

# Envisioning a Different Future for U.S. Relations with India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan



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## Objectives of the Workshop

What should be the objectives of the U.S. presence in South Asia—Afghanistan, Pakistan and India—in the post-Bush era? To discuss this



question the Orfalea Center brought a group of seasoned South Asia scholars to UC Santa Barbara for an intensive one-day workshop.

At the outset, Mark Juergensmeyer, director of the Center, posed some of the central themes for discussion: How did the United States reach this point of involvement in the region? What have been the internal pressures within India, Pakistan and Afghanistan that affect how they relate with each other and with the U.S.? What is the role of non-state actors in the region, including

### Historical Lessons Yet Unlearned

Looking at the history of U.S. military involvement, Richard Falk, distinguished fellow at the Orfalea Center and Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University, paraphrased a famous exchange between a U.S. Army commander and a Vietnamese colonel at the conclusion of the Vietnam War. The American commander made the point that the Vietnamese had never defeated U.S. forces on the battlefield, to which the Vietnamese colonel responded that, while true, this was “irrelevant.” Falk explained that even after the embarrassing adventure in Vietnam, the U.S. foreign policy establishment has continued to operate under the delusion “that foreign military intervention is a feasible means, in the postcolonial world, of promoting U.S. national interests—and there is not a single success story

religio-political organizations and civil society groups? What is the role of the military, and does U.S. policy strengthen the process of militarization in these countries? What should be the role of the UN and regional cooperation organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (of which India, Pakistan and Afghanistan are members) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (in which these three are observers; their central Asian neighbors, China and Russia, are members)? Does current U.S. policy foster or weaken the tradition of self-determination among the peoples in this region? And how can a new approach by the U.S. help to stabilize the region and provide a pathway towards a more peaceful and discrete role for U.S. involvement in the future?

**Cynthia Mahmood brought a perspective which she developed during regular and extensive travel in the region over the course of the past decade:**

*“Since we have seen the drone attacks, since we have seen the current government now cracking down as it has—with many more civilians killed than potential ‘terrorists’ killed—people are joining the Taliban for resistive reasons. This is now a direct and personal anti-occupation movement... anti-Americanism is as it has never been before... [and] that means something we’re doing isn’t working.”*

behind that.” Falk went on to describe how military superiority is inadequate to guaranteeing political victory in the post-colonial era “because of the different time cycles on which foreign powers and domestic resistance movements operate. Even though the [local] adversaries in these settings are militarily unable to contest the intervening power, they have a much longer cycle of endurance that in the end is what is likely to shape the political outcome of these conflicts.”

Two scholars of South Asian history echoed Falk's statement. According to Lloyd Rudolph of the University of Chicago, "the fact is that 21,000 more troops will make the American presence and the NATO presence into an occupation... We are not going to 'win' in Afghanistan, so we need to work much harder on a political solution." And UCLA's Stanley Wolpert noted that "we are not going to 'win' a war in Afghanistan that neither the British empire nor any other power has ever won. The Afghan situation remains basically fragmented and tribal and we haven't a clue as to how to resolve it; and it certainly can't be resolved with military intervention."

## Structural Forces in the American Political System

Juan Campo, Professor of Religious Studies at UC Santa Barbara, raised the specter of the military-industrial complex as a major driver of U.S. foreign policy: "I think we have so built that up—during the Cold War years and in the post-Cold War years using the 'War on Terror' as a way to re-energize it—that [the U.S. political system] cannot explore these other options, perhaps even if Obama wanted to. It seems to me that the decision making... is not so much driven by logic and rationality... but by this kind of dynamic of the military industrial complex, which really is just overwhelmingly powerful in this country."

