

CHAPTER 11

South Asia

South Asia embraces some of the world's most volatile, impoverished, conflict-ridden countries. It has both deep and persistent problems and untapped potential. The Eurasian heartland, the maritime, and the East Asian geostrategic realms form a crescent around the region, which abuts and influences lands rimming the Indian Ocean. The countries included within South Asia are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan. Myanmar, ruled by the British as part of India until 1937, lies on the margins of the region and is also tied to both East Asia and the Asia-Pacific Rim.

The South Asian subcontinent is not a shatterbelt, even though much of it is internally fragmented, wracked by rebellions within states and conflicts among them. What distinguishes it from a shatterbelt is the dominance of India that keeps the major powers from establishing positions of influence within the region and the absence of natural resources which diminishes their interest.

South Asia and the Middle East are geographically connected by Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan, which is organically part of South Asia, has been in conflict with India since its independence. It has become increasingly involved in Middle Eastern affairs through its ties to Afghanistan via the Pashtun lands that straddle the border between South Asia and the Middle East. India's interests in Afghanistan are aimed at preventing Pakistan from expanding its base of power by drawing Afghan Pashtuns into its orbit.

To the north, the Himalayas block China from India. While its towering peaks and high altitudes provide India with a substantial defensive screen, these harsh mountain conditions did not prevent China from overrunning Aksai Chin, at the western end of the border, and Arunachal Pradesh, at its eastern end, in the Sino-Indian War of 1962. China withdrew from the eastern end but retains full control of Aksai Chin.

India, the core of the region, while not yet a major power, is overwhelmingly the regional power. It has the potential to join the ranks of the world's major powers but has not lived up to its potential. Using our four pillars of major powerdom, India is a major military and economic force. It has the third-largest GDP in the world as well as a formidable blue-water navy. However, it falls short with respect to the ideological and political cohesiveness pillars. Ideologically, India has offered itself as a model of nonviolent democracy and neutrality. In reality, India is beset with internal and external conflicts, many of a violent nature. The stubborn social stratification of the caste system, although officially banned, remains a barrier to political cohesiveness as well as economic mobility and ethnolinguistic diversity. Even during the Cold War, many nations which responded to Jawaharlal Nehru's call for nonalignment

developed political and military ties with the United States or the USSR and engaged in conflicts among themselves. This included India, which turned to Moscow for weapons needed for its wars with Pakistan.

Historical Background

Under the British Raj, most of South Asia was a unified geopolitical region. Only Nepal and part of Bhutan lay outside the boundaries of British India. Since the end of British rule and the emergence of the subcontinent's independent states, a divided South Asia has known little but conflict. India and Pakistan have fought three wars. The 1947–48 War of Partition resulted in anywhere from one to two million people killed and fourteen million refugees—8.6 million of whom were Muslims and 5.3 million of whom were Hindus. Myanmar (then Burma) had split off from British India in 1937 and gained its independence in 1948. From that time, it was torn by civil war until 1962, when unstable and repressive military juntas took control. For nearly two decades, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), which also became independent in 1948, was in the grip of a bloody separatist rebellion by Tamils against the ruling majority Buddhist Sinhalese. Peace was finally achieved in 2009. The Tamils live in the north and east of the country and are Hindu. The independent state of Bangladesh was created when East Bengal, which was then East Pakistan, split off from West Pakistan, with the help of Indian troops, in the war of 1971–72, in which five hundred thousand were killed.

Thus, the unity which the Mughal (Mogul) and British Empires imposed on South Asia has been shattered by the political divisions and religious and sectarian strife of the past half-century. While neither of those empires fully encompassed all parts of the region, their rules embraced most of its territories and brought administrative order. The Muslim Mughal Empire reached its greatest territorial expanse by the end of the seventeenth century, when it extended from its base in Afghanistan east to Orissa on the Bay of Bengal and south through nearly all of the Deccan. Only the island of Ceylon, the northern Himalayas, and Burma lay outside its bounds.

As Mughal rule crumbled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British power began to extend over the subcontinent. The British Raj, too, never succeeded in fully encompassing all of South Asia. It failed to conquer Nepal and much of Bhutan, and while Burma proper had become a British colony, the rebellious Shan states of eastern Burma had only protectorate status, their local chiefs exercising political controls. At that time, the Government of India Act established the All-India Federation, and a framework of unity was put firmly into place. In accordance with this act, the native states were given freedom in domestic policies in exchange for British control of foreign affairs, defense, and communications.¹ Britain tried to extend its rule to Afghanistan, engaging in two wars during the nineteenth century before the border of British India was fixed by the Durand Line in 1893. The third Afghan war in 1919 ended with Afghanistan freeing itself from British influence by getting full control of its own foreign affairs.

While South Asia is not, and never was, a completely unified geopolitical region, it is a distinct geographical region, possessing many cultural and human similarities and separated from the rest of Asia. The Indian subcontinent stands aloof from its neighbors, behind a barrier of rimming deserts, mountains, and monsoonal forests. Its best connections to the outside are via the Indian Ocean.

Within South Asia, the population is most heavily concentrated along the Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Indus River valleys in the north and along the east and west coasts. It thereby

forms an almost continuous population ring around the Deccan—the highly dissected southern half of the Indian subcontinent whose center is semiarid. While population densities in the rural Deccan are high—over six hundred persons per square mile—they do not begin to compare with the densities of the great northern interior valleys that form the Plains of Hindustan, nor with the densities of the east and west coastal plains, which contain most of the big cities, industries, and transportation networks. There the mixed rural and urban populations range from twelve hundred to over five thousand persons per square mile. The populations of the Plains of Hindustan cross national boundaries in both the Punjab and Bengal to further intertwine the geopolitical fates of Pakistan and Bangladesh with that of India.

