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“South Asia Regional Overview”
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman
June 25, 2009

In land area, South Asia, composed of the nations of Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the Maldives, is half the size of the United States. Literally, two South Asias could fit within the borders of the United States. But South Asia is home to more than 1.6 billion people, and the United States, just over 300 million. In India alone, there are over 2,000 ethnic groups and 22 official languages.

These facts are not a basis for policy making, but they should be a cause for caution. South Asia is a region of almost unimaginable complexity and we come to it as strangers, as outsiders. Unfortunately, for many Americans, this region is still seen primarily through the lens of the attacks on our country on September 11, 2001.

This association is doubly tragic: the madmen responsible for 9/11 are, of course, not from South Asia, and their true ambitions are directed toward the Arab Middle East, not the Subcontinent. But worse still, South Asia’s own problems have become horribly engrossed in the struggle we face to destroy the threat of radical extremism.

Before 9/11, India and Pakistan had fought several wars, and gone to the brink of war many times over. Afghanistan was a badly ravaged country even before the Taliban took over and before al-Qaeda set up shop and began plotting the attacks on our country. Pakistan was not a stable democracy before we called upon that government to assist us in the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

And, it should be recalled, before 9/11, the United States could not honestly claim that our commitment to either Afghanistan or Pakistan was sustained, deep or serious. It wasn’t. We used them and they used us. And we assumed their dysfunctional governments and failing economies were problems of little consequence to us.

We made a lot of assumptions: that the fundamental political instability in the region could be contained by states and constitutions, and that they would make the conflicts between religions, tribes and ethnicities go away; that flags and governments would suffice in place of

genuine political reconciliation; that the conflicts between states and within states would not bleed over borders, or at least not beyond the region. In short, that the complexity of South Asia could be sealed-up and shrink-wrapped into tidy national packages and then left in cold storage.

Suffice it to say, these assumptions didn't pan out.

So today we are engaged in extensive military operations and massive efforts at governance and capacity building. At a time when our own economic and fiscal position is strained, the circumstances in Afghanistan and Pakistan still absolutely necessitate these extraordinary efforts.

Like many, I remain concerned that all the money and initiative and effort—and let us never forget, the blood of our heroic troops—will be for naught if we don't start making some very fundamental changes in how we do business.

We've poured billions of dollars in both economic and military assistance into both Afghanistan and Pakistan and in many cases it's hard not to conclude that the money was badly spent, if not completely wasted. We've fought for years in Afghanistan and it can't be truthfully claimed that the country is safe and getting safer. Moreover, the current counterinsurgency campaign in Pakistan, though badly overdue, has given rise to a massive displacement of approximately 2 million people. The anger and desperation of this population should give us pause, if the continued, growing public outrage about civilian casualties caused by our drone strikes wasn't enough.

I have no doubt that we and our allies will not be able to destroy al-Qaeda and block the revanchist dreams of the Afghan Taliban and other militants in Pakistan without violence. The fanatic ambitions of these groups leave us and our allies no real alternative.

But what is becoming clear is that while our own understanding of the regional security, ethnic and tribal dynamics is growing, so too is the popular backlash against the methods we've been using. So, something needs to change. Albert Einstein's warning holds true today: "We can't solve our problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

In approving billions of dollars of assistance, and supporting the heroic efforts of our troops and our diplomats and development officers on the ground, Congress has done a great deal. But I wonder if perhaps we wouldn't do more if we helped infuse a bit more circumspection about our ability to buy or impose changes in the interests and perceptions of other states; a bit more cautiousness about our capacity to build the capacity of others; and, maybe, a bit more modesty about the ability of the U.S. military to deliver political reconciliation and economic development.

Finally, I would be badly remiss if I didn't say a few words about the other states in the region. Truthfully, there is too much to say. With India we are moving forward on what I believe can be and will be a true strategic partnership, one built on both shared values and genuine cooperation across a broad range of shared interests. Though people tend to focus on cooperation on nuclear energy, I believe the potential of the relationship is much, much greater. The recent Indian elections hold out real hope of a strong government in New Delhi that is ready and willing to address the many political and economic challenges facing a country that, despite its shining achievements in the "new economy," remains overwhelming rural, agrarian, and impoverished. I think there is a tremendous opportunity for us to engage successfully with this government across the full spectrum of our interests. Special relationships aren't announced,

they're built one agreement and one success at a time. It's time for New Delhi and Washington to get to work.

Sri Lanka is emerging from an awful civil war, whose recent conclusion only opens new questions about how the Sinhalese and the Tamils can reconcile themselves to sharing one government and one nation. The end of the war—and we all pray that the war is truly over—has left thousands upon thousands injured, displaced, or embittered. I think the United States should offer its assistance to relieving the suffering of the displaced and, as much as we can, while fully respecting the sovereignty of Sri Lanka, should encourage true national reconciliation.

Bangladesh and Nepal both are transitioning to new and more democratic governments, which is good news, most of all to their own citizens. But I remain concerned that the fundamental political problems in both societies remain, by and large, unresolved. Ethnic tensions, endemic corruption, and political violence affect both countries and, I would argue, are going to continue until a broader consensus within these societies is achieved.

Bhutan and the Maldives are both places where a little bit of U.S. assistance can go a long way. In Bhutan the progress toward democracy is heartening and could probably benefit from some U.S. assistance in strengthening the capacity of the National Assembly. The Maldives is in growing jeopardy from increasingly violent weather, rising sea-levels, and a disturbing increase in local Islamic militancy. Again, a small amount of U.S. help can help the Maldives government cope with its own problems before they become problems for others or ourselves.

If we should have learned one thing from that awful day in 2001 it should be this: either we visit bad neighborhoods on our terms or, eventually, they're going to visit us on theirs.

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