

# BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY-MAKING AND ACADEMIA

An Interview with South Asia expert Alexander Evans

**YJIA:** How has your experience as an academic influenced your work as a diplomat and vice versa? Can you speak to the unique role of a diplomat-academic and how that role is perceived in each of those communities?

**Evans:** One practice influences the other. The advantage of academic research experience is that you bring a real commitment to evidence in foreign policy-making, and an appreciation of the value of expertise. The value of policy work is to appreciate the pace of policy compared to academia. The sociology and style of policy-making differs from academia. For example, I might be comfortable reading a 280-page anthropology dissertation that tells me lots of intriguing things about the way that people live in northern Pakistan, but the reality in the policy world is that I would be lucky to get a policy principal to read much more than two pages – and the language would need to be different.

In terms of how the two worlds view each other, there can be a degree of mutual skepticism. On the one hand, occasionally government officials imagine that academics live in a Harry Potter environment where they explore arcane issues in great depth but without much relevance to the world of practice. On the other hand, there is the stereotype held by some academics that diplomats are glib generalists who are ultra-realist in their approach to international relations, but not necessarily thoughtful, reflective, or critical in terms of the policy advice they offer. There's not always a good meeting of the minds when these two groups speak directly to each other. Academic writing values the intellectual and is not always clear. The policy world values clarity and brevity – neither of which always lend themselves to intellectual credibility.

However, I have found that diplomats – my colleagues in the UK Foreign Office and in

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the US State Department—have been thoughtful, well-read, and generally interested in understanding more about the issues or countries on which they work. I have also found a warm welcome in the different academic environments I have been in, and an interest in dialogue about the policy process and what differs from academic writing on it. In Oxford, the Library of Congress, and Yale, I have met collegiate academics. I personally feel enriched from discussions about everything from micro-research on conflict (thanks to the Order, Conflict and Violence Program) to reflecting on crises past (thanks to the historians in International Security Studies) to reconsidering the purpose and possibility of diplomacy (thanks to provocative discussions with my Yale students).

**YJIA:** So, are we moving toward a point where more people are able to bridge the divide by having one foot in either world?

**Evans:** There is value—particularly in diplomacy—in your ability to engage with a wide range of different people with different skills. You might have breakfast with a banker, lunch with a politician, and spend the evening with a group of historians discussing a strategic culture or national political movement. Your ability to engage with and interpret these different viewpoints matters. Skill in interpreting these different perspectives and presenting analysis in digestible form for senior politicians is

crucial. These skills can be useful in academia—I would like to see more diplomats in the classroom, helping the next generation of international affairs professionals develop knowledge and skills that would be useful for their careers.

However, I'm not convinced there's a drive toward having many more people who can interface between academia and diplomacy. In part, neither community is fully convinced of the need for greater engagement. Governments sometimes assume they can recruit or contract expertise, while academics can be territorial about their role in knowledge and teaching. Relatively few academics become diplomats—or diplomats become academics. I do both policy and academic work out of self-interest, not at the behest of my office. But I also believe that knowledge and reflection can improve the

quality of diplomacy. I have been lucky to serve under two British Foreign Secretaries—William Hague and David Miliband—who are interested in evidence. I was also extremely lucky to work for the late Richard Holbrooke, whose intellectual confidence meant that he valued expertise and robust analytical debate.

The encouraging trend is towards greater engagement between the foreign policy community and others. If you look at the nature of foreign policy formation in the early 20th century, there tended to be small cabals of (habitually) white men sitting around debating the major international issues of the day. It was really only in the post-Second World War period that you began to have policy planning staffs, which were tasked with going out and talking to people beyond government, like university

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professors, soldiers, and think-tankers. This has accelerated in an information age as technology – and the availability of data – means that officials can reach out to experts like never before. Interdependence and the complexity of global issues necessitate more engagement with experts beyond traditional officials. Most diplomats are generalists, not specialists, which means we gain so much more by reaching out.

