



Press Conference in Islamabad, Pakistan

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs
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AMBASSADOR CROCKER: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for coming today to meet our new Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia. As we expand the Bureau, Ambassador Boucher of course is no stranger to any of you, having served as Spokesman for six Secretaries of State, and in so doing, becoming the longest-serving Spokesman in the State Department's history. I'm personally not only pleased but very relieved that he is here today, so that for a change he'll be the one taking all your hard questions. Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I thought the rule was that the Ambassador gets the hard ones. Anyway, thank you ladies and gentlemen. It's a pleasure to be here today. This is my first excursion as Ambassador Crocker said, as the Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia. It is my first chance to travel here on my own, and I think the first thing I want to do is to thank the Pakistani people and the Pakistani government for their hospitality. I've had a chance to meet with a lot of people here, with President Musharraf, Foreign Minister Kasuri, Foreign Secretary Khan, people in the Foreign Ministry who handle the detailed work in our relationship and who work in other areas that are of interest to both of us, as well as people in the business community. I'll talk later about some of the others, but everybody has been very receptive, very open with me, very forthcoming with me, very frank in our discussions. And I think this is the kind of relationship that I certainly want to have with people in the government in Pakistan and with the people of Pakistan.

I'm here, I think, to show again how seriously committed the United States is to the success of Pakistan, to the building of a new modern nation here, a modern society, a democratic nation. And one that's successful economically, and regionally. Pakistan is a very important partner for us in many, many different areas. We were very proud to be able to help after the earthquake that occurred here. We were very saddened by the suffering that the earthquake caused. We are still here. We have been through the relief portion of this. We are now funding a \$13 million dollar transition program that will help people go back to their villages and clean up and rebuild their villages. And then we're already engaged in a longer-term reconstruction program that you all know about that will help the whole area recover from the devastating effects of this earthquake.

We're also moving forward on the agenda that the two Presidents set during their very successful discussions and visit last month. This is a relationship that for many years has involved many aspects of cooperation, especially in the fight against extremism and terrorism, in the building of Pakistan's economy, in the support for Pakistan's education system and other areas.

But I think it's safe to say that the visit of President Bush to Pakistan in our view was very, very successful. It was a very important milestone marking not only a deepening of the relationship with Pakistan, but a broadening as well. And one where we are working on a very wide agenda that works to help Pakistan move to the kind of society that Pakistanis want, the kind of direction that Pakistan is headed in, and the kind of success, as I said, that we all want for Pakistan. Therefore the visit was both symbolic but it was also quite specific and left us with a very detailed and broad agenda of things to work on. So that's one of the things I did here. We're moving forward on this agenda and strategic talks and discussions of economic cooperation, discussions of cooperation on education, cooperation on energy.

In a few weeks in DC, we will probably have a Strategic Dialogue at the level of the Foreign Secretary and our Under Secretary to delve into these issues further, to keep marking our progress, to make sure we're all doing what our leaders have told us to do and to keep moving forward on this very important agenda.

Another aspect of my visit here has been visiting with the heads of the legislative branch, the Chairman of the Senate, and the Speaker of the Assembly, visiting with the Chairman of the Election Commission, and I'll be seeing political party leaders as well. The goal of all this is that these are the people who are going to be involved in moving towards the election next year. You've heard from the President and others how important this development is to us and we welcome it. We want to support it. We want to talk and keep in touch with the people involved in moving forward. So particularly during my visit today with the new Chairman of the Election Commission, I think I was heartened to hear that he is going to work to make the election free and fair, work to make his body the independent and fair arbiter of how things proceed in the election and of course we'll be supporting him as he tries to do that in any way necessary. But we look forward to keeping in touch with all these different people who are involved in preparing a successful election next year and look for insights from them and hope they can cooperate together to give Pakistan and the people of Pakistan the kind of free and fair election they deserve.

Finally, I've been spending a fair amount of time with the people at our Embassy here, who are here representing the United States, and who are working, both Americans and Pakistanis, working to better the relationship between the United States and Pakistan and they are doing a great job, representing the United States here to a very important partner, and the work they do is really something that we value very much back in Washington and we'll continue to support them.



This I think, I hope, is the first of many visits, that I can come out here fairly often in my new capacity, and I'll see Pakistani counterparts in Washington fairly often. So it has been a real pleasure, it has been fascinating for me, and I hope useful for the people I've talked to, but I'm glad to be here.

