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Toward a Mutually Beneficial Partnership with India to Improve U.S. Strategy in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

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Chess has only two outcomes: draw and checkmate. The objective of the game ... is total victory or defeat—and the battle is conducted head-on, in the center of the board. The aim of Go is relative advantage; the game is played all over

the board, and the objective is to increase one's options and reduce those of the adversary. The goal is less victory than persistent strategic progress.

—Dr. Henry Kissinger

“The distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats.”¹ From a U.S. national perspective, there has been a recognized change in the strategic environment with the weakening of the post-World War II world order.² The two reasons for this shift that stand out the most are a rising China and a disruptive Russia. To address this change, it would be prudent to form alliances and partnerships with other democratic and like-minded nations, aiming to tilt the competitive balance and rebalance the distribution of power.³ To achieve this, it is crucial to avoid repeating past mistakes, such as those made in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the United States created alliances based on pressure instead of on the willingness of the parties involved.⁴ While these changes present new threats, they also present opportunities, including the possibility of forming an enduring and equitable partnership between India and the United States.

This window of geopolitical opportunity exists because both nations currently seek a common solution to contain China’s influence. For India, this common interest is primarily regional, while for the United States, China is considered a pacing threat and the “most consequential strategic competitor” at the global level.⁵ These interests intersect in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) region, providing an opportunity for a mutually beneficial partnership. Despite the obstacles that have existed for decades, the perceived threat from China now makes such a partnership seem more attainable than at any point in recent history. This potential partnership between India and the United States could be seen as a win-win for both nations.

Collective action, not just pontification, is required to address the changing distribution of power worldwide. The 2022 *National Security Strategy (NSS)*, signed by President Joseph Biden, proclaims, “We must proactively shape the international order in line with our interests and values.”⁶ The *NSS* goes on to explain how the Nation’s most important strategic assets are alliances and partnerships worldwide.

One strategy developed by the Department of Defense that will be used for proactive shaping is integrated deterrence.⁷ “Deterrence remains an essential pillar of U.S. defense posture.”⁸ The concept of integrated deterrence means it is integrated across domains, across the whole of government, and across allies and partners.

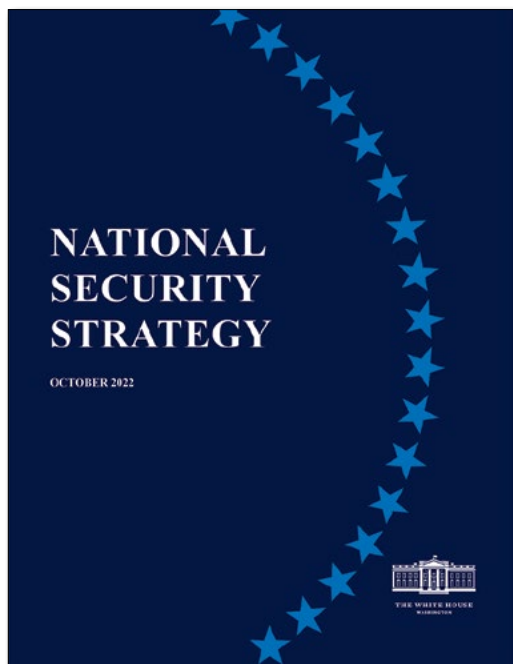
There are numerous U.S. alliances and partnerships that can be strengthened by implementing the concept of integrated deterrence and collective action, but India is uniquely positioned to benefit the United States through an enduring and equitable partnership. India’s value to the United States is due to its growing national power in the INDOPACOM region and its underleveraged global power potential. This U.S. and India partnership could build on existing similarities between the two nations, including shared cultural values, common goals, advancements in innovation, aligned economic interests, and diplomatic competition with China. This article examines the common interests as well as practical impediments to a working relationship between the United States and India. The Indo-U.S. partnership is an opportunity for a declining power (the United States) to ingratiate itself with a compatible, emerging one (India) to benefit both.

Partnership Compatibility

The similarities in culture and commonality of purpose make an equal and willing partnership with India a logical choice. Both internal developments and external influences, including the integration of Eastern

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To read the *National Security Strategy* online, visit <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

and European philosophies and customs, have shaped India's cultural heritage. This integration took place while maintaining its independence and at the same time rejecting foreign domination. This spirit of independence, particularly following India's emancipation from British rule, is similar to that of the United States.

