



US-India Security Relations in the Indo-Pacific

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The United States and India share a wide range of important interests, including a \$150 billion trade relationship, close people-to-people ties, and an overlapping set of challenges from the People’s Republic of China.¹ Nonetheless, their strategic partnership, in the first instance, rests on security concerns. Both India and the United States desire a “free and open” Indo-Pacific region, governed by liberal principles including open commons, deliberative dispute resolution, market economies, and the rule of law. This shared vision is threatened, however, by rising Chinese power.

Following China’s economic reforms in the 1980s, scholars, analysts, and world leaders believed that integration into the world economy would liberalize its preferences, making China a cooperative stakeholder in the international community. This belief proved to be false. The more integrated China became, the less liberal and more threatening China grew. Backed by a burgeoning economy and increasingly sophisticated military capabilities, China adopted predatory economic development schemes, employed coercive dispute resolution, rejected international law, undertook territorial reclamations, and subverted international institutions to promote its interests.² This behavior, if unchecked, threatened to yield a Sino-centric, authoritarian Indo-Pacific region rather than one that was free and open.

Both the United States and India had an overriding interest in avoiding such an outcome. Significantly, this did not require them to exclude China from the region. Their goal was more modest: to prevent China from exerting hegemony over it. Still, neither country had the ability to achieve its ends alone. India was significantly outmatched by China, with a smaller economy and military, and grappled with major developmental challenges.³ And the US, despite its enormous strategic capacity, had global equities and finite resources; it lacked the ability to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open alone, or even in concert solely with its treaty allies. Thus, to face the China challenge, India and the United States needed to work together.⁴

During the Cold War, US-India relations had been characterized by rancor and mistrust, with India viewing the United States as a neocolonial power and the US viewing India as a

de facto ally of the Soviet Union. With the Cold War's end and the urgent need to balance rising Chinese power, however, the two countries overcame their mutual suspicions and began to forge a strategic partnership.

The 2008 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement removed one of the biggest barriers to US-India cooperation, affording India access to civilian nuclear materials and technology, despite its having refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This gave de facto US approval for India's nuclear weapons capability and helped to undo decades of Indian resentment over US nonproliferation efforts. With the nuclear problem mitigated, and the Chinese threat growing, the two sides could cooperate in ways that previously would have been impossible.⁵

The US-India security partnership has focused largely on building Indian military capacity by providing it with high-quality equipment, so that India can resist Chinese coercion; a strong and genuinely independent India will necessarily impede Chinese efforts to exert hegemony over the Indo-Pacific region.

This has resulted in the two countries' defense trade skyrocketing from zero in 2005 to well over \$20 billion today. Increasing US openness to sharing technology, as evidenced by the US designation of India as a Major Defense Partner, and affording India Tier 1 Strategic Trade Authorization, has facilitated these efforts.⁶ Other measures include expanded joint military training, the signing of so-called foundational agreements pertaining to logistics and geospatial information sharing, and intelligence cooperation. The latter proved especially helpful to India during the Galwan Valley border crisis during 2020–21.⁷

Although this progress has been impressive, the United States and India must continue to push their relationship forward; achieving further progress remains an urgent priority. This is the case for two reasons. First, China has undertaken an enormous conventional and nuclear military buildup, increasing the danger to the United States, India, and other like-minded countries. Meanwhile, United States deterrent capabilities have been eroding. As senior US military officials have pointed out, these changes could encourage aggressive Chinese behavior in the near future.⁸

Second, the US-India relationship has hit a rough patch. India maintains close ties to Russia and has refused to condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine, despite strong US pressure to do so. This has led to public spats and resentment between US and Indian officials. Meanwhile, the Biden administration took more than two years to appoint an ambassador to India. Finally, the United States appears to be renewing strategic cooperation with Pakistan, which will stir mistrust in New Delhi and advance Chinese interests.⁹

We suggest five measures to help overcome these emergent problems and build momentum in the US-India relationship:

First, continue to focus on military capacity building. Both the United States and India agree on the importance of this project, and it has a track record of success over the past

two decades. Future efforts should focus on the need to move beyond a buyer-seller relationship, and work toward codevelopment and coproduction in India. These efforts could particularly emphasize the maritime domain, which will be a primary locus of Indo-Pacific competition and which has traditionally not been a focus of Indian strategic attention; relatively modest defensive capabilities in this domain could contribute to boosting India's naval strength. Efforts also could include an "aspirational" system of high strategic importance that captures the imagination, symbolizes US-India cooperation, and provides momentum to other aspects of the relationship. For example, the two countries could work toward coproduction of F-21s or F-18s to help replace India's aging fleet of fighter aircraft.¹⁰

