



Joint Regional Strategy

South and Central Asia

State Department Bureau for South and Central Asia
USAID Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs
USAID Bureau for Asia

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1. Executive Statement

The State Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Asia (Asia Bureau) and USAID Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs (OAPA) will calibrate engagement in South and Central Asia according to the Administration's South Asia and Indo-Pacific Strategies, to best protect the United States and advance its economic interests. The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) seeks to advance a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific region where all nations, including the U.S., may continue to prosper and resist political and economic coercion. The South Asia Strategy seeks to increase stability in South Asia, particularly Afghanistan, and supports regional connectivity, viability, and independence of Central Asian Republics. SCA, Asia Bureau, and OAPA developed the South and Central Asia Joint Regional Strategy (JRS) to integrate these two strategies and adequately prioritize them for the entire SCA region, in order to guide development and diplomacy efforts for the period of 2019-2021. The JRS includes five goals related to increasing engagement and cooperation within the region, as well as management sub-objectives relevant to the State/SCA Bureau. These goals acknowledge the often interrelated nature of USG activities and seek to ensure that diplomatic and development efforts are complementary and strategic. The goals are as follows:

1. Increase countries' stability, security, sovereignty, integrity of national borders, and freedom of navigation;
2. Achieve self-reliance through sustainable and inclusive economic growth, good governance of natural resources, increased fair and reciprocal trade and investment, and increased domestic economic independence;
3. Bolster more inclusive, transparent, and accountable democracy and governance based on international norms, free from malign influence;
4. Support efforts to achieve and sustain an inclusive political settlement that ends the conflict and ensures that Afghanistan no longer serves as a haven for international terrorism; and
5. Support India's emergence as a global power and U.S. partner, which contributes regionally to security, stability, and development.

Expanding security cooperation with SCA partner countries will allow the United States to maintain a Free and Open Indo-Pacific region; confront partners' mutual threats, such as terrorist organizations, most prominently from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (especially nuclear weapons); mitigate cybersecurity risks; combat transnational organized crime; and counter illicit human and narcotics trafficking. Moreover, fostering greater cooperation and interoperability between the U.S. military and security forces in the region will improve burden sharing, increase support for global peacekeeping operations, and help promote key U.S. values, such as civilian control of the military and respect for human rights.

The rapidly expanding markets in the region provide lucrative opportunities for U.S. businesses while raising millions out of poverty. Targeted U.S. foreign assistance resources will expand opportunities for bilateral trade with the United States and support broad-based, private sector led growth and a more stable, secure, inclusive, and prosperous region. SCA remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world, and USG development programs and diplomatic initiatives will strengthen cross-border cooperation, connecting vital sea lanes in South Asia with burgeoning trade routes and energy flows in Central Asia. For example, the “C5+1” diplomatic and assistance initiative engages the five countries of Central Asia to help the region address common challenges. These efforts will help to better integrate the region into the global economy and foster greater security and stability, particularly in the critical countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Democracy and an active civil society are critical for the region’s long-term stability and prosperity, but remain fragile in certain countries. Targeted U.S. support will help improve governance and the rule of law, reinforce democratic processes, strengthen civil society, enhance government accountability, and ensure human rights to improve quality of life for all citizens of the region. U.S. engagement on democracy, rights, and governance will support peace and stability within these countries, and allow us to cooperate on external security threats and increased economic opportunities. They will also help to inhibit practices that lead to unsustainable and unviable infrastructure projects that create debt burdens and put at risk governments’ financial position and sovereignty.

The United States works with the Government of Afghanistan and international partners to support a peaceful settlement to the country’s conflict and develop a coordinated, post-settlement economic plan to help sustain peace. SCA and USAID work closely with the State Department Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR) to negotiate a final, Afghan-led, Afghan-owned settlement. SCA and USAID are involved with ensuring smooth Afghanistan elections that reflect the legitimate will of its people. For a post-settlement economic plan, connectivity between countries in the South and Central Asian corridor is vital, especially for Afghanistan’s long-term economic growth and success. The United States will help integrate Afghanistan economically within the region by encouraging increased trade (goods, services, information, and energy) and connectivity with its neighbors and competitiveness of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) associated with export-oriented value chains. Specifically, the United States will work with the Afghan government to help implement its new National Export Strategy, improve its trade policy and business regulatory environment, improve its export infrastructure, and promote exports. We will also expand opportunities for key export-oriented sectors by supporting the private sector as it develops competitive value chains—products and services that meet the quality standards of local and world markets at prices that are low enough to compete with similar products and services and provide adequate returns on the resources employed or consumed in producing them—and by increasing the skills of the Afghan workforce, which will enable the continued productivity and growth of these sectors.

India's role as a regional security provider and global leader is essential to advancing U.S. interests. The Indo-Pacific Strategy envisions the U.S.-India strategic partnership as critical to advancing the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free and fair trade. An expanding strategic partnership with India also features prominently in the South Asia Strategy, particularly India's role as the fifth-largest donor to Afghanistan. India will play a central role in efforts to facilitate energy and infrastructure investment and development across the South and Central Asia region.

