





Leveraging Flexible Partnerships and the Thucydides Dance

Rethinking U.S. Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Command

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At dawn Sun Pin lured P'ang Chüan and half his army onto a narrow path along which Sun Pin had removed bark from a large tree. Sun Pin positioned his army in ambush along the trail with the instruction to fire when they saw a torch. General P'ang Chüan was summoned to the bare tree by his advanced guard. He lit a torch to examine the tree and discovered writing which stated "P'ang Chüan will die beneath this tree."

Sun Pin wrote the ending of his enemy by making his enemy's path appear obvious and easy, but it took P'ang Chüan's action to make that ending under the tree of destiny manifest. The challenge is that the path is not always the most obvious, direct, easy, or constant.

In the current global political climate marked by intricacy and interdependence, it is imperative to adopt a more sophisticated methodology when forging alliances. This proposed new strategy is characterized by adaptable relationships, collaborations centered around specific issues, and a shared set of values. This approach presents a practical and effective means for countries to navigate the complexities arising from China's growing influence without having to resort to rigid alliances or direct confrontations. It allows for a more nuanced and flexible approach that can adapt to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Emerging global powers that aim to supplant the United States as a global power are rivals, rather than potential allies who are open to sharing power across multiple nations. These rivals are attempting to rewrite narratives and histories to sow internal conflict abroad and justify the annexation of sovereign lands. Confronting these rivals directly would only amplify their internal and external narratives of the United States as an aggressor or enemy. Instead, the authors propose an indirect path of developing strong alliances and avoiding the narrow path of requiring allies to perfectly align with U.S. foreign and domestic policy. The narrow path of homogenous alignment, which does not tolerate entanglements,

leads to global polarization and allows rivals to form counteralliances among the alienated. Rather than trying to force countries to align perfectly with its policies, the authors argue that the United States should focus on building strong, adaptable relationships with other countries to avoid global polarization and counteralliances.

In their previous article, "Toward a Mutually Beneficial Partnership with India to Improve U.S. Strategy in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command," the authors made the case for the United States to form a more robust partnership with India. This article introduced the concept of U.S. policy that seeks "to enter more equitable and willing partnerships rather than coalitions of the coerced."¹ Strategic positioning is a crucial yet demanding approach for the United States to maintain its global influence and foster a strong partnership with India. In his book *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, Andrew Bacevich highlights the strain on American resources to maintain influence and security through strategic positioning, leading to strategic exhaustion.²

The United States recognizes the importance of establishing a mutually beneficial partnership with India to improve its strategy in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command by integrating diplomacy, information, military, and economics in strategic planning.³ This balanced approach ensures the United States does not rely solely on military might but also leverages diplomatic efforts, information sharing, and economic collaboration to achieve its objectives.

John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* highlights that true strength in international relations derives from military capability and strategic positioning.⁴ This principle of peace through strength is not solely about raw power but rather about maintaining a relative position that maximizes strategic advantages. This balanced approach fosters stability and peace, recognizing that it is better to be a good player on a winning team than the best player on a losing team.

Previous page: Soldiers assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 11th Airborne Division, train with Indian Army soldiers assigned to the 4/8 Gorkha Rifles Infantry Battalion, 91st Infantry Brigade, during Exercise Tiger Triumph near Visakhapatnam, India, on 4 April 2025. Tiger Triumph is a joint and combined U.S.-India exercise focusing on humanitarian assistance, disaster response readiness, and interoperability in the Indian Ocean region and beyond to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. (Photo courtesy of the Indian Army)

Strategic positioning allows for flexibility and the ability to leave relationships, when necessary, without the exhaustion and risk of unmet expectations and polarization. As Henry Kissinger discusses in *Diplomacy*, managing expectations and promoting fairness in foreign policies is essential to sustain partnerships and avoid the pitfalls of unmet expectations.⁵ Strength is not defined by power alone but by the ability to maintain peace through a strong strategic position.

