

Event Transcript

Reflecting on 30 Years of Research and Analysis on South Asia

The Stimson Center

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Featuring:

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Adil Sultan, Dean of Faculty of Aerospace and Strategic Studies and Acting Chair of Department of Strategic Studies, Air University

Elizabeth Threlkeld (moderator), Senior Fellow and Director, South Asia Program, Stimson Center

Brian Finlay (opening remarks), President and CEO, Stimson Center

Event Description

Over the past three decades, the Stimson South Asia program has worked with analysts and officials in South Asia and beyond to promote stability and reduce the risk of escalation in the region. Amid periods of both tension and engagement, the program has sought to foster cooperation and regional understanding through research, analysis, and outreach to leading and rising experts in South Asia. As we celebrate our program's 30th Anniversary, please join us for a panel discussion reflecting on three decades of change and continuity in South Asia's security landscape featuring former Visiting Fellows from the past 30 years.

More information and event video available at: <https://www.stimson.org/event/reflecting-on-30-years-of-research-and-analysis-on-south-asia/>

Event Transcript

Brian Finlay:

Well, a very good morning, good afternoon, good evening from wherever you are tuning in from. My name is Brian Finlay. I'm the President and CEO here at the Stimson Center where we are kicking off a very happy season, celebrating 30 years of our South Asia programming over the course of the coming months. I'm especially pleased that you have all taken just a few minutes to join us over the course of the next hour. As you may be aware, the Stimson Center is very proud to host, not just the largest, but in my view, one of the most effective South Asia programs, not just here in Washington but really around the world. It's deeply pragmatic and you are going to learn more about our current programming as well as our programming over the course of the past 30 years, over the next 60 minutes.

This all began as I mentioned, 30 years ago when the vision of our co-founder, the great Michael Krepon, viewed South Asia and the emerging

challenges, particularly on the security front, and particularly between two nuclear armed powers in 1993, and viewed the need to draw lessons learned from previous conflicts throughout the course of the Cold War to apply them in South Asia and ensure the peaceful interplay between India and Pakistan and indeed the rest of the world.

For Michael, the program was born really not just with that sense of a security urgency, but also a deep and abiding affinity for the great people of South Asia. He dedicated much of his career to working in and around South Asia to ensure peaceful relations between India and Pakistan. Over the course of the next 30 years, since 1993, our South Asia program has grown not just to focus on nuclear issues but an array of geopolitical issues in and around the region; the emerging role of China in the region, climate issues, as well as an array of other non-traditional security issues.

Lastly, I want to share with you Michael's other deep passion that informed the work here at Stimson and particularly his work in South Asia. It's a tradition that we have happily carried on since Michael's passing and that is his deep pride in inculcating the next generation of security analysts in South Asia, not just in India and Pakistan but also here in Washington. Over the course of the past 30 years, we have hosted more than 120 Visiting Fellows from the region that have gone back and grown up in their own careers and made vast and enduring contributions to peace and stability in the region. And right here in Washington, we are proud to have inculcated as well, dozens upon dozens of security analysts that have gone into government, gone into academia, gone into the business community from their beginnings here at the Stimson Center.

I'm proud now to introduce our current Director who is leading our South Asia program and carrying on Michael's great legacy, Elizabeth Threlkeld. Elizabeth is, as I mentioned, the Director of our South Asia program. She is a veteran of the State Department. Elizabeth, take it away.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much, Brian, for those kind words. Really a privilege and a pleasure to be with you all this morning, wherever around the world you're joining us from. Grateful to you for making time for what promises to be an interesting and informative discussion that will allow us to both look back at the ground we've covered over the past 30 years as a program, in discussion with four longstanding friends of Stimson, and also look ahead to what the next 30 years might bring to inform our analysis and help us see what that horizon might look like. The changes and continuities that have defined the last three decades in South Asia to help us clear a path forward for where we're going from here.

Over time as Brian was mentioning, the South Asia program has worked diligently to connect voices of both emerging and established analysts in South Asia, bring their perspectives across borders here in Washington, DC and back with many overarching goals, but particularly to ensure, to the extent that we can, the enhancement of stability and the mitigation of risk of escalation in South Asia, as well as identifying areas for cooperation and promoting regional understanding even during times when that seems challenging, given tensions on the ground.

One thing that I was keen to do in preparing for our 30th anniversary and thinking through how to celebrate it is to reflect on the contributions that my colleagues, my predecessors at Stimson have made, but primarily the work of those who have joined us from the region, people who have shared perspectives and analysis over time. And to do that with the assistance of our communications team, we've dived back into the archives and dusted off some of our greatest hit publications over the past 30 years. This website—they'll be sharing a link on Zoom and on Twitter—showcases some of those contributions over time. So we started in 1993 with the founding of the South Asia program, hosting of our first visiting fellows, and we take you through the last three decades in South Asia, highlighting key events that have transpired and the works that Stimson has produced to aid in our understanding to deepen the level of analysis that we have on these.

It is truly a treasure trove and in going through and putting this together, I was struck by how many of these publications continue to be relevant, the questions that were asked at the time that still remain in many cases unsolved, unresolved. And so I would encourage you all to take a look at this fantastic resource - we will be adding to it over the months to come. So very much see it as a live project, check back often and I think you will find a lot of food for thought here. To build on that, the matter of the moment today is our discussion with four longstanding friends of Stimson, three of whom are former Visiting Fellows, but all of whom have engaged with the program in various ways over the past three decades. Some from earlier in our trajectory, some a little bit later. But we're really, really pleased that these four in particular have joined us this morning.