The Department of State has three sub-objectives to enhance SCA management and platforms to carry out diplomatic, development, and security activities that advance U.S. interests. Aligning staff to support U.S. interests, maximizing resources to meet evolving needs in high-risk areas, and increasing the safety of personnel and security of facilities are key priorities to help advance the goals and priorities described above.

This triennial JRS outlines the shared vision of the Department of State and USAID for the future of U.S. policy, diplomatic engagement, and development assistance in South and Central Asia. SCA, the State Coordinator of U.S. Assistance to Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia (ACE), SRAR, USAID Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs (OAPA), and USAID Bureau for Asia, in addition to functional bureaus, had a role in shaping this JRS.

2. Bureau Strategic Framework

Goal 1: Increase countries' stability, security, sovereignty, integrity of national borders, and freedom of navigation

Objective 1.1: Prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-related technology and materials to other actors and encourage states with nuclear weapons programs to adhere to their WMD-related commitments and exercise restraint in this area

Objective 1.2: Strengthen bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism cooperation to prevent and counter the ability of violent extremist organizations to operate, raise funds, and recruit in the region

Objective 1.3: Enhance regional partner security and peace process sustainment capabilities, ensure equitable access to sea lanes and border security, and address destabilizing non-military security threats such as crime and trafficking networks, cyber threats, and natural disasters

Objective 1.4: Support South and Central Asian countries' sovereignty by strengthening their ability to resist economic and/or political pressures or meddling in their internal affairs by other countries

Objective 1.5: Assist displaced persons and their affected host communities, and support a peaceful, safe, and dignified long-term solution

Goal 2: Achieve self-reliance through sustainable and inclusive economic growth, good governance of natural resources, increased fair and reciprocal trade and investment, and increased economic independence

Objective 2.1: Advance global standards and environmentally sustainable practices in economic development, including for infrastructure development and financing; and advance the creation of a resilient regional power market based increasingly on clean, reliable energy generation

Objective 2.2: Promote U.S. economic interests and private sector led growth; enhance economic connectivity to increase rules-based trade, competitiveness and cross-border economic cooperation

Objective 2.3: Improve the health, education, and economic opportunities of all people in the region

Goal 3: Bolster more inclusive, transparent, and accountable democracy and governance based on international norms, free from malign influence

Objective 3.1: Promote and protect basic human rights through adherence to international norms, including upholding the rights of women

Objective 3.2: Strengthen civil society and improve access to independent media and unbiased information

Objective 3.3: Strengthen rule of law; promote government responsiveness, transparency, and accountability; and combat corruption

Objective 3.4: Encourage peaceful political competition; representative and transparent political processes; and governments that resist ethnic fracture

Goal 4: Support efforts to achieve and sustain an inclusive political settlement that ends the conflict and ensures that Afghanistan no longer serves as a haven for international terrorism.

Objective 4.1: Engage and encourage regional powers to help Afghanistan achieve a peaceful settlement to the conflict; support local-level reintegration of Taliban insurgents; and reduce the capabilities of destabilizing terrorist proxies

Objective 4.2: Promote a stable, inclusive, and democratic Afghan government that resists ethnic fracture, governs accountably, and upholds the rights of women

Objective 4.3: Build Afghanistan's economy and increase its economic integration within the region to help ensure its economic viability and promote better relations with its neighbors

Goal 5: Support India's emergence as a global power and U.S. partner, that contributes regionally to security, stability, and development

Objective 5.1: Expand defense and security cooperation with India to help India provide security to the Indo-Pacific region and beyond

Objective 5.2: Champion India's rise as a like-minded strategic partner in international fora, including the UN

Objective 5.3: Foster India's capacity and commitment to rules-based economic development in the SCA region and beyond

3. Goals and Objectives

Bureau Goal 1: Increase countries' stability, security, sovereignty, and the integrity of national borders, and freedom of navigation

Description and Linkages

Increasing stability and security within and among SCA countries remains a top priority for U.S. engagement. Consistent with the [2018-2022 Joint Strategic Plan](#), we help prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and counter violent extremism as key transboundary threats in the region and to the United States. We also support the sovereignty and security capacity of SCA governments, which helps our partners deter malign influences. The proliferation of nuclear weapons and the potential for their use continues to be one of the most serious national security threats facing the United States. It is paramount for the United States to support efforts to ensure that nuclear weapons and WMD-related materials and technology are secure.

Ongoing conflicts pose another major threat. The political and security transition in Afghanistan remains at the forefront of discussions with partners in the region. The growing threat of extremism exacerbates instability, threatens development and economic gains, and endangers U.S. national security. ISIS has sought to expand its presence and influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Threats against Muslim communities in Sri Lanka and India, nurturing the narrative that Islam is under global and regional threat, and attacks in Bangladesh prompting the government to restrict rights and further limit dissent, reinforce violent extremist organization (VEO) narratives and act as a driver of extremism. Central Asian economic migrants in Russia are perceived as a security threat and face daily economic hardship, abuse, and harassment -- factors that increase vulnerability to extremist recruitment. Although some nations lack the political will to address security threats, the United States remains committed to working with regional partners to combat these threats and promote tolerance.

