


Indo-Pacific Security Program Memorandum



INDIA'S GRAND STRATEGY AND THE U.S. RISK EQUATION

By McCarthy Anum-Addo

India has well and truly arrived. Today, its GDP ranks fifth in the world.¹ The country leads the Global South in multilateral forums. It develops indigenous missile systems, hosts digital identity infrastructure for over a billion people, and increasingly sets the tone in Indo-Pacific debates. But alongside this rise, India is also showing signs of democratic backsliding, typified by the suppression of dissent, growing religious intolerance, expanded executive power and the deployment of technology for domestic surveillance.²

The United States risks misunderstanding India not by underestimating its capabilities, but by misreading its strategic trajectory. India is not drifting toward Beijing. It is evolving into something more complex, a power that could embody many of the same structural features that made China formidable: centralized control, strategic ambiguity, and technological sovereignty.

Unlike authoritarian regimes, such a “Sinoform” state would maintain electoral democracy and pluralistic façades but adopt governance patterns that are optimized for control, stability, and leverage. India’s current direction suggests it could well become such a China-like actor, without becoming a Chinese ally. That possibility demands new thinking in Washington—not to pressure India into alignment, but to manage the risk of strategic replication.

As Washington redefines its Indo-Pacific posture, the prevailing assumption has been clear: India will naturally lean democratic, liberal, and Western. But assumptions are not strategy, and misreading India’s trajectory risks strategic drift.

The Evolution of Indian Strategic Doctrine

India’s strategic thinking has never been static. From the ashes of colonialism to the heights of modern multilateralism, its foreign policy doctrine has evolved through several distinct phases.

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At the time of the country's independence in August of 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru rejected the bipolarity of the Cold War, advocating instead for moral leadership through the Non-Aligned Movement. Strategic autonomy was both a practical necessity and an ideological imperative. India's refusal to join alliances was framed as a civilizational stance rooted in nonviolence, democracy, and sovereignty.

Subsequently, the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation with the Soviet Union³ marked India's shift toward a pragmatic alignment. Facing regional threats from China and Pakistan, India leaned heavily on Soviet defense supplies and diplomatic support while maintaining rhetorical non-alignment. This era saw the militarization of India's foreign policy, including its 1974 nuclear test.

The 1991 economic crisis forced India to open its markets and reconsider its strategic posture. Liberalization triggered deeper engagement with the United States, Israel, and the countries of Southeast Asia. Thereafter, the 2005 U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement signaled a willingness on Delhi's part to build long-term partnerships⁴ — so long as they did not compromise sovereignty.

Now, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has adopted a more muscular, Hindu nationalist posture. Strategic doctrine is no longer reactive but aspirational. India promotes itself as a “Vishwaguru” (global teacher), emphasizes civilizational exceptionalism, and projects power through both hard assets and soft narratives.⁵

This assertiveness is not just rhetorical in nature. Rather, it is articulated in India's official doctrine. The *Annual Report of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs for 2022–23* emphasizes India's commitment to “strategic autonomy and multi-alignment” as foundational principles for navigating global flux.⁶ Likewise, the Indian Ministry of Defence's Raksha Mantri Operational Directive reinforces India's posture as an independent power center not bound to formal alliances.⁷ While Modi has deep-

ened ties with the U.S. and Japan, he has simultaneously embraced multilateralism with Russia, Iran, and through China-led blocs like BRICS and the SCO.⁸

India In the New Era

Throughout all these eras, a central logic has persisted: to preserve space for international maneuvering, to avoid entanglement, and to convert partnerships into leverage.

This logic becomes even more striking in the contemporary geopolitical climate, one defined by assertive authoritarianism, democratic volatility, and the erosion of multilateral norms. India's strategic posture is not merely a continuation of its past, but a conscious adaptation to a world in which power is increasingly personalized, transactional, and narrative-driven.⁹

Under Xi Jinping, China has codified an assertive strategic doctrine that fuses Leninist centralization with technological authoritarianism.¹⁰ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's militarization of the South China Sea, and its aggressive “wolf-warrior” diplomacy all reflect a worldview that seeks dominance through entangled economic leverage and coerced consensus. India sees this, and it resists not just China's encroachments but the Chinese model itself. India's doctrine of Multi-Vector Hedging (described below) is, in part, a rejection of China's singular gravitational pull—a refusal to orbit any one power, including Beijing.