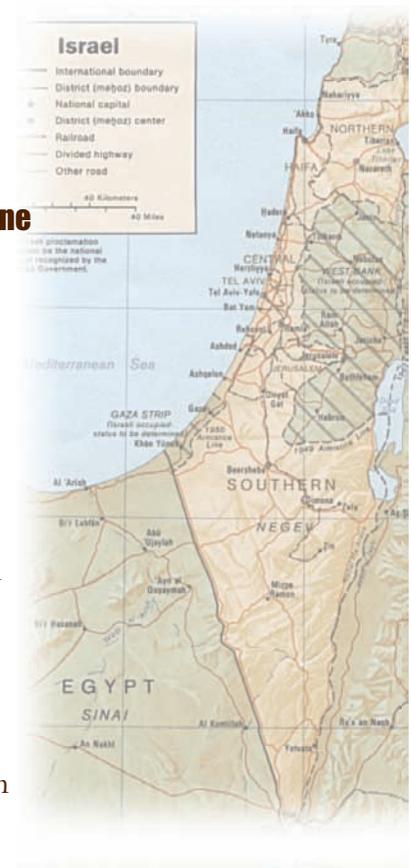
Later in the seminar, Falk expanded upon this line of reasoning: "The military-industrial complex is a very important issue to understand in its contemporary form. It really does impose a rather rigid structural constraint on political leadership... Elected political leaders, to be effective, have to defer to the current reality of the military-industrial complex, which reduces their room for political maneuver... It is not only the Pentagon military-industrial complex; it is also true, I think, in relation to Wall St., and in relation to Israel. These three sets of structural constraints actually limit the impact of democracy on policy... and the media is either terribly naive or part of the problem, and perhaps both."

Professor Cynthia Mahmood of the University of Notre Dame went on to recall wise words of Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India, "who ended 100 years of the British fighting with the Afgans by saying 'no patchwork scheme will do. Not until the military steamroller has passed over this country from end to end will there be peace, but I do not want to be the one to start that process.' For this wisdom he was made Foreign Secretary of the British Empire."

## The Israel-Palestine Conflict

Several speakers emphasized that perhaps no single issue has so thoroughly inflamed anti-American sentiment in South Asia as the Israel-Palestine conflict: "This is the time for Obama to deal with the Palestinian problem," said Mahmood. "It is at

the crux of a lot of Islamic rage... If there could be a Palestinian state... it would resolve so much of the problem of Islamic violence." Campo cited alleged U.S. support of Israeli territorial expansion as a important catalyst for the destruction of the U.S. embassy in Islamabad in 1979, which "indicates the fact that when we are thinking about what is going on in Pakistan and South Asia, I think we also have to take seriously the Middle Eastern connections that link up to that region of the world."



# Central Role of Lingering Post-Colonial Disputes

## Kashmir

*“We have to respect urges for self-determination,” noted Manoranjan Mohanty. “Much of the violence in the post-World War II era is about that.”*



Several scholars in the workshop pointed out that the nuclear capability of India and Pakistan adds a new dimension to the politics of the region. To that end, U.S. policy makers have rightly made stabilization of the Pakistani government a strategic imperative. Pakistan’s government, however, will never be able to stabilize until it can refocus on internal Islamist threats. Mahmood suggested that resolution of the Kashmir conflict is finally possible if a multi-lateral approach is adopted: “For the first time, I think there is a chance [for peaceful resolution]. Why? Because for the first time, there are a lot of people who have a huge stake in resolving Kashmir.”



*“What we have now,” according to Stanley Wolpert, “is the need for India and Pakistan to reconcile their differences over Kashmir. And I hope that will happen soon.”*

“I hope,” agreed Wolpert, “that Pakistan will recognize that the best thing they can possibly do is to accept the line of control that they currently have. Make that the international border, allow India to pull back its half million or more troops, and allow Pakistan also to stop wasting its money on lugging these weapons out to the highest glacier.

What in the world are they doing up there?

It is crazy. It is a waste of money and a waste of time.” As was emphasized by various speakers throughout the day, the Kashmir

dispute along the India-Pakistan frontier has constrained political discourse within and between these two countries for so long and to such an extent that it has taken on inordinate importance for the stability of the region as a whole.

Adding a perspective that would become one of the main themes of the day, Mohanty argued that “it is not a land issue... it is an issue of the Kashmir peoples’ aspirations for self-determination. The form of their self-determination is something that has to be worked out by the people themselves, with the regimes of India and Pakistan.”