Now let's go to questions. Why don't we start in the front.

QUESTION: I am Javed Siddique. I represent the daily Nawa-e-Waqt. In your discussions with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, the Foreign Minister has demanded that there should be a package agreement of providing civilian nuclear technology to both India and Pakistan. And he desires to have a similar kind of agreement between the United States and Pakistan, as it has been done with India. What is your evaluation and what is your response to that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We discussed a lot of things with the Foreign Minister. We talked about foreign policy areas, education, energy, economic growth, all these important things in our relationship, and certainly our civil nuclear deal with India came up. What I told him, and I firmly believe this, that the question is not what we have with India, is it the same as with Pakistan. The question is are we meeting the needs of the people of Pakistan as they move forward. Are we, the United States, helping them meet their aspirations for economic growth, to educate their children, to have power and energy to turn on the light bulbs in their houses, to build a stable society, to build a secure society. When a Pakistani child comes home from school and needs to do his homework, he wants to be able to turn on the light bulb to do his homework, when it is dark outside, he does not really care whether the energy for that light bulb is coming from a nuclear plant or coal fired plant or gas fired plant, or hydro fired plant. He needs light in the light bulb to do his work. So the question is are we helping Pakistan meet its energy needs and what are the sources that are important for that.

I think within a week of the President's trip, our Energy Secretary was down here, had very good discussions on a variety of energy sources that are available to Pakistan. We've got a team back here now working some more on that. We'll continue to work with Pakistan in trying to meet its energy needs. But we're not trying to duplicate the situation somewhere else. We're trying to serve the needs of Pakistan and what we think we can do to help Pakistan achieve its energy volts.

I'm sorry to give you a long answer. But there is another aspect of this I think you need to understand and that's the Foreign Minister and I had a discussion of, you might say de-hyphenation, which is probably a term more known to you than people in the United States. What does it mean that we now say we have a policy where we are de-hyphenated; we are not dealing with India-Pakistan? We are dealing with India; we are dealing with Pakistan. It means we're not oblivious to the effects of what we do with one or the other party. Each of them have their own security situations, their own concerns. But we also want to make sure that we are serving the needs of the individual relationship, that we look at that, as to make sure that we are making each relationship work in the best way possible to the extent we can help in different areas. And we don't do the same thing with India that we do with Pakistan. We don't do the investment programs or the diversification of export program or the Regional Opportunities Zones that we are trying to start up for Pakistan and Afghanistan. So that's what de-hyphenation means to us. Are we are pursuing each of these relationships as best we can? Are we are helping each of these peoples develop the best we can according to their aspirations and goals?

QUESTION: I am Saleh Zaafir. I work for the Jang Group of newspapers. Welcome to the region, Mr. Richard Boucher. My question would be one point was missing in your opening remarks, that is of the disputes between Pakistan and India. Pakistan has proposed that India should agree to a proposal for demilitarization of Kashmir and an arrangement of self-rule in that region as a part of the effort to resolve that issue. I wish to have your comments on that, Pakistan's move. And second please very kindly expand on this proposal, this decision of the State Department for de-hyphenation of relations between Pakistan and India. How will the United States address the concerns and reservations of Pakistan on account of that, especially as a result of the decision of the U.S. government, the threat to the security of Pakistan? Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think that is three questions. So I'm old enough that I can forget one of them and nobody will notice, I hope. On the question of proposals that Pakistan has put forward about Kashmir, I've certainly talked to a lot of people here, and I've talked to other people in India about the situation, the discussions that India and Pakistan are having together, the whole Composite Dialogue, including the question of Kashmir. We have these contacts as an interested friend. We are not directly involved. We are not a mediator or something like that. But we are an interested friend to both sides and we're interested in how they're doing together and where they're going.

They've done some remarkable things in the last two years, the bus service, the train service, the connection of Sikh holy sites, there have been a lot of very important developments, and very productive conversations, including creative ideas that have come forward about how to move forward on some of the tougher issues. So you know, we welcome that process; we are interested in that process. But we don't ourselves take positions on particular ideas that have been put forward. We just hope the sides are able to work together and find ways to solve some of these very difficult issues that have gone on for a long, long time.

