

Hudson Institute

An Integrated Approach  
to the Himalayas:  
Report of the  
Working Group on the  
Himalayan Region

*Ambassador Husain Haqqani  
Director for South and Central Asia*

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# Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Issues</b>	
<i>Security and Inter-Asian Rivalry</i>	<b>7</b>
<i>Policy Recommendations</i>	<b>9</b>
<i>Trade and Infrastructure Connectivity</i>	<b>10</b>
<i>Policy Recommendations</i>	<b>12</b>
<i>Water &amp; Climate Change</i>	<b>13</b>
<i>Policy Recommendations</i>	<b>16</b>
<i>Cultural Preservation, Minorities, &amp; Women</i>	<b>18</b>
<i>Policy Recommendations</i>	<b>22</b>
<b>Concluding Remarks</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>26</b>



## ***Preface***

**W**hile the Trump administration formulates its policy toward South and Central Asia as well as the Pacific Rim, greater attention must be paid to the strategically central Himalayan Region. The Himalayas stand at the heart of the crucial geopolitical situation emerging between Asia's rising powers. The U.S. needs to understand the critical importance of the Himalayan region to Asian security and prosperity, and how destabilizing factors in the region can adversely affect U.S. interests. Furthermore, the U.S. must pursue an integrated approach along with friendly states and peoples to help address the myriad strategic and population security issues that the area now faces.

The trans-Himalayan region extends some 1,500 miles and traverses India, Bhutan, China, Nepal, and Pakistan. Longstanding border disputes and strategic rivalries in the area mean that new connectivity schemes – both infrastructural and economic – are laden with geopolitical significance and security implications. The area is also host to a wide variety of non-state violent extremist and separatist movements with a diverse array of political, economic, and religious motivations and ambitions. Some operate as self-contained domestic insurgencies, while others have transnational characteristics, operating across borders and/or receiving support from external parties. In either case, these groups present a real threat to the security of the region and to key U.S. partners, and the issues they cause must be rectified to establish regional stability.

The Himalayas are often called Asia's "Water Tower," as ten major rivers – the Amu Darya, Brahmaputra, Ganges, Indus, Irrawaddy, Mekong, Salween, Tarim, Yangtze, and Yellow – have their sources in Himalayan glaciers and snowfields. Some 210 million people live in this mountain range and more than 2 billion across Greater Asia draw their water supplies from its river systems. Yet, rising demands caused by population growth and urbanization, environmental degradation, and unsustainable consumption practices have placed unprecedented strains on these crucial freshwater resources and threatened to impair economic development, undermine food security, compromise public health, and potentially upset regional stability.

The Himalayan region is also home to a variety of ethno-linguistic groups with diverse cultures and religions. The persistence of territorial disputes prevents many of these isolated communities from fully utilizing indigenous resources and engaging with a rapidly globalizing world. Furthermore, cultural diversity and minority and female rights have been gravely imperiled by various radical movements that have been gaining traction in the region. This exacerbates the threats that emanate from extremism, illicit trade, and economic disparities, and increase volatility in the area.

The United States has largely remained uninvolved in both the cooperative and competitive aspects of recent trans-Himalayan connectivity schemes. The U.S.

could benefit from taking on a more active role in influencing the emerging strategic and economic geography of the region, and developing a common agenda on these issues with friendly states and populations. Four areas that must be addressed to bring stability to the Himalayas are (1) security; (2) regional connectivity; (3) water usage and climate change, and; (4) cultural preservation, including the protection of women and minorities. Policy recommendations for the Trump administration regarding these topics include (1) pursuing closer ties with India to help balance an assertive China, reduce Indo-Chinese tensions and demonstrate to Pakistan the severe consequences for supporting extremism; (2) engaging in a more hands-on approach regarding trans-Himalayan connectivity to support development that serves the people of the region; (3) sharing information and helping build infrastructure to foster cooperation in distributing water resources, as well as providing aid to combat extreme weather events, and; (4) empowering local civil society groups and supporting grassroots solutions to combat inequality, intolerance, and extremism. In the end, international diplomacy, conservation, and community-driven development can help mitigate the drivers of insecurity and deliver mutual benefits to all of the countries engaged in the Himalayas.

