

Event Transcript

Security Dynamics in Southern Asia – Views from Rising Analysts

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Featuring:

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Event Description

The 2022 Visiting Fellows of the South Asia Program, Riya Sinha, Noorulain Naseem, and Rushali Saha shared the research that they produced during their year-long fellowship with the Stimson Center. This discussion explored the foreign policy objectives of the United States with regards to South Asia. The fellows recommended increased engagement by Washington in smaller South Asian states for infrastructure development, more U.S.-Pakistan cooperation over the Afghan Refugee crisis, and a renewed focus on the Indian Ocean as part of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy.

More information and event video available at: <https://www.stimson.org/event/security-dynamics-in-southern-asia-views-from-rising-analysts/>

Event Transcript

Akriti Vasudeva: Good morning to all those joining us in the United States, and a very good evening to friends and colleagues in South Asia. My name is Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar. I am a Fellow in the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center. I am very pleased to welcome you to the capstone presentations of our 2022 cohort of Visiting Fellows based on their research during a year-long stint with the Stimson Center South Asia Program. Since 1993, the South Asia Program has hosted a cohort of fellows from India and Pakistan to conduct a research project exploring security issues in Southern Asia and the role of U.S. policy annually. The fellows gain exposure to how Washington D.C.'s policy community views the region during a two-month residency at the Stimson Center. They conduct independent research and build networks and connections across the border for deliberative and long-term engagement.

Over the past three decades, our community of 126 fellows have gone on to serve in government, work in think tanks, or have become influential journalists and strategic commentators. I wanted to say for this class particularly, we were enthused that this happened to be an all women cohort of scholars, which I think is excellent for diversity and representation. So today, our visiting fellows will present their work that critically examines the importance of the Indian Ocean to the U.S. Indo-

Pacific Strategy, the need for a Washington focus on infrastructure development in South Asia's smaller countries, and a path forward for Afghan refugees that relies on U.S.-Pakistan cooperation. To do that, let me welcome our cohort of 2022 Visiting Fellows.

I am delighted to be joined by Rushali Saha. Rushali is a Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research in New Delhi. Her memo explored the importance of the Indian Ocean to U.S. foreign policy, and she will dig more into that in the presentations later. Riya Sinha is an Associate Fellow at the Center for Social and Economic Progress in New Delhi. Her memo examines the geo-strategic and geo-economic potential of smaller South Asian countries, why the United States should prioritize the region for infrastructure financing, and how it can collaborate with India on this topic. Noorulain Naseem is a Research Associate at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute. Her research for Stimson argued for U.S.-Pakistan cooperation in effectively managing refugee inflows, preventing security risks, and enhancing stability through policy coordination, legal frameworks, humanitarian aid, and strategic partnerships.

I did want to mention that, unfortunately, our fourth Visiting Fellow, Namra Naseer, could not join us today due to a scheduling conflict. Her research explores the U.S.-Pakistan relationship based on non-security collaboration. We are hoping to publish her paper soon and hope that you all will give it a read.

This conversation will be a moderated discussion. It will involve interaction among the panelists themselves and, of course, plenty of engagement with you, the audience. I will be interspersing questions from all of you throughout the session. If you want to ask our fellows anything, please submit your queries via www.stimson.org/questions. I will ask our speakers to keep responses to about three to four minutes to get as many questions as possible and have a bit of a back-and-forth conversation. Let us get right into it because we have less than an hour at this point. I just wanted to start with having maybe each of you lay out the key argument of your policy memo and why it is relevant to U.S. and South Asian policy-makers today. Why don't we start with Rushali?

Rushali Saha:

Thank you so much Akriti. I will take three quick seconds to thank you, Elizabeth, Frank, the entire team at Stimson Center, and especially Dr. Christopher Clary, who was my mentor, for a wonderful experience. It would not have been possible to publish this research without your support, so thank you so much for that. I will quickly delve into my motivation behind choosing this topic.

In 2017, when I first read the National Security Strategy, we spoke about the Indo-Pacific. I was very amused to see that it ended at India. You are talking about an Indo-Pacific strategy, which is supposed to be the integration of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Still, there is no mention of the Indian Ocean. It cuts out more than half of the Indian Ocean. The same was replicated in 2019 when we looked at the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. It did change in the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. But even the graphic map on the first page of the strategy document clearly shows Washington's definition of the Indo-Pacific.

Being a scholar of Indian Ocean security for a while, and especially in looking at India's approach towards the region, Chinese maritime activities in the region have been happening for a long time, and it is getting increasing attention. So, the Indo-Pacific strategy, which talks about China and increasing India's capabilities to counter China, does not mention the Indian Ocean. It was very intriguing to me. I thought this would be a great opportunity to delve into why this is happening and make a case for why the Indian Ocean needs to be strengthened within the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States. My argument is that the U.S. needs to look at the Indian Ocean beyond the South Asia frame and look at the region as an integrated whole.

For this, I go into the importance of the Indian Ocean. I look at Chinese activities in the region to explain why the U.S. cannot afford to ignore the Indian Ocean region. My policy recommendations revolve around the same. I argue for the United States to give more diplomatic representation in the Indian Ocean littoral countries [by] creating institutional links between India and the United States to have a more effective presence in the Indian Ocean region, which I firmly believe will become an important theater for U.S.-China competition that will become even more important.

