

Post-Cold War U.S. Engagement with South Asia: Exploring the Drivers of American Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War transformed the strategic environment in which the United States engaged with South Asia. With the disappearance of the Soviet–American rivalry, Washington initially reassessed the importance of a region historically shaped by superpower competition, but the persistence of nuclear proliferation, India–Pakistan rivalry, political instability, economic globalization, terrorism and the changing role of China soon gave South Asia renewed significance. This paper examines the principal drivers of U.S. foreign policy toward South Asia from the early 1990s to the contemporary period, focusing particularly on India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. It argues that American engagement has evolved through several overlapping phases: post-Cold War non-proliferation and regional stability; intensified engagement after India's 1998 nuclear tests; the transformation produced by the September 11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan; the emergence of the U.S.–India strategic partnership; and the subsequent Indo-Pacific emphasis shaped by China's rise. The paper demonstrates that U.S. policy cannot be explained by a single factor. Strategic interests, nuclear concerns, counterterrorism, economic opportunities, democratic values, domestic political pressures, regional crises and the balance of power have interacted continuously. The study concludes that contemporary U.S. engagement increasingly prioritizes India and the wider Indo-Pacific, while Pakistan remains important for counterterrorism, nuclear stability and regional security. South Asia therefore continues to matter to Washington, but the rationale for engagement has shifted from Cold War containment toward multidimensional competition, connectivity and regional stability.

Keywords *United States; South Asia; India; Pakistan; Afghanistan; Foreign Policy; Post-Cold War; Nuclear Proliferation; Counterterrorism; China; Indo-Pacific; Geopolitics*

Introduction

The end of the Cold War in 1991 marked a major turning point in international politics and compelled the United States to reconsider relationships that had previously been viewed primarily through the lens of superpower rivalry. South Asia was one such region. During the Cold War, Washington's policies were strongly influenced by competition with the Soviet Union, the strategic importance of Pakistan, the rise of China, the wars in Afghanistan and the broader concern that instability in the subcontinent could affect the balance of power in Asia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, these assumptions lost much of their relevance. Yet South Asia did not become strategically unimportant. Instead, new issues—including nuclear proliferation, economic liberalization, terrorism, political instability and the rise of China—created new foundations for American engagement.

The post-Cold War period is therefore better understood as a process of policy transformation rather than withdrawal. During the 1990s, Washington attempted to develop a more balanced relationship with India and Pakistan while maintaining non-proliferation objectives. India's economic reforms increased the attractiveness of the Indian market, but disagreements over nuclear policy continued to constrain relations. Pakistan remained relevant because of Afghanistan, nuclear concerns and regional security, although

sanctions and political differences created periods of estrangement. The 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests further complicated the American approach.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 produced the most dramatic shift in U.S. South Asian policy. Afghanistan became the central theatre of the American war on terrorism, and Pakistan was once again treated as a critical security partner. At the same time, Washington accelerated its relationship with India. The U.S.–India civilian nuclear agreement of 2008 represented a major change because it signalled that Washington was willing to accommodate India's nuclear status in pursuit of a broader strategic partnership. This evolution was later reinforced by growing concern about China's regional and global power.

Contemporary American engagement with South Asia therefore reflects multiple and sometimes competing objectives. Washington seeks counterterrorism cooperation, nuclear stability, economic access, maritime security, technological partnerships and a favourable regional balance. It also seeks to promote democratic governance and human rights, although strategic imperatives have often led to pragmatic compromises. The United States has consequently moved from a largely crisis-oriented policy toward a broader regional framework increasingly connected with the Indo-Pacific.

This paper examines the drivers behind this transformation. It asks what factors shaped U.S. policy after the Cold War, why relations with India improved while the relationship with Pakistan became more episodic, how Afghanistan and terrorism reshaped priorities, what role China played in the emergence of the U.S.–India partnership, and what characterizes American engagement in contemporary South Asia. The central argument is that U.S. foreign policy has been adaptive and interest-driven, with the relative importance of different drivers changing according to the international environment and regional crises.

Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this study is to analyse the evolution of U.S. engagement with South Asia after the Cold War and identify the principal drivers of American foreign policy. Specific objectives are to examine the changing importance of nuclear non-proliferation, regional security, counterterrorism, economic interests, democratic values, China's rise and domestic political influences; to compare U.S. relations with India, Pakistan and Afghanistan; and to assess the broader implications of contemporary American engagement.