Vladimir Putin's Russia embodies a different template: the fusion of nostalgia, coercion, and information warfare into a siege-based strategy of global influence. India's long-standing defense ties with Moscow continue to endure. But its strategic doctrine avoids emulation of Russia's current trajectory. Rather than aligning with Russia's revanchist militarism or its openly anti-Western posture, India uses its relationship with the Kremlin as ballast—exploiting historical dependencies for present-day optionality. India's affinity with Russia remains bounded and reversible.



And in Donald Trump's America—volatile, transactional, and at times contemptuous of multilateralism—India found both opportunity and cautionary tale. Trump's "America First" rhetoric¹¹ resonated with Modi's "Made in India" platform, and bilateral ties deepened. Yet the unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy under Trump also reinforced a central Indian lesson: alliances built on personality are fragile, and sovereignty must be systematized. This reinforced India's deeper institutional distrust of formal military alliances and preference for modularity in engagement.

In this world of hyper-personalized power—Xi's centralized permanence, Putin's imperial nostalgia and Trump's transactional nationalism—India's doctrine stands apart. It seeks influence not through domination, but through positional flexibility, reputation management, and strategic ambiguity. Where others pursue spheres of influence, India curates spheres of optionality.

Importantly, India is not passive in this dynamic. It is watching, learning, and selectively borrowing. From China, it takes the idea of technological sovereignty but rejects Beijing's coercive debt diplomacy. From Russia, it mimics defense indigenization but avoids geostrategic isolation. And from the U.S., it absorbs digital entrepreneurship and civil society innovation, even as it resists perceived moral imposition.

India is thus no longer a swing state. It is a sovereign synthesizer: a state assembling a custom doctrine from the ruins of 20th-century alliances and the contradictions of 21st-century power. The danger is not that India will align with autocracies, but that it will borrow their tools—narrative control, electoral majoritarianism, tech-driven governance—while retaining a democratic exterior. In a geopolitical landscape where alliances fray and ideologies blend, India's strategic doctrine is not outdated. It is dangerously modern.

The Three Doctrines of Indian Strategy

India's external engagement today is defined by its ability

to balance competing power centers. This is not passive non-alignment, but active hedging.

India buys over 45% of its arms from Russia,¹² even as it co-develops defense systems with the U.S., France, and Israel. It joined the Quad with the U.S., Japan, and Australia, while also leading the Shanghai Cooperation Organization alongside China and Russia. It trades heavily with China—\$136 billion in 2022¹³—even as it confronts Chinese troops at the Line of Actual Control.

Such multi-vector hedging maximizes autonomy. It reflects not confusion, but control. As Indian scholars Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi note, "India's hedging is an assertion of autonomy, not indecision."¹⁴ It allows India to extract strategic and economic benefits without joining anyone's camp.

As of 2023, India maintained formal economic and security dialogues with more than 12 major powers, including all five permanent UN Security Council members.¹⁵ That represents a rare strategic geometry, and one unmatched by any other Global South nation.

Likewise, India understands that its greatest weapon may not be kinetic but cognitive. After the 2020 Galwan Valley clash with China, India deployed troops, upgraded mountain infrastructure, and executed logistics maneuvers. However, it avoided escalatory rhetoric. Simultaneously, it held 17 rounds of diplomatic talks with Beijing while broadcasting images of restraint and discipline.¹⁶

A 2022 Pew Research poll found that 68% of Indians hold an unfavorable view of China,¹⁷ a perception the Indian state has leveraged to sustain a firm-yet-controlled border posture.

This cognitive deterrence doctrine involves the use of perception shaping, reputational contrast, and narrative warfare. Through platforms like Vaccine Maitri (its vaccine diplomacy initiative) and the Digital Public Infrastructure framework, India projects a rules-based,



democratic image. This enhances its credibility even as democratic institutions backslide internally. The goal is not deterrence through punishment but through political cost, raising the reputational consequences for adversaries tempted to escalate.

