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COMMENTARY

Avoiding a Collision Course With India

September 12, 2021



After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, some of the [harshest criticism](#) of America's credibility has come – surprisingly – from India. One prominent commentator projects the end of “[Pax Americana](#)” and another [argues](#) that the Taliban's victory constitutes the “first significant setback” of America's “Indo-Pacific project.” These Indian strategists see the end of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan as a sign of unreliability. Without U.S. troops on the ground, New Delhi will be challenged to contend with a Taliban government that tilts toward Pakistan and China. Afghanistan historically provided safe haven to terrorist organizations that targeted India, and New Delhi considers the Taliban's ascendance as a direct threat to its security interests. Other prominent Indian voices, however, take a different view on the meaning of the U.S. withdrawal. C. Raja Mohan, an influential Indian scholar, [believes](#) that the U.S. withdrawal can “accelerate current trends in India's relations with the United States,” while even the Indian foreign minister [insists](#) that the United States is still “the premier power” that [retains](#) a “very unique sort of standing.”

Debates over the reliability of the United States are commonplace in New Delhi. Earlier this year, for instance, Indian commentators argued over the significance of unilateral [U.S. freedom of navigation operations](#) in India's exclusive economic zone and the slow pace of U.S. [pandemic relief](#). Suspicion of U.S. intentions has a long history in India, dating back to the Cold War and America's longstanding ties with Islamabad. In recent decades, however, New Delhi has been able to count on Washington when in crisis. Last year, the United States rapidly [provided](#) supplies, expedited equipment, and enhanced intelligence during India's 2020 border crisis with China.

Where India remains uncertain is whether Washington will steadfastly support India's long-term defense and deterrence needs. These lingering doubts have intensified with the looming threat of U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which India could be subject to when it [takes delivery of the Russian S-400](#) air defense system at the end of 2021. These doubts could abate if the Biden administration is able to work with Congress to issue India a sanctions waiver, and allow strategic and market incentives, rather than punishments, to shape India's defense partnership choices.

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Far more than the last American soldier departing Afghanistan, sanctions on a burgeoning strategic partner could set back U.S.-Indian cooperation a decade or more, constrain Indian capabilities to generate a balance of power and influence in Asia, and raise doubts over U.S. reliability amongst many Southeast Asian swing states. Bolstering India to balance China's rising power in the Indian Ocean region – even with advanced Russian weapon systems – advances U.S. national security interests far more than denying a few billion dollars to the Russian defense industrial complex.

Background to Sanctions

Originally, Congress [enacted](#) CAATSA to more effectively punish Russia for its actions in Ukraine and its engagement in cyber attacks, particularly its [interference](#) in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The United States has sought to limit the sale of Russian arms to foreign states by threatening to apply [secondary sanctions](#) to any entity that does business with sanctioned Russian contractors. Such broad powers, though, which were [written in haste](#), are liable to create tensions with U.S. partners if overused.

CAATSA's ultimate objective, therefore, is to allow the United States to pressure and penalize countries for funding the Russian defense industrial base, which is why it has enacted sanctions against [China](#) and [Turkey](#) over their Russian arms procurements. Congress also designed CAATSA [Section 231](#) sanctions around the risk that U.S. partners and allies, like [Turkey](#), would introduce Russian platforms, like the S-400, into their militaries that could collect intelligence on sensitive U.S. platforms, like the F-35, that those militaries also operate. With India, U.S. defense officials have expressed concerns that Indian integration of advanced Russian systems like the S-400 that operate alongside, or networked to, advanced U.S. fighters, bombers, or surveillance aircraft risks ["exploitation, theft, or actually risk of non-operability."](#) These risks could constrain combined operations with U.S. forces and the prospects for joint defense production and technology development.

The Looming Crisis

Although even U.S. officials [acknowledge](#) that India signed an agreement to purchase the S-400 one year before CAATSA legislation was even written, India's receipt of the S-400 will [trigger sanctions](#) unless a waiver is signed. Some have speculated that it may be possible to apply ["very mild"](#) sanctions that are more symbolic than substantive, thus avoiding a waiver precedent while also preserving the U.S.-Indian partnership. Even symbolic sanctions, however, can prove [corrosive](#) to the partnership, as some former

U.S. officials argue. [Debates over U.S. credibility](#) tend to fixate on its resolve, but [recent scholarship](#) shows that states don't simply seek allies or partners that cultivate a reputation for loyalty, especially loyalty to a fault, that drains and diverts capabilities. Instead, states seek evidence of *reliability* demonstrated through behaviors that reveal an alignment of interests.

