Interview – Michael Kugelman

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Michael Kugelman is director of the Wilson Center's South Asia Institute. He is also a columnist for Foreign Policy magazine and writes its weekly South Asia Brief newsletter. He has held the South Asia portfolio at the Wilson Center for nearly 16 years, and his research has ranged from the destabilizing potential of natural resource stress in Pakistan to China's policies in South Asia. His most recent projects look at the future of US policy in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. His analysis has been featured in a range of major media outlets, including The New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, CNN, NPR, BBC, and Bloomberg News, and also in top media outlets in South Asia. He is always happy to speak with the next generation of South Asia scholars and analysts, and he can be reached here.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Good question. As an analyst of South Asia, the field often appears rather depressing: Polarization, intolerance, border disputes, economic stress, climate change—with all these bad-news regional trends, it's easy to forget the inspiring and positive developments in the region that present exciting new research opportunities.

One is the tech sphere. We've all heard about the global success story that is the Indian hi-tech sector, but it goes well beyond that. We're seeing a deepening tech industry footprint across the wider region. This raises interesting questions: What explains the emergence of this nascent regional tech ecosystem? How is it navigating often harsh regulatory environments in a region that's experiencing growing crackdowns on online content? If tech industries continue to grow, could we see the emergence of a region where economies grow less reliant on manufacturing and more focused on services?

Another exciting debate revolves around connectivity. South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions, in a transnational sense. But we're seeing dynamic levels of infrastructure development in domestic contexts. Bangladesh has recently completed or nearly completed new metro services, large bridges, and underwater tunnels. Chinese investments have brought new infrastructure projects to many countries around the region. There could be more around the corner, with a new MCC (Millennium Challenge Corporation) infrastructure grant recently finalized (after a long delay) in Nepal, and the UAE contributing to a generous infrastructure fund for India. So can all this domestic growth in infrastructure translate to greater regional connectivity? Regional political tensions suggest it's a long shot. But we're seeing small steps—some new electricity-sharing arrangements involving India and Nepal and Bangladesh, and Pakistan and Afghanistan exploring rail projects with Uzbekistan. Geopolitical rivalry may impose limits on the possibilities. But it would be a shame not to capitalize on the opportunity presented by these domestic infrastructure investment sprees.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Like many people of my generation, the 9/11 attacks impacted my worldview in a big way. I had just graduated from college in DC the year before, and even though I studied international affairs (specializing in Europe), had grown up abroad, and had done a study abroad year, I didn't fully understand how much international relations, and US foreign policy, could impact America, in America, so adversely and directly. Because of geography, what happened far away

stayed far away. Or so I naively believed. The 9/11 attacks jolted me and many of my peers out of our complacency. I still remember when my office, located just blocks from the White House, was evacuated, and we all ended up outside on the street, looking up in the sky, worried we'd see another hijacked plane, this one heading for the White House.

Another revelation happened a few years later. I had been fortunate to live a relatively privileged life—I grew up abroad, in Western Europe and East Asia, in peaceful and prosperous settings. I had never really directly experienced the pain and trauma of those impacted by conflict. From 2001 to 2003, I worked at a nonprofit that helped advise young people from the Middle East and North Africa studying in the US on scholarships. Many of them had sad stories to share—stories of war and terror and the impact on their families, with the trauma compounded by the fact that they were young Muslims in America shortly after 9/11, and many experienced discrimination in the US. My conversations with these folks made me understand, for the first time, what humanizing suffering is all about. It also made me want to go back to school to study the Middle East—and that's what I ended up doing, until I did a redirect toward South Asia.

What role has hate speech and communal tensions played in undermining social cohesion in South Asian societies in recent years? How has it impacted India's relations with its 'Muslim' neighbors and vice-versa?

Hate speech and communal tensions certainly aren't new in South Asia, but they have become more virulent in recent years. One reason is the emergence of aggressive, religion-based nationalism—from Hindu nationalism in India to Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka. The emergence and increasing influence of nong0vernment hardline Islamist groups in the region—from Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan to Hefazat-i-Islam in Bangladesh—though not part of the state, have similarly contributed to more toxic forms of religious nationalism. And the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan certainly doesn't inspire hope for religious freedom in that country. A second key factor is social media, which has become such a powerful platform for, and multiplier of, religious hate speech in a region where internet penetration has been quite impressive in recent years. In other words, there is easy access to religious hate speech.

