

Great Expectations: Asking Too Much of the US-India Strategic Partnership

After India re-elected Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in May 2019 in a landslide victory, President Trump congratulated him, tweeting that “great things are in store for the US-India partnership with the return of PM Modi at the helm.”¹ In June, Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver echoed this sentiment, anticipating “a lot of convergence on the strategic landscape” between the United States and India.² Nevertheless, on the eve of Secretary of State Pompeo’s June visit to New Delhi, analysts of the region warned that an emerging crisis could force a highly disruptive reckoning for the relationship.³ Recently, two of the original architects of US-India strategic alignment—former US ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, and former senior advisor to the US embassy in New Delhi, Ashley Tellis—have warned of “creeping disappointment and doubt” from both countries.⁴

Publicly, the US-India relationship has achieved rare status, touted as one of the greatest bipartisan successes and crowning achievements across the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations.⁵ Yet privately, some US policymakers have raised “serious concerns” about India’s defense decisions.⁶ Our own private conversations with US government officials and policy experts reveal frustration and concern over the supposed pattern of US concessions and Indian shortcomings—criticized as “all talk and no show.”⁷

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For their part, Indian policymakers are equally frustrated with the United States over shortfalls in technology transfers and investment, ever mounting American trade and economic demands of India, sharp turns in its South Asia policy that involve an exit strategy from Afghanistan, a revived relationship with Pakistan to facilitate US drawdown, and repeated offers to mediate the Kashmir dispute, all without sufficient consideration of New Delhi's equities.⁸

We argue that these recent tensions stem partly from significant departures from each country's

exaggerated and unwarranted expectations. Owing to several structural constraints, the convergence of strategic interests between the world's two largest democracies has been more limited and slower than many estimated two decades ago and still imagine today. These constraints, however, are obscured by often repeated shibboleths like "natural allies" and "defining partnerships of the twenty-first century" that further inflate expectations.⁹

Expectations incommensurate with reality—effectively a form of misperception in international politics—are not only disappointing but potentially detrimental to the relationship as they can lead to missteps, friction, and resentment on both sides. Today, the United States is at risk of doubling down on the same mistake: outsized ambitions about the contributions India can make to US security interests in the newly named "Indo-Pacific." To rescue the relationship from the weight of expectations and set it on a path of steady, sustainable, mutually satisfying cooperation requires an honest appraisal of limitations.

In this article, we make four arguments. First, we outline the expectations-delivery gap in US-India relations, centering our analysis on the recent frictions resulting from the lack of progress toward goals set out almost two decades ago when Washington began making significant investments in the relationship with New Delhi. Second, we offer a simple structural explanation as to why India has not fulfilled US expectations and will not align as closely with American interests and policy in the future as the "natural allies" mantra anticipates. Third, we explain how unrealistic expectations of partnerships can lead to misallocation of resources, miscalculation of strategy, misestimation of leverage, and, potentially, disappointment, resentment, and hostility. A more durable strategic relationship will require right-sizing expectations to structural realities, adjusting defense cooperation and trade to be commensurate with more modest ambitions and absorptive capacity, and accepting policy divergences with other partners. We conclude with recommendations for how both sides should reassess ambitions based on structural realities and adjust strategies accordingly.

The History of High Expectations

US Secretary of State Dean Rusk advised President Kennedy as early as the 1960s that India would be crucial to countering China in the long-term.¹⁰ Robert Komer of the National Security Council sought to persuade Presidents Kennedy and Johnson that the United States should rely on India because it was “the largest and potentially most powerful non-Communist Asian nation” and, therefore, “the major prize in Asia.”¹¹

With the end of the Cold War, alliance strictures, and India’s economic takeoff, US policymakers assessed by the early 2000s that India could become one of its closest strategic partners if it was able to remove some fundamental obstacles to cooperation. The Bush administration acted on this assumption with the 2005 civil nuclear agreement, investing substantial bureaucratic, political, and diplomatic capital between 2006 and 2008 to win approval from Congress and international institutions. This process intended to cut the proverbial Gordian knot that had obstructed a closer US-India relationship. Though framed to shore up the nonproliferation regime and ensure Indian nuclear restraint, the civil nuclear agreement between Manmohan Singh and the Bush Administration fundamentally intended to remove “a basic irritant” from the US-India relationship and set the stage to transform it into a deeper strategic partnership.¹²

