a high value on preventing an Indian-Pakistani (Indo-Pak) war, whether conventional or nuclear, and significant cross-border attacks by extremist proxies. India and Pakistan have fought multiple wars since 1947 and both have had nuclear weapons for more than a decade. Three sets of possibilities for cross-border violence exist. In descending order of probability, they include cross-border attacks by non-state armed groups (whether state-sponsored or not), conventional military engagements (escalating beyond the more common border skirmishes), or a conflict of any sort that results in the use of one or more nuclear weapons by a nonstate armed group, by a rogue military unit, or under orders from the military command (due to miscommunication or perceived threat). The worst-case scenario—a nuclear exchange—derives in part from risks related to geostrategic calculations. With its eye on China's growing military assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region, India has been improving its conventional military capabilities. In response, Pakistan has been increasing its production of nuclear weapons, including those it considers tactical. To prevent the increased risk that tactical nuclear weapons might be used, this geostrategic dynamic will need to be a central component of U.S. strategy in South Asia.

SECONDARY: PREVENTING ESCALATION OF AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT

Preventing Afghanistan's collapse, a major escalation of internal conflict, and a return of a Taliban-like regime will be top concerns of U.S. policymakers during 2014 as it draws down its troops and begins a new phase in U.S.-Afghan relations (still under negotiation at the end of 2013). If Afghan power brokers and former warlords reconstitute their militias as a hedge against future instability, there is a strong chance that the Afghan conflict could escalate significantly, with different factions vying for control over territory and seeking external support from Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others. After its drawdown, however, the United States will concern itself with such an escalation only if the conflict evolves in a way that seriously risks the return of a regime offering safe haven to al Qaeda or other terrorists, or if a return to chaos could reasonably be blamed on American abandonment rather than on bad decisions by local actors. (In Iraq, U.S. opinion leaders generally blame Iraqis for the reemergence of conflict since the U.S. departure.) The United States is not likely to fail to act against terrorist havens in Afghanistan like it did in the 1990s, but nor is it likely to occupy the country with a massive troop presence like it did in the 2000s. Over the next few years at least, the United States, European powers, and many of Afghanistan's neighbors are nevertheless likely to remain engaged in Afghanistan's reconstruction and some will continue to help train its security forces to try to make as much progress as possible once foreign troops withdraw.

Dynamics to Engage

The dynamics to engage are the most important internal and regional trends, relationships, complications, and opportunities that might affect the ability of the United States to pursue these priorities and avoid these contingencies. There are three primary dynamics, which the United States will unavoidably need to engage to clear obstacles to stability in South Asia: the China-India relationship, Pakistan's military evolution, and Pakistan's social disruptions. Two further sets of dynamics are of secondary importance: the U.S.-Iran relationship and Afghanistan's political economy. These are secondary not because they are necessarily less relevant to promoting stability in South Asia but because they depend on factors outside of South Asia and would have less powerful second-order effects on stability within South Asia than the primary dynamics would.

PRIMARY: CHINA-INDIA RELATIONSHIP

The first major dynamic is the China-India relationship, discussed earlier in this chapter. While they are important trading partners to each other, they both are also rising powers in the Asia-Pacific region and therefore competitors. China's military is increasingly assertive in the region, India is building its conventional military power in response, and Pakistan is growing its nuclear capabilities as a hedge against growing Indian power. The United States cannot manage or control any of these dynamics, but it can attempt to influence them by continuing to nudge India's military posture eastward toward a stable balance with China (for example by focusing military sales to India on its naval power), and encouraging and enabling India's economic integration with Southeast Asia and increased economic interdependence with East Asia, especially China (as U.S. economic diplomacy has done in the past).

PRIMARY: PAKISTAN'S MILITARY EVOLUTION

The second major dynamic to engage is the evolution of Pakistan's military doctrines and culture. Stability (and, ultimately, peace) will be enhanced if Pakistan's counterterrorism doctrine, attention, and capabilities continue to shift toward countering violent extremism domestically and regionally, and if Pakistan's nuclear doctrine can be shifted away from an emphasis on usable tactical weapons and toward strategic deterrence and stockpile security. U.S. interests can be better protected if Pakistani military personnel have positive or at least neutral views of the United States. U.S. policy has little direct influence over the evolution of Pakistan's military culture and doctrines. But it can shape its security cooperation to include opportunities for positive engagement, such as through military education. The United States and China could jointly encourage the evolution of Pakistan's counterterrorism doctrine. To help reverse the evolution of Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, however, it would be better to let the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and China take the lead: China has more credibility with the Pakistani military than the United States, and European NATO allies can use their Cold War experience of deterring Soviet attack as a basis for engaging Pakistan in a conversation about the role of tactical nuclear weapons in effective (and safe) deterrence.

PRIMARY: PAKISTAN'S SOCIAL DISRUPTIONS

Pakistan's social coherence is challenged by a number of trends and serious crises, including economic stagnation, an energy crisis, youth unemployment, ethnic and sectarian tensions, political violence, and natural disaster risks. U.S. assistance has sought to address many of these issues. But Pakistan is such a large country and its problems so severe that even the relatively large amounts of aid the United States has given in the past have not made significant progress at the strategic level. A more focused effort might make more progress on a problem that contributes to all the rest, such as helping Pakistan's civilian institutions address Pakistan's energy crisis and leading the international development community to focus on Pakistan's youth-jobs crisis.

SECONDARY: U.S.-IRAN RELATIONSHIP

The fourth dynamic is the U.S.-Iran relationship, which here is considered secondary because the ability to engage this dynamic will not depend on anything happening within South Asia. It will depend on Iran's willingness to abandon its nuclear weapon program and the United States' willingness to offer confidence-building measures in response to Iranian overtures. It is beyond the scope of a South Asia strategic framework to suggest a new path for U.S.-Iranian relations. But if U.S. leaders continue to engage Iran in talks and need an additional confidence-building measure to offer, they could contribute to stability in South Asia by agreeing not to oppose plans for Iranian projects that would deliver economic benefits to South Asians, especially in Pakistan's energy sector (which would contribute positively to the primary dynamic of Pakistan's social disruptions).

SECONDARY: AFGHANISTAN'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

The fifth and final dynamic that is worth engaging is Afghanistan's political economy, which is the main internal source of its instability and underdevelopment—a combination of poverty, isolation from the global economy, tensions between formal and informal power, and a political and economic system that does not discourage patronage and coercion. The United States could usefully nudge Afghanistan's political economy toward stability by encouraging China, India, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to pressure friendly Afghan officials and power brokers to use the political system instead of militias to protect their security and economic interests; letting China and possibly Iran pressure Pakistan to do the same; and leading the international development community and Afghanistan's neighbors to accelerate economic projects, especially in the transport sector and in jobs for youth.

The United States does not have decisive influence over any of these five sets of dynamics. In most cases it will need to work jointly with partners and regional competitors on specific areas of mutual interest. In others it will need to allow other countries to take the lead. In no case is success guaranteed—but neither is failure.

In the remainder of this report, we present the analysis and background information that generated this framework.

2 | Priorities to Pursue

This chapter identifies the most important concerns that the United States seems most likely to have in South Asia over the next 12 years and spells out the logic by which we identified and prioritized them. To differentiate between higher and lower priorities, we begin with general descriptions of the interests, values, or objectives (“concerns” for short) that the United States has at stake, first globally, then regionally, and then specifically in South Asia. This information is derived partly from papers commissioned for this project and partly from a review of other documents published by policymakers and other scholars, including recent studies by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on regional interests. A multilevel analysis follows to determine where U.S. concerns within South Asia overlap with regional and global policy concerns. This chapter concludes with a summary of how the United States is likely to prioritize its concerns in South Asia over the next dozen years.