India's cultural heritage informs its foreign policy. India asserts itself as a sovereign nation that greatly respects the independence and sovereignty of other nations. Additionally, India's foreign policy restricts foreign interference with other countries.⁹ India's foreign policy aligns with the United States and other U.S. strategic partners. In addition to shared values, India and the United States have similar political and economic systems. Both have classic liberal democratic-hybrid political systems, and India has gradually adopted a more capitalist economic system while the United States has moved toward a more regulated, socialist-oriented economy. As the two countries near this crossroads of more regulated and less regulated systems, there is increasing potential for commonality between the two nations.

Cultural similarities. The cultural exchange between the United States and India has been a two-way street, with Indian culture influencing the United

States and vice versa. The influence of Indian culture can be seen in the popularity of Indian philosophy (Hinduism), fashion, and Bollywood, while the United States has inspired India in areas such as media, protection of free press, and Hollywood.¹⁰

The growing population of Indian Americans in the United States is a testament to the cultural compatibility between the two nations. The United States benefits from this population because they are statically higher educated. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2020, Indian Americans made up approximately 1.2 percent of the U.S. population.¹¹ Indian Americans are among the most educated populations, with 99 percent having a least completed high school, 73 percent achieving a bachelor's degree, and 40 percent attaining postgraduate degrees.¹² Indian Americans as a demographic have above-average economic prosperity.¹³ Indians assimilate easily into the U.S. population as indicated by high levels of academic and financial success in a significant portion of the U.S. population, demonstrating the cultural compatibility between the United States and India.

The commonality of cultures and shared values between the United States and India offers a strong foundation for a partnership, which can be further strengthened through collaboration in areas such as innovation, economic interests, and diplomacy. The current U.S. *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* both address concepts like integrated deterrence, which offers an expanded opportunity for the United States and India to work together to address challenges in the INDOPACOM region and beyond.

Shared values. To best understand how deep these similar cultural roots are, it is important to remember that India was a former British colony like the United States. The founders of the governments in India and the United States rebelled against British government rule. They then slowly evolved into liberal democracies that promote individual freedoms and equality. The Indian and U.S. governments represent a variety of cultural and political views. In times of peace, the populations of both countries struggle with internal differences, but in the face of outside threats, they coalesce around a national identity.

The authors believe that a country seeking equality of competition translates to the same values in external trade. The similarities in cultures and shared values



Top: Over eighty thousand attendants celebrate at the 2013 Festival of Colors on 30 March 2013 in front of the Sri Radha Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork, Utah. Events like those shown in these pictures demonstrate the influence Indian culture has on the United States and vice versa. (Photo by Lisa Dacis via Wikimedia Commons)

Bottom: Indian players of American football run on the field 23 March 2012 during a practice session at the Salt Lake Stadium in Calcutta, India. (Photo by Bikas Das, Associated Press)

make India a logical choice for a strategic partnership with the United States. The strong bonds they share between their people have made them ideal partners in trade and diplomacy. As both nations continue to grow and evolve, they will undoubtedly continue to be valuable allies and work toward a more equitable world.

Emerging Global Power

India is an emerging global power that recently surpassed China in total population and could soon surpass them in innovation with aid from the United States. Sharing in innovation gives the United States an opportunity to ingratiate itself by contributing to India's rise. Innovation captures both the growth of the population in India and technological advancements possible with India. The population will provide the people, labor, and ideas that will drive innovation. In terms of demographic, India has a growing and increasingly industrious population, making it an attractive partner. The population of India stands at 1.427 billion; China is now the second most at 1.425 billion.¹⁴

Growing to rival China. India and China's labor populations have a comparable distribution across the three main sectors: services, industrial, and agriculture. India is weighted more in agriculture versus services but nearly equal in the industrial sector. The age distribution of military-aged (15–64 years) populations marginally favors China, with 68.3 percent compared to India's 67.51 percent (2021 figures).¹⁵ However, China's population is beginning to age out due to fewer females, resulting from the one-child policy introduced in the 1970s.