I will do brief introductions and then we'll launch straight into a Q&A. So we're disposing with remarks, we're going to have questions from moderators, discussion amongst ourselves, but we'll also be taking questions from the audience. I have an iPad where I'll see these up here, so please do send in your questions and I will be glad to get to them to the extent that we can in the next 60 minutes or so. But with brief introductions here we have first Dr. Adil Sultan who is the Dean of Faculty of Aerospace

and Strategic Studies and acting chair of the Department of Strategic Studies at Air University. He was a Visiting Fellow with Stimson in 2006, where his research focused on the U.S.-India nuclear deal and its implications for regional stability, maybe a topic we can come back to today. He has had a close to a two decade-long affiliation with the South Asia Program and it's really a pleasure to have you with us today, Adil. Next, we have Sitara Noor who is a research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center. She was a visiting fellow at the Stimson Center in 2019, where she focused on the role of third parties in crisis mediation between India and Pakistan in the wake of the Pulwama/Balakot crisis. Manoj Joshi is a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi. He's been a journalist specializing in national/international politics and has written extensively on issues related to Siachen, Pakistan, China, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, and Punjab. He's a longtime friend of Stimson and has participated in several track two dialogues and discussions over the years. Thanks for joining us today, Manoj. And last but not least, Rushali Saha is the Senior Research Associate of the Indo-Pacific at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research. Previously, she worked at the Center for Air Power Studies as a Research Associate and was a Visiting Fellow at Stimson last year in 2022, where she focused on the role of India in the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy.

So welcome one and all. Thank you so much for joining us. And I think to kick off the discussion today, I will start with an admittedly large question but one that I'm curious to see where you all take it and hopefully, we can pick up on some themes that we can dive a little deeper into. So, for this one, looking back over the last 30 years, which dynamics in the regional security landscape have held constant and which have evolved, and with that, why? So, I will open it up. Perhaps we can start with Adil and go to Manoj for reflections.

Adil Sultan:

Great. Thank you and hello to everyone who joined us. First of all, I must thank Elizabeth, you, and Brian for these 30 years of a learning process from which we all have benefited. I'm truly grateful to the Stimson Center because I think many scholars in Pakistan who have not even had the opportunity of the fellowship at Stimson continue to benefit and have benefited from the South Asian discourse that is generated by Stimson Center.

I must also remember Michael Krepon - I think the services that he has rendered to the Stimson Center, to this region - he was a passionate advocate of peace between India and Pakistan. He tried to show us the path towards peace. We listened to him partially, most of us didn't listen to him. We agreed on certain things and we agreed to disagree on many other things.

But after so many years since he was a mentor also, I must admire his process because he was one person who had a very clear vision that India and Pakistan need to resolve disputes and they need to learn how to live peacefully in this region, because there's no possibility of a war between the two countries, especially after we became nuclear weapon states.

Now coming to your question, I think both countries, both India and Pakistan have evolved, mainly in terms of strength but still not talking to each other. So, we have not agreed to take that dialogue process that was initiated in 1999 and then in 2004, and in between there had been certain attempts to push that. But I think that's one area that is of stalemate and that is because of continued distrust between both India and Pakistan.

While we are building our capabilities, both sides are in to fight a possible war in the future because of the disagreements and because of the outstanding disputes. Both sides have their own perceptions, but we haven't done any serious work or any progress towards peace building. So, threat perceptions I think remain a constant on both sides.

Another thing that has remained constant that I was thinking about is that South Asia continues to remain under the influence of global great power. The actors might have changed but the dynamics are the same and are constant. Stimson evolved or expanded its areas of research into the human security aspects. I think both India and Pakistan have not made any significant progress individually and, of course, collectively also. Domestically, I would say India might have made progress politically and economically. Pakistan, on the other hand, has moved on to negative trajectories. So, these are some of the broad issues that I think at the opening I would say. These are the trends and some of the continuities or constants in this region.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thanks very much Adil. Manoj, I wonder how you see that question, anything you'd add or quibble with?

Manoj Joshi: Well, first of all I'd like to thank Stimson for having me on this show. I've never really been a scholar at Stimson in the past, but I've been very friendly with Michael Krepon for a pretty long time. And he published an essay of mine on deterrence, and I interacted with him whenever I came to Washington, DC and Stimson hosted me providing several talks.

Responding to your specific question, I think India-Pakistan hostility has been a constant factor and Kashmir issue is the cause of frequent tension, number one. Number two, terrorism, and insurgency. Now though declining, the terror threat from groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed remain. So do those from various separatist outputs in the region other, I'm not talking of just Pakistan, but there are other

separatist elements also. The third constant factor is nuclear deterrence remains between India and Pakistan. And the fourth is the continuing efforts by India and China to stabilize their relationship.

