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Stanley A. Kochanek

The foreign policy of a nation like the United States really takes place at three different levels, at the global level, at the regional level and at the bilateral level. In the United States, each of these levels – global, regional and bilateral – is handled differently. Global issues are the special concern of the president of the US, his advisers and the organisation called the National Security Council and the Secretary of State. Regional policy is handled by what one might call distinguishable governments, composed of various US agencies concerned with foreign policy. Bilateral problems are handled by country directors and embassies.

There are several factors that affect the conduct of US foreign policy in any particular region. These factors include the level of continuity of American government interests, and the attention, amount and quality of information and knowledge available at various levels of government, the constraints that exist on American government and the constraints that exist within the region, and the type of influence and number of non-governmental interests that are found within the region. For example, let us compare Europe with South Asia. Taking a look at Western Europe, we find that relative to other regions Western Europe attracts continuous high level attention and still plays a key role in global security interests. Knowledge of the area is very high and of a superior quality and is available at all levels of government even at the presidential level and most presidents have some knowledge and experience of Western Europe. US intervention in Europe is more constrained than anywhere else by competition among various government agencies. There are strong and powerful governments in the region, including powerful political personalities, and a large number of non-government agencies and elements which can act as lobbying forces – business interests, immigrants, cultural and intellectual groups and the like. These combine to create powerful constituencies that cannot be ignored and, taken together, cannot be equalled in any other region.

From an address delivered by Dr Stanley A. Kochanek, Professor of Political Science, Pennsylvania State University, USA, at the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, on 15 July 1993.

In contrast, South Asia is almost at the other end of the spectrum. US government attention towards South Asia has been sporadic but at a high level of presidential attention. Presidential involvement in the making of South Asian policy has been intermittent and crisis-oriented. For example, President Johnson's interest and intervention during the 1960s involving the Indian food crisis, President Nixon's 1971 exemption to sale of military equipment to Pakistan, President Nixon's role in the Bangladesh civil war and the Afghan crisis. At the same time, detailed knowledge of the area at the presidential level is limited. It is, of course, high at the other levels of government such as within the bureaucracy with plenty of area specialists at all levels. But as decisions move up, the expertise on the region will decline and in crisis situations decision-making passes up to the higher levels where the depth of knowledge tends to be somewhat limited. Moreover, there exist relatively few constraints on US government from the region or within the US government – major US agencies play a very limited role because the programmes are so small. Agencies like the Treasury, the Commerce Department, the Labour Department either have a minor role or no role at all. The Department of Defence, the CIA, US AID, the Department of State, all have seen their roles change over time – during periods of high activity their roles are increased, during periods of low activity their roles are decreased. So you have a variety of government agencies with different kinds of interests.

Finally the level of US economic, commercial and trade interests in South Asia are extremely limited. South Asia has not been an important source of raw material critical to the United States. South Asia has limited market export potential but the region has received very little in terms of either investment or trade. For example, in 1993 the percentage of global trade of the United States with South Asia was less than one per cent and the percentage of global investment was 0.3 per cent. Bilateral aid to the region is about 500 million dollars which is not particularly high. Now these things count. For example, consider the issues which arose recently about American policy towards China and whether or not the US would continue to extend most favoured nation treatment to China. One of the major forces that intervened in favour of a positive decision was the American business community which, in fact, is becoming very active in China and which is determined that they did not want to see this change. So the level of activity is very important. The above sketch is designed to give you some idea of the organisation and domestic context within which US policy is made, especially in relationship to South Asia.

Now the question is, what has US policy towards South Asia been? There is a popular tendency to categorise American-South Asian

relations as a series of ups and downs. This is perhaps becoming somewhat of a cliché. A more accurate characterisation will be to categorise it as really periods of dramatic engagement and periods of disengagement. There have been two major periods of engagement from 1950 to 1965 and again from 1980 to 1989. There have been two major periods of disengagement from 1965 to 1979 and the post 1990 period. These patterns have been based on different calculations of what constitutes American interest and countries develop their policies in terms of their perception of what their interests are.