U.S. sanctions that take aim at India's "[strategic autonomy](#)" would constitute a profound public signal of divergent interests, unreliability, and even potential future abandonment. Unlike U.S. treaty allies in NATO or East Asia, India does not depend on the United States as a permanent security guarantor. Instead, New Delhi most values U.S. support for its political, material, and technological heft to become an independent and capable strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific, so policies that affect this ledger matter far more than the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. At times, this has led to [unrealistic expectations](#) about the degree of the America's "[strategic altruism](#)" (i.e., generous U.S. support without demands for Indian reciprocity) on concessionary technology transfers and preferential bilateral trade agreements. Nevertheless, the United States has generally bolstered India's position and, in return, India has gradually leveraged its material heft to aid a balance of power in Asia and to defend shared principles of rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, and territorial integrity.

In the past year, both sides have worked together to produce global public goods (e.g., COVID-19 vaccine distribution), [participate](#) in advanced joint naval exercises, [finalize agreements](#) to facilitate greater military interoperability and intelligence sharing, and co-develop defense technologies (like a [recent agreement](#) on air-launched drones). Sanctions would reverse this momentum. Indeed, Indian officials and insiders have hinted that sanctions imposition risks [jeopardizing](#) the strategic partnership and could set back the relationship "[a decade](#)" or [more](#).

Even while India [aligns more closely](#) with the United States, though, it retains a [strategy of multi-alignment](#), which entails foregoing alliances to maintain partnerships with a diverse set of states – something that CAATSA effectively targets. Sanctions are an attempt to force India to choose between arms ties with the United States or with Russia. While the United States might expect this to be an easy choice, it runs counter to India's grand strategy and [decades-long partnership with Moscow](#). Historically, India's relations with Russia have been built on [arms transactions](#), which has led some to mistakenly view this partnership as transactional. However, there is also a geopolitical logic, which the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan only clarifies. India now sees an even greater need for an autonomous strategy that allows for strong relations with regional players that command influence in Central Asia, like Russia and Iran, both of which the United States sees as adversaries. India also perceives particular value in Russia's willingness to co-produce defense technology, their mutual support of a multipolar order and spheres of influence, and even the

hope that India's partnership might [slow down](#) Sino-Russian relations, even if scholars [cast doubt](#) on whether a strategy to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow is feasible. CAATSA sanctions on India intend to drive New Delhi away from Moscow, and effectively from its multi-alignment strategy.

While, in recent decades, Washington has invested in India as a democratic partner that can serve as a bulwark against China's growing regional influence, the threat of CAATSA sanctions suggests that U.S. support is conditional on India's relations with other countries. The absence of an alliance treaty commitment, which most analysts agree will never happen, of course places understandable limits on the relationship. However, CAATSA sanctions don't simply establish a ceiling to relations – they pull out the rug from underneath them. Punitive measures won't successfully coerce India into reformulating its grand strategy, but they will lead India to question the United States' reliability as a strategic partner, might counter-productively slow collective balancing actions against China, and could push India to strengthen its ties to Russia to meet its future defense needs.

U.S. Concerns and Workarounds

[Proponents](#) of CAATSA sanctions on India argue that India's multi-alignment relations with Russia create two risks: a strategic risk to the global order, and a technical risk to greater U.S.-Indian military interoperability. However, sanctions would worsen the first concern, and the second is surmountable.

India's Russian arms procurements are frustrating because they flow billions of dollars into the Russian defense industry, effectively abetting its "[brigandry](#)" that subverts the international order. While understandable, sanctions that limit India's confidence in access to the U.S. defense industry inevitably force them closer to their trusted Russian partner. It may also be plausible to leverage India's relationship constructively. In a deal where the United States waives sanctions, it might also raise expectations of India to more publicly condemn Russian behaviors that subvert the international order, like [civilian infrastructure cyber attacks](#), [militarized territorial grabs](#), [disinformation campaigns](#), and [election interference](#).

On the other hand, sanctions that harm U.S.-Indian relations, and mechanisms like the Quad, will also set back the defense of the "[open rules-based order](#)." If the administration and Congress believe that the Indo-Pacific is the "[priority](#)" theater for defending this order, that China is the only "[systemic](#)" or "[pacing](#)" challenge to the United States, and that the partnership with India is "[vital](#)" to greater regional burden-sharing and balancing, sabotaging relations with India would be, on net, counterproductive.

The second U.S. concern is that India's continual procurement of Russian military equipment will place technical limits on defense cooperation between New Delhi and Washington. Advanced Russian equipment – accompanied by officers, scientists, and technicians – generates U.S. concerns about the security of any U.S.-Indian defense industrial technology collaboration. As well, the United States would be wary of sharing real-time information, and operating in theater, with Russian-origin Indian military platforms. The risks that there could be backdoors and other ways for Russia to acquire insights into American systems and operations, especially through the S-400's radar, is cause for U.S. defense officials to curtail the space for cooperation. The United States [sanctioned](#) Turkey in December for just such concerns, though the circumstances are different in this case as India would not be jeopardizing any existing allied treaty commitments or F-35 supply chains.