Now what is evolving? Well, what is evolving is the rise of Chinese influence in South Asia and the rising Sino-Indian tension. Number two, what are evolving, non-traditional security threats ranging from climate change, water scarcity, cyber and space warfare, cyber threats, space warfare. These are kind of evolving, which we haven't quite caught up with them. Number three, the issue of regional cooperation remains hanging. The SARC process is dead in the water, and I think there is a need to revive this. And fourthly the rise of India as an economic force and the evolving dynamic that is propelling India to become a major player in the US led Indo-Pacific Strategy. So, this is something which we are witnessing right now and it's difficult to forecast its exact trajectory. So, I'll just leave it at that and respond to other questions when they are posed. Thank you.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you sir. Sitara, maybe I can come to you next. Obviously, you and Rushali are joining with a slightly different perspective, right? Emerging analysts working on this region who have studied the last three decades through history books, through talking with scholars. But come perhaps with a fresh perspective. I wonder looking back but also looking forward, are there any issues that you would highlight in particular that you think will be particularly key to your generation? How does this rising generation in South Asia views the security landscape in the region? Are there any areas of concern there potentially or areas of promise that we might be able to tap into as your generation increasingly moves into positions of authority as policymakers, as practitioners, as analysts? Help us understand that perspective.

Sitara Noor: Thank you Elizabeth for setting this up. I think I take pride in the fact that I've been part of the Stimson Center South Asia Program since 2011 or 2012, I would say when Michael Krepon along with Stimson and Carnegie came to Pakistan. I was encouraged to participate as a young scholar. I worked on, I started talking about India-Pakistan relations from the CBMs perspective, and I remember I presented something on nuclear CBMs.

I think for the past almost a decade that I have been associated with the Stimson Center as well as working on South Asia in general, I think one element that stands out is that the more things change, the more they remain the same. And the only thing that has remained constant looking back past 30 years because when we talk about the past, we're talking about most part of that past has been overshadowed by the nuclear realization of the region because this year as Stimson celebrates 30th anniversary of South Asia Program, India/Pakistan celebrated 25th celebration or whatever we may

call it. We did celebrate though the 25th anniversary of nuclearization of the region.

And I think one thing that has remained from the past remained constant is the uncertainty. And I think moving forward that uncertainty surrounds the overall debate very significantly. And looking at it from the perspective of my generation and even younger generation because I somehow find myself in the middle because I have worked with the people who had actually seen the things evolving from really long time and I am taking it forward and certainly this is the time when the region and the world overall is moving towards more uncertainty because how things are evolving at the global stage is greatly affecting South Asia and India-Pakistan relationship very much and very deeply.

And one element I think, and one thing that must be kept in mind is that we really do not need to see things from the perspective, I mean history is important to learn from but I think a lot has changed and moving forward a lot will be different from how things were in the past because how the India-Pakistan relationship has evolved over the past 30 years or 25 years of nuclearization, I would say it has undergone various changes. If you look at the recent behavior or recent interaction amongst states, I think a number of factors that are affecting, and this will continue to affect in the future is first and foremost the engagement level has decreased significantly.

I mean looking back to 2004, I again had the opportunity to participate in, which I clearly remember the SAARC conference in 2004. I was a student volunteer. I've seen Vajpayee Sahib and Indian delegation in Islamabad, that was a different atmosphere. And perhaps the upcoming generation of the South Asian scholar would not witness the positivity that the element of hope and that would be the missing element in foreseeable future, unfortunately, given how a bilateral relationship has evolved in the recent past.

So, I think that will be a challenge where stubborn positions will make it difficult for a positive change. And what Adil and Joshi also mentioned, with regards to the rule of the great power politics that has impacted the region. So, the positioning of the countries in the region by virtue of what is the forces from outside the region has actually complicated the situation even further. So, it's no more India-Pakistan dynamics, it's a broader, I mean dynamics which are having a direct impact. Previously that was an indirect impact but going forward I think that is going to be a very direct impact.

And the challenge of the information age, that's also important because earlier on the policies were secured from what you may call... I mean, it's good to have people involved in the policy but the becoming of this

information and people having more strong and stubborn positions given how their leadership is trying to shape their own mindset in certain regions, I think that's also going to impact how we move forward. But definitely as I said, the more things change the more they remain the same, the rivalry of India/Pakistan remain the same, the nuclear challenges remain the same, but I think most countries are on the learning curve themselves and I think moving forward, one can expect there will be some positivity and some good learning as well. Thank you.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: That's really helpful, Sitara. Rushali coming to you, I think Sitara's point in terms of the role of great powers in the region and how that is reshaping what's for many years have been seen more as bilateral dynamics is important and timely given the work that you had done with Stimson and indeed more broadly the recognition of the importance of other states across the region, not just across South Asia but Southeast Asia, especially in the maritime domain you've done work on the Indo-Pacific. But I wonder especially with that perspective in mind, Rushali, what do you make of this question? Are there any areas of continuity or change that haven't already been mentioned that you think are particularly worth highlighting before we dive a little bit deeper?

Rushali Saha: Right. Firstly, thank you so much Elizabeth, the very fact that today I'm a part of such an esteemed panel I think speaks volume about how far this South Asian Voices program and Stimson Center has gone in supporting emerging scholars. So, thank you so much, I greatly appreciate this opportunity.

So, I can begin by tackling your question in terms, firstly I do give the disclaimer, I'm not sure if I can represent the views of my generation. But I do have a bit of a pessimistic take on that because growing up I've heard of how globalization has brought this world closer together, it's a small village but more and more what we are seeing is what many can call sort of a retraction of globalization, the rise of nationalism. And that is something I think which has evolved relating to your previous question. And how that is shaping regional geopolitics is something which we need to look out for.