On de-hyphenation, I don't know that there's much more to say. It has been an effort on the part of United States for a number of years. It goes way back before I arrived, and I think we've just tried to look at the relationships, each one on its own. Again, not oblivious to the fact that they each have neighbors, that they each have a relationship that is sometimes strained and difficult for them. But it is an effort to deal, I think, with Pakistan from a position of respect for Pakistan's own history and institutions, of respect for Pakistan's role in the world, some of regional cooperation we are looking at with Central Asia. Pakistan is a very important element in that. So it is really an attempt to deal with all capabilities and potential of Pakistan, without having to say what does that mean for some, for any of its neighbors.

And the third one I've conveniently forgotten, so thank you.

QUESTION: My name is Aroosa Alam, and I represent the Pakistan Observer. Sir, if we look at your schedule in Islamabad today and tomorrow, it seems that democracy and the next general election is at the center of your discussions. In Pakistan as you know the President's uniform has been a bone of contention and it has been a contentious issue in Pakistan. How do you look at that? Would you accept President Musharraf in uniform after the next elections? Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't think I can give you an answer yet on a particular aspect of the elections. This is an issue. It is an important issue in Pakistan; it is an important issue in the United States, the question of civilian rule, how and when it happens. As you know it came up during the President's visit. President Musharraf answered the question then as he has many times before. So it is not a hidden issue, it is an issue that he addresses, that we address. At the same time I think it needs to be seen as a part of the process. Our interest is seeing an overall process towards democracy, an overall process for the Pakistani people to be allowed to choose their own leaders, an overall process towards a more moderate, modern, still Muslim society. And so I think that's the context that this question will be looked at and decided as we approach the elections, or I think you mentioned after. We just have to see how it goes, and what's important for us is to be able to encourage and support the progress towards a more democratic society. And we will continue to do that.

QUESTION: Qudssia Akhlaque from the Dawn newspaper. Sir, to go back to the question of civilian nuclear cooperation, the U.S.-Indo nuclear deal. I think stability and security concerns are a key aspect you know in terms, of Pakistan's concerns, I'd like to know, I mean you still have not given us your response, we would like to have your response on Pakistani concerns on this nuclear issue, which is also supported by many critics in the U.S. and other critics that it would trigger a nuclear arms race in Asia. And Pakistan talks of the deal undermining Pakistan's nuclear deterrence and saying you know, it would do whatever is required to restore its deterrence, which I suppose would mean making more bombs.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I'm not going to interpret various phrases. But I think that was his third question that I forgot. I will address your question....

QUESTION: But...but..

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Just let me, I can listen if you want but I'm happy to talk as well.

QUESTION: Okay.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: This question has come up about what are the implications of the civilian nuclear arrangement with India, comes up in the States in our discussions with Congress, comes up in discussions of arms control experts and others. I'm sure it will come up, the Secretary of State will be answering this question probably in the next few hours because she's testifying in front of our Congress about the civilian nuclear arrangement with India. I expect we'll give similar answers but hers is always better than mine. So, look for that. But I think, let me try to say this to you. This is a civilian nuclear arrangement. This is not an arrangement that in any way helps or promotes the military side of whatever India may be doing with nuclear material. We still take our obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty very seriously. We would not have entered into this deal if we had thought it contravened Article I of the Non-Proliferation Treaty that says we will not help anyone in any way to build nuclear weapons.

We examine these questions very carefully. We are very careful about how we defined the deal, the areas, the kinds of cooperation that we would deal with. But let's look at the facts, too. What's happening in this, you have 19% of India's nuclear capability under safeguards now. Implementation of the deal will put 65% under safeguards. As India builds more civilian factories, more plants, there will be an expansion of the nuclear power sector and an expansion of the amount of percentage of India's plants under safeguards. That's not an expansion of capability on the military side, that's actually dedicating for sole civilian use a bigger and bigger portion of India's nuclear industry. So whereas they have a mixed up industry now and they can use any of these plants other than the 19% to produce fissile material, they'll have these plants, plus others, under safeguards, where they can't use it to produce material for weapons. So I don't see how you can say that putting more under safeguards, putting more capability under safeguards, making sure that more of their capability is not available for military purposes in any way helps or expands their ability to make weapons. And I just think, you know, it's an argument that's made. I acknowledge that. We hear it again and again. We also answer it again and again. But it just doesn't make sense to me. If you've got a program this big, and it's not under safeguards, it's all available for military purposes, and you make it a program this big, it's smaller. The capability to produce material for military use is smaller. While it's not a military agreement, working on the civilian side does have that affect. I can't tell you how much material they'll produce on the military side. That's not what this agreement is about. But it certainly doesn't expand the availability or the capability to produce material for fissile, for nuclear weapons.