Advocates raised expectations in a variety of areas, identifying specific US gains from the transformed relationship that included energy security, democracy promotion, global economic liberalization, and security of the commons in addition to nuclear nonproliferation itself. But one of the most compelling strategic frameworks for the relationship came from someone outside the administration who, though not the architect of the civil nuclear deal, would later go on to become Defense Secretary and one of the champions of the US-India relationship. Harvard Professor Ashton Carter, though skeptical of the nonproliferation and energy security benefits of the deal, argued that the United States was really placing a bet that significant asymmetric US investments would generate “broad strategic alignment” and cultivate India as an “informal ally,” raising expectations in a few specific areas.¹³ Condensing the laundry list of alleged benefits, Carter identified the four real security objectives the strategic partnership was to deliver on: manage the risks of nuclear instability and terrorism in South Asia (particularly in Pakistan), counter Iran, form a deeper defense trade and military partnership, and balance China. Several other proponents of the civil nuclear agreement echoed these goals, but the latter two—defense relations and China—constituted the most important expectations.

First, Indian cooperation was expected on a range of scenarios relating to state instability in Afghanistan and nuclear Pakistan: “loose nukes” and nuclear terrorism. The assumption was that India’s shared exposure to such regional risks that

warranted US military presence would give rise to greater burden sharing and joint contingency planning. However, the United States and India continue to diverge on Afghanistan and Pakistan policy.¹⁴ By 2009, this cooperation on regional instability issues more narrowly focused on intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation.

Second, India could be expected to curb its nascent defense relations with Iran and rhetorical support for nuclear fuel cycle activities while leveraging its diplomatic, economic, and energy relationships to help check Iran's nuclear ambitions. This would range from voting with the United States in international fora, to punishing Iran by refraining from any long-term oil and gas agreements, even though this could compromise India's friendly relations with Iran. Leaders like Congressman Tom Lantos warned that India could only become a "strategic ally" of the United States with a marked change in its Iran policy.¹⁵

Third, Carter forecasted significant defense cooperation including joint military planning and exercises, intelligence sharing, joint military capabilities, US trade preference, and even potential "access to strategic locations through Indian territory and perhaps basing rights," for proximate regional contingencies.¹⁶ The civil nuclear agreement was, in the eyes of many, a quid pro quo deal that would open doors to significant defense trade between the two countries.¹⁷

Finally, proponents of the deal believed India would evolve into a stronger and more dedicated counterweight to China to ensure a stable balance of power in Asia. Over time, the priorities that loomed large for advocates of the relationship in 2006, like counterterrorism and Iran, have yielded to the higher priorities of US-India defense cooperation for the purpose of balancing China.¹⁸ President Obama's 2015 National Security Strategy highlighted the strategic convergence between India's growing regional role and the US rebalance to Asia and the Pacific.¹⁹ In the same year, Obama and Modi released the US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region, which specifically affirmed the importance of safeguarding maritime security, freedom of navigation, and overflight in the South China Sea—a signal to China.²⁰

US expectations of the relationship have only risen in the Trump administration. In the face of rising strategic competition by revisionist powers, the 2018 US National Defense Strategy calls for a network of Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships for the purpose of "detering aggression" and "maintaining stability" to protect the "free and open international order."²¹ To operationalize this, the DOD's June 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* lauds the US defense partnership with India at "a level commensurate with that of the United States' closest allies and partners" and calls for deeper security cooperation and defense trade including military interoperability.²² Senior official Cara Abercrombie, who served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia

from June 2016 to July 2017, assesses that the United States has placed India “firmly at the center of its Indo-Pacific strategy.”²³

The Graveyard of Expectations

Despite India’s centrality to these US strategic objectives, reviews of the relationship suggest an Indian alignment that is “moderately and partially with US strategic interests.”²⁴ Though India has exceeded expectations on counterterrorism, it has exhibited a mixed record on Iran and, most disappointingly to the United States, has proven an underwhelming partner on core goals of defense relations and balancing China. US-India defense cooperation has exhibited “hobble[d]” and “fitful progress,”²⁵ while recent analysis suggests Indian backpeddling on China.²⁶ While India’s alignment on US defense relations and China balancing efforts is advancing incrementally in Washington’s preferred direction, it continues at a much slower pace than rising US expectations expressed in official rhetoric and apex strategy documents.

