A conversation with Milan Vaishnav and Lea Kenig, June 25, 2015

Participants

- Milan Vaishnav, PhD – Associate, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Lea Kenig, PhD – Deputy Chief Development Officer, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Josh Rosenberg – Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project
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Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Milan Vaishnav and Lea Kenig.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Drs. Milan Vaishnav and Lea Kenig of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (hereafter, Carnegie) to follow up on a grant that Good Ventures made to support Carnegie's work in India and to learn more about policy-oriented philanthropy outside of the United States. In March 2015, Good Ventures made a grant of $100,000 to support Carnegie's work in India and China over two years. Conversation topics included plans for setting up Carnegie's new India-based South Asia research center, its policy priorities in India, and how it plans to assess the center's impact.

Setting up a Carnegie center in South Asia

Carnegie is a think tank based in Washington, D.C. Since 1991, as a part of its "Global Vision," Carnegie has set up a number of independent, nonpartisan policy research centers around the world. It plans to open a new center dedicated to politics and policy in South Asia based in New Delhi, India, in 2016.

Several Carnegie staff members in Washington have studied South Asia policy issues, primarily in the areas of national security and foreign policy, for the past decade. Topics have included U.S.-India relations, India-Pakistan relations, nuclear weapons, domestic changes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and regional peace and stability.

In preparation for the launch of the South Asia center, Carnegie's Washington office broadened its focus to include India's domestic political economy and hired several additional staff members to work on India and South Asia policy issues. Prior to this ramp-up, just 1 to 1.5 full-time staff positions at Carnegie were dedicated to the region. Dr. Vaishnav, whose work focuses on India's political economy, including issues around governance, corruption, elections, voter behavior, and urbanization, was one of those hires. Other hires include Frederic Grare and Sarah Chayes; in addition, Carnegie maintains visiting and non-resident associations with several other scholars with expertise on the region (such as C. Raja Mohan and Christophe

Jaffrelot). A few other Carnegie scholars (such as George Perkovich and Toby Dalton) conduct research that touches on South Asia to varying degrees.

Timeline

Now that Carnegie has raised $11 million toward the South Asia Center, it is proceeding with a launch date of spring 2016.

Staffing

Carnegie aims to have a center director in place by the summer of 2016 and a chief operating officer by fall 2016. Recruitment discussions for these positions are underway. Other potential hires include a senior associate, a junior research assistant, an office administrator, and a program coordinator.

Low job turnover in India's think tank sector can make it difficult for new voices to enter the scene. Carnegie hopes to address this problem by investing in individuals with fresh policy voices in the prime of their careers and by helping them to build their profiles so that they can impact policy discussions. Potential hires may be Indian citizens completing PhDs abroad who want to return home and top Indian PhD students who might otherwise lack the opportunity to become involved in policy-driven research.

Funding

Carnegie expects the initial budget for the South Asia center to be $700,000 to $800,000 per year. Once fully staffed, the budget is expected to be approximately $2 million per year.

Carnegie staff has met an interim endowment goal of $11 million for the center's endowment. Carnegie hopes to eventually raise $20 million so that endowment income can provide roughly half of the center's operating budget, enabling it to maintain independence and to focus on issues of a more medium to long-term nature.

Publicizing the center

An edited volume published by Carnegie in 2014, *Getting India Back on Track: An Action Agenda for Reform*, helped raise awareness and increase stakeholder buy-in of its work in South Asia. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted a launch event for the book in June 2014; this was the first formal event held at his residence after becoming Prime Minister.

Priority areas for the center

As currently envisioned, Carnegie's South Asia center will have three broad areas of focus. The specific thrust within each domain will necessarily depend on the expertise of the scholars hired to staff the center. The three general categories are:

1) Governance/state capacity/public institutions
2) Political economy of economic reform
3) Foreign policy

The center's work on foreign policy and domestic issues will be complementary. Its location in India will be particularly beneficial for its emphasis on domestic policy topics, which include education, health, and infrastructure, as well as the governance and political economy areas listed above. Which topics the center will focus on will depend on which staff Carnegie hires and the expertise they have.

Governance/state capacity/public institutions

India has seen dramatic changes in its political, economic, social, and foreign policy landscapes over the past 25 years. Politically, it moved from a one-party system to a multi-party system. Economically, it moved from a relatively closed system to a more market-friendly system. There has been considerable social change, such as the emancipation of previously disenfranchised groups. And foreign policy has moved away from the Cold War model toward a closer relationship with the West.

However, over the same time period, there have been very few institutional and governance reforms. As a result, India has too much bureaucracy—in procedural terms—and too few government workers with the right skills. Performance incentives encouraging government workers to act in the public interest are also lacking.

There are too few people at the intersection of scholarship and public policy who are working to design and implement governance reforms in India. Although they may not be front and center on Modi's agenda today, the government will eventually be forced to consider institutional and governance reforms as its agenda bumps up against India's bureaucratic constraints.

For instance, one research question crying out for attention is whether (and why) the level of talent in the public sector is declining. This research could potentially be conducted in partnership with Indian organizations involved in training civil service officers.

Carnegie will take a two-track approach to sharing its research on questions like these. Any research the institution carries out would, first and foremost, be made publicly available, including to the media. If, for example, Carnegie scholars found that public-sector talent in India was declining, scholars would also work privately with groups involved in civil-service training and hiring as well as groups involved in higher education, to see if changes at those organizations could be made to address the talent issue.

The political economy of reforms

Few scholars (whose work is grounded in scholarship but who are engaged with high-profile policy debates) are conducting analyses about how to align political incentives in order to encourage policy reforms that are beneficial to India's economy. This alignment can be challenging in India due to the number of bureaucratic obstacles to enacting policy and the country's fragmented polity. Carnegie expects its South Asia center to work on such issues.

Foreign policy

Carnegie plans to hire staff in India to focus on foreign policy issues. These staff members (on this and other projects) may work jointly with Carnegie staff in Washington on U.S.-India cooperation on climate change, defense, science and technology, and other issues.

Carnegie's research process and measuring impact

In order to ensure their research has impact, Carnegie researchers will be expected to identify key individuals whom they hope to reach with their work and involve them during the research process. Possible avenues for this outreach include books, policy briefs, op-eds, and bringing influential individuals together to discuss policy ideas.

Although it is hard to accurately measure the impact of think tank research on policy, possible metrics include:

- How much public attention the research receives through media hits, social media, and citations.
- Assessment of influence through conversations with people in government who have read the work. That information can be confidential, but Carnegie tracks it when possible.
- The extent to which individuals in government turn to Carnegie's scholars as resources.

Example: Dr. Vaishnav's research process

Dr. Vaishnav has a forthcoming book on rule of law reform and corruption. Early on in the research process, he identified individuals and organizations he wanted to reach. These included India's elections agency, the law ministry, and the prime minister's office, as well as journalists and individuals in civil society who work on democracy and good governance. He asked them for feedback and delivered in-person briefings on his work in India.

Dr. Vaishnav spends approximately two-thirds of his time conducting research: analyzing and collecting qualitative and quantitative sources of data and writing papers. He spends the remaining one-third of his time on two activities: 1) writing short pieces for media and social media and hosting public events in the U.S. and India; 2) engaging with policymakers (in the US, India, or third countries) directly.

This October, in line with the priorities of the planned South Asia center, Dr. Vaishnav plans to launch a new project on institutional and governance reform. The project will investigate the mismatch between India's political, economic, and social transformations and the quality of its governance; illustrate the challenges this gap presents for India's future and international order; and offer targeted solutions for addressing this disjuncture.

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