Global Concerns

There is no universal method for determining what a country’s “real” or “permanent” national interests are, at least not beyond the level of general principles. Statements identifying a country’s national interests amount to predictions about what issues that country’s decisionmakers and public are likely to care about and try to influence in the future (whether they are able to influence them or not). They are predictions, not certainties, because political elites regularly disagree with one another about what issues are important and because the most difficult issues usually pose dilemmas (i.e., pursuing one set of interests might damage another set), and dilemmas are not predictably resolvable.

In a recent study, based on scores of interviews, document reviews, multiple working group meetings, and a peer review, a group of CSIS scholars identified a set of “core” U.S. national interests.² We adapted that work, for the purposes of the present study, to identify the global-level concerns that U.S. policymakers are likely to prioritize over the next 12 years. Those concerns are

the physical and virtual security of the United States, its citizens, its [treaty] allies, and its partners; an international order conducive to continued U.S. security

2. Nathan Freier et al., *Beyond the Last War: Balancing Ground Forces and Future Challenges Risk in US-CENTCOM and USPACOM* (Washington, DC: CSIS, April 2013), http://csis.org/files/publication/130424_Freier_BeyondLastWar_Web.pdf.

and prosperity, the rule of law, and universal human dignity; [the] stable functioning of strategic states; secure, unrestricted access to strategic regions, resources, and the global commons and prevention of their hostile domination; [and the] prevention of the continued development, proliferation, use of, or loss of control over [chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons] capabilities.³

For convenience, these five sets of global concerns can be labeled, respectively, as security, order, strategic states, access, and nonproliferation. Each is discussed below.

- *Security.* In general, U.S. policymakers have always been most concerned with the territorial integrity of the American homeland and the physical security of U.S. citizens at home and abroad. In many cases, U.S. leaders have also applied a “security umbrella” to treaty allies and partners and have taken action against threats abroad before they have had a chance to reach the American homeland. Threats of concern are not limited to military, terrorist, and criminal attacks, but can include disruptions of institutions and infrastructure, natural and humanitarian disasters, domestic civil conflicts, public health emergencies such as pandemics, and, increasingly, cyberattacks.
- *Order.* As a global superpower, the United States has a greater interest in the stability of the international system than either rising powers or marginalized peoples. To a large degree the system currently reflects a set of norms that are consistent with values Americans have long held, including the promotion of the rule of law, human dignity, democracy, and prosperity, values that, if upheld, can “not only mitigate immediate risks to U.S. political and economic well-being but also temper the kinds of extreme reactions against social dislocation and political disaffection that can breed violent threats to the physical security of the United States, its people, and its partners.”⁴ The international order today is not fundamentally under threat; even rising powers and most marginalized peoples simply want adjustments that would better advantage them or stop disadvantaging them. But some global actors—nonstate armed actors (e.g., al Qaeda, transnational organized criminals) and “rogue” states (e.g., North Korea, Iran, Syria)—are likely to continue threatening international norms, laws, or the system in general, whether out of moral disagreement, self-interest, or desperation. Threats to the international order can come from interstate wars, attacks against foreign economic interests, hostile control over strategic resources, civil wars that threaten to spill over international borders, mass atrocities, and tolerance or sponsorship of terrorist and criminal groups or the safe havens that protect them.
- *Strategic states.* A “strategic state” is not necessarily one that is friendly to the United States, such as a treaty ally or partner; it can also be a state that is indifferent or outright hostile. What makes a state strategically important is the likelihood that its

3. Ibid., 17.

4. Ibid., 19.

collapse—or significant instability short of collapse—would harm multiple U.S. core interests. It would not be enough simply to control an important waterway, for example; if such a state were taken over by extremists, the United States could probably find a way to deal with that problem. If, however, such a state also had CBRN capabilities, control over significant energy reserves, and a large population with a diaspora living in a neighboring country that is also a U.S. ally, it would be exponentially more difficult for the United States to deal with all of those problems at once. A state having any combination of features considered strategically important to the United States—its economy, resources, infrastructure, geography, population, location in the world, complex linkages to other countries or regions, and legal relationship with the United States—would qualify it as a strategic state, and its stable functioning would qualify as a core U.S. interest that the United States will continue to promote for many years.

- *Access.* Any action, event, or situation that limits U.S. access to the “global commons” (air, sea, space, and cyber domains not under the sovereign control of any state) or that restricts the free flow of strategic resources (those located on sovereign territory and critical to the U.S. and global economy) is likely to elicit a strong U.S. policy response. Access to the global commons and the free flow of strategic resources can be restricted by hostile regimes located near strategic choke points, such as the straits of Hormuz and Malacca; by instability or hostile action in countries that control infrastructure critical to the global economy, such as the Panama and Suez canals; or by wars, organized crime, instability, or natural disasters affecting territorial sources of strategic resources such as oil and uranium. Access issues will continually arise and in response the United States will likely act to prevent harm to the global economy or restore its access to regions it considers strategically important.
- *Nonproliferation.* The long-standing U.S. opposition to the proliferation of CBRN capabilities is very likely to continue into the future (barring some dramatic development requiring a counterbalancing of sorts). The greatest concerns are efforts by violent nonstate groups, especially anti-American terrorists, to acquire weapons-grade CBRN materials; instability in countries that contain such materials could result in a loss of control that enables such groups to acquire them or encourages an unauthorized military unit to use them. In addition, the development of a new CBRN capability changes the military balance in any region where it takes place, which can encourage military adventures or an arms race with regional adversaries. U.S. policymakers will continue to be concerned over any prospect for the development, proliferation, use, or loss of responsible control over CBRN weapons and materials.

Regional Concerns

Having considered the main U.S. global concerns—and before turning to the concerns the United States has within South Asia itself—it is instructive to consider the concerns the

United States has in the broader Asia-Pacific and Middle East regions. This section emphasizes those countries closest to South Asia geographically and diplomatically.

The countries of South Asia are in a tough neighborhood. The region to their west is characterized by competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and popular discontent threatening civil disorder. Due west are three countries that are likely to remain problematic to the United States—Iran, Iraq, and Syria—while to the south of those countries are the U.S.-partnered Gulf states. The Central Asian states lie to the north of South Asia; most do not get along with each other, have weak and corrupt governments, and have criminal and violent extremist organizations operating in their territories. They have generally friendly relations with the United States, but they are not deep friendships, and Russia considers them to be in its sphere of influence. The country to the east that is most relevant to South Asia's stability is China, which has a stronger historical relationship with Pakistan than with Afghanistan or India and is the most strategically significant global competitor to the United States.

Other countries are physically peripheral to South Asia but still relevant to its stability. Russia has a difficult history in South Asia and an increasingly problematic relationship with the United States. Europe is home to some of the closest and most reliable U.S. allies in the world, particularly those who are members of the U.S.-dominated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. Turkey, a NATO ally, has generally friendly but increasingly tense relations with the United States. All have made important contributions in Afghanistan.

Every global priority the United States has is challenged in one or more countries in this broad region:

- *Security.* A top global priority of the United States is to prevent a military conflict with China, which for two decades has been increasing its military and cyber capabilities and increasingly asserting itself against territorial and economic interests of U.S. allies in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Iran remains antagonistic to the United States and to several U.S. partners in the region (such as Saudi Arabia). Terrorist and criminal organizations with transnational reach operate throughout the region, and public health threats have originated from several areas as well. All of these issues are certain to continue to be high-priority concerns to U.S. policymakers for the foreseeable future.
- *Order.* Human dignity and the rule of law are far from universally respected in the region, a fact that both results from and contributes to weak, corrupt, or authoritarian governance, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia, where many nonstate armed groups and criminal organizations also operate. Civil disorder, sometimes turning into civil wars, is likely to be a growing concern in the years to come. This is especially so in the Middle East, where popular discontent with poor economic conditions and authoritarian governments has led to attempts to force change in political leadership (some successful), brutal crackdowns on demonstrators, and civil

wars involving foreign fighters, cross-border attacks, and widespread human rights violations.

