

The U.S.-India Relationship: Navigating Strategic Multi-Alignment

PERSPECTIVE



American Security Project

In Brief

India has remained strategically neutral on key geopolitical divides in the 21st century, prioritizing economic growth over great power alignment. Shifting global dynamics, including tighter sanctions on Russia and resurfacing conflicts in the Middle East, present a new opportunity for the United States to strengthen its strategic partnership with the world's most populous democracy. To offset Indo-Russian relations in security, trade, and diplomacy, Washington must incentivize Delhi's trust and cooperation while ensuring mutual commitment to human rights and democratic values.

KEY FINDINGS

- As a nuclear-armed democracy and the fifth-largest global economy, India has the potential to be a key strategic partner in the fight against rising Sino-Russian influence and aggression.
- Though India promotes a multipolar world, Russia and China's reignited interest in a Russia-China-India bloc remains a formidable threat to the interests of the U.S. and its allies.
- As Indo-Chinese relations deteriorate, the United States has a critical window of opportunity to be the trusted partner India needs to maintain its security and grow economically.
- However, India is backsliding in several democratic benchmarks and increasingly infringes on freedom of speech and religion at home and abroad.
- Given India's difficult geostrategic position, American policymakers will need to coerce India to more closely align with its democratic principles and improve its civil liberties without a formalized diplomatic or security alliance.
- Higher objectives in the U.S.-India relationship, such as critical technology co-development, must be built on a foundation of attainable goals that hold limited risk and build trust.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Temper discussions of a NATO-Plus alliance in support of India's "multi-aligned" public strategy.
2. Leverage multilateral trade and investment in exchange for greater security cooperation.
3. Incentivize commitment to free trade and democracy by jointly increasing collaboration and oversight.

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Introduction

Just as strategic non-alignment defined India's foreign policy during the Cold War, strategic multi-alignment has defined its security posture throughout the 21st century. By fostering strong and simultaneous relationships with Russia, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Iran, India's GDP has risen over 7% annually since 1990, becoming the 5th most powerful global economy after the U.S., China, Japan and Germany.¹

While the future for India looks bright, balancing the interests of its superpower partners remains a complex task. For decades, the Soviet Union supported India in its conflicts in Kashmir and with Pakistan, used its veto to kill resolutions against it in the UN Security Council, and bolstered its military capacity. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, China became India's largest trading partner, followed closely by the United States and the United Arab Emirates. Given the Russian invasion of Ukraine and rising competition between the U.S. and China, the appeal of enticing India as a valuable partner is higher than ever. Economic pragmatism has enabled India to abstain from political and security commitments, but as Russia's global influence dwindles and tensions with China rise, greater alignment with the West appears both advantageous and inevitable.



United States Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III is welcomed to the Indian Ministry of Defense in New Delhi by Minister Rajnath Singh on June 5, 2023. Department of Defense photo.^a

Across the Pacific, Washington is tasked with planning for the worst-case scenario: simultaneous war fronts in the Middle East, Ukraine, and the South China Sea, which would destabilize global trade and drastically shift the global balance of power. A strong U.S.-India partnership can reduce global economic dependence on Russia and China and solidify a democratic presence in the Indo-Pacific. However, as India backslides in several democratic and human rights benchmarks, it remains unclear whether it is ready to accept the terms of such a partnership. American policymakers must incentivize India to align more closely with its Western allies without making undue concessions that undercut global human rights and democratic values.



United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken Meets with India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar on November 13, 2023. Department of Defense photo.

The United States has a critical window of opportunity to be the trusted partner India needs to maintain its security and grow economically amidst rising Sino-Russian influence and aggression. Built on a foundation of trust and cooperation, this mutually beneficial relationship would improve commitment to democratic principles in India and set a precedent for Washington's relationships with other strategically non-aligned states. This report will examine the strength of security, economic, and diplomatic aspects of the Indo-Russian relationship as well as India's other partners and adversaries to determine the most practical course of action for policymakers.