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Counterterrorism

US equities in Afghanistan and relations with Pakistan—both of which have waxed and waned over the past two decades—have posed challenges for US-India relations. US policy toward Afghanistan has generally been dependent on Pakistan due to its geography and influence over the Taliban, necessary for military access and negotiations, respectively, which has resulted in India’s criticism and challenge of US efforts.²⁷ Nevertheless, US-India counterterrorism is, overall, one bright spot in the relationship. After India was shocked by the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks that also killed six Americans, counterterrorism cooperation accelerated on intelligence, homeland security, police training, counter-terror finance, and coordinated diplomacy. Some officials have privately asserted that the Mumbai attacks, more than the nuclear agreement, provided one of the biggest bureaucratic breakthroughs for the US-India relationship.²⁸

Iran

US expectations of India on Iran were partially fulfilled during the Obama administration, but the gap has been expanded by a Trump administration policy on Iran that has shifted the goal posts. India voted with the United States against

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Tehran in IAEA meetings in 2005, 2006, 2009, and 2011 and reduced some oil imports to help pressure Iran into the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. After the Trump administration withdrew from the Iran deal in May 2018, India sought to comply with US sanctions and reduce its imports of Iranian oil to zero. Nevertheless, India continues to cultivate high-level diplomatic and economic interactions to pursue its own interests with Iran including balancing Pakistan, connecting to Western Afghanistan via the Chabahar port, placating its Shia population, and building a north-south corridor to Central Asia and Russia.²⁹ In the foreseeable future, if Washington and Tehran were to come to a military conflict, New Delhi is unlikely to take sides.

Defense Relations

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice G. Wells called 2018 “a landmark year for US-India ties.”³⁰ Over the past four years, India had been designated a US “major defense partner”; signed two (of four) important foundational agreements to enable greater US-India military cooperation; rejoined the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (with Japan and Australia); initiated a US-India Ministerial 2 + 2 Dialogue (involving the most senior defense and foreign affairs ministers); and most recently, conducted a naval “group sail” in the contested South China Sea with the American, Japanese, and the Philippines’ navies.³¹ Nevertheless, this recent increase in activity does not necessarily translate into the quality of expectations laid out fifteen years ago, falling short in terms of defense activity, military ambitions, and arms sales.

First, India’s “strategic promiscuity” leads it to prioritize breadth of partners over the depth of capabilities.³² Although India exercises more with the United States than any of New Delhi’s other partners, the United States engages far more with other partners in the region. For example, in 2017, the US navy conducted 28 major exercises with the Japanese maritime SDF, but only one with the Indian navy. The United States conducts more bilateral exercises with Singapore than with India.³³ The lack of depth can impose a toll. US officials who profess India’s potential to be “one of our strongest and most dependable military partners in the region” may grow increasingly frustrated by India’s instinct for a “no-obligations partnership.”³⁴

The relationship has also fallen short of expectations in terms of the scope of military ambitions. The vision Carter expressed of joint military planning and capabilities remain very far off, while his vision of over-the-horizon basing

access seems unfathomable.³⁵ For these objectives, a level of interoperability is required that is not only absent but actively circumscribed by India. Abercrombie explains, “[India] expects to coordinate defense and security perspectives, approaches, and efforts but fundamentally to go it alone, functioning in parallel with the United States as opposed to working together.”³⁶ This creates a fundamental mismatch in expectations. While US strategy embraces Indo-Pacific alliances that contribute to a “networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression,” and senior US commanders have called on networks like the Quad for “counterbalancing and deterring coercion or unrestrained national ambitions,” India has explicitly opposed the idea of a military dimension to its participation in a multilateral architecture.³⁷

Finally, US disappointment with India emerged from the lack of expected “preferential treatment for US [defense] vendors” and, more generally, India’s sluggish efforts at procurement.³⁸ US companies lost out on the first competition to sell over one hundred combat aircraft to India when it was awarded to France’s Dassault in 2012, and they seem unlikely to win the latest round, valued as high as US\$20 billion. Even Lockheed Martin’s August 2016 offer of moving a joint production facility for F-16s to India to meet its domestic combat aircraft needs as well as its desire for indigenization and export potential has been met with skepticism.³⁹ Seven years of efforts at joint production through the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative continue to have potential but remain in “rough stasis.”⁴⁰ Indian purchases of Russian systems like the S-400 or its leasing of nuclear submarines only rub salt on the wound. Though US-India defense trade has been trending upward, India remains heavily reliant on Russian arms. The United States touts US\$16 billion in defense sales to India over a decade, yet in just the past year, India has signed defense purchase agreements with Russia valued at over US\$15 billion.⁴¹

Though advocates are quick to point out the convergent direction of interests and upwards trajectory of the relationship, India has failed to meet the pace of expectations, depth of interactions, and embrace the scope of ambitions for US-India defense relations set out in the early 2000s. To be fair, New Delhi has also been frustrated by an expectations-delivery gap of insufficient US defense investment, technology transfers, advocacy for Indian status in international institutions, and efforts to sideline India’s chief rival of Pakistan.