India's population surpassed China's population in 2023. India's growth rate of 1.02 percent is more than double China's growth rate of 0.42 percent. China's population is projected to seriously decline by 2030. India's population is expected to reach 1.65 billion before an expected decline in 2060.¹⁶

As overall prosperity improves so does education; literacy rates should see improvements above the present 77.7 percent.¹⁷ Any decline in China's population will create a labor shortage that could benefit India's educated but underemployed workforce. Based on these population demographics, both now and into the future, India is a strong contender for economic competition with China.

Advancements in innovation. The population growth story of India is compelling, but equally

important will be the exponential growth of innovation in technology. India's technological needs present a great opportunity for the United States to build further trust with India as a research and development partner. India has demonstrated respect for intellectual property (IP) per the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights agreement (TRIPS) and the World Trade Organization.¹⁸ China, in comparison, has a dubious history of violating TRIPS.¹⁹ China's IP theft threatens U.S. national security. An equal threat is China's dominance in the production of rare earth metals components.²⁰ India's compliance with TRIPS provides a safer alternative to China for manufacturing sensitive technologies.

India is also emerging as a center of innovation, as evidenced by an ever-increasing number of patents filed. In 2020, India granted only 4,988 of 23,141 resident patents filed, but granted 21,373 of 33,630 nonresident patents.²¹ India's consideration for a greater number of foreign patents further demonstrates the country's willingness to be a partner in technological innovation. India has also distinguished itself as an emerging center of research and development globally. According to Global Innovation Indexes, from 2011 to 2021, India has ranked high as an innovation leader in the central and southern Asia region, lower-middle economic group category, and performed above expectations.²² While not scoring as high on the Global Innovation Indexes scale as countries like the United States or China, India does surpass the United States, and it rivals China regarding innovations per gross domestic product (GDP).

Mutually Beneficial Ends

India seeks to boost its economic competitiveness and military capabilities. An early investment by the United States in India's emergent economy, which is far from its potential and poised to compete globally, would increase access to manufacturing and innovation. India has been purchasing advanced weapons from various countries, including Russia, the United States, France, and other nations. The government of India signed a ten-year agreement with Russia for small arms and other advanced weapons systems. Additionally, India sought advanced nuclear submarine and advanced avionics technology from various European Union and North American countries.²³

India's pursuit of advanced military weaponry has allowed its country to emerge as a potential counterbalance to China's threats to the supply chain.²⁴

Aligned economic interests. A partnership between the United States and India would be financially viable and sustainable for both nations, as their current economic interests are aligned. Here are some key statistics to consider. India is the ninth-largest economy globally and the third largest in Asia, behind China and Japan. India has the second highest growth rate of 8.4 percent among the G20 countries, ahead and almost double the 4.9 percent growth rate of both China and the United States.²⁵ India's 2021 GDP was \$3.176 trillion U.S. dollar (USD) equivalent and is projected to grow by 6.5 to 7 percent to USD\$5 trillion by 2026.²⁶

In 2026, India's working population is projected to surpass that of China, as the Chinese workforce begins to decline and its economic growth rate slows. India will be poised to fill a growing gap in goods and services. China's declining workforce could be an opportunity for employment by India's youth bulge. Fortunately, this segment of the Indian workforce has experienced an increase in literacy by twenty-four percentage points from 1993 to 2017–18 and has experienced a fifteen percentage point increase of youth attending educational institutions during that same period.²⁷ Meanwhile, China's debt is projected to increase from USD\$12.037 trillion, or 71.84 percent of GDP in 2021, to USD\$21.659 trillion, or 83.75 percent of GDP in 2026, due to the rising cost of supporting an aging population.²⁸ On the other hand, India's debt is projected to slow from USD\$2.429 trillion (84.68 percent of GDP) in 2021 to USD\$4.252 trillion (83.75 percent of GDP) in 2026.²⁹

The average Indian household debt is 34.6 percent of GDP, the Chinese household debt is 62.14 percent of GDP, and the U.S. household debt is 78.03 percent.³⁰ As the United States faces difficulties in financing its high levels of debt to GDP, a partnership with India and its lower debt-to-GDP ratio could help to mitigate attempts by China to drive up prices through supply-side restrictions.

Shared diplomatic competition with China.

