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Major Power Rivalry in South Asia

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INTRODUCTION

During the Cold War, South Asia was largely considered a peripheral theater. U.S.-Soviet competition affected the countries in the region and shaped their choices, but the subcontinent itself was not generally the primary, or even secondary, arena in the superpower rivalry. It was only with the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that the region came into the Cold War spotlight for any length of time.¹

The landscape today is different. The region is already involved in and affected by competition between the major powers—a dynamic that is only likely to intensify in the future. Significantly, the region is the primary site of one major power competition—that between China and India. Moreover, the crucial global competition expected to define the coming era—U.S.-China rivalry—involves a country abutting South Asia. And Beijing has been increasing its presence and influence in almost every South Asian country and in the Indian Ocean region.

These China-India and U.S.-China rivalries are likely to have the biggest effect on the region, both in terms of risks and opportunities. Other major powers, which have existing strategic or economic equities in the region or, in some cases, their own concerns about China's rising influence and behavior, will also play a role. These include Japan, Russia, and the European Union (as well as particular European countries, such as France and the United Kingdom).

Unlike in the Cold War, South Asia and the Indian Ocean region will be a significant arena of major power competition, even as East Asia and the western Pacific remain the primary area of U.S.-China competition. The larger powers will seek to protect their interests while managing their rivalries. Smaller states in the region will hope to exercise agency and take advantage of major power rivalries while insulating

themselves from any fallout. Together, these two dynamics will shape the geopolitical landscape of the region.

What happens in the region, in turn, could have implications for how major power competition plays out globally, and thus for the international order. The fate of the China-India rivalry will help determine the balance of power in the region. But it could also influence the extent to which those countries choose to cooperate or compete with each other—and whether they collaborate with other major powers—regionally and globally, including in international institutions or interest-based coalitions.

CHINA-INDIA RIVALRY

South Asia is the primary site of one major power competition: that between China and India. This rivalry has shaped Chinese involvement in other South Asian countries, particularly driving the close China-Pakistan partnership. It has also been a crucial motivator for India to cooperate with the United States and a number of U.S. allies and partners. These two dynamics—China’s partnerships in South Asia and India’s growing alignment with other major powers—have further fueled China-India competition. And this will have broader implications for the region and the global order.

There are multiple sources and dimensions of the China-India rivalry. It is playing out at the bilateral, regional, and global levels, as well as across multiple domains (geopolitical, economic, technological, ideological, and soft power).²

Many of the bilateral differences are long-standing. Most significant is the boundary dispute. The two nuclear powers have the longest non-demarcated border in the world and competing territorial claims, including Indian claims in the western sector of their boundary (to Aksai Chin, which China possesses) and Chinese claims in the eastern sector (to the Indian state Arunachal Pradesh). Their boundary dispute led to the 1962 war between the two countries that resulted in Indian defeat and historical baggage that the relationship has yet to overcome. It also led to a number of subsequent skirmishes.

This boundary dispute remains one of the most likely sources of military confrontation. After a relative lull of about three decades, it has repeatedly flared up since 2013. There have been at least four major military standoffs, including in 2017 at the Bhutan-China-India trijunction and in 2020–21 at multiple points, primarily in Ladakh.³ Each of these has taken place since Chinese President Xi Jinping came

to power and in the context of upgraded border infrastructure on both sides that makes the disputed areas more accessible.

The ongoing boundary crisis, which became evident in May 2020 and turned fatal in June 2020, is the most serious China-India confrontation in decades. Delhi sees the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) attempt to change the status quo at multiple points at the boundary—whether by establishing a permanent presence or hindering Indian patrols in areas that both countries claim—as the cause of the crisis. Beijing has contended that infrastructure-building on the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which separates the two militaries, changed the status quo.⁴ This crisis has lasted longer than other Xi-era incidents and involved more locations, greater aggressiveness, larger deployments, and the first fatalities in hostilities at the boundary in forty-five years. Subsequent incidents of firing in fall 2020 (in the course of India's attempt to offset Chinese gains and the PLA's response) also involved the first known shots fired at this boundary in decades.⁵

In part because the countries have crossed these thresholds, the current crisis is a watershed moment in the relationship.⁶ In addition, it suggests that the set of boundary agreements, norms, and protocols that Beijing and Delhi had put in place to manage the dispute and avoid escalation are insufficient, ineffective, or defunct.⁷ Moreover, the crisis has highlighted a potentially destabilizing gap between Chinese and Indian understandings of which parts of the boundary are settled and which are up for grabs.⁸ Finally, there is likely to be a lower level of trust in Delhi that Beijing will follow the bilateral agreements in the future, with particular concerns about further territorial salami-slicing (i.e., China opportunistically and incrementally taking control of disputed areas and presenting India with a *fait accompli*). These concerns could result in the LAC resembling the Line of Control between India and Pakistan, with a greater number of forward-deployed armed troops and a more militarized and tense boundary.

Another source of strain between China and India is the issue of Tibet. Beijing has long held suspicions of India's attitude toward Tibet, which intensified after the escape of the Dalai Lama and a number of Tibetans to India in 1959. These doubts, including about U.S.-India collusion, shaped China's calculations in the lead-up to the 1962 war.⁹ Beijing continues to look askance at the Tibetan presence in India and the activities of the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration, based in Dharamshala, India—though Delhi, which recognizes Tibet as a part of China, places restrictions on the activities the Tibetan leadership can undertake from India. China was likely displeased

with publicity in India during the current crisis about the deployment at the boundary of the Special Frontier Force, consisting of Tibetan soldiers and formed with U.S. assistance after the 1962 war.¹⁰ China also disapproves of official U.S. interaction with Tibetan leaders in India—meetings that usually take place with the acquiescence of the Indian government.¹¹ The Tibet divergence between China and India could become more acute as the question of the successor to the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who turned eighty-six this year, looms. Delhi does not support the contention that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation would require Chinese concurrence or Beijing's assertion that no other country should play a role.¹²

India, in turn, has objected to China's reluctance to recognize the former state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), now the union territories of Ladakh and J&K, as part of India. In 2009, for example, instead of stamping visas for Indian passport-holders from J&K and Arunachal Pradesh, Beijing issued them on separate, stapled pages.¹³ Seemingly in response, India has not publicly reaffirmed its commitment to a One China policy since 2010, even though it continues not to recognize Taiwan as a country. (Delhi has, however, deepened diplomatic, security, and economic ties with Taipei, and Indian public awareness of Taiwan has increased in part because of Taipei's pandemic response and diplomacy, much to China's chagrin.)¹⁴