QUESTION: I'm Shaukat Piracha from AAJ TV. We heard Secretary Sam Bodman and we heard you saying that Pakistan could meet its energy needs through hydel or gas or coal manners. Particularly if we talk about hydel resources you, and his Excellency the Ambassador is well aware, that there are numerous disputes between India and Pakistan on water resources. The Bagliar Dam controversy is there. The Kishanghar Dam controversy is there. And there is even objection from India to the proposed Bhasha Dam, so how, why I mean it is focused on the hydel energy when everything is already under controversy? The second aspect of my question, I need your comment on this aspect, that how at least the water disputes can be solved between the two countries and what is the perception of the United States is on these disputes? Secondly, whenever we see some statement, some harsh statement coming from Afghanistan, the common perception in Pakistan is that Afghan government functionaries, that they always speak with a push from the U.S. officials. Whenever there is violence, while the coalition forces cannot control the miscreants in Afghanistan, and always put on Pakistan's shoulders. Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Okay, two good questions. I cannot remember the first one. Oh, water. Water and dams. Yes, hydropower requires water. Water is controversial and difficult. Obviously we are going to look at all the various energy sources that Pakistan has available to it. It has enormous coal reserves which with the right technology can contribute in a cleaner manner to your energy needs. There are gas opportunities, gas pipeline opportunities. I think Pakistan participated in the meeting a month or so ago in Ashkhabad. It seems to move forward a little bit on the trans-Afghan pipeline. That's certainly something we have looked at that we are trying to support as best we can. So there are gas opportunities of various kinds and there are hydro opportunities. I am not an expert on water or hydropower. I realize some of the water resources are in disputed areas and difficult areas. I assume given the geography there are others that might not be so difficult. But I leave that to the experts to figure out. On the ones that are difficult and are disputed, unlike many regions of the world, this particular region has a mechanism, the Indus Water Treaty, to deal with these things, and it actually has a discussion, an active discussion between the two parties, as part of the Composite Dialogue to try to deal with some of these disputes. So water around the world is a very difficult problem. I'm glad there are ways to deal with it in this region, and I hope if there is something the U.S. can do to support resolution, we probably will. Tell me the second question again.

[inaudible].....Afghanistan.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Afghanistan. Oh yeah, and that we're behind every statement that everybody makes. No. We are, I think, as careful as we can be about working with two friends and allies in this region, all the friends and allies in this region, in a way that promotes stability, that promotes a resolution of common problems. We realize both Pakistan and Afghanistan face threats and that both Pakistan and Afghanistan want to deal with these threats. And that both Pakistan and Afghanistan need the other to deal effectively with these threats. There's a common enemy in the form of Taliban and the extremists. There is a common problem in terms of extending control of government into border areas, where the government does not have sufficient control. There is unfortunately a common geography that makes it difficult. What you said about, you know, why can't they just deploy troops and stop people from coming across the border here? You know this region probably better than I do. It's not an easy place to police and certainly it's not an easy place to police if you're only policing on one side of the border in a particular location.

So the only way they're going to stop this is to really have cooperation. We have done everything we can. We continue to do everything we can to encourage cooperation, to encourage a dialogue at all levels, about the management of these common problems, to come up with a common vision and a common solution to a threat that both Pakistan and Afghanistan face. And we, as you know, we have been a convener of cooperation in military circles and other circles. We have supported the efforts of Pakistan and Afghanistan to cooperate in other areas like economic discussions and we, during the President's visit, he talked about the Reconstruction Opportunity Zones. That was one of the things I was working on today. It may take some time to develop. But we think that can be an important contribution because it's the same on both sides again. You're not going to solve this purely with military means. We all know there are bad guys out there that need to be fought with military weapons. But there are also problems out there of governance. There are also problems out there of economic growth. And so one of the ways of looking at this is to try to help promote economic growth and cooperation across the border. So we're working in all these areas and encouraging both sides to find common cause in solving a common problem.