South Asia's geopolitical distinctiveness is influenced by its dependence upon agriculture and its inward economic orientation, as well as its geographical isolation caused by its rimming mountains. Over half of the workforce of the region is dependent upon agriculture (table 11.1). Much of this agriculture is traditional farming, although significant strides in modernization have been made in parts of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. For the most part, the region feeds itself, the exception being Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest countries. Bangladesh's agricultural production is subject to the vicissitudes of disastrous floods, droughts, and monsoonal storms, making it dependent on food aid imports.

Exchange with other nations is of secondary concern to many South Asian countries, whose trade in goods and services as a percentage of GDP averages a little over 5 percent. Three exceptions are Sri Lanka, whose exports of textiles, clothing, tea, gems, and rubber and imports of machinery, transportation equipment, petroleum, and sugar represent over 20 percent of its GDP; the Maldives, whose economy is based on tourism, shipping, and fishing; and India.

Although India's foreign trade is only 17 percent of its GDP, its offshore software and outsourcing business-processing industries command over half the world market, and its market economy is growing rapidly. Because of its large pool of scientists and skilled technology workers, India has considerable potential for expanding its high-tech industry. Software exports, mostly to the United States, continue to increase, as have exports of pharmaceuticals.

The concept of South Asia as an independent geopolitical region separated from surrounding geostrategic realms and their regional subdivisions was first advanced by this writer in 1963.² It diverged from the worldview of Halford Mackinder, who had considered India, the Southeast Asian peninsula, and China to be a unified monsoonal coastland. In

Table 11.1. South Asia Population and Trade

<i>Country</i>	<i>Population (millions)</i>	<i>Leading Export Market</i>	<i>Leading Import Market</i>
India	1,236,344,631	European Union	European Union
Pakistan	196,174,380	European Union	European Union
Bangladesh	166,280,712	European Union	China
Myanmar	55,746,253	Thailand	China
Nepal	30,986,975	India	India
Sri Lanka	21,866,445	European Union	India
Bhutan	733,643	India	India
Maldives*	393,595	Thailand	Singapore

Sources: Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook 2014*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2119rank.html>; list of countries by leading trade partners, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_leading_trade_partners, updated April 2014.

* 2.5 percent of the Maldivian labor force engages in fishing and, minimally, in agriculture because of the infertility of its coral soils.

his 1919 volume, he depicted this region as one of the six “natural” regions of the world.³ In continued support of this thesis, he argued in 1943 that “a thousand million people of ancient oriental civilization inhabit the lands of India and China. They must grow to prosperity. . . . Then they will balance the other thousand million who live between the Missouri and the Yenisei.”⁴ The latter reference is to the heartland and North Atlantic units working in cooperation with one another.

What this worldview failed to appreciate was that the geopolitical destinies of India and China could not be shared because of their unique geographical and cultural-historical settings. Even in Mackinder’s time, as today, the two had different demographic and resource bases and different sets of strategic concerns. China was an essentially homogeneous nation caught between the Eurasian heartland and Asia Pacifica, with much of its space belonging to the continental interior. In contrast, India’s populace was highly diverse racially, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously. Its Indian Ocean strategic orientation was reflected in the historic reach of its sailors and merchants to Southeast Asia’s islands and to the eastern and southern coasts of Africa—the two major regions where the Indian diaspora first took root. In addition, the ecumenes of the two great civilizations were too far removed from each other geographically to develop significant interaction or to enable one power to dominate the other militarily.

Although the historic buffer zone of Tibet and the Himalayas that lies between East and South Asia has been breached by China in recent decades, India holds the dominant position within its region. In general, the towering Himalayan mountain ranges continue to bar the route to northern India. They wall off Tibet from the lands to the south and, while the northern part of Azad Kashmir, which Pakistan ceded to China, now connects China’s Xinjiang to Pakistan, it is too remote an outpost to serve the Chinese as a serious military threat to northern India.

During the course of the Cold War, the USSR was able to gain some influence in India, while at various times China and the United States became important military backers of Pakistan. However, these inroads did not fundamentally alter the geopolitical status of South Asia. It remained a separate and inwardly oriented geopolitical region, most of which took a neutralist posture in the struggle between the Western and Communist realms. Pakistan’s ties to the West and China’s rise as a major power did not alter Pakistan’s fundamental geostrategic orientation, which remained South Asian. Its major concern was its struggle with India over Kashmir, but it also felt threatened by the Soviet inroads into Afghanistan.

South Asia was spared from becoming another Cold War shatterbelt by the combination of physical vastness, a huge population that has now reached 1.7 billion, an inward economic and cultural orientation, a common political history, and India’s dominant role. However, while it stands apart from adjoining geostrategic realms and maintains independent geopolitical regional status, the unity that the Indian subcontinent once enjoyed eludes it today.

Regional Geopolitical Overview

INDIA AND PAKISTAN

India gained its independence in 1947. It adopted a policy of nonalignment or neutralism in the Cold War, based in part on what Jawaharlal Nehru described as its geographical position: “India is big and India is happily situated. . . . [A]n invasion or attack on India . . . will give