Interview - Stephen P. Cohen

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Stephen P. Cohen is a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution, following a career as a professor of political science and history at the University of Illinois. In early 2008, Cohen was a visiting professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore and in India at Andhra University. He has consulted for numerous foundations and government agencies, and was a member of the policy planning staff at the Department of State from 1985 to 1987. In addition, he was a visiting scholar at the Ford Foundation in New Delhi from 1992 to 1993. In 2004, he was named by the World Affairs Councils of America as one of "America's 500 Most Influential People" in the area of foreign policy, and has authored, co-authored and edited numerous books, including his most recent, The South Asian Papers: A Critical Anthology of Writings by Stephen Philip Cohen (Brookings, 2016).

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

The larger research puzzle that has steered me for many years is: how do states manage or use violence, rather than being directed by the instrument of violence, the armed forces. My recent book "The South Asia Papers: A Critical Anthology of Writings" goes into this in some detail; I spent some time in India writing a study of the social and policy consequences of a disaster—the Andhra Cyclone of 1977—a form of natural violence, but the central argument there was that many deaths were preventable, and hence "man made", not mere acts of nature.

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

I don't think it has changed very much, which is why history is still relevant for policy makers. It gives you a range of possibilities about the future, but history is rarely a straight line projection of the past.

In your recent book "The South Asia Papers: A Critical Anthology of Writings," you have critically re-examined your theory of regional conflict. Could you expand on this specific theory, how it has evolved and what are its implications for regional security studies?

It is a theory of intractable conflicts, it could be original, but I suspect that someone has already set it out. Basically, intractable conflicts (those which last for years with no sign of resolution or termination) are caused when two parties each believe that they are a victim, a minority under pressure, and act the way all victims act: without regard for norms or standards because their backs are metaphorically against the wall. Victims and minorities have different rules and standards, which keeps these disputes going. This is described in detail in my book "Shooting for a Century".

As a military historian and sociologist, you have examined the caste dimension of the Indian Army. Drawing upon your Indian case study what would be the takeaways for the armies in other caste- or ethnicity-based social systems in terms of neutralizing grievances of different groups without sacrificing the stability of a country?

I haven't worked on these issues for years, but I'd say 1) technology makes obsolete several kinds of traditional ways of organizing militaries, so caste and class may be decreasingly relevant; 2), serving in the armed forces is still

important for citizenship, so armies should be as inclusive as possible, not just to improve military efficiency but to solidify the overall legitimacy of the state, which is in sharp decline everywhere, and 3) I'm puzzled why so few academics are interested in military matters, perhaps it is the silly bias of liberal scholars against those who use force or violence.

You have shed light on some fascinating facts of why and how India successfully pursued a policy of civilian supremacy, which you jokingly called a "civilian oppression" of military vis-à-vis military-dominated Pakistan for which the consequences are evident. However, countries that are reeling under domestic conflicts usually have the tendency to be seduced by the idea of military intervention into domestic politics, so what would be your comments and advice regarding this?

Every state looks for a man (or woman) on horseback, Aristotle wrote much on the allure of dictators, we have not moved much beyond him and he has a theory of political change which is still valuable. On India; it may be swapping military efficiency for civilian control, not a bad trade-off given the disastrous rule by generals in the neighborhood. But civilian militarism can be as corrosive as military-run states as Indira Gandhi showed.

A question that you have been asked perhaps several times regarding the pathologies of India-Pakistan relations, how the same peoples who had lived together for centuries have not been able to learn to live in peace as neighbors? Would you attribute this to the realist-type world system of distribution of power, or constructivist-type system of identity, or social psychology, emotions or leaders' role, or its just mere politics?

None of them. The best framework is still that of Kenneth Waltz — Man, The State and War; explanations for conflict have to be found at all levels; the individual (psychological), state type, and the interaction between states (the state system). I'm baffled by some of the new terminology. I don't think it (terminology) adds anything to our understanding of the past, and it is certainly irrelevant to the problems faced by the policy maker.

The neighborhood policy discourse in South Asia is predominantly realist and pessimistic, and not surprisingly so because of a long-standing environment of threat and distrust. As a result, academic and policy elites in the region explain the South Asian IR largely in realist terms. Therefore, do you think that encouraging and training young scholars and policy makers to think and generate optimistic discourse, mainly in India and Pakistan including other neighbors, could help overcome the chronic antagonisms that exist there?

I don't know what "optimistic discourse" means, but scholars, old and young, should be fearless in going where their arguments lead them, and be prepared to change course and to revise old theories and explanations. This is not a religion or creed, but a science whose propositions can only be temporary and conditional and which must be challenged and revised.

The US and India have had a "love-hate relationship" for decades. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, India's nuclear program, among others, continued to bother US policy makers a lot. But India now has emerged as a global economic power which the US cannot disregard, and there is also the increasingly assertive China. Do these dynamics allude to the fact that the US-India "partnership" (whatever that means) is here to stay?

Proliferation has two dimensions: on the one hand it may make large scale war between nuclear weapons states impossible (Waltz's argument), on the other hand we become complacent, and there can be accidents, which could lead to a history-ending war. So, from a policy perspective the question is "how can we retain the stability nuclear weapons offer while reducing the chances of accidental or inadvertent war?" In government there are still those who are nuclear abolitionists, but I don't think there are many who believe that we could "cap, roll back, or eliminate" India's nuclear program, a silly policy goal if there ever was one—silly because it was naïve and paid no attention to Indian (and Pakistani) motives. At the time of the tests, I wrote that India will feel more secure, but had become less secure. Of course, "security" is very subjective, perhaps we ought to teach courses in "national insecurity policy".

The process of defining insecurity and security is critical.

India is criticized and resented among its other neighbors (putting Pakistan aside) for its heavy-handedness and micro-management. Neighbors are heard saying that what they want from India is "live and let live," and want to reach out to China. But Indian policy elites put it differently, they argue that the neighbors profit from tossing India against China. In all this, the US apparently is not happy with India's behavior in its neighborhood, but has maintained restraint given its broader concerns with India. Since you have observed the region for at least five decades, in your view, where is all this headed?

Over the last ten years India has better managed relations with its smaller neighbors, partially because it does not see the US as seeking a foothold in the region, partly because there is a growing awareness of India's "gringo" policies which alienate its neighbors.

There are a growing voices in the academic field of international relations (IR) about making IR global, as opposed to Western-style academia, in other words, providing the space they deserve to other "poles" of the world. And since Nehruvian India vied for a different pole status through its "non-alignment" policy for good or bad, are such voices merely old wine in a new bottle?

IR, as a field, has to meet the reality and policy tests. Does it explain what has happened, and is it a useful guide to the future and to policy? Paraphrasing Mao ("let a hundred flowers bloom"), let there be many theories, let them contest openly. Western IR theory was much over-focused on the US-Soviet competition, there is much to learn from Chinese, Indian, and Iranian theories of relations between states.

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

Read history, read the classics of political theory, read anthropology and sociology, Aristotle, Freud, Weber; these, and good histories give you alternative explanations of real-world phenomena, don't rely on a single methodology.

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This interview was conducted by Anil Sigdel. Anil is a Senior Commissioning Editor at E-IR.