And I am unfortunately a bit pessimistic when it comes to how that will shape bilateral relations going forward. I do share the views that unfortunately India-Pakistan's strained relations is a geopolitical fact and that's here to stay. And that is defining geopolitics, in fact I also agree with Manoj sir when he was talking about how India-China relations there thing is like remain constant, but it has evolved in terms of the modus vivendi, which was there where they were talking and there was dialogue, that's changing now.

So, this is all a bit pessimistic as to how regional geopolitics is shaping up. Can we come up with a region where these developing countries can become, are given more agency? I see Global South actors taking sort of charge of the narrative of the Indo-Pacific and I'm very optimistic to see how this shapes up and how policymakers deal with cooperation under the Indo-Pacific banner and I'm optimistic to see how that will shape regional geopolitics. So that is my answer for now. Happy to take more questions on this.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: No, I appreciate it. I think you all have put a lot of questions on the table and it strikes me that one of the challenges we're facing here and not unique to South Asia in many ways, but particularly in areas with frozen conflicts. As dynamics evolve, very often the root issues remain fairly constant. There might be some evolution in terms, but it's that tension that remains. And so even as different geopolitical shifts come in, as bilateral relations develop, there's still that kernel of the root of the conflict. But in fact we add to it and there are different dimensions that evolve over time and I'm particularly mindful of Sitara, which you were mentioning in terms of the engagement that was happening in the first decade, decade and a half that we're looking back on that be it bilaterally or through fora like SAARC is no longer as active as it once was.

I wonder for both Adil and Manoj, what do you make of that assessment? Does that strike you as accurate? Right, I think on the face of it, that's certainly what we've seen SAARC, we haven't seen any real movement in SAARC over the last few years. Certainly, there was all the momentum in the composite dialogue process thought we were getting somewhere. And at this point it seems like backchannel discussions are happening on and off, but certainly not to the level of any sort of public recognition or movement on CBMs. How different does the situation in terms of bilateral relations between India and Pakistan feel today as opposed to in those moments in the early 1990s, post-1998, in the early 2000s? Help us understand where we are as opposed to where we were, what might be a little bit different then? Maybe Manoj if you have any thoughts on that and then Adil?

Manoj Joshi: Well, looking... So if I'm not mistaken because I have a hearing problem and if I'm not mistaken what you're saying is, how the India-Pakistan situation has varied between 1990s and 2000s and now. And my response - is that what you're asking for?

Elizabeth Threlkeld: And I think specifically where there was more room for engagement perhaps early on. When we saw the two sides sitting down at the table together publicly, when we saw visits - how that dynamic has shifted and what that might mean?

Manoj Joshi:

Well, the thing is Sitara spoke of Vajpayee Ji's visit in 2004, I was there in Islamabad. In the ensuing four or five years there was a certain atmosphere in India-Pakistan relations. People would travel back and forth; it was fairly easy to get a visa. My daughter also, she was in college, she visited Pakistan with Mohenjo-Daro and different places. All that's over now, it doesn't exist anymore and this is a problem. I'd be the last person to say that this is not a problem, but it is a problem. The problem is that we've gone through the entire checklist, after we went, we came very close to some kind of a formula to resolve the Kashmir issue with General Musharraf who was the president at that time. But subsequently we had the Mumbai attack in 2008, which is something which was a watershed when it comes to Indian attitudes. And I think after that, the situation has never really stabilized.

And then we have a very different government from 2014 onwards, a party which has a very different viewpoint including from its own, what should I say, one of its own leaders like Vajpayee. So there's a difference in the context there. Right now we are at a dead end to be very frank. We are at a dead end, and I think attempts are being made meaning from whatever one reads between the lines, what I read, especially in the Pakistani press, that there have been approaches since 2017, there have been efforts to see if we can get a backchannel dialogue going and that's the way to go in the present circumstances. Meaning the point is that Pakistan relations have become so woven into Indian politics currently that it's very difficult even for this present government to take a step back. But remember Prime Minister Modi began his term by inviting Nawaz Sharif for his inaugural.

So 2015, up to the Pathankot attack, things were going fine. So what I'm trying to get at is that Prime Minister Modi by himself does not represent any kind of a force which is completely hostile to negotiation or discussion. The point is that the politics that have driven since then have reached a point where Pakistan is no longer a priority in the Indian policymaker's outlook. And which is a tragedy because the fact of the matter is India cannot get away from Pakistan and Pakistan cannot get away from India. And if this region is to prosper economically, you need peace and stability. I'm saying this is a no-brainer in that sense. So we do need peace and stability, we need good relations, we need good and even close relations if I may put it that way. But the fact of the matter is, at this stage, everything is deadlocked.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Adil, coming to you on that same question. Anything you would add? What does it mean for the situation today that we're perhaps starting to lose some of that historical memory of moments of engagement between the two sides over the last three decades?

Adil Sultan:

Okay, before I answer this question, I think I was listening to these young co-panelists of ours. Both of them seem to be pessimists. I think South Asia,

the young program was started just because Michael probably lost hope in the first generation of strategists from both India and Pakistan. So you don't need to be pessimists, you need to work further and hopefully you'll find a way. I partially have a different view. I agree, I respect Manoj and what he said. But there's a deadlock, there's no dead end as I see. It's all a matter of political will on both sides. General Musharraf, he was a military strong man and Vajpayee—they made sincere efforts. But there are constituencies in both countries within and outside also who successfully sabotaged that peace process because they were--I agree as Manoj also said--that we were on the verge of agreeing to start a serious dialogue on Kashmir and all other associated problems including terrorism.

