

American Global Primacy and the Rise of India

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SUMMARY As China asserts itself economically and militarily, the United States is faced with maintaining a balance of power in East Asia and safeguarding its global dominance. In contrast to its competitive position with China, the US relationship with India—projected to be the third-largest economy by 2030—is set on a more collaborative course. American support for a rising India aligns with its broader security and strategic goals. India, for its part, remains intent on achieving a position of regional primacy, but welcomes the US presence in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region. The two nations, for example, have signed an agreement giving each other access to military facilities, and they conduct many bilateral military exercises. These developments are a far cry from the mid-twentieth century, when Jawaharlal Nehru called for the removal of all foreign militaries from Asia. What factors pushed the India-US relationship in this new direction? And what shared interests and goals does the partnership reinforce?

What does the US gain from cooperating with a rising power that was uncomfortable with its presence in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region throughout the Cold War?

The world's uncontested superpower in the years following the end of the Cold War, the United States today faces the daunting task of managing the rise of new great powers. According to America's 2015 national security strategy, "India's potential, China's rise, and Russia's aggression all significantly impact the future of major power relations."¹ While its competitive relationships with China and Russia are major sources of concern, the United States is responding to the rise of India with cooperative strategies. For example, former President Barack Obama affirmed that "India's rise is in the interest of the United States, regional and global stability, and global economic growth," and that America was committed to being India's "partner...in this transformation."² What drives this cooperative approach toward India? America's favorable assessment is ultimately predicated on the fact that a rising India does not challenge American global primacy in an increasingly multipolar world, and that India's emergence may even contribute to the maintenance of that position.

The United States' global primacy rests on its regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere and by maintaining a balance of power that favors America in three other critical regions: Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. While the reemergence of Russia and the rise of China directly challenge such a power distribution in these critical regions irrespective of their actual policies toward the United States, India's rise is confined to the South Asia/Indian Ocean region, an area of somewhat lesser importance to the United States than Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. Furthermore, a rising India is not trying to exclude US influence from the South Asia/Indian Ocean region, but simply seeks primacy (not the exclusivity of hegemony) in its home region. This goal seems to be acceptable to the United States.

India's intention of keeping the United States engaged in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region is best exemplified by the US-India bilateral logistics exchange memorandum agreement (LEMOA) that

was signed in August 2016. The LEMOA gives the two countries reciprocal access to their respective military bases for logistics (supplies and fuel). While this is not a military alliance, nor does it make any provisions for automatically joining the other side's military conflicts, it is a significant departure from Jawaharlal Nehru's "Monroe Doctrine for Asia." On the eve of India's independence in 1947, the head of the interim government and the future prime minister (and foreign minister) had called for the removal of all foreign militaries from Asia. So why is a rising India switching course and trying to keep the United States "in"? What does the US gain from cooperating with a rising power that was uncomfortable with its presence throughout the Cold War?

Though growing in power and influence, India lacks the will or strength to establish a hegemonic regional order for three main reasons: the long-standing rivalry with Pakistan, the influence of extra-regional great powers, and the rise of China as a South Asian/Indian Ocean power. At the same time, India's quest for regional primacy seems acceptable to the United States, given that India wishes to keep the United States in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region and may even grant military access beyond logistics if the need arises. Since the South Asia/Indian Ocean region is of secondary importance to the United States, Indian primacy does not affect America's global position. Furthermore, by demonstrating its potential willingness to give the United States military access, India is signaling that its regional primacy will not be detrimental to America's security interests in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region.

More importantly, America's accommodation of Indian primacy in the region will help shape a rising India's choices as it enters the East Asian strategic landscape, even in the absence of an alliance. For example, India is granted logistical access to America's military bases in the Indian Ocean and East Asia through the LEMOA. Such an arrangement might even help the United States in maintaining a

balance of power system in East Asia—a region of primary interest—that continues to favor America as China and India rise simultaneously. Indian regional primacy, however, is not a foregone conclusion but will have to be constantly negotiated.

India's Historical Quest for Regional Power

From the end of the Second World War and until the fall of the Soviet Union, India did aspire to be a regional hegemon, but was not successful for two main reasons. First, India's subcontinental rival, Pakistan, constantly defied India's efforts. Furthermore, Pakistan actively sought help from China and the United States to undercut India's material power advantages. While the Sino-Indian rivalry is an important reason behind China's support for Pakistan, the United States also supported Pakistan in its quest to achieve larger global/security objectives. China became a major benefactor of Pakistan in the 1960s and agreed to help with its nuclear program after India's 1974 nuclear test. By contrast, even though American support for Pakistan did not target India, it did diminish India's regional preponderance by contributing to Pakistan's military power. Second, the presence of British naval power in the Indian Ocean during the early Cold War, as well as that of the United States from the 1970s onwards, meant that Indian regional hegemony in the waters around the subcontinent was impossible. After all, a regional hegemon is the only great (military) power in its neighborhood.