## ***Security and Inter-Asian Rivalry***

**T**he greater Himalayan region is host to decades-long rivalries and border disputes that have only deepened in recent years. Just as the India-Pakistan conflict dates back to the partition of the British Indian Empire, the modern Sino-Indian border dispute dates back to the colonial era. The Himalayan Mountains were a strategic buffer-zone between British India and the Manchu Empire that ruled China until 1911, but this changed after the People's Republic of China – founded by Mao Zedong in 1949 – invaded Tibet in 1950. As the two largest countries in Asia and two of the oldest civilizations in the world, China and India share close trade and cultural ties from the ancient past. However, the Chinese Communist Party's desire to maintain its monopoly on power and regain lost glory has led it down a path of territorial disputes with its neighbors –including India – thus stoking a rivalry for position and influence in Asia and beyond.

This rivalry has intensified in large part because of the growth of Chinese power and militarization in the Himalayas. An increasingly assertive Beijing has pressed new territorial claims over what it refers to as “Greater Tibet” in the Indian territory of Arunachal Pradesh as well as in the Ladakh region. Chinese pressure is also increasingly felt elsewhere across the contested Himalayan borders, including in Nepal, Bhutan and Gilgit-Baltistan. China's “invisible incursion” policy – where religion, ideas, language and culture have been used to enlarge Beijing's influence – has been particularly successful and intensified over the last few years. Through this, China has rapidly emerged as a dominant political and economic force in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and other areas traditionally within India's immediate sphere of influence. India's growing sense of encirclement and insecurity have been further exacerbated by Beijing's “One Belt, One Road” strategic gambit, which has led to a major westward expansion of Chinese influence into South and Central Asia and into the Indian Ocean region.

The burgeoning China-India rivalry is already having a large impact on American national security interests. Shared concerns over China's threatening behavior and bellicose rhetoric serve as a powerful impetus for the budding Indo-U.S. strategic partnership, as well as for India's growing outreach and collaboration with key U.S. partners throughout the Indo-Pacific, like Japan.

Strengthened relations between the U.S. and India will take on greater importance in the future, as China is currently one of Pakistan's strongest allies. This relationship began primarily as an economic affiliation in the 1950s, with Pakistan being China's window to both the Arab Middle East and to Western nations. However, over the decades it evolved into a strategic relationship with a strong military – both conventional and nuclear – dimension. Elements in the Pakistani government believe that China is an ideal ally that has the economic and military potential to help it obtain strategic parity with India. It remains to be seen, however, whether increased Chinese involvements and investments in Pakistan will benefit the peoples of Pakistan and help stabilize the country.

In addition to these geopolitical realities, trans-Himalayan space is also host to a variety of non-state violent extremist and separatist movements with a diverse array of political, economic, and religious motivations and ambitions. Some of these are self-contained domestic insurgencies, while others have transnational characteristics and operate across borders and/or receive support from external parties, like the Pakistani military's funding of religious extremists in Afghanistan.

Some conflicts, like the ones in Tibet and Xinjiang, are the result of the Chinese state's intrusion and repression. Others, like the decades-long conflict in Kashmir, as well as the Naxalite rebellion in India's northeast, are the result of state weakness and are simultaneously exacerbated by external actors. Indeed, inter-state rivalry in Asia has begun to mix with these smaller, protracted conflicts as states have sought to exploit them for their own gain. Pakistan's intelligence services, for instance, have over the decades provided extensive support to groups inside India, especially in Kashmir and India's northeast.

For the United States, the greatest non-traditional security challenges in the Himalayan region emanate from Pakistan, including (1) extremist groups supported by elements of the Pakistani state operating and conducting attacks in India and Afghanistan (e.g., Afghan Taliban, *Lakshar-e-Taiba*, and *Jaish-e-Mohammad*); (2) extremists based in Pakistan plotting or targeting the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests abroad, and; (3) domestic insurgent groups threatening the stability of the Pakistani state itself (e.g. Baluch separatists and the Pakistani Taliban's off shoot, *Jamat-ul-Ahrar*). The threats posed by Islamist militancy in Pakistan touches upon a wide variety of U.S. national security interests including homeland security, the fate of Afghanistan, the security of India, the prevention of another Indo-Pakistan conflict, and the safety and stability of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

### ***Policy Recommendations:***

**Continue pursuing a deeper strategic partnership with India that supports the shared interests of both states, and balances India's rivalry with China.** The U.S. should continue to invest substantial capital in fostering the strategic partnership with India at the highest levels of government. Washington should avoid framing the Indo-U.S. partnership as one directed against China, but should not shy away from voicing shared concerns about China's behavior with its Indian partners. It should also reinvigorate efforts to strengthen practical security cooperation with India, while integrating Delhi into pre-existing multilateral security arrangements with other allies and Indo-Pacific security partners, like Japan and Australia. Finally, the U.S. should continue to coordinate with India in the defense of shared principles, laws, and norms increasingly under duress, like freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute settlement, and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Strengthening the security partnership among the nations of the Indo-Pacific is gaining increased importance, especially as China becomes more linked to Pakistan.