Within that, I also think that the littoral states will have a strong say in shaping how this will play out because the bipolar competition, so to speak, is playing out in a much more multipolar world today. Therefore, having their representation in an Indo-Pacific-focused platform is very important, which is another policy recommendation I make. Apart from that, I also talk about the need to integrate Africa, especially the eastern coast of Africa, within the Indo-Pacific strategy more holistically. I am glad I published my policy research with the Stimson Center.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you so much, Rushali. That was a really comprehensive overview of your paper, and I have a couple of follow-ups for you. But before we get to that, I want to invite Riya to discuss her argument and research.

Riya Sinha:

Thank you, Akriti. I would echo Rushali in thanking the Stimson Center team for this wonderful opportunity. We got a lot of inputs and research insights through this fellowship, and I am truly grateful for what this fellowship was about and the opportunities it has brought for all of us. My policy memo focuses on infrastructure financing in South Asia, particularly focusing on a case for U.S.-India cooperation in this region. Now, connectivity through infrastructure development and infrastructure financing is not only a geostrategic or a geoeconomic tool, but it is also a policy priority for the growth and development of many of the smaller South Asian countries in the region.

When I say smaller South Asian countries, I mean economically and geographically, just in terms of the size. Many studies present how much of an infrastructure investment South Asia needs. It amounts to about \$6.3 trillion in climate-adjusted infrastructure investments, spanning energy, transportation, hydropower, water and sanitation, etc. South Asian countries, at this point, face domestic as well as regional and geostrategic challenges in meeting a lot of these needs. Therefore, this presents an opportunity for both India and the U.S., who are like-minded partners, to invest in infrastructure development in transparent and sustainable terms.

What I do in my policy memo is that I map the existing U.S. investments in the region. I make a case for why the U.S. and India should consider this region important, and I devise three parameters on why this is important. First, on the economic growth of South Asia. Second, in light of China's increasing engagements in the region. Third, to also engage India as a regional partner. I then address challenges, identifying some and putting forward some policy recommendations. Some are technical in nature, on which mechanisms can be used to finance this infrastructure. From a policy side, this includes using minimum criteria for infrastructure projects to invest in top-up financing instead of financing a large infrastructure project together because it is only possible for some countries to match dollar for dollar what China is doing in the region. Therefore, focusing on the relative strengths that the U.S. and India can bring to the region is important. Doing this is important for regional stability and economic prosperity in the South Asian region. This is the crux of my policy memo, and I am happy to answer the follow-up questions later. Thank you.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you so much, Riya. We will finally come to Noor. Over to you to discuss a little bit about your policy memo.

Noorulain Naseem:

Thank you very much for introducing us so generously, Akriti. I can not believe we are officially at the end of this wonderful fellowship, with our final output being published. My policy memo highlights the value of continued cooperation between Islamabad and Washington, D.C.,

regarding the byproducts of the Afghan conflict. This primarily includes Afghan refugees, the humanitarian crisis, the border security situation, and transnational terrorist organizations, including TTP and ISIS-K, which are quite resurgent and have gained unbelievable operational momentum since the withdrawal of 2021 and subsequent takeover by the Taliban of Kabul. It is not a very popular topic in Islamabad or Washington, D.C., right now. Particularly last year, there was a lot of institutional lethargy in both policy centers, saying, "Oh, but we have withdrawn for good," in D.C., and in Islamabad, "Haven't we had enough of Afghanistan? We have fenced the borders. So hopefully, much of what is happening in Afghanistan will be contained in Afghanistan."

But we have seen very clearly that none of the foreign policy security goals of the U.S.—which were mentioned quite clearly in the Doha Agreement—Pakistan, or even the regional states have been met. In fact, the humanitarian crisis on the ground is deepening. The treatment of women and young girls at the hands of the Taliban and the former U.S. allies is beyond depressing. The refugee flows towards Pakistan continue, even though Pakistan is going through a severe constitutional crisis. Its economy is experiencing a growth rate of less than 1%. I try not to advocate for increased cooperation but at least for pursuing efficiency-based cooperation.

If the U.S. is not ready, quite understandably, to increase the funding or assistance to Pakistan and Afghanistan operations, at least it can make sure that its taxpayer's money in over-the-horizon CT operations, in refugee management, in ex-FATA—that is, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border terrain whose rehabilitation U.S. has extensively invested in—should give a return on investment to the U.S. as a major donor of humanitarian aid, refugee operations, and a major CTE partner. Transnational terrorism is definitely an international security concern.

This is pretty much what I was trying to do in DC last summer. I learned so much from my fellow VFs. I can not believe that we do not have Namra here. She was such wonderful company. I do not think that this memo could have this much value for its readers had I not been in contact with my Indian counterparts, and also Namra, and every one of you from the Stimson team. Thank you so much.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you so much, Noor. In our next round of questions, we will get more into this question of political will and political feasibility. A couple of follow-ups that I had for each of you. Rushali, first to you. You mentioned the importance of the U.S. engaging the Indian Ocean, particularly the littoral states. We have seen some of this come through in the last few years, right? Particularly if you look at the Biden

administration's efforts regarding stepping up engagement with Maldives or Sri Lanka.

How do you see that in the context of the US, broader into Pacific strategy? Scholars like Nilanthi Samaranayake have spoken about how U.S. policymakers still view the Indian Ocean primarily through a South Asia lens. I believe you also mentioned that at the top of your comments. Have you seen some recent actions and developments break out of that mold?