- *Strategic states.* All of the peripheral countries mentioned above are strategic states: Europe and Turkey are formal U.S. treaty allies, and Russia is a large country that borders other strategic states. Russia has a large population, nuclear weapons, strategic resources such as natural gas, terrorist organizations, and good relations with countries that are hostile to U.S. interests, such as Iran. China has a similar list as Russia and is universally recognized as a strategic state. Iran and Saudi Arabia are both large countries with control over important energy resources and lie in immediate proximity to a strategic waterway (the Gulf). For these and other reasons, instability in any of these countries would have a complex set of second- and third-order effects on the world economy and a wide range of other U.S. interests.
- *Access.* The Suez Canal and the Bab al Mandeb on either side of the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia are four of the world's most important choke points for the distribution of energy resources. Many countries in the broader region are themselves sources for oil, natural gas, and other strategic resources. The global economy would be harmed if the countries bordering those choke points or in control of those resources were to become unstable or hostile. The United States uses ground transportation routes through Russia and the Central Asia states for transit into and out of Afghanistan; access to those routes will continue to be important to the United States for the next few years but might not be beyond that. Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and Syrian hackers have engaged in cyberattacks against the United States, a threat to cyber infrastructure that is almost certain to grow over time.
- *Nonproliferation.* Russia and China both have nuclear weapons. Syria and Iran both have some CBRN capabilities. Iran is under international sanctions for its refusal to allow sufficient international review of its nuclear research and development activities. There is a pressing concern that, if Iran comes to possess a nuclear weapon capability, Saudi Arabia and Turkey would take seriously the option of developing their own such capability because a nuclear Iran would significantly change the balance of power in the region. The ongoing civil war in Syria, which affects much of the Middle East, raises serious concerns not only about further use of chemical weapons by the regime (or by opposition fighters) but also about the possibility that terrorist organizations might come into possession of them due to a loss of effective control over stockpiles or chemical precursors. (Syria's offer to declare and destroy its chemical weapons has not fully allayed these concerns.)

These concerns are likely to remain both regional and global priorities for the United States for the foreseeable future. Other, perhaps lower-priority concerns in the region include natural resources crises (water, food, and energy shortages, which are both humanitarian concerns and conflict risks); drug trafficking (heroin from poppy grown in Afghanistan and distributed by illicit networks with links to violent anti-American

groups); and border disputes (China-India, India-Pakistan, and Pakistan-Afghanistan, as well as the much higher priority concerns over China's territorial claims in Southeast Asia).

Concerns within South Asia

Now that U.S. global and regional concerns have been identified, it is time to consider the concerns the United States has in South Asia itself to determine which ones are as important to the United States as its regional and global priorities.

India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are three very different countries. India has a large population, functioning state institutions, moderate levels of violent conflict (relative to its western neighbors), nuclear weapons, and high connectivity to global markets. Pakistan has a smaller but still large population, state institutions of varying degrees of functioning, medium to high levels of violent conflict, nuclear weapons, and, compared to its neighbors, medium connectivity to global markets. Afghanistan has a small population, barely functioning state institutions, high levels of violent conflict, few advanced conventional weapons, and little global economic connectivity.

Because of these differences, U.S. policy in South Asia is generally carried out bilaterally. In this section, therefore, we review U.S. priorities within each of the three countries before summarizing the priorities in the region as a whole. (The background papers on each country, available on the CSIS website, go into significantly more detail.) Identifying these as priorities does not suggest that the United States has decisive influence over any of them, only that U.S. leaders are likely to shape policies toward the region in a way that is intended to bring them about; whether they succeed is another question entirely.

PRIORITIES IN INDIA

India's value as a U.S. partner has most certainly grown since 2001. India is on a steady path to becoming one of the world's largest markets, has worked with the United States on counterterrorism in the region, and is critical to security in the Indian Ocean. The United States has emphasized bilateral diplomatic ties, conducted war exercises and counterterrorism exercises, established a military sales relationship, supported its nuclear energy program, and heavily expanded the trade relationship. Key priorities in India have included:

- *Expanding economic relations.* The United States has worked to develop a closer strategic partnership with India to support U.S. economic growth and trade, increase investment, and enhance the flow, transfer, and exchange of technology.⁵ India is critical to key shipping routes through the Indian Ocean. As its economy grows, the

5. Marshall M. Bouton, "U.S.-India Initiative Series: America's Interests in India," working paper, Center for a New American Security, October 2010, http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_USInterestsInIndia_Bouton.pdf.

prospects for greater U.S. exports to India increase. The United States and India both share an interest in maintaining a stable South Asia, and India has slowly increased trade and investment with Afghanistan. A strong economy is what drives India's rise as a regional power. The next point elaborates on why the United States might support this.

- *Responding to the India-China relationship.* An economically strong, politically stable India, with a strong, capable military would help maintain a balance of power that contributes to regional stability. U.S. leaders implicitly promote India as a natural counterweight to China's power in the broad region and they are likely to continue doing so in the future. U.S. and Indian opinion leaders rarely talk about the relationship in this way. But the United States and India both share concerns about China's economic and military rise. All three countries are economic competitors but also important trade partners. A strong Indian economy and South Asian economic integration could help counterbalance China's economic might without damaging the China-India economic relationship. Militarily, both the United States and India are wary of China's increasingly assertive territorial claims in the region. The United States sells arms and undertakes joint military exercises with India to facilitate cooperation and a degree of interoperability between the two countries' militaries. India's economic strength would underpin its military power.

PRIORITIES IN PAKISTAN

The United States has, through aid and diplomacy, tried to encourage Pakistan's development as a moderate Muslim state friendly to the United States and a willing partner in fighting extremism. The United States has also worked to expand bilateral economic relations with Pakistan and remains one of the highest contributors of foreign direct investment there. Its main concerns in Pakistan are:

- *Eliminating extremism.* After the United States occupied Afghanistan in 2001, al Qaeda and Taliban leaders fled into Pakistan, where many took advantage of safe haven for years. Much of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has centered around counter-ing those groups and individuals. There is a fear that such groups will continue to destabilize Afghanistan from safe havens in Pakistan after 2014.
- *Promoting internal stability.* As Pakistan faces growing pressure from militant groups targeting the Pakistani state, the United States has offered help to the military and the civilian government. Instability in Pakistan could easily spill over into Afghanistan, India, and Iran, areas already volatile and rife with ethnic and sectarian divisions. A thriving Pakistani economy would contribute to stability and employment.
- *Preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.* U.S. concerns about nuclear weapons in Pakistan are focused not only on preventing their intentional or accidental use against India but also on Pakistan's security structures and control of those

weapons. U.S. leaders are likely to continue to be concerned about CBRN weapons and materials falling into the hands of extremist or terrorist groups or sold to other governments, as A.Q. Khan has done.