**Distinguish between the different varieties of extremist groups operating in the region.** When dealing with insurgencies and terrorism in the region, and the conflicting views of the region's countries on radical organizations, the U.S. should make clear distinctions about which groups are insurgents and which are terrorists, as well as which are local, and which are sponsored by external actors. Doing this can help the U.S. better navigate the complex nature of conflict in the trans-Himalayan space, and ascribe more effective policy recommendations when violence arises in the region.

**Emphasize that Pakistan will be held accountable for supporting terrorism, and rewarded for changing its policies.** The U.S. should continue to "de-hyphenate" its relationships with India and Pakistan, treating them as separate entities in foreign policy. It should abandon the canard that Pakistan is a major non-NATO ally and base its engagement with Islamabad on a more realistic appraisal of Pakistan's policies. While continuing humanitarian assistance to Pakistan, Washington must do a better job employing both carrots and sticks to convince Islamabad that times have changed, and that American tolerance for Pakistan's support to a variety of jihadi groups has come to an end. In doing so, the U.S. must be willing to demonstrate greater resolve in punishing Pakistan for its malfeasance, while maintaining the prospect for greater engagement and material benefit should the Pakistani military abandon its "double game." While China might oppose stricter American policies towards Pakistan, the U.S. must not be deterred from holding Pakistan accountable for failing to combat extremism within its borders and in the greater Himalayan region.

## ***Trade and Infrastructure Connectivity***

Weak states and contested sovereignties across the Himalayas have induced a number of regional actors to seek deeper physical and economic connectivity within the region through new infrastructure that supports transportation needs, trade and commerce, and access to resources. The region's indigenous inhabitants have largely welcomed this, as they have long been denied access to the benefits of the global economy and trade. However, longstanding border disputes and rivalries mean that efforts to foster greater connectivity in the Himalayas are laden with geopolitical significance, whether it is road connectivity through the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative or China's \$46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

As a result, there is an inherent challenge in disentangling the benign aspects of trade and infrastructure development initiatives from those of strategic concern and the broader contest for influence. In particular, new Chinese-led efforts, exemplified by the "Belt and Road" scheme, are stimulating not only cooperative efforts between some countries in the region, but also competing efforts on the part of powers that are wary of Chinese intentions and what they might mean for national sovereignty and free commerce and development. Indeed, Beijing's expanding presence and high interest loans to countries in South Asia – excluding India – to build sensitive infrastructure like ports (Gwadar in Pakistan, Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh, and Hambantota in Sri Lanka) have generated concerns about Chinese domination that would undermine economic and political opportunities ordinary people have in the region. They have also heightened security concerns in Delhi.

There are also new security risks related to the weakness of regional states and insurgent attacks. For instance, in Pakistan, because China is viewed as a supporter of the Pakistani establishment, Chinese investments and civilians in Baluchistan have been attacked by Baluch insurgents.

The peaceful development of the Himalayas will depend in part on creating alternatives that ensure development does not lead to domination by any given power. If this competition can be confined to the economic realm and based on rules, then there are potential benefits in having powers from inside and outside the region battling to build roads and railways, upgrade ports, and reduce trade barriers. However, there is also great risk of wasteful and redundant projects, the exacerbation of corruption, inadequate attention to environmental threats, rising debt burdens, and a myriad of other problems that have resulted from a number of similar initiatives elsewhere.

In comparison to proposals under China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative, many local and external actors view other schemes like the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridors, floated by researchers at the Asian Development Bank (ADB), more favorably. At present, however, the various schemes for creating new trans-

regional connectivity are proceeding at radically different paces and on vastly different scales. While CPEC has advanced rapidly due to unequivocal bilateral momentum from China and Pakistan, other multilateral schemes such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Economic Cooperation have been slower moving.

The United States has not involved itself yet in the scramble to build new regional connectivity and to encourage greater cooperation. Other extra-regional powers like Japan – with its Quality Infrastructure Initiative (QII) – and EU member states, through membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), have taken a more active role in seeking to influence developments in the Himalayas. Many see Japan's QII as an alternative to OBOR. Over the decades, Japan has built a reputation as a no-strings attached aid donor to developing countries – one who completes projects on time and works with the local government, and not just the top elite or military, to help the country concerned.

Meanwhile, the United States continues to remain distant in regards to Himalayan connectivity schemes. U.S. involvement in the Himalayas has been restricted to modest bilateral efforts, limited attempts at cooperation with China and with allies in the region, and its financing role as a member of multilateral development banks, principally the ADB and the World Bank. This reflects a broadly ambivalent U.S. stance – supportive, in principle, of connectivity schemes, but skeptical about elements of the actual initiatives proposed.