Finally, there is India's pursuit of what could be called strategic non-permanence. Simply put, India views alliances as traps. It prefers modular, transactional, and renewable partnerships.

Thus, India participates in the Quad alliance but resists its militarization. It engages in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor yet declines to anchor them in binding governance regimes. And its cooperation with Iran on the Chabahar port ebbs and flows, depending on pressure from Washington.

India's decision to abstain from binding multilateral treaties like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)¹⁸ reflects a consistent aversion to frameworks that constrain future sovereignty, even when short-term gains from such architectures are evident.

This behavior reflects a postcolonial memory: that permanent alignments often come with asymmetric constraints. As diplomat Shyam Saran puts it, "India remembers too well the price of permanent alignment."¹⁹

Implications For Relations with the United States

All of this is germane to India's contemporary relationship with the United States. Despite growing U.S.-India cooperation, underlying tensions could disrupt the relationship. These include:

Russia Sanctions

India's continued arms trade with Moscow and refusal to criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine challenge U.S.

expectations of values-based alignment.²⁰

Digital Sovereignty

India's data localization mandates,²¹ restrictions on foreign platforms, and push for an indigenous tech stack clash with U.S. commercial and ideological interests.

Democratic Norms

Press freedom, religious pluralism, and judicial independence have declined in recent years, prompting concern in the U.S. Congress and civil society.²²

Simply put, India views alliances as traps. It prefers modular, transactional, and renewable partnerships.

Iran Ties

India's strategic engagement with Tehran—including energy deals and infrastructure investments—significantly complicates the U.S. posture in the Middle East.

These fissures do not signal hostility. However, they do expose the limits of assuming that shared democracy equals shared direction.

The danger here is not divergence. It is misalignment without adaptation. If the United States clings to rigid alliance logic while India prioritizes maneuver, the result is not conflict but irrelevance. What's needed is not pressure, but instead a paradigm shift in how Washington engages rising sovereign actors.

India remains indispensable to any credible U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Its demographic scale, digital backbone, military reach, and convening power among Global South nations position it as the only viable counterweight to China outside of the West. Strategic convergence may be imperfect, but strategic irrelevance is far worse. To walk away from India would be to abandon the architecture of the Indo-Pacific to authoritarian



influence. The question, then, is not whether India will lead, but rather who will shape the way it does.

Shaping, Not Forcing

The U.S. must accept that India's logic is not alignment—it is leverage. A more effective strategy is one of calibrated influence that supports Indian autonomy while shaping the parameters of its strategic evolution. At the core of such a strategy should be a range of modular strategic initiatives that align with India's preference for issue-based, renewable partnerships. These include:

Quantum and AI Governance Alliance

The United States and India should co-develop ethical AI, privacy safeguards, and post-quantum encryption standards. Such a partnership would position India as a Global South champion of open-source, rights-based digital governance. This is logical. After all, India is already leading global initiatives like the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model,²³ advocating ethical standards rooted in transparency and accessibility. By co-developing AI norms, the U.S. can support India in becoming a democratic tech exporter to the Global South. Without this partnership, however, India may default to proprietary, state-centric systems that echo China's surveillance-first architecture.

Indo-Pacific Space Surveillance Fusion Center

The United States should include the India Space Research Organization (ISRO) in multilateral maritime domain awareness frameworks, without permanent basing. Such a partnership would support shared security goals while respecting India's autonomy. India's ISRO has proven itself a cost-efficient leader in space-based intelligence.²⁴ Integrating Indian assets into multilateral maritime domain awareness systems would enable non-intrusive cooperation on shared security threats like illegal fishing and gray zone aggression. The absence of such collaboration, by contrast, risks ceding dominance of orbital observation in the Indian Ocean to China.