India's Relationship with Russia

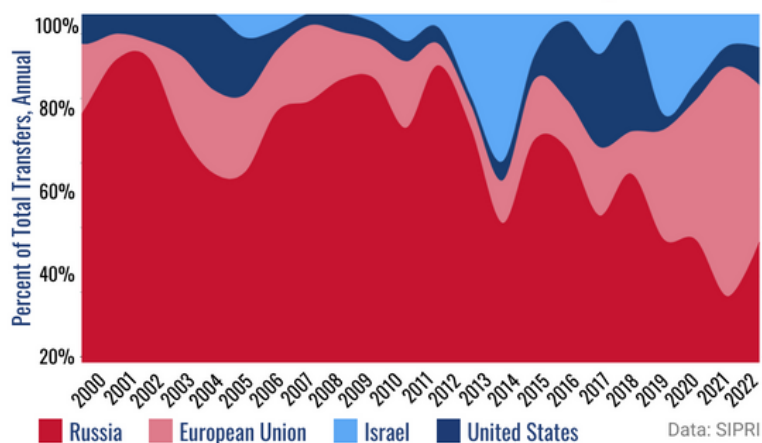
The enduring resilience of the India-Russia relationship offers critical insight into India's strategic priorities in the 21st century. Unlike in many Western democracies, India's foreign policy is pragmatic, counter-hegemonic, and predominantly economic in its objectives. Understanding the Indian-Russian relationship—their security and arms agreements, recent strengthening of bilateral trade, and long diplomatic history—provides an opportunity for the United States to offer alternatives that align with India's vision of itself and its future.

Shared Security Objectives and Infrastructure

Regional security has been the defining feature of India-Russia relations since the Cold War. As the founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, India initially declared itself independent from both American and Soviet political interests.² After the U.S. signed a military pact with and sent military aid to Pakistan in the 1950's and 60's,³ India signed a mutual strategic cooperation treaty with the Soviets.⁴ Arms transfers soon became central to the Indo-Soviet relationship,⁵ and "Russian-origin" military equipment such as fighter aircraft, cruise missiles, and battle tanks were regularly imported and maintained each year.⁶ The relationship quickly extended beyond weapons sales; frameworks such as the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation featured joint military trainings and exercises as well as after-sale servicing and improvement mechanisms for previously purchased equipment.⁷

Russia's early investment in Indian national security paid substantial dividends; India's military expenditures are now the fourth largest in the world.⁸ As its defense capacity expanded, the two states began co-designing and co-producing military platforms, including the joint BrahMos cruise missile first launched in 2001.⁹ As transfers to India grew to 31 percent of all Russian arms exports, Russia's overall share in global arms exports fell from 33 percent in 2003 to just 9 percent in 2022.¹⁰ This granted New Delhi strategic leverage within the arms partnership that it used to its advantage. In 2017, India began prioritizing its own indigenous weapons platforms under its Made in India initiative, abandoning development on the joint Sukhoi/HAL fifth-generation aircraft in favor of its own HAL AMCA design.¹¹

Global Share of Indian Arms Imports



While India's focus on domestic development strained its relationship with Russia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine cemented its inability to meet India's defense needs. As Russia deployed more of its own stock, it faced significant delays in delivering new systems and even repurchased arms and equipment from India.¹² In June 2023, India signed a \$3 billion deal to purchase 31 U.S. Predator drones;¹³ less than a year later, Indian officials signaled their intent to pivot away from Russian arms transfers.¹⁴ Delhi's renewed armament strategy, called "domestic production with Western technology," commenced with a one-billion-dollar acquisition of American GE fighter jet engines in January 2024.¹⁵

The shift to Indian-Western joint defense production is a monumental opportunity for the United States. However, careful steps must be taken to avoid Russian retaliation. Although the United States supplied just 15 percent of India's arms imports between 2019 and 2021, Moscow formally requested deeper military cooperation with India and stated their willingness to allow India to take on the bulk of production as an additional incentive in early 2023.¹⁶ Playing the United States and Russia against each other will result in the best overall deal for India, but it cannot push too hard or too publicly against Moscow as long as Russian armaments comprise a majority of the Indian arsenal.

