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55. Policy toward India and Pakistan

The U.S. government should

- focus on democratic India as a leading diplomatic and economic partner of the United States in South Asia and as a strategic counterbalance to China,
- reassess economic and military ties with Pakistan as part of a policy of U.S. “constructive disengagement” from that unstable military dictatorship,
- reject plans to establish a long-term military presence in Pakistan,
- treat India as a central player in the U.S.-led campaign against terrorism and the radical Islamic forces in South Asia,
- refrain from pressing India not to use its military force against terrorism emanating from Pakistan, and
- resist calls for an activist U.S. diplomatic role in mediating the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

The easing in June 2002 of the tensions between India and Pakistan, South Asia’s two nuclear-armed countries, was portrayed as a major success for U.S. diplomacy. According to the State Department’s spin, Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage helped to prevent an Indo-Pakistani war, including the possible use of nuclear arms, after winning a pledge from President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan to halt terrorism in the disputed state of Kashmir. In response, New Delhi permitted Pakistani commercial aircraft to again use Indian airspace and withdrew its naval forces from the Arabian Sea.

Building on this modest reduction in regional tension, Secretary of State Colin Powell visited South Asia in July 2002 and described both governments as America’s “allies” in the war on terrorism, projecting an even-handed U.S. diplomatic approach. Yet other statements by Powell

seemed to reflect a vague diplomatic tilt toward Pakistan. He accepted the Pakistani position that the infiltration of Muslim terrorists from Pakistan into Indian-controlled Kashmir had declined, despite the skepticism expressed by Indian officials. Moreover, by proposing to place the issue of Kashmir on “the international agenda,” Powell was siding with Pakistan, which wants Washington to play a more active role in future negotiations aimed at resolving that dispute. India has supported the idea of bilateral Indo-Pakistani talks about Kashmir but refuses to hold them until there is clear evidence that Islamabad has put an end to its sponsorship of terrorism in Kashmir.

It’s not surprising, therefore, that New Delhi regards the American view articulated by Powell as running contrary to India’s national interests as well as reflecting a distorted analysis of the current Indo-Pakistani tensions and the balance of power in South Asia. What the Bush administration has done through its attempt at mediation has been to help a weak Pakistan to strengthen its diplomatic hand in the confrontation with a more militarily powerful India. Musharraf, like Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis with the United States, recognized that the conventional and nuclear military balance of power favored the other side. And, like Khrushchev, he had no choice but to submit to the ultimatum imposed on him and bring an end to the terrorist infiltration into Indian-held Kashmir (in the same way that Khrushchev had to withdraw the nuclear missiles from Cuba).

The Bush administration’s diplomacy involved more than just helping Musharraf save face. It helped reduce the pressure on the Pakistani leader by hailing his public commitments to prevent terrorists from slipping into India. But Musharraf’s anti-terrorist measures proved to be temporary, enabling him to preserve U.S. support without actually ending the backing for Muslim militants in Kashmir. Pakistan continues to tolerate the presence of terrorist camps on its side of the line of control in Kashmir, allowing the anti-Indian militant groups to maintain their communication networks and logistical backup in Pakistan. And while the infiltration of terrorists did slow initially after Musharraf’s pledges were given to Washington, it has resumed at a level almost as high as before June 2002.

Equally important, the Indians resent what they consider the double standard that Washington applies in its war on terrorism in South Asia and the Middle East. India’s position on talks with Pakistan has not been very different from that of the Israeli government, which has refused to restart negotiations with the Palestinian Authority until the latter takes

concrete steps to end terrorism. The Bush administration has regarded Israel as a partner in the war on terrorism, accused the PA of supporting anti-Israeli terrorism, and refrained from treating those two entities even-handedly. Indeed, unlike in the case of India and Pakistan, Washington has not only expressed total support for Israel's preconditions for talks with the PA but has also called for the removal from power of PA president Yasser Arafat. President Bush, who has refused to meet with Arafat, has also linked any U.S. support for the Palestinians to their adoption of an ambitious agenda of political and economic reform. But Musharraf, a dictator whose military coup brought an end to Pakistan's democratic political system and whose main base of power is the political axis between Pakistan's leading anti-democratic forces (the military and the religious establishments), was invited to the White House and was showered with military and economic assistance. Indian leaders have noticed that inconsistency.