If I want to learn something about Mali or the Maldives, for example, it makes more sense for me consult with someone who has worked in development there for the past twenty years than to necessarily reach for the nearest official. If I want to understand water security and how it affects Bangladesh-India relations, it makes much more sense for me to talk to a specialist on water-sharing issues – perhaps someone at the World Bank or at an NGO – than somebody in my own office. Not all experts or academics want to engage with diplomats. Some fear being compromised, others are suspicious of governments' motives. It can be difficult to make sure that people understand and feel comfortable with how their knowledge or expertise is going to be used. Examples of this include the use of expert knowledge to support counter-insurgency or counterterrorism.

**YJIA: Based on your diplomatic and academic work on India, what do you think are the greatest challenges to India's rise as an economic and political power?**

**Evans:** I think India's rise as a global power is inevitable. The fundamentals are not in doubt but there are challenges along the way. These challenges will shape the pace of India's advance and the nature of India's role in the world. Some are domestic: the need to develop India's infrastructure and India's glorious, democratic, and complex civil society, which is a huge strength for democracy, but can also push political compromise when bold steps are required. Take economic reform. The recent debate about foreign investment in Indian supermarkets is one example. The government wanted major investment but there was political opposition from within the Indian body politic. Eventually, the government yielded to these opponents, and reform was paused.

One fascinating question is what kind of international power will India become? There isn't a consensus on that within India. Some recurring themes have informed Indian foreign policy since independence in 1947: autonomy in the international system, strong respect for sovereignty and non-intervention, and a reluctance to become tied into external alliances that could threaten to trap India into policy pathways that might not be in India's interest. India's careful consideration of its own autonomy in the international system – it still has a preference for non-intervention – makes it quite different from superpowers like the United States, or indeed the Soviet Union as it was during the Cold War. India is not an activist international power in that way. It is, however, a major development donor: look at the generous aid it has been giving to Afghanistan, for example, as well as its contributions to development in Africa. This includes certain types of support for democracy – for example, India has shared transparent ballot boxes with other countries holding free, democratic elections. But at the same time, India is generally reluctant to push political reform on other countries through the international system.

**YJIA: You mentioned the domestic infrastructure challenges. What about development within India in general? How do you foresee the divide in development between different states and territories?**

**Evans:** Some parts of India continue to see significant growth rates, despite the recent slow-down. Economic performance in Gujarat, for example, is extraordinary. And then you're seeing parts of India that are not. Uneven development is probably natural, since India is such a huge, diverse, political and geographic entity. But greater divides between Indian states – and indeed within them – may add to the difficulties facing Indian politicians and planners as they try to manage the political consequences.

There's a leftist academic named Palagummi Sainath who wrote a provocative book called *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* in 1998. One argument he makes is that rural India is neglected by journalists and commentators in favor of the hip, urban spaces of Mumbai and Delhi and Kolkata – and now also cities like Amritsar and Ernakulam. There are a lot of mid-level towns with large numbers of middle-class Indians with money who are living an urban lifestyle. Sainath's point was that rural Indians remain important – as voters, and as a potential source of disaffection. This remains true today.

**YJIA: How critical is a long-term shift toward civilian leadership for Pakistan's stability and prosperity? How can the United States promote this rebalancing of domestic power without alienating the military in its support for counterterrorism efforts in the short term?**

**Evans:** In the long term, civilian democratic leadership in Pakistan is hugely important for Pakistan's progress as a modern state. Pakistan has labored under significant periods of direct military rule, as well as indirect military influence. Past democratic governments have worked in the shadow of the military. The Chief of the Army Staff remains an important figure in Pakistan, and military preferences can constrain the debate – and possibility – of policy change.

At the same time, some of the problems that Pakistan faces have as much to do with civilian politics as the military. These challenges include a youth bulge, a huge fiscal gap due to low tax collection but high government spending, the challenge of electricity generation and supply, and also, of course, militancy. With each of these issues, civilian political leadership is just as important as military rule, and democracy alone is not necessarily going to solve them. As we've seen with economic reform, for example, there's not always the political will to increase taxes or make sure that citizens using services – like electricity or schools – actually contribute towards them.