QUESTION: Zafar Abbas from BBC. Sir, in these recent days, there has been a marked increase in militancy in the tribal areas that border Afghanistan, particularly the Waziristan area. Is it a matter of concern for you and did this matter come up during the discussions with President Musharraf today?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I did not discuss the sort of very recent developments in specific terms. I am not a military planner, anything like that. I think those kind of developments are indeed, need to be discussed in the right channels, with tripartite military groupings and other groups like that can focus on what's really going on, what's the source of this violence, and how do we stop it together. So no, I didn't get into specifics. I'm certainly very aware of the attacks, of the violence that has been faced by Pakistani forces on this side of the border, certainly regret every time we see that they've lost their lives pursuing this very important goal. But it is a very important goal that their service entails, and it's the goal of protecting Pakistan and making it a safe place.

QUESTION: But you are satisfied with the way the Pakistani military has been handling this?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think, again, I'm not the military expert so I can't give you a critique of any particular operation. I think we are very satisfied. The President made that clear during his visit, that Pakistan is doing a lot of things, making a maximum effort to fight the terrorists, to fight the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda and the people who are trying to kill Pakistanis, and Afghans, and Americans, up in these border areas.

QUESTION: Sir, I'm Masroor Gilani from Agence France Press. I would like to know if the United States is still seeking to question Dr. A.Q. Khan about the underground nuclear proliferation network or is it a closed chapter for you?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think, I guess, what I'd say is that there's, I think that this is an ongoing problem. We keep bumping into, I think the international community keeps bumping into pieces of this operation in various places. There is an ongoing need for cooperation and information. We've had a good relationship in that regard with Pakistan and Pakistan's had a good relationship with the International Atomic Energy Agency. We look for a continued flow of information and continue to work together on issues that arise from this information, so it's an ongoing thing. It's been good cooperation so far and we expect that to continue.

QUESTION: I'm Nadeem Malik from CNBC. I have two questions, first regarding the gas pipeline. We have seen U.S. opposition for the Iranian gas pipeline project, but in the past a leading U.S. company was very much interested in the Turkmenistan gas pipeline project. Is there any possibility of renewed U.S. interest and U.S. government support for such a project in this region? Secondly, you have talked about Reconstruction Opportunity Zones. Can you explain a little bit, is there any possibility that products produced in these areas would get duty free access in the U.S. markets?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Okay, let's start with pipelines. We do have some concerns about an Iranian pipeline and we've raised those concerns, we've expressed them to the parties. We understand the needs for energy and gas, but we do have some concerns on that score. On the Turkmenistan-Afghan pipeline, yes, this is something that we would be very supportive of. We will, as we look at the overall energy needs in this area and the opportunities in this area that could be an important step forward for a lot of reasons. Our basic strategy, our basic goal is to see that countries in the region have more options, particularly those in Central Asia who have been geographically isolated because of the problems of Afghanistan. As Afghanistan opens up, settles down, becomes a place of transit, a place that can actually facilitate exchanges between South and Central Asia, many opportunities are opened up. And the first stop on my trip was in Kabul, not just because Afghanistan's important to us, but there was a conference going on sponsored by the Afghan government and Johns Hopkins University, specifically about this topic -- regional economic integration. How do you move forward in encouraging the flow of trucks, goods, transportation? How do you encourage the flow of power and energy? How do you encourage the flow of trade? How do you encourage the flow of people and ideas between Central Asia where they need outlets and options, don't want to be stuck between two big powers, and South Asia where they need energy, they need sometimes raw materials and they have the productive capacity of consumer goods and industrial goods and other things that people in Central Asia need.

So we're very interested in looking at how we can sponsor this flow. And obviously Pakistan is a very important player. I first heard these ideas discussed by President Musharraf a few years ago with Secretary Powell. So they're not new to you; they're not new to him. But I think in terms of the ability to accomplish them now, to really do them. We do have a big opportunity now. And so the trans-Afghan pipeline is one way, people looking at electricity and the United States sponsoring an electricity conference in Istanbul in June. How can you generate electricity through hydro, gas and other sources in Central Asia and bring it down through Afghanistan and into Pakistan? So there are a lot of new opportunities available because of this strategic change in the situation. These are opportunities for Pakistan, opportunities for the countries of Central Asia and for Afghanistan as well.

QUESTION: And the second part of the question, duty free?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I wrote it down. Reconstruction Opportunity Zones. Yes. Is there a possibility of duty free treatment? Yes. We have to define the range of products though. And we have to find products that are economically important. Products where Afghanistan and Pakistan can both find opportunity and cooperate in production, and products that we can use and need in the U.S. market. So we'll be working now for a little while, working with our partners, doing the appropriate feasibility studies to define the product areas. There will be some that include textiles and apparel, but probably not that many in that category. But there will be other areas where both Pakistan and Afghanistan can find products that diversify their exports, provide new industries and jobs.