Another point of strain involves the Brahmaputra River, which flows from China to India and Bangladesh. India's concerns include Chinese dam construction, potential river diversion, and the erosion of its usage rights. Moreover, Beijing's suspension of hydrological data-sharing during the Doklam crisis was not reassuring, suggesting that China could be willing to use its upriver position to try to influence Indian behavior in the future.¹⁵ Some believe this could turn into a more serious dispute and even spark a conflict, particularly if there is any river diversion; however, others are skeptical on geopolitical and scientific grounds.¹⁶

Bilateral friction has also grown as China-India economic ties have increased. Indian concerns include the trade deficit (between one-third and a half of its total trade deficit is with China), lack of reciprocity (especially in terms of market access), intellectual property theft, the collection and use of Indians' data, Beijing's influence over Chinese companies operating in India, supply-chain vulnerabilities, and the potential use of economic coercion for strategic and political ends.¹⁷ The imbalance in trade relations with China was a significant reason why India declined to join the Beijing-backed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

in 2019.¹⁸ Beijing, for its part, has complained about restricted market access for its companies in certain sectors and regions.

China and India's bilateral differences are the most likely to lead them to military confrontation, but their regional differences have spoiled the atmosphere as well. India particularly looks askance at China's long-standing strategic relationship with Pakistan, which has deepened and broadened in recent years, partly because of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹⁹ Delhi perceives Beijing as enhancing Islamabad's conventional military, missile, and nuclear capabilities and providing it cover or support in such international institutions as the UN Security Council and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).²⁰

Beyond Pakistan, India has warily watched China's increased diplomatic, political, economic, and defense ties with its other neighbors (Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka). These ties have deepened in part because of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As scholar Constantino Xavier has noted, today India has to deal with a more competitive space after having been singularly dominant in its neighborhood.²¹ The sense among many policymakers is that China's influence in India's territorial and maritime neighborhood is jeopardizing Indian interests—that Beijing has not respected Delhi's sensitivities in the region and is not just creating the space for India's neighbors to do the same but actively encouraging them to do so.

These concerns—and the fact that some CPEC projects are in territory that India claims—have led to Indian opposition to BRI.²² Delhi rejected an invitation to the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, stressing that connectivity projects should be based on “respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability” and should not exacerbate debt burdens or strategic competition—suggesting that BRI did not meet these standards.²³

China's forays into the Indian Ocean have added to India's anxieties. Delhi worries that Beijing's unilateral attempts to change the status quo elsewhere—such as the South and East China Seas and its borders with Bhutan, India, and Nepal—suggest it will not be a rule follower in this maritime region, either.²⁴ And Indian policymakers are concerned about the reliability of any Chinese assurances about its activities, pointing, for example, to Chinese overseas bases and troop deployments contra previous declarations.²⁵ This has fueled India's willingness to work alone and with like-minded partners—including the United States, Australia, France, and Japan—to, as the Indian chief of naval staff put it, ensure “safe, secure seas,” “freedom of navigation,” and a “rules-based order” in the Indian Ocean region.²⁶

Beijing, for its part, has seen Delhi's deepening ties with these like-minded partners as a challenge. It has been particularly vocal in its opposition to the U.S.-Australia-India-Japan quadrilateral grouping (the Quad) and those countries' Indo-Pacific concepts. After dismissing these initiatives in 2018, more recently Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that they represented "huge underlying security risk[s]," portended a "new [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]," and would "stir up confrontation among different groups and blocs and ... stoke geopolitical competition."²⁷

Underlying this tension are the different visions that China and India have for the region. Analyst Yun Sun has noted that "Beijing's vision for Asia is strictly hierarchical—with China at the top—and [it] does not consider India an equal."²⁸ India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar, however, made clear that "a multipolar world must have a multipolar Asia as its basis."²⁹ Delhi also sees a role for non-Asian countries such as the United States in the region, while Beijing has expressed an Asia-for-Asians preference.³⁰

China's and India's different perceptions and approaches are also evident on the global stage, where in the past they found common cause. Delhi sees Beijing's resistance to Indian membership in the UN Security Council and the Nuclear Suppliers Group as reflective of its desire to limit India's space and to prevent its rise. Beijing has most likely noticed how Delhi, in turn, has been cooperating with like-minded partners to blunt Chinese influence in international organizations.³¹

One other area could cause friction: Indians seeing and highlighting the ideological contrast with China, a sensitive subject for Beijing. Some of India's China hands are increasingly perceiving China's political system as part of the problem because of Beijing's initial lack of transparency about COVID-19, its subsequent contrasting of its own success with certain democracies' deficiencies in tackling the pandemic, and its greater willingness to propound its system (and tools) as a model. India, in turn, has an interest in benefiting strategically and economically from portraying its democratic system as more transparent and reliable than that of China—an approach that annoys Beijing.³²

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China has actively sought to blunt the idea of democracies in general, and India in particular, as effective alternatives or providers. Rather than serve as an opportunity for cooperation, this global health crisis has reinforced rivalry between China and India, with response and recovery efforts being seen through a competitive prism. Most recently, as India experienced a deadly second COVID-19 wave, China did offer help, just as India had assisted China

at the beginning of the pandemic. However, this seemingly cooperative step got mired in concerns about China suspending cargo flights and passing commercial supplies off as assistance, Chinese suppliers raising prices of essential supplies, Chinese state-owned media outlets and social media highlighting India's shortcomings, and questions about whether India would accept help from China.³³

U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY

Although China-India competition will be the major power rivalry with the biggest effect in and on South Asia, U.S.-China competition will also have an effect. As their rivalry has intensified, Washington and Beijing have seen South Asia through a more competitive prism. And with a few exceptions, they see the other's role as unhelpful, if not harmful.

On the one hand, the United States sees China's rivalry with India as destabilizing, but, on the other hand, it has opened the door for a closer U.S.-India partnership. This has been useful in the context of U.S. competition with China, in which officials and analysts have envisioned India as a geopolitical counterbalance, economic alternative, or democratic contrast to China. This view has contributed to the last few U.S. administrations seeing India's rise to be in U.S. interests and worth supporting.