If India were to aspire today to regional hegemony, it would have a new factor to deal with: the phenomenal rise of China. China's close economic and security relationships with the countries around India—on land and at sea—are fast transforming China into a South Asian/Indian Ocean power. Many analysts even speak of an “Indo-Pacific” region in this regard, a larger Asia with both a maritime and a continental system. The presence of a new great power, China, in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region

along with the incumbent system leader, the United States, is another reason that a regional hegemonic order centered on India would not be viable.

India's strategic elite has recognized the difficulties of establishing a regional hegemonic order centered on India since the Cold War. For example, according to the so-called “Indira Doctrine,” which was never formally enunciated, India would tolerate the intervention of extra-regional powers in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region only if they gave precedence to Indian interests.³ In the post-Cold War period, India highlighted its own centrality in South Asia through the so-called “Gujral Doctrine” (named after Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral), in which India agreed to respect the sovereignty of its smaller neighbors and to avoid seeking “reciprocity” in bilateral relations because India could afford to give more.⁴ Later, in 2005, then-Indian foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, noted that India would not like to see its South Asian neighbors “seek association with countries outside the region or with regional or international organizations, in a barely disguised effort to ‘counterbalance’ India.”⁵ More recently, while highlighting India's centrality in maritime security in the Indian Ocean, Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted that India was willing to work with extra-regional powers “with strong interests and stakes in the region.”⁶

These statements demonstrate that India wishes to be treated as *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”) in the strategic affairs of the South Asia/Indian Ocean region. The geopolitical realities of the region mean that India cannot militarily dominate this region—though it can likely militarily dominate all South Asian states except Pakistan—nor can it exclude the extra-regional great powers. India hopes to be the single largest regional power in the South Asia/Indian Ocean area, along all dimensions of power—political, diplomatic, economic, and military. It is willing to work with the smaller regional players as well as the extra-regional great powers provided they

China's close economic ties and security relationships with the countries around India are fast transforming it into a South Asian/Indian Ocean power

understand that India is the “first in order, importance, or authority” in regional affairs.⁷ Most regional states seem to accept this, except for Pakistan. Importantly, the United States is willing to accept a regional configuration of power in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region that points toward Indian primacy.

US Backing for India’s Regional Goals

The United States emerged simultaneously as a great power and a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere in the late nineteenth century. While it navigated in a multipolar world in the first half of the twentieth century, the United States has sought to maintain a balance of power favorable to it in Europe and East Asia in the aftermath of World War II, given that these regions are home to industrial and technological powers “where the sinews of modern military strength could be produced in quantity.”⁸ Similarly, American policy has been geared toward maintaining a favorable balance of power in the Middle East, a region that is home to the energy supplies that fuel modern economies and militaries. These three regions—Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East—are the regions of vital interest to the United States, along with its home region in the Western Hemisphere.⁹

The United States’ global primacy depends upon maintaining its regional hegemonic status in the Western Hemisphere, while also maintaining a favorable balance of power in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East.¹⁰ By contrast, the South Asia/Indian Ocean region is of less vital interest to the United States. America is agnostic about the regional configuration of power in South Asia/Indian Ocean.¹¹ For example, while the United States did send an aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Bangladesh War, it did not try to militarily prop up the diminished (West) Pakistan after that conflict, and the US-Pakistan relationship resumed only after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As a region of less critical interest, America’s main strategic goals

in South Asia/Indian Ocean—from the perspective of America’s position in the global balance of power—are to ensure access to the region (if the need arises) and to prevent its domination by extra-regional great powers (the Soviet Union during the Cold War and perhaps China today).¹²

As long as India has neither the capability nor the intention to exclude the United States from the South Asia/Indian Ocean region, America is unlikely to hinder India’s quest for regional primacy. While the LEMOA is the most dramatic display of India’s intentions to keep the United States engaged in regional affairs, these efforts are not a recent development. In fact, they have been underway at least since the end of the Cold War. Some important episodes, such as the Central Intelligence Agency’s use of an Indian base for the U-2 program to spy on China, even happened during the Cold War (in the Nehru years). Later, India allowed American aircraft on supply runs from the Philippines to the Persian Gulf to refuel at airbases in India under Prime Minister V.P. Singh’s National Front government (1989–90), while his successor, Prime Minister Chandra Sekhar (1990–91), continued with this policy after US-led military action against Iraq was launched during the First Gulf War. In a dramatic display of its strategic intentions, India offered “unlimited support” to Washington, including the use of specific air bases just three days after the 9/11 attacks. Furthermore, the Indian navy escorted several high-value US naval vessels through the Strait of Malacca in 2002.