Rushali Saha:

Thank you so much for that question, Akriti. As I pointed out during my remarks, it was quite positive to see the Biden administration rectify in many ways by expanding the definition of the Indo-Pacific in its strategy document and explicitly mentioning that it includes the entire Indian Ocean. However, in my assessment, it is still insufficient. Since you mentioned Maldives, let me point out that since 2020, there have been talks of the U.S. establishing a diplomatic presence and an embassy in Maldives. I think the target was supposed to be end-2022 or early-2023, but that has still not happened. Meanwhile, Maldives has reopened its embassy in Washington. There have been indicators which show that there is renewed interest. Especially in the Congress as well, there have been a lot of discussions, there's been a lot of hearings. In translating into action, there is still limited effort or actionable moves towards the same.

As you correctly said, Nilanthi has also spoken about this a lot. There is a tendency to view the Indian Ocean as separate from the larger Indo-Pacific strategy. The focus is more on the Pacific, which is understandable because it has regional defense commitments and allies. It is important to highlight here that developments in the Indian Ocean will inevitably affect what is happening in the Pacific, both in offensive and defensive operations. So yes, the positive aspect is that I see a renewed focus on non-traditional security issues from the U.S. The U.S. has been engaging with the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka on maritime domain awareness and, more broadly, on regional maritime security. Still, it is noteworthy that many of the Indian Ocean littoral countries still do not have representation in IPEF, and I think they would benefit greatly from the IPEF.

While the U.S. has made concerted efforts to include Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, it needs to be more engaged with the African littorals in bringing them under the IPEF framework. Again, coming to Sri Lanka, which I believe you mentioned as well, I see it to be more of a politically charged relationship and more developments happening, of course, along the lines of talking about democracy and human rights. The economic angle of it is still missing. U.S. investment when it comes to port infrastructures in

these countries is limited. When it comes to integrating them within the regional maritime security paradigm...it is still limited.

I believe much more needs to be done, but I identify more momentum and awareness on the importance of the Indian Ocean and engaging with these littorals. Also, more positively, ties with India have been strengthened. From New Delhi, there is a more positive view of American presence in the Indian Ocean, which is a very good starting point for the two countries to work together to increase U.S. benign presence, if I can put it that way, in terms of providing development, cooperation aid and sort of more coast guard cooperation, and responding to what the countries need. There is more scope for it in the current administration, but much more needs to be done.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you so much, Rushali. I remember the conversation about six to eight years ago about the lack of an operational overlap between the U.S. and Indian geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific or even the focus on the Indian Ocean. That conversation has definitely advanced over the last few years. So that is a positive development. Coming to you, Riya, you have a lot of experience conducting fieldwork in the region. You have looked at various water connectivity and infrastructure projects. You have seen the involvement of other actors in the region besides the U.S. I wanted you to reflect on how you would compare and contrast the engagement of, say, Japan or Australia to that of the U.S. in infrastructure development in South Asia. What do you think recent successes India has had in the region regarding border connectivity and infrastructure mean for its collaboration with all of the Quad partners?

Riya Sinha:

Thank you, Akriti. I think if you are comparing the investments or the engagements by partners such as Australia, the U.S., and Japan in the region, it needs to be compared regarding the quantum of engagements, the financing, and the development that has happened. In terms of my experience, fieldwork, and speaking to people in New Delhi, Japan is much ahead of Australia and the United States. Earlier this year, when the Japanese Prime Minister announced a new plan for a free and open Indo-Pacific, the agenda for connectivity itself was expanded from just infrastructure development and financing to creating industrial value chains. Thereby really enhancing the sustainable aspect of it by focusing on investments and industries to drive growth and development. With Japan, I think there are also institutional mechanisms that focus on connectivity and cooperation with India, such as the Act East Forum for example. There is also the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt Initiative, also known as the BIG-B, that Japan is spearheading in the region. Bangladesh has shown a lot of inclination to join BIG-B as an initiative.

Japan is bringing best practices and success stories from Southeast Asia, such as the Southern Economic Corridor, to spearhead the development and infrastructure development, financing cross-border infrastructure, and multimodal connectivity in the region. Now compared to this, compared to Japan's engagements, Australia is a relatively new player. In early 2002, I think Australia announced a commitment of about \$36 million for disaster preparedness, trade competitiveness, and development in a region that it calls the Northeast Indian Ocean or the Bay of Bengal region, which includes five countries of South Asia. It also is focused on development in the region.

U.S. engagements lie somewhere between those of Japan and Australia. The U.S. has been present in the region for a long time. USAID, for example, has been one of Nepal's oldest development partners, but it has mainly been working towards strengthening democracy or promoting inclusiveness. In India, USAID has had investments in the energy sector, but all of that is changing right now. In Bangladesh also, the focus has been on democracy, and in Sri Lanka, the peace process historically. All of this, however, is changing with the coming of agencies such as the DFC or USAID, which is also expanding its mandate, the MCC. This is changing the focus of how the Quad partners for all these countries are coming into the region.

You mentioned India's success stories and how that enhances collaborations. See, in the last decade for sure, India has had huge success in connectivity. There were historic legacy projects that India has completed in the previous decade. Newer infrastructure projects have come up, such as cross-border petroleum pipelines, in-land water waste transportation, about ten integrated check posts have been built, whereas in the 2000s, it took ten years even to build the first check post itself.