PRIORITIES IN AFGHANISTAN

In Afghanistan, the United States has tried to improve the capacity and legitimacy of Afghan state institutions, both the civilian and military, as part of an overall effort to foster stability, reduce extremism, and either defeat or settle with the Taliban. The United States has provided billions of dollars in assistance to train Afghan security forces; eradicate opium and offer alternative livelihoods; combat illiteracy, especially for girls and women; promote democracy, voting rights, electoral monitoring, the rule of law, and justice; update health facilities and address maternal health, infant mortality rates, and polio; and upgrade basic infrastructure for water, telecommunications, energy, and electricity. An additional concern underlying all U.S. activity in Afghanistan is the safety of U.S. troops and civilian personnel. Important policy themes include:

- *Eliminating extremism.* The main reason for entering Afghanistan, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, will remain the main motivation for continuing to engage with Afghanistan as long as there is a possibility of a return of international terrorist groups.
- *Facilitating a peaceful transition.* It is a high near-term priority for the United States to end its long-term engagement in Afghanistan as peacefully as possible, retaining only a minimal military presence to support a democratically elected government and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The diminishing U.S. military presence will be accompanied by a civilian drawdown, although perhaps not as dramatic, with more coordination and oversight therefore likely to come from the United Nations and NATO.
- *Preventing state failure.* U.S. leaders are likely to be concerned about the possible effects of armed violence on the stability of the Afghan state. The United States has worked to build Afghan government capacity, legitimacy, good governance, and democracy and increase its capacity to generate employment, foster economic growth, and generate government revenue. Progress has been significant, but not strategically decisive. Still, the United States would like to prevent those gains from being lost to violence.

U.S. Priorities in South Asia in Regional and Global Context

An analysis of the issues addressed in this chapter suggests three sets of U.S. concerns that are common at the bilateral, South Asia, broad regional, and global levels. Two sets of issues seem to be of primary concern:

- preventing the use, loss of control, and proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons and capabilities
- containing the ability of nonstate armed groups to carry out violent attacks, undermine state institutions, and incite sectarian, interethnic, and interstate conflicts

A third set of issues, related to economic interests, seems to be of secondary concern:

- encouraging economic stability, the growth of markets for U.S. goods and services, and balanced economic power in the Asia-Pacific region

It seems likely that U.S. policy for South Asia over the next 12 years, regardless of which political party is in power, will be centered around these themes. The two security concerns (primary priorities) are likely to take precedence over the economic concerns (a secondary priority). But all three will take precedence over other, “softer” objectives, such as fostering good governance, promoting international norms, and supporting human development. These latter concerns will probably be tertiary priorities, except in cases where they are considered essential to achieving the higher priorities.

We are not arguing that the tertiary priorities will not be pursued: they undoubtedly will be, most already are, and we think they should continue to be pursued. But if tensions rise, violence increases, and conflicts escalate, U.S. leaders could be faced with decisions about which priorities to continue pursuing. We are simply arguing that the trade-offs that would be made in such circumstances will almost certainly favor the security concerns over the economic concerns and the economic concerns over the developmental concerns—except where the lower priorities are seen as useful for preventing escalation or bringing such contingencies under control. The next chapter discusses the regional dynamics affected by such contingencies and what they imply for how the United States can pursue its priorities in response to them.

3 | Contingencies to Avoid

The previous chapter suggested that any significant increase in the lethality or influence of extremist groups in South Asia would be a cause for alarm in the United States, because terrorist attacks are what elevated South Asia's strategic importance to the United States in the first place. Any prospect for the use, proliferation, or loss of responsible control over nuclear weapons would likewise be a high-level concern for the United States. And as a lesser concern, any major economic crisis in India (less so in Pakistan) would be potentially damaging to U.S. economic interests, shift the net balance of economic power in the broader region somewhat in China's favor, and thereby weaken the economic basis of India's rise as a regional power. The previous chapter identified these concerns as primary and secondary priorities, meaning the United States is very likely to continue focusing its policies and resources on dealing with these issues regardless of what contingencies emerge.

This chapter considers several contingencies that would put two or more of the primary and secondary priorities at risk and discusses how different actors in the region would respond to them. Each section addresses the most important internal and regional trends, relationships, complications, and opportunities that might affect the priorities the United States is likely to pursue. Three sets of such contingencies are offered: Pakistan's internal conflicts escalate, India and Pakistan engage in cross-border attacks, and Afghanistan's internal conflicts escalate. The first two are the most important, as they would affect the primary and secondary U.S. priorities more directly than instability in Afghanistan would, given the current trajectory of events.

We are not arguing that any of these contingencies is highly likely, only that over the next 12 years they are not unimaginable. If they were to happen they would attract a great deal of attention by U.S. policymakers and other countries in the region. In each of the three sections below, therefore, we summarize a few different ways the contingencies in question could play out and then discuss how each would probably affect political, economic, or social dynamics in the broader region—dynamics that would partly shape how the United States could respond to them.

Other contingencies are possible, as almost anything can change in 12 years: U.S.-Iranian relations could thaw, Turkish-NATO relations could deteriorate, India or China could collapse economically, Pakistan could stabilize, the nuclear-attack taboo could be breached, or a major-power war could break out in Southeast Asia. Any of those

low-probability scenarios would realign relationships in the broader region and change how any given actor might respond (compared to what is described here).

What is not likely to change, however, is the high priority the United States will place on avoiding the three sets of contingencies discussed below, especially first two (an unstable Pakistan and an Indo-Pak war), with the third (an unstable Afghanistan) being a concern under somewhat more limited circumstances.

Pakistan: Internal Conflicts Escalate

Decades of conflict and instability in Afghanistan have funneled weapons and trained fighters into Pakistan. Wealthy donors from the Gulf states have funded extremist groups and hard-line Islamist schools throughout Pakistan and its Afghan refugee camps. Economic and energy crises have harmed the quality of life for tens of millions of Pakistanis. Religious militants increasingly attack individuals exhibiting moderate, liberal, democratic, or modern values. Politics in some parts of the country are characterized by high levels of violence and coercion, especially in Pakistan's financial capital, Karachi. Persistently poor government service delivery and lack of opportunity have driven many young people to disaffection and some young men to radical groups. For many Pakistanis, ethnic identities compete with a national identity, with different provinces dominated by different ethnic groups and some ethnic groups not so represented. Tensions with India and Afghanistan rise and fall but never go away.

A lot of good things are happening in Pakistan, too, such as the successful democratic succession in 2013. But Pakistan's complex set of problems could interact in unpredictable ways and lead to any number of disturbing scenarios.

On the lower end of the threat spectrum, Pakistan's nonstate armed groups could gain enough strength, recruits, weapons, financing, or territory to pin down Pakistan's military more intensively or in more places than they already do. That would not necessarily lead to a collapse of the Pakistani state, but it would exacerbate just about every other problem Pakistan already faces: economic stagnation, an energy crisis, too few economic opportunities for its large youth population, human rights abuses, sectarian violence, and insufficient civilian control over the military, to name just a few.

On the other extreme is a civil war or insurgency involving multiple sectarian and ethnic groups, a loss of state control over significant territory, a fragmentation of the Pakistani military, and the risk of combatants or extremist groups gaining control over and possibly using CBRN weapons or materials. Separatist movements, such as in Baluchistan, could escalate into violent conflicts and fragment that province socially, which would harm Pakistan's economy and disrupt energy supplies. Insurgent groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) could gain control of some northern territories and drive out government workers from remote outposts. Significant conflicts with multiple nonstate groups would harm Pakistan's economy, especially if large swaths of territory were lost.

In an unlikely (but not impossible) worst-case scenario, an extremist group or rogue faction of the military could obtain access to a nuclear weapon. Nuclear facilities could come under attack by Islamist militants, or Islamist militants, having risen through the ranks of the Pakistani military or intelligence services, could initiate an insider attack or sneak out nuclear material.⁶

These contingencies—and any variants in between—would almost certainly affect Afghanistan and India, not to mention Iran and China, as refugees escape the violence into neighboring countries, a slowdown in cross-border trade harms regional businesses, combatants use neighboring territory for safe haven, and the governments of the affected countries take defensive measures at or across their borders. (The remainder of this section assumes, however, that spillover from the Pakistan contingency is limited to those harms just mentioned. The two subsequent sections address contingencies involving larger conflicts within Afghanistan and between India and Pakistan.)