*“Almost everywhere that Britain left, they left behind a divided polity, with tragic results.”*

*— Richard Falk*

### How Are Radical Groups Recruiting so Successfully?

*Cynthia Mahmood emphasized that U.S. policy makers might better understand why people enlist to fight for radical Islamist groups if they look at situations on the ground, where combat creates refugees and dislocation. Mahmood’s own understanding of the real dynamics of Islamist recruitment crystallized when she saw who was helping refugees from the Kashmir conflict “as they stumbled from India, the democracy, to Pakistan—which was at that time under the Zia dictatorship.” “Indeed it was radical Islamic organizations of various stripes, not Western aid organizations” who were “there handing out blankets and tending to the wounded.” The same dynamics, Mahmood believes, are at play in Palestine and other combat zones where extremism is apparently resurgent.*

## The Naxalites and the Taliban: Local Powers in the Vacuum of State Power

In 2006, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared the Naxalites to be the most serious threat to India's national security. The Taliban threat to Pakistan's stability is self evident. In order to ground the seminar's understanding of these two groups, Vinay Lal suggested that we "put into contrast and juxtaposition these two elements." The Naxalites are estimated to have significant control over roughly 15% of India's territory. The Taliban's territorial reach within Pakistan is of a similar proportion. There are estimated to be roughly 20,000 Pakistanis who are members of roughly three dozen distinct groups now known as "the Taliban," often having remarkably little in common with each other. The same statement could be made regarding the Indian Naxalites.



*"There are elements that are common to the Naxalites in India and the Taliban in Pakistan and one of them—if I may put it this way—is the state. That is, the state is not there."*

— Vinay Lal

"that this is a problem and a question that goes back to the time of colonial India... What was the reach of the colonial state? It seems to me very clear that there were large pockets of India and large segments of its population which never really came under the umbrella of the colonial state and these are precisely those areas where the Naxalites have been the most important in India." "In other words," suggested Lal, "what is being described as the Taliban or jihadi element in Pakistan" might be seen as movements for self-determination that arose to fill the vacuum of state power.

"It seems to me," noted Lal,

### Regarding the Enemy: Does Anybody Know Who the Taliban Is?



*Columbia University's emeritus professor Ainslie Embree put the U.S. military's position succinctly. "Our argument is clear: it serves our interests to fight the Taliban—whatever the Taliban is."*

According to Mona Sheikh of the University of Copenhagen, there are estimated to be between thirty and forty active factions of the so-called Taliban, twenty seven of which are part of an umbrella organization. Given this multiplicity of presumed enemies, Mahmood asked: "There are so many Talibans in

Afghanistan, so when we say we are fighting the 'Taliban', what does it really mean?"

Sheikh pointed out that the name "Taliban" was originally a Western label applied to a small group of Afghani refugees in Pakistan who organized with some Pakistani students to establish peace in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union. The root of the name (*Taleb*) simply means "student." The contemporary "Taliban" has morphed dramatically and is anything but monolithic, with

scores of distinct groups either claiming the label or officially designated as such by the U.S. military. This begs the question, who are the American and NATO forces fighting? The answer, unfortunately, seems to be that they are fighting ever increasing segments of Pakistani and Afghan society. Cynthia Mahmood noted that the demographic composition of so-called "Taliban" groups in southern Afghanistan and in the north of Pakistan have dramatically shifted over the past few years. Whereas the memberships of these various groups were once primarily indigenous, young, secular, middle class, and educated, over the past two years she saw "that group of fighters become more religious, youthful, less educated, more of peasant background, and more Pakistani influenced." During her travels in the region, she has also noted a dramatic increase in foreign fighters in general, signaling that as the battlefield has broadened, the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan has become a pan-Islamic cause.

## American Failure to Take "the Other" Seriously

Ainslie Embree explained that both Hillary Clinton and Richard Holbrooke “announced firmly that the aim of the U.S. was the destruction of the Taliban... Pakistanis, even secular Pakistanis, took very badly to that—just as Americans would react if somebody from the outside world announced that they were going to destroy the Christian Right in this country.”

Embree continued: “What the Pakistani constitution says is that Pakistan is an Islamic country and that their intention is to implement Sharia law fully as the law of the land.” A fundamental reason for the chronic mistrust between U.S. and Pakistani officials is that U.S. policy makers keep expecting Pakistanis to do what “we like,” even when what “we like” is quite contrary to core Pakistani values.

*“What is happening in South Asia is that the present administration—as the former administration—keeps expecting the Afghans, and the Pakistanis, and even the Indians, to do what is good for us... In Afghanistan and Pakistan, we have made an enormous mistake in thinking that their interests are the same as our interests.”*

—Ainslie Embree



*“It seems to me that U.S. policy in the region, if it is really concerned about working towards peace, really can only change when it recognizes the complex profile of Islam there, in Pakistan in particular.”*

—Juan Campo

Richard Falk underscored Embree’s point that “American myopia, the inability to take seriously the otherness of these very deep Asian cultures,” is a root cause for much of the conflict in that part of the world. Falk went on to paraphrase John Foster Dulles, who said he “could never understand why the Palestinians and the Israelis could not sit down like good Christians and solve their problems.”

