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The United States Should Strengthen Ties with the Smaller Countries of South Asia

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Last week, the United States and India concluded the fourth strategic dialogue on Asia-Pacific regional affairs, illustrating the importance that Washington places on its relationship with New Delhi. India's surging economy has deepened interest among US policymakers eager to advance bilateral ties with a large country in the region that shares a democratic identity. Factors contributing to this shift include China's ascent as an economic and strategic power and the possibility that the US military may favor an offshore strategy in the future.

Nilanthi Samaranyake, Strategic Studies Analyst at CNA, argues that "For too long, the United States has ignored the potential benefits of fostering relations with the smaller countries in South Asia. Prospects for advancing US security ties with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Nepal deserve serious examination."

However, India should not be the sole hope on which US security strategy rests in South Asia. US relations with this new strategic partner are guaranteed to experience bumps, as evidenced by the recent rejection of US firms in the Indian Air Force's Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) competition. Moreover, India has long maintained a strong non-aligned foreign policy tradition, enforced by policymakers who face continual domestic political pressures not to appear too pro-American. This is not to say that the US-India strategic partnership appears ready to fail. Still, one possible scenario could find relations with India not progressing as quickly as desired, while relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan remain in tatters, leaving minimal US relations with other South Asian states. Even if this scenario does not occur, the United States cannot afford to ignore the need to forge deeper strategic relationships with the smaller countries in the region.

Relations with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Nepal hold many unexplored possibilities and reasons for expansion. First, as Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert Blake pointed out in Congressional testimony earlier this year, all these countries are governed by democratically elected leaders. As with the "shared values" discourse supporting greater relations with democratic India, the United States has a similar foundation for fostering ties with these nations. Second, three of these countries are maritime states. Given the importance of securing Indian Ocean sea lanes, through which 50 percent of the world's container traffic and 70 percent of the world's crude and oil products transit, it is in US interests to promote maritime security cooperation among South Asian countries and deepen defense ties with these navies as a form of burden-sharing in the Indian Ocean.

Further, smaller countries provide better test cases for realizing new strategic visions and more permissive environments in which to experiment than do the larger states of India and Pakistan, where constraints are omnipresent and the stakes are much higher. In the *Harvard International Review*, Doug Lieb has discussed the importance of analyzing international relations in "marginal states" that are often overlooked in a structural realist worldview that privileges the study of large countries. The smaller countries of South Asia could be easy wins for the United States, especially in the face of increasing Chinese dealings there.



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US ties are probably the strongest with Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority and democratic nation. Given the country’s vulnerability to nontraditional security threats such as cyclones and earthquakes, the Bangladeshi military would appreciate increased help with weather forecasting technologies and cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief issues. Before the next environmentally related cataclysm occurs, the United States should further develop security relations with Bangladesh.

Like Bangladesh, the Maldives is a relatively pro-American Muslim democracy. It faces the challenge of countering Somali pirates and Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists from Pakistan seeking harbor on any one of its 26 atolls. The Maldives National Defense Forces would likely not be equipped to handle a potential Mumbai-style attack on its tourism industry and could benefit from US counterterrorism assistance.

US relations with Sri Lanka have been strained due to charges of human rights violations during its defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. Yet as Sri Lanka’s economic and diplomatic ties with China grow, the United States must try not to alienate Sri Lanka given its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. In fact, the US Navy could benefit from exchanges with the Sri Lankan military. For example, learning the swarm attack tactics that were employed during the country’s civil war could help the United States prepare for the threat it may face from Iran in the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, the Sri Lankan navy could benefit from US assistance in transitioning its patrols from the north to the south, where roughly 300 ships pass the tip of the island daily.

Regarding Nepal as it draws down its forces and integrates Maoist rebels into the military as part of its peace process, US security cooperation and expertise could be critical in this operation. Finally, judicial capacity-building would be another low-cost way to advance US ties with all these countries.

By comparison, China has been strengthening its ties to South Asian countries, especially in the form of infrastructure development. Chinese port construction in Chittagong, Bangladesh; Hambantota, Sri Lanka; Gwadar, Pakistan; and Kyaukpyu, Burma have all been cited as prominent examples of a supposed “string of pearls” that China may be seeking to build in an area outside its traditional sphere of influence. Regardless of actual Chinese intentions in South Asia, Indian analysts have voiced concern about being “encircled” by China’s economic, military, and diplomatic inroads with these countries, including Nepal.

In recognition of the growing challenges South Asia presents to the United States, experts are beginning to discuss ways of reorganizing the US government’s bureaucracy to address the region’s new realities. Bruce Riedel and Stephen Cohen have proposed the creation of a “South Asia Command” (SACOM) to overcome the seam issues posed by Pacific Command (PACOM) and Central Command (CENTCOM) separating India and Pakistan in US defense policy. Others have suggested an Indian Ocean Region Command (IORCOM). With such talk and broader discussions about a realignment of US force posture in Asia, now is the time to also examine relations with the smaller countries in South Asia and the prospects for building partner capacities in the region.

As the United States winds down its commitment in Afghanistan, while confronting unbounded uncertainty in its relationship with Pakistan, it can look to the promise of partnership with India only to a certain extent. If disappointments such as the MMRCA rejection happen too often, or if India tests nuclear weapons again and Washington re-imposes sanctions, the United States would be left without strong security partners in the region. For too long, the United States has ignored the potential benefits of fostering relations with the smaller countries in South Asia. Prospects for advancing US security ties with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Nepal deserve serious examination.

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