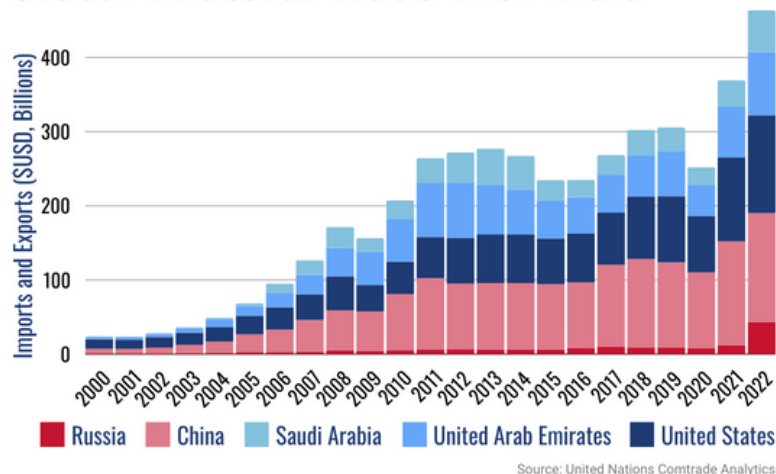
Recent Economic Shifts

While India has always exported pharmaceuticals, agricultural products, and textiles to Russia, trade was never the cornerstone of their relationship. In 2005, total bilateral trade remained under \$3 billion compared to \$25 billion between India and the U.S.¹⁷ As India began to shift away from Russian arms, however, it dramatically diversified and expanded its economic ties with Russia to keep the relationship strong. In December 2014, the leaders of the two countries set a target of \$30 billion in bilateral trade by 2025, up from \$6.6 billion that year.¹⁸ This led to a new free trade agreement as well as a promise to invest nearly \$60 billion in each other's state-owned companies by 2025.¹⁹

Despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine posing significant reputational risk to India, New Delhi capitalized on economic opportunities stemming from Western sanctions. In December 2022, the G7 capped global crude oil prices at \$60 a barrel to prevent low- and middle-income countries from being unable to meet their energy needs.²⁰ As crude oil refined in India is no longer considered a product of Russia, Europe and the United States began importing high volumes of Indian petroleum to fill their deficits.²¹ As a result, Indian imports of crude oil from Russia skyrocketed to a record \$37 billion in 2023.²² This is one of several examples of the benefits of India's multi-alignment strategy.

Going forward, India states that it aims to prioritize its "Act East" policy, which emphasizes trade and soft-power infrastructure deals with other Southeast Asian countries.²³ Its largest leaps in trade, however, have been with the United States and Europe.²⁴ U.S.-India bilateral trade increased from \$80 billion in 2021 to \$129 billion in 2023.²⁵ While petroleum exports dominated, the Biden administration dissolved several tariffs imposed during the Trump administration to diversify the partnership in the future. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi then revoked India's retaliatory tariffs, declaring a "new beginning" for U.S. and Indian trade relations.²⁶

Global Bilateral Trade with India



Ongoing Diplomatic Considerations

Ostensibly out of respect for the Non-Aligned Movement, India has taken a neutral stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.²⁷ While this posture is partly a function of India's majority-Russian arsenal, India and Russia's bilateral strategy, called the "reciprocity of silence," involves both states abstaining from United Nations votes on issues of state sovereignty and agency.²⁸ Beginning in the Cold War, this policy has occasionally pitted India and Russia against the United States, which has been unafraid to suspend India's diplomatic and economic privileges in return.²⁹

India's neutrality, however, negatively impacts its perception within the international system. Western-Indian relations strengthened significantly after the Cold War ended, with significant diplomatic cooperation on Islamic counterterrorism, nuclear issues, and climate change. During the Obama administration, the United States even endorsed India for permanent membership on the UN Security Council.³⁰ As a result, New Delhi's continued dedication to Moscow surprised and disappointed many across Geneva as well as Washington.³¹ Ultimately, however, demands that India change its diplomatic stance towards Russia ignore the historic importance of the Russia-India relationship. If it wants a loyal partner, the U.S. and EU will need to demonstrate loyalty in turn, potentially sacrificing their ability to hold the Indian government accountable in the case of a greater shift towards authoritarianism.

Multi-Alignment in Practice

India maintains bilateral ties with several partners whose foreign policy goals contrast with the United States. In line with its counter-hegemonic national strategy, India uses its relationships with these partners to diversify its economy and limit its dependence on Western countries. While these partners are less reliable, India uses its multi-alignment policy to leverage competing interests and generate incentives for its foreign policy priorities. To defend against this behavior, Washington will need to recognize India's foreign policy red lines and strongly communicate its own.



Indian Minister of State for Home Affairs Shri Kiren Rijiju visits an outpost on the Indo-China border on November 03, 2015. Indian Defence Ministry photo.