China

In 2005, when the United States announced its objective to “help India become a major world power in the 21st century,” a State department spokesman stated explicitly that the United States “[understood] fully the implications, including military implications, of that statement.”⁴² Architects of the relationship who

sought a favorable balance in Asia counted on a partnership that enhanced Indian military hard power to balance and deter China. One scholar of US-India relations, Professor Dinshaw Mistry, who also serves as an advisor to the House Foreign Affairs Asia subcommittee, suggests this objective has seen “low to moderate” progress due to meager capabilities generation and equivocating policy positions.⁴³

India’s buildup of military power to balance China has been underwhelming. On one hand, India has authorized a new mountain strike corps; fielded new lift, fighter aircraft, and cruise missiles close to its border; expanded its naval forces; and flexed its strategic arsenal vis-a-vis China by deploying a sea-based nuclear deterrent and developing longer-range ballistic missiles, missile defense, and multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRVs). The trouble is that its mountain strike corps has been shelved, or at least delayed, while its manpower-intensive (and Army-dominant) force imposes real tradeoffs for its ability to convert to a technology- and firepower-centric force to compete with China.⁴⁴ India’s air squadrons still remain at 80 percent of its own desired strength, and its February 2019 air battle with Pakistan exposed countless problems in military effectiveness including training, systems integration, and command and control.⁴⁵ Last, 60 percent of the Indian navy’s ships are “approaching obsolescence.”⁴⁶ With a limited and flatlined budget and insufficient ships for land attack or power projection, the Indian Navy remains torn between organizing for sea denial or sea control, (e.g., for deterrence or compellence).⁴⁷ Furthermore, it appears to discount nimble, cost-effective defensive systems in favor of budget-busting prestige systems like aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, even though India lacks sufficient resources, experience, accompanying platforms, or organizational capacity to make the most out of these systems.

In addition to its capability shortfalls, India’s inconsistent, even ambivalent approach to China has led many to question its alignment with the United States on this issue. After India stood up to China during the Doklam crisis of summer 2017, India took a sharp turn to hedge its bets and has hesitated to antagonize China further, hoping to maintain stability on its border, encourage greater investment and trade, and dampen Chinese inroads in its regional backyard.⁴⁸ Consequently, it has moved slowly on certain aspects of military and naval cooperation with the United States and sought to placate China after the spring 2018 Wuhan Summit between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping. Modi conspicuously ducked diplomatic opportunities to call out China’s growing assertiveness and avoided joining a regional infrastructure initiative to counterbalance China’s ascending leverage in the region.⁴⁹ India continues to stiff-arm Australia from its annual Malabar naval exercise with the US and Japan, and generally oppose a military role for the Quad for fear of Chinese retaliation, a fear US military officers and defense officials interpret as “intimidated dithering, if not out-right appeasement.”⁵⁰ Rather than pick a side between China and the

United States, India seems to be hedging between the two great powers, hoping to extract more concessions from both. This is cause for concern, as an India too timid to exert military force may “be of limited utility to regional balancing efforts and a poor choice for a close partnership with the United States.”⁵¹

Modi’s hedging posture on China is grounded in Indian public and elite opinion. The Indian general public’s suspicion and perception of China’s formidability is lower than that of the United States and most of its allies, and even the majority of Indian strategic elites surveyed prefer that India sit out the intensifying US-China competition.⁵² The pursuit of equidistance will intensify as India is expected to host a second Modi-Xi summit in fall 2019 and deepen economic ties with China.

Beyond divergences in defense relations and China policy, a broader set of recent US-India frictions should cause analysts to at least reevaluate the assumption that they share the same vision of the US-led international order. For one thing, India’s UN voting behavior in the past fifteen years after the US partnership shows little difference from the previous fifteen years, and this has begun to pose consequences.⁵³ India recently backed a UN process and vote that resulted in an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that jeopardized US basing in Diego Garcia, which is critical to US power projection in the region.⁵⁴ Though the material effect may be mitigated, it will imperil US credibility in defense of the liberal international order and enable China to dodge criticisms of flouting the Hague Tribunal ruling against its claims in the South China Sea. Furthermore, India has largely remained silent on Russia’s annexation of Crimea and voted with Russia and China within the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons against the institution’s investigatory and attribution powers regarding chemical weapons attacks (specifically by Russia in England against a former spy).⁵⁵ Even today’s trade frictions between the United States and India, while intensified by the Trump administration’s policy, stem from longstanding differences over free trade that led India to oppose the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).⁵⁶

US-India frictions should lead analysts to reevaluate whether they share the same vision of international order.