There have also been positive developments in the security sector. South Asia has been a key partner in advancing global security through UN Peacekeeping missions; Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan are among the largest troop contributors in the world. Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Central Asian states are looking to expand their participation in international peacekeeping, and Kazakhstan has deployed peacekeeping troops to Lebanon. Maritime security is inextricably linked to the stability of the global economy, with roughly 30 percent of global trade passing through the Indian Ocean. Increasingly, countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh will need to work with each other, the United States, and other partners to uphold international norms and combat piracy and trafficking of drugs, weapons, and people on the high seas.

Objective 1.1 Prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-related technology and materials to other actors and encourage states with nuclear weapons programs to adhere to their WMD-related commitments and exercise restraint in this area.

The proliferation and potential use of WMDs, especially nuclear weapons, remains one of the most serious U.S. national security threats. This applies to use by state or non-state actors, as well as use either against the United States or U.S. interests and allies abroad. Therefore, it is critical to support efforts in the SCA region to ensure that WMD-related materials and technology are secure, including through harmonizing regulations and practices according to international standards. In addition, U.S. nuclear deterrence remains a top priority, as well as a force for global stability. Besides dissuading countries from conducting nuclear explosive tests, the United States will continue diplomatic and assistance efforts to encourage states against taking positions in international fora that would diminish or delegitimize U.S. deterrence.

Objective 1.2: Strengthen bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism cooperation to prevent and counter the ability of violent extremist organizations to operate, raise funds, and recruit in the region

The SCA region continues to be a focal point of terrorist activity, such as transnational VEOs like ISIS-Khorasan, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates, as well as Lashkar e-Tayyiba (LeT) and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Afghanistan endures Taliban and Haqqani Network (HQN) attacks across the country, and despite Pakistani military operations in its tribal areas, a number of groups, including HQN and the Afghan Taliban, are able to train and operate from Pakistani soil. LeT and other Pakistan-based groups also continue to attack India. Pakistan suffers TTP attacks across the country, primarily launched from Afghanistan, despite ongoing operations against the group. The presence of ISIS and its affiliates is growing in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and in Central Asia. There is the risk of insufficient political will to cooperate regionally, which would weaken CVE efforts. The United States is committed to defeating ISIS, and U.S. forces continue to work alongside Afghan and NATO Resolute Support partners to fight terrorism. As a top priority, the United States will help strengthen partner governments' capabilities to counter violent extremism, messaging, and recruitment, as well as investigate and prosecute terrorist networks in order to prevent attacks, and will promote tolerance.

Objective 1.3: Enhance regional partner security and peace process sustainment capabilities; ensure equitable access to sea lanes and border security; and address destabilizing non-military security threats, such as crime and trafficking networks, cyber threats, and natural disasters.

Promoting the sovereignty and independence of our partner countries is a cornerstone of the National Security Strategy, the South Asia Strategy, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. SCA countries face a number of common security threats and challenges that require the

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USG to strengthen long-standing military relationships and encourage the development of a strong defense network. Increasing the security capabilities and interoperability of regional partners helps forces work together better and align technical capabilities to support coalition military goals. It is important to increase SCA countries' ability to protect their own territorial integrity and control their borders, given the security risk posed by both China and Russia. We will work with SCA countries to reduce their dependence on China and Russia for defense partnerships of procurement and military sales.

South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean region are home to some of the world's most strategically important sea lanes, ports, and trade routes. With over 30 percent of the world's trade, including the majority of seaborne trade in oil, flowing daily through the region's waters, the SCA region is of critical importance in the United States' global efforts to protect freedom of navigation and ensure equitable access to sea lanes. The United States will work with our regional partners to enhance their maritime domain awareness and improve their capabilities and information-sharing.

In addition, SCA countries face a wide range of emerging and non-traditional, non-military threats that are often transnational and even global in scope, requiring significant international cooperation in the law enforcement, intelligence, economic, and public health sectors. Increasing the resilience of critical infrastructure – such as computer networks, water, power, and transportation – is essential to promoting economic prosperity and stable communities. Similarly, supporting partners' capabilities to investigate, prosecute, and prevent transnational crimes – such as narcotics, weapons, wildlife, or human trafficking – has multiple positive first- and second-order effects, such as reducing corruption, eliminating potential sources of financing for terrorist organizations, and reinforcing rule of law and respect for human rights. These efforts prevent regional threats from making their way to the United States.

The United States and SCA countries increasingly face other security challenges, including increased occurrences of natural and man-made humanitarian disasters. Such threats require significant international cooperation across sectors. To this end, the United States will promote capacity and resilience of partner countries, as well as deepen and leverage traditional alliances and emerging partnerships.