QUESTION: This is Ejaz Mahar from the BBC. Can you share your concerns with regards to holding general elections in Pakistan, free and fair [inaudible]?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: With regards to what?

QUESTION: Yes, to hold free and fair elections in Pakistan.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think, you know, we're a long way from that election, in some ways. We're getting closer all the time. We've been talking for a long time about the direction that Pakistani society has taken, the sort of moderate direction, the more open direction. We have attributes here that some other countries don't have – we have a free press, we have some degree of government accountability. We have seen local elections. We have very active political parties. So there are a lot of things that are headed in the right direction here. And it's a direction that we support.

We believe that for Pakistan to find that role in the future is, to stand out as sort of a modern Muslim nation, part of that is being a democratic nation, as well as an economically prosperous one, as well as being one that is stable. And so we want to see democracy here. That has been a clear goal supported by the United States and one that we have expressed for a long time. But as we, as the calendar marches on, I think those of us who want to see democracy here should support the effort to get there and to see what we can do in more specific ways to support, not to support any political parties, not to support any side, faction, grouping or other political point of view, but rather to offer to people who are involved in the democratic process whatever help and support we can to make it successful and fair to everybody. That's why we think the appointment of a new Chairman for the Election Commission is an important step forward, because it is someone appointed permanently to do this work, a man of good reputation and who is committed himself to freely, fairly, implementing provisions of the Constitution for everybody. That is why we will look, keep hearing, keep in touch with the political parties to see how the process is going, how they see it, keep in touch with people in government who are helping work this process. So I just think it's long been a position of the United States to support the democratic progress of Pakistan, and we need to look together at what are the areas that we are able and where it's appropriate for us to offer our support.

QUESTION: Can you tell us if the United States has made a formal request to the SAARC chair for observer status and also why is the United States interested in obtaining the observer status, in SAARC, as a non-Asian country? And did you discuss this during your talks here with the Pakistani leaders?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I mentioned it here in the discussions at the Foreign Office. We have, I have a little problem with your question because there is one piece I don't know. We have made a request to participate in SAARC as an observer country. I think we actually still have to write a letter to make it a formal letter. And I don't know where the letter is, but we've gone in and talked to them about it. We've expressed our interest in joining SAARC as an observer country.

We're interested for a couple of reasons. One is, you remember what I said about regional trade, Central-South Asia? We think regional trade within South Asia and between South and Central Asia is very important. And the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is starting, working a free trade arrangement that has gone into effect. We're very interested in how that works. We're interested observers and thought that was the kind of status we wanted to have with the organization, so that we can keep in touch and encourage that process. As we talked about all these connections that can be made in this region, the connections, the trade between people in the region, is as vital, as important, as any trade bilaterally with the United States or in places far away. So it's an interest of ours. I would hope that that sort of trading arrangement in South Asia, number one, could be effective, opening up lots of channels for lots of people in this region, but also start to link up with others in Central Asia and elsewhere.

QUESTION: Do you have support from SAARC countries, for example, did you solicit Pakistan's support on this?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know, we haven't actually gone around lobbying this. That could be a failure, maybe a, my first failure of diplomacy. But I think we are going to meet a fairly warm reception in that regard. I haven't heard any voices that might not want us there.

QUESTION: Matthew Pennington from AP. Regarding this vision of Pakistan becoming a modern, tolerant Muslim democratic nation, do you think it will be sort of contradictory to this vision for the President to stay on as Army Chief after 2007? Because this would mean he would have been in power in this dual capacity for eight years. I mean would you take a sort of stand on that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know I'm being asked about hypotheticals down the road. I realize this is the same question I was asked before. I don't have any better answer for you fifteen minutes later. This is indeed an issue. And we firmly believe in civilian rule, civilian control of the military. But how this particular issue is going to be addressed by the President other than the way he has already said, I think we'll just have to see. It's part of the democratic process, and it's one of the issues that does arise, and that we think is being thought about in terms of the overall progress towards democracy. And that progress towards democracy overall is what's most important to us. It's not one isolated piece of it. It's the whole progress towards democracy.

Thank you all. Good to see you. And I think I finally answered all of the questions.

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