In a recent publication on “South Asia Today” a prominent and respected Indian journalist commenced his analysis of the “US and South Asia” with the comment that:

Over the last three and a half decades the US role in South Asia has been at best of benign neglect and at worst of malign intervention. Interludes of intervention have, however, been both more frequent and more prolonged. Like all generalisations this one is a slight (?) oversimplification of the inevitably complex reality. But this is the heart of the matter. The record speaks for itself.¹

I wondered just which “malign interventions” he would cite: the 20 billion in US economic aid to India through bilateral and multilateral programs; the immediate US arms assistance to India in the 1962 war with China in which the aircraft carrier Enterprise was sent into the Bay of Bengal to provide air support to India, if requested; the tens of thousands of Indian students who have received subsidised education at US universities; the termination in 1979 of US economic and military aid programmes to Pakistan in the context of “revelations” about its nuclear programs; or the importance to India of the US as a source of trade and technological knowledge. But no, it was the usual charade of allegations. The Dulles brothers didn’t appreciate the high moral character of Nehru’s nonalignment policy—even though it was under John Foster Dulles that India
became the largest recipient of US economic aid. Or it was the US arms provided to Pakistan that were used in the 1965 Indo-Pak war—while he and all other Indian commentators never mention that it was Soviet arms or the products of the Chinese arms industry built by the Soviets that were used by China in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Or, it was Kissinger’s pointing out in 1971 that US commitments to India against China applied in the context of another Chinese attack, but not necessarily in the complicated politics of an Indian invasion of Pakistan. And so on and on.

The article is a rather standard example of some gross distortions of history and a conveniently selective memory on issues involving the US role in South Asia up to and including the 1980s in which the Indian authors pay little or no attention to anyone else’s concerns and interests but their own—and occasionally the USSR. Most American academic specialists on South Asia dismiss such diatribes as politically-motivated documents (this one was written during the height of the Indian anti-Pakistan and anti-US publicity campaign in the Fall of 1983), not to be confused with the more sophisticated and balanced, though still usually critical, Indian appraisals of US policy in “their” region. But this article also does highlight a persistent theme in all Indian foreign policy commentaries—namely, that South Asia has always been peripheral to US vital interests; that US policy toward the region is made primarily with developments in adjacent regions in mind; that American policy can and has been destabilising in regional terms; that American policies and commitments cannot be expected to outlive the events and conditions that motivated them; and that, therefore, the US is an unknown quantity in South Asian politics.

This is, it should be noted, one aspect of international relations on which India and the other nations in the region are in broad agreement. Many Pakistanis stress the failure of the US to honor its commitments to their country’s security in crisis periods, e.g., 1965 and 1971, and question the durability and
reliability of current American policy in South and Southwest Asia that is, supposedly solely a response to developments in Afghanistan and Iran. Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka question the willingness of the US to adopt a supportive position in their troubled relations within the region if, in the process, additional strains are placed upon the already difficult Indo-US relationship. While some Indians are busily concocting a whole set of imaginative scenarios in which the US is busily organising the rest of South Asia against India, these other states are bewailing the reluctance of the US to assume even the most minimal obligations to provide very limited assistance or support that would, presumably, help them to meet both internal and external threats to their political systems or, indeed, their existence as independent and sovereign states.

An honest and frank analysis of US policies in the subcontinent would demonstrate that there is some basis for these negative evaluations of US policy by South Asians as well as for their concern over the durability and depth of American commitments to the integrity of the state system in the region. But it would be a mistake to project US policy responses in South Asia in the 1960s and early 1970s into the 1980s without fuller consideration of the major changes that are underway in Washington’s perceptions on this subject. While some East Asian specialists still retain a very narrow China/Japan perspective on all things Asian, it is now much more widely understood that South Asia is the more critical region in all of southern Asia and in the vital to US, Japanese, and European interests—Indian Ocean area. And again, in the 1950s it was considered sufficient to link in Pakistan to a West Asian security system, but in the 1980s there is a much better understanding that both Pakistan and India are important factors in West Asian geopolitics. It is, indeed, doubtful that there are such things as West Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian policies in US projections today, even though we may still define policies in narrow regional terms for conceptual—and institutional—convenience. What is more important are the broader range of
factors that now motivate American policy when compared to any previous period.

