



<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/modis-trip-washington-marks-new-heights-us-india-ties>

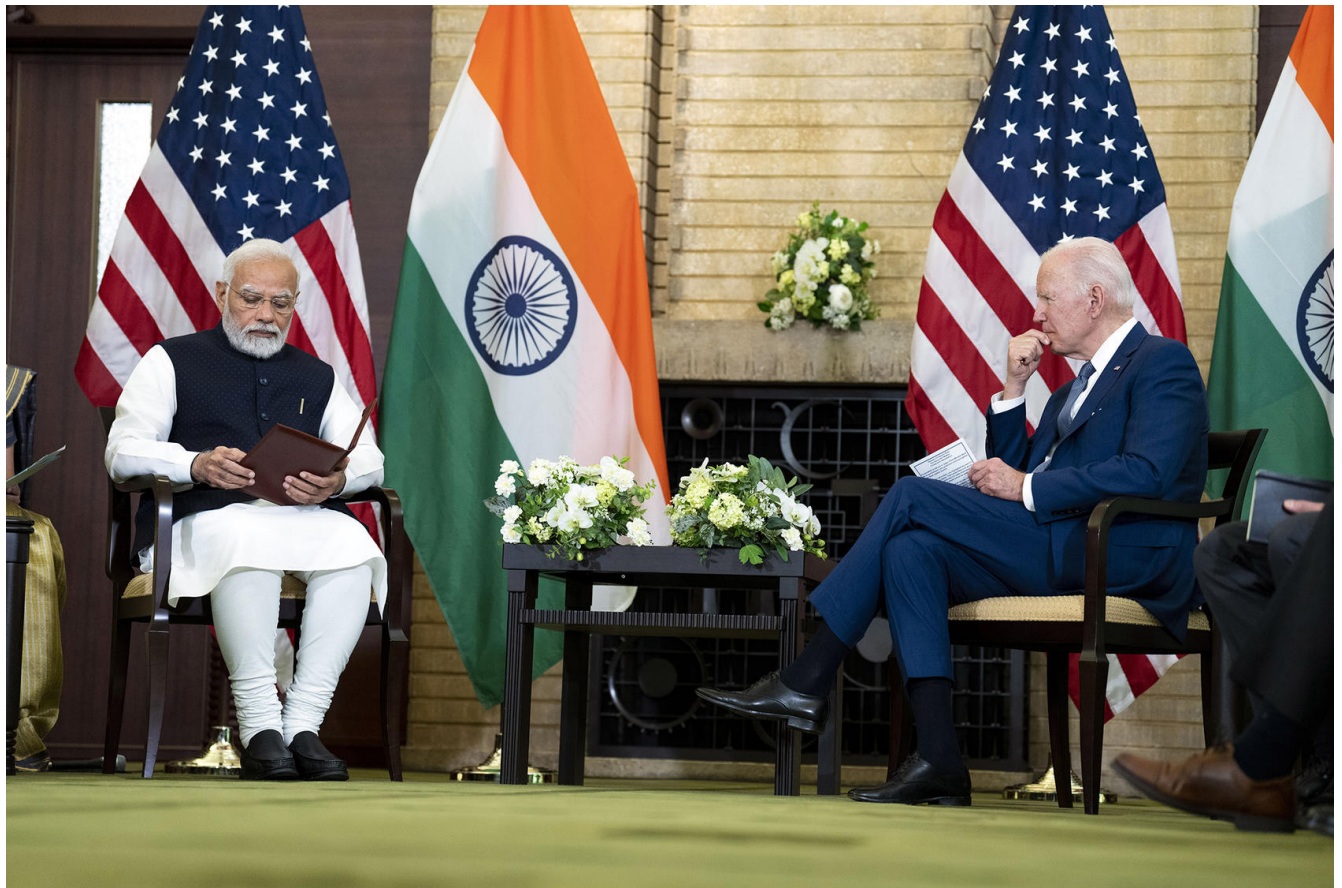
Modi's Trip to Washington Marks New Heights in U.S.-India Ties

What's behind the dramatic increase in strategic cooperation? One word: China.

Tuesday, June 20, 2023 /

By: Sameer P. Lalwani, Ph.D.; Daniel Markey, Ph.D.; Tamanna Salikuddin; Vikram J. Singh

Against the backdrop of tightening U.S.-India ties, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi heads to Washington this week for an official state visit — only the third President Joe Biden has hosted since taking office. The bilateral relationship has soared to new heights in recent years, particularly on economic, technological and defense issues. Underpinning these developments is both sides' desire to counter China's effort to project power and influence across the Indo-Pacific region. While Washington and New Delhi have their disagreements on issues like Russia's war on Ukraine and human rights, they see the relationship as too strategically vital to be jeopardized by these differences.



President Joe Biden meets with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India in Tokyo, May 24, 2022. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

USIP's Tamanna Salikuddin, Vikram Singh, Sameer Lalwani and Daniel Markey analyze the significance of this visit, the difficult issues that will be on the table, and how China will factor will into the leaders' discussions.

