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pp. 13-26

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# Indian Involvement in Afghanistan in the Context of the South Asian Security System<sup>1</sup>

By Melanie Hanif

## Introduction

The end of bipolarity disrupted conflict management arrangements on global and regional levels. During the "unipolar moment," the consequences of this rupture affected the regional level more seriously because the United States and Russia, who had previously assumed the main responsibility for the "management" of regional conflicts, were either unable or unwilling to become entangled in peripheral disputes.<sup>2</sup> This has changed since the beginning of the 21st century. The United States is now committed to costly missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. It has, however, become obvious that international security today cannot be granted or guaranteed by the United States alone. Attempts by international organizations, especially the United Nations (UN), to fill this gap have proved disappointing. The search for alternative conflict management mechanisms is under way.<sup>3</sup>

Since the September 11 attacks, the Afghanistan conflict has taken center stage in the discourse on international security. Attempts to manage this conflict have mainly been international, led by the US and NATO. The neglect of the regional dimension is due not only to the ignorance of policymakers but also to Afghanistan's peculiar location between three different security systems: Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia.<sup>4</sup> It is not clear whether Afghanistan merely separates these security environments or whether it is part of one or more of them. This ambiguity, largely inherited from colonial times,<sup>5</sup> has been the root cause of many problems in contemporary Afghanistan. Today even the limited goals for the country, namely, a crackdown on al-Qaida and the ousting of the Taliban regime, seem distant.<sup>6</sup>

This article focuses on the regional requirements for a pacification of Afghanistan. For this purpose, Afghanistan is analytically "reframed" as part of South Asia. The hypothesis is that India is the only regional actor that might possess both the incentives and the capabilities to deal with the negative security externalities emanating from Afghanistan.

In South Asia, material characteristics such as the delineation of the region and its power polarity are unclear. India's role within the region is even more controversial. By examining India's role within its security environment, this paper will suggest how this lack of clarity could be remedied. In light of the disputes between India and Pakistan and between Pakistan and Afghanistan, India's involvement in the Afghan conflict is probably the most critical test case for India's leadership potential. The following section elaborates a theoretical framework based on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and the concept of regional hegemony as one form of regional order.

## Analytical Framework: Regional Security Complexes and Regional Hegemony

A Regional Security Complex (RSC) is a special form of region, defined by the notion of security.<sup>7</sup> Lake and Morgan define an RSC as:

"a set of states continually affected by one or more security externalities that emanate from a distinct geographic area. In such a complex, the members are so interrelated in terms of their security that actions by any member, and significant security-related developments inside any member, have a major impact on the others."<sup>8</sup>

Security externalities are costs and benefits that accrue not only to the actors that cause them, but also imperil the safety of neighboring states. Variations in magnitude, distribution, and number of security externalities mark the "density" of an RSC.<sup>9</sup> RSCs differ from one another in terms of degree of conflict and security management arrangements.<sup>10</sup> These arrangements are termed regional order and are treated as dependent variables by the RSCT. Possible independent variables are (1) the distribution of power within the RSC, (2) the number and characteristics of involved actors, (3) the degree of conflict, (4) their "embedded-ness" in the global system, and (5) great-power involvement. It is the combination of these variables which leads to the adoption of a certain regional order, which, in turn, varies in terms of (1) the level of cooperation and (2) the level of legal regulation.

One mode of regional order which has not been discussed systematically within RSCT yet, but which is implicit in both the Buzan/Wæver and the Lake/Morgan RSCT approaches,<sup>11</sup> is the concept of regional hegemony. The idea is derived from hegemonic stability theory, which was originally developed in the field of political economy.<sup>12</sup> As a rather new trend, hege-

monic stability is also being discussed as a model of regional order.<sup>13</sup> The key argument is that power asymmetry leads to peace and stability when power is exercised in a "benign" manner.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is both the structure and the "character" of power which lie at the heart of hegemonic stability:

"Benign unipolarity refers to a hierarchical structure in which a preponderant geographic core establishes a hub-spoke pattern of influence over a weaker periphery. Like an empire, the core exerts a powerful centripetal force over the periphery by virtue of its uncontested preponderance and the size and scope of its economy. But unlike in classical empire, regional order emerges from a *consensual bargain* between core and periphery, not from coercion."<sup>15</sup>