Structural Realities

Several explanations have been offered for why Indian convergence has fallen short of US expectations: timid leadership, anticolonial and non-aligned

ideologies, bureaucratic inertia, and domestic political obstacles among them. Yet these explanations are relatively mutable, leading analysts to assume the right political leader with a large political mandate can overcome them. Four structural realities, however, shape India's threat perceptions and preferences. India's absolute economic and military capabilities constrain its ambitions, its geography shapes priorities divergent from the United States, its possession of a robust nuclear arsenal dampens threat perceptions, and its relative position in the international system incentivizes it to hedge its bets with the United States.

Absolute Capabilities and Capacity

Because of the sheer limitations of its resources and absolute capabilities, India has not grown as rich, as militarily capable, or as intertwined in US defense planning as expected in 2005. Frequent exercises and new arms from the West demand new fiscal outlays that can overstretch a still-developing economy trying to make prudent investments in infrastructure, manufacturing, education, and social services. Moreover, overhauls of India's defense and foreign policy software demand tremendous political capital.

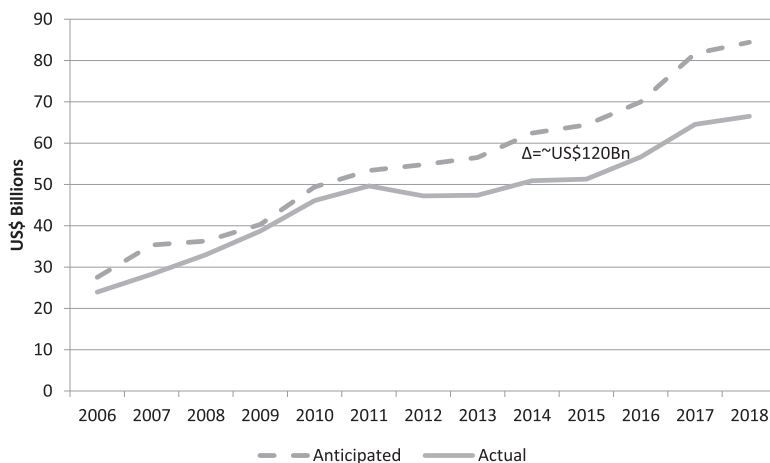
In 2015, a Council on Foreign Relations taskforce report judged "sustained high rates of growth as the most important factor for India's global rise."⁵⁷ While Indian growth paces most economies, India has not been able to grow fast enough, nor shed its liabilities and convert this into substantially greater military power.⁵⁸ India remains a poor, developing economy that has averaged 6.7 percent growth over the past decade according to World Bank data, rather than the 8 percent to double-digit growth forecasters like Goldman Sachs and the McKinsey Global Institute predicted in the early 2000s.⁵⁹ India's former chief economic advisor issued a stunning correction that Indian growth between 2011 and 2016

Economists continue to downgrade India's future growth projections.

reached only 4.5 percent, considerably below the official figures of close to 7 percent, and economists continue to downgrade India's future growth projections.⁶⁰ Growth may also be held down by persistent restrictive labor laws and energy and infrastructure bottlenecks that did not change in Modi's first term.⁶¹ Slower than expected growth has been compounded by declining military spending as a percentage of GDP, which fell from a high of almost 3

percent in 2009 down to 2.1 percent in 2019, even as rising labor and pension costs severely crowded out capital expenditures.⁶²

From 2006–18, India underspent an estimated US\$120 billion on defense than they would have had they achieved the anticipated 8 percent growth and spent at

Figure 1: India's Anticipated vs. Actual Defense Spending, 2006–2018

2.9 percent of GDP on defense annually (see figure 1). Roughly US\$10 billion more per year would have almost doubled the Indian military's annual capital budget and defense acquisition power. Not surprisingly then, based on IISS data, we estimate the capitalization of India's security forces—a crude measure of military quality—has only doubled in fifteen years (while it has quadrupled in China during the same period).⁶³ It has been and will continue to be difficult for India to shed manpower for technology when it is exhibiting sustained jobless growth.⁶⁴