No matter what penalties the United States might seek to apply, though, India is [in too deep](#) with its strategic systems – including [nuclear submarines](#), [cruise missiles](#), and [fighter aircraft](#) – to divest from its Russian partnership. India's military is overwhelmingly reliant on Russian equipment and it has decades of acquired tacit knowledge on operating, maintaining, and strategizing with Russian platforms. However, the United States can develop tactical, geographic, and technical workarounds to these hurdles (as we detail in a [longer paper](#)). Washington can concentrate its defense cooperation with New Delhi on essential areas, like maritime reconnaissance, that are geographically separated from S-400 batteries and other problematic Russian systems, while it tailors technical solutions to overcome exploitation and cyber security threats. Creative workarounds to technical obstacles are available – workarounds to political fallout and unreliability concerns from sanctions are extremely difficult.

Re-Thinking How India Benefits the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

Assuming it is willing to work with the United States and can [rise to its potential](#) as a military and geopolitical power, India can advance the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy materially, technologically, and politically – ironically because it is *not* a U.S. ally. First, India offers one of the best chances of checking China's assertiveness in the Indian Ocean, simply given its military size and strength, unique geography, and economic heft. Some [argue](#) India's importance to American interests has even increased since U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The United States will maintain an interest in coordinating with India to affect the Asian balance of power, even in spite of some [decay](#) in India's [democratic institutions](#), so long as India maintains support for the most essential strategic elements of the rules-based order – rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, and territorial integrity. An independently capable India will naturally be inclined to counter any attempted militarized aggression, including from Beijing. For that matter, Russian arms – like the S-400, but also the soon to be acquired [stealth frigates](#), nuclear submarines, and the jointly developed [anti-ship cruise missiles](#) – all bolster India's deterrent and defense capability. An urgent China challenge mandates Indian capability, regardless of those capabilities' origins.

The United States might also re-conceptualize the benefit of India's non-allied status, which is a unique geopolitical asset. U.S. partners often [voice concern](#) about being "[forced to choose](#)" between Washington and Beijing, so a powerful, non-allied third party, like India, affirming status quo principles releases fence-sitters from that binary choice.

Over decades of close relations with the littoral nations of the Indian Ocean, India has accrued trust and influence the United States cannot match. India's clear statements that it is a multi-aligned state, and not part of a Western bloc, also strike a chord among some [swing states in Southeast Asia](#) that seek a similar balance. By defending the maritime commons and a rules-based order, India offers these states a permission structure to align their stances on the core concerns of international order, not because they are promoted by the U.S. allies, but precisely because they are promoted by influential like-minded states outside that Western alliance structure. Former U.S. officials [acknowledge](#) many Southeast Asian states are uncomfortable expressing their concerns with China out loud but, if India affirms a set of international rules alongside the United States and its allies, these states could be emboldened to become similarly forthright. India's early success [selling](#) jointly made Indo-Russian anti-ship cruise missiles to Southeast Asian states (something that CAATSA sanctions could also constrain) further emboldens Southeast Asian states to [defend their territorial waters](#), contributing to a more stable Asian balance of power.

Tools like CAATSA sanctions that seek to force India into the mold of a U.S. treaty ally either compromises India's perception of U.S. reliability as an Indo-Pacific partner or compromises the valuable currency of legitimacy India's multi-aligned status confers. Most likely, though, it undermines both Indian trust and the perception that it is truly an independent and sovereign actor, a two-fold loss for U.S. regional interests. Such reliability questions will only be compounded as other states with defense industrial ties to Russia, like [Vietnam](#) and [Indonesia](#), would then fear that U.S. support is conditional on their subordination to every U.S. foreign policy.

Looking Ahead

Washington may underestimate how much of a collision course it is on with India. The threat of CAATSA sanctions has already cast a [cloud](#) over U.S.-Indian relations and imposes a drag on many aspects of the defense partnership. Far more than the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, sanctions will cause India to raise fundamental questions about America's reliability for years to come. The Biden administration can avert this by taking Congress into consultation to grant India a sanctions waiver.

Rather than diminishing Indo-Russian relations, CAATSA sanctions ultimately threaten U.S. interests by undermining India's capabilities to defend the rules-based order and willingness to deeply coordinate with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. India's capacity to support that strategy means the United States should prioritize allowing India to strengthen its capabilities, regardless of origin, rather than seeking to force India into the framework of an American ally that operates U.S. military equipment. While India's

multi-alignment policy can be frustrating to deal with, and trades off with some depth of U.S.-Indian defense cooperation, it remains one of Washington's best bets for burden-sharing, balancing, and unique political currency among numerous Indo-Pacific littoral states.

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