This "bargain" does not necessarily imply a formal procedure. Rather, it evolves from constant interaction between the regional actors. Nevertheless, it is crucial to the legitimacy of a hegemon's rule over the region. But how can these often informal bargains be captured and analyzed? One possibility is to look at them as the outcome of strategic interactions. This outcome is shaped by both the actors and the environment in which the interaction takes place. From this perspective, local security externalities increase regional costs. "It is the desire to reduce these greater social costs or capture the larger social benefits that motivates efforts at regional cooperation."<sup>16</sup> An RSC, then, constitutes the strategic environment created by externalities and the incentives to deal with them. The question of managing conflict becomes a problem of strategic choice. The outcome—that is, the mode of conflict management—depends on the preferences, perceptions, and relative power of the regional actors involved, while their options depend on the preferences of and actions taken by other actors.<sup>17</sup>

An analysis of regional conflict management arrangements thus has to take into account the type and severity of regional security externalities, the regional incentives, and the capacity for dealing with these.<sup>18</sup> Particularly in conflictive regional settings, a hegemon's offer of restraint is affected by a lack of credibility. From the perspective adopted in this paper, credibility is dependent on the preferences of the actors and uncertainties about other actors' type. It applies both to current promises and the question of whether these promises, even if credible today, will be in the actor's interest in the future.<sup>19</sup> By applying this theoretical framework, the following section will analyze India's role in South Asia. For this purpose it will be argued why Afghanistan should be treated as a member for the South Asian RSC and why India's interaction with Afghanistan and Pakistan is crucial for assessing India's regional leadership potential.

## India's Afghanistan Policy and Its Implications for Regional Order in South Asia

### *The Delineation of the South Asian RSC*

Afghanistan lies at the crossroads of the Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and South Asian RSCs. In the nineteenth century, it was crafted as a buffer zone to separate the then dominant regional powers—Britain, Russia, and Persia. Today's regional powers in the broader neighborhood around Afghanistan—especially Iran, Pakistan, India, and China—are all involved in the country's affairs. Iran, for instance, has been significantly contributing to the reconstruction of Afghan infrastructure<sup>20</sup> and China may soon become the largest provider of foreign direct investment in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

This is only to mention a few examples of external powers' activities in the country. The rivalries among them often hamper the purpose of stabilizing Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> Another consequence of ongoing multi-party involvement by neighboring states is that the designation of Afghanistan to one region of the world is still inconclusive. Buzan and Wæver, for example, describe Afghanistan as an insulator state or a "mini-complex" and not as a member of a particular RSC.<sup>23</sup> They reason that:

"[F]irst, none of the neighbouring countries is either interested in, or capable of, establishing its hegemony over [...] Afghanistan. [...] Second, all of the neighbouring states have more pressing security concerns in other directions."<sup>24</sup>

Today, Afghanistan is clearly a part of the dominant conflict in South Asia.<sup>25</sup> Pakistani policymakers have found themselves flanked by two neighbors with whom they have been involved in territorial disputes since the very emergence of Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> Pakistan supported the Taliban government in order to relieve pressure stemming from Pashtun nationalism<sup>27</sup> and to gain "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, India's support for perceptibly anti-Pakistani forces in Afghanistan is interpreted as encirclement by Pakistan.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, Pakistan sees both India and Afghanistan as relevant to its own national security and, accordingly, responds to actual and perceived threats in its relations with both states.<sup>30</sup> Pakistan has time and again faced the danger of fragmentation and has accused India and Afghanistan of supporting separatist movements in Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> The fragmentation of Pakistan would, however, send out major shock waves to Afghanistan and

Central Asia and not least to India.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, any worsening of the security situation in Afghanistan directly spills over to Pakistan by encouraging local Taliban. Notwithstanding this, Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of supporting the Afghan insurgents in order to maintain control over intra-Afghan affairs.<sup>33</sup> This indicates that "security externalities are far more extensive, compelling, and durable"<sup>34</sup> among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India than between them and other countries.