If Pakistan's internal conflicts escalate, China, which has long been Pakistan's closest international friend (and vice versa), would be most likely to offer help to prevent a collapse or a significant degradation of the Pakistani state. The Chinese military has long been reluctant to send its troops to intervene in foreign internal conflicts, but it almost certainly would provide financial assistance, arms, and other military equipment. On its own side of the border, however, it would take strong action against any increase in extremism resulting from the Pakistan conflicts. Meanwhile, the civilian government in China would probably be forced to slow down or shut down some of its economic projects in Pakistan, if only temporarily.

Iran has cordial relations with Pakistan, but its reaction to significant instability there would probably not be strong. Significant attacks by Pakistani forces against Shi'ite minorities would probably poison the diplomatic relationship and, socially, harm Pakistanis' image among the Iranian people. If the conflict involved a significant escalation of violence by Baluchi separatists, Iran would work to contain any spillover of refugees and combatants across its border into Sistan-Baluchistan Province, which also wants autonomy. The evolution of conflicts and competition in the Levant (Iran's traditional region of concern and activity) would affect its ability and desire to focus on Pakistan beyond containment. If Saudi Arabia were to increase its aid to Pakistan, it is doubtful Iran would want to either turn against Pakistan by aiding any anti-government groups (and fight Saudi Arabia by proxy) or side with Pakistan (and be on the same side of the conflict as Saudi Arabia). If Iran becomes a nuclear power, Saudi-Pakistani security cooperation would almost certainly increase significantly, but that would probably not change the likelihood of Iranian intervention in an internal Pakistani conflict. The same can be said if Iran's regime changes in a more democratic direction.

6. Greg Miller, Craig Whitlock, and Barton Gellman, "Top-secret U.S. intelligence files show new levels of distrust of Pakistan," *Washington Post*, September 2, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-09-02/world/41690725_1_intelligence-u-s-spy-agencies-other-adversaries.

Russia has traditionally been closer to India than to Pakistan, although it has made efforts in recent years to improve relations with both. If Pakistan were to be threatened with collapse, it is not clear that Russia would do much beyond working with major powers diplomatically to help contain the conflicts. The same can be said for Turkey, although it has traditionally been closer to Pakistan than to India; at most Turkey might increase military assistance to Pakistan.

By contrast, European powers and the United States would almost certainly engage in both diplomatic and military efforts to prevent the collapse of the Pakistani state, the growth of extremism, or the loss of control over nuclear weapons. It is doubtful they would deploy large numbers of ground troops. But they certainly would offer financing and military assistance, offer diplomatic approaches to negotiating an end to conflict, and most significantly insert special operations forces to CBRN storage facilities to defend them against loss to nonstate or unauthorized parties.

The set of unstable-Pakistan contingencies is most likely to result from unpredictable interactions within Pakistan between extremist violence, fear of India, and other social and economic ills that threaten social unity. As such, it is potentially avoided by reducing the effectiveness and influence of extremist groups, mitigating social harms from macro-level crises (economy, energy, jobs, water, and so on), easing fears of an Indian military incursion across the border, and possibly countering ethnic and sectarian tensions with a narrative of national unity.

Normalized and growing Indo-Pak trade relations could offer further reassurance that India would consider a war with Pakistan to be against its economic interests. The United States and Russia have every reason to encourage such a shift in India's military posture, as it would also help balance China in the broader region. (China's foreign policy places a high priority on restraining India's rise in turn, but it also prioritizes preventing Pakistan's fall.) With less fear of an attack from India, Pakistan's military establishment could focus more of its attention on countering extremists that threaten the Pakistani state and would have less reason to support anti-India extremists. But finding a way to reassure Pakistan that India is not a threat will take significant, sustained confidence-building measures, combined with more economic integration (to give stability more of a constituency) and efforts to convince Pakistanis that their most important security threats come from within.

The United States will certainly continue to encourage and enable efforts against extremists in Pakistan, unless the U.S.-Pakistan relationship deteriorates beyond anything it has experienced in the past. U.S. development assistance might be spread too thinly to contribute to significant progress against Pakistan's multiple crises; a more intensive focus on private-sector job creation or on helping resolve its energy crisis might make a more significant contribution, although other international actors such as the World Bank or Asian Development Bank might be better placed. The United States will have no role to play in encouraging national unity in Pakistan under any conceivable circumstances.

In the end, these are Pakistani issues that are resolved mainly by Pakistanis. Continued improvements in democratic governance and civilian institutions, especially if led by political moderates, combined with a corresponding decline in the military's dominance over policymaking, a marginalization of hard-liners more broadly, and a change in mindset among Pakistan's economic elites toward a more inclusive economic order would all contribute significantly to an easing of the risks of significant instability in Pakistan.

India-Pakistan: Cross-Border Conflicts Escalate

India and Pakistan have fought multiple wars since their independence from Britain in 1947 and border disputes flare up from time to time even as diplomatic relations alternately warm and cool. Both countries have had nuclear weapons for more than a decade. India has been improving its conventional military capabilities, and in response Pakistan has been increasing its production of nuclear weapons, including those it considers tactical—triggering concerns that Pakistan's military establishment might at some point consider their use against an Indian conventional attack to be feasible. The 2008 attacks by Pakistani extremists against targets in Mumbai also increased concerns about the potential for future violence by nonstate groups, including some acting as state proxies. Both countries have hard-liners, and depending on the outcomes of future elections, a situation could emerge in which hard-line factions are in positions of influence in both countries, resulting in a heightened potential for conflict.

Three sets of possibilities for cross-border violence exist. In descending order of probability, they include cross-border attacks by nonstate armed groups (whether state-sponsored or not), conventional military engagements (escalating beyond the more common border skirmishes), or a conflict of any sort that resulted in the use of one or more nuclear weapons by a nonstate armed group, by a rogue military unit, or under orders from the military command (due to miscommunication or perceived threat).

It is likely that Pakistan and India would work at all costs to avoid an escalation of border tensions beyond the current level. Pakistan's armed forces are already overstretched with insurgencies that threaten Pakistani civilian and military institutions, Pakistan would be hard-pressed to win a conventional war against India in any case. Indian leaders are aware that many of its own Muslim citizens would have mixed feelings about a war with Pakistan; some elements among Indian Muslim communities are already radicalizing, and a war against a Muslim state would risk increasing India's own internal tensions and a possible rise in domestic terrorism. The economies of both countries would be damaged by a large-scale or extended conflict. And even though India would probably win a conventional war with Pakistan, such a conflict would cause price shocks, currency fluctuations, and stock market losses, all of which Indian leaders and businesses would clearly prefer to avoid.

Both the United States and China have mediated disputes between India and Pakistan in the past and would have every reason to play similar roles in any future dispute, as would Russia and the United Kingdom. Their top priority would be to prevent the conflict's

escalation to nuclear war, however minimal that risk might be. China would use its relationship with Pakistan's military to discourage the use of tactical nuclear weapons in response to India's conventional dominance, while Russia and the United States would strongly encourage restraint by India. None of them, however, is likely to intervene militarily in a war between Pakistan and India. The only exception would be if a multilateral force were established to keep peace; in that case, they would provide diplomatic support, funding, and possibly some troops.

