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RESPONSE

# America's Best Bet in the Indo-Pacific

## How Washington and New Delhi Can Balance a Rising China

By Arzan Tarapore  
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Indian soldiers marching in New Delhi, January 2022  
Adnan Abidi / Reuters

Over the last two decades, successive U.S. administrations have sought to cultivate a strong relationship with India. As the world's most populous country, with the second-largest military and the fifth-largest economy, India is uniquely positioned to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. Yet as Ashley Tellis argued in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this month ("[America's Bad Bet on India](#)," May 1, 2023), there are limits to what the United States can expect from this partnership. New Delhi will not rush to Washington's side in the event of a security crisis with Beijing unless its interests are directly threatened. India is not a sheriff of the international order or a treaty-bound defender of U.S. interests. In Tellis's view, this makes the U.S. policy of cultivating India as a strategic partner a bad bet.

But India has never pretended it would behave like a treaty ally of the United States, and the occasional divergences between New Delhi's and Washington's interests do not mean the U.S. investment in the bilateral relationship is misguided. Still, the United States can make an even better bet when it comes to its partnership with India—one that is more realistic than a security pact and that still contributes meaningfully to advancing shared interests in a free and open Indo-Pacific.

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## IMPERFECT ALIGNMENT

India has a long history of conflict and competition with China. After a shocking and bruising war in 1962, the two countries waited until the 1980s to restore diplomatic relations, gingerly constructing a modus vivendi through a series of confidence-building agreements. Their border remains unsettled and the scene of sporadic local crises; a major Chinese incursion in 2020 into territory claimed by India led to a deadly skirmish and another rupture in bilateral relations. India also remains anxious about China's creeping influence across the Indian Ocean region, where China plans to maintain a permanent military presence supported by a growing network of bases.

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But India's competition with China does not mean it is perfectly aligned with the United States. Although India accelerated military cooperation with the United States after the 2020 crisis, the two countries remain divided over key regional and global issues. On Afghanistan, for instance, India was dismayed by the precipitous U.S. withdrawal, while in Myanmar it continues to engage the military junta that Washington has shunned. The differences between New Delhi and Washington have been displayed most prominently during the war in Ukraine, where India has been reluctant to alienate Russia, on which it depends for military equipment and cheap energy.

Even when it comes to their shared interest in preventing Chinese hegemony in Asia, India and the United States sometimes have differing policy priorities and use different tactics to achieve similar goals. For New Delhi, Chinese moves on the Himalayan land border naturally matter more than a potential [attack on Taiwan](#). And as India's foreign minister has conceded, the country's options against its much stronger rival are limited.

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These differences do not make India an outlier among Washington's global partners. Even formal U.S. allies—those with written security guarantees—do not see eye to eye with Washington when it comes to China. Japan's vaunted new security strategy, including its bold plan for a long-range missile arsenal, is designed for self-defense, not as a playbook for assisting the United States in the event of a conflict over Taiwan or some other crisis. France's President [Emmanuel Macron](#) has gone further and preemptively ruled out acting in support of the "U.S. agenda" in a Taiwan crisis. The United States would be churlish to expect India to unreservedly take its side during a global crisis when it cannot expect the same from long-standing allies bound to it by formal treaties.

If Washington cannot expect India to contribute military forces in a crisis, then what is the point of the U.S.-Indian partnership? The answer involves accepting that partnerships are about more than planning for emergencies. U.S. policymakers recognize that a stronger India, one that is more capable of resisting Chinese coercion, serves U.S. interests. But in the absence of clearly defined policy goals, India's cheerleaders in Washington may conjure up unrealistic expectations—and then sour on the partnership when they learn India will not fight for Taiwan. In addition to bolstering economic and interpersonal ties between the two countries, Washington should focus on deepening cooperation in three specific arenas in which India is willing and potentially able to assist it in constraining Beijing's expansive regional ambitions.

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## SEA CHANGE

India has a formidable geographic advantage in the Indo-Pacific region. It dominates trans-Indian Ocean [trade](#) and energy routes, which Chinese strategists recognize as a vexing vulnerability. As the Chinese navy quickly builds its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, India and the United States risk finding their interests routinely contested in the region. Greater Chinese influence over regional countries' security policies would give it greater leverage to coerce them, predatorily extract resources, or limit others' freedom of navigation. In times of crisis, a larger Chinese naval presence, supplemented with more port access, would give Beijing greater capacity to strike or intimidate Indian forces.

The United States, therefore, should support India's efforts to extend its military posture in the Indian Ocean region, including by upgrading its base infrastructure and military equipment. It should also support new training procedures among partners—especially among U.S., Indian, and Australian forces—that make use of each other's facilities. India's military already dominates the northeastern Indian Ocean and the western approaches to the Strait of Malacca, a vital shipping lane that links the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. With upgraded basing in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands archipelago, and bases on Australia's northern coast and Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the three partners would be better able to host reciprocal visits and, eventually, rotational deployments.

The United States should invest in further combined military activities with India in the eastern Indian Ocean, bolstering both countries' capacities to track and, if necessary, target Chinese forces. This would not only be a boon for Indian security but it would also change the strategic geometry of the Indo-Pacific. A more potent force within striking distance of Chinese facilities and assets in the South China Sea would severely complicate Beijing's military planning for any invasion of Taiwan. All aspects of the Indo-Pacific theater are ultimately linked: by taking prudent steps to improve their military posture in the Indian Ocean, India and the United States can also create a ripple of added deterrence in the western Pacific. In this way, India can shape Beijing's decision-making even without engaging directly in a Taiwan conflict.