The United States and India now conduct more conventional bilateral military exercises with each other than with any other country, even though, beyond the large Malabar exercise, the scale of most other US-India exercises is small.¹³ Not only has the United States openly declared its intention to help India become “a major world power,” but it has also designated India as a “major defense partner”—a category created specifically for India to expedite defense technology transfer in the absence of a

The US has designated India as a ‘major defense partner’

military alliance. The Pentagon has also noted that the United States is “investing in a long-term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to serve as a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the Indian Ocean region.”¹⁴ Such a formulation of India as an anchor and security provider is tantamount to Indian primacy and bodes well for India’s own ambitions to emerge as a “net security provider” in the region.¹⁵

A Rising India and US Global Strategy

America has five key reasons for promoting the strategic rise of India. First, India’s rise in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region does not diminish America’s position in the global balance of power, especially since India is not trying to deny the United States access to this region. Second, such a strategy allows the United States to integrate a rising India into the international order created and led by the United States by giving India a stake in it—that is, the regional leadership that India has desired for several decades. Third, offering India this position allows the United States to focus its resources on maintaining a favorable balance of power in East Asia, a region where America has two important allies, instead of trying to divert resources to the South Asia/Indian Ocean region. This is important simply because China is the foremost rising power, and is even a candidate for a potential “power transition” with the United States. While China—the second-largest global economy behind the United States today—is expected to become the largest economy by 2030, India is expected to rise from its current position of seventh largest economy to the third largest (behind the United States).¹⁶ This shifting of ranks matters because it gives China the potential to challenge American primacy at the global level, in addition to the East Asia level. India, however, does not have the power attributes to make such a bid in the foreseeable future.

Fourth, by giving India a stake in the American world order, the United States will be able to shape

India’s choices, even in the absence of a formal alliance between the nations. For example, the LEMOA will give India access to American military facilities in the Indian Ocean (Diego Garcia) and East Asia (Guam). This is significant in the context of India’s Act East policy (which makes relations with East Asia neighbors a foreign policy priority) and its strategic foray into East Asia. India is likely to work in coordination with the United States and its friends and partners in East Asia, most notably Japan. This will contribute to the maintenance of a balance of power system in East Asia that will continue to favor the United States, even as China continues with its ascent. Not surprisingly, the Pentagon already sees a “strategic convergence” between India’s Act East policy and the American rebalance to Asia.¹⁷ Fifth, and finally, the emerging US-India bonhomie will create *uncertainty* in China, especially as India emerges as the third-largest global economy over the next decade behind China and the United States. While such uncertainty will have to be diplomatically managed to prevent any undue Chinese fears, it may contribute to more cooperative Chinese behavior in the years ahead.

India’s Larger Ambitions and the American World Order

US backing of India’s ambitions for regional primacy helps New Delhi in two significant ways. First, a close partnership with the United States will encourage China to take India more seriously in Asian strategic affairs. While many analysts argue that China does not consider India a significant power or rival, there is a hint of exaggeration in this assessment. After all, the China-Pakistan entente is a product of their common rivalry with India, and China-Pakistan cooperation has even been described as “the *most stable* and durable element in China’s foreign relations.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, these rivalry dynamics are asymmetric because the United States is China’s “principal” rival, even as China is India’s “principal” rival. However, as

By 2030, India is expected to be the world’s third largest economy

the United States gradually and cautiously advances India's power, China is bound to take notice.

Second, a close partnership with the United States will complement India's Act East policy and facilitate its emergence as a significant player in the East Asian strategic architecture. For example, the emerging India-Japan strategic partnership has certainly been helped by the countries' close relations with the United States. Similarly, Southeast Asian states are less concerned about India's rise than they are about China. While multiple factors are behind Southeast Asian states' relatively benign perceptions of the rise of India—including their territorial disputes with China and the absence of such issues with India—the United States' own benign perception of the rise of India is important. This lack of alarm is advantageous for New Delhi, as India must develop the capabilities for extra-regional power projection (or power projection beyond the South Asia/Indian Ocean region) to be considered as a great power.¹⁹ Given that the LEMOA offers India access to American military facilities in East Asia, a region that cautiously welcomes India's rise, a close partnership with the United States offers India the opportunity to establish itself as a significant player in the emerging Asian security architecture.

Hurdles Ahead

Indian regional primacy in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region is not a foregone conclusion simply because the United States finds it beneficial. The rise of China as a South Asian and Indian Ocean power will challenge India's ambitions in the region. China has already displaced India as the top trading partner of some South Asian states (such as Bangladesh), and it is fast narrowing the trade gap with India in others (such as Nepal).²⁰ At the same time, South(ern) Asian states remain the top export destinations for China's defense industries. While Pakistan purchased 41 percent of China's weapons

over the past five years, Bangladesh and Myanmar accounted for another 28 percent.²¹ China's influence in the South Asia/Indian Ocean states surrounding India will further increase as China's One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) takes off, even if this takes 10 to 15 years. Notably, OBOR passes over land through parts of South Asia (via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), as well as through the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the exigencies of Indian domestic politics, including state-level politics, have worked to China's advantage in places like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. As such, India's quest for regional primacy will be a significant challenge for Indian diplomacy and will be tested on a case-by-case basis across different policies and issues.