How or whether China would provide unilateral material support to Pakistan would depend not only on the state of its own domestic stability at the time but also on how it views culpability for the conflict. If the conflict began with a Pakistani incursion across the border or by a Pakistani terrorist group attacking Indian targets, China would probably exert strong but quiet pressure on the Pakistani military to stand down or reign in the extremist groups. Otherwise it would not do much to protect Pakistan (except perhaps diplomatically) unless it considered India's response to be excessive. If it thought India started the conflict (or its response excessive), China would stand up for Pakistan diplomatically in international fora and provide financial backing and possibly military equipment and arms to bolster Pakistan's conventional defense so it would not need to resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. But that would be a last-resort effort, undertaken only as part of a broader effort to mediate and ease tensions. China wants to prevent a war between India and Pakistan and has no desire to itself get involved in a war against India.

With an Indo-Pak war, the Gulf states would be caught between competing priorities: old allegiances (with Pakistan) or new and profitable economic ties (with India). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar would probably do little to respond to a conflict. Saudi Arabia would try to insulate itself from any fallout (for example, the reactions of its Indian and Pakistani migrant workers), but given its long-standing relationship with Pakistan it would probably engage in quiet diplomacy to try to moderate the violence. Pakistan would probably want Saudi financing to conduct any large-scale war with India, but many Saudis would be reluctant to jeopardize their strong economic relationship with India by doing so. If the Gulf states' own internal economies were suffering (due, for example, to a decline in global oil prices), they probably would work diplomatically to ease tensions and protect their economic interests in the region to the degree they could do so, and make public statements of support, but would otherwise stay out.

Almost regardless of how Iran's government evolves over the next 12 years, it would be very unlikely to see any benefit to getting involved in a war between India and Pakistan.

Central Asia could do little to help either way, but it would suffer politically and diplomatically from a major war in South Asia. Central Asia is already a low priority to most international actors, and a war in the more strategically significant South Asia would simply draw diplomatic and economic attention even farther away from Central Asia.

Turkey's public would respond to significant conflict between India and Pakistan by pressuring their government to support Pakistan. Turkish leaders, however, are not likely

to take any material action to do so, preferring instead to work via international fora to encourage a peaceful resolution. It is possible that if hard-line Islamic political leaders were to gain influence in Turkey, the temptation to provide more material support might exist, but this seems a low probability. A more concrete Turkish response could follow if an Indo-Pak war escalated to a nuclear attack: nuclear fears could lead the Turkish public to pressure the government to develop its own nuclear weapons capability (despite being protected under NATO's nuclear umbrella), but whether that pressure worked would depend on the state of Turkish relations with its NATO allies and on where Iran stands in its own nuclear development.

As in the unstable-Pakistan contingency, no actor in the region or any other stakeholder has any interest in a war or other significant cross-border violence between India and Pakistan. Therefore, most countries have good reason to help prevent it, including the two countries themselves.

Many of the preventive measures discussed in the previous section (regarding Pakistan's internal conflicts) might contribute to preventing this contingency as well. That is because some potential paths to an Indo-Pak conflict contingency go through an unstable-Pakistan contingency. For example, many Pakistanis already believe India is fomenting Baluchi extremism; whether true or not, a Baluchi insurgency could therefore lead Pakistan's military to take a hard line against India in a way that escalates tensions and results in violence. In another potential path, a significant increase in extremist violence in Pakistan overall could draw so much of the military and intelligence services' attention away from managing their contacts among anti-India extremists that the latter might feel less restrained from staging major assaults in Indian territory.

Other paths to an Indo-Pak war over the next 12 years generally involve border tensions combined with miscommunication or panic—especially likely if future Indian governments or the Pakistani military command come to be dominated by hard-liners. As India builds its conventional military capabilities—with arms and equipment purchases from the United States and Russia—Pakistan has been responding by building its nuclear capabilities with weapons that it considers to be tactical (to be used to defend against attack) as opposed to strategic (to be used mainly for deterrence), with support from China. Because India has never lost a war against Pakistan, it is clear India's buildup is intended to enable it to defend its interests in East Asia against encroachments from China. So far, Pakistan is not convinced that India's growing conventional power, even if focused eastward, is not a westward threat as well. There are no clear paths to convincing Pakistan otherwise, but finding a way to do so would go a long way toward reducing the chances of a conflict emerging from this security dilemma (i.e., India's need to balance China without seeming to threaten Pakistan).

As noted earlier, economic ties seem to be the main moderating factor in relations among all of these countries—India, Pakistan, China, Russia, and the United States, not to mention the United Kingdom, other European powers, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. An

Indo-Pak war would be so economically disruptive that the governments and business leaders of all of these countries would have every reason to try to prevent it. Stronger economic ties between India and Pakistan and between these other countries and Pakistan would offer an additional cushion against the impact that increased tensions would have on the likelihood of conflict.

The greatest danger, even if it is the lowest probability, would be a nuclear attack, whether by the Pakistani military in response to an Indian conventional attack, by an extremist group that managed to steal a low-yield weapon from a relatively insecure site, or by a rogue unit of the Pakistani military amid a broader fragmentation of that country. Preventing these versions of this contingency is partly a matter of physically securing Pakistan's weapons, and partly a matter of influencing Pakistani military doctrine for the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The United States is reasonably well positioned to help on both fronts as part of its broader security cooperation with Pakistan, but China would be in an even better position to do so.

Afghanistan: Internal Conflicts Escalate

Distasteful as it is to say after 12 years of war in Afghanistan, there are only two plausible reasons the United States would concern itself with an escalation of that conflict after withdrawing its troops at the end of 2014: if the conflict evolves in a way that seriously risks the return of a regime offering safe haven to al Qaeda or other terrorists, or if a return to chaos could reasonably be blamed on American abandonment rather than on bad decisions by local actors. The United States did little in response to Afghanistan's civil war during most the 1990s, and most Americans paid little attention until al Qaeda carried out attacks against U.S. targets, culminating in the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Even then, it was not the civil war but the exploitation of the regime's hospitality that led to those attacks. The United States is not likely to make the same mistakes there again: it would not fail to act against terrorist havens in Afghanistan like it did in the 1990s, but neither would it occupy the country with a massive troop presence like it did in the 2000s. At most, in response to any major escalation of the Afghan conflict, the United States would use special operations forces to protect narrowly defined interests and offer humanitarian aid to mitigate its worst consequences. Beyond that, the only likely alternative would be support for a United Nations (UN) mission to support peace.

It is not inevitable that Afghanistan's conflict will worsen after U.S. troops depart. The presence of foreign troops has been a recruiting tool for the Taliban and other insurgent factions. Insurgents might therefore find it difficult to change their narrative of foreign occupation as the justification for fighting, and they might lose whatever support for them remains if they are seen as targeting fellow Muslims instead of foreigners. If their capacity for violence thereby diminishes, the power brokers who once were warlords or mujahideen but today are government officials or businessmen might no longer feel the need to reconstitute their militias to protect themselves from insurgents once foreign troops leave. That would reduce the risk of warlord violence, which dominated the early 1990s and

remains a concern after 2014. It would further reduce the risk of a return of warlord violence if the election in 2014 is reasonably free and fair and manages to bring a broad coalition of such influential Afghans into the new government.

Under these best-case circumstances—an admittedly low probability—violence could stay at or below today’s level, further territory might not be lost, and the country might not experience a major fragmentation or existential threat to its state institutions.

At the very least, it is possible a semblance of stability could prevail for at least a couple of years after most international troops depart, just as the Soviet-supported Afghan government survived on Soviet financial and technical support for several years after Soviet troops departed two decades ago. To improve the odds of that happening beyond 2014, the United States, European powers, and most of Afghanistan’s neighbors will probably remain engaged in Afghanistan’s reconstruction to try to make as much progress as possible before violence breaks out.

