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Security Issues in South Asia

Strobe Talbott

I'm just going to say a few words about the book and then turn to somebody who, unlike me—I'm an amateur when it comes to South Asia—is a real expert and who's writing on South Asia guided me back when I was a journalist, and was instrumental to me when I was doing a lot of homework on South Asia when I was in the State Department and knew that I was going to get that diplomatic assignment.

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My book, *Engaging India*, in a way, is a very simple, linear story told in the first person. It is about the dialogues—plural—that I conducted on behalf of President Clinton and Secretary Albright with the principal envoys of the prime ministers of India and Pakistan in the wake of the two sets of nuclear explosions in May of 1998 that took those two countries, which were long presumed, correctly, to have nuclear weapons capability, across the threshold. They became explicit nuclear weapons states which put them at odds with the global nonproliferation regime embodied in the nuclear nonproliferation treaty. But the essence of what I was asked by President Clinton and tried to do in both of these dialogues, was to work with high levels of the Indian and Pakistani leaderships and see if there was some way that we could reconcile the United States' very strong commitment to strengthen the global nonproliferation regime which, of course, includes the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with the clearly irrevocable positions and actions of India and Pakistan to be nuclear weapons states outside of the NPT.

In those terms, neither of these dialogues paid off, which is to say that we did not accomplish very much on the nonproliferation agenda per se, and I'm sorry to say that the dialogue with Pakistan didn't pay off in general very much. There are a variety of reasons for that which I discuss in the book. I think the principal reason is that during the period that I was most intensively involved, the Pakistani government was largely dysfunctional. The prime minister of Pakistan was simply too frightened, and I use that word advisedly, of a couple of constituencies. He was constantly looking at over his shoulder. Over his right shoulder, he was looking up at the military which has historically had a pattern of taking power from civilian leaders in Pakistan, as in fact happened in his case. And then he was looking over his other shoulder at the Islamists in Pakistani society and in the Pakistani political structure. Whenever I would try to engage him on a tough issue he would often say, in so many words, "please don't put pressure on me in that regard. If I give in in any way to American pressure, the next time you come you will be dealing with somebody who wears a long beard," and we all understood what that meant. The long and short of it is that that dialogue kind of petered out.

The dialogue with India did not peter out, even though Jaswant Singh, who during the course of my working with him became in effect the Foreign Minister of India, but did not get very far on the nonproliferation agenda per se. We might have been able to get the comprehensive test ban treaty signed if domestic politics, both in India and the United States, permitted, but that's another story. We actually did accomplish something that turned out to be quite important. In substantive terms, what we did was to broaden and deepen the agenda, with the United States and India engaging each other. While we never left the side of the nonproliferation and nuclear issues, we got deep into some other questions, notably including the question that is encapsulated by the title of Steve Cohen's book, *The Idea of Pakistan*. We debated that, and there's a great deal in the book about that debate. I think I can summarize Jaswant Singh's position fairly by saying he thinks

Pakistan was, is, and always will be a bad idea and that Pakistan was, is, and always will be a failed state, a rogue state, a Talibanized state. All of these are phrases that he used.

My position is quite different. My position is that it is extremely important that Pakistan not meet that description, and that to write it off, to basically accept Singh's depiction of Pakistan, would be self-fulfilling. If the United States were to give up on Pakistan, it would increase the chances that Pakistan indeed would go in a very dangerous and unstable direction.

Strobe Talbot
President, Brookings Institution

I cannot claim that we resolved that disagreement any more than we resolved the disagreement over nuclear weapons as well as some other tough issues where we remained, not at odds with each other, but holding very different views, such as Hindu nationalism: to what extent was Hindu nationalism in India compatible with the idea of India, which is a pluralistic secular democracy? We didn't crack that nut either. But we took each other seriously and we penetrated deep enough into that issue and other ones that we were able to elevate to a degree that had not been the case between American and Indian officials before, a level of trust between us. We also did that between our teams. Each of us had about half a dozen officials from various parts of the American and Indian governments, and most importantly we were able, by proxy as it were, to elevate the level of trust between the American president and the Indian prime minister.