Objective 1.4: Support South and Central Asian countries' sovereignty by strengthening their ability to resist economic and/or political pressures or meddling in their internal affairs by other countries.

Promoting the sovereignty and independence of our partner countries is a cornerstone of the National Security Strategy, the South Asia Strategy, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. In South Asia, partner nations are facing increasing political and economic pressure due to China's efforts to assert its influence and expand its access to ports, territorial waters, and shipping lanes. In Central Asia, Russia continues to seek political and economic influence, undermining the independence of partner nations, while China places Central Asian countries under mounting debt.

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Objective 1.5: Assist displaced persons and their affected host communities, and support a peaceful, safe, and dignified long-term solution.

South Asia is home to numerous large-scale refugee populations, including approximately one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, 1.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and about one million Afghan refugees in Iran, some of whom are returning. Many Afghan refugees have lived in Pakistan for nearly 40 years, making it one of the largest and most protracted refugee populations in the world. The overarching priority is for the Government of Burma to create conditions that enable the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of Rohingya refugees. Until that occurs, it is in the United States' interests—and a reflection of our core values—to provide urgent, life-saving humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees residing in Bangladesh. It is similarly in the United States' interests to assist the Bangladeshi host and impacted communities whose livelihoods, services, and natural environment has been negatively affected by the sudden and large population influx. The United States must work with partners in the region to support the basic needs of refugees, alleviate duress on Bangladeshi communities, and foster conditions that allow the populations to peacefully coexist for as long as the refugees remain.

Bureau Goal 2: Achieve self-reliance through sustainable and inclusive economic growth, good governance of natural resources, increased fair and reciprocal trade and investment, and increased economic independence

Description and Linkages

As discussed in Goal 1, the IPS seeks to advance prosperity and self-reliance across this strategically vital region, especially in energy, trade and increased capital flows, and support regional states' resilience from coercion by outside powers. The South Asia Strategy seeks to link the economies of the five Central Asian states more robustly to the broader region, particularly by fostering increased private sector engagement so that they are increasingly self-reliant, stable and resilient in the face of Russian pressure and potential Chinese debt traps, and contribute to stability in Afghanistan. Given the Great Power competition at play in the region, Goal 2 advances the policy priorities of these key strategies by building partner country capacities for inclusive, sustainable economic development while helping to create a level playing field for U.S. investment. Goal 2 is also consistent with the JSP Goal 2, sustained economic growth and job creation, and promoting health, educated, and productive populations in partner countries to foster inclusive growth. It also supports the JSP Goal 3 of American leadership through balanced engagement as we increasingly partner with the private sector.

The SCA region plays an increasingly important role in the global economy and the prosperity of the United States. The United States is already South Asia's largest single export market, and there are opportunities for stronger trade and investment ties. A flourishing private sector is essential to increased economic growth to create job

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opportunities, improve quality of life, and reduce poverty. There has been a dramatic increase in U.S. investment in India, which is outpacing U.S. investment in China. The United States has also become the largest single-country importer of Sri Lanka's and Bangladesh's primary export: garments. As a region, South Asia has more working-age people than anywhere else in the world. The rapidly expanding South Asian middle class is a lucrative market for U.S. goods and services. In the last 15 years, South Asia's overall imports from the United States have increased four times over. South Asia can increase its global economic role by adopting rules-based economic systems that encourage investment, broaden participation in the economy, and expand market linkages.

SCA is one of the least economically integrated areas in the world. Increasing regional connectivity and trade will promote stability in the region, produce more jobs, reduce poverty, and create opportunities for greater U.S. investment. Simultaneously achieving goals of poverty reduction and connectivity will require sound management of natural resources, such as water; strategic energy planning; and promotion of high standards and safeguards for infrastructure development. Some foreign investments in infrastructure erode the natural resources upon which many of our partner countries depend for their long term growth. Irresponsible extraction of natural resources threatens food security, environmental health, inclusive economic growth, and stability. The USG will promote transparent government policies, regulations and transactions that foster adherence to internationally-accepted standards, including environmental safeguards.

The United States will work with partner countries and institutions, bilaterally and multilaterally, as well as with the private sector, to promote economic cooperation within SCA. In the energy sector, the United States will enhance energy commerce, advance transparent procurement, strengthen regional energy markets, modernize utilities, increase private capital investments, and expand affordable, reliable energy access.

The economic picture in Central Asia is mixed. A weakened Russian economy combined with artificially low hydrocarbon commodity prices are exacting a heavy toll. Many Central Asian states have historically relied on remittances from migrant workers. As overseas job opportunities dry up, especially in Russia, Central Asian states need to increase job growth, agricultural production (particularly in Tajikistan), financial literacy, and value-added exports. In order to more fully participate in the global economy, a number of these states are joining the World Trade Organization and increasingly turn to China, South Korea, and Japan to diversify their economies. The United States is expanding our investment in an increasingly open Uzbekistan. We will continue to use regional platforms – including C5+1 – to increase connectivity and coordinate on economic, security, the environment, and other potential issues.