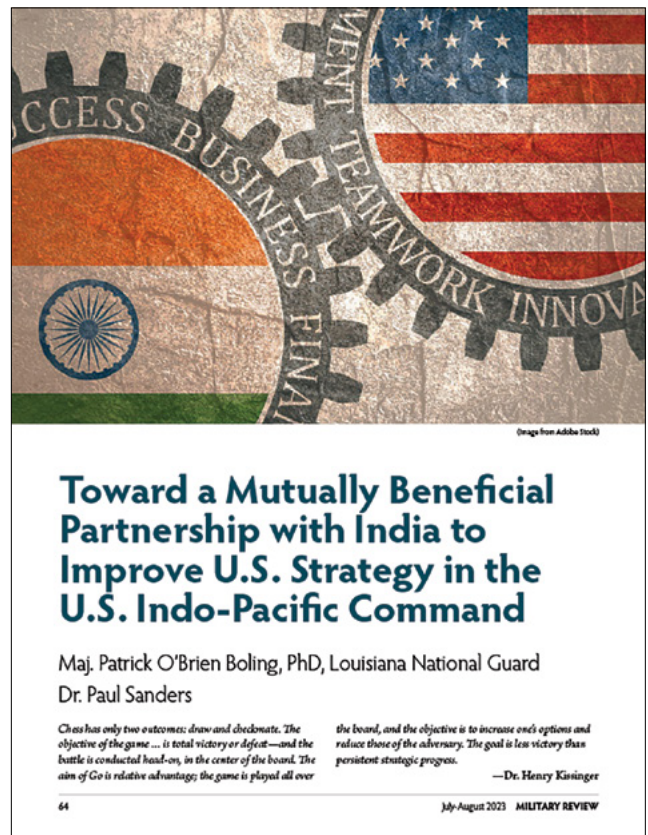
A practical example of strategic positioning is India's purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia.⁶ The acquisition strengthens India's military capabilities with no direct cost to the United States. This demonstrates how strategic positioning can enhance overall national security. However, promoting fairness and managing expectations is important in preventing unmet expectations that could strain the partnership between the United States and India.

To reiterate, strategic positioning is a necessary and sustainable approach for the United States to maintain its influence and foster a stronger adaptable partnership with India. By integrating the diplomacy, information, military, and economics framework and managing expectations, both nations can achieve peace through strength and ensure that strategic positioning remains a practical approach in their foreign policy arsenal.

Reasonable Expectations

Maintaining a strong adaptable relationship between India and the United States requires continuous effort and the setting of reasonable expectations. In international relations, the belief that a single treaty can resolve all issues without ongoing effort is unrealistic.⁷ The dynamic nature of global politics necessitates that countries continuously engage with one another to address emerging challenges and opportunities.

The historical context of Sino-U.S. treaties underscores the importance of ongoing engagement. Initial agreements between the United States and China were often undermined by changes in China's policies and actions that the United States did not anticipate or respond to promptly.⁸ The expectation of signing a treaty and walking away ignores the realities of an ever-changing environment.



Published in the July-August 2023 edition of *Military Review* by Boling and Sanders, this article discusses an enduring and equitable partnership between India and the United States that could present opportunities for both nations to work together to contain China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. To read this article online, visit <https://www.armypress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/July-August-2023/Mutually-Beneficial-Partnership/>.

As China grew economically and militarily, it increasingly violated the terms of various agreements, exploiting the United States' lack of proactive monitoring and response.⁹ Moreover, the United States often underestimated China's strategic ambitions, leading to treaty violations and strained relations.¹⁰

To maintain a robust and adaptable relationship with India, the United States should expect to continuously monitor and actively manage this relationship. This involves regular diplomatic engagements, addressing conflicts proactively, and adapting to changes in the geopolitical landscape to ensure that both nations can mutually benefit from their partnership. By understanding and implementing these principles, the United States can foster a more stable and enduring relationship with India.

Exclusivity Not Required

Expecting international partners to be exclusive to the United States and seek single sources is unrealistic. India, for instance, has learned from its historical relationship with Russia that relying on a single partner can lead to issues such as delays in supply, sub-standard quality, and maintenance difficulties.¹¹ As a result, India has shifted toward diversifying its defense procurements.¹²

The United States can leverage its technological superiority and robust defense infrastructure to provide tailored solutions that address India's specific needs and challenges. This approach mitigates the risks associated with single-source dependency and fosters long-term strategic partnerships based on trust and mutual benefit. By emphasizing the quality, reliability, and comprehensive maintenance support of U.S. defense equipment, the United States can strengthen its appeal to countries that are wary of overreliance on any single partner. Furthermore, by actively engaging in joint ventures, codevelopment

projects, and technology transfers, the United States can enhance its collaborative footprint in the defense sector.¹³

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This type of strategy addresses the concerns of countries seeking diversified procurement and positions the United States as a critical enabler of their defense modernization efforts. The United States has a unique opportunity to capitalize on the lessons learned by countries like India. By offering reliable, high-quality defense solutions and fostering adaptable partnerships, the United States can enhance its role as a preferred and trusted partner in the global defense market, strengthening its strategic alliances and expanding its influence.