China

Over decades of rapid growth, China and India have aimed to maximize gains from their relationship while keeping the other in check. This push-and-pull has resulted in deep economic ties marked with security and diplomatic tensions. Despite committing to a “strategic and cooperative partnership” in 2005, a resurgence of border disputes near the Line of Actual Control and China's expanding regional claims halted the agreement's implementation.³² As diplomatic channels disintegrated, China became India's number one trading partner,³³ and soft power influence in the Indo-Pacific became increasingly important to back up land claims.

Rejection of Chinese soft power projects led India to refuse participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative,³⁴ but one year later it would become the second-largest partner in Beijing's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.³⁵

These apparent inconsistencies originate from India's desire to undercut its rivals and benefit from global tensions. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was India's critical security partner and China its adversary. After the Russia-China eastern border settlement in 1992 and subsequent Joint Declaration on A Multipolar World,³⁶ Moscow's relations with Beijing became stronger while New Delhi turned closer to Washington.³⁷ Though a Russia-India-China bloc was proposed, India preferred to leverage its Russian partnership against China rather than serve as a second-tier partner to both states. This pushed Russia and China closer, with India joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017.³⁸ While it is significantly less capable of leveraging its Eastern partners against each other, New Delhi now aims to use its relationship with Western states as leverage against increased Russian-Chinese cooperation.

Pakistan

Given India and Pakistan's difficult history, increasing Russia-Pakistan ties pose a threat to India. Soon after trade and diplomatic relations between Pakistan and India were suspended in 2017, Pakistan and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement involving four Mi-35M gunship helicopters and conducted several joint military exercises.³⁹ In 2021, Russia and Pakistan's economic and energy agreements featured a multibillion-dollar Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline.⁴⁰ Eventually these activities crossed a red line for New Delhi, and it denounced Islamabad for transferring arms to Ukraine in 2022.⁴¹ This failed to impede growing Russia-Pakistan relations, however, and in 2023, Pakistan announced its intent to apply for BRICS following its first import of 100,000 tonnes of Russian crude oil.⁴²

Despite both Pakistan and India benefitting from Russia's supply of cheap energy, one of the foundational pillars of India-Russia relations was alignment against the United States and Pakistan. India still desires to isolate its neighbor from its international partners, but this is difficult given Pakistan's historically strong relations with the European Union and United States.⁴³ The United States has attempted to thread the needle by avoiding new investments in Pakistan while allowing it to benefit from Russian oil, but U.S.-Pakistan relations have only continued to decline.

Iran

Despite Iran remaining a hostile U.S. adversary since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, it became a strong Indian partner during joint counterterrorism operations in the 1990s. India and Iran have since introduced several bilateral trade and infrastructure agreements, though these are frequently rebuked by the U.S. In 2009, Tehran and Islamabad signed a \$7.5 billion gas pipeline deal, but this soon collapsed in favor of the Indo-American nuclear deal.⁴⁴ In 2016, India and Iran pledged to invest nearly \$8 billion to implement a new infrastructure and transit project in Iran's Chabahar port and Chabar Special Economic Zone, only to be faced with U.S. sanctions.⁴⁵ The U.S. later exempted the multinational port from these restrictions due to its importance to trade in Afghanistan, but the project never recovered.⁴⁶

While a closer U.S.-India relationship might facilitate more effective sanctions against Iran for its escalating proxy attacks against Israel and the United States, New Delhi has been historically unwilling to engage. This may soon change; in January 2024, the United States accused Iran of attacking a Japanese shipping vessel off the coast of India, which resulted in India sending their Minister of External Affairs to Tehran.⁴⁷ While it has not joined the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian coalition against Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, India deployed 10 warships to the Gulf of Aden and offered assistance to an American-owned bulk carrier cargo ship after it was attacked by drones.⁴⁸ As India is a close security partner of Israel, however, it rejects any perceived alignment with either Iranian-funded terrorists or Israeli defense forces.⁴⁹

Broader Geopolitical Considerations

Encirclement in the Indian Ocean

In addition to its abundance of critical minerals, the Indian Ocean is vital to military operations and global trade due to being the primary maritime route connecting Europe and the Middle East to East Asia. China has introduced expansive Belt and Road Initiative projects in its waters since 2017, terming its soft power and surveillance network its "Maritime Silk Road." Over land, the planned \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) links China to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan's Gwadar port.⁵⁰ China also operates a naval base in Djibouti, ostensibly to prevent interdiction of its ships along the Red Sea.⁵¹ From New Delhi's perspective, this "string of pearls" strategy encroaches onto its sovereignty and constitutes a direct threat to Indian national security.⁵² To counter this, Indian Prime Minister Modi has attempted to prevent Chinese infrastructure projects and expand India's own India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) alongside Saudi Arabia and the United States.⁵³