Many developments have taken place, and this is good news for India, South Asia, the development partners, and the Quad partners because they now see India as a reliable infrastructure development partner and financier in the region. Japan, for example, when it released the new free and open Indo-Pacific policy in New Delhi a few months ago. The 2002 Indo-Pacific policy of the United States also calls India a like-minded partner and a regional leader in South Asia. So, without delivering, there would be a lack of trust in India's capabilities. Delivery is very important in this regard, bringing all the Quad partners together in the region for development.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thanks, Riya. I think it is really important that the Quad countries are actually responding to the needs of the countries in the region and having more of a dialogue about what projects make sense and what collaboration

mechanisms make sense, which is definitely an improvement on how things have been over the last few years at least. So, thanks for that. Noor, coming to you. As we discussed, I wanted to dig deeper into that question of political will. Especially cognizant of the fact that Pakistan is currently undergoing its own domestic challenges, both economically and politically. Since you are on the ground and having these conversations, how salient is the public and policy conversation in Pakistan on Afghan refugee management, considering there are so many other issues to deal with domestically? And how could Pakistan's relations with the Taliban regime, which have been particularly tense over the last few months, impact how Afghan refugees are viewed going forward?

Noorulain Naseem: Yeah, that's a very good question. I absolutely agree with you that there is very little political will in Islamabad to take a look at any political situation just because of the fact we actually have an interim government, and we are pretty much delaying the much-awaited elections. Also, Pakistan is an underdeveloped state, sustaining around 3.5 to 4 million Afghans for over four decades. It is logical, if not moral, that there is an overall lethargy inside Pakistan and I think in every host state. Unfortunately, 80 percent of the global refugee situations are hosted in underdeveloped states because most of them share international borders with the conflict zone. So yeah, it's pretty obvious that there is also a lethargy inside Pakistan policy circles. Inside the communities, mostly the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP region), which is a Pashtun-dominant region and shares borders with Afghanistan, around 60 to 70 percent of Afghan refugees are Pashtuns. So yes, it's a mix-and-match situation. The communities are also, if not frustrated, then at least a bit tired of hosting the refugees.

At the central government level, there are too many frictions happening between the major political parties. We have a constitutional crisis that I have already mentioned. At the provincial level, there are more important issues like transnational terrorism, how to elect the local bodies, and elections there are also delayed. So yes, in the middle of that, it takes a lot of work to advocate for a relatively politically powerless, if not inconsequential group like the refugees. As policy researchers, I think it is our job to remind the policymakers that just because an issue is not imminent in nature, and just because it is not an internal security issue does not mean that it is not an issue that is absolutely worthy of your attention.

I would also like to mention that there have been several times in the last year in particular that parliamentarians from ex-FATA, like Mohsin Dawar, have taken up the floor of the parliament and been very vocal about the fact that Afghan refugees are not being entertained or managed in a just manner.

Despite the fact that Pakistan's own 2 million kids are out of school, to expect it, with its staggering economy and its struggle to entertain refugees on a prima facie basis, does not make a lot of sense or could not be sold very easily to policy circles. The debates are alive.

As far as the Pakistani relationship with the Taliban is concerned, I think that Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban is as complex as the situation or the interdependence that Pakistan and Afghanistan have with each other in terms of trade, in terms of the fact that they share an international border, the fact that the ethnic group of Pashtuns is divided across their border, the fact that Pakistan enjoyed the infamous strategic depth because of the Taliban for so long. I think outrightly saying it is a completely bad marriage situation that cannot be redeemed is a bit far-flung. Taliban are coming more and more onboard daily to contain the TTP.

Only recently, they ordered a religious decree under which they have forbidden all Afghan nationals to attack Pakistan territory, particularly Pakistan security forces. They have also shown some flexibility in taking it a little bit easy on the border because it was previously pretty much on fire. They were targeting Pakistan security forces repeatedly. But the fact that the Taliban did not have effective control of Afghanistan, it cannot be expected that they will be able to create any political discipline at the center or even provide for the people they are supposed to care for. This means that the push factors are pretty much going to be alive, and more refugees will be coming to Pakistan.

Per my understanding, the previous repatriate agreements between UNHCR, the Pakistan government, and the previous Afghan government were the documents steering the repatriation of Afghan refugees. No such agreement, however, has recently been discussed or is anywhere near being signed. It is all happening pretty much ad-hoc-ly, particularly after the withdrawal of U.S. forces as around 600,000 Afghans entered Pakistan. None of them have been issued asylum certificates by the UNHCR and they are not being entertained under the Proof of Registration card, the POR card that Afghan refugees usually hold. We are actually at the brink of an acute statelessness, which nobody wants to discuss in Islamabad, Kabul, or DC. I hope I answered your question, Akriti.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you so much, Noor. We are already starting to get a lot of audience questions, but if you would like to ask our panelists something, please go to www.stimson.org/questions to type in your query.

For the next round, maybe I will sort of dig into some of the common themes I saw throughout your policy memos and maybe disperse some audience questions. We will go in reverse order. So, Noor, I will come to

you first. Your memo specifically makes a case for greater U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and calls for greater U.S.-Pakistan cooperation. This, as we have spoken about, is happening at a time when Afghanistan or Pakistan issues have taken a backseat to a great power competition with China and Russia.

There is also an audience question that I think really plugs at this theme. Muhammad Muqem Abbas has asked about U.S.-India-Pakistan relations in this context. He asks, "As the U.S. increasingly focuses on the Indo-Pacific for its strategic interests, there is greater potential for US-India multilateral partnership to grow further. Amid all this, how will the U.S. approach its relationship and cooperation with its historic non-NATO ally Pakistan? Could we be seeing a broader shift in U.S. priorities between the two South Asian rivals?"

