
America's Role in South Asia: The Pakistani Perspective

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An Interview by Travis J. Bryan and Jeffrey W. Dillon
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Journal: Does the United States have a strategic role to play in South Asia? What might this role entail?

Khokhar: The United States, by virtue of presently being the sole superpower, has a certain degree of responsibility for maintaining peace, security, and stability worldwide and, of course, in certain regions of the world. South Asia, situated near both Central Asia and the Gulf, is a volatile region of the world. We certainly believe that the United States, as a friend of both India and Pakistan, can play an important role. Of course, I do not mean by pressuring India or Pakistan but by playing a friendly role. When two contending parties cannot see reason, it is always helpful to turn to somebody who can provide guidance. As a facilitator, the U.S. can bring the contending parties together and show them a little bit of light. The United States has played a facilitating role in other regions. For instance, the role the U.S. played in the Middle East in bringing about some degree of dialogue led to a series of developments in that region. We see the U.S.'s role as helpful, not interfering. Although we do not encourage interference, we would certainly encourage some degree of facilitation in bringing India and Pakistan closer together. This is something that we know our Indian friends oppose. For example, I think the U.S. can contribute to improving prospects for regional

economic cooperation. If, let us say, General Motors sets up a plant in India, that plant can certainly cater to India, but it can also cater to the region. Thus, if the U.S. wants to encourage economic cooperation in the region, this would be one good way of doing it.

Journal: Do you believe these security concerns must be dealt with before economic cooperation can take place in the region?

Khokhar: The Indian view is that we should move forward with trade and economic cooperation and then, once the atmosphere improves, we can talk about security concerns. We believe that both should be done simultaneously. Let us address the issues which, in our judgment, are causing all of the tension and problems between India and Pakistan. If we can resolve them, then the prospects for regional cooperation, trade, and integration are tremendous. Regional cooperation would open up tremendous vistas for the 1.3 billion people of South Asia.

We already have a certain degree of economic cooperation in the region. We think it should be further strengthened, broadened, and deepened. However, there are still impediments. Many in Pakistan believe that we should not trade with a country with whom we have such an impossible relationship. However, there are more and more people who now believe that maybe we can do two things simultaneously. They would like to address security issues as well as trade and economic matters. This does not mean that there is presently an absence of trade between India and Pakistan. We do have a trading relationship, but one facing certain difficulties. For instance, we do not allow India what is called "across the border trade." Some people may say that this is discrimination. Our argument is that it is not discrimination, first of all, because we are two unequal countries and, secondly, because India has a lot of non-tariff and tariff trade barriers. These are all problems that are amenable to solutions. In fact, trade is not a problem between Pakistan and India. Our problem is basically a political problem. How do we sort out the problem that is causing a cancer between India and Pakistan? People are being killed everyday. This violence is a huge expense for both India and Pakistan. I say, let's sit down with India and talk about the problems. Let's not engage in an arms race or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, India does not really feel the necessity of doing this because it is the biggest country in the region. There is this question of size, industrial prowess, and regional military balance. India doesn't really feel compelled to talk, not only to Pakistan, but to any of its neighbors. I can't really point to a single problem that has really been solved on a bilateral basis in that region.

Journal: Do you think the U.S. can play an effective mediating role?

Khokhar: Yes, we believe the U.S. can play a constructive role. I do not mean that the U.S. can interfere. I do not think the U.S. can interfere in a country like India. It's too big, it has the ability to look after itself; it has democratic institutions and a free press. I do not think the U.S. would want to interfere.

Journal: You mean in a manipulative manner?

Khokhar: Not in a manipulative manner. I do not think the U.S. has that kind of influence. Today, the U.S. has the preeminent position in the international community as the sole superpower. The important thing is to see that the U.S. plays a helpful role, not a role in which there is a *diktat* involved or pushing country A or B to do something. That doesn't work anymore.

Journal: Should the primary issue be economics?

Khokhar: No, the primary issues in South Asia are durable peace and security, the core question of the right to self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and nuclear proliferation. The whole world is focusing on the issue of proliferation today. India is, in our judgment, a country with nuclear capabilities. We are also considered a country with nuclear capabilities. We haven't weaponized, but India has already proved that it has the capability to make a weapon. Whether they have one or sixteen is immaterial. So this is a critical issue. New levels of technologies are being perfected everyday. Economic cooperation, not only in the region, but with the outside world becomes very fundamental. Both India and Pakistan are looking for foreign investment, and I think this is where the U.S. and other developed countries have a critical role to play.