So I think the political will at that time, we need to see a similar kind of political will in the future also. It's all a matter of leadership. If leadership on both India and Pakistani side at one time, and eventually as we live in this region, we cannot live in perpetual state of fear or animosity. Eventually we will have to talk to each other and resolve our differences and develop some workable relations. So I think it's just a matter of political wealth and there could be some leaders, maybe next generation of leaders in both India and Pakistan. But at the moment I agree it's a deadlock because there are other factors also. Pakistan at the moment is very focused inwardly. It is not looking at its regional neighbors or how to resume this dialogue with India because as you all know, there are lots of political troubles and economic troubles within.

So that's also difficult to manage. This is not a possible or appropriate time for Pakistan. Even if somebody initiates that dialogue, I don't think that would have any credence or legitimacy. We just have to wait maybe if the elections are held this year and there is a strong political leadership in Pakistan, on the Pakistani side. And as we have seen the patrons, whenever there are elections, new government comes in, they do offer this hand of friendship to India and Nawaz Sharif did, People's Party government did, Imran Khan's government did. And we are just hoping that once we get over with this internal turmoil and there is stable political leadership or the government in Pakistan, probably we will again try and mend fences with India. But it has to be reciprocated also.

There's a problem on the Indian side also. At the moment, Prime Minister Modi is following that hate politics against Pakistan. So Pakistan is unnecessarily politicized in their domestic politics. So whatever happens in India, it is being blamed on Pakistan so that we understand it's for their domestic politics, but it is creating more misperception, more hatred at the public level, people to people. And it will definitely make it difficult for the next governments on both sides for rapprochement. And I think that's one

area that we need to be careful, that we should not excessively misuse each other for our domestic politics.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Easier said than done perhaps, but I think a timely reminder heading into election seasons on both sides. I want to start to bring in questions from the audience as well. Just kind of sprinkle these through and really open this up to any of you who have thoughts on it. I might start with Sitara so we don't have dead air here, but please do feel free to jump in.

This question is from an audience member named Moline who asks, "The longest running political conflict in South Asia is that of Kashmir. What in your opinion has changed about it in the last 30 years and what hasn't?" Now obviously we've been talking about this but with the specific issue itself, I wonder Sitara if you have any thoughts on where things have come, where things haven't. Help us understand the extent to which the Kashmir conflict is really still driving events or whether perhaps events have taken on a life of their own between the two sides.

Sitara Noor:

Thank you for the question, Elizabeth. I think Kashmir remains at the heart of everything. Whatever is the problem in India/Pakistan, I think it is centered around the Kashmir issue. But no matter how much India wants to move away from that, I think that would be temporarily just putting it under the carpet. But that's something that would stay there because this is where Pakistan's consistent position comes in: that you need to talk about Kashmir. And this is what Adil also referred to—that during Musharraf's government there were some sincere efforts from both sides and there was some willingness or at least some partial willingness on both sides or matching willingness I would say on both sides to at least discuss and take it forward. But I think this is no more there and considering, and as you also rightly said, there are things which are easier said than said done.

And one important problem or the significant problem moving forward is going to be shrinking space for dialogue on Kashmir. And this is more from the Indian side because of how the Indian position is hardening over Kashmir and how the current BJP government and most likely the next BJP government is solidifying its position particularly after the August 5th revocation of the Kashmir status. I think politically it would be really hard for any government coming next in India for instance. And most likely it's going to be the BJP, so they're not going to reverse their position. So this hardening of position I think is something which is more troubling because it removes any space for dialogue process or give some back and forth on the issue if you just simply refuse to talk about it and minus Kashmir, I think one can have some semblance of the normalcy or some semblance of dialogue. But I think unless the poor issues are not sincerely addressed and with the motive to get something out from it.

And as Adil also said, there is this sense of this pessimism, I think I still want to sound like an optimist, but what I was referring to precisely was because I have seen an initial part of my engagement with the issues that there were this space and there was this dialogue or some level of dialogue, there was no breakthroughs of course, but there was this dialogue space available. But over the periods I have seen that space shrinking at one hand and more problems coming in form of a domestic political situation becoming more problematic and external elements coming in and having some negative impacts. So those all factors combined together I think make it difficult to move forward.

And I think, as I said in the beginning, Kashmir sits at the central issue. And just putting it aside I think would not bring any normalcy to the region for the long term. So one has to go back to find some way as to address that or at least start addressing that. Now what we see is there is complete refusal from the other side, that issue does not exist. So denying the existence of an issue I think is something which further problematizes the situation.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thanks, Sitara. I wonder if anyone else on the panel, anything to add? Anything you disagree with or nuance there?

Rushali Saha: I think I'd like to come in here and just to address the question in terms of how it's evolved I see is, from what I understand having followed this issue for a while is I think see there being a greater international recognition that this is a bilateral. So the claim that this is something which involves a third party or involves mediation of some sort is being disregarded now. And I do see there being space for dialogue with Pakistan as long as it's bilateral. So I do not see any sort of involvement even if it's from the United Nations and that is clear from the disputed history of it coming up repeatedly in the United Nations and India making it stand very clear that this is a bilateral issue. So I do understand of course the space for shrinking dialogue is definitely a reality, but I do see there being possibility of dialogue as long as it is taking place bilaterally between the two countries.

