

Why South Asia's Rise Should Interest the US

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Gurumurthy Kalyanaram

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A salient but somewhat overlooked element of the Obama presidency is the rise of new strategic opportunities for the United States in South Asia and its neighborhood, through the revival and strengthening of democratic governments in large parts of this region. These opportunities certainly have risen due to many factors — some of which have been in play for a long time — yet Obama deserves at least some credit for many of these outcomes, even if the only action was a carefully calibrated inaction on his part.

Three developments in the past few years have pushed back China's influence in South Asia: a dramatically new democratic order in Myanmar, a fresh beginning in Indonesia, and turnover to a more responsive leadership in Sri Lanka. To these, one can add a relatively peaceful democratic transition in Pakistan and the continued consolidation and advancement of such institutions in India. The only two instances for disappointment are developments in Bangladesh and Nepal.

These developments have brought significant beneficial geopolitical opportunities for the United States. In some instances, like that of Myanmar, Obama and his administration gently nudged the society without being overbearing. In other cases, such as Indonesia, the Obama administration acted as a supportive cast. And in yet other examples, like India, the administration corrected its previous course and embraced the change.

Myanmar

From the geopolitical point of view, the most notable of all the outcomes is the recently concluded peaceful and unimpeded elections in Myanmar. For the first time since 1962, the country will have a civilian government — or at least one that is not completely controlled by the military establishment.

Although it is true that Myanmar's military will retain significant power (including direct control over the police and large parts of the bureaucracy) because of provisions in the current constitution, there is much to celebrate: free and open elections, the willingness of the military to respect a severely adverse electoral outcome, measured conduct by the victorious National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and acknowledgment by both the military and National League for Democracy of [the need for a stable and peaceful transition](#).

Myanmar's democracy has been a long time in the making — at least 25 years, since Aung San Syu Kii won the 1990 elections. Widespread protests forced the military to conduct the vote, but the military then nullified the result of the elections. Since then, the military has adopted incremental reforms, including crafting a new constitution in 2008. (It believes that the constitution is sufficiently stacked in its favor.)

Through all these years, the United States has maintained a policy of gentle nudging. Rightly so: pushing Myanmar's military would have been counterproductive, particularly since China was openly willing to support it. However, since 2011, Myanmar has turned to the United States because of the resentment generated as a result of the heavy-handed approach of Chinese companies, both in exploiting natural resources and in eliminating Myanmar's small businesses. Since coming to power three years ago, Chinese president Xi Jinping has not visited Myanmar — a telling sign of the decline in the two countries' relations. Even when Myanmar pivoted to the United States, the Obama administration was careful not to take advantage of its vulnerability. Although President Obama twice visited Aung San Suu Kyi at her home in Myanmar, the military was nudged to set its own accelerated timetable for political reform.

The world now has a relatively free Myanmar, one which looks at the United States as a potential partner and has moved away from over-dependence on China. But unless the United States invests in Myanmar with a thoughtful and sustained scheme, like a Marshall Plan, today's hopes are likely to curdle into tomorrow's despair. Myanmar does not have the hard and soft infrastructure to bring a minimum measure of prosperity to its people with any real urgency. That despair could very well bring back the military and push the country closer to China.

Indonesia

In 2014, Joko Widodo, the governor of Jakarta, won Indonesia's presidential elections. He defeated Prabowo Subianto, a former general who had served a prominent role in the military during the ironfisted reign of President Suharto. Although there had been some political reforms and new faces in the Indonesian government after Suharto's departure in 1998, the post-Suharto political leadership was still substantially connected to the former head of state. This makes what happened in 2014 all the more important. For the first time, there has been a new beginning for Indonesia's government; Widodo has no connection at all to Suharto, and he campaigned as a change candidate with a record of reform as the governor of Jakarta.

The Obama administration supported Widodo — a preference that, for the most part, was expressed subtly and indirectly. That support became direct in June 2014, when it appeared that Widodo's electoral opponent was gaining ground. As was reported at the time, after the June 2014 polls, Robert Blake, the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, [sent an email to the *Wall Street*](#)

[Journal in which he called for Indonesia to investigate alleged human rights abuses](#) by General Subianto. On June 22, 2014, the *Journal* published an article about the email and Subianto's actions. Although Ambassador Blake said that the administration was not taking sides in the Indonesian presidential race, he admitted that his action followed poll results showing Subianto gaining ground.