India, for its part, has also seen the United States as crucial to its strategy of managing China. Its China approach has included cooperation, internal balancing, and external balancing. Each of these elements has involved a role for the United States. India has found that its ties with the United States have at times given China an incentive to interact with India—and that China, because of its concern about the United States' convening a countervailing coalition, takes India more seriously in part because the United States does. The United States has also directly and indirectly helped enhance India's military, economic, and technological capabilities. And the United States is a crucial part of India's network of partnerships that can help maintain a favorable balance of power in the region.

Thus, U.S.-China competition and China-India competition have paved the way for deeper U.S.-India ties, driven by their shared concerns about a rising China's behavior. This has particularly been the case in the defense and security space over the past decade and a half,

and recently was evident in Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to India in March 2021 and the Indian external affairs minister's visit to Washington, DC, in May 2021. A set of agreements, regular dialogues and military exercises, and the Indian acquisition of U.S. military equipment have facilitated habits of cooperation, military interoperability, and intelligence-sharing, among other things. The two countries are also cooperating in third countries, with other partners (for example, via the U.S.-India-Japan trilateral, the Quad, and one-offs such as a U.S.-India-Japan-Philippines group sail through the South China Sea), and in regional and international institutions.³⁴

The United States has also worked with India—and sometimes with countries such as France and the United Kingdom—to overcome Chinese resistance in international institutions. This has benefited Delhi through a Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver that opened the door for India to import certain technologies and equipment; the greylisting of Pakistan at FATF, which requires it to take action against money laundering and terrorism financing; the United Nations' 1267 Committee designation of Pakistan-based terrorists that had targeted India; and the blocking of China-Pakistan efforts to raise the Kashmir issue in the UN Security Council.³⁵

The United States has had a mixed view of China's partnership with Pakistan. By giving Pakistan a non-U.S. option, China has reduced U.S. leverage with Pakistan and made the Pakistani leadership less willing to take action the United States desires, especially on counterterrorism. For example, China has been willing to use its leverage with Pakistan to curb the activities of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement but not of the Haqqani network or Lashkar-e-Taiba.³⁶ At times, though, Washington has found that Beijing's influence with Islamabad can be useful if it coincides with U.S. interests—for example, on Afghanistan or in India-Pakistan crisis management.

However, intensifying U.S.-China competition can change views in Washington. For example, initially the United States took a more sanguine view of CPEC, hoping it could contribute to Pakistani economic development, reduce Islamabad's demands of Washington, and incentivize China to seek stability and security in Pakistan. In recent years, though, U.S. officials have spoken out against CPEC, questioning its costs, effect on Pakistan's debt burden, lack of transparency, and effect on employment.³⁷

The U.S. view of the smaller South Asian states (SSAs) has also changed as a result of U.S.-China competition.³⁸ For one, this rivalry has put South Asia and the Indian Ocean region under a bigger spotlight

because this is seen as an important arena in which China is increasing its activities, presence, and influence. Indeed, the Chinese port project at Hambantota in Sri Lanka contributed to Washington's seeing BRI from a more competitive prism.³⁹

The greater U.S. concern about China in South Asia, and especially the Indian Ocean region, has led to increased attention to the SSAs. In a five-month period during 2018–19, then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hosted the foreign ministers of Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka and then discussed COVID-19 with them in 2020.⁴⁰ Also in 2020, the United States signed a defense agreement with the Maldives, and then Secretary of Defense Mark Esper spoke with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.⁴¹ Pompeo visited Sri Lanka and the Maldives (announcing plans for a new embassy in the latter), while then Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun traveled to Bangladesh. His successor, Wendy Sherman, recently held a consultation with the SSAs on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting. With this attention has come some increased security assistance, help in dealing with COVID-19, and development assistance.⁴²

For these countries, U.S.-China competition—and China-India competition—has thus brought with it some benefits and an ability to play one benefactor against the other to maximize gains and their strategic space. An additional benefit from some SSA governments' perspectives (for example, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka): major power rivalry has reduced the extent to which U.S. concerns about their internal political developments have impeded U.S. interaction with their countries.

U.S. concerns about Chinese activities—concerns that converge with many of India's—have also opened the door to a greater degree of U.S.-India consultation, coordination, and cooperation in the region. Delhi has historically not liked to see extra-regional countries be active in what it considers its backyard. But, just as in the 1950s and 1960s, as China has become more active in the region, India has become more accepting, if not welcoming, of more U.S. and Japanese involvement in the region if it brings additional resources and offers alternatives to China's initiatives. This was evident in India's response to the U.S.-Maldives defense agreement and the Japan-Maldives coast guard agreement. This attitude has also opened the door to potential U.S.-India cooperation (as they did in Nepal in the 1950s) or coordination (for example, on COVID-19 response) in the region.⁴³

While the primary area of U.S.-China competition will remain in East Asia and the western Pacific, Beijing largely sees Washington—and particularly its ties with Delhi—as part of its challenge in South Asia. It

sees most U.S. actions there, alone and in conjunction with other major and middle powers, as complicating the landscape and Chinese interests. Some analysts have argued that Beijing, in response, should take a more moderate approach to Delhi lest China-India tensions push India toward the United States even further. Others, however, have asserted that Delhi is already allied and colluding with Washington, and that should not prevent a tougher approach to India—and indeed should serve as an argument for it.⁴⁴

Publicly, Chinese analysts have often highlighted the U.S. presence in the region as a net negative. They have even suggested to Indian counterparts that the United States is a source or instigator of China-India problems.⁴⁵ There have been some exceptions to the Chinese view of the United States as a problem in the region, and the two countries have even cooperated or consulted in response to crises. However, their intensifying rivalry could change that dynamic, too.

THE ROLE OF OTHER MAJOR POWERS

Although the China-India and U.S.-China rivalries will have the most influence on South Asia, other major powers are not missing in action. They have independent interests in the region, but their relationships with the United States, China, and India also affect the role they are playing.

RUSSIA

Several factors shape Russian involvement in the region: its concern about developments in Afghanistan, its partnership with India, its alignment with China, and its rivalry with the United States.

The India-Russia partnership has roots in the countries' Cold War-era rivalries with China. Delhi and Moscow's concerns about Beijing led them to sign a treaty in 1971. That fueled a significant defense relationship that has continued even after the Cold War ended and their relationships with China changed.