Defense Cooperation

The notion of the United States and India fully integrating their military forces or "giving" military capabilities to one another is unrealistic and contrary to each nation's strategic imperatives. This notion is not supported by each country's distinct defense strategies, geopolitical goals, and historical analyses of their defense relations. Instead, both nations desire to retain strategic autonomy and avoid overdependence on any single partner.¹⁴

India's approach to military modernization involves leveraging multiple international partnerships to bolster its defense capabilities without compromising its sovereignty or becoming overly reliant on any single country.¹⁵ David Brewster emphasizes India's strategic independence, highlighting that while India seeks to enhance its military capabilities through international partnerships, it maintains strict control over its military assets and decisions.¹⁶

The United States, on the other hand, has overestimated India's willingness to align closely with American strategic interests, particularly in countering China.¹⁷ Although the defense trade between the two countries has grown substantially, it faces limitations due to India's modest defense budget, the high cost of U.S. defense systems, and its insistence on local production and technology transfer, which often makes deals commercially unattractive for American companies.

Therefore, the United States should adopt a more realistic and adaptable approach to its partnership with India, recognizing the limits of what New Delhi can and will do to support American strategic objectives. Both countries have deepened their defense cooperation, but their partnership is bounded by the desire of both nations to retain strategic autonomy and avoid overdependence on any single partner.



Indian Army soldiers from the 4/8 Gorkha Rifles Infantry Battalion, 91st Infantry Brigade, conduct a large-scale amphibious landing drill 11 April 2025 as part of Exercise Tiger Triumph at Kakinada Beach, Andhra Pradesh, India. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Aaron Irvin, U.S. Air Force)

Polarization

Successful international cooperation relies on nations accommodating political and economic interests that are diverse. Embracing political diversity and respectfully tolerating entanglements among allies are crucial strategies for preventing alienation and polarization of outside nations. This more accepting approach fosters a more stable and cooperative international environment by acknowledging and managing the inherent differences in interests and policies among allied nations.

International orders are built through inclusive institutions that manage political diversity and conflicting interests among allies.¹⁸ These institutions enable a stable and cooperative international system by creating frameworks in which diverse political interests can coexist and be managed constructively. Nations embracing political diversity and tolerating entanglements among states are essential for fostering diplomatic relationships and preventing the alienation of potential allies.¹⁹

Managing conflicting interests within alliances is crucial for maintaining unity and preventing polarization. Alliances are more effective and durable when they can accommodate and reconcile the diverse interests of their members, thereby enhancing collective security.²⁰ The European Union's success lies in embracing political diversity and managing conflicting interests among member states, which limits polarization and strengthens the union by allowing it to adapt to diverse political landscapes.²¹

Successful international cooperation relies on institutions that accommodate diverse political and economic interests. Embracing political diversity and tolerating entanglements among allies prevent alienation and polarization that can lead to further divisiveness and tensions among nations.

Strategic Flexibility

The swing state analogy, when applied to diplomacy, underscores the importance of strategic flexibility

and the ability to adapt to a shifting geopolitical landscape. In international affairs, viewing pluralism as pragmatism highlights the value of embracing diverse perspectives and alliances to achieve more stable and favorable outcomes.

In the context of U.S. presidential elections, swing states do not consistently vote for a single party and thus become crucial battlegrounds. This analogy can be applied to diplomacy, where countries must navigate a complex and fluid international environment, building and maintaining relationships with diverse partners to secure strategic advantages.

Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* emphasizes the need for flexibility and pragmatism in foreign policy, as rigid alliances can lead to strategic vulnerabilities.²² Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* further supports the idea that embracing pluralism is a pragmatic approach to achieving global stability and addressing common challenges.²³

In *The Future of Power*, Joseph S. Nye discusses the concept of "smart power," which combines hard and soft power strategies to navigate the complexities of international relations. Nye's emphasis on the need for a pragmatic approach to diplomacy aligns with the idea of viewing pluralism as a practical and effective strategy in international affairs.²⁴ Kissinger's *World Order* further underscores the necessity of pluralism and pragmatism in diplomacy, arguing that a stable international order can only be achieved through a balance of power that respects the diversity of political systems and cultural values.²⁵ In conclusion, the swing state analogy and the view of pluralism as pragmatism in diplomacy highlight the importance of strategic flexibility, embracing diverse perspectives, and building alliances to achieve more stable and favorable outcomes in the complex and fluid international environment.