What role is there for the United States? It's really tricky. One of the former ambassadors to Pakistan – I think it was Tom Simons in 1997 – said that the US is perceived to be behind most things in Pakistan, whether they're good or bad. That's part of the legacy of US assistance to Pakistan. It's tempting to exaggerate the role that the US plays and assume that the US can play a significant role in advancing civilian government in Pakistan. I think the reality is that, like in most societies, external inputs can help but Pakistan's future really depends on Pakistan's own leaders. They're going to make decisions autonomously and in light of their own perception of Pakistan's

interests and that perception may not necessarily correspond with the desires of US policy makers.

**YJIA:** Do you see a shift in the way aid to Pakistan is dispensed after Osama Bin Laden’s death—perhaps more aid being directed to the civilian government, as opposed to going through the military?

**Evans:** You have to differentiate between military assistance and economic assistance to Pakistan. Most of the economic aid to Pakistan is run through civilian governments, or in some cases, contractors. This is a balancing act because there is Congressional demand in Washington for oversight of the money, but that’s quite difficult when you’re handing over large chunks of money to any government, particularly through direct budget support.

In recent years, there has been the problem of [United States Agency for International Development] USAID working through contractors in the US. Although this helped meet some of the requirements of accountability to Congress, how much aid actually reached Pakistan and how much went to the so-called “Beltway bandits”—the consultancy firms around Washington, DC? More aid got through than the critics claimed, but the criticism was valid.

I don’t think there’s been a huge shift in the aid strategy since the death of Osama Bin Laden. But the last eighteen months have seen a significant deterioration in the US-Pakistan relationship. On the US side, there is a sense that Pakistan hasn’t delivered on Afghanistan, that it hasn’t necessarily played straight, and you have voices—particularly in Congress and the media—asking why the US doesn’t isolate or sanction Pakistan. In Islamabad and many other Pakistani cities, you can hear a deep sense of frustration with the United States. There’s a sense that the US hasn’t appreciated Pakistan’s role in fighting domestic terrorism. Tens of thousands of Pakistanis, including civilians, military and police, have died fighting domestic extremism in Pakistan. There is also a perception that some of the problems that Pakistan has been facing in the last ten years have derived from the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, and those consequences are not appreciated either. Unhappiness over certain US counterterrorism policies—not least, the raid into Abbottabad and drone strikes—contribute to those perceptions in Pakistan as well.

The bigger issue in the US is the economic opportunity-cost. Every dollar that goes to Pakistan is a dollar that doesn’t go toward reviving manufacturing in the Northeast or paying for social programs in Chicago. That’s a political choice. Pakistan and Pakistanis don’t always appreciate this political reality in the US—that it is tough to build a case for a large aid program against this backdrop, even before critical media commentary on both sides makes it more difficult yet.

Like classical tragedy, there is probably a little bit of truth in both sides’ frustrations. But for the future of Afghanistan, as well as the future of Pakistan, you need an engaged US in an active relationship with Pakistan. It doesn’t have to be a happy-go-lucky relationship, but it has to be strong enough to support serious discussions that are needed over the challenges that both countries face.

**YJIA: Do you feel like the political and military situation in Afghanistan is more complex than other cases in which the United States has intervened internationally? How do you think the US should go forward in this environment?**

**Evans:** I wouldn't say that it is dramatically more complex than other conflicts. There are two fundamental challenges. The first is how to end up with a settlement in Afghanistan that builds peace, stability, and development for the Afghan people. The second challenge is how to attain a regional and international balance that will support Afghanistan.

In the 1990s, you had not only internal fighting and differences, but also external competition over Afghanistan by Afghanistan's neighbors. Neighbors picked their factions within Afghanistan. These two distinct but overlapping problems don't seem insurmountable, particularly since none of the neighbors really want to spend the next twenty years fighting a proxy war over Afghanistan. Nor do Afghan players want to spend the next twenty years engaged in sustained fighting without the prospect of victory for either side.

However, a political process is complicated because dialogue and settlements can take a long time. There is debate over how settlements should be structured, and major terrorist events or military developments on the ground can affect what happens politically. For example, what happens when people involved in the peace process get assassinated? The lessons from history, I think, are clear: a) a political process in Afghanistan is possible; b) it does take time; and c) you have to be prepared for unexpected shocks along the way. I think that's true across a range of different conflict

negotiation processes elsewhere, as I found when I worked in Macedonia in the late 1990s, or talked to former rebels in Bangladesh's border areas with Burma in the mid-2000s.