That was not an abstract accomplishment because in the spring of 1999 the Pakistanis did something very dangerous and very foolish—they sent troops across the so-called line of control, the cease-fire line, which serves as a de facto border between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, and they occupied high ground in the Himalayas. There commenced a military encounter between India and Pakistan that was taking place between two declared nuclear weapons states. Bill Clinton was able to play an instrumental role in defusing that crisis. He did so by allowing the prime minister of Pakistan, uninvited, to come to Washington and have a real head scrubbing session with him in Blair House and essentially persuaded him, using all of the powers of persuasion that he had, which were considerable, to get him to back down, to hold his forces back over to the Pakistani side of the line of control.

Bill Clinton would not have been able to do that had it not been for the kind of passive absentee participation of a third party, and that was the prime minister of India, who trusted Clinton just enough to let him handle this crisis and to hold Indian action at bay during the Blair House talks. It's an unprovable point, but I believe very deeply that those talks would not have been successful, there would not have been sufficient trust between the Indian prime minister and an American president before this dialogue.

I would hope that in the course of our discussions we might look into the future a little bit and see what the trajectory of these three relationships are: between the United States and India, between the United States and Pakistan and between India and Pakistan. I will just conclude by saying that before President Clinton made an extremely successful visit to South Asia, which took him not only to India but also to Bangladesh and Pakistan in the spring of 2000, he got into a little bit of trouble, at least with the President of India at the time, by calling South Asia the most dangerous place in the world. I think it was a factually accurate statement. It is also factually accurate to say it is not by a long shot the most dangerous place in the world today, and that is to the credit of the

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current leadership in India, its predecessors, it's a credit to the current leadership in Pakistan and its predecessors, and it is certainly a credit to the United States of America. So with that, let me turn the podium over to Steve Cohen.

Stephen Cohen

I've been studying South Asia from 1963 when I first went to India. So, I'm an old South Asia hand. To paraphrase Shakespeare, some people are born Indian and Pakistani, some people go to India and Pakistan, but Strobe had India and Pakistan thrust upon him by the nuclear tests, and so he's been a South Asia expert since that time. His learning curve was steep, but I think he really ranks among those people who really understand the region very well.

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When I came to Brookings after 30 years as a professor, with a couple of years off in the U.S. government working for George Schultz, another Californian, I felt as if I had gone to heaven, because Brookings was a great place to be, just a wonderful place to be—no committees, that was the greatest attraction, but also there was a great emphasis on objective research. You may have heard some of the complaints about academia these days, and really Brookings offered me an opportunity to work on what I thought was important and supported me in the way I thought they should be supportive. I've written two books since coming to Brookings, I'm now working on a third and a fourth simultaneously and so I think that as a former professor it's a marvelous environment to be in and I will share some of my conclusions of my latest book , *The Idea of Pakistan*, with you.

Stephen P. Cohen
Senior Analyst, Brookings Institution

My first project at Brookings was a book on India and I think it was the first major book to conclude that India was a significant country and that we should pay more attention to it. I was cautiously optimistic about India. India will be the world's largest country and it's growing very quickly. It's a superpower in terms of information technology. There are many other qualities about it which really command our attention, not least of which is that it ran an election just recently of a country of 1.2 billion, with not a single major electoral problem, run largely on computers, held peacefully. Clearly we need technical assistance from India on how to run elections here—it was a remarkable accomplishment.

When I finished that book I turned around and thought, "what should my next project be?" and it clearly had to be something on Pakistan. Just four years ago, when I began this book, Pakistan was a troubled state. It was clearly a state of great concern in terms of American policy, in terms of Indian policy and also in terms of China and its other neighbors. Pakistan had become a nuclear weapons state. Pakistan was clearly supporting what I would regard as terrorists, although the Pakistanis argue they were freedom fighters both in Afghanistan and India. The Pakistani political system was in disarray. It was a democracy, but it was a very unstable and weak democracy. There were a lot of reasons why Pakistan was a troubled state.