And as Manoj pointed out, backtrack diplomacy is something which has been going on and it comes out in newspapers as well. So I do see hope for dialogue on that issue there. And also again on the question of being optimistic as far as India-Pakistan relations are concerned, I think it would be unfair if I don't talk about how people-to-people ties is still the highlight of this relationship, and this is something that I learned during my experience at Stimson also. Having interacted with my fellow Pakistani cohort members, where we realized that there are so many similarities as far as culture similarities are concerned is especially the love for Bollywood, which I have to mention here.

So that is something which ties the two countries together and whatever strategic dynamics and however geopolitics may play out, that is something that will definitely not go and that is what ties these two, the people-people ties something which is very important and it's inalienable when you're talking about India-Pakistan relations. So I thought it was important I add that note of optimism, which definitely plays in my mind when I'm thinking about India-Pakistan relations.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: No, I appreciate that, thank you so much. I'll bring in maybe a combined question from the audience here. We've obviously started with more of a bilateral lens, but particularly over the past few years so much of the action has shifted to the India-China border region along the Line of Actual Control. And we have two questions, one of which is from Mohammed Omar Afzal and the other is from Ladhu Chaudhary, who's actually one of our current visiting fellows, who's tuning in live. But both are curious about various dynamics along the line of control.

So Mohammed Omar Afzal asks, given Adil, you mentioned that there's no possibility of war between India and Pakistan because of the nuclearization issue. I think I would raise the potential of inadvertent or accidental issues but aside that, he's wondering within that lens, based on what we've learned over the past three decades from India and Pakistan dynamics, what can be applied helpfully to the India-China context? Are there any lessons learned that we could see in managing this disputed border between India and China? Is it a totally different context? Help us understand how to put those two disputed borders next to each other and how we can appreciate potential risks that might be merging over the next several years to come between India and China.

Manoj, I know you've worked extensively on the China issue, I wonder if we could come to you for your sense of how India-China border dynamics today are evolving, and any lessons learned that we should look for from the India-Pakistan experience in understanding the LAC going forward. It looks like you're muted, Manoj, sorry.

Manoj Joshi: Both of them sound very much alike, Line of Actual Control, Line of Control in Kashmir, Line of Actual Control's international border. The dynamics of the India-China border are actually pretty different from that of India-Pakistan, because for the simple reason that the large part of the India-Pakistan border is an international border which has been demarcated, accepted by both sides. Even the Line of Control in Kashmir has been worked out by the two militaries, and they have signed onto maps which precisely locate its extent to where exactly the Line of Control runs. The problem with the Line of Actual Control with China is that there's no mutually accepted map. Even sometimes place names are different, even

the extent of the border is very different, meaning we say it is 4,000 kilometers, the Chinese say it is 2,000 kilometers.

And also while most of the India-Pakistan border include LOC, as well as the international border, is relatively lower than the India-China border. And so it is inhabited. There are people there, and there is often some friction arising from that. The India-China border, most of it, no one lives there. There's actually nothing of earth-shaking value anywhere there. So this is a peculiar kind of situation. When the two countries became republics in 1949 and 1950, this was more about actually establishing the border. No one knew where the border was on both sides. But today they have a pretty good idea both sides observed, most of the Line of Actual Control is observed by the militaries of both sides. The problem is there are some 18, 20 places on that Line of Actual Control where there is a difference of opinion, not a very great difference of opinion meaning by 10, 20 kilometers, square kilometers, but yet if those are breached it creates a problem and that's what happened in 2020, which becomes kind of an international crisis.

But otherwise this is pretty well-managed in the sense even if you look at the 2020 crisis, no weapons were used, people used stone, meaning unfortunately people used stones and improvised spears but no weapons have been used. And since that one particular incident in 2020, both sides have maintained constant touch with each other. There have been 18 rounds of core commander level talks and there are innumerable discussions, telephone conversations between local commanders, et cetera. So as I said that, that particular border is managed in a very different way, whereas the India-Pakistan border, it's completely fenced, meaning the border is fenced and floodlit. It's breached also in the sense we get a lot of drones coming in from Pakistan, often drug smuggling, weapons, et cetera, people coming across the Line of Control. We have Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed people coming across into Kashmir.

So what I'm trying to say is the nature of the two borders is very different and dealing with them, I suspect it will also be very different. Meaning in the case of China, we maintain a bilateral dialogue despite the 2020 problems, you would have repeated grounds of discussions by the two sides, they talk on for hours and hours and hours. So that process has been continuing despite the 2020 crisis. In the case of Pakistan, as we know, nothing much has been happening because as I said, the border itself is defined, so that's not the big issue. The issues are larger, the breaching of the borders, the crossing of people to make war on this side, which is the problem.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: It strikes me on one side we have ongoing talks with very little to show for it and incursions and on the other it's important to remember we've had a re-engagement of the ceasefire on the Line of Control for the past couple of years and yet no ongoing public dialogue at least. And so interesting dynamics there. I wonder if any of our other panelists have anything to add on that question before we move along? Feel free to jump in if so.