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**YJIA: How influential is the discovery of resources and minerals in Afghanistan in shaping other countries' interests in events there? Is this discovery a positive development?**

**Evans:** Well, there is the familiar discussion about the resource curse. I wonder if the one thing worse than Afghanistan being poor is Afghanistan being rich. But people have known about some of Afghanistan's mineral wealth for a long time. The Russians did survey work there in the 1980s, so this information is not new. What you have now is probably the biggest private

sector investment in Afghanistan from the Chinese, which is good for Afghanistan in terms of long-term sustainable economic development. But I do not think that Afghanistan will see a renewed "Great Game." It's not going to be like the scramble for Africa. I don't think knowledge about Afghanistan's mineral wealth or this investment has fundamentally changed the agenda.

Given Afghanistan's traditional dependence on trade and remittances, and more recently on aid, developing trade routes flowing through Afghanistan from South Asia to Central Asia might better help build Afghanistan's economy and give Afghanistan



itself a stronger basis for economic development. Opening these trade routes both needs and could contribute to better infrastructure across Afghanistan, as trade will generate government revenues. Trade and transit agreements with neighbors, including opening up trade from Afghanistan through to India, are important.

**YJIA: What do you think are the most important determinants of a peaceful transition of military and political power in Afghanistan in 2014? What is the role of the international community in supporting this transition?**

**Evans:** The transition is about increasing the Afghan lead in terms of security and so much of this is about NATO giving way to Afghan security forces, both police and military, in different parts of Afghanistan. It draws on having effective Afghan national security force with the capability to take over. But transition is just as much about governance and development: you need to have government infrastructure capable of providing a range of different services, not just security, in any given area.

The role of the international community in supporting this transition is not isolated to 2013 or 2014. It is and will need to be an ongoing role. Part of that role is committing the necessary resources to support the county because Afghanistan is still going to be heavily dependent on external assistance for security and development. It's also about providing appropriate training for the constituent parts of the Afghan state so that Afghan officials and security forces are prepared to progressively take over responsibilities as a transition takes place.

**YJIA: Based on your experiences as a diplomat, overall what do you view as the main challenges to policy-making and diplomacy in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India?**

**Evans:** I think the main challenge is one of coherence and balance. While we shouldn't lump all of these countries together, the US needs to have a coherent strategic policy toward the region as a whole, as well as individual country strategies that make sense. Policy-making tends to be led by the events of the day, prioritizing the immediate and the urgent at any given moment. But the longer-term challenge is to have a regional policy that fits into a broader Asia policy and a broader global policy.

Knowledge about these countries is also important. A particular challenge in both Pakistan and Afghanistan is that a lot of diplomats come and go with much greater frequency than was the case in the past. Whereas some diplomats might have served for three or four years in Pakistan in the 1980s, they might serve for one or maybe two years now. Moreover, because of the constraints of

physical security, the ability to get out and meet people is more limited. For example, I learnt much about Pakistan riding on the back of a motorcycle around towns in the 1990s. It's still possible, but I'm not sure how safe it would be. Times change. The

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British diplomatic service is investing once more in this kind of expertise. One current initiative has much deeper in-country immersion for diplomats posted to India – preparation that means diplomats can build experience and relationships that they might otherwise not do in the air-conditioned confines of a major city. This is good news.

Perhaps we go full circle here to the link between academia and policy-making. To be an effective policy maker, you want to have more information than you operationally need to make a decision, and you also want that information in the hands of the people who are actually providing you advice. That means having a capable diplomatic corps, with people who really do understand individual countries, as this ought to be essential to effective policy-making. It doesn't guarantee success and it doesn't guarantee that the right advice will be given, but it does ensure that the advice is better informed by knowledge.

In the UK, the British foreign minister, William Hague, calls this “diplomatic excellence.” To be an excellent diplomatic service, to provide high-quality advice, and to help deliver measurable outcomes, you need to base that on knowledge. That's a very positive agenda. Diplomacy should be about understanding other societies and countries, and then using that understanding to effect, influence, and intervene where intervention can work and is appropriate. ❏

– *Interview conducted by Hanna Azemati and April Williamson.  
Edited by April Williamson and Charlie Faint.*