Today, India continues to perceive a role for Russia as it tackles its China problem. Moscow remains a major supplier of military equipment, spare parts, and certain technologies that other countries are unwilling or unable to supply to Delhi. For its own reasons, Russia also provides military equipment to other Indian partners in the region, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, that have security concerns about China. And it provides an alternative in sectors in which China is also bidding for projects—for example, setting up a nuclear power plant in Bangladesh.⁴⁶ More broadly, Delhi envisions Moscow as part of its balancing strategy vis-à-vis Beijing, given Russia's previous rivalry with, and ongoing concerns about, China.⁴⁷

However, in recent years, Russia has deepened its partnership with China, and the two countries have cooperated in the bilateral, regional, plurilateral, and multilateral arenas. This growing China-Russia alignment has complicated India's landscape. Historically, close Beijing-Moscow ties were generally to Delhi's detriment. During the 1962 war, for example, the Soviet Union chose ally China over friend India, declining to help India diplomatically or rhetorically, holding up the supply of fighter aircraft to curry China's favor, and providing intelligence on India to China.⁴⁸ Thus, India looks askance at closer China-Russia ties, especially in the defense, security, and technology arenas.

Today, Russia is helping strengthen the Chinese military, one that is involved in a standoff with India—Vladimir Putin publicly highlighted Russian assistance in enhancing PLA capabilities even as that force continued to face off against the Indian military. He also extolled the many virtues of the China-Russia relationship and their deep level of trust, and stated that an alliance could not be ruled out.⁴⁹ This could just have been signaling to Delhi and Washington, but Delhi nonetheless will worry about what Beijing-Moscow ties could mean for Russia's willingness to supply India in its crises with China.

The ongoing China-India boundary crisis will only bring India-Russia contradictions on China to the fore. Beyond their bilateral defense ties, Beijing and Moscow also appear to be cooperating in the region and on the global stage in ways that are not beneficial to India—or at least impinge on its interests. For example, there have been questions about whether Russia continues to support India at the UN Security Council or whether it directly or indirectly sides with China (and, by extension, Pakistan).⁵⁰ Despite Indian overtures, Russian officials have also publicly rejected the Indo-Pacific concept on grounds similar to China's.⁵¹ This disconnect was evident during Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Delhi in April 2021, during which he also noted that Sino-Russian ties had "reached the best level ever."⁵² Furthermore, Russia and China have brought their joint maritime exercises closer to India, undertaking them with South Africa off Cape Town in November 2019 and with Iran in the Indian Ocean in December 2020.⁵³ There were some indications that Iran had also invited Pakistan to the latter—a development that would have caused even greater concern in India.⁵⁴

India has closely watched Russia's increasing interactions with Pakistan in recent years, including via an annual military exercise since 2016, through China-Pakistan-Russia discussions on Afghanistan that have at times separately involved the United States and Iran, and diplomatic

activities such as Lavrov's visit to Pakistan following his India trip.⁵⁵ Moscow's relationship with Beijing also indirectly helps Islamabad—for example, the PLA's deployment of the Russian S-400 system during its military exercise with the Pakistani military would give the latter familiarity with a platform that India will also be inducting.⁵⁶

India sees the U.S.-Russia rivalry as a—if not the—major driver of Russia's deepening ties with China. It has encouraged Washington to recognize that its major challenge is Beijing and that consequently it should seek an accommodation with Moscow.⁵⁷ Some U.S. policy-makers have favored a wedge strategy to divide Russia and China and weaken their partnership. However, Russian actions in Crimea, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. elections have kept any U.S.-Russia rapprochement at bay.⁵⁸ Some U.S. and Russian analysts argue a wedge strategy would be ineffective—and China-Russia relations will continue to deepen regardless of developments with the West.⁵⁹

The ongoing U.S.-Russia rivalry also causes some friction in the U.S.-India relationship. India's acquisition of major defense platforms from Russia, particularly the S-400 missile defense system, has been a crucial subject of concern in the United States. It leaves open the possibility of sanctions against India under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act and could preclude the United States from selling or supplying certain advanced military technology to India.⁶⁰ A waiver provision could prevent the former, and India is convinced that it can find a way to work with the United States despite the latter. But, for now, Russia remains a point of contention in the U.S.-India relationship.

DELHI AND WASHINGTON'S LIKE-MINDED PARTNERS

India's uncertainty about the United States and Russia has reinforced its preference to maintain a diversified portfolio of partners to tackle its China challenge. This has opened the door to a greater degree of cooperation in the region with other powers, including Australia, Japan, and the European Union (EU), particularly some of its individual member states, such as France and Germany, and former members, such as the United Kingdom. These partners can help build India's capabilities, provide non-China alternatives to South Asian countries, ensure a favorable balance of power in the region, and maintain a rules-based order—one not dominated by an assertive China.

Australia, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom, as well as the European Union, have their own motivations for wanting

to increase their involvement in the region. Many of them have existing equities in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. France and the United Kingdom, for example, have territorial possessions and historic ties deriving from their imperial histories. Japan and the EU have provided development assistance. Australia, for its part, shares the extended neighborhood.

Moreover, these countries' increasing concerns about Beijing's behavior have enhanced their interest in developments in the broader Indo-Pacific. These worries include unilateral attempts to change the status quo, the consequences of BRI, technological inroads, unequal economic ties, economic coercion, political interference, disinformation, arbitrary detentions, and lack of transparency, reciprocity, and respect for agreements, international law, and norms (including freedom of navigation).⁶¹

Although each of these powers has close ties with China, especially economically, they also want to ensure that a rules-based order prevails globally and in the region. This greater interest has come with increased attention and resources and adjusted approaches to the region. Japan originated the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept and has poured billions of dollars into the region through its Quality Infrastructure Initiative.⁶² France and Germany have released Indo-Pacific policy guidelines or principles.⁶³ The United Kingdom has undertaken a strategic review and promises greater involvement in the region. The EU, which has called China a "systemic rival," has issued an Asia connectivity strategy and an Indo-Pacific strategy.⁶⁴

These major and middle powers are increasing cooperation with each other bilaterally and plurilaterally. Japan, for example, has deepened ties with Australia and India, supported the EU's Asia connectivity strategy, and advised the United States on development finance.⁶⁵ India and Japan are consulting on infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, and the United States and India are collaborating in Nepal.⁶⁶ Australia and India have trilateral dialogues with Japan (with whom they are discussing a supply-chain resilience initiative), Indonesia, and France.⁶⁷ The United States and Japan have trilateral dialogues with India and Australia (the latter is undertaking joint infrastructure projects).⁶⁸ The United States, Australia, India, and Japan have formed the Quad, which has a wide-ranging agenda.⁶⁹ Washington is more frequently interacting with Berlin, London, and Paris, including on Beijing, and the United States and EU have started a dialogue on China.⁷⁰ The EU and India have launched a maritime security dialogue and conducted a joint naval

exercise. Then there are one-offs such as the United States, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom conducting an exercise in the Bay of Bengal.⁷¹ These various like-minded partners have also cooperated in international institutions.⁷²

Unlike Beijing, Delhi has, on balance, welcomed the involvement of these major and middle powers in the hope that it will have a force multiplier effect. As for the smaller states in the region, a competitive space can benefit them. However, there is also the danger that they could get caught up in major power competition in ways that do not serve their interests.