Subianto was known to be a sympathizer of China and a man who would not hesitate to adopt violent means to retain power. In advocating the election of Widodo, the Obama administration advanced both U.S. geopolitical interests and values in the fourth most-populous country in the world. In light of China's aggressive posture in international waters and in the Indian Ocean, Widodo's presidency offers a new opportunity to the United States to contain that aggression. [President Widodo's official state visit to the White House in October 2015](#) has been perceived as a success by Indonesia's media and its citizens. That augurs well.

Sri Lanka

In the case of Sri Lanka, the U.S. posture was more direct in the past five years or so. President Obama and his administration were sharply critical of President Mahinda Rajapaksha for alleged serious human rights violations in dealing with violence and terrorism in Sri Lanka. Shunned by the United States and the Western world, Sri Lanka predictably moved closer to China for support and investment. China gladly leveraged this opportunity to increase its influence in South Asia, and made substantial investments in critical ports and roadways. President Rajapaksha permitted Chinese submarines to dock in Sri Lankan ports, creating serious anxieties in India and the United States.

President Rajapaksha, confident of his reelection, declared new elections for early January 2015. Inspired by the United States' tough posture on human rights, one of Rajapaksha's ministers, Maithripala Sirisena, resigned from the cabinet and announced his candidacy for the presidency. In Sirisena, the Sri Lankan electorate found a credible alternative to the president. Tiring of Rajapaksha's heavy-handedness, Sri Lankans voted Sirisena to the presidency. The policies of Sirisena and his prime ministerial appointee, Ranil Wickramasinghe, are known to be friendlier to the United States and India, and less so to China.

Accordingly, there is an opening here. But this opening will close unless the United States acts decisively and immediately, whether directly or through international agencies, and helps Sri Lanka restructure its debt payments. Right now, Sri Lanka is now buried in debt, most of it to China. Seventy percent of Sri Lanka's infrastructure projects were funded and built by China, nearly tripling its foreign debt over the past five years. Since many of these projects have been halted by the Sirisena government, China is very upset, and is refusing to reschedule the debt payments. America must step in.

President Obama and his administration have not engaged with Sri Lanka in as sustained a manner as would be advisable. That is unfortunate. Sri Lanka is an important gateway to the Indian Ocean and the security and prosperity of South Asia and neighboring regions. If the United States is interested in containing China, it is not enough to invest in India, Myanmar, and Pakistan; it must also invest in Sri Lanka.

India

In the case of India, President Obama and his administration corrected course in May 2014 when inaction could have been disastrous for both for the United States and India. During the first six years of the Obama administration, the [president developed a personal rapport and deep respect](#) for then-Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh. In 2009, Singh was the honored guest of President Obama's first official state dinner. At the end of a visit by Singh in 2013, Obama even made the rare personal gesture of walking down to the White House portico to see off the departing prime minister.

Obama's approach necessarily changed after May 2014, when India's national parliamentary elections gave the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Narendra Modi, a decisive majority, trouncing Singh's Congress Party and its allies. Accordingly, Modi was elected prime minister of India.

Modi, whose party embraces a form of Hindu nationalism, had been governor of the state of Gujarat in 2002, when large-scale systematic, premeditated violence against Muslim Indians had erupted. Ever since, Modi has been dogged by allegations that he had failed (willfully or not) to stop the violence and in the process aided in the slaughter of a religious minority. It was the reason why, in 2005, Modi was denied a visa to visit the United States. After the denial, Modi never again sought to visit the United States, nor did the U.S. government ever hint at a relaxation in its stance toward him.