The United States and its NATO allies could continue to build the capacity of state institutions, especially the security forces, and continue to provide development and humanitarian assistance, although likely at lower levels. India could continue to engage diplomatically and economically (but probably will covertly support Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara power brokers as a hedge against the support Pakistan would presumably continue providing to Pashtun power brokers and the Taliban).

To reduce the Indian-Pakistani tensions that drive much of the disorder in Afghanistan, U.S. and NATO assistance could target mutually beneficial projects such as the proposed natural gas pipeline running from Turkmenistan to India or other economic ventures that benefit both India and Pakistan. If conflict does not escalate immediately, China could likewise continue to build its economic relationships with Afghans (including infrastructure and mining projects) and normalize its political relations with the government; it is likely to maintain informal relations with Afghanistan’s power brokers as well to ensure its economic and security interests remain protected. Turkey likewise could continue economic support and diplomatic and cultural engagement.

Unfortunately, stability is not the most likely development in Afghanistan. Many of Afghanistan’s power brokers and former warlords are already rearming and beginning to reconstitute their militias as a hedge against future instability. There is a strong chance, therefore, that the Afghan conflict could escalate significantly, as different factions tried to gain monopoly control over different territories throughout the country: Uzbeks and Tajiks in the north, different Pashtun factions (including the Taliban) in the south and east, Hazara in central Afghanistan, and others in different parts of the country, alternately allying with and fighting against each other, and most seeking external support covertly from Pakistanis, Indians, Saudis, Iranians, and others.

This contingency is especially likely if the April 2014 elections and subsequent presidential appointments do not succeed in coopting (or definitively marginalizing) the power

brokers who are potential spoilers to peace, and if too few U.S., NATO, and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops remain at the end of 2014 to adequately train (or support) Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to maintain peace. The ANSF are better trained and equipped than any Afghan militia of the 1990s was, but there is some risk the ANSF could fragment along ethnic and tribal lines if significant social violence breaks out.

Afghanistan's neighbors would suffer the consequences of a major escalation of Afghanistan's internal conflict. All neighboring countries are concerned about refugee flows. All are concerned about incursions by combatants across their borders to stage attacks, recruit fighters, or form alliances with local extremist groups. All are concerned about the safety of their nationals working in Afghanistan (diplomats, development officials, trainers, advisers, and so on). And all are concerned about the security of any economic projects that they are sponsoring or would benefit from. Some are concerned about the safety of Afghans who share their ethnic identity. And Pakistan and India are concerned about having influence with the central government in Kabul and, in Pakistan's case, with the governors and power brokers in the provinces along its border.

In the event of conflict escalation in Afghanistan, China would be in direct contact with the Afghan government, the power brokers it has a relationship with, and with Pakistani civilian and (especially) military leaders to strongly encourage a political settlement. It would put its economic projects on hold temporarily. But it would not become involved militarily; instead, it would try to contain the fallout with, for example, stronger border security.

Iran would certainly take similar measures to contain spillover from an escalated Afghan conflict, but otherwise its involvement would depend almost entirely on the state of its conflicts and rivalries in the Levant and the Gulf, much higher-priority areas than Afghanistan. If things settle down to its west and south, Iran might turn some attention eastward to Afghanistan's conflict. This would not be in the form of direct military incursions but rather of funding, military equipment, and possibly safe haven to Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek groups, as it has in the past, with a particular priority on protecting Afghanistan's Shi'ite minority.

Saudi Arabia, working with Pakistan, would probably offer support to groups that oppose Iranian-support groups. Qatar might follow Saudi Arabia's lead or it might offer to mediate talks between opposing groups, as it has recently. Beyond that, Qatar and UAE would probably stay out.

Russia would probably increase its security presence in Central Asia, as noted above, but work diplomatically with the United States, European powers, or NATO to find ways to contain the spread of violence from Afghanistan into Central Asia.

The most beneficial potential response would be cooperation among China, India, Iran, Russia, and the United States to find a diplomatic solution, with China and possibly Iran putting pressure on Pakistan to encourage its proxies to engage in political talks and the

rest encouraging their contacts to do the same. Given the rivalries within that grouping (China-Russia, U.S.-Iran, etc.), such cooperation would be a tall order.

Most major economic projects that are ongoing or envisioned in Afghanistan or that would connect Afghanistan to its neighbors would probably benefit the Afghan economy as well the economies of most of its neighbors. Unfortunately, the economic benefits to non-Afghans generally fall in the category of helpful but not essential. An economically stable Afghanistan is generally treated more as a preference than an interest by most countries in the region and other stakeholders. They would like to help Afghans and to benefit from their economic development. But if they cannot, due to a major conflict, they will simply turn their economic attention elsewhere. If the conflict escalates and those projects are canceled or postponed, non-Afghan economies would not suffer tremendously, if at all—they merely would not benefit.

To change these economic calculations, there would need to be enough years of stability—most of the next 12 years—to enable major regional infrastructure projects to be completed and start providing actual economic benefits to countries in the region. If that happens, there would be a stronger economic incentive by Afghanistan's neighbors to maintain peace or take forceful action to reverse any escalation of the conflict. Just about everyone in the region hopes Afghanistan will muddle through long enough for this to happen, but most fear it will not.

4 | Dynamics to Engage

The second chapter identified a few sets of concerns that the United States is likely to continue having in South Asia over the next 12 years and divided them into a rough order of precedence. The primary priorities have to do with extremists and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) materials (mostly nuclear weapons); the secondary priority focuses on economic issues; and the tertiary priorities deal with governance, norms, and development.

The third chapter reviewed several contingencies that would affect one or more of these priorities. A number of key dynamics that the United States will need to address within South Asia were discussed in that chapter. In addition, here we review the most important trends, relationships, constraints, opportunities, and other dynamics the United States faces in its relationships with the countries around South Asia and other key international stakeholders: China, Iran, Gulf states, Central Asia, Russia, Turkey, and Europe. (For extended discussions of each, including their key relationships, trends, and likely responses to important contingencies, see the background papers at <http://c3.csis.org>.)

China

In many ways, the top global priority of the United States is to avoid a war with China or, in less dramatic terms, to respond to China's rise in a way that facilitates its integration into the international system without threatening U.S. interests or values.

This priority has two dimensions: economic and military. China's economic growth over the past three decades has provided significant competition to the United States and has decreased U.S. market share in a number of sectors. This has been accompanied by a significant increase in its military spending and, most recently, assertive territorial claims against several countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia, including some treaty allies of the United States. China is less militarily aggressive in other regions and is an important economic partner to the United States in many respects. China owns over \$1 trillion of U.S. sovereign debt, and gross domestic product (GDP) growth for both countries is mutually dependent.⁷

7. "Major Foreign Holders of Treasury Securities," U.S. Department of the Treasury / Federal Reserve Board, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/data-chart-center/tic/Documents/mfh.txt>.

As Andrew Small writes in his background paper on China, “The two sides are deeply embedded in a global economic order that requires the free movement of commerce and capital, providing a significant shared interest in the fundamental stability of the international system, from energy supplies to global finance. However, translating these higher-order interests into practical cooperation has proved difficult, given the other ideological and strategic differences between the two sides.”⁸ U.S. policy priorities over the next 12 years will certainly include balancing mutual economic dependence with military competition.

The United States also competes with China (and Russia) in the civilian nuclear power market. The United States is the largest provider of civilian nuclear power capabilities (currently helping India with its program, for example) and therefore has an economic interest in preventing Russia and China from taking U.S. market share.