Noorulain Naseem: I will take care of the first question you asked me in the context of the memo, and then we circle back to Muhammad's question. The policy memo, like I mentioned initially, does not advocate for increased financial assistance or aim to convince the U.S. policy community to completely re-shift their focus from India, for example, or Ukraine. But at least be cognizant that it is U.S. taxpayer's money that has been allocated under the budget requests moved forward by the U.S. administration to Congress in 2022, and under that budget administration, around \$82 million has been allocated for Afghanistan-Pakistan operations. Under those operations, the rehabilitation of ex-FATA region, which means policing reforms, judicial reforms, administrative reforms, border management, and also Afghan refugee management, most of the funds of which move through UNHCR operations...the efficiency around these funds should at least be a concern to U.S. policymakers because it is their taxpayers' money. So the memo basically not only tries to highlight the plight Afghan migrants and refugees are going through because they are pretty much being forgotten by not only the donor states but also the political entity or the group which is supposed to represent them at least, or majority of them, back home. Not only was I trying to make a case on moral grounds or international humanitarian responsibility towards refugees that the entire globe has... Or particularly the U.S., which has committed so many funds over the years, has remained the largest investor of humanitarian funds in Afghanistan for so many years. Why wouldn't it want the outputs or the return on that investment?

That is basically what I was trying to advocate for. In order to identify the mechanisms, methods, and stakeholder engagement that can help the DC community attain this goal of efficient funds management or deployment, I have come up with a few recommendations. For example, using the desk of the refugee coordinator deployed by PRM at state at the U.S. embassy who has a lot of political goodwill in DC, and famously has a lot of

political goodwill or sway in Islamabad policy circles and also Rawalpindi policy circles because it is actually the military which is mostly in charge of the ex-FATA border region. Then USAID operations and DOD operations have either been directly responsible for the collateral damages that happened across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, or the rehabilitation of IDPs and the infrastructure that was destroyed.

I think it is high time that the U.S. and Pakistan both account for the mistakes that were made and move forward on a needs assessment basis, not just historical baggage or repetition of action. Just because a certain amount of funding is always deployed in a certain country or in a region, does not mean we are not going to move below a certain category of funds and we are just going to repeat investment under certain budget heads. It highlights the value that the U.S. can have in terms of its investments in refugees on over-the-horizon CTE, ex-FATA rehabilitation, or border management in terms of curtailing transnational terrorists, which have targeted the U.S. time and again and had the ability to engage D.C. in this infamous Afghan conflict for two decades, which cost the U.S. economy so much. The U.S. had to withdraw without its foreign policy goals being met.

One of the major goals was to contain transnational terrorist operations and reduce, or at least reduce, if not completely kill, their capacity to engage international targets, particularly the U.S. A recent Pentagon report indicates that ISIS-K might engage in international targets in the U.S. or in Europe. These were the points that I was trying to make. Again, because it is your taxpayers' money, because transnational terrorism is alive across the border, because the U.S. is already investing in refugees because, if Pakistan is not able to hold them, they will seek illegal routes and opt for third state settlement, which of course the U.S. cannot entertain beyond a certain capacity of its own. I think the Biden administration promised some 125,000 refugees from across the globe. I mean, it cannot entertain all of them to be Afghans.

As far as Muhammad's question is concerned, I think it's a very valid question. There is a lot of insecurity or apprehension in Islamabad right now. Then also in Rawalpindi, given the rapidly and impressively growing defense ties between the U.S. and India, especially after President Modi's visit. The change of status of Kashmir is something that was not very well received in Islamabad as well. In the meantime, Islamabad has its engagement alive with China and is likely to engage more with China, which is a strategic counterpart of the U.S. and also India. I think that states do balance power quite well.

South Asia, unfortunately, is also a nuclear flashpoint. If it becomes a casualty of great power competition in the near future, which

unfortunately the state decisions on both sides of the border, even Pakistan, repeatedly remind us that both the states are ever too ready to engage in an arms race. I think we are talking about millions of people who are already struggling with poverty, underdevelopment, and underrepresentation. States are mostly concerned about being entertained under defense deals, either with India or China. I think it is such a shame. That is what I would say. Thank you.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thank you so much, Noor. I think you made your case very effectively. Riya, coming to you and digging deeper again into that theme of competing priorities and the question of political will. We have seen that there is a larger focus in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy now on some of the other neglected regions in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Pacific Islands. How would you argue in favor of the importance of infrastructure development in South Asia in such a context?

I will fold in a question from the audience as well. Betzalel Newman asks, "How can the U.S. play a role in improving the institutional capacity in smaller South Asian countries when it comes to infrastructure development, beyond just competing with China on filling these investment gaps?"

Riya Sinha: Thank you, Akriti. Like I said initially, infrastructure development and investment priorities are different for different countries. One of the realizations when we were in D.C. was that perhaps South Asia is not a priority area in D.C., especially the smaller South Asian countries. So one of the focuses of the policy memos was also how do you make the case that South Asia is important too? Not that the Pacific Islands are not important, but it is just another region that requires additional focus, collaboration, and cooperation mechanisms for growth and development.

I would argue for three reasons why South Asia is important, and this is something I highlight in the policy memo. The first is on the economic potential of South Asia. It has been established by multilateral agencies as well, including the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank, that within Asia, the requirement for infrastructure development, for infrastructure financing is the highest in the South Asian region.