Pakistan under Musharraf has had even more ties with terrorism and anti-American groups and policies than the PA has had under Arafat. In fact, when President Bush declared that the next phase of the anti-terrorism campaign would be aimed at pressing the members of the so-called axis of evil not to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and stressed that the war against terrorism would be grounded in a set of universal values, including the rule of law, religious freedom, and respect for women, he could legitimately have included Pakistan in that axis. After all, Pakistan's leaders have maintained close ties to radical Muslim terrorist groups and have pursued successful efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD). And they have either supported or tolerated policies with clear anti-Western and pro-militant Islamic orientations that are the antithesis of the universal values that the Bush administration is supposedly promoting.

Instead of being placed on President Bush's list of "evil" states, or at least being condemned and isolated diplomatically like Arafat's PA, Musharraf's Pakistan is now topping America's "A List" of the anti-terrorism coalition. Ironically, the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington and the ensuing U.S.-led war on terrorism have given Musharraf an opportunity to improve the relationship between Washington and Islamabad. That relationship had experienced a steep decline in the 1990s, as the end of both the Cold War and the common struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan eroded the perception of shared strategic interests.

But since September 11, General Musharraf, whose regime had been the main source of diplomatic and military support for the terrorist Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan, has portrayed his regime as an ally of Washington in its counterterrorism campaign. Despite his record—heading a military clique that assisted radical Islamic terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Kashmir, pressing for a war with India, advancing Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program, presiding over a corrupt and mismanaged economy—Musharraf is being hailed by the Bush administration as a “courageous” and “visionary” leader who is ready to reorient his country toward a pro-American position and adopt major political and economic reforms. In exchange for his belated support, Musharraf has been rewarded with U.S. diplomatic backing and substantial economic aid.

There is no doubt that Musharraf’s decision to join the U.S. war on terrorism did not reflect a structural transformation in Pakistan’s policy. It was a result of tactical considerations aimed at limiting the losses that Islamabad would suffer because of the collapse of the friendly Taliban regime in Kabul. Rejecting cooperation with Washington would have provoked American wrath and placed at risk Pakistan’s strategic and economic interests in South Asia. But while some cooperation between the United States and Pakistan is necessary to wage the war against terrorism, it must not evolve into a new long-term strategic alliance. Washington should view Pakistan, with its dictatorship, failed economy, and insecure nuclear arsenal, as a reluctant supporter of U.S. goals at best and as a potential long-term problem at worst. If anything, the Bush administration’s concern with nuclear proliferation and with the possible transfer of WMD to terrorist groups should make Pakistan—a nuclear military power whose military leaders and scientists are committed to the notion of an “Islamic Bomb” and have maintained ties to the international network of radical Islamic groups, including al-Qaeda—a focus of U.S. anti-proliferation and anti-terrorism policies.

Indeed, changing international realities and developments in Asia provide the Bush administration and Congress with an opportunity to consider “constructive disengagement” from Pakistan. That nation has little strategic value to Washington over the long term. Indeed, it is likely to become more of a burden than an asset as far as long-term U.S. interests and values are concerned. Hence, U.S. policymakers and lawmakers should reject the idea of establishing permanent military bases in the hostile political environment of Pakistan. They should also recognize that any effort to prop up the Pakistani military involves long-term risks, including

the possibility that the powerful military machine of Pakistan will fall one day into the hands of a radical Islamic regime.

Conversely, Washington should recognize that Westernized and secular India is a more reliable and important partner than Pakistan in the war on terrorism. Moreover, India, some seven times more populous than Pakistan, should be the focus of U.S. strategic and economic interests in South Asia. Such a policy would reflect genuine American national interests at the end of the Cold War and in the aftermath of September 11. The United States has a clear interest in establishing strong ties with India, one of the rising political, economic, and military powers in Asia and a potential strategic counterbalance to an increasingly assertive and difficult China. India is also the world's largest democracy as well as an important emerging economy and an expanding market for U.S. goods and investment.

The strengthening of U.S. ties with India should not, however, be construed as unconditional support for India's position on Kashmir in a way that could increase the power of the more hawkish nationalist forces in New Delhi. Washington should remain committed to a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Kashmir dispute leading (it is to be hoped) to an outcome that will give that province more political autonomy. But the United States should not get directly involved in trying to mediate that conflict and should recognize that American interests would be preserved if the resolution of the conflict reflected the balance of power in the region—which clearly favors India. On the other hand, a solution that tilts in the direction of the radical Muslim terrorists in Kashmir would amount to a defeat of the U.S. goals in the war on terrorism. Hence, pressing the Indians not to respond to terrorist acts directed from Pakistan and resisting calls by Indian leaders for the United States to condemn anti-Indian terrorism in Kashmir project more than morally dubious double standards. Such a policy runs contrary to U.S. national interests.

Suggested Readings

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