

One Hundred Thirteenth Congress
Congress of the United States
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific

February 26, 2013

The Rebalance to Asia: Why South Asia Matters (Part I)

Chairman Steve Chabot (R-OH)
Opening Statement

Last Congress, I was honored to serve as Chairman of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, which was a truly rewarding experience filled with both great opportunities and tragedies. As the new Chair of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, I am happy to announce that South Asia is once again under the jurisdiction of the Asia Subcommittee. Historically and culturally, I think combining the two makes sense. They share transnational threats from terrorism and natural disasters to nuclear proliferation and human rights abuses.

In November 2011, the Obama Administration detailed its plan to strengthen American engagement and leadership in the Asia-Pacific region in order improve regional security, promote U.S. values, and increase economic prosperity. This strategic rebalance toward Asia is also viewed by many as an attempt by the United States to address the growing political and military influences of China. Examining the Administration's efforts to create a more integrated approach to the region over the past two years, much of the focus has been on East and Southeast Asia. We see this through the improved military relationships with the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan; the opening of a Marine base in Darwin, Australia; and the positioning of littoral combat ships in Singapore. We also witnessed this in Burma following the opening of its borders to the world and its pursuit of democratic reforms in which the U.S. has played a key role in; and also in the ongoing Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement negotiations that aim to create a high-standard free trade agreement linking the Asia-Pacific region.

While there have been successes, it seems many of the priorities and goals described in the "pivot" are more ambitious rhetoric than detailed plans describing how to achieve long-term, sustainable results. One area that we see a disparity is in a subregion that has been largely neglected from the rebalance strategy---South Asia.

Straddling the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and Java and South China Seas, South Asia bridges a world fraught with uprisings and civil strife to one that will drive global politics and the world's economy. It consists of the world's largest democracy, second most populous nation, one of the poorest countries, and one of the youngest overall demographics. As the

center of the Indian Ocean rim-land that extends from the Middle East to India and south to Indonesia, South Asia is a subregion in need of strategic stability.

The scene of a power struggle for energy security, the Indian Ocean maritime region holds the world's most important shipping and trade routes, accounting for 70 percent of petroleum product shipments and half the world's container traffic. It is in recognition of this region's importance that has created an intense rivalry between India and China. The rise of China, India and other Asian nations, and the rapid growth in seaborne trade and dependence upon imported energy from the Indian Ocean through the Straits of Malacca, has resulted in the unification of the Indian Ocean maritime region to the Pacific as one geostrategic space—in what some refer to as the “Indo-Pacific” region.

Secretary Clinton used “Indo-Pacific” for the first time in November of last year to describe the integration of South Asia as part of the United States' broader strategic rebalance to Asia. I welcome this as a sign that India and the broader region will play a more critical role going forward. I do not believe the “pivot” will succeed unless the U.S. does more to build stronger relationships in South Asia and with India, in particular.

India's cultural influence, pluralistic society, democratic government, and growing military power place India in a position to take advantage of future economic growth in East and Southeast Asia, while also contributing to regional security and achieving national security interests that both India and the U.S. share. While we have seen progress in certain areas of the U.S.-India relationship, many areas are at a state of frustrating impasse. This is partly due to the divergence of various objectives in the region, historical distrust, and India's determination to maintain strategic autonomy. These concerns raise many questions about how to move forward; however, these obstacles should not impede efforts to place the U.S.-India relationship as a key feature of the broader U.S. strategy in Asia.

The Administration stated in December 2012 that its “strategic rebalancing to Asia will continue with renewed vigor” and that “U.S. engagement in South Asia” would be central to this reinvigorated outreach. I hope the witnesses here today will elaborate on this statement and discuss how the Administration is planning to continue the rebalance with a stronger focus on South Asia, not forgetting U.S. engagement with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives, and further elaborate on specific actions or commitments it plans to take in this effort to achieve more tangible results.