In addition, the cooperative structures in the region, limited as they may be, should not be entirely omitted. The inclusion of Afghanistan into South Asia appears all the more justified since Afghanistan joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2007.<sup>35</sup> The exclusion of Afghanistan from what "naturally" constituted South Asia (or, formerly, India) can be traced back to British colonial rule.<sup>36</sup> As part of the hegemonic discourse, it was aimed at concealing Britain's inability to gain control over the territory west of the Indus. After the departure of the British from the subcontinent, the US promoted the term *South Asia*, distinguishing it from *Southeast Asia*.<sup>37</sup> The reason for these different framings of South Asia is that they fundamentally affect responsibility for engagement.<sup>38</sup> In this light, Afghanistan's accession to the SAARC and the fact that it was promoted by India<sup>39</sup> can be interpreted as a sign of India's willingness to engage durably in Afghan security management and to integrate Afghanistan into the South Asian regional order.

Turning to the Middle East, Afghanistan is not a party to the dominant conflict there, which is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Afghanistan is connected to the Middle Eastern RSC mainly through Iran. Iran's role in both security environments is indeed important to their delineation. In this regard, Buzan's assessment that Iran is much more preoccupied with developments in the Middle East, where it seeks a leading role, appears to be correct. For Iran, the most pressing security threat emanating from Afghanistan is *not a local externality* (such as Islamic fundamentalism or Afghan refugees) but the military presence of the United States. This presence threatens Iran not so much because of competing interests within Afghanistan itself, but rather because of U.S. containment of Iran's leadership aspirations in the Middle East. Therefore, it seems reasonable to take the Iranian border as the line that separates the Middle Eastern from the South Asian RSC.

With a view to Afghanistan's northern neighborhood, Russia's attempt to integrate Afghanistan into Central Asia has failed. Although northern Afghanistan has close economic, ethnic, and cultural ties with Central Asia, in terms of security it is much more affected by South Asia.

### *Regional Order in South Asia*

Within the South Asian RSC, India is the overwhelmingly dominant actor in terms of material capabilities. India accounts for more than 75 percent of the region's population, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and military expenditure.<sup>40</sup> The distribution of capabilities within the South Asian RSC is thus unipolar. India has nonetheless never managed to transform its material lead into the political reality of hegemony. In fact, South Asian politics seem to have been driven by a bipolar constellation most of the time, with India unable to resolve its conflict with Pakistan. The regional order in South Asia has remained a crisis-prone power-restraining-power model. This highlights the fact that no approach related to distribution of power can explain South Asian politics since India has not been able to dominate regional affairs according to its material superiority, nor has it effectively fostered regional integration through the provision of public goods. No clear tendency of joint balancing among or "bandwagoning" by the smaller South Asian states has been observable so far. In short, most scholars find it puzzling that the South Asian RSC is far from exhibiting a stable hegemonic order in spite of a unipolar distribution of capabilities.

This can be partly explained by the fact that, despite India's apparent superiority, Pakistan is still disproportionately strong compared to the remaining South Asian states.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it has been relatively easy for India to transform its relations with the smaller South Asian states towards hegemony, which has in turn brought about more cooperation to this part of South Asia. India had little to fear when it announced the principle of non-reciprocity with these countries. But although the gap in material capabilities between India and Pakistan is considerable, India still does not feel comfortable including Pakistan in its doctrine of unilateral concessions.<sup>42</sup> The nuclearization of the subcontinent has reinforced Pakistan's claim as a challenger of India. This could explain why

"South Asia comprises of two distinct "theatres" of conflict: between India and Pakistan, on the one hand, and between India and its smaller neighbors, on the other. The first is a theatre of war where military hostilities are always a distinct possibility; the other is a theatre of less militarised conflict in which hostilities are virtually ruled out."<sup>43</sup>

From this point of view it becomes clear that the South Asian RSC does not revolve around the India-Pakistan rivalry, as is often portrayed, but around the dominant position of India, which has dominated all smaller neighbors in the first place.