From 1950 to 1965, the United States became very much engaged in South Asia, which was given very high priority during this period, which is marked by the high point of the Cold War. The South Asian subcontinent was considered a focal point of world politics and critical to US interest. Former Secretary of Defence McNamara, for example, once said that South Asia has become through a combination of circumstances and geography a vital strategic area in the present context between expansionist and non-expansionist power centres. In friendly hands or as non-alliance states, South Asia can be a bridge between Europe and the Far East and a major physical barrier to the southward expansion of China and the Soviet Union. In hostile hands it will seal the long term hope of building a free Asian coalition able to provide adequate counter-weights to an expansionist China.

Now this assessment of geostrategic significance had certain consequences. In the first place, in the security realm this meant there was an attempt to organise a security bloc in the region as part of a global policy of containment. This led to pacts such as SEATO, CENTO, major arms supplies programmes particularly to Pakistan, a slightly smaller programme to India following the 1962 India-China border clash. In the economic realm, it meant that US aid levels were huge, totalling some 13 billion dollars during that time period. This included large amounts of food aid. In fact, in 1967, for example, India was receiving 583 million dollars worth of food aid and Pakistan 230 million dollars. In 1968, India got 619 million dollars food aid and Pakistan received 353 million dollars. One-quarter of the entire wheat crop of the United States was going to India. There was high economic involvement and there were major diplomatic, cultural and humanitarian links. In short, there was a high degree of direct involvement in regional, security and economic development affairs.

The intensity of these commitments began to change in the mid-1960s as a result of global changes and developments within the region itself leading to a reassessment and the shift from a period of engagement to a period of disengagement. What were the factors that led to this reassessment? At the global level, a variety of important changes had taken place in the world. Perhaps the most important

factor affecting the shifting policy was the change in the United States worldview and the definition of the US role in the world. Factors that affected the American worldview in the mid-1960s and after were things like the end of what was considered to be the period of bipolarity, the development of the Sino-Soviet split, the emergence of what some people call resource diplomacy, that is the emergence of OPEC and concern about economic questions, the Vietnam war and the development of major domestic problems in the United States involving race and the explosion of cities. These global factors meant that US military and even economic programmes increasingly in the 1960s became viewed by many Americans as dangerous preliminaries to deeper involvement and there was an enormous amount of domestic pressure for disengagement. There were also developments within South Asia that played a role. The 1965 war between India and Pakistan marked a turning point in US attitudes and involvement in the subcontinent.

The most dramatic result was the halt of American military aid but really the effects were much more widespread. A declining number of American officials regarded Pakistan as a true ally, and a feeling began to develop in government, the Congress, the press and the population at large that regional animosities made aid efforts futile and that therefore lesser commitment was necessary. And there was a feeling that basically neither the Soviet Union nor China would be in a position to overwhelm the region. In short, an overall decline and concern with the subcontinent and a reassessment of US interests in the region resulted from a combination of global and regional developments. This reassessment of US interests was signified by a withdrawal from the region and corresponding reduction of US resources and US role. Although there were some who argued for a permanent role for the United States in South Asia, the dominant position was against such a policy. Why was this the case?

There were several factors that reinforced those who argued for a policy of low priority or disengagement. The feeling was that US interests would be served by the situation that existed and therefore the United States should take a low profile politically, economically and militarily. Politically the argument was that the Soviets had assumed a basic responsibility for Indian security and this would help to contain Chinese pressure but this in turn created problems for Sino-Soviet relations which as far as Americans were concerned was all to the good. In addition, the Soviet role in India was producing a mutual uneasiness as the Indians themselves were concerned about their closeness and dependency on Soviet economic and military support. There were also problems about Pakistan-Chinese relations and Pakistan-Soviet relations. So politically the feeling was that nothing terrible was going to happen. Economically the argument was that

South Asia was of little economic value or importance – there was very little by way of trade, investment or other such factors and that the development problems in South Asia were so enormous that the US, no matter what its resources, would not be in a position to be really effective. Even massive US efforts would not be enough and, moreover, there simply was no popular support base within the United States to provide that kind of massive effort. Militarily there was also criticism that the arms that had been supplied had been used by countries within the region against each other and pressure developed within Congress and in the public to bring this to a halt.