## FINDING A NICHE

The United States should also support India's development of high-value niche military capabilities. The wholesale recapitalization of India's ponderously large military is overdue, but replacing legacy Russian-origin kit with U.S. equipment would be slow and prohibitively expensive. The Indian military, however, does not need to replace its entire order of battle with new planes, tanks, and ships. Indeed, India's recent acquisition of a relatively small number of U.S.-made transport aircraft has given it a new and valuable ability to execute high-profile humanitarian relief and evacuation operations in Turkey and Sudan.

As the war in Ukraine has shown, excellence in a niche military capability can have a disproportionate effect on the battlefield. Military modernization need not produce a standardized, wholly modern military, especially when resources are scarce. Instead, it could produce pockets of highly effective capabilities, using high technology in highly specialized roles. Rather than trying to match China's comprehensive and resource-intensive modernization, India should tailor its capabilities to repel specific types of enemy aggression in specific theaters—and Washington should help it do so.

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India faces threats from China's incremental encroachment on its land border and gradually expanding presence in the Indian Ocean. To deter a fait accompli land grab in the Himalayas, India needs high-quality intelligence and surveillance capabilities to detect incursions early and highly mobile reaction teams to deny them. To deter a roving group of maritime militia vessels or submarines, India would benefit from long-range and long-endurance undersea drones and more air-launched antiship missiles. These are just two examples of how the United States can bolster India's military capabilities without selling it a large fleet of F-35 fighter jets. Selective projects for weapons codevelopment or transfers can have outsized deterrent or combat effect. And over time, they can become a key pillar of the U.S. and Indian militaries' ability to operate together.

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## A DIPLOMATIC OFFENSIVE

Finally, the United States should enhance its diplomatic coordination with India. Washington and New Delhi exert diplomatic influence over different groups of countries. In some cases, this has been a source of frustration or friction—most acutely, when India's relationship with Russia prompted it to take a more neutral position on the Ukraine war. But in the context of strategic competition with China, such links may prove to be an asset that Washington lacks.

India brings well-developed connections to countries of the global South, mostly in Africa and Asia. Washington has traditionally neglected such states, in part because policies tailored to win influence in the developing world are not vote-winners in the United States. In today's Washington, bellicosity on China is a much surer way to win and remain in office than investing in renewable-energy infrastructure in Africa. In contrast, India's influence is based on a historical legacy of diplomatic leadership, diaspora links, and a perceived affinity of interests. And it is devoid of Washington's alien-sounding appeals to a global contest between democracy and autocracy.

Whereas China has built global influence through its investment largesse, India retains a reservoir of goodwill based on its legacy as a champion of the globe's marginalized countries. Last week, Papua New Guinea's prime minister, James Marape, welcomed Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a visit by declaring, in an echo of the Cold War's Non-Aligned Movement, “we need a third big voice” on the global stage. In return, he pledged, the island nations of the Pacific “will rally behind your leadership.” This is far from a zero-sum contest for favor; the United States signed a new security agreement with

Papua New Guinea at the same time. But India can often serve as an indispensable bridge—a “South Western power”—to build consensus when U.S. demands may be polarizing. At the G-20 summit in Bali last November, Indian diplomats cobbled together a joint communiqué mildly rebuking Russia’s [invasion of Ukraine](#), declaring this is “not an era of war.” The term, which was coined by Modi months earlier, certainly does not represent a full-throated denunciation of Moscow’s actions—but it was better than nothing.


In times of crisis, U.S. and Indian diplomatic messaging may not be identical—but it can be complementary. A coordinated diplomatic campaign that includes India would extend a political consensus against Chinese coercion far beyond what Washington could achieve alone.

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## A BETTER BET

In the coming years, India will play a bigger role in containing China’s growing power—but on its own terms. As Tellis rightly notes, New Delhi’s limited power and its strategic priorities mean that it will refuse to be an appendage of the United States. But it will remain a potent competitor to China as it seeks to safeguard its interests and reduce its vulnerabilities. If Washington works with New Delhi to reinforce their combined posture in the Indian Ocean, helps it develop niche military capabilities, and collaborates with it in rallying international support for a free and open Indo-Pacific, the U.S.-Indian partnership can play a pivotal role in regional [security](#).

Together, these efforts represent a better bet on India. They would make a meaningful contribution to preserving the status quo without requiring far-fetched obligations from India to support the United States in a crisis. They are also politically and practically feasible because they would not represent an offensive threat to China or require India to dramatically increase the resources it devotes to defense. But they do require that Washington and New Delhi share in-depth assessments on Chinese intent and capability, and periodically review how they could collectively meet new strategic challenges. U.S. defense policy toward India should focus on jump-starting these tasks, rather than preparing for coalition warfare.

India is an intrinsically important country that is rapidly strengthening its ties to the United States. The growing flows of trade, investment, and people between the two countries has obvious mutual benefits. But the defense relationship often suffers wild oscillations of expectations. As Washington feverishly convinces itself that it is hurtling toward war with China, some will be tempted to judge allies and partners based on their willingness to sacrifice blood and treasure in a potential conflict over Taiwan. But Washington will find itself very lonely if it imposes such an unreasonable litmus test. It has a chance, instead, to build a more realistic and resilient strategic partnership with India that will outlast a Taiwan crisis—and may even help to deter one. 

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