

A More Focused and Resilient U.S.-India Strategic Partnership

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INTRODUCTION

The United States has made a “strategic bet” on India. This bet—“that India’s greater role on the world stage will enhance peace and security”¹—was a central pillar of the Obama administration’s rebalance to Asia, and it remains a central pillar of the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy.² For nearly two decades, Washington has embraced the strategic logic that it should facilitate the rise of India as a great power because a stronger India is indispensable in counter-balancing Chinese power and ambitions. In this policy of strategic altruism, Washington should not be overly concerned with specific Indian preferences, strategies, or capabilities—the general growth in Indian power would help to uphold a favorable regional balance of power.³

Recently, this strategic logic has begun to show signs of strain. In part, this is the result of emerging policy divergences on a range of issues from bilateral trade to Indian arms purchases from Russia.⁴ More fundamentally, aside from differences in policy preferences, analysts question whether India will have the capacity to play a significantly greater role in global and regional security.⁵ India’s economy and military capabilities have expanded, but only incrementally and arguably at a pace insufficient to keep up with China’s growing power and assertiveness—or with American expectations. Even the firmest proponents of this strategic bet, like senior analyst Ashley Tellis, have openly pondered, “if India continues along this path, does our bet on it become a failed bet?”⁶ As Indian capabilities and U.S. expectations evolve, how can the two countries work together to uphold a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific?

It is time for Washington to reframe its strategic bet on India. A close U.S.-India strategic partnership remains critical to meet the challenge a revisionist China poses. But the United States must adjust its policy approach to ensure the partnership is more focused on priority goals, and more resilient to inevitable disruptions. A more focused and resilient partnership would prioritize certain strategic tasks and geographic areas; in particular, the United States and India should cooperate to develop a denial strategy in the Indian Ocean.

¹ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011.

² Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, June 1, 2019.

³ Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, “The India Dividend: New Delhi Remains Washington’s Best Hope in Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* 98:5 (September/October 2019): 173-83; and Ashley J. Tellis and C. Raja Mohan, *The Strategic Rationale for Deeper U.S.-Indian Economic Ties: American and Indian Perspectives*, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).

⁴ For an overview of recent strains in the bilateral relationship, see Jeff Smith, “Modi 2.0: Navigating Differences and Consolidating Gains in India-U.S. Relations,” Backgrounder No. 3425, (Heritage Foundation, August 5, 2019).

⁵ For example, see Paul Staniland, “America Has High Expectations of India. Can New Delhi Deliver?” *War on the Rocks*, February 22, 2018.

⁶ Quoted in Sadanand Dhume, “India is Falling Behind China in an Asian Arms Race,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2019.

RISK OF STRATEGIC FAILURE

The United States' policy of pursuing a deeper strategic partnership with India has been founded on two assumptions. These may have been compelling assumptions in the recent past, but now have been empirically discredited.

The first assumption is that India has the wherewithal to quickly emerge as an Asian great power, closing the gap with China's explosive growth in economic and military power. In the first Obama administration, U.S. policy documents and cabinet officials publicly anticipated India taking a regional leadership role as a net security provider and acting as the linchpin of a regional counter-balancing coalition.⁷ The election of Prime Minister Modi in 2014 was widely seen as heralding a bolder program of economic reforms and foreign policy ambition that would catalyze much of India's latent potential.⁸

It has since become clear that India has not closed the gap with China. Economic reforms have been piecemeal and Indian state capacity remains weak.⁹ Its military modernization is starved of resources and requires universally agreed but politically sensitive organizational reforms.¹⁰ And China's recent military modernization and reforms have, if anything, further widened the capability gap. In time, India may be able to reverse this trend, but for the foreseeable future and absent major reforms, India is not expanding its capacity relative to China.