Ultimately, India's ability to emerge at the top of the regional hierarchy in the South Asia/Indian Ocean region will be a function of its ability to rapidly expand its economy while integrating its neighbors through infrastructure, trade, and investment links. However, South Asia remains one of the least integrated economic regions in the world. The United States is trying to help India in its regional endeavor through the so-called Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor, which will help connect South and Southeast Asia through physical connectivity, trade and energy networks, and people-to-people links.²² India's regional leadership will also be a function of its ability to rapidly modernize its naval, aerospace, and cyber capabilities along with energetic defense diplomacy. In this regard, India is trying to expand its maritime footprint in the region through close relations with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius. India's cautious fostering of regionalism through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the Indian Ocean Rim Association also has the backing of the United States.

Although the United States supports the rise of India, and US-India relations have come a long way since the end of the Cold War, there are at least three significant hurdles in the way of this

Indian regional primacy is not a foregone conclusion simply because the US finds it beneficial

relationship achieving its full potential. First, even as Indian and American interests and world views are congruent when it comes to the region to India's east, the two sides differ somewhat on Pakistan and Afghanistan to India's northwest. While India considers Pakistan to be the source of regional (and international) terrorism, Pakistan is a partner as well as a problem in America's global anti-terror efforts. America's provision of almost \$20 billion in economic and military assistance to Islamabad since 2001 included military equipment that significantly enhances Pakistan's military power relative to that of India.²³ (American security assistance to Pakistan has included the sale of advanced military platforms that are of limited utility in counterterror operations, such as P3-C Orion maritime patrol aircraft and anti-armor, anti-ship, and air-to-air missiles.)²⁴ Likewise, the India-Pakistan rivalry has thus far prevented a common American and Indian approach to Afghanistan. While a trilateral dialogue between the United States, India, and Afghanistan has just begun, Pakistan is not a part of it. Similarly, India is not a member of the US-Pakistan-Afghanistan talks, even as China has now joined them.

Among some political and intellectual elites in both New Delhi and Washington, DC, there is unease about an Indian-US partnership

Second, the American world order entails a far bigger vision than the maintenance of American global primacy, as it includes an open trading system, democracy promotion, nonproliferation, and other important goals. There remain significant differences between India and the United States on many of these issues. For example, India is not keen to promote democracy (despite being the world's largest democracy) through military means, and it is resistant to doing so beyond its immediate neighborhood even through nonmilitary means. Nevertheless, the United States is able to promote these other goals largely because of its global primacy, and India's rise does not challenge this fundamental pillar, even as disagreements on these secondary issues can negatively affect the two nations' overall relationship. Finally, the vagaries of domestic politics in both Washington and New Delhi will need to be constantly managed. Some of India's political and intellectual elites continue to remain deeply suspicious of a close partnership with the United States. Similarly, some among Washington's strategic elite continue to doubt India's reliability as a close partner. Therefore, the vision and the efforts of the top leadership in both capitals will continue to remain important for the US-India relationship to progress.

Notes

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² The White House, "US-India Joint Statement—"Shared Effort. Progress for All," January 25, 2015.

³ Bhabani Sen Gupta, "The Indian Doctrine," *India Today*, August 31, 1983.

⁴ The Gujral Doctrine was not extended to Pakistan. For the full text, see "The Gujral Doctrine," January 20, 1997, available at <http://www.stimson.org/the-gujral-doctrine> (accessed September 14, 2016).

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⁶ India Press Information Bureau, "Text of PM's Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda," March 12, 2015, available at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=116881> (accessed September 14, 2016).

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⁹ Michael Desch, "The Keys That Lock Up the World: Identifying American Interests in the Periphery," *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 97–100.

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- ¹⁵ For example, see “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy” Indian Navy, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1.2, October 2015 on page 8, available at https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf
- ¹⁶ According to one estimate, the three largest economies (at market exchange rate) in 2030 will be China (\$26.499 trillion), the United States (\$23.475 trillion), and India (\$7.841 trillion). The three largest economies in 2050 will be China (\$49.853 trillion), the United States (34.102 trillion), and India (\$28.021 trillion). See PricewaterhouseCoopers, “The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050?” February 2017, 68, available at <http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/world-2050/assets/pwc-the-world-in-2050-full-report-feb-2017.pdf>.
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