

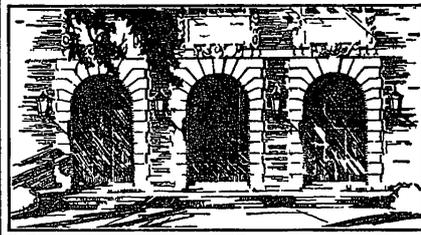
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Soviet Interests
in South Asia

Stephen P Cohen

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SOVIET INTERESTS IN SOUTH ASIA

Testimony of Stephen P Cohen
Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives,
Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs,
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Stephen P Cohen is Professor of Political Science, University of Illinois at Urbana. He is the author or co-author of four books on South Asia, including The Indian Army and The Pakistan Army, published by the University of California Press. He has served as a consultant for the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, the Asia Society, and the U S government, and directs the South Asian Security Project at Urbana. Biography in Who's Who in the U S

I do not appear before you today as an expert on Soviet affairs. Rather I am here as one who has lived and worked in South Asia for twenty years studying that region's security and foreign policy, which necessarily includes some amount of Kremlin-watching.

In 1963 there was virtually no important regional support for the Soviet Union except for the pro-Soviet wing of the Communist Party of India and a few "friends" in the Congress Party. The Communist Party of Pakistan was outlawed, and in any case had but a small following. Russian influence in Afghanistan was competitive but marginal, and was insignificant in Nepal and Ceylon. The Soviets were still agonizing over the fulfillment of a major arms deal with India--the licensed manufacture of the MiG-21 interceptor--but Indian defense planners had already turned to the West to rebuild their obsolete forces after the Sino-Indian war of 1962. Indeed, American and Commonwealth air forces had just participated in a joint exercise with their Indian Air Force counterparts. India adopted some of the McNamara innovations in defense planning and several hundred U.S. military personnel were in India to advise and consult. There remained a large U.S. civilian and military presence in Pakistan, which at that time liked to term itself the "most allied" of American allies, participating in CENTO, SEATO and bi-lateral pacts with the U.S.

By 1983 the Soviets are firmly and probably permanently entrenched in a devastated Afghanistan. They have cordial relations with Pakistan even as they accuse it of aiding "insurgents" in Afghanistan, their symbolic economic projects, especially the Karachi steel mill, are on target. Their presence in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh is minimal, but that certainly is not the case in India.

which has become closely linked to the Soviet economy and defense establishment through massive purchases of weapons often bartered for Indian-made consumer goods. Ironically, some of these goods are manufactured in plants established by Western multinationals who seek back-door entry into the Soviet Union. The Indian Air Force is virtually a display-case of recent Soviet technology; the Navy is more than half Soviet or Polish in origin, and the Army is newly dependent upon the Soviet Union for armor. All of this, one might add, program of military "self-reliance" begun by Krishna Menon and Nehru twenty-five years ago.

Does the above picture in 1983 represent a steady expansion of Soviet influence in South Asia between 1963 and 1983? No, it does not, with the exception of Afghanistan--on the way to becoming a Soviet Central Asian republic in all but name. Soviet influence was greater in 1966-71, when the U S had politically withdrawn from the region. The Russians presided over the Tashkent meeting, which formally ended the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, they then provided some military assistance to Pakistan, and in 1971, after the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship, they greatly increased their weapons supplies to India. They also proposed a regional security treaty (that would have tied together a number of important Asian states) which was given serious consideration in at least New Delhi. However, the Soviets failed in their broader strategic objective of uniting the two major South Asian states into a de facto alliance that might better serve Soviet interests.

The present situation is not a case of more or less Soviet

influence than in 1963 or 1970, it is a different kind of influence more brutal more direct, far more expensive, but remaining fixed upon the same purpose

Soviet Regional Interests

The interests of most states generally fall into one of two categories direct and indirect Direct interests involve relations with regions or other countries which are themselves important Indirect interests involve third parties State A is interested in State B because of B's relationship to C Change the B-C relationship (or the A-C relationship), and A-B ties vanish, at least as far as A is concerned

Soviet interests in South Asia are almost all indirect and strategic in purpose The exception is the current involvement in Afghanistan, although some of the events that led to it may have also been more relevant to Soviet policy elsewhere than to Afghanistan or even South Asia As for India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, the Soviet connection is based on indirect strategic, not ideological or cultural or economic considerations In India, where the Soviets move most freely and are most enthusiastically received, there is little personal warmth or ideological fervor behind the relationship To the Soviets India remains a bourgeoisie society at the top and a pre-revolutionary nightmare at the bottom, Indira Gandhi cracks down on the Indian Communists when it suits her domestic needs

Soviet interests in South Asia certainly are not economic Although the Indian trade and barter arrangement is convenient the

Soviets are under no compulsion to export their weapons nor are they dependent upon any raw materials or finished products from South Asia. The Soviets see no military threat to themselves from South Asia, nor do any South Asian countries belong to an alliance directed against them. The Soviets, after all, were able to live in harmony with a Shah of Iran who was heavily dependent upon American weapons, and earlier normalized their relations with Pakistan when after 1965 Ayub Khan made it clear to them that Pakistan was not in CENTO or SEATO out of anti-Soviet reasons. In any case, there has been virtually no serious American military presence in South Asia for many years, as we have spent our energies and treasure elsewhere, yet it was this very period, that saw the greatest expansion of Soviet military and economic aid to the area.