Despite this, for years, of course, the South Asian region has been registering a higher GDP growth minus the pandemic years. We also need to look at the potential of additional financing. If this is the growth rate without having good infrastructure in the region and high logistics costs and higher transportation costs, then imagine what would be the potential of this region when it has good infrastructure financing, when it has robust, sustainable, resilient infrastructure. This is also important in the sense that when we are talking about moving supply chains away from

China. India is, of course, a bigger player, but neighboring countries like Bangladesh can really add value to the reshoring of supply chains.

In the absence of this infrastructure development, we also need to be cognizant of the fact that it makes the smaller South Asian countries vulnerable. For example, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are some of the highest recipients of Chinese loans in the region. For example, we are all aware of the economic crisis in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Nepal and Bangladesh are not too far because they also have recent arrangements with the IMF. In this kind of geostrategic context, we do not want larger engagements with China, or a larger influx of China in the region, which does cause anxieties within India, in New Delhi, and also in Washington D.C. It is important to support these South Asian countries through their development needs. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Like you mentioned earlier, there are national priority projects recognized by each of these South Asian countries, which the U.S. and India can tap into.

The third reason that I would argue for is that India, when the U.S. says, when Washington says that India is a like-minded strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific, an India that is deeply invested in its neighborhood itself because of China because of any other region, may not be able to be a very valuable and efficient partner in the long run. Therefore, relying just on one country to meet the infrastructure needs of those other South Asian countries, or any other financing or fiscal requirements for that matter, is not going to be a beneficial way to address the challenges.

Now, I do not always advocate for collaboration. Of course, there is a lot of emphasis on how the U.S. and India can collaborate, but I would argue also that it does not need to collaborate. There does not need to be a U.S.-India mechanism all the time. Of course, there can be beneficial mechanisms. India and the U.S. do have trilateral partnerships in Asia and Africa, but I think coordination of projects is more important in this regard. The MCC for example, if you deep dive into the projects, they are close to the Indian border, and a coordinated mechanism is going to have longer long-term returns than compared to, say, collaborative projects, which may have terms and conditions that the smaller countries cannot fulfill, for example.

To answer Betz's question on how the U.S. can play a role in improving institutional capacity, and I take it from the coordination part of it, that it is not enough to just invest in a larger infrastructure project. It is not enough to just build the infrastructure. These countries within South Asia also need bureaucratic and institutional capacity-building. If a mechanism can be introduced where a capacity-building component of a community development program can be incorporated within the project, I think that is going to have a holistic developmental benefit for these countries, rather

than standalone infrastructure financing and leaving it to the countries to operate then. I think a little bit of handholding over there is required. That said, the region also needs to be very careful about how both India and the U.S. need to be very careful about how they use terms like Indo-Pacific and Quad because they are not always perceived in very positive terms in the region.

The same is happening with BRI, for example. There is hesitancy in the smaller South Asian countries to go into a U.S. camp with the Indo-Pacific or a BRI camp with China. So it is important to have these projects, announce them, coordinate, and cooperate for these projects. I think it will not be beneficial if we announce the projects, announce something as Indo-Pacific, and not deliver, than just delivering on the projects that will have a more positive impact in all of these countries.

Akriti Vasudeva: I think that is a great point, Riya, and particularly on the coordination bit. I think the lesson also from Delhi's experience of working with Tokyo and Sri Lanka or broadly as well has been that it is easier to coordinate rather than collaborate because it is hard to harmonize guidelines and procedures, especially when there are existing relationships that these countries already have in the region. So that is a really important point. Rushali, coming to you. I wanted to dig deeper into how perhaps your assessments might have changed in light of some of the recent developments about the U.S. posture of thinking on the Indian Ocean.

So we have seen the announcement of an inaugural Indian Ocean dialogue between the U.S. and India during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to DC in June. There were also then various references by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to the Western Indian Ocean and U.S. interests there. We've also seen greater interest from Washington, for example, in Africa with the U.S. Africa Leaders Summit in December 2021, and so wanted to ask you whether that has changed your perception of U.S. importance to the Indian Ocean and what are perhaps areas of collaboration between the U.S. and India and Africa, more broadly? Prime Minister Modi has also mentioned that Africa is a priority area in India's foreign and economic policy.

Rushali Saha: Thank you so much for that, Akriti. I would not read too much into the Indian Ocean dialogue, which you talked about, especially since such platforms have existed, and still exist. There is a U.S.-India maritime security dialogue, which happens regularly, and Indian Ocean issues are discussed quite frequently there. What I would be more interested to see, and plus I think it is a bit too soon to assess, I am hopeful about the outcome, but I am curious to see at what level this will be implemented. One of my policy recommendations is about creating greater institutional links between India and the U.S. on the Indian Ocean. I am curious to see

whether India's recently announced maritime security coordinator will have a dialogue with the core security coordinator. And at what level will that conversation take place is something that I am looking forward to seeing.

But in itself, just conversations do indicate that there is a greater need for thinking. Both are consulting each other on important issues. I still think that more action needs to be taken. I am more hopeful about the remarks by Wendy Sherman in Dhaka, which was at the Indian Ocean Conference, where the U.S. committed an estimated \$165 million and has even asked the Congress for \$6 million for Indian Ocean regional maritime security initiatives with Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Now, I think is a very positive development, which does indicate that the U.S. is thinking more seriously about this region and is looking to partner with India in the Indian Ocean region.