Mahmood voiced her own concern that U.S. policy makers and media had failed to acknowledge the complexity of the political landscape in Pakistan and Afghanistan. “The word ‘Taliban,’ she explained, “is an umbrella category or an epithet given by its other and is not really appropriate for people on the ground” trying to understand the true nature of the conflict. Mahmood continued: “One of the things that I want to call for is a willingness to truly dialogue with other sources of knowledge. Those Talibani who went to madrassas, they have a kind of knowledge that actually needs to be entered into a discourse with, and not just called crazy. They have some things to teach us.”

*Mona Sheikh explained that the process of Talibanization has swept through the tribal areas and most of the North-West Frontier Province over the past several years, despite military opposition from Western forces. “Why is the Taliban gaining success?” asked Sheikh rhetorically. “The power of anti-occupation narratives” should not be underestimated as a key part of the answer, she urged.*



From interviews with Taliban activists from the diverse groups, Sheikh identified three unifying arguments which, in sum, show how divergent perspectives on history virtually preclude any chance for military resolution of the conflict. “In order to de-escalate the conflict and arrive at prudent policies, it is important to understand the people we are fighting, what they are feeling threatened by, what their grievances are, what they are fighting for.” As articulated by presidents Bush and Obama, “it is clearly the U.S. government’s perception that ‘we’ are under attack, that our values of freedom are under attack. But if you listen to the narratives on the other side, they have precisely the same perception. They perceive their freedom and sovereignty as threatened by foreign occupation forces.” In contrast to the conventional view among Americans, the history of U.S.

- US wishes to bring chaos and destruction to the Muslim world
- US intends to prevent every Islamic system from existing in the world
- Individualization of the duty (fard al-ayn) “warfare jihad” (jihad bil qitaal) – emergency and defensive situation

*“In order to de-escalate the conflict and arrive at prudent policies, it is important to understand the people we are fighting, what they are feeling threatened by, what their grievances are, what they are fighting for.”*  
 – Mona Sheikh

involvement in the region does not start immediately after 9/11 for most Taliban activists. They tend to understand U.S. interventionist policies in the region as predating the World Trade Center attacks by many years, and they are convinced that the current NATO military involvement is just another chapter in a longstanding anti-Islamic campaign led by the U.S.

## Just War on Both Sides?

In the Western legal tradition there are certain conditions which, if met, legitimize a war and make it “just.” The quotes below from leaders interviewed by Sheikh articulate some of the grievances of those we are fighting, and show that they do have reasons to believe that they are fighting a just war.

A Taliban sympathizer named Umm Hasaan said: *“In Pakistan the jihadi culture is flourishing. Why? Because injustice has become common everywhere in the world. Look at Palestine. Muslims are dying in Pakistan. Muslims are dying in Iraq, Bosnia, Burma, or Kashmir. Muslims are killed everywhere, wherever you look. What options are left for the Muslim? He has only one option: to kill the one who is coming to kill him. This is tit for tat. That is what is happening in Pakistan. The more hard-handed and eagerly the government tries to crush Islam, the more hard-handed the reaction will be. These [mujahids] are trying to save Islam.”*

The following are excerpts from an interview with Muslim Khan: *“A few years ago when we fought against the Soviets, then Europe, America and Pakistan were all crying out that this is [legitimate] jihad. All Muslims were called to do jihad in order to fight the Soviets. Today the same jihad is just happening against America, but we are called terrorists. I want to ask the world and especially the Muslim countries, how come the mujahideens of yesterday are suddenly the terrorists of today?”*

*“President Bush said it himself that he is fighting the ideological war of this century. He said ‘crusade war’ before attacking Afghanistan.”*

*“The solution to this war is that the European countries and the U.S. forces take their armies out of here and return to the regions of the north Atlantic Ocean. Then I will give the world a one hundred percent guarantee that all these mujahideen will go to sleep in peace and live peacefully.”*