Second, expand joint strategic efforts into new areas. Ideally, these areas could combine security, where the two countries have enjoyed considerable success, with areas such as trade, where cooperation has lagged. The need to maintain secure supply chains across a diverse spectrum of sectors, ranging from energy to medicine to technology, could offer one such opportunity. "Friendshoring"—locating critical nodes of supply chains in trusted countries—is emerging as a potential means of enhancing supply-chain security. The United States and India could work together on friendshoring efforts, which would move production related to sensitive items such as lithium batteries, drones, artificial intelligence components, and semiconductors from unreliable or normatively problematic countries to India.¹¹ This would be less expensive than manufacturing these items in the United States, and more secure than producing them in countries such as China. And it would offer the United States and India a new form of security-related cooperation, the importance of which is likely to grow.

Third, base the US-India relationship on shared strategic interests, rather than on moral convergence. Moral issues have been a long-standing source of friction between the two countries. During the Cold War, each side routinely harped on the other's perceived ethical shortcomings. India, for example, upbraided the United States for its prosecution of the Vietnam War, while the US criticized India's closeness to the Soviet Union. Today, disagreements over Russia's invasion of Ukraine roil the relationship. US officials have publicly scolded India for failing to condemn the invasion and buying discounted Russian oil, and Indian officials have responded with accusations of hypocrisy.¹² Although such moral rancor will not derail the US-India partnership, it creates needless obstacles to cooperation. This can be largely avoided by focusing on the central goal of the US-India partnership: ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific, composed of a network of like-minded independent states, by offsetting China's rising power and preventing its establishment of regional hegemony. The partnership does not require India and the United States to achieve convergence on any number of other normative issues, including their relationships with third-party states, domestic political arrangements, and energy. Although the two countries will often agree on such matters, sometimes overriding security or economic interests, or genuinely different moral viewpoints, will lead the two countries to adopt opposing positions on them. The United States and India must not lose sight of their larger strategic goals because of these other issues. Rather, they should agree to disagree in such cases, while actively pursuing their central shared strategic interests.

Fourth, the United States must avoid the temptation to reprise its alignment with Pakistan. The Trump administration distanced the US from Pakistan in light of long-standing Pakistani support for terrorism. But the United States now appears to be reversing course, seeking an “ever stronger” relationship through a \$450 million sustainment package for Pakistani F-16s, a visit of the Pakistan Army chief of army staff to Washington, and robust counterterrorism cooperation based on “shared values and interests.”¹³ This will increase the threat to India’s west and distract India from the task of balancing China. Renewed cooperation with Pakistan also indicates that the United States is an unreliable partner, seeking close Indo-US cooperation while underwriting India’s sworn enemy. The United States has little to gain in return for these costs. Though it was once a close partner in US counterterrorism efforts, Pakistan in fact supported violent religious extremism in South Asia and the Taliban in Afghanistan throughout the War on Terror.¹⁴ It can hardly be relied upon for robust counterterrorism support now. In addition, Pakistan is a close friend of China, which it considers its “all-weather ally,” and to which it is tethered through the \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.¹⁵ On occasion, the US can engage in limited counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan, including measures such as overflight permission and actionable intelligence on specific targets. The two countries also can cooperate on humanitarian efforts in Pakistan and the region, and on improving trade relations. But more significant renewal of US-Pakistan relations is ill advised; it will harm the US relationship with India, ignore Pakistan’s long history of support for terrorism, and play directly into China’s hands.¹⁶

Finally, the United States and India must actively manage their diplomatic relationship. Recently, diplomatic relations have been allowed to languish. For example, the Biden administration took more than two years to appoint an ambassador to India. Eric Garcetti, the former Los Angeles mayor, had been nominated for the position but failed to secure Senate confirmation. Rather than quickly find a replacement, the administration stuck with Garcetti, resulting in a multiyear confirmation saga.¹⁷ This situation should have been corrected immediately. Failure to fill the ambassadorship impeded progress in United States-India relations, making the types of initiatives we discuss above more difficult. It also indicated a lack of US seriousness about India and the two countries’ relationship. This was not lost on the Indians, who are sensitive to matters of standing and protocol.¹⁸

Although the US-India strategic partnership consists of diverse components, it rests primarily on the two countries’ security relationship. This relationship has made remarkable strides in recent decades, but it will require attention from both parties to ensure continued progress. By adopting the five measures discussed above, the United States and India can continue actively to cultivate their partnership and ensure forward momentum into the future.

NOTES

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