There is also another aspect of South Asia that has influenced US policy in the past and continues to do so today. And that is the comparative stability of the region in political and international terms. Since the 1950s, Washington has usually tried to avoid assuming a significant role in the settlement of regional disputes, leaving these to the South Asian states to settle bilaterally. The exceptions to this general rule—Kashmir in the 1950s and early 1960s or the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971—had such negative results that the US government was persuaded of the wisdom of staying out. It was only when major external powers appeared to be intervening in ways that threatened to destabilise the region—Soviet pressure on Pakistan in the early 1950s and again since December 1979 or the Chinese threat to India during and after the 1962 war—that the US considered it essential to adopt an interventionist policy to help sustain the status quo in the subcontinent.

This predilection for noninvolvement in strictly rational disputes and controversies continues to be a major factor in US policy in South Asia. And now, as in the 1950s, the perspectives of the South Asian states on US "intervention" depends on whether this is seen as serving their national interests. While India has generally projected a distinct lack of enthusiasm for an American role in South Asia, at times New Delhi has not only welcomed intervention by the US, but urged a vigorous and more expanded involvement. These were, of course, times when this was seen to serve India's interests in and beyond the subcontinent. However, the general principle of Indian foreign policy today, as we understand it, is to exclude external intervention in South Asian politics. The US has no objection to this as long as it applies to all external powers and is broadly acceptable to the other South Asian states. The tolerant acceptance of Soviet aggression in
Afghanistan has made a mockery out of this Indian regional policy principle, however, and this the US cannot and will not ignore. If at some point in the future, SARC should be transformed into a regional security system based upon a cooperative relationship among the participant states, the US will have no reservations about accepting such a system and limiting any American involvement to be determined by the SARC forum.

South Asian Issues: US Perspectives

Perhaps one of the most difficult and divisive issues in South Asia in the 1980s are the charges of interference by one state in the domestic politics of a neighboring state. This is not new, of course, in South Asia. India had “managed” the 1950-51 revolution in Nepal; provided vital assistance to the Bangladesh liberation movement in 1971, had helped train, according to Prime Minister Morarji Desai, assassination teams directed at the Bangladesh President in 1976-77 until Desai cancelled the project, and had been an important source of financial assistance to the Afghanistan-based “Azad Paktunistan” movement directed at the integrity of Pakistan (while never publicly questioning the validity of the Durand Line). Pakistan, meanwhile, had supported “Azad Kashmiri” guerilla movements in Kashmir Valley in 1948 and as the prelude to the second Indo-Pak war in 1965 it had also cooperated with the PRC in establishing training camps for some rebel tribal factions in northeast India prior to 1971.

Interference in neighbouring state politics, thus, is an old story but, with the exceptions of the 1965 Kashmir and 1971 Bangladesh movements, had been more sideline operations that were meant to complicate matters for the governments in the target states rather than cause major upheavals. This is not quite so clearly the case in 1984-85. The extent of the charges and countercharges being made are more extensive, affect more vital interests, and threaten to elicit an intensity of response that could prove very destabilising. India, as the only state in South Asia with borders on all the other states (a watery
border in the Sri Lanka case), is of course the focus of these developments. Pakistan’s quiet references to Indian vocal support of the Sind uprising and the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy in 1983, and Islamabad’s deep concern over alleged assistance to the Al-Zulfikar terrorist groups and to some dissident elements in the Pak military were expressions of apprehension about India’s intentions toward Pakistan. The Sri Lanka government (SLG) which had initially appreciated New Delhi’s efforts to mediate between the SLG and the moderate Tamil political factions in 1983 and early 1984, was expressing considerable concern over the way in which, as verified in the Indian press, Tamil insurgents were given training by supportive Indian Tamil groups in Tamilandu and, allegedly, arms were being channeled into these forces by some organisations in the Indian government. Once again, it was New Delhi’s ultimate intentions and its reservation of the right to intervene “in the interests of regional stability” that aroused fears in Colombo.

Indian allegations on the role of the “foreign hand” in various recent domestic upheavals have been loudly proclaimed in the press and, occasionally, by official sources. The Assamese “sons of the soil” movement never projected any separatist proclivities but was, nevertheless, denounced by the Soviet-subsidised press in India (e.g., Blitz, The Patriot as a foreign inspired project directed at destabilising the entire Northeastern India. The centre-directed campaign against the Farooq Abdullah government in Jammu and Kashmir was once justified by a Congress Party leader as necessary because Pakistan was intending to “redo 1965”, and Farooq was not vigorous enough in suppressing pro-Pakistani political elements. But the main theme has been the “foreign hand” in the tragic events in Punjab in the summer of 1984 and in New Delhi on 31 October. Charges that Pakistan had assisted in the training and arming of Sikh “extremists” and that the Sikh communities in the US and UK have not been properly controlled in their anti-Indian activities and statements have poured out from
New Delhi. And, of course, the always reliable (it never tells that truth if it can think up a good lie) Patriot concocted one of the more imaginative accounts of the "foreign hands" at work in Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. Then, finally, there are the occasional efforts by Indian officials and some journalists to imply that it is Pakistani and American support of the National Liberation Movement in Afghanistan that keeps the war going there rather than the Soviet aggressors against this nonaligned state.