The paper follows a qualitative and historical-analytical methodology. It relies on secondary literature, including academic books and journal articles, official U.S. government documents, policy studies and reputable research institutions. The analysis uses a chronological approach combined with thematic interpretation. The post-Cold War period is divided into broad phases while recognizing that policy changes rarely occurred abruptly. The study draws on foreign-policy analysis, realism, balance-of-power theory and the concept of strategic partnership.

The Post-Cold War Context and Policy Reorientation

The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the principal organizing principle of American foreign policy. Washington no longer needed to view South Asia primarily as a potential arena of communist expansion. This created an opportunity to reassess relations on the basis of nuclear security, economic interests and regional stability. India's importance became particularly visible because of its size, political institutions, location and economic potential. Pakistan, by contrast, lost some of the strategic importance it had possessed during the Soviet–American confrontation in Afghanistan.

During the early 1990s, nuclear proliferation became a central obstacle. India and Pakistan were developing nuclear capabilities outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty framework, and Washington feared that an arms race could destabilize the region. U.S. policy consequently emphasized restraint, export controls and diplomatic pressure. The sanctions environment also complicated relations with Pakistan, while non-proliferation policy limited technological cooperation with India.

At the same time, India's economic liberalization after 1991 changed the economic basis of bilateral relations. The opening of the Indian economy increased opportunities for American businesses and encouraged greater commercial engagement. As economic ties expanded, the relationship gradually moved beyond the narrow strategic calculations that had dominated earlier decades.

Pakistan's position was more complicated. Although the United States had important interests in Pakistan's stability, Washington's relationship was affected by nuclear proliferation, democratic governance, military rule and concerns about militant organizations. The disappearance of the Soviet threat reduced the immediate strategic rationale for close military cooperation. This produced a perception in Pakistan that the United States was an unreliable partner that became interested when it faced a major regional crisis and disengaged afterward.

Thus, the first post-Cold War decade produced an important paradox: the United States wanted South Asian stability but lacked a single overriding strategic framework. Nuclear security, economic engagement and crisis management coexisted as sometimes competing priorities.

Nuclear Proliferation and Regional Stability

Nuclear weapons became one of the most persistent drivers of American policy in South Asia after 1991. Washington feared that India–Pakistan rivalry could produce an arms race and that conventional crises could escalate into nuclear confrontation. The 1998 nuclear tests by both countries transformed the issue from a proliferation concern into an established regional security reality. The United States imposed sanctions, but it also recognized that complete isolation of India and Pakistan would not resolve the underlying security dilemma.

The Kargil conflict of 1999 reinforced U.S. concern about escalation. Washington became involved diplomatically in encouraging de-escalation, and the crisis demonstrated that the United States could play a significant role in managing India–Pakistan tensions even when its broader policy preferences differed from those of either government. Nuclear weapons therefore increased the value of crisis diplomacy.

Over time, Washington's approach shifted from attempting to prevent India's nuclear emergence toward integrating India into a broader international non-proliferation and strategic framework. The U.S.–India civilian nuclear agreement was a landmark in this transformation. Supporters argued that closer relations with India would encourage responsible nuclear behaviour and strengthen a major democratic partner; critics argued that the agreement weakened equal non-proliferation rules. Regardless of the debate, the agreement reflected a major change in the hierarchy of American interests.

The nuclear issue therefore demonstrates the adaptive character of U.S. foreign policy. Non-proliferation remained important, but its application was increasingly shaped by broader calculations involving India's regional role, economic potential and the changing Asian balance of power.

India as an Emerging Pillar of U.S. Policy

The transformation of U.S.–India relations is arguably the most significant long-term development in post-Cold War South Asia. During the Cold War, disagreements over non-alignment, India's relations with the Soviet Union and U.S. military cooperation with Pakistan created considerable distrust. After 1991, these structural barriers gradually weakened.

Economic liberalization created new commercial opportunities, while the growth of India's information-technology and services sectors increased American interest in bilateral economic relations. Political leaders on both sides also recognized the potential value of cooperation in science, technology, defence and education. The strategic relationship accelerated during the George W. Bush administration and continued under subsequent administrations.