China and Pakistan have a close relationship and China has significantly more credibility and influence with Pakistan’s military and civilian officials than the United States does. Pakistan’s civilian nuclear program receives support from China, just as India’s receives support from the United States.

China and India have an economic relationship that is a mix of cooperation and competition (like both have with the United States), but China benefits greatly from that relationship. Both countries are also rising military powers, although China began its military buildup several decades ago. To catch up, India has started building its conventional military capabilities, including naval forces to protect its interests in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, where China has been increasingly assertive.

Iran

Iran’s relationships with India and Pakistan generally center on energy and trade interdependence, with some concerns on Iran’s part to prevent refugees from Afghanistan and refugees and Baluchi separatist fighters from Pakistan crossing its border.

The most pressing U.S. policy priority in the Middle East is preventing Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon capability. The United States and the European Union have imposed increasingly harsh sanctions aimed at getting Iran to agree to cease or limit its enrichment of uranium and permit international monitoring of its nuclear development program. The United States will continue to oppose Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon capability, because it fears nuclear strikes against U.S. and Israeli targets, accidental detonation, and an arms race in which Saudi Arabia (probably with Pakistan’s support) and possibly Turkey would seek nuclear weapons capabilities as well.

While it is clearly a high priority for U.S. leaders to prevent Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon capability, the United States did nevertheless cooperate with Iran

8. See China background paper at <http://c3.csis.org>.

to remove the Taliban and establish a transitional Afghan government during the first several years of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. (In fact, cooperation in Afghanistan served as a precedent to the secret U.S.-Iranian talks that led to a six-month agreement in late 2013 in which Iran would suspend parts of its nuclear program in exchange for short-term sanction relief.) Iran's involvement in Afghanistan over the past decade has generally been constructive (although it has supported violent factions) and, given its reasonably good relations with both Pakistan and India, it could play a constructive role there as well. But until Iran gives up its nuclear efforts, the U.S.-Iran relationship will stand in the way of allowing Iran to play any such role in South Asia.

More broadly, Iran's foreign policy has long been adversarial to U.S. interests world-wide (and vice versa). An escalation of tensions with the Gulf states could threaten trade routes for oil exports if Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's tactical support for Hezbollah, other illicit groups, and the Syrian regime has directly harmed Americans and partners in the Levant and broader Middle East.

The election of Hassan Rouhani, the most moderate of Iran's presidential candidates in 2013, and his active efforts to soften Iran's rhetoric and image internationally opened up space for the United States to engage with Iran on a broad range of issues. It is not yet clear that the short-term agreement that resulted from this hopeful opening will produce lasting changes in the difficult U.S.-Iranian relationship.

Gulf States

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and other Gulf states are strategically important players in the global oil market, and any disruptions there would harm the global economy. It is widely expected that the development of unconventional oil and gas (e.g., fracking) and other energy alternatives will decrease U.S. dependence on oil from the Gulf. But the region still supplies enough oil to the global market that it will continue to be a U.S. priority to ensure its distribution for years to come.

The Gulf states are, in general, partners with the United States on a range of issues. They hold a significant amount of U.S. sovereign debt, the United States has military bases in the region, and there is a shared concern over religious militancy (even though some wealthy independent donors in the Gulf region support some anti-American terrorist groups).

There have been disagreements surrounding the uprisings in the Arab world, which have affected each country in a different way. The United States remains concerned that popular discontent over poor economic prospects and authoritarian governance, especially among large youth populations, could lead to further disturbances if the regimes do not address grievances or if potential succession crises are not resolved peacefully.

All of the Gulf countries are concerned, as the United States is, that if Iran succeeds in developing or acquiring a nuclear weapon capability it would disrupt the balance of military

power in the region and encourage Saudi Arabia, Iran's main regional competitor, to seek a nuclear weapon or other nuclear deterrent as well. But the Gulf states are also concerned about the United States' recent willingness to engage in talks with Iran over the issue.

Most Gulf states have good relations with Pakistan, based on a shared religious identity, and good economic and energy relations. They also have significant populations of migrant workers from both Pakistan and India, and have to varying degrees contributed to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Central Asia

At the moment, the main priority in Central Asia for the United States is maintaining access to the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which is needed to get equipment into and, increasingly, out of Afghanistan. It is not clear that U.S. leaders will continue to prioritize development of the NDN once most U.S. troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan. It will probably keep supporting the project at some level under the logic that improving economic integration would provide an incentive for cooperation and be a basis for stability. The United States has military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan that it is likely to want to maintain, if only to keep an eye on extremist groups and on Russian and Chinese competition for influence in the region.

Central Asian states are the only ones that would potentially suffer from a stable Afghanistan. Whatever cooperation they engage in now—as a result of international pressure to contribute to South Asia's stability—could weaken if the international community, relieved at the relative stability in Afghanistan, turns its attention away from South Asia and Central Asia. While it is possible the Central Asian states would find ways to continue cooperating over trade infrastructure and economic integration, it is at least equally likely that, with international attention waning, competitive pressures between and among those states would return over issues such as water, energy, and security. Furthermore, if Afghanistan more or less stabilizes and any of the Central Asian states destabilize (for example, as a result of a succession crisis), it is likely that Central Asian terrorist groups that had been hiding in Pakistan or fighting in Syria would return to Central Asia and give Russia a reason to maintain a strong security presence there. A significant escalation of Afghanistan's conflict would, however, be even worse for Central Asia, as refugees and combatants would spill over Afghanistan's northern borders, put even greater pressures on already weak systems, strengthen domestic hard-liners emphasizing security over reform, attract a stronger Russian security presence, and in general reduce the chances of needed reforms taking place.

Russia

The United States and Russia have a complicated relationship. As a nuclear power with a seat on the UN Security Council, Russia often plays the role of spoiler to U.S. ambitions in

the world. Russia is also an important player in global energy markets, in particular as a key exporter of oil and natural gas to Europe. It has demonstrated a willingness to cut off access to its resources to coerce trading partners on matters of foreign policy. At times, the United States and Russia find common ground, as in Syria's agreement to declare its chemical weapons and allow them to be destroyed.

Russia and China cooperate economically and are the two main drivers behind the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia considers India to be its most important strategic partner, encouraging its rise as a regional military power and global diplomatic power. It has recently made overtures to Pakistan as well. China considers Pakistan its closest friend in the world but is now also India's largest trading partner.

Turkey

While the U.S.-Turkey relationship has been generally good since their serious disagreement over the Iraq War in 2003, recently U.S and Turkish priorities in the region have begun to diverge. Turkey has hosted important international talks about Afghanistan's future and is a troop-contributing member of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (and the only Muslim member of the NATO alliance). Maintaining Turkey's close ties to the West through NATO and improving relations through policy coordination are likely to be U.S. priorities over the next 12 years.

Although the United States would like to see Turkey use its influence to play a moderating role in the Middle East, Turkey's ability and willingness to do so has been limited. Turkey's relationship with Pakistan has important historical and cultural roots, and their military and economic relationships are relatively strong. The Turkish-Indian relationship is based almost entirely around strong trade relations.

Europe

The U.S. priority for Europe and its NATO allies globally is to ensure that Europe remains an active and engaged diplomatic, economic, and security partner despite growing domestic fatigue over Europe's decade-long military deployments to Afghanistan, its ongoing economic crisis, and recent National Security Agency revelations. While Europe and the United States have been and will remain strong allies, the relationship has become strained and somewhat unpredictable as Europe's assumed positive response to U.S. policy action can no longer be taken for granted. Nevertheless, in South Asia, the United States can generally expect a reasonable degree of European cooperation (but not leadership) on most issues of concern, including those issues incorporated into the overall strategic framework presented in this report and summarized in the first chapter.

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