The practical implication of this analysis was that the security role of the United States would be reduced and that it would not become a major arms supplier – its role as an arms supplier would decline. There would be limited bilateral economic aid, with a larger stress on multilateral aid, diplomatic support would be provided on issues depending upon the specifics of the case, attempts to preserve the territorial integrity of the region would be a priority, short of any kind of direct intervention. In this regard, major emphasis was placed upon diplomatic pressures to encourage economic and social development, an emphasis upon strengthening political and non-military elements and, in fact, attempting to restrain a military arms race. Finally there would be an encouragement to trade, cultural relations and humanitarian systems. This process of disengagement was brought to a sudden halt with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Until the Afghan invasion, South Asia had been given a relatively low priority. However, with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, South Asia became a significant area of concern and a policy of engagement began.

This policy of engagement began towards the end of the Carter administration but was particularly brought to the fore by the Reagan administration. The Reagan administration had three major regional objectives in South Asia. The first objective in the priority of objectives was to contain Soviet power. Afghanistan became a major concern. The second objective was to try to lessen Indian dependence on the Soviet Union and the third was concern about nuclear proliferation. These three objectives were not equally pressing and, in fact, they were given different levels of attention at different points in time. Let us take a look at each of these. In the first place the containment of Soviet power was given a primary priority. The United States saw Afghanistan as a major regional problem facing the US in the early 1980s and the US historical policy of keeping the Soviet Union out of South Asia was in effect reactivated. Pakistan figured significantly in this calculation, India did not. India was seen as not particularly helpful because of the stand that it had taken on the Afghan crisis. The policy towards Pakistan had the major objective to reassure

Pakistan that the US was committed to assisting her against direct Soviet aggression. The result was two major commitments, one in 1981 to 1986, a six-year 3.2 billion dollars military, economic aid programme which included high performance aircraft such as the F-16 and these arms were supplied despite Indian objections. A follow-on programme was developed in 1987 for 4.2 billion dollars which was to continue from 1987 to 1993 and which ran into problems because of the third priority, that is, the whole question of nuclear proliferation.

The first priority was to check what was perceived to be Soviet expansion in the region, in Afghanistan, and in this case the priority was Pakistan. As far as India was concerned, the objective was to try to lessen Indian dependence on the Soviet Union. Initially India was unhappy with US policy but the Reagan administration showed little sympathy for Indian sensibilities. While the Reagan administration was unwilling to alter its relationship with Pakistan in any way to accommodate India, it was not willing to write India off altogether and therefore it developed a two-track approach. While supporting Pakistan it tried to wean India away from its Soviet dependence. In the 1980s, India itself was beginning to alter its position on US-Pakistan relations and the Indians themselves began to follow what was called a bifurcated approach. The Americans and Indians came to the conclusion that perhaps the best thing we can do is agree to disagree on geostrategic questions that this is an issue we are not going to be able to settle. So what we should really do is to accept the fact that we are not agreed and let us try to develop our relations in the economic, cultural, technological and other areas of cooperation. This became then the major approach.

The first priority was the containment of Soviet expansionism, the second was to wean India away from the Soviet Union, the third was the question of non-proliferation which has always been on the agenda because there are very strong lobby groups in the US that have a very strong commitment to that principle, particularly within the Congress. The executive branch also had its own views on the subject and has tried to cope with the problem in various ways. There were three changes in policy towards India, Pakistan and the region. In the case of India, one of the big problems was that the United States had established a power plant in India in Tarapur in Bombay and the question about the supply of fuel for that reactor and the whole proliferation issue was involved. The Reagan administration solved the problem by allowing the Indians to get their fuel requirements through the French who were able to sell fuel to India for the maintenance of the Tarapur project.

In the case of Pakistan the nuclear proliferation issue was linked to military sales. The whole military aid programme to Pakistan was justified in the United States as a way of almost ensuring that Pakistan would not in fact go nuclear. It justified arms transfers as a way of encouraging Pakistan to remain a non-nuclear power. And then, thirdly, the administration tried to encourage regional agreements such, for example, as the 1991 multi-purpose proposal to try to get the countries of South Asia to agree on restraints. Many Americans who review this policy feel that probably one of the consequences of this policy was that it did act as a restraint on the nuclear arms race in India and from that point of view they feel that they have made a positive contribution.