The 2005 announcement of the civil nuclear cooperation framework and the eventual 2008 agreement were especially important. They symbolized U.S. willingness to treat India as a major strategic partner despite India's non-NPT nuclear status. The relationship subsequently expanded through defence agreements, military exercises, maritime cooperation, intelligence exchanges and technology partnerships.

The China factor has increasingly reinforced this partnership. As China's economic and military capabilities have grown, Washington has seen India as an important actor in maintaining a favourable balance in the Indo-Pacific. India, however, has not accepted a formal alliance relationship with the United States. Its foreign policy continues to emphasize strategic autonomy and diversified partnerships. The U.S.–India relationship is consequently based on convergence rather than complete alignment.

Academic analyses emphasize that domestic and bureaucratic factors also matter. Congressional attitudes, business interests, diaspora connections, executive leadership and perceptions within the U.S. national-security bureaucracy have influenced the pace of bilateral improvement. Thus, the rise of U.S.–India relations cannot be explained by China alone.

Pakistan and the Changing Nature of U.S. Engagement

Pakistan has remained strategically significant to the United States, but the basis of the relationship has changed repeatedly. After the Cold War, the decline of the Soviet threat reduced Pakistan's immediate value to Washington. Nuclear proliferation and concerns about democratic governance contributed to sanctions and political distance. The relationship changed dramatically after September 11, 2001, when Pakistan became a major partner in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.

Pakistan provided logistical access, intelligence cooperation and political support for U.S. operations. Washington provided substantial economic and military assistance, while Pakistan became a central partner in counterterrorism. Yet the relationship was marked by persistent distrust. U.S. officials questioned Pakistan's commitment to combating militant networks, while Pakistani policymakers objected to drone strikes, sovereignty concerns and what they perceived as unequal treatment compared with India.

The killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011 intensified these tensions. The United States became increasingly skeptical of Pakistan's reliability, while Pakistan's political and military establishment became more critical of U.S. policies. The subsequent U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan reduced one of the strongest structural reasons for close bilateral cooperation.

Nevertheless, Pakistan remains important because of its nuclear capabilities, geographic position, relations with Afghanistan and China, and potential role in regional stability. The United States therefore continues to maintain engagement, although the relationship is more selective and issue-specific than during the peak of the post-9/11 period.

Afghanistan and the War on Terror

Afghanistan became the centre of American South Asian policy after September 11, 2001. The U.S. intervention initially focused on dismantling al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban government that had provided it sanctuary. The mission later expanded into state-building, counterinsurgency, governance assistance and economic reconstruction.

Afghanistan transformed U.S. relations with Pakistan, India and other regional actors. Pakistan became a frontline partner because of geography and its influence over Afghan political and militant networks. India supported reconstruction and development but remained concerned about Pakistan's role and the possibility that instability in Afghanistan could affect its security. Iran, Russia and China also became relevant to the evolving regional environment.

The long duration of the war exposed the limitations of American power. Despite enormous military and financial resources, the United States was unable to create a political settlement that could permanently stabilize Afghanistan. The withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2021 represented a major transition in American South Asia policy. Washington retained interests in counterterrorism, humanitarian concerns and regional diplomacy but no longer maintained a large-scale military presence in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan illustrates how U.S. engagement can be driven by immediate security threats rather than long-term regional integration. It also demonstrates the limits of external state-building when local political structures, regional rivalries and social conditions are insufficiently aligned with external objectives.

Counterterrorism as a Major Driver

Counterterrorism became one of the most durable drivers of U.S. engagement with South Asia after 2001. The region contained organizations and conflict zones that Washington associated with transnational terrorism. Pakistan, Afghanistan and parts of the wider region therefore became central to American intelligence and security policy.

Counterterrorism cooperation strengthened intelligence sharing and security relationships but also created political tensions. U.S. policymakers often prioritized operational effectiveness, while regional governments were concerned about sovereignty, domestic legitimacy and public opinion. The use of unmanned aerial systems and special operations against militant targets generated particular controversy in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Over time, U.S. counterterrorism policy has become more focused on preventing the re-emergence of transnational terrorist threats rather than maintaining large-scale military occupations. This shift reflects lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the changing nature of terrorism. Nevertheless, extremist violence and instability continue to influence American assessments of South Asian security.