An underperforming economy limits India's ability to leverage surplus wealth, technological infrastructure, and efficient production to generate more effective fighting forces and the industrial base to produce advanced conventional combat platforms and power projection capabilities.⁶⁵ Defense acquisition and indigenization is further constrained by the impossible "trilemma of cost, quality, and time," that is, acquiring sophisticated defense systems at a sustainable cost within a meaningful timeframe before obsolescence.⁶⁶ In short, India's still-developing economy and limitations in acquiring or producing modern military capabilities have hindered its ability to fulfill US expectations for deeper US-India defense relations to balance China. If this does not turn around in the next 10 to 15 years, Ashley Tellis suggests US investment in India may amount to a "failed bet."⁶⁷

Even if India eventually builds its hard capabilities, it still lacks the requisite national security "software" to translate this into military and foreign policy effectiveness to balance China. India still struggles to convert these large quantities of arms imports into military power due to problems of dysfunctional systems integration, civil-military relations, jointness, and strategic assessment.⁶⁸ The recent decision to create a Chief of Defense Staff to enhance force

integration has the potential to bring important changes over the coming decades, depending on implementation, resourcing, and actual authorities.⁶⁹ India's foreign policy software fares slightly better but still imposes a similar drag on its ability to generate and wield "soft power" due to staffing, organizational, and systematic deficiencies.⁷⁰

India's limited absolute capabilities can help account for much of the gap between expectations and performance and divergence from the United States when it comes to policy on Iran and Russia, defense cooperation, or standing up to China politically and materially. It simply lacks the hard- and soft-power tools to blunt counter-reactions. As a developing country with significant limitations, India has generally shied away from decisions or actions that risk jeopardizing the flow of Chinese investment and trade, Russian arms, and Iranian oil that could also impede its economic growth.

Geography

In addition to its capabilities, India's distinct geography—based on its vulnerabilities, westward focus, and continental orientation—contributes to threat perceptions and interests different from that of the United States. India's former national security advisor, Shivshankar Menon, argues that the open geography of the Indian Ocean makes it less vulnerable to regional domination by any major power.⁷¹ Rather than countering the Chinese Navy, projecting naval power beyond its neighborhood, or deterring hostile actions by extra regional powers, developments in the Indian Navy over the past 20 years indicate that India

Pakistan is still far more salient than China as a foreign policy priority among the Indian general public.

aims primarily for sea lane security.⁷² Moreover, while the US presence and its new Indo-Pacific Strategy concentrate on East Asia and the South China Sea, India maintains a "divergence in strategic mapping."⁷³ New Delhi focuses more attention on potential disruptions within South Asia in the Western Indian Ocean because India disproportionately depends on this region for its maritime transit of exports, critical energy resources, and migrant workers and remittances.⁷⁴

Additionally, while the United States worries most about Chinese threats to the maritime commons, India's internal security situation as well as long borders with rivals Pakistan and China compel it to concentrate on continental threats. Evidence suggests that Pakistan is still far more salient than China as a foreign policy priority among the Indian general public.⁷⁵ India's defense spending favoring the Army and internal

security forces reflects this prioritization, backed by the opinion of strategic elites who identify the Chinese threat as one principally challenging terrestrial equities on the Indo-Pakistan and Sino-Indian disputed borders more than the maritime or global order.⁷⁶ Though some analysts consider India's continental orientation as complementary for a competitive strategy with China, US motivation for the partnership has been founded on expectations of naval cooperation and maritime security coordination.⁷⁷

Finally, due to sophisticated Chinese non-military encroachment into India's sphere of influence, India has been contained and forced to play defense within its subcontinental geography rather than pursue extra-regional influence, as expected of a net-security provider. Despite its historical preeminence, shortfalls in economic leverage, diplomatic influence, and military power limit India's influence.⁷⁸

Recent events in the disputed Kashmir region are likely to harden India's geographical orientation in the medium term. In February 2019, a terrorist attack precipitated an exchange of airstrikes and major crisis that reinvigorated India-Pakistan tensions. On top of this, expected US drawdowns in Afghanistan, greater US reliance on Islamabad, and India's recent abrogation of Kashmir's autonomy provisions have intensified border tensions and international scrutiny.⁷⁹ Despite aspirations of power projection in the Indian Ocean that may see some success in the coming years, these events are likely to demand a greater share of India's security attention, driving India's focus back to its Western land borders and continuing its reluctant re-hyphenation to Pakistan.

