

Challenges in South Asia: Security and Conflict Issues

Dr. Stephen P. Cohen
Senior Fellow
Brookings Institution

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Let me propose two different gateways to an understanding South Asian security issues.

The first is that we risk confusion on both the analytical and the policy side by the ways in which we “look” at a region, such as South Asia. Different academic disciplines have different concepts as to whether India and Pakistan are ‘South” Asia, Southern Asia, or part of the Indian subcontinent. This is also true of the policy process. Within the US government I know of five or six different ways of slicing up what we usually call South Asia; this presents an obvious problem for policy coordination.

These necessary but artificial divisions make it easy to create a logical error: if a state is important in one respect (culture, economy, political system), then it is important in all respects (strategic importance, for example).

Scholars are particularly susceptible to this process: those who study India tend to see the rest of the region and the world through Indian eyes. Those whose original country of expertise was Pakistan or Sri Lanka have another judgments of the region’s natural order: they acquire what I call carbon copy images of the region.

This is a terrific asset: it is very hard to see the world through the eyes and the mind of another culture or state or society, it is a talent that Fulbright-Hays and other programs strengthen, but of course it can distort judgment.

My second conceptual point is that with the end of the Cold War we more clearly see some long-term trends. Globalization did not come to South Asia yesterday, but three inventions accelerated the process. They were the transistor, the wide-bodied jet, and the roll-on-roll-off container ship. These made it possible to move ideas, people, and goods around the world at a speed and cost that is truly revolutionary.

This is not new, it is just more. As Thoreau wrote, Walden Pond ice could be sold to the British Indian clubs in Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, mixing with the holy waters of the Ganges; this was possible because a new technology allowed more ice to be packed and preserved in sailing vessels.

In recent years American interests have been affected by the way globalization has impacted on South Asian states. The processes of state and nation building have been affected by the new globalization. India has taken advantage of some aspects of globalization, becoming a software superpower, a cultural superpower, a potential manufacturing center, and Indian-Americans have become a factor in American society. This is all to the good, and is very promising. However, globalization had a corrosive effect on at least three South Asian states, the three least adaptable ones: Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Nepal is barely a state, Pakistan is being swamped by very destructive radical global Islamist ideas, which in turn (along with nuclear technology) have been exported in all directions. The relations among South Asian states have always been about overlapping ethnic and linguistic groups, they are increasingly about cross-border ideological wars.

So, in shaping a new policy towards South Asia the traditional concept of working with the strongest and most coherent state as part of a global balance of power no longer applies. States are important now because they are failing under the onslaught of globalization, as well as because they take advantage of globalization. American policy in South Asia is compelled to first deal with state failure, not state success—and Pakistan's comprehensive failure would dwarf

any event that we have seen since the end of the Cold War, and perhaps after the fall of Japan and Germany. A nuclear armed state coming apart at the seams is not an attractive proposition.

The saving grace might be that other countries are aware of this possible future, and America should work with as many of them as possible to avert worst-case scenarios. This includes India, of course, but also Iran and China, as well as Europe.

To summarize, the consequences of malign globalization transcend any one ---or two or three---regions. We need to restructure our government to account for this, we need to encourage multi-regional expertise, and we need to understand that while the arrogance of ignorance is dangerous to policy, parochialism that is sometimes the byproduct of deep immersion in a single foreign society can be nearly as harmful.