## Pakistan: A Nation at the Crux, a State on the Brink

It would be easy to formulate a strong argument that Pakistan's political system will not withstand the various forces that beset it. The dearth of legitimate leadership (whether existing or potential), seemingly stunted institutional capacity with which to successfully operationalize democracy, and the historical tendency for the country's political system to be manipulated by foreign powers, led many observers to take a pessimistic view of Pakistan's future as a state. The recent emergence of middle class lawyers and civil society as significant forces on Pakistan's political scene is a reason for hope, however. Susanne Rudolph suggested that "having heard today's comments in which the problems of ethnic communities and political subgroups have been explored, it is a little hard to imagine so old-fashioned an instrument as a constitutional convention coming together in



*"Pakistan is a candidate for a failing state, possibly a failing democratic state."*

— Susanne Rudolph

Pakistan, but it is conceivable that it might" yield a workable political framework on which the country's political system could continue to develop.

Cynthia Mahmood noted that, for the U.S. government, "the most important thing has not been finding Bin Laden. The most important thing has been preserving the stability of Pakistan, because we wanted to preserve the stability of those nukes. That was the most important thing. We knew that if there was a too heavy-handed crackdown there would be a backlash, and we didn't want an Islamic backlash. That is what is happening right now."

## A Regional Approach Needed

*"I think it is time for a really, fully regional approach... Now, the U.S. can't be the one to lead this, it has to be a plurality of nations."*

— Cynthia Mahmood

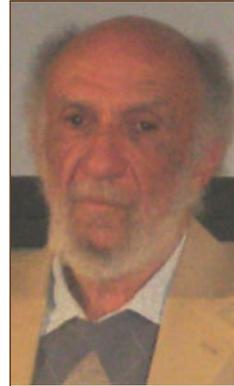


Several seminar participants noted that when local governments are not able to resolve situations, regional solutions—rather than international military intervention—should be attempted. Manoranjan Mohanty, for instance, mentioned the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation, in which India plays a dominant role, though the group also includes Afghanistan and Pakistan. Equally relevant is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), consisting of China, Russia, and four Central Asian countries. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and India have membership as observers.

Vinay Lal pressed the case that a "civilizational discourse" needs to take place in South Asia. As long as the region's problems are considered within a nation-state framework, conflicts are nearly inevitable because they are analyzed with a zero-sum logic. Unfortunately, "there has been an attempt to disown Pakistan's place in that cultural-religion-political synthesis, which explains why" extrinsic strains of Islam have been able to gain popularity there. According to Lal, "there has to be an admission that Pakistan is in fact part of that civilizational discourse too—that the center of Pakistan's being does not reside with an affinity to the Islam of the Middle East... but rather that the Islam that has been generated in Pakistan is part of a certain kind of cultural synthesis" which arose organically in this part of the world.

## Demilitarization, a Truly Grand Strategy

President Obama has said that there is no military solution to problems in South Asia. But this could be taken to mean that the military approach, though necessary, is not sufficient. The conclusion arrived at during the workshop was that the military presence itself is counterproductive. The very size of such a huge U.S. military buildup creates antagonism towards the United States. As evidence of this, political scientist Mona Sheikh cited a disturbing recent opinion survey conducted by the New America Foundation, which showed that 44% of the surveyed Pakistanis regarded the United States as their principal adversary; only 14% considered it to be India, 8% the Pakistani Taliban, and 4% the Afghan Taliban. Only a process of demilitarization can begin to reverse the negative consequences of U.S. military presence in political,



*“A very important aspect of my criticism of what has been happening under the Obama presidency is a failure to distinguish between Obama’s rejection of the grand strategy of the neo-conservatives—particularly as embodied in the Middle East policies centered on the war in Iraq—and his essential acceptance of Bush’s response to 9/11 by way of the War on Terror, even if it is not called that at the present time.”*

— Richard Falk

economic, social, and cultural spheres, and the enormous antagonism this has generated among the people of the region.

## Recognizing the Need for Religious Education

Juan Campo pointed out that leaders are finally starting to “realize that classes dealing with religion do not form part of the American foreign policy training track... religion is not included in the training of our policy analysts and diplomats. That might be changing now somewhat but there is still a remarkable lack of that [training]... and so it is not surprising to find that any consideration of Islam in terms of shaping U.S. relations with the

Middle East or South Asia was considered to be very irrelevant” in recent history.