According to Russia's Maritime Doctrine of 2015, the Indian Ocean is a region in which Russia must have "maritime dominance and strategic presence."⁵⁴ As a result, Russia has greatly increased its surveillance and naval operations in and around Indian territory over the past decade. In addition to joint military patrols and exercises with China,⁵⁵ Russian President Putin has increased ties with Pakistan,⁵⁶ docked warships in Bangladesh,⁵⁷ and held joint naval exercises with Myanmar.⁵⁸ Despite its strong public position against foreign actors intruding on its waters, India views Russia's maritime presence as a moderating force against Chinese expansion.⁵⁹ Despite this acquiescence, strong Sino-Russian ties may jeopardize India's maritime security should New Delhi move too quickly to separate from Moscow.

Transnational Repression

India's targeting of anti-government protestors in other states raise questions about its commitment to democratic ideals at home and abroad. In September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau accused the Modi government of involvement in the murder of Indian-Canadian Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Nijjar, the president of his local Sikh temple in Canada, was a staunch advocate for Sikh territorial independence from India.⁶⁰ With credible intelligence that New Delhi was behind the attack, the United States was placed in a tough position between choosing to support one of its strongest historical allies or assuage a partner it was trying to build stronger relations with. Ultimately, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken defaulted to neutrality, stating that "Those responsible need to be held accountable and we hope that our friends in both Canada and India will work together to resolve this matter."⁶¹

To many, the statement did not seem strong enough to hold New Delhi accountable for its history of attacks on separatist proponents. In particular, Indian attacks on Western journalists who criticize the state and its anti-conversion laws led several U.S. Senators to accuse the state of democratic backsliding.⁶² As in Brazil or Saudi Arabia, however, India believed its growing strategic importance as a partner in the fight against Russia and China granted it a certain degree of autonomy.⁶³ The United States soon corrected this assumption; one month after Nijjar's murder, American federal prosecutors indicted Indian national Nikhil Gupta for attempted murder of American Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, in the process issuing a diplomatic warning to the Indian Central Government for their supposed involvement.⁶⁴ India was more conciliatory to the U.S. than it was to Canada in its response, demonstrating that when Washington is willing to push back, New Delhi cedes.



Leaders of Brazil, China, South Africa, India, and Russia at the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa. BRICS photo.

BRICS

BRICS is an inter-governmental organization comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Established in 2006 as a group of middle-income countries with high growth rates, BRICS aimed to counter perceived inequalities imposed by Western economic organizations. In 2014, India proposed the formation of the New Development Bank (NDB) to bolster World Bank and International Monetary Fund investments and offer competitive rates in the global south.⁶⁵

Strategic multi-alignment is common within BRICS; Brazil, India, and South Africa each work collaboratively with

Western partners while criticizing the United States' and NATO's influence over global norms.⁶⁶ This balancing act requires a degree of internal cohesion and compromise; following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the NDB announced it would be pausing all new transactions in Russia, but all countries abstained from votes of condemnation at the United Nations.

India is the least cohesive with other BRICS states due to the joint participation of one of its closest allies, Russia, and key competitor, China.⁶⁷ It limits China's authority over the organization when possible, setting strict admissions rules to prevent Beijing from using BRICS for its soft power objectives.⁶⁸ However, India's pursuit of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council has compromised these values. By pressuring new BRICS members to support India and Brazil's petition for permanent member status, it may allow these states to enter China's orbit in return.⁶⁹

The Quad

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is comprised of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Started in 2007 but mostly inactive until growing consensus on Chinese expansionism in 2017, its goals are to “advocate for a rules-based order, protect freedom of navigation, and promote democratic values” in the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁰ The Quad has a strong focus on countering China’s overreach in the region, though it aims to avoid public perception as a coalition against China to avoid inflaming regional tensions.⁷¹ In addition to annual diplomatic summits, the Quad cooperates on military initiatives such as the annual Malabar and Rim of the Pacific naval exercises.



U.S. President Biden with Australian Prime Minister Anthony, Indian Prime Minister Modi, and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida. White House photo.