The Story About Horse Racing

Han Xin, a renowned Chinese strategist, employed a clever strategy to win a horse race against a rival general. He raced his slow horse against the rival's fast horse, his medium horse against the slow horse, and his fast horse against the medium horse, resulting in victory in two out of three races.²⁶ This story illustrates strategic principles, emphasizing the importance of leveraging one's strengths against an opponent's

weaknesses, echoing Sun Tzu's strategic thinking in *The Art of War*.²⁷

Seek Favorable Outcomes

In strategic scenarios, adopting a pragmatic approach that aims for partial but significant success can reduce the risk of overwhelming loss. This "two out of three" success rate principle, reminiscent of Sun Tzu's wisdom, is particularly relevant in diplomacy, where minimizing risks and maximizing gains are crucial. Sun Tzu advises that understanding when to engage and avoid conflict is crucial to victory.²⁸

Howard Raiffa's *Decision Analysis: Introductory Lectures on Choices Under Uncertainty* highlights the importance of decision-making strategies that maximize favorable outcomes while minimizing potential losses. Raiffa discusses the benefits of probabilistic decision-making, where aiming for a majority win can lead to more stable and sustainable results.²⁹ This concept is particularly applicable in diplomacy, where nations negotiate complexity with multiple interests at stake.

John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* introduces mixed strategies in game theory, which involve making decisions that balance risks and rewards to maximize expected utility. In diplomacy, pursuing multiple avenues of negotiation and cooperation to achieve a majority of objectives reduces the likelihood of complete failure.³⁰

In his work *Diplomacy*, Kissinger underscores the importance of balancing competing interests and achieving incremental gains in international relations. Successful diplomacy often involves compromise and the willingness to accept partial victories to maintain stability and avoid escalating conflicts.³¹ By integrating these strategic insights, it becomes clear that adopting a "two out of three" approach in both horse racing and diplomacy can effectively minimize risks and enhance the likelihood of achieving consistent and favorable outcomes.

The Thucydides Dance

The concept of a "Thucydides dance" is a strategic approach to avoid the Thucydides trap, a situation where a rising power causes fear in an established power, leading to conflict. This strategy incorporates elements from various historical diplomatic efforts and alliances to manage and mitigate the risk of war through balanced power dynamics and strategic partnerships.



As President Donald J. Trump looks on, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India signs the visitor's book at the White House on 13 February 2025. (Photo courtesy of the White House)

Graham Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* explores how the rise of a new power such as China can lead to conflict with an existing dominant power like the United States.³² To avoid this, the Thucydides dance concept suggests a complex interplay involving multiple powers to balance and manage these tensions.

Kissinger's principles of *détente* and his approach to opening diplomatic relations with China in the 1970s serve as foundational strategies for the Thucydides dance concept. Historically, *détente* with the Soviet Union and the opening to China were used to create a balance of power and reduce the risk of direct conflict among superpowers.³³

The Thucydides dance involves forming strategic alliances similar to the Triple Entente of World War I, where France, Russia, and Britain partnered to counterbalance the power of the Central Powers. This historical precedent illustrates how alliances can form to counter a rising power and manage the potential for destabilization.³⁴

Applying this to contemporary geopolitics, India can be viewed as a rising power that can play a crucial role in counterbalancing China's growing influence. India's strategic partnerships with the United States and other democratic nations can serve to mitigate the risks associated with China's rise.³⁵

In summary, the Thucydides dance concept builds on the Thucydides trap, opening relations with China and *détente* to create a strategic approach for avoiding conflict among rising and established powers. By forming strategic alliances and balancing power dynamics, nations can mitigate the risks associated with a rising power and maintain stability in the international system.

Web Spinning

By accepting partners like India and allowing them to form additional partnerships with other nations such as Russia, we can enhance the complexity and stability of international diplomacy, even when interests conflict. This approach prevents the polarization of nations and reduces the likelihood of dragging more

countries into war. By spinning a web of international alliances, we can create a more nuanced and interconnected global community, avoiding the binary “us or them” mindset that historically led to catastrophic conflicts like World War I. Experts agree on the importance of maintaining flexible and diverse alliances to manage global stability.³⁶ The détente between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War and the U.S. opening relations with China in the 1970s exemplifies how engaging with diverse partners can prevent the rigid polarization that leads to conflict.³⁷

The international community can foster cooperation and reduce tensions by tolerating different perspectives and interests. The domino effect that led to World War I illustrates the dangers of polarized alliances. According to Annika Mombauer, in *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, the rigid alliance structures and binary thinking of that era contributed to the rapid escalation of conflict. The polarization of alliances, such as the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente, left nations with little room for maneuvering, ultimately dragging them into war when conflicts erupted.³⁸ Robert Keohane’s *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* discusses how international institutions can manage cooperation among states with conflicting interests. Keohane argues that embracing pluralism in alliances rather than forcing binary choices helps maintain global stability and prevents unmet expectations that can arise from rigid, binary alliances.³⁹ In *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace*, Charles A. Kupchan emphasizes the importance of diplomatic flexibility and the ability to manage conflicting interests among allies. Kupchan’s analysis supports the idea that tolerating differences and engaging in strategic partnerships with diverse nations can prevent polarization and reduce the risk of conflict.⁴⁰ Lastly, Nye advocates for building a web of alliances to enhance global stability. He argues that tolerating diverse interests and forming strategic partnerships with countries like India and Russia, despite their conflicting interests, can prevent the rigid polarization that often leads to war.⁴¹