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India has a huge market, it has almost a billion people. We're around 140 million people. We have a fairly good buying capacity. For instance, we have something like seventeen power projects on stream at the moment with the U.S. Both India and Pakistan would welcome foreign investment that brings in the U.S. Not only that—South Asia is adjacent to Central Asia. Now that's where the future is. In terms of all the energy resources of the world, we are now focused not only on the gulf but on Central Asia. How do you get the gas and the oil from Turkmenistan? or from Kazakhstan? You can do this if there is durable peace between India and Pakistan. And the only way India can get access to Central Asia is through Pakistan, because that is the most logical and economical route.

Not only can we bring the gas and oil out from Central Asia into the Indian Ocean for the developed world, but also for India and Pakistan. We are a small country and we have enough gas of our own, but in twenty years or thirty years we are going to run out. So we need gas, and India needs it more than we do. India cannot even think of economic development programs without considering where it will get energy and oil from. So, if these gas pipelines can come down from Central Asia into Pakistan and then India, we welcome that. For that we would require the help and cooperation of the U.S., Japan, and the European Union, because these are not small investments, you're talking in terms of billions of dollars.

Journal: Let me bring up again another possible impediment. The relations between Pakistan and Iran are seen in a negative light by many in the U.S., particularly by Congress. Do you see that as a negative influence on the U.S.'s relations in South Asia given that Iran has relations with many countries in the region, particularly Pakistan?

Khokhar: We are a neighbor of Iran. Please do not forget that. It's not unlike the U.S. and Mexico. We are neighbors, but not only that, our relationship goes beyond just that between two states. It's a civilizational relationship. We have so many things in common with them. We have a common religion and a lot of our cultural aspirations come from Iran. We depend on each other. We are what you would call friends. Pakistan and Iran also have some problems over Afghanistan, but even that is not bad enough to tear us apart. We do not think that our relationship with Iran should be an impediment between Pakistan and the U.S. In fact, I mentioned to you that I am also responsible for Iran's representation in Washington. So, we feel that instead of being an impediment, we can possibly facilitate progress. Also, I know that Iran has good relations with India, so I do not think it's a problem.

Journal: We recently did an interview with the foreign minister of Iran, Ali Akbar Velayati, and during that interview he stated that the U.S. seems to seek to weaken Islamic countries. Does Pakistan feel that way?

Khokhar: I wouldn't put it that way, but what I see is that there is a need in the United States for an improved understanding of the Islamic world. I think there are some misperceptions that have been bred. For instance there Professor Huntington's famous theory, the "clash of civilizations," and we certainly do not want this to become a reality. Therefore, there is a need for a better understanding between the Islamic world and, not only the United States, but I would say the whole of the West. From Mauritania virtually up to Indonesia is just one great

swath of Islamic countries. I know the U.S. claims that it has good relations with most Islamic countries, but these are mostly oil-producing countries. Okay, so you do not have good relations with Iran now but had excellent relations with them in the past and who knows, may have good relations in the future. Similarly, you have good relations with most of the Middle Eastern states. You may have some difficulties with Libya and North Africa, but overall I do not see, either the Islamic world working against the United States or the United States working against the Islamic world. I would say that there is great need for bridge building, and bridge building is made possible by interaction and understanding. Who's to say that so-and-so is a fundamentalist? A question arises, is the Pope a fundamentalist? How do you define fundamentalist? You have to make a distinction between what is fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism; and you also have to have an understanding of what is modernism. Why is there resistance to certain influences from the West? Let's say, discothèques. Okay, it's alright for the West, but that's not modernism in the Islamic world. A lot of people do not see it that way. People think that this is something alien to the Islamic civilization where male/female relationships or societal relationships are well defined. They see it as vulgarity. I'm just giving you an example. So, there is need for understanding. There is great need in the Islamic world, in fact, a burning desire, to acquire the technologies that the West has. So there is a distinction between acquiring the good things and there is the question of what is genuinely seen as modernity.

Journal: Prime Minister Sharif has called for a reassessment of the Pressler Amendment, which precludes the transfer of U.S. military equipment to Pakistan. Do you think this step is necessary before the U.S. could act as a mediator?

Khokhar: In our judgment, this is a law that specifically meant for Pakistan. It basically bars any economic or military assistance or sales to Pakistan. All that is required is that country A or B possesses a nuclear device. If in the U.S. President's judgment, Pakistan does not possess a nuclear device, then it can get economic assistance. The U.S. President has not been able to certify whether Pakistan does or does not have a nuclear device, and the Pressler amendment is being applied. We believe this to be highly discriminatory. I think the Pressler Law has failed to accomplish the very purpose for which it was designed. It hasn't prevented the proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia. We feel that it is not based on equity or justice. Only Pakistan is being singled out for this treatment. If the U.S. genuinely wants to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia, then the same approach must be applied to India and Pakistan, without discrimination. If you just single out one country and allow another country a free hand, then it will not work. We have lived with American sanctions for the last seven or eight years. Why maintain a law which is not really serving any purpose? ❁