## ***Policy Recommendations***

**Engage in a more hands-on role in regional connectivity schemes to promote American interests.** Till now, the U.S. has preferred to play a “software” role over a “hardware” role to expand regional economic cooperation, and it has been cautious about inadvertently competing with China within the economic realm. Nonetheless, the United States has a number of interests that are not adequately addressed by this hands-off approach. These include rule-setting in the trade and investment sphere; ensuring standards on financing, corruption, environmental issues, labor rights, and other areas; access for U.S. companies to growing markets; conflict mitigation; ensuring a balance of power in the region that favors friends and allies (in which economic factors will play a critical role); and preventing states in the region from needing excessive dependence on rivals and competitors, whether that be for trade routes or financial support. By taking a more proactive approach in the region, the U.S. can better prioritize objectives that are not currently being fully addressed.

**Support the Quality Infrastructure Initiative as an alternative to Chinese-led regional partnerships.** Many of these goals can be advanced by taking on a more direct role in seeking to influence the emerging strategic economic geography of the trans-Himalayan region, and developing a common agenda on these issues with U.S. partners, rather than simply reacting to Chinese plans. In this context, the U.S. should support and expand the Quality Infrastructure Initiative (QII) developed by Japan as an alternative to Chinese-led initiatives like OBOR and CPEC, because it more effectively cuts back on corruption, emphasizes development according to rule of law that serves the needs of local people, and seeks to mitigate conflict.

## ***Water & Climate Change***

The combination of geopolitical rivalry and rapid economic growth is driving new competition over an increasingly precious resource: water.

The high-altitude alpine areas of the Himalayas play an essential role in Asia's water supply. Mountain glaciers and snow fields act as massive water reservoirs, accumulating ice and snow in the winter, and releasing meltwaters in the spring and summer that feed the surrounding rivers. Ice and snow melt contribute to 69 percent of the total flow of the Amu Darya, 35 to 40 percent of the Indus, 40 percent of the Tarim, and 18 percent of the Yangtze. Meltwaters are crucial for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal – especially during the dry seasons – and shoulder the burden in between rains and in years of weak or failed monsoons.

Rivers that begin in the trans-Himalayan region nourish substantial agricultural economies and ensure food security for hundreds of millions. The Indo-Gangetic plains of India and Pakistan, for instance, constitute the most intensively irrigated land on Earth. India's Punjab state alone, in the central Indus basin, furnishes 50 to 75 percent of the wheat that maintains the nation's buffer stocks of food grains. In the Amu Darya basin, the agricultural sector employs 59 percent of the labor force in Afghanistan, 27 percent in Tajikistan, 29 percent in Turkmenistan, and 21 percent in Uzbekistan. Similarly, Himalayan rivers yield critical energy supplies, with Nepal and Tajikistan each generating 99 percent of their electricity supply from hydropower.

Increasingly, however, surging demands caused by rapid urbanization and development in some parts of Asia have strained available water endowments. Many rivers – including the Amu Darya, Ganges, Indus, Tarim, and Yellow – are increasingly “closed,” meaning that under current management practices, all of their renewable annual water flows are already allotted to various human and environmental uses, with little to no spare capacity to accommodate new users.

Underground aquifers also face unsustainable overexploitation. Across a broad arc, extending from western Afghanistan through northern Pakistan and India into Bangladesh, users annually withdraw 54 km<sup>3</sup> more groundwater from aquifers than natural systems are able to replenish. This amount is twice the size of the total water stored in all the reservoirs of Pakistan.

For the substantial swathes of the trans-Himalayan region that are supplied by these rivers, the demands surpass locally available resources. Inadequate and unsafe water supplies take a considerable economic toll, annually costing India upward of 6 percent of its GDP and Pakistan over 4 percent of its GDP in health damages and lost economic activity.

These realities are compounded by extreme weather events, including rising temperatures, torrential rains, and heavy flooding, which accentuate the clear and present danger posed by climate change. A notable example of such an extreme weather event was the 2010 Pakistan floods, which resulted from heavy and prolonged rainfall, and caused \$43 billion in damage while displacing approximately 14 million people.

Furthermore, within the Himalayan region, as with other mountainous glacial areas, there is a large risk of glacier lake outburst floods (GLOFs). These floods can travel hundreds of kilometers, traverse national borders, and either severely damage or destroy crucial infrastructure. GLOFs not only impact infrastructure that supports connectivity (i.e. roads, bridges), but also impact the often-sparse power generation infrastructure (i.e. hydropower dams, electrical grid) in the region. Thus, climate change is exacerbating regional insecurity.