Economic and Commercial Interests

Economic considerations have become increasingly important in post-Cold War U.S. engagement. India's economic reforms created opportunities for American firms in technology, finance, pharmaceuticals,

aviation, energy and services. The expansion of bilateral trade and investment increased the domestic constituency in the United States for stronger relations with India.

South Asia's growing consumer markets also give the region importance in American economic policy. India's rise as a technology and innovation centre has created opportunities for cooperation in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, space, telecommunications and clean energy. Economic engagement also contributes to broader geopolitical objectives because resilient supply chains can reduce dependence on strategic competitors.

Pakistan and Bangladesh have different economic profiles but remain important for trade, development and regional connectivity. The United States has historically provided substantial development assistance and has supported economic institutions in the region. However, American economic engagement faces competition from China, which can offer large infrastructure financing and state-backed investment. This has encouraged Washington to emphasize private investment, transparent financing and partnerships with allies and multilateral institutions.

Democratic Values, Human Rights and Domestic Politics

Democratic values have been an important but inconsistent component of U.S. foreign policy toward South Asia. India's democratic institutions have facilitated closer political relations, while military rule in Pakistan has periodically generated U.S. pressure. Yet strategic requirements have often produced pragmatic exceptions. Pakistan's importance during the war in Afghanistan, for example, limited the extent to which Washington could condition cooperation on democratic reforms.

Domestic politics within the United States also influence South Asia policy. Congress plays a role through legislation, sanctions, foreign assistance and oversight. Business groups support commercial engagement, while the Indian-American diaspora has become an influential constituency in U.S. politics. Human-rights organizations, religious groups and advocacy networks can also affect public debate.

Foreign policy is therefore not produced by the executive branch alone. The interaction among the president, Congress, bureaucracy, military, intelligence agencies, business interests and civil society shapes policy outcomes. This supports the argument in foreign-policy analysis that systemic international pressures must be combined with domestic and bureaucratic explanations.

The China Factor and the Indo-Pacific Turn

The rise of China has become one of the most important contemporary drivers of U.S. engagement with South Asia. China's economic expansion, military modernization, Belt and Road Initiative and growing presence in the Indian Ocean have increased Washington's interest in India and the wider region.

The Indo-Pacific framework has expanded the geographical conception of South Asia. India is increasingly treated not simply as a South Asian state but as a major Indo-Pacific power. Maritime security, freedom of navigation, supply-chain resilience, critical technologies and defence cooperation have consequently become central elements of U.S. policy.

The Quad, involving the United States, India, Japan and Australia, represents this transformation. It provides a flexible platform for cooperation without requiring India to enter a formal alliance. The partnership also allows the United States to support regional public goods such as maritime-domain awareness, disaster relief, infrastructure and technological cooperation.

However, the China factor should not be treated as the only explanation for U.S.–India convergence. Shared democratic institutions, economic interests, technological cooperation and mutual concerns about regional stability also matter. India's strategic autonomy remains a significant constraint on American expectations. New Delhi cooperates with Washington while simultaneously maintaining relations with Russia, Iran and other states.

China has therefore accelerated an existing trend rather than creating the U.S.–India relationship from nothing. The result is a more multidimensional American presence in South Asia that connects regional issues with wider Asian geopolitics.

Major Drivers of American Foreign Policy in South Asia

An examination of the post-Cold War period reveals several interconnected drivers. The first is security. Nuclear weapons, terrorism, interstate conflict and political instability have repeatedly generated American engagement. The second is the balance of power. The changing distribution of power in Asia, especially the rise of China, has increased the strategic importance of India and the Indian Ocean.

The third driver is economic interest. India's market, technological capabilities and growing role in global supply chains have created incentives for deeper engagement. The fourth is institutional and domestic politics. Congressional preferences, bureaucratic interests, business groups and diaspora networks influence policy choices. The fifth is ideology and values, including democracy, human rights and governance, although their application varies according to strategic circumstances.

The sixth driver is crisis. American policy has often become most active during periods of conflict, including Kargil, India–Pakistan crises, Afghanistan and major terrorist attacks. Crisis-driven engagement can produce short-term diplomatic achievements but does not always create sustainable regional frameworks.