I wouldn't overstate the impact of these developments on social cohesion. It would be hyperbolic to suggest it has heightened the risk of religious conflict or civil war. It's worth noting that new research by Amit Ahuja and Devesh Kapur shows that internal violence has actually fallen significantly in India in recent years. Still, one can't deny how intensifying communal tensions and hate speech are making social environments more toxic, and most importantly making life miserable and indeed dangerous for many members of religious minorities. There's arguably no better example than the Indian Muslim community.

But let's be clear: While religious intolerance and hate in India risk poisoning Hindu-Muslim relations, New Delhi's relations with the wider Muslim world have not really suffered. Public sentiment in Bangladesh may strongly oppose Modi's policies, but the ruling Awami League shares much ideologically with India's BJP—such as a willingness to crack down on dissent and strong stands against political Islam. In Afghanistan, the Taliban have welcomed New Delhi's decision to reopen its embassy in Kabul and called for warm relations. Further afield, Muslim countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia have complained little about Modi's policies. That's because they see India as a key trade and investment partner and don't want to rock the boat. Pakistan is the exception; Modi's policies that related to Muslims—in Kashmir, on issues of citizenship rights—have provoked strong condemnation. But these are two longstanding rivals with a range of grievances, and even without Hindu nationalism in India their relations would be tense.

How do you see the pervasive impact of political nepotism in South Asia vis-à-vis the rise of populist regimes especially in the context of the collapse of Sri Lanka's economy and political establishment?

It's been a mixed bag. The success of the BJP and PTI in India and Pakistan, respectively, can be attributed in part to public disgust with political dynasties and strong public perceptions of them as corrupt, out-of-touch, and generally incompetent. But the PTI, because of its falling out with the military, is no longer in power, and PTI leader Imran

Khan, without that support from the military, may have trouble returning to power.

In other countries in the region, dynasties retain a stranglehold on politics, and we haven't seen the emergence of viable alternatives. In Bangladesh, beyond the two dynastic parties that dominate politics—the ruling AL and opposition BNP—there's not much. The Jamaaat-i-Islami has effectively been banned by Dhaka, but its close ties to the BNP link it to dynastic politics. A few new parties have emerged in Bangladesh in recent years, but they're nascent and lack mass support.In Sri Lanka, mass protests prompted the Rajapaksa family to give up power, but the new administration is led by a close ally of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the previous president, and much of the Cabinet also served in his government.

This doesn't rule out change down the road. It's just that it may take several generations of political leadership. It takes time for new parties to emerge, to overcome the powerful patronage systems enjoyed by the old dynastic parties, to develop mass followings, and to prevail electorally. It took Imran Khan, an anti-dynastic populist and a national hero from his years as a cricket star, 22 years from the time he launched his party to the time he took office as prime minister—and that was because the military's behind-the-scenes pre-election engineering helped him win. Still, I remain sanguine about longer-term possibilities for successful non-dynastic parties—because of strong public sentiment against the same old faces and families in politics, and because of the region's large youth bulges, which means that for many years there will be plenty of opportunities for new, young political leaders that aren't products of nepotism or dynasties.

How do you predict the relationship between India and China, its largest neighbor, will be during India's presidency of the G20 in the coming year?

The trajectory of India-China ties this year will be shaped by developments unrelated to India's G20 presidency: the situation on the border, the extent of China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean region and investment footprint in South Asia, the degree of growth in US-India relations, and so on. In the past, the ups and downs of India-China relations have played out even as the two have partnered in multilateral arrangements. They were cooperating within BRICS and AIIB, for example, when Modi and China's Xi held bilateral summits in 2018 and 2019, and also when the two sides were plunged into conflict in Ladakh in 2020. This is why I don't think India's G20 presidency is the right signpost to use to gauge the relationship's direction this year.

Now, all this said, one of New Delhi's objectives with its G20 presidency is to showcase its ability, as a nonaligned state, to manage different great power rivalries. And in that regard, it has a strong interest in managing its relations with all the G20 countries, including China. So this means that India will have a strong interest in ensuring that anything that happens within the G20 doesn't make its relationship with Beijing any more tense than it was before India took on the G20 presidency.

What possible adverse impacts could the current deadly COVID-19 wave in China have on the world? What kind of disruptions are likely to be seen?

The good news is that with vaccine successes, the public health impacts likely won't be too bad. China's neighbor India has not seen a major surge in new cases. The most likely impacts will be economic. If the wave is serious and sustained, labor shortages in China will impact factory production and hurt business on the whole, which will reduce exports and lower demand for many imports. This will have implications for China's trade partners, and given China's vast economic power, that means much of the world will be impacted. Most of South Asia—including India, a top trade partner of China—has substantive commerial relationships with Beijing, so this is nothing to sneeze at for the region.