Overall, the Reagan administration's policies towards South Asia were seen by analysts as being reasonably successful. Again things began to change, and if there was a reassessment of American policies in the 1960s which led from a process of engagement to a process of disengagement, in the 1990s there is a renewed assessment and again events developed which led to a new assessment about engagement and disengagement. The end of the Afghan war in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Gulf war in 1991 have all combined to alter the US global, regional and bilateral relations not just with South Asia but with the entire world. Almost five decades of the Cold War had come to an end and not just the United States but the entire global community was now in search for a new set of global arrangements. We are yet unclear what these new arrangements are going to be. But certainly they will involve and have resulted in a much greater emphasis on what are considered to be global issues. One of these important global issues is the emphasis upon the proliferation question which now means not simply proliferation of nuclear weapons but the whole problem of what used to be called CBR – chemical, biological, and radiological warfare – and the technological means to deliver those aircraft and missiles. So there is this whole concern about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and how this could be somehow contained. Other global issues involved emphasis upon human rights and the environment. There was renewed emphasis on this kind of global issues many of which existed during the Reagan administration but were basically played down because of the concerns over larger strategic questions. Another major emphasis has to do with opening up of free trade and investment and this is reflected not only in the attempts on the global scale to develop regional trade blocs but also to press for a new GATT Agreement and the like, encourage regional cooperation and other issues of this nature.

In short, while the United States role in South Asia will not return to the very low levels of the 1960s, it certainly has declined

from the high profile of the 1980s. The major focus of American policy is going to be on Europe and the Pacific-Europe, because of the whole development of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and the Pacific rim which involves the American-Japanese-Chinese relationship will be of primary concern. South Asia will command a lot less attention but certainly would command attention on a crisis basis. South Asia should therefore look towards trying to develop greater regional autonomy from outside pressures. To a certain extent, these issues are reflected in the current declarations of the Clinton administration. The new administration has defined its policies. The clearest definition came from the Assistant Secretary of State John Malott on 28 April 1993, when he delivered a statement to the US Congress on American policy in South Asia. This policy statement emphasised one of the key elements which was called 'an even-handed approach'.

The even-handed approach can be translated into the following kinds of fundamental American objectives. First and foremost to prevent war and the spread of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. Number two, to support economic reform and development, obtain greater access for US trade and investment, and improve intellectual property rights and protection. Number three, to support strengthening of democratic practices and institutions and greater respect for human rights. Number four, to enhance military to military contacts and preserve unhampered maritime and naval transit. Number five, to end terrorism. Number six, to work with governments to control the production, trafficking and shipment of narcotics. Number seven, to help promote population planning and finally, to support international efforts to ensure the care and maintenance and repatriation of the region's several million refugees.

The real need in South Asia is for much greater regional cooperation and reduction of tension. However, this depends more on the states of the region than it does on what happens with outside powers. Outside powers can encourage and support these developments, they cannot create these developments. And yet the patterns in South Asia have been mixed. During the height of the Cold War, when the Indians had a problem with China, Pakistan did not think it was much of a problem. In 1979, when Pakistan thought that Afghanistan was a serious problem, the Indians did not share that perception. So there seems to be a problem that the leaders of the major states of the region do not have a similar conception of threat. Moreover, the attempt to create a regional association in the form of SAARC has experienced considerable difficulties. In order to avoid the dangers of external involvement or great power involvement it seems that the governments of the region will need to strengthen their ability to effectively manage their ethnic, religious and other conflicts as well as to manage their relations with each other.

The development of a more effective system of regional cooperation through greater economic, cultural, travel and other arrangements will also help and to stabilise the disposition and composition of military forces will help. But a lot of the problems that South Asia faces are problems that have been here now for the last four or five decades and they do not seem to be any closer to a solution. This is unfortunate because as one looks around the world, one finds that problems which for the last 50 years seemed almost intractable are gradually getting sorted out. The Cold War came to an end. Even South Africa seems to be on the verge of sorting itself out though the results may be mixed there. Peace talks are taking place in the Middle East and clearly the South Asian region remains one of the areas where there are a variety of problems that need to be sorted out. But basically these problems have to be handled by the countries within the region with outside help if they so desire.