After President Obama took office in 2009, he did not proactively reverse President George W. Bush's policy of visa denial, and appeared to continue to keep Modi at bay. But when Modi was elected prime minister in May 2014, Obama immediately and wholeheartedly embraced the verdict of the Indian electorate. With hardly a pause, Obama invited Modi to make an official visit to the United States. Modi accepted the invitation, and since then, Obama and Modi have developed a collegial and warm relationship. [Obama even authored a short profile of Modi for TIME magazine's "Time 100" list of the world's most influential people.](#) Since May 2014, Prime Minister Modi has visited the United States twice and conferred with Obama. Obama has visited India once, serving as the chief [guest of honor at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2015.](#)

In the Obama-Modi years, India and the United States have made progress in cooperation on strategic defense. Many complex legal issues remain, but the two leaders have developed a framework to resolve the thorny issues of liability that have impeded the implementation of the India-U.S. civil nuclear agreement. If U.S.-India relations had not been enlarged upon, as President Obama has done, there would have been no counterbalance to China in South Asia and its neighborhood. Democratic India now offers that.

Pakistan

Over the past decade and more, the United States has grown weary of Pakistan's inability and/or disinterest in rooting out the sources of terror and extremism. And while the United States has exerted some pressure on Pakistan in response, the Obama administration has realized that there is a point beyond which such pressure is simply counterproductive: Pakistan may fragment, or it could seek the protection of China.

President Obama and his administration have been engaging the democratically elected governments of Pakistan, including the current government led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. But the administration also has been careful to engage Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment, which historically has exerted power over the nation's democratic government. Following the official state visit of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to the United States in October 2015, the U.S. government received Pakistan army chief General Raheel Sharif in November for additional policy discussions.

The U.S.-Pakistan relationship continues on a predictable path. Pakistan, as less than forthcoming as it may be in fighting terror, is an important bulwark against complete dissolution of order in the borders of Afghanistan. The United States needs Pakistan. President Obama and his administration realize this, and accordingly have maintained a balance in encouraging the democratically elected government even as they have engaged with the military establishment.

Bangladesh and Nepal

Democratic institutions remain underdeveloped in Bangladesh. Though it has a two-party system, the parties have been led by the same two respective leaders since 1991, and they have rotated in and out of the government majority ever since. The last elections, in early 2014, were boycotted by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Khaleda Zia. The victorious Sheikh Hasina of Awami League, now prime minister of Bangladesh, is working to confront the nation's increasing violence and fragile polity.

For more than a decade, Nepal has been rocked with violence from its communists. After much debate, the country has produced a new constitution, but it has become a source of strife, as

significant segments of minorities allege discrimination. The constitution transforms Nepal, once an officially Hindu monarchy, into a secular, federal government composed of seven states, each with its own legislature. The presidency will be a mostly ceremonial position, with real power vested in the parliament. Two large minority groups claim conspiracy: the Madhesi and Tharu ethnic groups allege that even though the new constitution *appears* to guarantee representation, its newly created states are actually designed to break minority groups into even less-powerful blocs. As the Madhesis are largely from India, India has been caught in this storm.

The United States has engaged with Bangladesh and Nepal in only a limited manner. Although a higher level of engagement with Bangladesh may earn surprisingly productive results — after all, it is a country of some 150 million people, a larger population than any nation in Europe — it is understandable that the United States has to prioritize its resources. India has substantial economic and political interests in Bangladesh and Nepal, and the United States must find a way to work with India to bring greater stability and prosperity to these two countries.

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In South Asia and its global neighborhood, democracy is taking hold and democratic institutions are growing robust. The new democratically elected governments in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka are potential economic and security partners of the United States. All are pushing back on China. But in order for that pushback to continue, the United States must substantially invest in Myanmar, and assist Sri Lanka in its debt crisis with China immediately. India will remain a natural ally of the United States in the region. But expanding the relationship with India to include Japan, European countries (particularly France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), and Israel can further enlarge and strengthen this strategic relationship. Pakistan is, as always, a delicate balance. The United States must insist that India and Pakistan improve their relations through bilateral talks, while carefully guarding against any third nation intervening in India-Pakistan talks, lest those discussions open a new avenue of influence for China. Finally, Bangladesh and Nepal require attention — here, working with India may be the most efficient approach.

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Gurumurthy Kalyanaram, a doctoral alumnus of MIT, is a professor and dean, academic advisor, and management and policy consultant. He can be reached at kalyan@alum.mit.edu.