To summarize, the concept of a Thucydides dance involves a strategic approach to avoid the Thucydides trap, where a rising power causes fear in an established power, leading to conflict. By forming strategic alliances

and engaging in a complex interplay involving multiple powers, this strategy aims to balance and manage tensions, thereby dissuading adversaries from war or causing them to trigger their demise. This approach incorporates elements from historical diplomatic efforts and alliances, such as Kissinger’s détente to manage the rise of potentially destabilizing powers like China.

Mimetic Theory

Mimetic theory, which posits that humans and their societies emulate each other’s behaviors and desires, can be applied to India-U.S. diplomatic relations to understand the evolving dynamics of their partnership. René Girard’s exploration of mimetic theory suggests that the United States and India are likely to adopt similar strategies and policies, enhancing their mutual interests without the constraints of formal alliances like NATO.⁴² Unlike NATO, which has become polarized due to external conflicts such as the Ukraine crisis, the U.S.-India relationship benefits from flexibility and independent positioning. This flexibility provides a strategic advantage, allowing both nations to reposition rather than merely retreat if faced with a potential China-India conflict.

NATO’s precrisis state was one of relative stability, but Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, driven by fears of potential Ukrainian NATO membership, has disrupted this balance. This invasion has ironically strengthened NATO, as evidenced by the new member states that have joined since the conflict began.⁴³ However, NATO’s involvement in Ukraine is nuanced; while supporting Ukraine, NATO itself has not directly entered the war, reflecting its defensive nature and adherence to nonaggressive principles.⁴⁴

Considering the idea of India joining NATO is strategically inadvisable. India’s current independence in foreign policy is beneficial as it prevents unnecessary provocations such as a potential China-Russia alliance. Though often messy, encouraging diplomacy through platforms like the UN remains a cornerstone of U.S. strategy, supporting global peace and cooperation.⁴⁵ The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks exemplify how shared challenges can strengthen U.S.-India relations, particularly in counterterrorism. This cooperation marked a significant convergence of interests, highlighting how crises can foster deep, resilient partnerships.⁴⁶

The concept of True North is that navigational True North is fixed, while your metaphorical True North can evolve as you grow and change. True North, in this context, is about fostering commitment over compliance. The goal is to support organic, locally inspired governance solutions rather than imposing nation-building efforts that create proxies and further polarization. By inspiring people to shape their governments, the United States and India can build a partnership grounded in mutual respect and shared values, avoiding the pitfalls of enforced compliance and external manipulation.⁴⁷

Recommendations

In an era of shifting geopolitical dynamics marked by China's growing assertiveness, the question of how to best safeguard a rules-based international order has become increasingly pressing. While the formation of a singular anti-China coalition presents significant risks, a more effective approach lies in cultivating a diverse network of partnerships. By focusing on shared interests and values, the United States and like-minded countries can create a more agile and adaptable strategy. The following recommendations outline a path toward building such a network, prioritizing cooperation, and constructive engagement over direct confrontation.

Regional alliances and partnerships. Rather than creating a single coalition, the United States and like-minded countries could strengthen existing regional alliances and partnerships. For example, the United States could deepen its engagement with

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), work closely with the Quad (comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia), and support regional organizations in Asia to collectively address security and economic concerns.

Issue-based coalitions. Rather than forming a broad counter-China coalition, countries could come together on specific issues of mutual concern. This approach allows nations to collaborate on areas such as cybersecurity, maritime security, climate change, and public health without necessarily forming a comprehensive alliance.⁴⁸

Flexible partnerships. Countries can engage in flexible partnerships where they cooperate on certain matters while maintaining their independence in others. This approach allows nations to pursue common goals without necessarily entering formal alliances.⁴⁹

Norms and values coalition. A coalition could be formed around the promotion of democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law. Countries that share these principles can work together to defend them globally.⁵⁰

It's important to recognize that any efforts to counterbalance China should be approached with caution and a focus on constructive engagement. The goal should not be to isolate or antagonize China but to promote a rules-based international order, peaceful resolution of disputes, and cooperation on global challenges. Building and maintaining such a coalition is a complex and long-term endeavor that requires skillful diplomacy and strategic thinking. ■

Notes

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