Finally, some see the Soviet connection to India as important because of the latter's role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This fails to take into account the inverse relationship between this role and Soviet interests in India. It is undoubtedly useful to the Soviets to have a friendly state once again assume importance in the NAM, but India is neither a showcase of Soviet technology nor a trustworthy flunky, Cubans and others have been available for several years to express the authentic Soviet view in this forum.

Soviet interests in South Asia are primarily strategic in nature and derive from the long-standing Sino-Soviet hostility. They are thus indirect, and fluctuate with the Sino-Soviet relationship and with that between individual South Asian countries and the Chinese. Nothing brings Soviet generals offering hardware to India quicker or

intensifies the invective over Radio Peace and Progress more than the prospect of Sino-Indian negotiations over their border dispute. Similarly, nothing troubles the Soviets more about Pakistan than that country's continuing ties to China, even the new American connection is insignificant in comparison. This was also true in the 1960s. American intelligence flights from Pakistan and Turkey did not directly threaten the Soviet Union, and such "national means of verification" have since become legitimized in various SALT treaties. Far more troubling to the Russians is the sight of another major communist power exercising an independent diplomacy indeed one aimed at easing pressure on China itself by strengthening other states with a common strategic interest. Particularly galling is the direct road link between China and Pakistan, which allows direct passage between Sinkiang and Pakistan, and traverses the Karakorams only a few miles away from Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor, this desolate area is the meeting place of four historic empires (the British Indian, the Persian, the Russian and the Chinese). The Soviets must regard it as having great symbolic value, for they occupied it immediately upon their invasion of Afghanistan.

Compared with their sensitivity to China, the growing Soviet interest in the Indian Ocean--or even in the revival of an American regional role--is secondary. The Soviet Union is a land-based imperial state, excessively fearful of diversity on its borders. China represents one kind of challenge to Soviet regional domination, the fall of a pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan represented another. Both have implications for the permanence of Soviet control over

Eastern Europe

While I believe that the most important reason behind Soviet interest in South Asia derives from their military, ideological, and strategic concerns vis a vis China, the pursuit of such an interest necessarily produces side effects. Over a long period of time civil and military bureaucracies acquire a stake in the maintenance of the relationship, and changing it can be difficult in the face of institutional inertia. But the Soviets have shown themselves to be adept at switching sides when opportunities arise and "objective conditions" alter. The present structure of Soviet commitment and interest in South Asia is vulnerable in three ways.

First, if Sino-Soviet relations improved neither would have as great an incentive to support what they believe to be their regional surrogates, Pakistan and India. I do not regard this as very likely. Somewhat more probable are two other developments. One involves Soviet interests in Iran and the Persian Gulf and the possibility of a major Soviet role there. Should the Gulf's politics become unstable, some Russians might argue that a warmer relationship with Pakistan might pay considerable dividends, even at the cost of strained relations with India. For the Soviets the calculation would be the relative value of India vis a vis China versus the relative value of Pakistan vis a vis the Gulf and Afghanistan, this might also detach Pakistan from Chinese and American influence. I do not see the present Pakistani leadership subscribing to such a view but there are those within the military and in some political parties who have argued for a much closer tie to the Soviets. From Pakistan's

perspective this would also raise the prospect of militarily de-linking India from the Soviet Union. India would thus be faced with a genuine strategic dilemma. It is simply less useful than Pakistan in any grouping aimed at the Soviet Union. Yet the Chinese would have little incentive to normalize their relationship with India, except perhaps to embarrass the Soviets (the India-China and Soviet-China border disputes being very similar in origin).

The third alternative to the present structure of Soviet influence in south Asia would be an increase in regional cooperation free from Soviet control. There are signs that Pakistan and India agree on one thing at least: the Soviet presence in Afghanistan is a threat to the region, not just Pakistan. Were India to conclude that closer ties to Pakistan lessened its need for Soviet arms and that its own power was more than sufficient to enable it to negotiate on an equal basis with China, it might "do a deal" with both antagonists and emerge as a powerful regional leader.