In the coming decades, growing populations and expanding economies will place further pressure on the region's water resources. By 2050, the sixteen countries that are partially or entirely fed by the ten rivers originating in the Himalayas will add another 610 million inhabitants, with their accompanying thirst for agricultural, domestic, and industrial water supplies. Projections by the 2030 Water Resources Group suggest many basins could fall short of these needs. If we keep in mind present demand trajectories and rates of technology and water-use efficiency improvements, by 2030, yearly water demands may exceed renewable supplies by 50 percent in the Ganges and Indus basins, and by 25 percent or more on the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers.

This points to a future that could be catastrophic for the peoples of the Himalayas and those who depend on them. Already, residents regularly experience droughts and water shortages that created an increased reliance on glacier snow melt for drinking water. In Pakistan, one of the most water-stressed countries in the world, groundwater tables are plummeting precipitously. In India, more than 300 million people face water shortages.

Furthermore, increasing competition over scarce resources could spur conflicts between claimants. Seven of the great rivers with headwaters in the Himalayas are shared between two or more states. In such transboundary basins, measures taken by upstream countries or communities to bolster water security – such as building dams and reservoirs for hydropower, flood protection, or water storage – may be seen as diminishing or disrupting flows to downstream users, thereby threatening their water supplies. Such fears plague basins across Asia, notably setting Tajikistan and Uzbekistan at odds on the Amu Darya, China and India on the Brahmaputra, India and Pakistan on the Indus, and China and the lower riparians on the Mekong, among other disputes.

While these problems are severe, international cooperation can manage many water and climate concerns and deliver mutual benefits to Himalayan countries.

In particular, active U.S. diplomacy can play a large role in spurring regional collaboration. The region largely lacks adequate institutional structures, and none of the seven transboundary Himalayan rivers are governed by an international accord encompassing all of the riparians. Furthermore, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) stated that weak legal frameworks and pervasive political frictions, combined with rising demand and increasing environmental pressures, render five of the seven basins particular “hot spots” for worsening water stress, socioeconomic impacts, and transboundary tensions.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the U.S. must encourage all regional countries to refrain from undertaking unilateral developments on shared rivers, and promote collaborative dialogue and conflict resolution among relevant riparians on issues of mutual concern. While it would prove challenging to realize, a trans-Himalayan conservation plan would ideally mitigate many issues related to water usage and climate change.

## ***Policy Recommendations***

**Share information and technology to improve regional water governance:** Across the Himalayas, decision-makers often lack consistent, accurate data to monitor, measure, and evaluate hydrological systems, precipitation patterns, water flows, and withdrawals, particularly in the region's remote mountain zones. U.S. agencies like NASA, NOAA, and the USGS possess tremendous assets in data acquisition and management through remote sensing, basin modeling, and other capabilities, and can cooperate with bodies in the region to better gather and employ data to inform and improve water governance.

**Assist in developing infrastructure that supports efficient water conservation.** The Asian Development Bank estimates Asia as a whole will require infrastructure investments in water and sanitation of \$800 billion from 2016 to 2030.<sup>2</sup> Beyond development aid and commercial investment, the U.S. can provide targeted assistance in developing and deploying water conservation techniques. Such measures include supporting efficient agricultural technologies like drip irrigation, backing rainwater harvesting and groundwater recharge that increase water storage, aiding innovations in desalination, and promoting water reuse and recycling to assure more sustainable management of the region's water resources.

**Support international institutions that champion increased cooperation between states in the region.** The U.S. should support international institutions like the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and the Mekong River Commission, which offer platforms for regional capacity building and dialogue. Similarly, judicious U.S. engagement via both official "hydro-diplomacy" and informal civil society Track II dialogues should encourage and support regional policymakers and stakeholders to manage shared water resources collaboratively.<sup>3</sup> Washington should encourage the main regional organizations of the broader Himalayan region — the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) — to issue statements and draft policies that address the challenges of climate change. The U.S. government has a particularly strong opportunity to do so within SAARC, where it enjoys observer status.