Diplomacy with India is critical for balancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Having an enduring partnership with India would provide regional legitimacy within INDOPACOM and a direct counterbalance to China's influence. The partnership

could also benefit the United States by encouraging third-party nations and other regional powers such as Russia to form partnerships with India and the United States. This could catapult India to a higher position in the global power hierarchy.

Diplomacy with India is complex. The very challenges that make a relationship with India compelling for the United States are the same challenges that both attract and limit U.S. leverage. Limited leverage should not be confused with the absence of leverage. The United States should use a pragmatic approach that considers the present power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. Diplomacy should begin with an understanding of the limited intervention approach by India to regional diplomacy.

During the Cold War, the Indian government had been more aggressive toward its neighbors; this resulted in the neighboring countries seeking to isolate India's influence. In the 1990s, India shifted to a more cooperative "Look East" policy, which transformed its perception among regional powers. Over time, India's neighbors began to see India more as a partner than a threat.³¹ India began to focus on economic partnerships as the vehicle for diplomacy. As these relationships grew, India sought security by forming regional coalitions.³² "Look East" became "Act East," which sought to increase economic diplomacy. A component of the Act East coalitions is countering China's economic and military threat. As a result of these economic partnerships, the Indian economy improved.

India is now seeking recognition as a responsible nuclear power and a seat on the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which will require substantial diplomatic support from the United States.³³ The United States has taken steps to support India's acquisition of nuclear energy.³⁴ These actions could provide the United States substantial leverage in the near term.

One of the challenges to diplomacy in competition with China is legitimacy. To effectively engage in diplomacy with India, it is important to have an appreciation for India's unique history and identity. India's rich history predates China, including the ancient Harappan civilization, the Mauryan Empire, and the Mughals, among others.³⁵ This history supports India's claims to territorial issues and usage of the seas within the INDOPACOM theater.



Soldiers of 2nd Brigade, 11th Airborne Division, and Indian army soldiers carry out a mock operation to flush out armed gunmen from a house during the Indo-U.S. joint exercise Yudh Abhyas in Auli, in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, 29 November 2022. (Photo by Manish Swarup, Associated Press)

The second challenge to diplomacy in competition against China is territorial disputes on land and in sea lanes. Establishing legitimacy for land and sea usage and territorial claims is a top priority in the INDOPACOM theater. India claimed the lands of Jammu and Kashmir, triggering a war between India and Pakistan. These lands remain contested, with China involved as a third-party claimant over Kashmir.³⁶ Additionally, the Sino-India War was sparked by a dispute over territory.³⁷

China's invasion of Tibet to annex territory and its incursions into Kashmir to build a road have added to territorial tensions. In 2017, China further escalated tensions by constructing a road on the Himalayan plateau of Doklam in the sovereign territory of Bhutan near the Indian border. The Chinese used this as an opportunity to paint India as the oppressors of Bhutan's foreign policy.³⁸

India also faces disputes with China over Indo-Pacific maritime movement corridors. China began activities in Sri Lanka by providing naval craft to the country, which coincided with the Sino-Pak Naval agreement and the sale of Chinese naval vessels to

Bangladesh.³⁹ In 2010, China loaned Sri Lanka an excessive amount of money for a port with insufficient traffic to justify the loan. In 2019, China exercised a loan provision that allowed it to confiscate the port when Sri Lanka failed to make payments.⁴⁰ The Straits of Malacca are also a friction point with China. India moves 50 percent of its trade and 70 percent of its oil through the Straits of Malacca.⁴¹ China's military activity within the straits threatens not just the Indian navy but also threatens India's economy.

Territorial disputes and sea lanes are significant friction points in the INDOPACOM theater. If India backs down from China's aggression, they risk conceding territory or access to sea lanes to China. On the other hand, attacking China would give them justification to attack India. India's military is not yet prepared to engage a significant threat. Assisting India with equipping its military provides an opportunity for the United States and its forces to check China's provocations.

Existing alliances between the United States, India, and other nations can both present opportunities and pose complications to any future Indo-American partnership.