Nuclear Weapons

India's more subdued threat perceptions and continued distaste for alliances may be enabled by its possession of a surprisingly robust nuclear arsenal and strategic capabilities.⁸⁰ India's status as a nuclear weapons state generates fundamentally different threat perceptions than other US partners, largely removing India's need for extended nuclear deterrence from the United States that allies like Japan and Australia cite as fundamental to their security. The possession of nuclear weapons ensures India is safe from a full-scale war, especially with China; serves as a partial substitute for military protection from allies; and may lead it to act more independently. This affords India a certain degree of bargaining space without resorting to US support.⁸¹

Relative Position

India's position of power in the international system offers another explanation for its likely continued divergence from US expectations, at least in the short- to medium-term. India, as a rising power—as opposed to a system hegemon (and its treaty allies)—has unique incentives for both procrastination and buck-

passing. Risers tend not to risk premature confrontation, preferring to wait for the relative power gap to recede.⁸² As long as India expects to rise while other major powers reach the plateau of the growth curve or decline, India can expect its bargaining position vis-à-vis both partners and rivals to increase every year into the future. India's position in the international system (along with its deep domestic challenges) may also make it prone to buck-passing—deferring to others to take on the responsibility of confronting an aggressor and defending the existing international order without it getting involved.⁸³

Going forward, as the United States shifts from short-term cooperation to a more long-term view of competition and confrontation with strategic adversaries, India has every incentive to not only buck-pass and free-ride, but to leverage uncertainty about its alignment intentions. India may benefit as a “swing state” while China and the United States, along with its allies, pay the costs of an unproductive confrontation. This incentive should at least induce some caution as the United States and a rising China were once “virtual allies” against the Soviet Union and developed into competitors decades later.⁸⁴

The Dangers of False Expectations

Just like with adversaries, miscalibrated beliefs of partners—or persistent gaps between expectations and actual behavior—are a critical component of misperception and false optimism in international politics.⁸⁵ Correcting false expectations of partners matters because overinvesting in a partnership held back by structural factors can produce self-defeating side effects. Maintaining infeasible expectations for partners creates costs and risks including foregone resources, miscalculated strategies, and outright hostility.

First, false expectations of a relationship can cause one party to invest past the point of diminishing returns, diverting resources from potentially higher-return assets. The initial strategy for bolstering Indian power was to do so at “minimal cost to any other competing national security objectives.”⁸⁶ Considerable human and bureaucratic resources have been poured into the India bet—as one official privately noted, there are more people working on the India relationship in the Pentagon than on the Japan relationship.⁸⁷ The imbalance in prioritization and resourcing has not gone unnoticed. In this case, overinvestment in the US-India relationship may divert time, energy, and personnel from other Indo-Pacific wagers critical to balancing China: firming up strong treaty allies who require continuous garden tending (Japan, Australia), reviving old alliances (Philippines, Thailand), or cultivating nascent partners (Vietnam, Indonesia). The United States may be able to more efficiently allocate resources to support a free and open Indo-Pacific while getting the most out of its partnership with India.

Second, false expectations can lead to miscalculations based on an assumption of support that may not be forthcoming. Vagueness in a strategic relationship can be an asset, enabling flexibility while avoiding provocation of countervailing responses.⁸⁸ However, while the United States may not seek military confrontation with China anytime soon, US policy that counts India as a key part of its deterrence strategy in the Indo-Pacific may be underestimating how much “ambiguous commitments tend to weaken deterrence.”⁸⁹ False optimism in India as a proto-ally could lead the United States to become overconfident in its coercive leverage in Asia, motivating it to risk more aggressive confrontations with countries like Iran or China.

Third, false expectations about the trajectory of a relationship could create misperceptions in leverage that setback a partnership when one side overplays its hand. At present, US belief in the inevitability of closer strategic alignment may be driving it to press India on a number of areas that could cumulatively undermine the relationship. The list of US concerns with India has now expanded to include 5G infrastructure, data localization, trade barriers, Iranian oil, and Russian weapons. These disputes are forcing India to choose between advancing the US relationship and many of its own near-term interests including important economic, neighborhood, and defense acquisition policies.

These three consequences of inflated expectations can lead both sides to a disenchantment that undermines the partnership. One need only look at years of festering US disgruntlement with NATO allies’ shirking of defense commitments, which has recently turned from acrimonious to almost adversarial. Today, descriptions of India as a “major defense partner”—a status with undefined obligations—generate implicit expectations of Indian alignment with the United States on a whole raft of policies.⁹⁰ High, explicit commitments that are fulfilled can build confidence and generate momentum in a relationship, but vague, implicit expectations that go unmet are likely to poison it.

These three consequences of inflated expectations can lead to disenchantment that undermines the partnership.