POTENTIAL AREAS OF CONFLICT

Historically, major powers have been involved in military confrontations in South Asia, directly or indirectly. Some scenarios could lead major powers (especially the United States, China, and India) to face off or get involved in conflicts again.

One scenario is an India-Pakistan conflict. The United States and China are already involved because they supply military equipment to India and Pakistan (as do France, Russia, and the United Kingdom). Beyond that, the United States and China generally prefer that India and Pakistan crises do not escalate (in part because those countries possess nuclear weapons). However, if the China-Pakistan and U.S.-India alignments deepen in the context of heightened U.S.-China competition, and if they think their credibility and partnerships are at stake, Washington and Beijing could view the situation differently. This could involve being reluctant to persuade or pressure their regional partner (India or Pakistan) to de-escalate or providing diplomatic cover for one or the other.

In terms of direct military involvement, China has been reluctant to intervene on Pakistan's behalf in the past, but one unknown is whether the greater presence of Chinese citizens and facilities in Pakistan changes this stance (it could instead induce greater Chinese efforts to de-escalate the situation or greater Indian caution).

Another scenario could involve a China-India conflict or even a two-front war for India against China and Pakistan. Various contingencies could lead to war, but the boundary conflict is the most likely to do so. In the present China-India crisis, Washington has provided Delhi diplomatic support and intelligence and fast-tracked military supplies. The United States does not have treaty commitments to India. But it could get more involved if a China-India conflict comes amid a U.S.-China

confrontation or more adversarial relationship, prompting the United States to think the regional balance and its credibility are at stake.

A third scenario could follow from attempts—real or perceived—by the United States, China, or India to obstruct each other’s access in the Indian Ocean. These could stem from restricting freedom of navigation, gaining base access or limiting that of others, increased militarization, exploitation of marine resources that upsets local constituencies, activities of China’s maritime militia, or an accident or error.

Other scenarios involve Beijing and Delhi intervening covertly or overtly to protect their preferred partner or faction (or their own red-lines) in one of the smaller South Asian or Indian Ocean states. With the recent collapse of the Afghan government and a takeover of the country by the Taliban, possible outcomes include major powers intervening to counter terrorist attacks or safe havens, protect their citizens or facilities, or back their supporters or proxies.

Some crises could also emanate or spill over from outside the region. One such scenario that could heighten tensions or even spark confrontation is an incident in the South China Sea that involves deliberate or accidental harm by Chinese entities to an Indian vessel or personnel traversing through, or operating to or from, offshore gas blocks (Vietnam has granted rights to an Indian state-owned oil and gas company).

Another possible area of conflict that could involve multiple actors is a U.S.-China conflagration, whether over Taiwan or another contingency. Various powers will have to decide whether and how to play a role. India would be hesitant to get directly involved in a U.S.-China confrontation, though its decisions could be affected by the state of China-India ties at the time, and its strategic and economic interests will be implicated by a crisis over Taiwan. Its calculations could also

change if a U.S.-China conflict results in Indian citizens or interests being harmed. Some U.S. strategists believe that even if India does not get directly involved in a U.S.-China contingency, it could take actions or deploy forces in a way that would divert or keep at bay certain Chinese resources.

The probability of these scenarios varies, and major powers would more likely get involved through indirect means rather than through direct military intervention. Responses could include rhetorical or diplomatic support, supply of military equipment or intelligence, or direct military involvement (either covert or overt). Whether and how major powers intervene could depend on the nature of the crisis, whether they believe their credibility is at stake, the state of their relationships—and level of real or perceived leverage—with the antagonists, and whether it would affect their own rivalry with another major power.

POTENTIAL AREAS OF COOPERATION

The major power rivals have collaborated in the past—and could do so in the future—on at least three fronts: managing their own differences so they do not escalate, making efforts to de-escalate regional crises, and cooperating or at least working in parallel to tackle regional challenges and global problems.

In terms of the first front, China and India have made a number of efforts in the past to manage their differences. Most significantly, after a 1986–87 boundary standoff, the two countries signed a series of agreements that established mechanisms to manage (and potentially even resolve) the boundary dispute and norms to govern behavior at the boundary. Among other things, the agreements, signed between 1993 and 2013, created platforms for dialogue on the boundary at the military, bureaucratic, and political levels. These mechanisms—mostly missing in the India-Pakistan case—have been used for crisis management between the two countries, along with others such as direct exchanges between their foreign ministers.⁷³

Designed to maintain peace and tranquility at the boundary, these agreements also paved the way for progress and exchanges in other realms of the China-India relationship. The two countries instituted numerous dialogues, including on economic and defense issues, hydrological data-sharing, Afghanistan, and counterterrorism—these were designed to not only find areas of convergence and potential cooperation but also manage divergences. Other cooperative initiatives, which were partly intended as confidence-building measures, included a regular bilateral military exercise and joint training of Afghan diplomats.⁷⁴ Thus, there is no lack of agreements and mechanisms between China and India. And, during the current crisis, they have used them to begin a disengagement process that could eventually lead to de-escalation at the boundary.⁷⁵

The challenge to cooperation, however, is the lack of trust, including the confidence that the other side will comply with its commitments. The recent boundary conflict has only amplified this lack of trust, and it has spilled over into the broader relationship. On the one hand, the dialogue mechanisms are being used. On the other hand, a slew of policy measures have resulted from heightened Indian concerns about economic overdependence on and exposure to China, inroads that Chinese companies—particularly those with close links to the state or Chinese Communist Party—have made into certain sensitive Indian economic sectors, and avenues of Chinese influence in India. These measures will restrict or scrutinize Chinese activities in the economic, technology, telecommunications, public diplomacy, and education sectors.