Socioeconomic exclusion or living in places with weak and unstable economies can breed disaffection, extremism, and violence. U.S. efforts will continue to support inclusive economic growth, including a focus on women's economic empowerment. Activities will support the development of healthy and educated populations with citizens who are able to participate as productive members of their communities and contribute to long-term

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development and stability. These efforts are intrinsically linked to U.S. national security and economic interests.

Objective 2.1: Advance global standards and environmentally sustainable practices in economic development, including for infrastructure development and financing; and advance the creation of a resilient regional power market based increasingly on clean, reliable energy generation

The United States seeks to encourage policies and regulations in line with U.S. and international standards that foster entrepreneurship, innovation, trade, and sustainable investment, and create a more favorable environment for U.S. businesses. American companies can compete more effectively when an open, transparent, and fair enabling environment honors contract law, respects intellectual property, and enforces international norms on trade and investment. Counterfeit goods, money laundering, corruption, and flaunting of labor health and safety laws all reduce the ability of U.S. companies to compete on an even, rules-based playing field. To date, Chinese investment in large infrastructure projects has led to indebtedness and over-dependency of some countries, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. In contrast, the United States seeks to ensure high standards in infrastructure, including environmental and social safeguards, which creates a level playing field and attracts private investment. These standards help foster SCA countries' sustainable development and protects their freedom to make sovereign decisions.

Within South Asia, energy shortages hinder economic growth, as unreliable electricity supply hampers manufacturing and other industries, and can contribute to instability. With regional energy demand soaring, several Central Asian states are planning to export electricity surpluses to their energy-deficient neighbors in South Asia. This requires regional partners to invest in electricity generation, distribution, and transmission systems, as well as develop platforms for cross-border power sales. The United States supports technical assistance to improve legal and regulatory frameworks and enhance energy coordination to facilitate regional power and gas connections across borders. U.S. projects that create open and competitive markets and promote cross-border energy trade through improved legal and regulatory frameworks will incentivize private sector investment in diversified energy sources, renewable energy generation and energy-efficient technology and services.

Strategic U.S. efforts will help advance progress toward an efficient regional power market with clean, reliable energy generation that will yield a number of benefits. Stable, reliable power supplies are a vital precondition for sustainable economic growth. Regional cooperation in energy also has the potential to enhance the prospects for wider collaboration among governments in the region. Investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency will create new jobs and a cleaner environment in a region badly affected by pollution. The United States has a competitive advantage in advanced energy systems, including smart grids, distributed renewable energy, and energy efficiency. Given the large and growing market for U.S. technologies and services, the United States will continue to

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encourage best practices and models for energy-sector reform, engaging with both the public and private sectors.

Objective 2.2: Promote U.S. economic interests and private sector-led growth; enhance economic connectivity to increase rules-based trade, competitiveness, and cross-border economic cooperation.

The United States' role as the largest single export market for South Asia, which has the world's largest share of working-age consumers, provides ample opportunities for expanding trade and investment ties that will promote U.S. exports and create and sustain American jobs. U.S. promotion of rules-based economic systems and regional connectivity will help promote regional stability and ensure a level playing field for U.S. businesses to compete in South and Central Asia's potentially lucrative markets. Public-private partnerships can contribute to U.S. policy and strategic priorities by leveraging growing human and financial resources and encouraging innovation, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure investments.

The economic component of the IPS seeks to advance market-based economics, free, fair, and reciprocal trade, and high-standard infrastructure investment. These broad objectives are especially pertinent in the SCA region, which is one of the least integrated areas of the world in terms of economic ties, with intra-regional trade at about five percent of overall trade. Increasing connectivity within and across the region will promote stability, boost trade, and create opportunities for greater U.S. investment. The United States works with governments, multilateral organizations, civil society, and business associations to improve economic governance and increase economic connectivity – allowing for greater access to shared resources. Regional connectivity increases efficiencies, provides opportunities for economic growth, and reduces poverty. Transparent regional markets also support U.S. business opportunities and improved economic reach.

To broaden connectivity, governments and the private sector must invest in infrastructure such as roads, railways, and ports, improved regulatory frameworks, more capable institutions, and better-networked businesses and people. Regional economic connectivity will also require driving policy reform and increased transparency to help level the playing field for U.S. businesses in the region. The United States supports technical assistance and connectivity-related initiatives that are strengthening energy, trade, transit, and people-to-people links within, to, and from countries in the SCA region.

Objective 2.3: Improve the health, education, and economic opportunities of all people in the region.