An India–Middle East Renewable Energy Corridor

The United States should likewise support trilateral green hydrogen and rare-earth partnerships with India and Gulf allies. Such lash-ups are necessary in order to counter China's influence in the energy transition with decentralized infrastructure. India's need for green hydrogen and rare-earth minerals aligns with U.S. goals to diversify energy routes away from Beijing.²⁵ A trilateral corridor with Gulf states could form the backbone of a post-carbon trade system. If the U.S. lags in this regard, however, China's BRI-linked solar and lithium diplomacy will fill the vacuum.

U.S.-India Smart Manufacturing Fund

The United States should also seed joint ventures in semiconductors and dual-use tech under India's "Make in India" program. This necessitates a move from buyer-seller to co-developer logic. India's push for manufacturing sovereignty under "Make in India" offers a strategic opening in this regard.²⁶ Joint ventures in dual-use tech, particularly semiconductors and drones, can help transition the U.S.–India relationship from a buyer-seller dynamic to a co-developer ecosystem. If not leveraged, Indian industrial policy may increasingly look inward—or Eastward.

Indo-Pacific Cyber Reserve Force

Also needed is the development of a distributed, modular cyber response unit drawing on Indian expertise. Such a body should be non-aligned, renewable, and scalable, in order to comport with India's preference for strategic non-permanence. India possesses a vast pool of cybersecurity talent—one that remains underutilized.²⁷ A U.S.-supported modular cyber team, jointly trained but independently deployable, would offer a non-aligned model of multilateral digital defense. This would sidestep political sensitivities while building collective deterrence against authoritarian cyber offensives.

Democratic Resilience Through Normative Embedding

Rather than lecturing India, it's necessary for the United States to embed soft guardrails into bilateral and multi-



lateral cooperation. For instance, the U.S. should require data ethics, transparency protocols, and human rights standards in tech co-development. It should fund ex-

tial. That requires a new strategic humility from Washington, and a deeper understanding of how to influence a sovereign giant without trying to own it.

If Washington attempts to force alignment, it may provoke resistance and deepen India's drift toward Sinoformation: a powerful, democratic-structured state that replicates China's strategic architecture of control, sovereignty, and tech nationalism.

changes for Indian journalists, legal scholars, and civil society actors as a way to strengthen India's bottom-up democratic capacity. And it should support the development and entrenchment of pluralistic institutions via discreet, long-term partnerships with Indian universities and independent research bodies. The key is normative conditionality without coercion, which entails partnering in ways that reinforce India's democratic foundation without triggering a nationalist backlash.

Ultimately, partnership cannot be imposed. Influence, if it is to endure, must be earned through modular trust, normative depth, and narrative restraint. These recommendations are not a blueprint for alliance. Rather, they are a strategy for coexistence with a state that refuses to be contained.


Preventing The Rise of the "Sinoform"

The U.S.-India relationship cannot rest on assumptions. India is not a "natural ally" simply because it is democratic. Nor is it a counter-China by default. Its trajectory is unique, and uniquely consequential.

If Washington attempts to force alignment, it may provoke resistance and deepen India's drift toward what I term Sinoformation: a powerful, democratic-structured state that replicates China's strategic architecture of control, sovereignty, and tech nationalism.

The alternative is risk-managed convergence, entailing support for India's rise in a way that is flexible, modular, and respectful yet anchored in shared democratic poten-

The choice is not between an ally and adversary. It is between shaping a space of influence—and watching a friend evolve into a formidable stranger.

What follows will depend not on declarations, but on design. Can the U.S. offer India a relationship spacious enough for difference, yet stable enough for trust? Can it embed values without imposing them, and shape convergence without demanding compliance? The era of rigid alliances is fading. In its place, a new form must emerge—one modular, sovereign, and plural. India may never be contained. But it can still be persuaded. And if we succeed, the democratic future may not be ours to impose, but it will still be ours to co-create. 

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For the United States, the Indo-Pacific represents a region of significant security challenges and enormous political and economic opportunity. AFPC's Indo-Pacific Security Program seeks to provide policymakers and the general public with the analysis, insights and recommendations necessary to properly understand and navigate this vital region.

For more information about the program, please contact Ilan Berman, Senior Vice President, at berman@afpc.org.

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