What is the significance of the state visit for both the United States and for India?

Salikuddin: Modi's visit will be filled with substantive and ceremonial events, including a South Lawn welcome, a state dinner and an address to a joint session of Congress. While Modi has visited the United States several times, this will be his first state visit, demonstrating the depth of the bilateral U.S.-India relationship, which Biden has described as the ["defining relationship"](#) of the 21st century. Per the White House's official [announcement](#), "the visit will strengthen our two countries' shared commitment to a free, open, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific and our shared resolve to elevate our strategic technology partnership, including in defense, clean energy, and space."

While none of the official statements mention China, this visit is all about China. As U.S.-China competition is only becoming more intense and the Biden administration identifies China as its "pacing" challenge, India is one of the most important partners for the United States in its Indo-Pacific policy. While India actively counters China on its northern border, its deepening relationship with the United States make it part of the bulwark of nations committed to countering Beijing's malign influence.

Beyond the convergence on China, India and the United States are seeking deeper ties on economic, defense and technological grounds. This visit is significant in cementing the partnership, and no detail is being left unchecked with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visiting New Delhi in the last few weeks. This visit and the broader high-level U.S.-India engagements this year — including Biden's planned trip to New Delhi in the fall — are a high-water mark in the bilateral relationship. Coming 18 years after the historic U.S.-India civil nuclear deal, these engagements highlight the remarkable progress that has been made in terms of expanding economic, social, technological and defense aspects of the U.S.-India relationship.

As Modi departed India, he [reaffirmed](#) the significance of the trip: "I am confident that my visit to the [U.S.] will reinforce our ties based on shared values of democracy, diversity, and freedom. Together we stand stronger in meeting the shared global challenges."

What are the difficult topics that might be on the table, and how are Biden and Modi likely to navigate these?

Singh: Biden and Modi are determined to take U.S.-India relations to a new level with this visit, and part of having a mature strategic partnership is the ability to tackle difficult issues and areas of disagreement.

Issues that get a lot of media attention include policy differences on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and issues of human rights and democracy. More below-the-radar are key regional challenges like Afghanistan and [Myanmar](#); enduring difficulties in a bilateral trade agenda; and finding a way to cooperate more on global governance, especially regulation of technology and the digital economy.

India will also seek progress in easing visas for Indian citizens, especially student visas and H-1B visas for highly skilled foreign workers, and U.S. commitments to greater technology sharing needed to implement the high-tech cooperation the leaders have rolled out.

A major change over the past decade is that the United States and India can now disagree on some issues and continue to work together on a large shared agenda. Given the strong personal bond Biden and Modi seem to have developed, expect them to be direct and forthright with one another in private and broadly supportive and celebratory in public.

On issues like Ukraine, intense private consultations will likely touch on assessments of the state of the conflict and the need to ensure Putin does not turn to nuclear weapons. Biden may seek Modi's assessment of Putin and possible paths Russia might take to end the war. On Afghanistan, Modi and Biden may share assessments of Taliban, al-Qaida, ISIS and Pakistan-based militant threats since the U.S. withdrawal. India has kept a small diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and may encourage the United States to engage more actively to partner in preventing terrorism in and from the region.

Democracy and human rights, which get the most media attention, will not be avoided, but expect a similar pragmatic approach. U.S. leaders are concerned about democracy everywhere — including at home. Biden has taken an inclusive view that all democracies face challenges and that leaders of democracies should work together to improve durable democratic development. That will likely be the approach with India. U.S. leaders will welcome public comments or gestures from Modi in support of pluralistic democracy, but do not believe that lecturing India on these issues can be effective. A logical takeaway is that the United States will handle human rights concerns with India more like it does with a country like Poland.

First and foremost, Biden and Modi both pursue the interests of their own citizens, and they seem to understand each other on this basis. For Modi, this means development and meeting the basic needs of 1.4 billion people by transforming India into a modern, global technology powerhouse that competes with China. For Biden it means rebuilding the American middle class and maintaining America's global leadership. Underneath the lofty rhetoric about two great democracies, these leaders see pragmatic

benefits for their own people coming from deeper social, economic, political and security ties. They will manage the hard stuff to protect those gains.

How might the outcomes of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's recent trip to India shape conversations on defense and technology?

Lalwani: Austin's trip to New Delhi two weeks ago helped finalize agreements and set the table for Modi's historic state visit to Washington. The 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy called for more technology cooperation with allies and partners, which produced greater technology-sharing mechanisms with [Australia](#) (through the [AUKUS](#) deal with the United Kingdom) as well as [with Japan](#). Now the United States appears poised to take some unprecedented steps toward the third partner in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, India.

U.S. technology cooperation with India is likely to include [co-production and technology sharing of General Electric engines](#), which will be used in Indian military fighter jets to deter and defend against China. Additional [Defense Department efforts involve](#) a defense industrial cooperation roadmap to expedite co-production of military equipment; new programs to network both countries entrepreneurs, research labs, industry, and venture capital fueling defense innovations over the medium term; and enhanced scientific collaboration on emerging technologies in artificial intelligence, synthetic biology and robotics.