India’s decision to enter into the Quad was less a move to intimidate China and more to influence policy decisions made by powerful states near its borders. To avoid resembling “an exclusivist group focused only on security matters,” India emphasizes economic rather than security interests and continually reiterates that the Quad does not constitute an alliance nor mandates its participants to engage.⁷² While India is sometimes referred to as the group’s “weak link” due to its unwillingness to take a security posture,⁷³ its geostrategic position makes its participation vital. This grants India leverage that it has used to push for projects benefiting itself, such as an agreement to procure 1.2 billion Covid-19 vaccines in 2021 and another to facilitate \$50 billion in infrastructure investments in the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁴

A Window of Opportunity for The United States

The United States is well-equipped to build a strong and secure partnership with India. This section explores the benefits and drawbacks of three competing policy strategies Washington could pursue to accomplish this goal:

- **The NATO-Plus Model:** Push for a formalized mutual security agreement in exchange for meeting India’s foreign policy objectives.
- **The Democratic Accountability Model:** Impose pressure on the Indian government to improve its commitment to democratic and free market practices, then deepen economic and security ties.
- **The Strategic Ambiguity Model:** Maintain a limited liability partnership but further U.S.-India cooperation in key strategic areas.

The NATO-Plus Model

As a nuclear-armed country and democracy with 1.4 billion people, India could be a key strategic partner in the global push against Chinese and Russian revisionism. Alternatively, the establishment of a Russia-China-India bloc would pose a formidable threat to the interests of the U.S. and its allies. Given this dichotomy, the strongest U.S.-Indian relationship includes a mutual security agreement and subsequent military cooperation against China and Russia if necessary. The benefits to the U.S. are clear: treaty alliances are transparent regarding roles and responsibilities, maximize cost-to-benefit ratios, and are difficult to renege on. Aside from challenges relating to India’s status outside the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, a U.S.-India alliance would fall neatly into the standard model that the United States maintains with its other close partners. As with Australia and the United Kingdom, the U.S. would protect India from external security threats and leverage its military for allied foreign policy objectives elsewhere.

Given these advantages, Washington is strongly pushing for a formalized security partnership. In May 2023, the U.S. Congressional Committee on Strategic Competition with China promoted India's inclusion in NATO-Plus.⁷⁵ The Biden Administration's Roadmap for U.S.-India Defense Industrial Cooperation, released a month later, proposed India as a "logistic hub" for the U.S. and its Indo-Pacific partners in return for meeting its "military modernization objectives."⁷⁶ This included a promise to collaborate on emerging technologies through an "Innovation Bridge" connecting U.S. and Indian defense startups. In July, the National Defense Authorization Act reiterated India's status as a major defense partner,⁷⁷ granting additional security cooperation benefits typically reserved for allies.



U.S., Indonesian, and Indian vessels during the Rim of the Pacific, the world's largest international maritime exercise, on July 27, 2022. Department of Defense photo.

Despite these generous olive branches, India continues to proclaim both its strategic autonomy and unwillingness to engage on issues that do not directly impact New Delhi. From its perspective, India's independence is paramount to its own great power ambitions.⁷⁸ Economic competition with China is desirable, but conflict is not; as a result, India is unlikely to join any allied confrontation in the South China Sea. While current events grant India additional flexibility in its relationship with Russia, their asymmetric military capacity remains a strong deterrent. Prime Minister Modi has not pledged defense cooperation with the United States except against regional terrorism, where the U.S. would serve in a supporting role.⁷⁹ All other objectives have been achieved without India needing to sign over a sliver of its sovereignty.

Even if New Delhi changes its posture, a mutual security arrangement may not align with Washington's interests. The U.S. is Pakistan's largest export market and, until recently, its top source of foreign direct investment.⁸⁰ Though the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has weakened in part due to Washington's courtship of Delhi, a formal security pact with India may push Pakistan closer to Iran and China.⁸¹ Given Pakistan's nuclear capabilities and its complex relationship with regional militant groups,⁸² the U.S. should recognize the broader implications of a formal alliance.