Adil Sultan: India, the LAC and the LOC, India on both sides is distinctly different as Manoj also explained. And towards China, I think it sells in India's political interest to maintain or to keep up that rhetoric that China is an aggressor and India needs to take corrective action and probably that also serves India's interest because it attracts external power, especially the United States that yes, China is creating trouble for India and that legitimizes India's case to be helped and propped up against China, that's my perspective.

Onto Pakistani side, I think despite that the border is fenced India's behavior is very quite aggressive. Whatever happens, whether it comes from Pakistan or not, again, that's a political rhetoric and I'm not going to reiterate what the official nominees state at such events, but the point is whatever happened, little happened, India took a very harsh or very aggressive posture toward Pakistan.

So this approach towards China and Pakistan, India's approach, I think it has more to do with external politics the way India wants to project itself in the region also and at the global level also. And interestingly, despite no bullets apart between China and India, China is being perceived as a major rival or threat to India and both countries have more than a hundred billion of bilateral threat. With 1.4, 1.2 billion people on both sides, it's not in their interest to fight war. Yes, keeping this dispute alive helps politically India. So I think we have to understand these different dynamics towards LOC and LAC and why India maintains a relatively less offensive posture towards China and more aggressive rather excessively aggressive posture towards Pakistan. So it's more to do with external politics and the way India wants to convey these signals to the external players, the global powers especially.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Yeah, I think certainly some disagreement there in terms of threats and threat perceptions that are probably important to talk through, especially as we get into a situation where there are trilateral security dynamics that are increasingly tense in the region. Obviously, we're all familiar with the idea of the strategic chain, but one thing that strikes me that has changed significantly over the past three decades is, it's no longer to the extent that it ever was in a bilateral framework. And now we have China looking to the US, India looking to China, Pakistan looking to India, but as well the close

alignment between China and Pakistan and India and the US, and so it seems like the chess board is getting a little bit more cluttered in ways that we don't fully understand or necessarily have a guidebook for.

A number of you have mentioned the role of third parties and great powers in particular in the region. I'm cognizant of time here and that we only have a few more minutes for a discussion that I think could be its own track II and carry on for several days. But in the interest of time, I'll ask each of you for any final reflections looking forward. Not maybe to the next three decades, I think that would be a little bit challenging though I'd welcome your thoughts if you're able to, but really over the say the next three years, maybe we can put it in those terms in the region.

What are some key trends that we should be keeping an eye on, and especially reflecting back over the past three decades of the South Asia program? Are there any lessons learned from how the US in particular has engaged with South Asia that we should carry forward that will help us to inform, provide better analysis, provide better understanding of the situation in South Asia going forward? So help us look forward whether it's optimistic or pessimistic, I'll leave it to you. But maybe we can start in reverse order actually. Rushali, if I could come to you for any final thoughts you'd leave this with?

Rushali Saha:

Right. Thank you so much for that. I feel looking forward, I'll particularly be interested to look at how emerging organizations such as BIMSTEC are driving regional integration in this region. I see SAARC honestly as a dead end, again sorry for the pessimistic take, but I do see SAARC is dead, and I do not see much progress happening there. But I'm curious to see how organizations like BIMSTEC are going to take forward the region integration project. And I'm also curious to see how the Indo-Pacific narrative plays out because I see South Asia being increasingly turning into Southern Asia, which is something that a lot of scholars have also spoken about, which really highlights the maritime dimension, which I think has been missing in conversations on regional security in South Asia for the longest time.

Indian Ocean is something which is bringing this region together, there is so much maritime trade that is happening. It's very, very important to look at how the dynamics in the Indian Ocean will shape regional politics in South Asia. That is something that I will definitely be following closely and I am quite optimistic about that. And yeah, I think I'll leave it for the other panelists and maybe come back again with more reflections since we are short on time.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much. Sitara, over to you.

Sitara Noor:

Thank you. Since Elizabeth, you specifically talked about the evolving role of third parties and the external actors. So I think it's also important to understand that the role of external parties in general issues is different or in crisis their role is different. And in any other bilateral issue there are multiple third-party actors who can play their role. And we have seen that even in negotiating some of the bilateral issues, for example, if we look at the water issues. The World Bank played a role and there are multiple other examples where different entities have played a role, but in terms of crisis management, as we have noticed that the US has been that the one particular actor that had played its role and helped both countries diffusing the escalation or diffusing the tensions.

And I think that role is very much important because both parties have not, despite learning so much from the Cold War experiences, they have not really learned or invested something in the bilateral escalation control mechanisms, and they have conveniently relied on third-party intervention. This is something which has remained constant, and I think shall remain not the same but significantly important to US, important goal will be there. But I think 2019, as I've written about it as well and I keep bringing it back, that third-party role has changed to an extent that since US, India has become so closer and have become strategic partner and, in the Indo-Pacific dynamics, they're joining hands against China. So that plays heavily in India-Pakistan dynamics as well where US's role as a neutral third party has been affected, has been questioned, particularly how it turned out during the 2019 episode.

And moving forward, I think the US still will play a role because it is definitely in all—everybody involved in Indo-Pacific—of their interest that there is no nuclear exchange. So to that extent, I think everybody or all actors will play that role that I think the political cloud or the intelligence means are available, not available to everyone. And I think only still date, I think it's the US's position which can play that role, but I think moving forward this is going to be challenging not the way it has reliably been played out before. Thank you.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Certainly, something to keep our eyes on and I hope you will continue to write for Stimson on how you see that evolving. Manoj, we'll come to you on this question next.