Finally, geography remains fundamental. South Asia sits between the Middle East, Central Asia, China and the Indian Ocean. Its maritime routes and proximity to major energy-producing regions give it continuing strategic value. These factors explain why the United States has repeatedly returned to the region even after periods of apparent disengagement.

Critical Assessment of U.S. Engagement

U.S. engagement has produced significant benefits but also serious contradictions. Closer ties with India have strengthened American access to a major Asian power and created opportunities in defence and technology. Cooperation with Pakistan contributed to counterterrorism efforts and supported U.S. operations in Afghanistan. American diplomacy has also played a role in reducing escalation during India–Pakistan crises.

However, policy inconsistency has sometimes damaged U.S. credibility. Pakistan's experience of changing American attention contributed to perceptions of transactional engagement. India's experience with sanctions after the 1998 nuclear tests also demonstrated the limits of a rigid non-proliferation approach. The long Afghanistan war exposed the difficulty of converting military power into sustainable political outcomes.

Another challenge is the risk of viewing South Asia primarily through the lens of great-power competition. If the region is treated only as a theatre for balancing China, the developmental needs and strategic autonomy of smaller states may receive insufficient attention. A sustainable policy must therefore combine

strategic competition with economic development, regional connectivity, climate resilience, health cooperation and diplomatic engagement.

The United States also needs to recognize that India and other South Asian states will not necessarily adopt identical positions on global issues. Strategic partnership is more realistic than alliance. Washington's ability to work with partners while respecting their autonomy will determine the durability of its regional influence.

Emerging Trends and Future Prospects

Several trends are likely to shape future U.S. engagement with South Asia. First, the U.S.–India relationship will probably remain the central pillar of American regional policy. Defence technology, space, artificial intelligence, semiconductors and maritime cooperation are likely to expand. Second, China will remain a major factor, particularly in the Indian Ocean and infrastructure connectivity.

Third, Pakistan will continue to matter for nuclear stability, counterterrorism and regional diplomacy, although its relationship with Washington is unlikely to return automatically to the high-intensity partnership of the post-9/11 era. Fourth, Afghanistan will remain a security concern without the large-scale U.S. military role that characterized the previous two decades.

Fifth, smaller South Asian states will increasingly practice hedging. They will seek Chinese investment, Indian connectivity, American technology and Japanese or European development assistance simultaneously. U.S. policy will therefore be more effective when it offers choices rather than demanding alignment.

Finally, the future of American influence will depend on economic credibility as much as military power. Infrastructure, digital connectivity, education, investment and technology partnerships can create durable relationships that military deployments alone cannot sustain.

Conclusion

The post-Cold War history of U.S. engagement with South Asia demonstrates that American foreign policy has been shaped by changing international conditions rather than by a single permanent objective. The end of the Cold War reduced the importance of ideological containment, but nuclear proliferation, regional conflict and economic globalization created new reasons for engagement. The September 11 attacks transformed Afghanistan and Pakistan into central security concerns, while the subsequent rise of China encouraged a deeper partnership with India.

The evolution of U.S.–India relations is the clearest example of this transformation. From a relationship marked by Cold War distrust and nuclear disagreement, the two countries developed extensive cooperation in defence, technology, trade and regional security. The civilian nuclear agreement symbolized this shift, while the Indo-Pacific framework and Quad have further institutionalized cooperation.

Pakistan remains important but for different reasons. Its nuclear capabilities, geographical location, counterterrorism role and connections with Afghanistan and China continue to matter, but the relationship is more selective. Afghanistan similarly demonstrates both the importance and limitations of American power. The central finding of this study is that U.S. foreign policy in South Asia is driven by an interaction of security, economic, geopolitical, domestic and ideological factors. The relative weight of these drivers changes over time. Contemporary policy is increasingly shaped by China and the Indo-Pacific, but regional stability, nuclear security and counterterrorism remain significant. A durable American role will require

consistency, respect for South Asian strategic autonomy and greater emphasis on economic and technological cooperation. Rather than viewing South Asia solely as a site of great-power competition, Washington will need to engage the region as a collection of diverse states with their own interests, aspirations and choices.

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