Development assistance in health, education, and other key social services contributes to U.S. national security by mitigating drivers of state instability and extremism with human capital investments that enable healthy, educated citizens to better contribute to the economy. This empowers partner countries to provide basic services to their citizens over

the long term and protects the United States against global health threats. The United States will strive to improve the quality of, and ensure inclusive access to, a broad range of social, health, and education services for the poor, vulnerable, and underserved populations; address gender-based violence and harmful practices that prevent girls from accessing school or healthcare; and assist in establishing institutions that have the capacity and will to provide these services to their population. By strengthening and building resilient health systems, countries can efficiently manage and respond to global health threats that negatively impact productivity, contribute to significant GDP loss, and jeopardize countries' efforts to achieve self-reliance. Partnerships with government and engaging with local private sector actors will increase country-level ownership, leverage technical and financial resources, and encourage gender parity. This will result in system-level solutions; greater country capacity for policy-making, monitoring, and accountability; improved application of technology; and ultimately, better, more reliable healthcare and education services.

Bureau Goal 3: Bolster more inclusive, transparent, and accountable democracy and governance based on international norms, free from malign influence

Description and Linkages

The SCA region contains the entire range of political systems, from the world's largest democracy (India) to one of its most closed political systems (Turkmenistan). There are bright spots of democratic progress and breakthrough (Maldives, Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Uzbekistan) as well as countries experiencing backsliding in inclusive, transparent and accountable governance (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Tajikistan). Across the region, the model of democracy as a path to development is now challenged by Chinese and Russian models of top-down, state-led economic growth. Both China and Russia are actively competing for influence and investing in the region. The countries of the region are highly dependent on labor migration and remittances. Both the Central Asian dependence on migration to Russia and the South Asian dependence on migration to the Middle East expose millions of workers to influences that are often detrimental to the democratic development of the home countries, including conservative and regressive attitudes towards ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities as well as towards women. Adherence to the rule of law in the region is mixed. Security forces and courts are generally adequate at maintaining order, but are often used to suppress political opposition, applied unevenly to minorities, and often used to private economic advantage. The judicial branch in most of the countries of the region is generally not fully independent and frequently is controlled by the executive. The parliaments in most of the countries are either heavily influenced by the executive or highly dependent on partisan political interests, and often struggle to fulfill the primary legislative functions of law-drafting, representation, and oversight.

U.S. assistance seeks to support democracy and governance that is inclusive of minorities, women, and vulnerable populations, and is held accountable by civil society. U.S.

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programs and diplomatic efforts under this strategy will support democratic governance, as emphasized in the U.S. National Security Strategy. Stable, democratic countries offer opportunities for increased U.S. investment and exports that create U.S. jobs and make strong partners; conversely, countries with weak governance and less democratic institutions are more vulnerable to armed conflict and more likely to provide space for corruption, transnational crime, terrorist groups, and violent extremism.

Objective 3.1: Promote and protect uphold basic human rights through adherence to international norms, including upholding the rights of women

The promotion and protection of basic human rights, active civil society, and access to information are essential to fostering more inclusive and accountable democracy and governance. Rigorous minority protections are needed in order to prevent ruling elites from using majority antipathy towards minority groups to consolidate power. Minority protections are crucial bulwarks against human rights abuses, not only for those groups, but for the whole society. Members of vulnerable groups often do not have the knowledge or power to advocate effectively for their own protections. Raising awareness of the binding international norms relating to fundamental freedoms and workers' rights is the first step in empowering local actors to press for their rights and to restrain violations of those rights.

Objective 3.2: Strengthen civil society and improve access to independent and unbiased information.

Civil society plays an important role in advocating for broader social interests, holding the government to account and empowering communities and social groups to solve their own problems and meet their own needs outside the government sphere. Tolerance for civil society varies across the region. Civil society organizations and advocacy groups have limited ability to hold governments accountable. Several countries feature civil societies organizations that are not truly independent of governments; rather, governments organize and support civil society groups. Civil society also reflects the range of people's values and interests, with some groups promoting intolerance and even violence.

In addition, improved access to independent media and unbiased information is critical to democratic stabilization in the SCA region. Disinformation is used by local actors, transnational groups, and other governments, especially Russia and China, in ways that are particularly unfriendly to U.S. interests. The U.S. seeks to increase citizen access to objective information about domestic and global issues of public importance and to enhance local media's ability to engage a larger audience, including their print, multimedia, and online readership. Programming and policy will improve the quality of local traditional and online media and increase the public's access to reliable and unbiased information. Finally, access to reliable and credible information through a free and independent press allows individuals to hold governments accountable, express their opinions about decisions that affect their lives, and ultimately make informed choices based on the information.

Objective 3.3: Strengthen rule of law; promote government responsiveness, transparency, and accountability; and combat corruption.

Rule of law exists when the law is applied impersonally and equally and protects the minority from the prejudice of the majority. Where the law is used as a political weapon, applied unequally towards minorities, or manipulated for private gain, there is no rule of law, despite the infrastructure of police, courts, and well-written laws. Professional, effective, and rights-respecting rule of law institutions are key to any functioning society and economy. Weak rule of law allows for corruption to flourish; promotes instability; provides space for violent extremists to function; and inhibits governments' abilities to combat poverty, promote trade, and protect vulnerable populations. Weak rule of law often leads to violation of citizens' human rights because relevant protections do not exist or are not implemented, or because government is not held accountable for the rights of its people. Support for open-government initiatives – including ensuring electronically available voting history and other government records and readily accessible means for constituents to contact their elected representatives – is a critical step in increasing transparency and accountability.