**Continue providing natural disaster relief and taking precautionary measures to mitigate the effects of severe weather events.** Washington can help alleviate, even if indirectly, the effects of natural catastrophes and climate change in the region. By doing so, it would forestall economic crises and destabilization that could result from increases in the number and severity of extreme weather events. Washington should continue, if not increase, flood relief and other weather-related aid in its existing humanitarian assistance packages to countries like Pakistan in the Himalayan region. Similarly, the U.S. should

**promote regional cooperation in disaster planning and response via initiatives like the newly inaugurated SAARC Disaster Management Centre.**

## ***Cultural Preservation & Minorities***

The human topography of the Himalayas is as deeply variegated as its physical topography. Some 210 million people live in the region, practice many of the world's major religions – Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam – and speak a multitude of languages. Today, however, these indigenous ethno-linguistic and religious minorities are under increasing threat, as large states like China, Pakistan, and India vie with one another for geopolitical position and control over dwindling resources across the rooftop of the world.

Tibet, or the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), was fully incorporated into China in 1959, and since then “Sinification” of the region has wiped out Tibetan culture, language and beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic Tibetans are the majority in the TAR, but their language has no status for employment purposes, as exams are held in Mandarin Chinese. Since 2002 Mandarin, not Tibetan, has been the exclusive language of instruction from elementary and secondary schools to universities. The Chinese Communist Party's policy of cultural hegemony has ensured that only those who speak Mandarin, primarily Han Chinese and not Tibetans, are employed. According to Minority Rights Group International, between 1999 and 2003, the proportion of government positions held by Tibetans fell from 71 percent to 64 percent.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is following a policy of Islamization in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan, also called the Northern Areas. The non-Muslim Kalasha tribes indigenous to this region are some of the oldest minorities in the greater Himalayas.<sup>5</sup> Over decades, social factors like high infant and maternal mortality rates, Islamization through forced conversion by radical Islamist terror groups and Pakistani Islamist organizations, and migration of Muslims into the region have led to a steep decline in the population of the Kalasha community, and in their culture and language. Islamabad's policy of Islamization aims to ensure a Sunni Muslim identity for a region that is both indigenously tribal and heavily Shia. There has been a slow ethnic purging of the region, with Muslims from other parts of Pakistan, like Pashtuns and Punjabis, immigrating to the region and inherently changing its demographics.

In India's northwestern region of Ladakh, bordering Tibet, the indigenous culture is threatened by both the India-Pakistan and India-China rivalries, as well as by intra-Islamic rivalries spilling over into the area.<sup>6</sup> Historically, Ladakh cradled both Muslim and Buddhist traditions with great harmony and symbiosis. Today, however, Ladakhi Muslims are caught within the crosshairs of extremist elements of both Shiite ideology – funded by the Iranians – and the Wahhabi tradition exported by Saudi Arabia. These external pressures on local populations – both the influence of extremist Shiism supported by Iran and Wahhabi rhetoric backed by Saudi Arabia on local Muslims, as well as the influence of both Tibetan and Chinese

dogmas on local Buddhists – have the potential to destroy the ancient tradition of harmonious interaction present in Ladakh.

Sufi-style Nubakshis and other moderate Muslim sects that have long been part of the Ladakhi community are now considered “lost sheep” or “heretics,” and are being coerced to adopt more radical and non-indigenous versions of Islam. The number of mosques in Leh increased from one to 30 in the last few years, and has also grown rapidly throughout Ladakh. Worshippers erected a large Iranian-sponsored and styled mosque in Leh, and some locals changed their Ladakhi personal and business names to sound more Persian. Furthermore, indigenous Ladakhi mosques also changed their aesthetic style in an effort to appear more Persian.

Additionally, Wahhabi propaganda is spreading, particularly during non-tourist months when there are virtually no visitors or press present. In October 2016, for example, over 100 Wahhabi-styled posters and banners covered Leh’s business district. The messages largely conveyed extreme forms of vice and virtue, and advocated sacrificing one’s life for religious causes. Women in certain villages are now forced to wear non-indigenous head-to-toe covering, and are only allowed one chaperoned walk per day. There have also been violent acts committed against girls attending high school.

Furthermore, there is growing concern among a section of China watchers that Beijing is using “invisible” methods of having ethnic Tibetans infiltrate India. Local populations have been persuaded by outside ideologies to consider indigenous Ladakhi cultures and religions, especially Drukpa Buddhism, “barbaric” and “heretical.” This change in thought is coupled with an encouragement of Tibetan/Chinese cultural superiority. Local dress, language, customs, and art are discouraged or destroyed. The growing Tibetan/Chinese influences on the region’s culture have led to a correlative increase in fear, shame, and punishments for celebrating Ladakhi culture – including a fine imposed on members of certain villages for attending Drukpa rituals.

There are other signs of a clear shift having taken place, such as the growing intervention and takeover of Buddhist institutions by Chinese Tibetans, rising sectarian tensions among Buddhist sects, and the popularity of Mandarin as a language in the Himalayas. As Nepal clamps down on Tibetans within its own confines, keeping a close watch on their activities, hundreds of them have crossed over the porous border with India. Thus, there is need for new development and security approaches that preserve and protect indigenous culture in a region that possesses thousands of years of culture and history.