To summarize, Soviet interests in South Asia are largely indirect, and derive from its more important conflict with the People's Republic of China. India is one of the few countries with a live border with China, and could be vitally important to the Soviets in the eventuality of a war with China. There is no evidence that the Indians have agreed to such a role (and the Soviets must be nervous that in such a crisis the Indians would not deliver), but only India and Vietnam have the capacity and interest to assist the Soviets in balancing Chinese power. Pakistan, a close ally of China, has been important in a negative sense: the Soviets were as eager to undercut

Chinese influence in the 70s and 80s as they were once eager to undercut American influence however, the prospect of an extended occupation in Afghanistan and Pakistan's good ties to the Islamic world are relatively new factors that have nothing to do with China and suggest a quite different line of policy

The Soviets in Afghanistan

I find it difficult to be optimistic about negotiating the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Soviets have stated on more than one occasion that Afghanistan must not only continue to pursue a foreign policy compatible with Soviet interests, but that the revolution of 1978 must not be aborted. They have been willing to pay a very high price for their Afghan war not because they see Afghanistan as a route to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean (or even the Persian Gulf) but because Afghanistan now falls into that category of allied border state which includes Mongolia and Eastern Europe. Force had to be used to save a pro-Soviet group in Afghanistan because it could not be as easily used in Poland, the Soviets wanted to show the world (and especially those who might challenge them in the WTO countries) that if pushed too far they could still act. They will not "trade" Afghanistan for Nicaragua or Cuba, but they will agree to talk, talk, talk, as long as they can continue to build an infrastructure of loyal--if not happy--Afghans. This is going to take a long time and the Soviets would be most pleased if the U S were to offer guarantees that might ease the process of Sovietization. Pakistani and Iranian support for the Mujahiddin is troublesome but the Soviets have the option of forcing even more refugees across the borders further

destabilizing these two countries (Modern technology and terror tactics has made the term "decimation" obsolete, as over a quarter of the Afghan people are now either dead or in forced exile)

While this process goes on, the Soviets will take whatever benefits they can from Afghanistan. Natural gas and mineral resources are promising and may yet pay for some of the cost of occupation, so is the use of Afghan territory for military forces which are oriented towards the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. These, however, are the perquisites of imperial expansion, not its cause.

American Policy

Finally, what is America's role in the region? Until 1964-5 the U S saw South Asia very much as the Soviets saw it - an arena of conflict with other global rivals. For the U S these rivals were China and the Soviet Union. After 1965 several things happened - both the Soviet and the Chinese threat were sharply downgraded, Indo-Pakistan conflict (especially the 1965 war) led to disillusionment about the prospect of a coordinated regional anti-communist policy, concerns about internal subversion in these and other South Asian states faded, and, above all, Vietnam became a national obsession, necessitating a reduction of commitment elsewhere. When the region momentarily emerged as important in 1971 it was purely as a function of the new Chinese connection, only when the Indians detonated a nuclear explosion in 1974 (and Pakistan began its own nuclear program) did the region command renewed official American interest (and, that was largely because of the fear that nuclear weapons would spread to the Middle East). Oddly, while American

policy has been steered by these indirect strategic considerations, there has been a substantial increase in direct trade, cultural, educational, and family ties between the U S and the major states of South Asia. The personal basis for better relations between the U S, India and Pakistan was laid down during the same period that political ties to the region deteriorated.

I think the time has come for a major reassessment of American policy in South Asia. This reassessment must recognize three points

-- First, the Soviets are likely to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely. They will not be forced out by Mujahiddin action, but neither should the U S assist them in their brutal pacification. It is important to lend support and encouragement to the Mujahiddin should that time come when the Soviets undergo a change of mind and as a reminder to others that we are willing to support alternatives to totalitarianism, left or right.

-- Second, South Asia itself has changed dramatically from the days when the U S tried to manage the regional balance of power. India and Pakistan are truly non-aligned in that they seek to keep both superpowers out of the region. Further, India especially has emerged as a regional great power with a full-fledged missile and nuclear capability around the corner, Pakistan, although militarily inferior to its giant neighbors, is in many ways the most powerful and developed country in the Islamic world. Both states have shown renewed interest in working together in the context of a new South Asian regional

association, it is very much in America's interest to support and encourage such regionalism

-- Third, America's fluctuating relationship with China is viewed in the region as a matter of utmost importance. Close U S -PRC ties are misread in Delhi as implying a U S -PRC-Pakistan alliance directed against India. The Soviets eagerly spread this line through their captive media sources. They recognize that China is not a superpower (or even half a superpower), and correctly assess India's strategic potential, an American China policy that fails to do so serves neither our interests in China or in South Asia.

The above suggests a long-term, albeit limited, strategic relationship with the major South Asian states, supporting them in their adjustment to the new Soviet presence and recognizing their resurgence as thoroughly independent states with interests that may not always harmonize with ours. Such a policy has as a major asset the natural attraction of American technology, culture, and society to the elites of these states. They are repelled by the Soviets, but will they be offered a choice in the matter?