On the second front, relations between the major powers have shaped the nature and extent of their conflict de-escalation or resolution efforts in the region. For example, during the ongoing China-India boundary crisis, Russia, which sees both countries as partners, has publicly noted its hope for de-escalation. Tension between them is a mixed bag for Moscow. On one hand, China-India competition is partly what makes Russia useful to India. On the other hand, China-India crises put Russia in an awkward spot and could require it to make choices that could make it seem less reliable to the Indian government and public. Therefore, while it is unclear if Moscow has played a mediatory role (Delhi has denied one), it has provided a platform—through its hosting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), Russia-India-China (RIC), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summits—for Chinese and Indian officials to interact even in the course of the crisis. For example, the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers met on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Moscow.⁷⁶ Russia has also offered to mediate India-Pakistan crises, such as in February 2019, but India has turned it down.⁷⁷

The United States and China have also responded to crises in the region—responses that could be affected in the future by their intensifying competition. Take India-Pakistan tensions. During the Cold War, China intervened on behalf of Pakistan in the 1965 war. Its threat to increase its military involvement led to the United States warning it off and suggesting the United States could intervene on India's behalf in response. In the 1971 war, the United States and China backed Pakistan, while the Soviet Union backed India. However, after the Cold War, as China sought stability in the region and cooperation with India, there were instances of China either working alone or on a parallel track with the United States to try to defuse India-Pakistan tensions when

they boiled over or threatened to do so. This was perhaps most evident during the Kargil conflict in 1999 and after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008.⁷⁸

During the last India-Pakistan crisis in February 2019, however, the U.S.-China rivalry and Washington's and Beijing's respective relationships with Delhi and Islamabad seemed to shape their lack of consultation. The United States even saw China as being unhelpful (though Wang Yi later claimed some credit for the de-escalation).⁷⁹

Washington and Beijing's future desire and ability to work together in South Asia will likely depend on the nature and extent of their rivalry, their relationships with Delhi and Islamabad, and their assessments of the leverage they have with those two (and their willingness to use it). One complication is that China's relationship with Pakistan is partly motivated by its rivalry with India. The United States, on the other hand, does not benefit from strained India-Pakistan relations—indeed those have often created problems for Washington. So, while the United States and China could seek stability in the region broadly, their motives and equities vis-à-vis India-Pakistan tensions are not necessarily the same.

The U.S.-China rivalry has also affected China-India crises. In the past, this was most evident in U.S. assistance to India in the 1962 war.⁸⁰ More recently, during the 2017 Doklam crisis, Washington provided some rhetorical support and behind-the-scenes assistance (including, reportedly, through intelligence-sharing) to Delhi. The United States affected the crisis from another perspective, too—military equipment that India has purchased from the United States has improved its ability to respond to Chinese activities at the boundary. P-8I reconnaissance aircraft, for example, provided India a better picture of Chinese deployments.⁸¹ During the 2020 crisis, U.S. support for India was more visible. Rhetorical support included criticism of China from the Donald Trump administration and both sides of the aisle on Capitol Hill. Trump administration officials were in regular touch with their Indian counterparts. U.S. assistance to India also reportedly included the fast-tracking of certain equipment and intelligence-sharing. The Indian military has also once again extensively deployed equipment acquired from the United States during the crisis.⁸² Since coming to office, the Joe Biden administration has also criticized China's "aggression on the border with India."⁸³

How much—or in what way—U.S.-India relations have affected China's decision-making in these crises is a matter of some debate. There has been some concern in Delhi that deepening U.S.-India ties,

driven by shared concerns about China, will provoke Beijing.⁸⁴ This has indeed contributed to Indian reluctance to take certain steps with the United States in the past. However, it is not clear that Beijing's assertiveness follows periods of deepening U.S.-India relations. The 2013 and 2014 boundary incidents followed a lull in U.S.-India ties, and the onset of the 2017 crisis took place before Delhi had found its footing with the Trump administration; it was indeed China that had just emerged from what was considered a successful Trump-Xi Mar-a-Lago summit.

A related question is whether China sees periods when the United States is distracted or when U.S.-India ties are not flourishing as windows of opportunity at the boundary. There have also been some moments when Beijing is itself uncertain about Washington, and it seeks an accommodation with its neighbors or tries to create a wedge between them and the United States. For example, as U.S.-China competition intensified in the fall of 2017, China sought to stabilize relations with India and Japan.⁸⁵

The link between China's concerns about the United States and its behavior toward India has arisen again in the context of the 2020–21 crisis. There are two views in China—one that this crisis will push India further into U.S. arms and therefore should be resolved because it does not make sense to bolster the United States' countervailing coalition against China, and the other that India is already in the United States' embrace, an alignment that has "emboldened" India, and so China should not hesitate to make tactical gains, demonstrate its strength to the United States and India, put India in its place, and expose the vulnerabilities of this U.S. partner.⁸⁶

Beyond the U.S.-China-India triangle, other crisis scenarios in the region could lead the United States and China to cooperate—for example, in Afghanistan, where the two countries have worked together or at least pulled in the same direction at times (including in collaboration with Pakistan) and could do so again following a Taliban takeover of the country, or in the event of a terrorist attack.⁸⁷

In terms of the third element, major powers have in the past and could in the future cooperate or at least work in parallel on certain regional and global issues. For example, the United States, China, and India, along with other powers, participated in counter-piracy operations and continue to share an interest in maritime security in certain realms. Each has responded to disasters in the Indian Ocean region—sometimes separately, sometimes coordinating (such as after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami). They have also at times aided each other in evacuating citizens in emergencies (for example, India's evacuation of

U.S. citizens, among others, from Yemen). And they (in parallel) cooperated on climate change in the run-up to the Paris Agreement.

China and India, for their part, have worked together in the past on multilateral issues beyond climate change, such as trade, cyber governance, and global economic governance reform. They have discussed regional issues, such as Afghanistan in the RIC trilateral and counterterrorism at the SCO. Development finance has been another area of cooperation, with India joining—as the second-largest shareholder—the China-proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the two countries and other BRICS partners establishing the New Development Bank.

The major powers also share an interest in tackling climate change, ensuring environmental sustainability, maintaining global health security, and arguably advancing counterterrorism and nonproliferation or nuclear security objectives.