### ***Women***

Women are the backbone of Himalayan societies and cultures, particularly in rural areas, because mountain societies traditionally had less rigid social structures and hierarchies. Women thus had more freedom and a larger say in decision-making processes. Women, children, and minorities act as natural stakeholders for peace

and stability in many communities and if they are properly empowered, can play a significant role in maintaining regional stability. Yet, despite their critical role in supporting social structures, these women also face tremendous hardships and gender-based discrimination.

Historically, the Himalayas were geographically isolated, protecting both the ecological and cultural integrity of the region. However, development and extension of the state apparatus to rural communities has paradoxically resulted in the gradual replacement of a tribal culture that gave women an elevated societal rank with a patriarchal culture where women have a lower status in society. Women are now less likely to own land and other productive resources, undercompensated for their labor, and underrepresented in formal decision-making bodies, whether at the local or regional levels.

Women are involved in various important activities, ranging from farming, wood and fodder gathering, and water collection to raising the family. The migration of most men to urban areas or even foreign countries – whether to neighboring countries like India or the Gulf – further ensured that women ran the household. Young children, primarily female, often helped their mothers with work as young male children frequently joined their fathers and migrated out of the region.

Economic exclusion and geographical obstacles are key concerns for women that inhabit rural villages. Women have access to few technologies to provide relief from their work, which leads to a toll on their mental and physical health. Household chores, combined with involvement in high-intensity activities like cooking, farming, and wood gathering, make a woman's workload overwhelming. Remoteness – not only from towns but also from other households – creates a further sense of isolation that prevents and limits a woman's social capital, which could be used to access information, develop new skills, and adapt to new challenges like globalization and climate change. Social infrastructure and governmental services remain inaccessible for most Himalayan women, whose mobility has been restricted by motherhood and new cultural norms that incorporate a preference for boys and men in resolving societal issues.

Across the Himalayan region, there is also a large gap between the literacy rates of women and men, although the size of the gap varies across countries. In 2007, 51 percent of women in the region were literate, compared to 71 percent of men. According to India's 2001 census, the overall literacy rate for citizens residing in the Indian Himalayas was 67.45 percent, with the rate for males standing at 77 percent, compared to a literacy rate of 57 percent for females.

The Himalayan region also has some of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. This high mortality rate is primarily due to poor maternal health and inadequate and unsafe motherhood practices that stem from a lack of crucial resources like clean water, ignorance regarding health education, and a general health services deficit in remote areas. Women in these regions often work 14- to

16-hour workdays and consume a diet with inadequate amounts of protein, iron, and calories. This prevents women from obtaining necessary nutrients and gaining weight during pregnancy, which then leads to improper development of the fetus and extremely low birth weights.

Furthermore, children often suffer the same fate as their mothers, as they are pulled out of school to help with day-to-day chores and activities. Female children face the brunt of this work, and are tasked with helping care for younger siblings and assisting with domestic work instead of going to school.

Thus, there is a need for development approaches that help restore and reinforce the traditional position of women in these societies. These alternative solutions must come from the bottom-up in Himalayan communities, and focus on empowering them by putting development initiatives in their hands. While many of these changes must come from within Himalayan societies, the United States can work with regional governments, civil society groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help women and minorities develop the skills necessary to protect and advance their communities in the long-term.

## ***Policy Recommendations***

### ***Cultural Preservation & Minorities***

**Empower local civil society organizations to promote a diverse community.** In India, local civil society organizations, representing the people of specific areas, are the best way to ensure cultural longevity. The United States should help identify and empower local and indigenous communities that have long standing traditions of service and celebrating diversity, such as the Drukpa Lineage, the Kung Fu Nuns, and Ladakhi communities, and help preserve them in the face of threats from both Islamist and Chinese divisive rhetoric. Meanwhile, the U.S. also take a clear stand against the repressive policies toward Himalayan minorities implemented by Islamabad and Beijing.

**Aid cultural preservation through preserving history and celebrating traditions of diversity.** Appreciation of a region's history helps protect against forced cultural and religious conversions, especially when the value of diversity is deeply embedded into the historical narrative. When communities have pride in their own culture, they are less inclined to adopt foreign influences. Textbooks on history and culture written by locals and distributed freely would help revive this culture, and also counter the region's Islamist propaganda narrative.