Finally, a wholesale modernization of India's defense and economic capacity is likely too ambitious to be successful. Strong protectionist policies, lack of infrastructure, and weak intellectual property laws lead to a high risk of technology transfer and data theft in India. Prime Minister Modi's "Aatmanirbharta" centralization policies control the energy and transportation sectors, restrict investments in banking, insurance, real estate, and resource extraction, and discriminate against foreign suppliers. As a result, American firms are resistant to sharing their proprietary technologies with Indian state-owned enterprises. This led to the 2016 Defense Trade and Technology Initiative resulting in what Indian officials called a "patronizingly" insufficient number of low-grade manufacturing contracts instead of the cutting-edge military research and development opportunities Washington promised.⁸³

The Democratic Accountability Model

Since the turn of the century, India has attempted to leverage the conflicting interests of the United States, China, and Russia to its advantage. While benefitting from Western partnerships in defense, trade, and direct investment, India criticizes the U.S. and EU for what it sees as imposing Western values and norms on developing countries. From its perspective, former imperial powers amassed wealth through exploitative practices and then cemented their global leadership by imposing difficult-to-meet standards on their former colonies.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, New Delhi publicly applauds partners such as Iran and Russia despite their destabilizing effects on the international order. In addition, India's persecution of religious minorities and criminalization of public dissent has led to accusations of human rights violations and democratic backsliding. After the death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Prime Minister Modi's visit to Washington, D.C. was met with controversy and protests from American citizens.⁸⁵

India's poor human rights record has been deemphasized due to its increasing strategic importance and potential to replace Chinese trade in key industries. The United States has been conciliatory under the assumption that India will become more liberal with greater economic cooperation, but this approach has not stifled authoritarianism. As a result, groups such as Amnesty International have demanded greater accountability of Washington and New Delhi.⁸⁶



Indian security forces have been accused of unnecessary and excessive use of violence against peaceful protestors, including tear gas drones. Credit JK Photography.

For those who believe trade incentives have failed to improve civil liberties, sanctions are a solution. India quickly backed down from retaliating against U.S. steel tariffs in 2018,⁸⁷ and sanctions against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps deterred India from completing its \$1.6 billion Chabahar-Zahedan railway.⁸⁸ The U.S. could also impose tariffs on imports or suspend technology initiatives until India improves labor and trade practices. Finally, Washington could temper its investment in the Indo-Pacific.

However, with India remaining an important member of both BRICS and the Quad, using economic controls to provoke change in Modi's government may push India closer to its Chinese and Russian partners. New Delhi is aware that each U.S. president makes promises the next President may choose not to fulfill, resulting in cases such as the U.S. failure to meet its weapon supplies and aid promises post-9/11.⁸⁹ It may even assume that the U.S. needs India's manufacturing and natural resources more than India needs U.S. military hardware, and impose retaliatory sanctions that erode diplomatic trust and impose mutual costs. The U.S. must commit to its economic agreements and ensure that privileges are not granted without preemptive investments from India in improving human rights and rule of law.

The Strategic Ambiguity Model

Given the risks of fully championing or rebuking India, the path forward should incentivize economic and security cooperation without setting unrealistic expectations. "Strategic ambiguity" has long described the White House's position on Taiwan, but in an increasingly multipolar environment, it can also be applied to India. In lieu of demanding that India renounce its diplomatic compromises, Washington should slowly broaden security cooperation by using free trade agreements and economic controls as a carrot and stick. By working together on smaller, critical issues without a formal treaty alliance, both states can maximize their agency and improve their defensive interoperability without threatening regional peace or appearing placatory towards each other's less-favorable foreign policies.



U.S. Navy Lt. James Stranges speaks with an Indian Navy officer during Exercise Malabar. Department of Defense photo.

While a formalized U.S.-India alliance is a clear objective of Washington, these agreements are less steadfast than commonly portrayed. This is especially true in non-Western states; despite the mutual commitments of Russia and China's "no limits partnership" and Russia and India's "special and privileged strategic partnership,"⁹⁰ neither have sent troops to Ukraine. Similarly, the odds of India and Russia fighting alongside China in Taiwan are slim. This is not unique to autocracies; allies such as Turkey, France, Egypt, and Brazil reject U.S. alignment on key issues, while others, including Luxembourg and Bulgaria, contribute disproportionately little for NATO defense.⁹¹ India may not be a U.S. ally but

cooperates on most global issues and contributes to joint overseas operations, most recently in the Red Sea against Houthi trade attacks.⁹² Quiet, supportive partners like India are preferred to loud, uncooperative ones.