The second assumption underpinning U.S. policy was an expectation of continued policy convergence, as both sides would continue to overcome historical distrust and see eye-to-eye on an ever-growing list of regional security issues. Successive joint statements, like the 2015 Joint Strategic Vision, indicated an agreement on core strategic interests and suggested a trajectory of increasing alignment.¹¹ Washington expected that as India's power and interests expanded, and as it engaged in fiercer competition with China, it would progressively jettison artifacts of non-alignment ideology and identify more closely with the United States and likeminded democratic powers.¹²

However, there are significant limits to U.S.-India policy convergence. India maintains a defense procurement relationship with Russia, which may consequently restrict the U.S. transfer of sensitive defense technologies to India. Across the region, India maintains a complex web of productive relationships and adopts policy stances, from Iran to Mauritius, that do not align with U.S. preferences.¹³ And, after the 2018 informal bilateral summit in Wuhan, India appeared to have struck at least a temporary stable modus vivendi with China, while cultivating a degree of

⁷ Robert Gates, "America's security role in the Asia-Pacific," Shangri-La Dialogue, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 30, 2009; and Leon E. Panetta, "Partners in the 21st Century," (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, June 6, 2012).

⁸ For example, see Michael Schuman, "Here's How Narendra Modi Can Revive India's Economic Miracle," *Time*, May 16, 2014.

⁹ Milan Vaishnav, "Transforming State Capacity in India," (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2, 2019).

¹⁰ Abhijnan Rej, "Death by a Thousand Cuts," *Firstpost*, March 2019.

¹¹ Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, "U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region," January 25, 2015.

¹² Tellis and Mohan, 79–81.

¹³ Robert Thorpe, "India Scores a Pyrrhic Victory in the Indian Ocean," *War on the Rocks*, July 12, 2019.

strategically valuable uncertainty in its partnership with the United States.¹⁴ Its conciliatory relationship with Beijing may eventually yield tangible results, such as progress on delimiting their land border dispute, and stands in contrast to Washington's increasingly confrontational approach. On all fronts, India has made clear that even with shared values and interests it could pursue a different approach to China and other regional issues.

A regional policy based on these two assumptions risks strategic failure. U.S. policymakers bet that India would begin catching up with China and would, through self-interest, generally support the regional balance of power. But an India with only incremental economic and military expansion, and with a range of complex and nuanced policy positions, will not be the steadfast linchpin that Washington expects. The current strategy is too vague and too slow: without clear priorities, the United States and India risk squandering effort on activities that do not effectively reinforce the regional military balance. By depending on ponderously slow economic and military reforms, India allows China to make relative gains in influence. Waiting for generalized and indeterminate Indian balancing action will allow China to aggressively establish political influence and military reach across the region.

REFRAMING THE STRATEGIC BET

Given the urgency of the Chinese challenge, the United States should reframe the strategic bet it placed on India to focus on a modest set of achievable priority goals. This would be a deviation from recent and current practice in which the United States adopted a broad and desultory approach to building defense relations with India, attempting and accepting progress across a wide range of initiatives, many of which have little prospect of near-term operational utility or strategic value. The Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DDTI), for example, which selected pilot acquisition programs for concerted effort on joint development, was designed to optimize the bureaucratic processes of defense relations rather than their effects. DDTI focused, for example, on the development of aircraft launch systems for aircraft carriers, a technology decades away from operational fruition and with dubious strategic merit for India.¹⁵ Such initiatives may also exact an opportunity cost: engagement for its own sake often absorbs scarce bureaucratic capacity on both sides, jeopardizing potentially more fruitful initiatives.

Some analyses seek to move beyond vague notions of Indian balancing behavior by advocating specific concepts for the strategic partnership. These usually involve competitive strategies in which the theory of victory centers on compelling China to make suboptimal defense investments. Defense analyst Evan Montgomery, for example, argues that the United States should support an Indian ground-force build-up on its northern border with China to redirect Chinese defense allocations away from the maritime forces that pose a greater threat to the United States.¹⁶ Such cost-imposition strategies, however, similarly face strategic failure because they are directed against an extremely well-resourced adversary with high resolve and firm strategic preferences. Goading China to reinforce defenses on its western land border with India will not have an appreciable strategic effect because China will not be dissuaded from focusing on its "core interests" in the first island chain.

¹⁴ Arzan Tarapore, "Using Uncertainty as Leverage: India's Security Competition with China," War on the Rocks, June 18, 2018.