The strategic result will be twofold — enhanced Indian deterrence and greater trust in U.S.-India defense collaboration. First, in the near to medium term, India will be able to augment its military capabilities to defend against Chinese aggression, which ratcheted up with the [Galwan crisis](#) and clashes during the summer of 2020. The defense industrial roadmap involves four focus areas for fast-tracking technology cooperation: air combat and land mobility systems; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); munitions; and the undersea domain awareness (UDA).

As India is able to quickly develop better ISR assets, it will be able to identify the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) maneuvers or gray zone incursions on their disputed continental border much earlier. Similarly, better UDA will enable India to better discern and track Chinese submarine activity in the Indian Ocean, and share that data with friends and partners. With both, detection will play a critical role in deterrence. Greater land mobility systems will help India to quickly surge forces and supplies to flashpoints along the disputed border with China, while longer range munitions can threaten to interdict PLA supply lines in the event of a conflict.

The second expected result of this technology sharing effort can be greater mutual trust in order to enhance collaboration in the Indo-Pacific. The trust generated from top-down and bottom-up technology cooperation may be less tangible yet is more significant. India has made no secret of its decades-long desire for a high-technology partnership, and the great lengths the U.S. government has gone to fulfill this desire serves as a costly signal of its commitment and reliability. With this mutual trust, both partners will be better able to engage in more advanced joint assessments, contingency planning, and exercises as they prepare to backstop each other, interoperate together, and share the burdens of deterring aggression and securing the Indo-Pacific commons.

What are the most pressing issues the United States and India will be focused on when it comes to China?

Markey: The bedrock for cooperation between the United States and India lies in a shared interest in deterring Chinese territorial aggression and challenging the extension of China's political influence and military presence in India's backyard.

The most immediate concern is along the Line of Actual Control, the contested China-India land border, where China has made vast investments in military infrastructure that have already enabled it to [push India from former patrolling points](#) and could, in a worst-case scenario, even [enable large-scale incursions](#) into Indian territory. U.S. officials are eager to help India reinforce its own capacity to deter and defend against such attacks, as they pose a genuine near-term threat to Indian security and represent a dangerous precedent that could intimidate other less powerful states across the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. defense sales to India are intended to fill immediate capability gaps (for instance, to improve border surveillance with [U.S.-made drones](#)) as well as to co-manufacture future weapon systems (such as [fighter jet engines](#)).

Also of concern to both Washington and New Delhi is the rapid growth of China's navy. Although China's military is disproportionately focused on challenges along the nation's eastern seaboard, especially Taiwan and the South and East China Seas, the rapid modernization and expansion of its fleet enables operations across the Indian Ocean as well. U.S. officials aim to explore [cooperative ventures](#) with India that will enable better monitoring of and response to Chinese maritime activities.

Finally, whereas in the past Indian officials jealously perceived U.S. involvement in South Asia as a threat to India's regional hegemony, now New Delhi is increasingly eager to see Washington play an active economic and political role in neighboring states across the region, such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, as a means to counterbalance Chinese influence.

Related Research & Analysis

[What's at Stake for China in the Iran War?](#)

Monday, June 23, 2025

By: Adam Gallagher, Editor in Chief, USIP

China has major energy and economic interests that are threatened by an escalating conflict. But Beijing may also see some strategic opportunities with the U.S. focused on the war. Ultimately, China is likely unwilling, and unable, to make a serious effort to broker peace.

Type: [Analysis](#)



[The Element of Surprise: Space and Cyber Warfare in U.S.-China Rivalry](#)

Wednesday, June 18, 2025

By: Dean Cheng

The 2024 revelations over China's effort to implant malware in critical U.S. infrastructure by the Volt Typhoon hacking group — as well as the Salt Typhoon group's successful breaching of at least nine major U.S. telecoms — have renewed concern over Beijing's constant, ongoing efforts to hack Western companies, governments and non-governmental organizations. Unlike past incidents, like those involving Chinese military unit 61398, which were largely about cyber espionage, the Volt Typhoon group was actively implanting malware designed to disrupt critical infrastructure such as water and power systems.

Type: [Analysis](#)



[How Vulnerable Is India to Chinese Economic Coercion?](#)

Monday, June 16, 2025

By: Sushant Singh

While India has taken a strong security stance against China, its economic posture has been cooperative. But India's reliance on Chinese imports may undermine its role as a counterbalance to China. The U.S. can help India serve as a counterweight to China by supporting Delhi's de-risking efforts.

Type: [Analysis](#)



[The Perils of a Cold War Analogy for Today's U.S.-China Rivalry](#)

Tuesday, June 10, 2025

By: Andrew Scobell, Ph.D., Distinguished Fellow, China

In the new era of great power rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China (hereafter "China"), the paradigm of strategic competition has become popular. In looking to make sense of the present global geopolitical moment and paradigm, pundits search for a relevant historical analogy.

Type: [Analysis](#)



[View All Research & Analysis](#)