The states in the eastern theater (Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Sikkim, and the Maldives) were too weak to resist Indian superiority and India was confident in resorting to a "benign" strategy. These developments were consolidated by the restraint of outsiders who acknowledged India's dominant role in this area. Thus, the United States countenanced India's interventions in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Nepal.<sup>44</sup> As predicted by RSCT, this unipolar sub-order functioned relatively autonomously and headed towards stability.<sup>45</sup> In the western theater, however, quite the contrary was the case. During the Cold War, the bipolar logic within this sub-order was sustained through great-power involvement, that is, the United States and China on the Pakistani side and the Soviet Union on the Indian side. Given this backdrop of a bipolar international system interacting with a quasi-bipolar regional system, it is not surprising that attempts at conflict management in western South Asia have been sparse and ineffective.<sup>46</sup>

Up to today, violent conflict has prevailed in the western theater; the density of the complex could hardly be higher. On the other hand, incentives for managing conflict are also inherent in these sources of crises. The boom of the Indian economy throughout the last decade has raised the hope that India could now extend its ordering model to its western neighborhood. The next section will explicate the conditions under which India might possibly become a "benign hegemon" in the entire South Asian RSC, including Pakistan and Afghanistan.

### *India as a Benign Regional Hegemon in South Asia*

India's incentives to engage in Afghan conflict management are obvious: inaction is felt in the difficulty to access the Central Asian economies and energy reserves or in the constant infiltration of militant Islamists to Kashmir. The geographic proximity makes the projection of force to Afghanistan easier for India than for remote powers. With Pakistan's refusal to grant India overland access to Afghanistan,<sup>47</sup> however, this advantage on India's part is rendered less significant. The decisive issues determining India's future role in Afghanistan are in fact (1) whether India possesses the capabilities for long-term engagement in Afghan security (2) whether its engagement will be accepted as legitimate by Afghans and other stakeholders in Afghan stability; and (3) whether Indian policymakers will be able to justify their engagement vis-à-vis their domestic constituencies.<sup>48</sup>

Addressing the question of its resources and resolve, India is the largest non-OECD donor to Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup> It provides scholarships for Afghan students and fosters commercial ties with the country. India has also

offered training to the Afghan National Security Forces, but this has not been realized due to Pakistani opposition.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, India has sent about four thousand Indian workers to Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> It is committed to infrastructure projects, especially the reconstruction of overland roads. In terms of soft power, India's asset is the popularity of Indian music, movies, and television shows in Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> With a view to military capabilities, India has enhanced its presence in Central Asia through the establishment of its first airbase outside India in Tajikistan.<sup>53</sup> All this points to India's willingness to become more deeply involved in stabilizing Afghanistan. Nevertheless, India as the main provider of security in its troubled neighborhood can only be a long-term prospect. Even if this scenario was desirable for India and its neighbors, the burden of granting security would still fall on the United States and NATO for quite a long time, while India is expanding its capabilities and its commitment to Afghanistan.

Concerning external acceptance, the United States is likely to welcome increased Indian engagement as long as this does not endanger Pakistan's cooperation. This potential acceptance is largely due to a transformation in the relationship between the United States and India towards a strategic partnership since the end of the Cold War.<sup>54</sup> Russian-Indian ties have always been friendly, with India being an important client for Russian military exports. As long as India does not advance its military presence deeper into the Russian sphere of influence, Russia is likely to prefer an India-dominated regional order that stretches through Afghanistan over a U.S. presence in the region.<sup>55</sup> The same applies to Iran, with whom India has enjoyed increasingly cooperative relations since the end of the Cold War.<sup>56</sup>

Although most of the external parties are likely to accept a prominent role of India in Afghanistan, two important veto players remain: Pakistan and China. Since the late 1950s, India-China relations have been marked by rivalry and at times overt hostility. Today, both countries seem to handle their relationship pragmatically, giving priority to economic growth.<sup>57</sup> Due to their status as emerging non-Western economies, both countries have common interests vis-à-vis established powers. Nevertheless, China remains suspicious about the Indo-US partnership and fears encirclement,<sup>58</sup> just as India fears encirclement by a hostile China-Pakistan entente. Furthermore, whereas Chinese and Indian claims along the border, in Southeast Asia, Tibet, and Kashmir are set, Central Asia is a new playground where both states are competing for natural resources. Against this backdrop it appears doubtful that China will consent to an extension of Indian influence to the outskirts of Central Asia. On the other hand, the alternatives—an enduring US presence, an abandoned Afghani-

stan drifting into chaos, or China itself as a provider of security to Afghanistan—seem similarly undesirable from a Chinese perspective.