How does the US respond to these charges, real and imaginary, of intervention by one South Asian state in a neighbour's politics. In some cases, there would appear to be a good deal of skepticism about the accuracy of the allegations. The charges of Indian support of the Sindi movement in Pakistan in 1983 has little evidence in its support which also seems to be the case for the charge that Pakistan intended to attempt to "redo 1965" in Kashmir. But it may be that there are more legitimate complaints on the al-Zulfikar, Punjab, and Sri Lanka cases, and that these could have serious consequences for peace and stability in the subcontinent. The official—and real—US position is to discourage interference in the state systems in South Asia, either from within the region or from outside, and to urge a peaceful resolution of issues in dispute, whether on a bilateral basis or through multilateral forums. But let me make one point clear: the US does not consider of provision of assistance to the Afghan people against the Soviet invaders and the puppets who came in with the Soviet forces to establish a client regime under Soviet protection after the Soviet troops had assassinated the head of state of the Afghan government then in office. The bland statements emanating from New Delhi which accept without question the legitimacy of this Soviet implant in Kabul cannot and has not been accepted by the US, the other states in South Asia, and by the large majority of the members of the UN General Assembly.
The US government's position on a resolution of the Afghanis-
tan issue has been widely misinterpreted, and possibly misun-
derstood, in Pakistan as well as in India. Washington sees no
advantages for the US in the continuation of the war in
Afghanistan and is under no misapprehension that this is a
"Vietnam" for the USSR in which we can help make the Soviets
"bleed." It is, after all, the Afghan people who are bleeding in
large numbers and who are the victims of a complex form of
genocide in which the objective is to either kill off or expel from
the country the mass of the people who are not prepared to kneel
before the Soviet invaders or their puppets. The ultimate results,
if the war is allowed to continue on its present basis, can-
not help but be a threat to the interests and security of the US
and its friends and allies. The US government, I believe, would
endorse the policy of the Pakistan government—namely, to accept
any Afghan government established in the context of a with-
drawal of Soviet forces. Moreover, it is understood that the
legitimate security interests of the Soviet Union must be recog-
nised by any Afghan government if peace is to be reestablished
in this region with some sense of confidence in its durability.

With respect to the Indo-Pakistan dialogue, interrupted since
mid-1983, on a variety of issues of mutual concern, the US is
hopeful that the talks can be renewed once the domestic politics
in both states are somewhat less disruptive.

Washington sees a good working relationship between India and
Pakistan as the best guarantee of stability and progress in South
Asia and would have no qualms about reducing its involvement
in the region to whatever level would be preferred by both
states. But there is no way in which the US can accept what
appears to be the Indian government's position on one vital issue—
that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan does not constitute
a security threat to Pakistan and, more indirectly but still seriously,
to other South Asian and Southwest Asian states.

This is not to allege that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan
is part of a bigger expansionist programme or a drive for a "warm
water port” that will inevitably lead to Soviet intervention in Pakistan and/or Iran. But it is an inevitable part of superpower-smaller power geopolitics that sharing a common border can have disastrous consequences for the latter state; just ask Afghanistan which had always sought to be accommodating to Moscow in order to avoid doing anything to which the Soviets could reasonably raise objections. I can understand why New Delhi dislikes the establishment of an American military facility on Diego Garcia, given their perception of India’s interests. But it is incredible to me that New Delhi can claim that Diego Garcia is a threat to India and South Asia, but that somehow a Soviet-occupied Afghanistan is not a threat to Pakistan—and South Asia. Similarly, that India should ignore all the principles it so loudly and properly proclaims on the issue of Third World countries as the victims of western imperialism by its abandonment of the rights of the Afghan people to choose their own government is quite disheartening. Consistency may be the hobgoblin of small minds, but this drastic violation of a basic moral principle by the successor government to Jawaharlal Nehru is incomprehensible to an outsider.