Manoj Joshi: I just want to say that I think we are headed towards the end of our program. One of the biggest misperceptions is that South Asia is a homogeneous entity. It is in fact a continental size entity, meaning most people call it subcontinent, but I call it a continent. And it's got diverse countries and security concerns. Also, sometimes security issues are reduced to an India-Pakistan binary, whereas there are other countries, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, which have their own security

dynamics. So you need to contextualize the region, I think, by a deeper understanding of the security challenges of the individual nations and to look at broader issues ranging from counter-terrorism, border management, ethnic conflict, political stability, climate change of course has been spoken about, but we are also now on the cusp of a whole new kind of an era where issues relating to artificial intelligence, et cetera also come into the picture.

So my call is here that we really need to look at this region from a newer perspective, which takes all the entities into account and doesn't just simply reduce it. And that was the original intention of SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. And I think it's really a pity that that SAARC had got stuck where it is. 2004, when we were in Islamabad, they had announced the creation of the South Asian pre-trade area. And I can imagine had such an area evolved by 2014 as it was planned, we would've had a very different set of dynamics in the whole region as compared to what we have today.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: That's a point very well taken, Manoj. And I think even to add to it a bit, sitting here in Washington, there is an increasing focus on perspectives of other states in South Asia, but it's primarily through the lens of great power competition. It's the US-China rivalry and how it's playing out in those states. And so I think taking that forward and focusing on security interests of states unto themselves in addition to or beyond that great power competition dynamic will be key. Adil, I'll come to you, any concluding thoughts for us?

Adil Sultan: Yeah, just a few points and very quickly, I know time is running out. First about the third-party role. I think that has always been significant and it will remain significant. We were not ready to talk to each other unless a third party intervened and we started talking and the peace process, everything. And especially institutions like Stimson, at some time when we were not ready to talk to each other, the Stimson Center, people at the Stimson Center, they were in a way acting as a medium to convey each other's intent. So I think that role is there, the kind of relations India has with United States and Pakistan has with United States, the third-party role would remain relevant.

Second about this definition of Southern Asia. I personally have disagreed with that because if you want to resolve a problem, you need to compartmentalize that problem not to further expand that problem. Because if you start to redefine that region and bring other actors into it, we are already not talking bilaterally, yes, ideally, we should be dissolving our disputes bilaterally. But if we are not ready to talk bilaterally, how are we going to talk in a multilateral kind of a setting where the disputes are different or the threat perceptions are different. So India may have its own

interest, it's on a rising path, yes it has all the right, but if it wants to have a stable region, it would have to talk to Pakistan directly. And in that context, I think we need to be very clear what constitutes South Asia, otherwise Stimson would have to change its South Asian Voices to Southern Asia Voices also.

The other thing is on nuclear issues or strategic stability or military. We have had these 30 years, three decades of learning process and we have, one cannot say that we have not achieved anything. Yes, Stimson helped us develop a better understanding of each other's intent. And Stimson also helped both Indian and Pakistani scholars to understand how nuclear dynamics work or how the strategic issues are dealt. But I think we need to move on now because if we are not talking on the military issues, there are plenty of other issues that are common to both India and Pakistan, climate has been referred to. I think that's a mutual threat and it is an existential challenge now for Pakistan and possibly India. I think we need to start.

Then this threat of emerging technologies. I'm not talking about in terms of militarization of emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, or cyber. I think this is a mutual threat to the global community. And here if the regional actors, they sit together and identify common problems and build some mechanism to work on these issues. So while working on these issues could be a good path forward to build that confidence amongst the two adversaries and leave the military issues for the time being aside. I think once we start to talk and build that confidence.

And one last point that just triggered because the recent episode that dam was burst in Ukraine and the controversy over that, I was just thinking India and Pakistan, as mentioned, none of the two countries should attack each other's dam. But for confidence building, why not have this an agreement, like we have an agreement of non-attack on each other's nuclear facility, then we exchange that list every first January. Why not have that agreement that both the two sides would not attack each other's dam. I think these kinds of measures are out-of-the-box thinking. If we start working on those at track II level, at the think tank level, I think it'll bring the strategic community together and then once we, if and when we build this mutual confidence, we can possibly tackle the difficult issues also. So thank you, I'll stop here.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: No, thank you all so much. You put a lot of food and thought on the table. I wish we had much more time to dive into it. But I'm especially keen to look forward and I welcome your thoughts, your inputs, your criticisms because they make us better and they help us guide our path forward over the next three decades. And I count myself as privileged and our program

doubly so that we can count you all as friends. And I look forward to sitting down with you across the table and working through these issues.

Thank you so much to those of you who have joined us this morning, this afternoon, this evening, wherever you're joining us from—we really welcome your input. As I said, it makes us better. I would again recommend you take a look at the timeline that we've put out today, we'll be building to it. There is so much accumulated wisdom that's captured in that page, much of which remains relevant as we try to put our thinking caps on and understand where the region is headed and how we can best contribute. So thank you all so much for joining us this morning. Again, I'm Elizabeth Threlkeld, Director of the South Asia Program. And it really was a pleasure to learn from our esteemed panelists. Have a wonderful rest of your day and be well.