I sat down and began *The Idea of Pakistan.* As the title indicates, it is really a dual biography. One is a biography of the idea of Pakistan, the history of the idea of the state of Pakistan; the other, of course, is a history of the state of Pakistan. In a nutshell, the idea of Pakistan is still a matter of contention among Pakistanis and, of course, the Indians have their own views about the kind of state Pakistan is or could be.

What I discovered and what really impressed me was that there were many ideas of Pakistan between the Islamists on the one hand and the liberals on the other hand. There really is a great debate going on in Pakistan about what Pakistan is and should be. The

founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who tragically died in 1948, really had an idea of Pakistan that resonated to me and to many others because it was very similar to the idea of Israel and the idea of the United States. Think for a minute what kind of country Pakistan is. Pakistan was to be a homeland for Indian Muslims who felt threatened by an intolerant majority. Now you can argue whether that was accurate or not, but clearly the analogy of Israel was very powerful and is there. Of course, the analogy with America is also powerful, that America was a homeland for Catholics and Protestants who felt persecuted back in Great Britain and then, of course, many religious minorities came to America and made their home here and it evolved into a secular state. Israel is a religious state that in fact is predominately secular; Pakistan is still debating intensely whether it will be a religious state and what kind of religious state it will be, or whether it will be a more or less secular state. So this idea of Pakistan is a very contentious issue among Pakistanis, but it is still evolving.

The other biography presented in the book is a biography of the state of Pakistan. In a nutshell and in one phrase, Pakistan has been an armored democracy for almost 35 years. Since the coup of 1954, Pakistan really has been dominated by the military. In a sense Pakistan is run by perhaps 1,000 families at the most, so it's sort of an oligarchy. But Pakistan has strong elements which could turn it into a liberal democracy.

So the book's purpose really was to sort out the futures of Pakistan—what kind of Pakistan might we see emerging in the next five or six years, and this is a book that projects out that far. I was able at Brookings to write not a book which dealt with today and tomorrow but a book which dealt with the day after tomorrow. So much of this really looks beyond Musharraf and beyond his successor to what might happen five or six years from now.

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I won't go into the details that are in the book, but the futures of Pakistan could range from pretty much the same thing—a failing but pretty much still struggling oligarchy, sometimes democratic sometimes not democratic, to a radical Islamic state which I would rate as a very low probability over the next five or six years, but if things went badly you could see Pakistan as a nuclear armed Iraq or Iran.

Pakistan now has 50 nuclear weapons and certainly in five or six years from now will have at least 150 and the numbers will keep on growing with delivery systems able to reach out all over the Middle East and parts of Central Asia. So Pakistan will be a very important country in terms of our military strategy.

There are other futures for Pakistan that the book discusses. A Pakistan that began to break up because of its own internal rivalries, a Pakistan which produced a great dictator along the lines of a Sukarno or Nasser, which took Pakistan in a rogue state direction and so forth. I won't bore you because the details are kind of frightening, but the conclusion is the payoff chapter, the last chapter, which discusses American policy with regard to Pakistan. At Brookings we have to write the policy chapter. So I think that Pakistan is not an irretrievably lost state. One characterization of Pakistan as a Taliban state is completely inaccurate, but Pakistan has the potential of becoming that state.

My bottom line in terms of the policy recommendations is that it's worth a major American effort, perhaps the last possible effort, to work with other countries, including India, to rescue Pakistan from these fates, and in this I think we can work with many Pakistanis, the overseas Pakistani community, many Pakistanis who are liberal Pakistanis. Moderate Pakistanis really do not want to see their country either fail or turn into a radical nuclear and terrorist prone state. So, I think there's an opportunity for the next administration and the one after that. This just simply cannot be a one-administration effort to really do more than simply prop up the present regime in Pakistan, but help it turn that corner so it becomes a state which is at peace with itself and with its leaders.

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