There's also the question of political impacts. If Beijing struggles to rein in the COVID surge, it may feel a need to step up its game abroad with some muscular acts to strengthen morale at home—keeping in mind, in particular, the large protests against's Beiing's COVID policies several weeks ago. This could mean more provocations along the border with India, the Taiwan Strait, or the South China Sea. Let's be clear: Beijing has suffered a series of setbacks in recent months: An economic slowdown, a growing backlash abroad against BRI projects, terrorist threats against

its workers in Pakistan, and then the anti-government protests amid the latest COVID surge. Beijing will have a strong incentive to produce a rally-around-the-flag effect at home.

What is the most imminent crisis looming over South Asia in the coming year?

I'd say the risk of economic collapse in Pakistan. It could well become the next Sri Lanka, with its foreign reserves having plummeted exponentially for nearly a year, to the point that it now has enough to cover imports for only a few more weeks. The government is unpopular, suffers from poor leadership, and appears to have no coherent economic recovery plan. If it's to avoid default, it will need to unlock more IMF funds, and that will involve austerity measures like removing subsidies that will be incredibly risky politically at a moment when the government is already suffering a legitimacy crisis.

I think it's likely that the IMF will eventually come around (in late January, Islamabad took new steps to meet IMF conditions), funds will be released, and default will be avoided. But even if Pakistan does avoid default, it will still be confronted with levels of inflation and debt that it hasn't experienced in decades, a resurgent threat from the Pakistan Taliban, and an ongoing confrontation between the government and the opposition. Given the various volatilities that Pakistan grapples with even in the best of circumstances, this makes for a very unsettling state of affairs.

There's also reason to be concerned about another India-China border clash. New Delhi has proven unable to deter Chinese incursions, which have continued even after the Ladakh clash in 2020, the deadliest border clash since the 1962 war. Tensions are high because of the border dispute, China's growing naval presence in India's maritime neighborhood, Indian concerns about Chinese surveillance, and Chinese worries about a growing US-India security partnership and the momentum of the Quad. As I noted earlier, Beijing will have a strong domestic political incentive to do something strong abroad to rally support at home. The good news is the two militaries continue to meet regularly to discuss the border dispute, and bilateral trade remains robust, which means there is some goodwill, even if on commercial levels. Still, the risk of another border crisis is real. And given how brutal and deadly the 2020 one was, we can't rule out serious levels of escalation if a new one were to break out.

We also shouldn't be complacent about the risks of other border conflicts in South Asia. Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions are high amid the Taliban's refusal to address Pakistani concerns about Afghanistan-based terrorists (a sharply ironic role reversal from earlier years, when it was Afghanistan raising this concern about Pakistan), and we can't rule out cross-border Pakistani counterterrorism offensives. Similarly, despite a border truce nearly two years ago, India and Pakistan are one Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack in India away from a fresh crisis. And don't overlook the Bangladesh-Myanmar frontier, where the Myanmar junta's battles against insurgents have spilled into Bangladesh in recent months.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Ah, where to start? First, I'd strongly recommend, while still in school, going outside your comfort zone. Take a class on a topic that you don't think interests you, or that you don't intend to pursue profesionally. You may be surprised and learn something new and fascinating, and perhaps even be so impacted that you change your plans. On a whim, I took a class on the history of Afghanistan and Pakistan as a first-year graduate student, and it ended up shaping my decision to make a career out of South Asia studies.

Also, take as many economics classes as you can. Even if you're convinced you want to study security or society or politics, take economics. So much of international relations revolves around economics. I made the mistake of not taking enough economics classes, and I still regret it.

I'd also suggest recognizing how the nature of global threats and challenges has changed so dramatically, and be sure to keep that in mind as you consider what type of research to pursue. Climate change, resource scarcity, cyber threats, fifth-generation war—these are no longer far-off, future threats—they're clear and present dangers playing out as we speak. This doesn't mean you shouldn't pursue careers in war studies, great power competition, or international law. But just remember that these traditional disciplines will be impacted, in a big way, by the newer

threats in international relations.

Finally, cherish the privilege of mentorship, both as a mentor and mentee. Seek out mentors and listen to them closely. Not all senior scholars are willing to make time for younger scholars. Respect those that do. At the same time, as you get further in your career, be sure to pay it forward. Be a mentor to the next generation of IR scholars. The best way to honor our mentors is to mentor others.