



South Asia's New Strategic Importance Calls for Stronger U.S. Military Relations in the Region

With the advent of two nuclear powers, discoveries of nuclear trafficking, and the growth of insurgencies and terrorism that directly threaten U.S. interests and objectives, South Asia has become a primary theater of concern for the United States. Free from the restrictions of earlier sanction regimes and attentive to the region's central role in the global war on terrorism, the United States has engaged South Asian states aggressively with a wide variety of policy initiatives. Despite the diversity of policy instruments, however, few are very powerful. Indeed, only the U.S. military seems to offer many options for Washington to intensify its security cooperation and influence in the region.

RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) studied the key factors in the region that imperil U.S. interests and suggested where the U.S. military might play an expanded, influential role. Current U.S. military force posture, disposition, and lines of command may not be optimal given South Asia's new strategic importance. Seven key steps may improve the United States' ability to advance and defend its interests in South Asia—and beyond to the Middle East and Asia at large:

- **Consider South Asia as a “transformation driver.”** The military requirements necessary to manage trouble arising from the region should be treated as important design points for the transformation of U.S. military forces.
- **Modify the Unified Command Plan.** South Asia is currently divided between U.S. Central Command and U.S. Pacific Command. The Department of Defense should consider creating a new combatant command for South Asia, assigning the region to one existing command, or enhancing coordination between the two existing commands.
- **Fund intensified U.S. security cooperation in South Asia.** Initiatives such as the U.S.-India Defense Policy Group and the U.S.-Pakistan Defense Consultative Group and military exercise series such as COPE INDIA and BALANCE IROQUOIS can enhance U.S. influence with participating states.
- **Reconsider contingency plans for South Asia.** Counterterrorism, counterproliferation, and weapons of mass destruction contingencies merit special attention in terms of the likely time demands on U.S. responses and the number, type, and size of U.S. forces necessary for successful operations.
- **Intensify intelligence production on the region.** Intelligence production should anticipate the need to support a wide range of military activities and contingencies. In particular, the military services should expand their foreign area officer expertise in the region, especially through language training.
- **Review Special Operations Forces (SOF) requirements for the region.** The military services should consider creating a new SOF component command to enhance U.S. capabilities to meet potential contingencies.
- **Further develop power projection capabilities in the region.** The United States should develop its basing infrastructure on the periphery of the region where it can enter the region quickly, act, and loiter or retire as necessary in response to fast-breaking events.

Given South Asia's potential for violence, it is prudent to shape a part of the U.S. military to meet potential crises, just as the United States once shaped its military presence in Western Europe for the contingencies of the Cold War. ■

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This research brief describes work done for RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *War and Escalation in South Asia*, by John E. Peters, James Dickens, Derek Eaton, C. Christine Fair, Nina Hachigian, Theodore W. Karasik, Rollie Lal, Rachel M. Swanger, Gregory F. Treverton, and Charles Wolf, Jr., MG-367-AF (available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG367/>), 2006, 120 pp., ISBN: 0-8330-3812-5. Copies of this research brief and the complete report on which it is based are available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310.451.7002; toll free: 877.584.8642; or email: order@rand.org). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND®** is a registered trademark.

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