So, of course, positive developments have been there, but I do believe that more concerted action is necessary. I am hopeful that, going forward, the Indian Ocean will receive more priority within the Indo-Pacific strategy. As you mentioned earlier, there is growing awareness. The conversation in the past three or five years has definitely changed. The Indian Ocean is coming up in more and more conversations now. That is definitely a positive development. But there is more scope for work to be done, and that is where I think Africa comes in now.

Historically, if you look at the U.S. view of this region, the term that is used, which was used in a diplomatic telegram back in the 1970s was Arc of Crisis. So, the region in the U.S. is often seen from this lens of the Arc of Crisis, which I still see in many ways does dominate. That is not true, of course. Nullified efforts, which have been done by the African central command, which has a very strong reputation.

I have had interactions with African scholars who view the African presence very positively there because they have contributed a lot, in terms of providing humanitarian assistance. The Coast Guard has been active. But we will still see that U.S. involvement in port and ship-building is still very limited. In fact, just yesterday, in contrast, India (Goa Ship Building Limited) signed an agreement with the Kenya Ship Building Corporation to build ships and commercial ships there. That is an area where the U.S. has so much domestic experience. The U.S. must come in here and explore this region and the prospects of port-led coastal development, which is still missing. Because right now, there are a lot of activities happening, but they're mostly focused on issues such as the IUU fishing, which is of course a very important problem.

But the economic development which will truly bring the region out of poverty and lead to overall development is still missing, and the U.S. can play an important role here. Having said that, it is also important for the U.S. to keep in mind that there are concerns about militarization. So, a greater naval presence may not be the way forward for that. India and the U.S. should take the navy-to-navy relations a step further and build it into a more comprehensive relationship where there can be greater Coast Guard collaboration between India and the U.S., which would be a positive way forward for both countries to cooperate. As Riya pointed out, Indo-Pacific is a term which has a lot of apprehensions associated with it. There is very little awareness about what this strategy is about, and there is, in fact, a misperception about it being against China.

If you look at India's vision of the Indo-Pacific, it is not aimed towards countering China. That's why we keep stressing inclusivity. ASEAN centrality is such an important pillar. It is important to have these conversations with the African countries to explain the Indo-Pacific. You spoke about the U.S. and Africa Leaders Summit. It makes no mention of the Indo-Pacific there. Even in India's interactions with Africa, there is no talk about the Indian Ocean. If these issues are discussed with African countries more extensively, paying more attention to what it is that they need, and offering jointly would be a good step to work together and go forward.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thank you so much, Rushali. Let me take a couple more audience questions before we get to our last round here. Rushali, I will probably club two that are related and we have not spoken about too much. One question is from Matthew Kennedy, and he asks about China-India Naval competition and the Indian Ocean, sort of as a theater of competition. What are your views on that? And a completely sort of opposite question: "Is there any low-hanging fruit that India and China can cooperate on in South Asia?" This question is from Atif Chaudhary.

Rushali Saha: Thank you so much for that. As far as India and China's Naval competition is concerned, I think there is much greater awareness now in New Delhi that China is a real threat in the Indian Ocean. For the longest time when we used to talk about a two-front war in New Delhi or in strategic circles here, it referred to the territorial threat, which is coming from China on one hand and Pakistan on the other. But now, when we talk about the two-front war, it talks about how, if it is a territorial threat from Pakistan along the land borders, it is a threat from China in the Indian Ocean. This is very concerning here in New Delhi.

Although India developed its maritime consciousness slightly later because of course, it was caught up with territorial concerns in the post-independence Cold War period. I do believe India has made major strides,

especially under the current administration with SAGAR. SAGAR, Security and Growth for All in the Region, has been a victory for India in many ways. This has to do not just in terms of the diplomatic presence, but even what India offers. As Riya also mentioned, India's reputation as a reliable partner is something that it can really bank on, and it has further honed over the past couple of years. India has become, I believe, a much more assertive player in the Indian Ocean. Having said that, China's strategy towards the Indian Ocean—which is something that I go deeper into in my policy memo as well—is not just about Chinese military presence and submarine presence, but how China is presenting itself as an alternative to Western countries for the region.

Now, this is taking the shape of providing development aid, being involved in port infrastructure projects, and in terms of responding to what these countries want, and increasing high-level engagements with these countries. The competition definitely is here to stay. I do believe that going forward, it'll be a major determining factor in terms of believe that going forward, it will be a major determining factor in how India—and as the overall competitive relationship evolves—the Indian Ocean will be an important arena where this competition plays out. As far as low-hanging fruit is concerned, at this point, India and China ties are at a low, and I am not very, very optimistic about areas of cooperation.

Having said that, I can think of climate change being one area where the two countries can cooperate, especially China, which has made many advances in controlling air pollution. Sitting here from New Delhi, I can assure you is something that India really needs to think about a bit more seriously. I do not see in the current environment scope for cooperation on these lines, but I do believe that a dialogue between the two countries on this issue is something which both sides could benefit from.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you so much, Rushali. I think you are right that currently, India-China ties are impasse because there is such a sort of fundamental disagreement between both sides on what normalization of the relationship actually means and whether keeping the water issue central to the relationship is important or not. And both Delhi and Beijing have very different views on it. And so, not too much scope for cooperation in the current kind of political environment.