As I see it, the US will continue its efforts to contribute in any way we can to the security and integrity of Pakistan. It is, of course, the prerogative of the Pakistan government to decide on the forms and extent of assistance, if any, it will request from the US as well as on how best to respond to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan in terms of Pakistan’s interests. This is the subject of a very broad and important debate in Pakistan these days, and the difficult decisions made by the government are constantly subject to review.

The US must be sensitive to the ways in which its military sales to Pakistan are a complication for both Indo-Pakistan and Indo-US relations. The level and types of military sales to Pakistan have been determined as best it could be by the extent necessary to meet Pakistan’s defensive requirements on both its western and eastern borders, keeping in mind the major and much larger military modernisation programme introduced by the
Government of India in the mid-1970s and by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The US has been, and remains, open to Indian military purchases on a scale not too dissimilar to Pakistan’s, but New Delhi’s insistence on terms not usually conceded to Pakistan or US allies has deterred this programme so far. But the door is still open and a new Indian shopping list might well be in order if New Delhi is interested. It is India and not the US that is responsible for the present imbalance in our military sales to India and Pakistan—a fact of life that is rarely mentioned in the Indian press and never by the Indian government. New Delhi is, of course, entitled to make its own decisions on the terms on which it obtains military equipment from foreign sources, but to expect Washington to offer anything better than the terms on which we sell military supplies to Pakistan or allied states is unrealistic.

There is also the increasingly important issue of US military sales to the other South Asian states which must buy virtually everything in that category abroad and see the US as one of several possible sources. Here again, one gets the impression that New Delhi is prepared to accept, rather grudgingly, their acquisition of military equipment from western Europe, the Soviet Union, and even China, but that a small shipment of non-nuclear sling-shots from the US would elicit a rash of officially-inspired stories in the Indian press about how the US is getting together with such small but powerful states as Sri Lanka in an effort to “surround” India in its own region. Washington does not consider any military sales it may make to these other South Asian states as a contribution to their security if, in the process, further strains are made in their relations with New Delhi since, in contrast to Pakistan, the only potential threat to their security at this time is India. US policy, therefore, has been to politely defer most such inquiries in order to avoid placing any additional obstacles in the way of the efforts to construct a South Asian regional system. That India’s objections have a political rather than a security motivation and that it is New Delhi’s perceptions of the “proper” relationship between India and the states in South Asia other than Afghanistan—
called the “Indira Doctrine” by some Indian commentators—that underlie New Delhi’s policy on this and related issues is well-understood in Washington.

There is also the assumption in New Delhi that all other countries but India can obtain military supplies from the US only by conceding the use of military bases and facilities to American forces. This allegation is made repeatedly with respect to Pakistan despite the failure of anyone to find evidence of anything even remotely resembling a military facility in Pakistan to which US forces have access in the fourth year of the US-Pak agreement. And the allegations with respect to Trincomalee in Sri Lanka and St. Martin’s Island in Bangladesh keep reappearing with monotonous regularity. The Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Michael Armacost, stated the US position on this and related issues quite clearly in December 1984.

Let there be no misunderstanding; the United States should not be involved in maintaining regional security and a balance of power in South Asia by establishing military bases or stationing American troops on the subcontinent. We have no desire to dominate the region. Our interests are best served when South Asian states are stable, resilient, and strong—capable of preventing outside forces from intruding in their regional affairs. ³

May I suggest that this denial of an American interests in bases or in direct involvement in security issues within South Asia be accepted until and unless there is some evidence to prove it wrong. The wild allegations on this subject from pro-Soviet sources have broadened my knowledge of South Asian geography (I had never heard of St. Martin’s Island until Blitz found a major US base there in one of their Editor’s narcotic fantasies), but that’s a low return for a bit of nonsense.

There are a couple of aspects of US global policy that also are important ingredients in its role in South Asia which should be noted here. The first is the policy on nuclear proliferation, a subject dear to the heart of some powerful public interest groups in the
US and hence, by necessity, important to even those elements in the government who are not such emotional true believers or so simpleminded on the subject. That India and Pakistan, the prime targets of the US on the proliferation issue in South Asia, do not see their security and economic interests served by a submissive adherence to the principles embodied in the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty or, even less, the 1978 US legislation on the punishment of prospective proliferators, is quite understandable even by someone who would like to see across-the-board reductions in nuclear weapon systems around the world.