The challenge has been their differences in approach, as well as these issues getting caught up in their rivalries. When that happens, instead of helping alleviate tensions, these domains become another arena for competition—as the recent responses to COVID-19 demonstrate. And sometimes these issues themselves can contribute to competition (for example, what some see as China's overfishing contributing to marine resource depletion on which livelihoods in the Indo-Pacific depend).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the coming years, South Asia will be both the venue for and the source of intensifying U.S.-China and China-India rivalries, albeit to different degrees. The principal differences between those major powers are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, and they will continue to compete to defend their interests. In this context, a core challenge ahead for each of them will be to manage their rivalry in ways that do not increase the risk of armed conflict, particularly the danger that relatively localized crises could escalate in inadvertent and undesirable ways. Several factors could make South Asia more susceptible to such crises in the future, including an increasingly militarized Sino-Indian border, China's pursuit of expansive boundary claims with India (and potentially Bhutan), the spillover effects from growing U.S.-China strategic competition in other areas, and heightened nationalism amplified by governments, media, and social media.

With the overarching goal to prevent rivalry turning to conflict while protecting its and allied interests, the United States should take the following steps:

Help India and Partner Nations Deter and Counter Growing Chinese Assertiveness

Deterring Chinese actions that threaten the security of India and other partner countries in the region requires three mutually reinforcing lines of effort: sending a clear message to China about the consequences of threatening or destabilizing behavior, enhancing national defense capabilities, and bolstering regional political and security partnerships.

In the past, China and India have not welcomed third-party intervention to help resolve their differences, preferring to use their own

bilateral lines of communication. This seems unlikely to change—Beijing will consider Washington as less than impartial given closer U.S.-India relations in recent years, while Delhi will be leery of potential U.S. involvement that could require it to make concessions to Beijing for the sake of regional stability. Nevertheless, Washington has an important and growing stake in the evolution of Sino-Indian relations, particularly given the possibility that the United States could be drawn into a future conflict. Accordingly, it should communicate to China its concerns about assertive or aggressive Chinese actions against India and the potential consequences as it has done before, most notably in the 1960s. The goal would be to clarify any potential misunderstandings or preconceptions in Beijing about where Washington stands on actions that threaten the status quo. Such messaging, however, would have to be conveyed in a way that is transparent to Delhi and does not signal to Beijing that Washington would accept Chinese assertiveness so long as it stays below a certain threshold.

The United States should continue with recent efforts to strengthen India's overall national security and defense posture in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness. This includes further bolstering its capacity to detect and deter Chinese military actions along the border as well as its ability to defend itself through the provision of military equipment and intelligence. Elsewhere, particularly in the Indian Ocean and other maritime areas, improvements to bilateral interoperability (through exercises, operationalizing defense agreements, liaisons, and regular consultations) as well as enhanced information sharing should be pursued. The United States can also help enhance the ability of India's political, military, economic, and information, communication, and technology systems to detect and resist attacks or undue influence

and interference. When identifying potential gaps and requirements, nongovernmental actors—corporations, the media, and civil society groups—should also be involved as much as possible to enhance the systems' resilience.

The United States and India should also help partner countries in the region strengthen their national security capacities to deter and respond to traditional and nontraditional security challenges, including potential interference and coercion. They should do this both individually and in cooperation with each other. Steps could include helping build partner country defense capabilities through the provision of equipment, training, and best-practices advice as well as information sharing. They should also be prepared to offer partner countries attractive alternatives to the Chinese options that have helped Beijing expand its strategic influence—for example, development assistance, investment, and export markets. Should these partners be targeted, the United States and India need to demonstrate solidarity by offering diplomatic support and, where relevant and welcomed, security or economic assistance. At the same time, however, the United States and India should practice what they preach with regard to Chinese behavior; they, too, need to desist from actions that otherwise contravene a rules-based order.

Encourage the Peaceful Resolution of Territorial Disputes

As the United States takes steps to deter Chinese actions that could lead to dangerous confrontations, it should also encourage complementary efforts to defuse or resolve the most likely source of such crises in a peaceful manner. Thus, Washington should support ongoing efforts by Delhi and Beijing to de-escalate border tensions. China and India, on their part, will need to reassess and revise the extant set of agreements, mechanisms, and protocols that the two countries established between 1993 and 2012 to manage their territorial disputes. These have clearly proved insufficient in preventing the recent spate of border incidents. They should also revive efforts to demarcate the LAC in ways that render it less prone to violent clashes. Talks have been suspended since 2002 because of China's concerns that demarcation could make the LAC a legal border and prejudice their claims—though some in India have since wondered if China's reluctance was more due to a desire to change the status quo on the ground through incremental, accumulating measures.⁸⁸ India, for its part, has dismissed China's idea of a code of conduct partly because it could

limit India in upgrading its infrastructure and capabilities near the boundary—which China has been doing for years, with India playing catch-up over the past decade.⁸⁹ Moreover, the existing agreements already contain a code of conduct. The United States should facilitate such efforts and offer technical or other assistance, if necessary and welcome. For instance, it can help enhance India's ability to monitor and verify China's compliance with agreements at the border, which could have a stabilizing effect.

Bolster Crisis Preparedness and Management

Washington and Delhi's best efforts to prevent a serious crisis could ultimately be unsuccessful, and thus they should prepare as best they can for such eventualities. This includes precautions they take independently and measures they can take collaboratively. The former include considering how various Sino-Indian crisis scenarios could develop, improving the capacity to detect and react to sudden changes in the status quo, and reviewing and, if necessary, updating various contingency plans. Both sides could be reluctant to share details of such sensitive matters. Nevertheless, useful discussions can still take place between Delhi and Washington in which they can raise specific concerns, clarify their interests and intentions, and identify mechanisms and processes for crisis communication and potentially coordination. They could also identify how the United States can help—with intelligence and diplomatic assistance, for example—however, this will have to factor in both that the two countries are not allies and do not share formal security commitments and that Washington will not want to exacerbate a crisis. In the case of crises (whether a Sino-Indian or a Taiwan Strait one), Washington and Delhi will need to discuss and manage the expectations they have of each other.