Cynthia Mahmood agreed. In order to more credibly discuss solving South Asian problems, she said, Western leaders “need to be more active about educating about Islam and forcefully talking against Islamophobia.”



## Conclusion

There was consensus that in order for a sustainable peace to be secured in South Asia, it is imperative that U.S. policy makers pursue a new strategic direction. In his concluding remarks, Mark Juergensmeyer attempted to synthesize the seminar's key themes into a workable set of policy suggestions. The participating scholars agreed upon the following five principles as the basis for formulating a new U.S. policy in the region:

*1. Support self-determination.* The Obama administration needs to make clear that the people of the region shall decide their own future and the U.S. or any outside power can only play a modest role in helping that process. It cannot control it. Many people in the region see the U.S. presence in South Asia as a continuation of British colonial influence. The parallels with Vietnam are striking—for there the U.S. also appeared to be replacing a colonial power, albeit French. Many Afghans see the U.S. military as a curious repetition of yet another military intruder, in this case the Soviets. Though the U.S. policy might intend to help fight terrorism in the region, the very presence of U.S. forces helps to create the climate of hostility in which anti-American terrorism can thrive.

*2. Demilitarize.* As President Obama has said and General David Petraeus has affirmed, there is no military solution in the region. But it's not just that the military approach is not sufficient—it is counterproductive. The mere presence of such a huge U.S. military deployment creates antagonism towards the U.S. A recent opinion survey conducted by the New America Foundation showed 44% of surveyed Pakistanis regarded U.S. as their principal adversary—only 14% considered it to be India, 8% the Pakistani Taliban, and 4% the Afghan Taliban. A process of demilitarization will help to reverse the pervasive consequences of U.S. military presence in political, economic, social and cultural spheres, and the enormous antagonism this has generated among the local people.

*3. Recognize religious and organizational diversity.* The Taliban is not a single unified organization. There are more than twenty different groups operating in the name of the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some are tribal groups, some are ideologically religious, some are thugs; but all are ethnically Pashtun. They are different from the Punjab-based militant groups such as Laskar e-Taiba connected with Kashmir insurgency and accused of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Even within the more moderate religious groups there is a great deal of diversity. Besides Shia and Sunni streams there is a long tradition of Sufi practices in the subcontinent. Among the Sunnis there are differences between the Deobandi and the Baraelhi schools, which interpret Islamic law differently. Some

Muslims follow the controversial Ahmadiya sect and some adhere to other religious traditions. There are native Sikhs in the Swat valley who have been attacked by some branches of the Taliban, and Sufi shrines in many areas have been condemned. So it would be a mistake to regard the diverse forms of Taliban as the same, or all Islamic religious groups as the same.

*4. Respect the legitimacy of religious politics.* Among the many forms of religious politics in the region are quite a few that are democratic and tolerant. The rise of religiously-related political movements is not necessarily to be feared, nor are they antithetical to democratic values. One of the great nonviolent leaders of South Asia's independence movement, Ghaffar Khan, was known as the Pashtun Gandhi. For centuries Muslim courts in the region provided the civil structures of justice and order that are the hallmarks of a decent society. For many people in the region, the longing for a religiously-based political rule is simply a way of stating a desire for morality in public life, and forms of government that are just, fair, and high-minded in their values.

*5. Be open to regional solutions.* When local governments are not able to resolve situations, regional solutions—rather than international military intervention—might be utilized. One such organization is the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation, which includes Afghanistan along with Pakistan and India. Equally relevant is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), consisting of China, Russia and four Central Asian countries; Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and India are formal observers. At a recent meeting of the SCO, Russia proposed an interesting solution to stabilize the Afghanistan security situation; it would activate the UN Contact Group on Afghanistan and expand it to include its six neighboring countries along with the U.S., Russia and NATO. It is important for the U.S. to respect such initiatives and work with them to encourage progress along regional lines.

The key to this five-point framework for U.S. policy in the South Asia region is to demilitarize the U.S. presence while utilizing its influence for regional cooperation and viable self determination. The politics of the region may not always mimic the secular politics of the West, but they may be capable of more latitude for justice and fair play than the most strident versions of the Taliban have presented. This kind of supportive U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India in a new era of global cooperation may help to bring peace to the region and provide substance to President Obama's promise of "mutual interest and mutual respect" among the peoples and countries of the world.



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