Adjusting to Realities

This essay does not intend to claim that deeper US engagement with India is impossible or undesirable—far from it. India can be a valuable and potentially powerful partner, but a sustainable US-India strategic collaboration would

benefit from some realism about the limitations of the relationship. India faces significant economic challenges and capability deficits it must overcome within one to two decades,⁹¹ geographic reasons to focus on its neighborhood and land borders rather than the Pacific, more room than most states to maneuver independently given its possession of nuclear weapons, and strong incentives to hedge. These four factors combined should generate a more reasonable, average expectation of the US-India relationship—at least in the medium-term—absent a significant shock. These pressures can be overcome if India’s material capabilities increase and its interests and reach expand beyond its traditional geography, or a radical departure in Chinese behavior that deeply threatens New Delhi. Ultimately, its continuously updating strategic preferences may converge with those of the United States.

Why do US leaders and analysts have such a hard time managing their expectations of India?

In the meantime, these limitations are generally known and understood, so why do US leaders and analysts have such a hard time managing their expectations of India? First, US leaders continue to refer to India as an “ally” because the United States has tended to think in binary terms—muscle memory of the Cold War—and regards claims of equidistance or multi-alignment with a good deal of confusion or skepticism. Additionally, a US aspirational bias may also serve to distort public judgments as US officials repeat the hyperboles—e.g.,

“natural allies,” “most consequential bilateral relationship in the 21st century,” and “one of our strongest and most dependable military partners”—which obfuscate structural divergences in the relationship.

A third reason might reside more with India: namely, that it does not easily fit into either of the two basic models of alliance or partnership. In a symmetric “capability-aggregation” model, partners value each other for their mutual military assistance to support deterrence and defense. The second model is an asymmetric relationship, considered more stable and one the United States has grown accustomed to since 1945, wherein the more powerful state offers security benefits (e.g., mutual defense commitments) to the weaker one in exchange for autonomy benefits (e.g., basing rights) to maximize foreign policy goals for both countries.⁹² India would never accept an asymmetric relationship because it is “too proud a nation to be seen as Washington’s minion,” but simultaneously, it cannot fit the symmetric capability aggregation model because it is “also much weaker than the United States and could not often make substantial direct contributions toward realizing US objectives.”⁹³

In order to reduce mutual frustration, the United States could reduce the scope of the relationship—both what it expects of India, but also what it invests in India—to render it truly symmetric. Scoping the relationship to India’s absorptive capacity would then allow the two partners to steadily and reciprocally raise mutual expectations and commitments as India materially rises over an extended time horizon. (This could include discrete, asymmetric assistance when it directly advances US interest—like the sharing of select intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance on India’s border with China.)⁹⁴ Another approach might be to recast the US-India relationship as one of “preclusion”—not necessarily for deterrence or defense. This would play to India’s preference for multipolarity, offering a more flexible, minimal bargain to disincentivize India from aggregating its capabilities with a current or future US adversary.⁹⁵ A third might be to diversify the Indo-Pacific portfolio and treat India as an important bet among several prickly “porcupine” bets placed in the region with nascent partners in South and Southeast Asia.⁹⁶ None of these approaches appeal as well as the silver bullet of “natural allies,” but they pragmatically match means to more realistic ends bounded by structural constraints.

What is clear is that raising expectations that continue to go unmet may damage—or at least slow—progress in the relationship, contributing to the recurring problem of “India fatigue” in the United States and distorting strategic calculations in the Indo-Pacific. Addressing frustrations in US foreign policy circles regarding the slow, uneven rate of convergence requires the United States take Indian foreign policy as-is, rather than pressing for alignment on areas in which India is likely to diverge.

Working with a strategic partner that aligns on some, but not all, national security interests in the region will require a mutual relaxation of expectations and greater degree of dexterity than an alliance partner like Japan. The United States may need to adjust its behavior by acknowledging and respecting the primacy of India’s economic development, the security priorities of its regional neighborhood, the utility of its relationships with Russia and Iran, and an Indian defense strategy congruent with its economic growth needs for industrial manufacturing, employment, and spillovers for technological innovation.

Rather than an “anchor of global stability,” the US-India strategic partnership should be seen as a hopeful, but not inevitable, element of US deterrence in the Indo-Pacific (particularly absent Chinese encroachments in the Indian Ocean region).⁹⁷ Policymakers place a lot of stock in the assumption that, in lieu of an alliance, an elevated partnership with India could deter China, but there is little evidence that anything short of a high-end alliance with mutual defense treaties would deter conflict.⁹⁸

To call on policymakers to learn from the US-India successes and shortfalls of the past fifteen years does not attempt to scuttle the relationship, but to restore it

to safer ground. The US-India strategic partnership can and will continue to progress into something larger and mutually beneficial, albeit slowly, when it is freed from the burden of impossible expectations.

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