Objective 3.4: Encourage peaceful political competition; representative and transparent political processes; and governments that resist ethnic fracture.

Elections require fair and impartial administration, meaningful choice between parties and candidates who have equal access to the process, inclusive access for all voters, and an outcome that is not predetermined. All the elements of a healthy electoral system should be developed to ensure inclusive and meaningful participation free of violence and fraud. Political parties that can organize themselves democratically and inclusively and articulate platforms based on the needs of constituents are the basis of a competitive political system.

Bureau Goal 4: Support efforts to achieve and sustain an inclusive political settlement that ends the conflict and ensures that Afghanistan no longer serves as a haven for international terrorism.

Description and Linkages

The United States has a vital national interest in preventing terrorist groups from using Afghan territory to attack the U.S. homeland or its citizens and allies overseas. Under the President's South Asia strategy, the United States seeks to secure that interest by facilitating a sustainable and inclusive political settlement between the Afghan government, the Taliban, and other Afghans. The Afghan government has invited the Taliban to enter into a peace process without preconditions, and the United States has voiced its willingness to support, facilitate, and participate in intra-Afghan peace talks. It has also shifted from

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calendar-based to conditions-based planning to make clear to the Afghan public, the Taliban, and the entire region that it has the resolve to stay as long as it takes to enable a political settlement. The United States supports the initiation of talks without preconditions, but our desired outcomes are clear and have not changed. The Taliban must renounce violence, break ties with al-Qaida, and come to the negotiating table with the Afghan government and other Afghans in order to achieve an inclusive peace settlement.

Objective 4.1: Engage and encourage regional powers to help Afghanistan achieve a peaceful settlement to the conflict; support local-level reintegration of Taliban insurgents; and reduce the capabilities of destabilizing terrorist proxies

The South Asia strategy recognizes that a solution to the conflict in Afghanistan lies in the region; the renewed commitment to Afghanistan outlined in the strategy aims to confront the incentives for hedging among some regional actors, which increasingly has taken the form of direct support for the Taliban. The United States looks to Pakistan, in particular, to take decisive action against militant groups based within its borders that are a threat to the region.

The United States also looks to re-invigorate the diplomatic track by prioritizing steps to improve Afghanistan-Pakistan bilateral relations; engaging neighbors, including China, to support peace efforts; and working even more widely with Afghanistan's circle of international friends in the coalition and in the international donor community to ensure continued economic and military support. As part of our pressure strategy, the United States supports reducing the Taliban's cohesion by peeling away Taliban elements (e.g., field commanders and shadow governors) from the movement through de-escalation, cooptation, and/or reintegration.

The South Asia strategy also aims to reduce the capabilities of terrorist groups in Afghanistan by dismantling the operational capabilities and financial resources of such extremist forces; building the capacity of Afghan security forces to counter them; and reducing the appeal of recruitment to extremist organizations. These efforts will reduce the risk of Afghanistan becoming a safehaven for terrorists to threaten the United States or our interests.

Objective 4.2: Promote a stable, inclusive and democratic Afghan government that resists ethnic fracture, governs accountably, and upholds the rights of women

The United States looks to the Afghan government to play a critical role in setting conditions for a peace process and to demonstrate it is a willing and stable partner to peace discussions. The United States will work with the Afghans as partners to encourage the kinds of reforms that will enable Afghanistan to be more self-sufficient and less reliant on donor assistance over time. However, it is essential for the Afghan government to continue reforms and to deliver on its commitments to international partners. The Afghan government also must take steps to make the government more inclusive, including through credible elections in 2018 and 2019.

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The United States will work to increase government accountability to citizens and the rule of law by helping to increase citizen participation in decision-making processes; improve the effectiveness of government institutions; and reduce the risk of corruption of the Afghan government. Increasing the government's accountability to its citizens will help improve the country's stability and inclusivity, as Afghans' trust in their government improves and the participation of citizens and civil society in governance expands. The United States also plans to maintain and advance Afghanistan's social gains by improving health outcomes, educating Afghans better, and increasing gender equality and female empowerment. Advancing these gains will enable the country to become more inclusive and will increase the ability of Afghans to participate in the economy and contribute to their country's economic growth; it will also help the country become more stable, as Afghans gain more confidence in their government's ability to achieve reforms and deliver services. The United States will also engage with the private sector on service delivery to more effectively advance social gains, for example, through public-private partnerships, and maintain an emphasis on women and youth across all sectors.