¹⁵ On the dubious value of aircraft carriers for India, see David Brewster, "Glug, glug, glug: India's interest in unsinkable aircraft carriers," *The Interpreter*, June 20, 2018.

¹⁶ Evan Montgomery, "Competitive Strategies against Continental Powers: The Geopolitics of Sino-Indian-American Relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36:1 (2013).

Instead, the U.S.-India strategic partnership's greatest contribution to a favorable regional balance of power would take the form of a strategy of denial in the Indian Ocean region. The United States and India would not seek to exclude legitimate Chinese economic and political influence, or even military activities. Rather, the policy goal would be to deny China the ability to coerce regional states, establish a larger permanent military presence, or threaten India's or others' freedom of action.

The U.S.-India strategic partnership would focus on several mutually reinforcing lines of effort. These activities would go beyond the headline-grabbing and expensive major arms transfers, which have dominated the contours of the relationship thus far. Equipment sales are susceptible to bureaucratic or political setbacks, triggering wild swings in each partner's expectations of the other side. The strategic partnership should not be held hostage to whether the United States and India can co-develop or co-produce aircraft carrier technologies or transfer fifth-generation fighter aircraft. Those developments would be welcome, but the strategic partnership cannot be slaved to them. Rather, an indicative list of other defense activities could include:

- *Coordinated or, occasionally joint, security assistance for regional states.* The United States has a wealth of expertise and experience providing security assistance, and India conducts a wide range of security assistance activities around the Indian Ocean region.¹⁷ Coordination of their unilateral activities, or occasionally joint delivery of assistance, would allow the United States and India to more efficiently achieve effective security outcomes, ensure activities are aligned with broader strategic goals, and build trust with regional militaries.
- *Reciprocal exchange of Indian military personnel with regional states.* Personnel embedded in partner states' military organizations—either as liaison representatives or fully integrated staff—serve to build mutual visibility and trust. The Indian military's well-trained officers could also provide significant expertise and capability to some smaller regional states. For example, they currently occupy several command positions in the Mauritian military.¹⁸ In other states, they could provide expertise in planning and other staff functions; regional officers embedded in Indian formations would similarly gain valuable training and build institutional familiarity.
- *Multilateral exercises with highly capable forces.* The United States and India can and should increase the tempo and complexity of their military exercises, but given the scale of the region and its potential military challenges in the future, they should also broaden some exercises to include other highly capable militaries, including Australia, Japan, and France. The latest iteration of the bilateral India-Australia naval exercise Ausindex included serials on anti-submarine warfare¹⁹—but trilateral U.S.-India-Australia anti-submarine warfare exercises would yield even greater operational dividends, by training for the ability to jointly detect, track, and if necessary prosecute submarine targets.

With such a strategy, the United States would be making a new strategic bet—that India can prevent Chinese hegemony in the Indian Ocean. This reframed strategic bet would have the advantages of exploiting India's existing geographic and historical advantages, focusing on a high-priority policy goal, and being resilient to inevitable future disruptions elsewhere in the bilateral relationship. This

¹⁷ Nilanthi Samaranyake et. al., *U.S.-India Security Burden-Sharing?: The Potential for Coordinated Capacity-Building in the Indian Ocean*, (Center for Naval Analyses, April 2013).

¹⁸ Sanjay Badri-Maharaj, "The Mauritius-India Naval Relationship: Naval Diplomacy 2.0," *Africa Trends*, April–June 2016.

¹⁹ "India-Australia naval exercise Ausindex-19 comes to an end," *Times of India*, April 15, 2019.

should not preclude other activities in the strategic partnership, but it should offer guidance on how to prioritize scarce resource allocation and policymaker attention.

Most importantly, it offers a framework for the U.S.-India strategic partnership that does not depend on lofty expectations of Indian power quickly closing the capability gap with China, or continued bilateral policy convergence on a wide range of security issues. Should those ambitions materialize in the future, Washington and New Delhi can build upon this framework to further deepen the partnership. But in the meantime, this framework allows both sides to direct their energies to meet the urgent challenges facing the regional balance of power.