Given India's pragmatic security strategy, the United States should leverage its "friend-shoring" economic policy to maximize New Delhi's gains and limit Washington's risks. Democratic accountability can be effective in peacetime, but the U.S. faces enormous pressure to reduce its reliance on Russia and China without significantly raising costs. Meanwhile, New Delhi needs steady tax flow from its predominantly low- and middle-skilled population to invest in critical technologies,⁹³ but is less motivated to divest from China and Russia.⁹⁴ Friendshoring advocates like U.S. Treasury Secretary Yellen stated that the U.S. plans to "proactively deepen" economic integration with India rather than demand preemptive policy change in sustainable development, free trade, and labor rights.⁹⁵ Unlike in China, where insufficient labor and transparency standards resulted in human rights violations,⁹⁶ strong oversight mechanisms must be enforced to ensure new economic opportunities meet high labor and equity standards.⁹⁷

Policy Recommendations

Stronger U.S.-India relations could provide a bulwark against rising global instability. While pushing India into a traditional alliance model may incite retaliation from Russia or China, disproportionate incentivizes for cooperation may enable further democratic backsliding. Ultimately, the best path forward for the United States is to strengthen bilateral relations with India while recognizing that New Delhi will likely continue to prioritize its immediate interests.

1. Temper discussions of a NATO-Plus alliance in support of India's "non-aligned" public strategy:

Given that India, Russia, and China collectively comprise one-third of the global population and one-fifth of world landmass, there is significant motive and capability for these countries to unify against the West. While India currently champions multipolarity and views China as a threat, peaceful resolution of border conflicts and greater coordination in global trade may alter this calculus.⁹⁸ By publicly embracing multipolarity, Washington can offer New Delhi the cover of independence and pursuit of self-interest while ensuring that alignment with the U.S. is the logically preferable option. This could set a precedent for other countries in the Indo-Pacific that currently feel forced to align with China due to a perceived "us or them" posture.

2. Leverage multilateral trade and investment in exchange for greater security cooperation:

Despite its firm stance against formal alliances, there is still room for India to become a vital security hedge in Asia. Looking only at the diplomatic scandals of the past twenty years, it is easy to forget the enormous shift that India has made towards the West. It has demonstrated that it is willing to fulfill and even exceed its multilateral obligations, while being far from the only partner that diverges from the U.S. on issues of labor, trade, and sustainability.⁹⁹ That being said, incentives like critical technology co-development and trade agreement reforms are valuable bargaining chips that should not be offered freely. Continuing to strengthen the Quad will require significant economic investment that should be repaid in turn through increasing military interoperability and a continued shift away from Russian arms and defense integration.

3. Incentivize commitment to free trade and democracy by jointly increasing collaboration and oversight:

Support for economic diversification in India enables both it and the United States to become less reliant on Russia and China. However, India's primary security objectives are to maintain its posture along the Line of Actual Control with China, ensure dominance over Pakistan, prevent encirclement in the Indian Ocean, and retain control over its domestic population. It has not consistently applied democratic and humanitarian principles in meeting these objectives, and Washington has alternated between turning a blind eye and unilaterally suspending certain privileges. While the U.S. should avoid disgruntling India, it must strongly reinforce the value of democratic and humanitarian ideals. Washington must ensure that its agreements with New Delhi lift everyday citizens out of poverty, protect human rights and civil liberties, and promote research and innovation from every sector of Indian society.

Conclusion

For nearly fifty years, state actors were forced to choose between capitalism and communism, democracy and authoritarianism, and Western versus Eastern poles. Since the turn of the century, India has raised more than 400 million individuals out of poverty,¹⁰⁰ contributed one-tenth of graduating doctoral students in the G20,¹⁰¹ and became the first country to land a spacecraft on the moon's south pole.¹⁰² These remarkable achievements are a testament to the ability of states to rise when freed from imperialism and domination. However, the global rise of authoritarianism proves that the fight for freedom endures—particularly in India, where balancing its historic ties with revisionist states and commitment to democratic principles tests the limits of multilateralism. While a strong United States-India relationship can improve security in the Indo-Pacific and demonstrate Washington's ability to stand for the prosperity and equality of all individuals, India craves a multipolar world order to ensure competition for its attention and reap benefits with as many countries as possible. To fulfill both these objectives, the U.S. should adapt its foreign policy strategy to reflect the increasing self-sufficiency of its partners—without sacrificing its values in the process.

Endnotes

^aThe appearance of U.S. Department of Defense visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

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