Indian and Chinese forces clash on 28 September 2021 in the mountainous Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh at the Line of Actual Control—the de facto border between the two countries. Both sides reported minor injuries. A border skirmish the year before in the Ladakh region had resulted in at least twenty-four deaths. (Screenshot from China Central Television)

India and the United States have similar relationships with China, but with subtle differences. While the United States is an economic trade partner and competitor with China, and to a lesser extent, India, it also competes with China in diplomacy, information, and the military. For India, the United States is its largest trade partner (China is second), and it mainly competes with China in diplomacy, information, and the military (including territorial disputes along the borders with China).⁴²

As discussed earlier, India is increasingly competitive in culture, innovation, technology, economics, and diplomacy. It is important to consider that an Indo-American partnership formed to compete with China does not have to be confrontational. The NSS is very clear that the United States will work with any nation that shares our goal of a rules-based world that is free, open, secure, and prosperous.⁴³

Admittedly, the combined leverage of an Indo-American partnership would be more substantial for both countries in the great-power competition relative to China. However, regarding China, India and the United States could serve as each other's best alternative for a

negotiated agreement rather than engaging with China independently. China's more aggressive use of national power and the decline of U.S. global power highlights the need for a partnership with India while also preventing the United States from dictating India's foreign policy.

The Russian entanglement. India's enduring partnership with Russia, which originated during the Cold War, is an important consideration. At that time, India's opposition party, the Indian Communist Party, had strong ties with Russia, and the Indian government had aligned itself with Russia and adopted some socialist policies domestically. At the same time, the United States had supplied military equipment to Pakistan, which were employed against India. As a result, India became the largest customer of Russian military arms, many of which are still in use by the Indian military today.

The long-standing relationship between India and Russia only complicates the Indo-American partnership, if one believes the United States has the right to impose its foreign policy on its partners. Perhaps it is time for the United States to enter more equitable and willing partnerships rather than coalitions of the coerced.

India could likewise question the U.S. relationship with Pakistan. This logic also applies to Russia's relationship with Pakistan and India's relationship with Iran. India has maintained economic trade with the rogue nation of Iran and maintains an embassy in that country. This provides India with access to Iranian diplomatic channels and any strategic partner with a back door for negotiations. The United States can find potential benefits by shifting the paradigm and reevaluating the Indo-Russian relationship. Consider that perhaps Russia's entanglement with India could be reducing the potential of Russia's invention on behalf of China.

The United States has not lost its moral high ground by avoiding dichotomous alliance formations. This can also be implied to intervening in internal conflicts such as friction between the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh populations within India or ongoing border disputes with other nations (e.g., Pakistan). With Russia's recent missteps internationally, India may replace Russia as the third superpower in a New Cold War. Furthermore, as both the United States and Russia are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, an alliance with India may result in India becoming a security council member. Having a similarly minded democratic nation on the security council could be a positive outcome.

Conclusion

The Indo-U.S. partnership is an important opportunity because of their compatibility as partners, the opportunity for a declining power to ingratiate itself to an emerging one, and commonality of purpose.

The similarities in culture and commonality of purpose make an equal and willing partnership with India a logical choice. India's foreign policy aligns with that of the United States and other U.S. strategic partners. The

cultural exchange between the United States and India has been a two-way street, with Indian culture influencing the United States and vice versa. In addition to shared values, India and the United States have similar political and economic systems; both have classic liberal democratic-hybrid political systems that promote individual freedoms and equality.

India is an emerging global power that recently surpassed China in total population and could soon surpass them in innovation with aid from the United States. India's growth rate of 1.02 percent is more than double China's growth rate of 0.42 percent. China's population is projected to seriously decline by 2030. India has demonstrated respect for IP and is emerging as a center of innovation. Sharing in innovation allows the United States to ingratiate itself by contributing to India's rise.

An early U.S. investment in India's emergent economy, far from its potential and poised to compete globally, would increase access to manufacturing and innovation. A partnership between the United States and India would be financially viable and sustainable for both nations. Diplomacy with India is critical for balancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Regarding Indo-Russo relations, perhaps it is time for the United States to respect a partner's rights to form its own relationships.

This article presents both practical and historical considerations for how action-plan items can be implemented regarding India. The newest *Indo-Pacific Strategy* document outlines an action plan comprised of ten lines of effort, over half of which were addressed directly or indirectly herein.⁴⁴ That document recognizes the foundational concepts of integrated deterrence and collective action. The action plan and those concepts will benefit from an even closer partnership with India. ■

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