These discussions can be part of or in addition to a broader strategic dialogue between the two countries regarding China that can clarify each other's assessment of Chinese capabilities and intentions as well as how best to meet the challenge. They should also discuss their differences. For example, should Russia be viewed as part of the solution or part of the problem?⁹⁰ Finally, the two governments should also encourage track two and track 1.5 discussions that bring together stakeholders and experts to share assessments on issues such as Chinese economic prospects, Chinese military capabilities, a Taiwan Strait crisis, or the security implications of Belt and Road Initiative projects in the region. This will not just provide an opportunity to compare analyses and

approaches but also develop a network of interested and engaged individuals outside government.

Promote Continued Development of Regional Institutions and Partnerships

Beyond deepening its own ties with allies and partners in or operating in South Asia, Washington should encourage and facilitate cooperation among them—even if the United States is not directly involved. For instance, it could support Australia-India cybersecurity consultations or India-Japan collaboration for the development of regional infrastructure. The United States should also encourage India's defense and security cooperation with U.S. allies that takes place bilaterally (e.g., with South Korea) and trilaterally (e.g., Australia-India-France) though in a coordinated way. Arguably the most important new initiative to balance China and promote other U.S. regional initiatives involving India is the Quad. This still-evolving arrangement holds tremendous potential, including in the maritime security domain, which could be crucial to conflict prevention in the region as well as in the emerging and critical technologies space. The Quad needs to be further institutionalized without over-bureaucratizing it or creating yet another international organization that inhibits its flexibility. This can be done through regular meetings at various levels, a calendar of military exercises, working groups, and liaisons or point persons in each country. The Quad is already expanding vertically (in terms of levels) and horizontally (in terms of issue areas) but should not expand its membership in the near future. Instead, the Quad can cooperate opportunistically with like-minded partners on particular issues in which they are capable and willing. For instance, the Quad could work with South Korea on supply chain resilience, France on maritime security, or the United Kingdom on critical technologies.

Explore Areas of Cooperation With China

Washington and Delhi's broad concerns about Beijing's behavior should not preclude discussions with Beijing over how they can cooperate on shared concerns, not least major global challenges (e.g., climate change, health security, global financial stability, and non-proliferation) as well as some regional ones (e.g., stability in Afghanistan and Myanmar). However, expectations for progress should remain realistic. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, areas that were traditionally considered ripe for cooperation, such as global

health security, can also turn competitive. Climate change will not be immune either, as it intersects with technology competition and concern about supply-chain vulnerabilities and dependencies—and whether and how China will use them. Another area in which this dynamic could play out is Afghanistan, where China’s calculations could change as its rivalries with the United States and India intensify, leading it to play a more active role that hinders or harms U.S. or Indian interests there. Moreover, the desire for greater cooperation with Beijing should not lead to accepting or ignoring malign behavior or unilaterally ceding their own interests or those of their partners. Although it could seem like an attractive option in the short term, that approach will only invite further instability in the future.

Upgrade U.S. Management and Coordination of South Asian Affairs

Growing major power rivalry in South Asia requires the United States to be effectively organized to manage and shape developments in the region. Although there is no pressing need to undertake wholesale reorganizations of government bureaus or combatant commands, Washington should create new mechanisms to foster closer cooperation and coordination among the leading players. The creation of the Indo-Pacific coordinator position at the National Security Council is a step in the right direction. Further informal or formal mechanisms could help as well, including more regular exchanges between bureaus and commands and their counterparts in the region. The Biden administration should also encourage diplomats to serve across these organizational seams and thus develop a much deeper pool of experts on the Indo-Pacific region. Historically, because of the linkage of South Asia with the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. diplomats who served in the subcontinent tended to spend most of their careers in these two Asian subregions. But due in part to changes made in the George W. Bush administration as well as the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan’s office absorbing many of those officials, an increasing number of officials from the East Asian and Pacific Affairs side have served in or worked on India or the SSAs. This trend should be encouraged.

Finally, the U.S. policy, business, and academic communities should invest in the development of a better understanding of the strategic, economic, and political landscape in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region as well as China’s regional interests and intentions. This could include government and private-sector funding for the study of this

region and the countries in it, more visiting fellowships for or exchanges with experts and students from the region (and vice versa), the inclusion of these countries in more university study abroad portfolios, and increased opportunities for policymakers and experts to travel to the region and collaborate with high-level officials and counterparts there.

CONCLUSION

Seventy years ago, the United States, China, and India were on the same side in World War II, cooperating particularly in the China-Burma-India theater. Today, there is a different equation in the South Asian theater, with U.S.-China and China-India competitions that will likely intensify. And the outcome of those rivalries will have implications beyond South Asia and the Indian Ocean—for regional stability and security in the Indo-Pacific and for the global balance of power. That makes this region worthy of the Biden administration's interest and attention, even as East Asia and the western Pacific remain the priority theater for the United States. And, as in that linked region, it will require collaborating with allies and partners, competing with rivals to protect U.S. interests, grappling with the risk of conflict, and, if possible, exploring cooperation with China.

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90. The United States and India should also consider how their differences in other domains—for instance, on trade, values, or Pakistan—could affect their defense and security cooperation. For instance, if congressional concern about the state of democracy in India could affect the Biden administration’s ability to give India a waiver from sanctions for its purchase of the S-400 system from Russia, or if India’s displeasure at past U.S.-Pakistan collaboration on Afghanistan could make it reticent to deepen security cooperation in certain spheres, or if U.S.-India differences on digital trade and policies could limit their cooperation in the critical technology arena.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanvi Madan is a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution's Foreign Policy program and director of Brookings' India Project. Madan's work explores India's role in the world and its foreign policy, focusing particularly on India's relations with China and the United States. She is a member of the editorial board of *Asia Policy*, a contributing editor at *War on the Rocks*, and a member of the Australian National University's National Security College's Futures Council. Previously, Madan was a Harrington doctoral fellow and teaching assistant at the University of Texas at Austin's Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. She has also been a research analyst at Brookings and has worked in the information technology industry in India.

Madan is the author of the book *Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations During the Cold War*. She is completing a monograph on India's foreign policy diversification strategy and researching her next book on the U.S.-China-India triangle. In addition to a bachelor's degree in history from Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi, she has a master's degree in international relations from Yale University and a doctorate in public policy from the University of Texas at Austin.

Cover photo: A panoramic view of south central Mumbai, India, shows a vast contrast in living conditions between lower-middle-class dwellings and towers for the elite.
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Council on Foreign Relations
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58 East 68th Street
New York, NY 10065
tel 212.434.9400

1777 F Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
tel 202.509.8400