### ***Women***

**Give women equal financial responsibility to help them with the countless social obligations they hold.** Women in the Himalayas are accustomed to hard labor and being heads of the household, and South Asia is ripe with examples of microfinance projects that have benefitted and empowered women. They need help on fronts like finance, literacy, healthcare, and access to water and energy resources. The U.S. can partner with South Asian microfinance institutions like the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh to encourage bottom-up empowerment in which women manage remittances, undertake economic activities, and find ways of utilizing indigenous resources with innovation and investment.

**Provide women education as a means of empowerment and promoting cultural diversity.** Women are the backbone of these indigenous and mountainous societies that have survived for centuries. Educating women will ensure that subsequent generations are literate, healthy, and economically empowered. Training local women as primary school teachers and building small schools with the help of local civil society organizations would be ideal methods of community empowerment. While many of these initiatives must inherently come from within Himalayan communities, the United States should support programs that work with the next generation of female leaders to hone the skills necessary

for promoting a robust civil society, and ensure they have the ability to act as barriers against the spread of extremism.

**Support basic health care and reproductive health.** The U.S. must support primary health care in the Himalayas, and help increase access to clinics that address general health needs. Again, this can be accomplished by aiding local NGOs and civil society groups dedicated to treating the ill. Establishing small primary health care clinics and training local women as midwives and primary caregivers are simple and cost-effective solutions to help improve health care in the Himalayas.

## ***Concluding Remarks***

**I**t is essential that the Trump administration develop a cohesive foreign policy in the Himalayan region. Stability in a region of such high strategic importance is critical, yet the Himalayas are currently fraught with tensions deriving from deepening inter-state rivalry and unwanted external influences, as well as from struggles over controlling the area's vast resources and territory. In order to protect its interests, the U.S. should engage in a more hands-on approach that serves to promote peace, stability, and economic prosperity in the region.

By pursuing a deeper strategic relationship with India, the United States can help offset regional concerns over China's intentions in the Himalayas, and exert itself in both territorial and economic disputes in the region. Furthermore, Washington must make it clear that Pakistan will be severely reprimanded for harboring terrorists and supporting local extremist and secessionist movements.

While it is important to engage China where possible, the U.S. must also find a way to create alternatives to Chinese-backed regional connectivity schemes like OBOR and CPEC. One such solution is championing agreements like Japan's Quality Infrastructure Initiative (QII). Either way, becoming more actively involved in regional initiatives is essential for the U.S. to protect its interests, and ensure that any given country does not gain hegemonic regional power.

With regards to water usage, Washington should increase cooperation with its Himalayan counterparts, and provide the necessary equipment and technology to help assess and mediate disputes over an increasingly scarce water supply. The U.S. should also help the region prepare for extreme weather events, while maintaining its levels of aid after such tragedies occur.

The rise of radical movements in the Himalayas has significantly altered a society that historically championed diversity and important societal responsibilities for women and minorities. While it will be difficult for Washington to play a direct role in resolving such disputes, it can indirectly help safeguard cultural diversity by supporting local civil society groups and non-governmental organizations.

Above all, Washington should take a broader, more geographically holistic view of the trans-Himalayan space — a region that tends to be perceived, in a policy sense, through the lens of individual countries. This entire region — despite the many differences that characterize its various countries — faces shared challenges. By tackling these issues head-on, the U.S. can help bring stability to the region, while also protecting its chief national interests.

## ***Acknowledgements***

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## ***Endnotes***

1. UNEP-DHI/UNEP, *Transboundary River Basins: Status and Trends* (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2016).
2. ADB, *Meeting Asia's Infrastructure Needs* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2017).
3. Benjamin Pohl et al., *The Rise of Hydro-Diplomacy: Strengthening Foreign Policy for Transboundary Waters* (Berlin: Adelphi, 2014).
4. Tibet's population stood at 2,675,500 according to a 2005 census, with 2,549,300 or 95.3 percent of them classified as Tibetans. According to 2010 estimates by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the population of Tibet was 3,002,166. The main languages spoken are Tibetan and Mandarin.
5. With no official census in Pakistan since 1998, there are no actual recent figures regarding the population. Some have argued that there were around 10,000 inhabitants in 1951 with only 3000 currently remaining.
6. The population of Ladakh, that forms part of Indian Jammu and Kashmir, stands at 274,289 as per the 2011 census. Leh, the capital of Ladakh, is primarily Buddhist (67 percent), with substantial Muslim and Hindu minorities. Kargil is primarily Muslim (77 percent) but with large Buddhist and Hindu minorities. The overwhelmingly Buddhist population of Ladakh subscribes to the school of Drukpa Buddhism – an indigenous tradition of the region.



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