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

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Opening Statement

Today's hearing is a continuation of the hearing we held two weeks ago with Assistant Secretary Robert Blake and Acting Assistant Secretary Joseph Yun, which gave the Administration the opportunity to address how it plans to increase South Asia's role as part of the strategic rebalance toward Asia. I think it's fair to say that there was bipartisan support in this room regarding the critical strategic importance of South Asia, particularly with India, to U.S. interests in the broader Indo-Pacific region. I want to emphasize today that I do not believe the Administration's rebalance will succeed unless the U.S. does more to build stronger relationships in that part of the world. Unfortunately, two weeks ago we did not hear from our witnesses how the Administration specifically plans to tackle the myriad of challenges the U.S. confronts in enhancing its engagement in the region, or tangible actions the Administration intends to pursue to emphasize South Asia's critical importance and better integrate India into the regional architecture. Today, I hope that we can explore these challenges and examine actions the United States can take to further U.S. interests and foster stronger relations throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

The interconnection of U.S. economic, political, and security objectives can be found in and along the Indian Ocean Rim. Economically, the region is a lifeline of international trade, carrying half the world's container ships, one third of the bulk cargo traffic, and two-thirds of the world's oil shipments. Woven together by trade routes, it is a geographic area that the world greatly depends on, and containing nearly a third of the world's population, the significant human resources and technological capabilities within this rim-land is extraordinary. It is certainly no surprise that China and India regard this region as critical, where economic interests meet security interests. Consequentially, actions and decisions made in this region will undoubtedly have a direct impact on the economy of the United States and on the creation of American jobs. Since these actions will also help to shape the political landscape, it is now more important than ever that the U.S. focus on enhancing economic openness, political freedoms and democratic governance in this region where so many nations are in the midst of political transition.

The opportunities we see in South Asia are at the same time challenges, and one of the biggest challenges we face is building a more dynamic relationship with India. It is vitally important for the U.S. that India takes a more active role in developing the Indian Ocean region and increases its engagement in the Asia-Pacific; however, the real question is how can we help India do this? India is still excluded from various security and economic groups, particularly U.S.-led global nonproliferation and arms control groups and a range of economic associations; but, India, like China, wants a greater role in the global order. It also wants the U.S. to play a constructive role in helping to maintain regional security and promoting economic cooperation—to balance what it calls “China’s irredentist encroachment on the global commons.”

At the same time, India has been both unwilling and ostensibly unable to assume a leadership role as an international actor commensurate with its size and power. Indian leadership has been hampered by corruption, endemic poverty, and its acute dependence on unreliable regional allies. U.S.-India cooperation will likely remain incremental and measured as long as India strives to maintain its strategic autonomy. While we could fault India on the sluggish bilateral relationship, for being overly focused on maintaining its strategic independence and acting more reactionary than proactive and engaged, that will not bring the change we want to see. We need to build on the strengths of the relationship, find ways to foster trust with India, and help India integrate into the international system. I believe there are steps the Obama Administration can take to do this that it is not presently pursuing.

Assistant Secretary Robert Blake stated at our first hearing that, “While it may not get the same attention as our relationships with countries of East Asia, U.S. engagement in South Asia remains central to our reinvigorated outreach to the entire continent.” This statement is a little misleading because South Asia has never been considered central to the rebalance in the first place. To that end, while South Asia is unlikely to play the central role, I am hopeful that it can increase its presence on the world stage.

An increased engagement strategy with South Asia will help the United States secure its long-term goals in Asia in a number of ways: maintaining freedom of navigation, preventing the spread of radical Islam and terrorism, upholding human rights, and helping to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. For the strategic rebalance toward Asia to be successful, not only does South Asia need to play a more active role, our policies need to have clear objectives and precise markers of success. The U.S. also needs to remain committed. Unfortunately, two weeks ago we did not hear specific steps the Administration is taking or planning to take to address these many challenges. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and examining policy options the U.S. can take to strengthen America’s engagement strategy in Asia.