I do, however, have problems understanding why the Government of India has responded negatively to President Zia's proposal that: (1) both countries maintain and develop their nuclear capacities; but (2) that both agree to the nonproduction of nuclear weapons; and (3) that mutual inspection rights of all nuclear facilities in both countries be accepted. India's nuclear weapons capability was vividly demonstrated in 1974, and there would appear to be no great secrets that require protection from Pakistani inspectors of Indian nuclear facilities. On the other hand, there is much less certainty about Pakistani capabilities in the nuclear field, a point that innumerable Indian official and political commentators have noted with alarm in their references to the "threat" from Pakistan. India, therefore, would seem to be the beneficiary of this proposal, in view of its oft-repeated statement that India has no intention to move to the production of nuclear weapons. But then, perhaps New Delhi prefers a policy of ambiguity on this subject, as K. Subrahmanyan has argued so persuasively should be its policy.

The other global policy of the US that has an immediate impact on all the South Asian states, potentially at least, concerns the American contributions to such international financial organisations as the IMF, the IDA, and the ADB which provide loans at low-to-no rates of interest to "developing countries." All the South Asian states concur that the amount of funds available to these institutions for distribution should be increased substantially, and all are unhappy with the Reagan administration's decision to retain
the US contribution at its present level or just with some very mod­
est increases. On the other hand, there is a division of opinion
among the South Asian states on the US position that low-interest
rate loans should be made available on a much-reduced basis to the
“more developed” (e.g., India and China) developing countries
that can afford any market interest rates on loans but rather
should be directed to the “less developed” (e.g., the other
South Asian states) countries that are less able to afford bank loans.
I don’t have the space—or the expertise—to go into this subject,
but just let me make a couple of comments on how this is seen in
the US. First, the criticism of the Reagan administration’s
policy by the elitist press in the US and by career-minded American
“specialists” on this subject does not reflect the views of the vast
mass of the American public. Second, that while Americans
have demonstrated over three-and-a-half decades a willingness to
extend assistance to Third World countries for their development
programmes the public in the US has no sense of guilt or responsi­
bility for their deficiencies in these endeavours and does not respond
positively to demands for more assistance because we owe it to
these countries. Pragmatic rather than moral agreements elicit
a much better response.

Let me conclude with a brief statement on US policy toward the
integrity of the state system in South Asia, since this is the subject
of a wide variety of speculation in the region. It has become a
regular line among some Indian political commentators, fed
by Soviet disinformation campaigns, to argue that the US sees its
interests in South Asia as best served by the disintegration of the
Indian Union and the division of India into several states. How
this would benefit the US is never really explained; rather, it is
just assumed that Washington finds India’s independent and
nonaligned policies, based on the highest moral principles, of
course, an obstacle to US regional and global objectives, and
one that can be managed only through the dismemberment of
the Indian Union. Reality is quite different. India is sometimes
an irritant and occasionally, as in the case of Afghanistan, is
seen as misguided in failing to adopt a policy position that
would seem to serve India's interests and meet its proclaimed moral standards on international behavior. But far more important to the US is the vital and useful role that a stable and vibrant India plays in South Asia, in the process preventing external powers from exerting an inordinate influence in the subcontinent. A dismembered India, in contrast, might open up South Asia to a greater US role, but it is the nearby major powers that would have the capacity to intervene forcefully and successfully, and this would be a serious problem for the US. So, in the US we are confident that New Delhi will maintain the integrity of the Indian Union—with or without the assistance of foreign hands.

This American interest in stability and peaceful and friendly relations in South Asia applies also, of course, to the other states in the region. Here again, American interests are best served by the maintenance of the status quo in national terms and by the development of a regional system that will contribute to the resolution of disputes and disagreements between the states in the subcontinent. We understand that the American relationship with one country in the region may be seen as detrimental to the interests of a neighbouring state, certainly the way in which India views US-Pakistan relations in the 1980s and also, perhaps, the emerging relationships between the US and other South Asian states. It is for this reason that there must be a better understanding on all sides of the objectives and limitations of US policy in South Asia, for only then can we avoid jumping to conclusions that have no basis in fact and inspire responses that complicate rather than improve relations.
NOTES


2. As a Corrective to a normal Indian misstatement, it was not Nehru's nonalignment policy as such that Dulles termed "immoral" but rather the failure of "nonaligned" India to condemn the brutal and bloody Soviet military intervention in Hungary in 1956.


4. First made to Mrs. Gandhi in 1981 and then to Rajiv Gandhi after he had assumed the Prime Ministership in November 1984.