In our last few minutes, what I wanted to do, and I will also try to fold in a couple of audience questions, but maybe give you all a little bit of time to reflect on your time in DC, the two months in residence and the yearlong fellowship that you had, and wanted to specifically ask you how the fellowship experience and the opportunity that you had to interact with your fellow analysts, whether that has impacted your research approach,

and what was your greatest learning from your time in DC about U.S. perspectives on South Asia as a region? Let us start with Riya.

Riya Sinha:

Thank you, Akriti. The entire fellowship, as I mentioned before, has been a very enriching and rewarding experience. And, of course, I am grateful to the Stimson Center for the opportunity. I have learned so much about asking difficult questions as well from my fellow fellows who are friends today, and we continue to talk. It is also a bit of a reality check because I am in the South Asian region and researching the South Asian region, so for me, this is very important. When you move to another region, say Washington D.C., for example, it was very new to me that South Asia does not even feature in the top 10 list of priorities for the U.S. right now. And, of course, understandably, because of its own interest, Washington has different priorities.

Therefore, it also enabled me to ask some of the difficult questions on how we can make this happen and what challenges we need to be aware of. Because sitting in the region, we think in silos sometimes. It was a great opportunity to come out of that and have the experience of conducting research and writing these policy memos. I am very grateful to the Stimson Center for this.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thanks, Riya. Noor?

Noorulain Naseem:

I would like to chip into the last question of low-hanging fruit for China and India. I think the transnational terrorism ensuing from Afghanistan is definitely something that India has been at the receiving end of, something that the region has to engage with when it comes to a regional dialogue. Unfortunately, there is no regional dialogue right now. The lines of communication are pretty much dead between Islamabad and New Delhi. The posture between Beijing and Delhi was pretty apparent in some international conferences that Beijing attended in New Delhi, which is such a shame. Climate change is very well mentioned. South Asia is the worst hit of all the regions across the world. I think it is high time everybody sits together and realizes or banks in realities other than our arms competition. Also, the Indian Ocean: Both India and China are aspiring leaders of the Global South and both are investing heavily in connectivity infrastructures. And for that, the peace across international borders is absolutely necessary. Because India and China share an international border, it is absolutely necessary that there is an ongoing conversation between them that rather than competing on these connectivity projects, they can definitely converge their interests. Both are energy-starved, both are rising economies, and both have huge populations that they have to feed.

In terms of the fellowship, it was absolutely wonderful. I think that my two recent pieces received in D.C., one on the arms race and the other on the Chinese growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, I could not have conceived at all without the knowledge that I learned from all the questions that Riya and Rushali asked in D.C. circles. So thank you so much. Me and Riya also did a publication. I have to give her all the credit because it is her work that I built on with the co-author in Islamabad on the importance of border infrastructure and how they can bring peace and connectivity to the region.

The way everybody from the team, including yourself, Elizabeth, and Frank, and everybody really... I can name everybody, but that would take too much time...[they] mentored us, gave us confidence. To really know how D.C. perceives South Asia and how different policy circles inside the larger policy circle of D.C. perceive South Asia; how the government looks at South Asia; how the DOD looks at South Asia or Pakistan or India; how the INGO community looks at it; how think tank community looks at it and where basically the conversation or the interest fallout. It was such a novel experience. So I definitely thank Stimson, definitely thank the fellow VFs, and you. If I look at my learning curve and worldview, it has expanded since last summer and has been remarkable. So, I am very humbled by this opportunity and very lucky to get to know all of you and learn from you. Thank you very much.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thank you, Noor. Rushali, last word to you on your fellowship experience before we wrap up quickly here.

Rushali Saha: Thank you so much, Akriti. Thank you, Riya and Noor, for your wonderful remarks. It is indeed quite emotional. I am so glad I get to see both of you again. But it is just for me; this fellowship was not just learning about Washington D.C., but I learned so much about Pakistan. From the first day, I connected with my fellow VFs from Pakistan, where we shared my love for Bollywood. Now, this is something I had heard about and had read about, but just meeting in person on the first day, I realized we have so much in common. It was also very emotional with sharing our experiences, and what I have heard from my grandparents, and connect over that, discovering shared heritage. And yes, I know Noor is smiling because she also has lineage from Calcutta, which is where I am from. So it has been a very, very emotional experience for me.

This would not have been possible without the Stimson Center Visiting Fellowship. As Riya pointed out, it was really a learning experience for us when we went there and realized what goes on in Washington D.C. That is when it made me realize we have heard about the American dream so much sitting here in Delhi, but once we go there and we understand what

the U.S. is, it made me realize that it is still a superpower in many ways as far as soft power is concerned. There is so much that is happening there.

It was very interesting for me to learn so much about how even the think tanks in DC are working and how actively they are contributing to the policy discourse, which was very positive. And overall, it was a great learning experience. The team at Stimson made us feel at home. So it was a great time overall, a great learning experience. I hope to take forward my research on the Indian Ocean and talk about the need for more cooperative approaches and taking the Indian Ocean more seriously within the Indo-Pacific crater. This has given me a great head start. So thank you so much. It has been a great experience.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Well, thank you to all of you for the in-depth and thoughtful research you conducted while in D.C., and everyone for joining us today. If these presentations and this session have intrigued you and you would like to apply for the South Asia Program Visiting Fellowship, applications for next year will be live in October, so please do look out for that. Please check out the policy memos of all our visiting fellows, which are available on the Stimson website. With that, I thank you all. Have a good evening, or morning, wherever you are. Thank you so much again for joining us.