Objective 4.3: Build Afghanistan's economy and increase its economic integration within the region to help ensure its economic viability and promote better relations with its neighbors

Connectivity to countries in the South and Central Asian corridor is vital for Afghanistan's long-term economic growth and success. The United States will help integrate Afghanistan economically within the region by increasing trade and connectivity with its neighbors and increasing the competitiveness of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) associated with export-oriented value chains. Specifically, the United States will work with the Afghan government to help improve its trade policy and business regulatory environment, improve its export infrastructure, and promote exports. We will also expand opportunities for key export-oriented sectors by supporting the private sector to develop competitive value chains—products and services that meet the quality standards of local and world markets at prices that are low enough to compare well with similar products and services and provide adequate returns on the resources employed or consumed in producing them—and by increasing the skills of the Afghan workforce, which will enable the continued productivity and growth of these sectors.

Bureau Goal 5: Support India's emergence as a global power and U.S. partner that contributes regionally to security, stability, and development

Description and Linkages

India's role as a regional security provider and global leader is essential to advancing U.S. interests. The Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy supports the emergence of India as a

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strong strategic and defense partner advancing a shared commitment to the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free and fair trade. India is key to our efforts to facilitate energy and infrastructure investment and development across the South and Central Asia region. We will also help India further build its capacity as a global leader in other areas like water security, disaster risk reduction, and as a foreign assistance provider. An expanding strategic partnership with India also features prominently in the South Asia strategy, particularly India's role as the fifth-largest donor to Afghanistan. In addition, our prioritized relationship with India supports the State-USAID JSP Goal 3 of American leadership through balanced engagement.

Objective 5.1: Expand defense and security cooperation with India, to help India provide security to the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

India is a critical Indo-Pacific partner with a shared commitment to uphold the rule of law, freedom of navigation, democratic values, and free and fair trade. In 2015, India and the United States renewed a ten-year Defense Framework Agreement, and in 2016 we concluded a long-pending secure communications agreement to facilitate closer defense cooperation. Congress recognized India as a Major Defense Partner in the National Defense Authorization Act for the first time in 2016, a significant milestone. Over the last decade, U.S.-India military exercises and exchanges have grown in scope and complexity across all services. For example, MALABAR, our annual naval exercise, is now a trilateral engagement with Japan and regularly features carrier operations and anti-submarine warfare. Through the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative, we will continue to actively pursue co-production/co-development opportunities with India. Since 2008 India has purchased over \$16 billion in U.S. defense technologies with potentially billions more in the pipeline. These efforts are important to reduce the risk of other major actors in the region threatening other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

Objective 5.2: Champion India's rise as a like-minded strategic partner in international fora, including the UN.

The United States and India share interests in shaping an Indo-Pacific regional architecture that upholds the fundamental international norms and values that have provided a foundation for peace and prosperity across all of Asia for the past 60 years. Our efforts to uphold the rules-based order include deepening our networking and cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia. We have broad shared strategic interests with these partners and are looking to harmonize efforts to contribute to the security, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific, including through bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral initiatives. Regional institutions, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), are centerpieces of our Indo-Pacific vision as platforms for promoting a free and open order. We hope to do more together with India and these institutions to advance market economics and peacefully resolve territorial and maritime disputes in accordance with international law.

In multilateral institutions, we seek to improve coordination with India in key international and regional institutions, including in the United Nations, EAS, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, BIMSTEC, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

Objective 5.3: Foster India's capacity and commitment to rules-based economic development in the SCA region and beyond.

Increasing economic connectivity is an objective in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. There is a pressing need in the Indo-Pacific region for investment, particularly in infrastructure. Support for connectivity and commerce is particularly critical in South Asia, where intra-regional economic activity remains only four to five percent of South Asia's total trade. The United States and India, along with close partners like Japan, have a significant role to play in improving overall standards for the financing and development of infrastructure in the region.

We welcome India's rapid growth and development into a major market-oriented economy, which creates new markets for American goods and an increased role for India as a development partner. As India's top export destination, we will actively pursue improved market access for U.S. goods and services to India, particularly in areas with long-standing market access problems.

Increasing India's ability to act as a development catalyst in the South Asia region and beyond will serve U.S. interests by expanding economic opportunities and local capacity, and contribute to long-term economic growth. The United States will partner with India to further build its capacity as a donor and global leader in areas including energy, water security, and disaster risk reduction. We increasingly work together to address regional development issues, such as through the annual USAID-sponsored Passage to Prosperity trade and investment show, which has enabled hundreds of Indian and Afghan businesses to sign contracts worth millions of dollars.

4. Management Objective

Objective: Enhance SCA management processes and platforms to carry out diplomatic and security activities that advance U.S. interests.

These objectives reflects priorities outlined in the National Security Strategy, the Joint Strategic Plan, and the Functional Bureau Strategies of the Department of State's Bureaus of Budget and Planning, Diplomatic Security, Human Resources, Information Resource Management, and Overseas Building Operations (OBO). They also supports the State-USAID JSP's Goal 4 of ensuring effectiveness and accountability to taxpayers, by aligning State Department workforce plans, resources for diplomatic and security operations, and the need for safe and secure facilities.