India has little to offer to influence the Chinese position. China's reluctance would make it more difficult for India to establish hegemonic order over Afghanistan, but it would not make it impossible. Pakistan, on the other hand, could doom India's efforts to failure. Vis-à-vis Pakistan, however, India has more options for inducing cooperation. The liberalization of the Indian economy and its subsequent boom have increased both the possibilities and the benefits of regional economic cooperation. But a mere consolidation of India's material lead will not suffice. Hegemonic stability requires both a certain structure and a certain character of power: "The core agrees to engage in self-binding, and in return the periphery bandwagons and agrees to enter into the core's sphere of influence."<sup>59</sup> Indian policymakers may be convinced that they already have been acting with self-restraint vis-à-vis Pakistan. To them it will be obvious that India only seeks its due position in a secure and stable South Asia. Khosla, in a publication of the *Indian Foreign Service Institute*, for instance, expressed it this way:

"Because of its size India can afford [...] non-reciprocity in relations with the smaller neighbours. [...] [G]estures that are being made to Pakistan on issues such as their claim on the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, are steps that fall in this category; they [...] promote the regional spirit."<sup>60</sup>

The problem in this respect is India's credibility in the eyes of Pakistan. At the heart of this problem lies Pakistan's trauma of disintegration suffered in 1971. While India may believe that it has acted with restraint in prior crises with Pakistan, for example in the 1999 Kargil crisis, from the Pakistani perspective India's assistance in the creation of Bangladesh overshadows all other Indian actions.<sup>61</sup> For India, the intervention in the 1971 East Pakistan crisis was legitimized by West Pakistan's bad governance in the east and the resulting negative security externalities affecting India. India's limited motivations have, from an Indian perspective, been demonstrated by the non-integration of East Bengal into the Indian Union and the sparing of West Pakistan. For Pakistan, however, the events of 1971 were the proof that India ultimately seeks to dismember Pakistan.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

In summary, the analysis has shown the high degree of security interdependence which exists in the western theater of South Asia, that is,

between India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It has furthermore detected strong indications of India's willingness to expand its responsibility in this area, especially through contributions to stabilizing Afghanistan. These intentions could fill an existing gap since other regional and global actors have so far not been able or willing to consolidate security management arrangements in western South Asia. On the other hand, it has become clear that the establishment of regional order is hampered by Pakistan's opposition to Indian domination. It has been argued that Pakistan can only accept an India-centered order if its own security—vis-à-vis neighbors, external powers, and most importantly India itself—is granted. This requires a credible demonstration of Indian self-restraint as well as mechanisms to ensure India's commitment to this principle in the long term.

"As the security issue is vital for Pakistan, it cannot afford misjudgments of Indian motivations. To change the situation it is necessary to strengthen Pakistan's sovereignty. Therefore the border issues between India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan need to be resolved. India, as the strongest and most consolidated of the three states, would have the best chances of making unilateral concessions, for example, regarding the Siachen Glacier. The extension of the principle of non-reciprocity to Pakistan would be domestically costly for any Indian politician. But according to the logic of signaling, it is these costs that make a signal credible."<sup>63</sup>

Given this, it appears doubtful that India aspires to a leading role in South Asia. What would be the benefits? The most convincing answer to this question refers to two preferences in India's grand strategy: India wants to (1) exclude external powers from its immediate neighborhood<sup>64</sup> and (2) be recognized as a global major power.<sup>65</sup> *If* these assertions are correct, India will not be able to avoid taking on responsibility for security in its sphere of influence. *Whether* they are correct and how they relate to one another should be the subject of further investigation.

## About the Author

After completing an M.A. in political science, Melanie Hanif worked at the German Foreign Office where she facilitated a training course for diplomats from Afghanistan. Currently she is a doctoral candidate at the University of Hamburg. Furthermore, she works as a researcher in the Regional Powers Network at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies. Her doctoral thesis investigates regional conflict in South Asia. Ms. Hanif may be contacted at: [hanif@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:hanif@giga-hamburg.de).

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Indian Involvement in Afghanistan in the Context of the South Asian Security System

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- 51 I.P. Khosla, "India and Afghanistan," 551. Jayshree Bajoria, "India-Afghanistan Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounders*, available at: [http://www.cfr.org/publication/17474/indiaafghanistan\\_relations.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/17474/indiaafghanistan_relations.html), see reference # 49.
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