

Marines currently under 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, and members of Indian military wade to shore during exercise Tiger Triumph, on Kakinada Beach, India, November 19, 2019 (U.S. Marine Corps/Christian Ayers)



# Moving Past the Name

## Focusing on Practical Implementation of the India-U.S. Strategic Relationship

By Nicholas O. Melin

Indispensable allies,” “natural allies,” “comprehensive global strategic partners,” “defining relationship of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” These are a selection of ways American Presidents and Indian prime ministers have described the strategic bilateral relationship over

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the past dozen years. Yet analysts in both countries continue to document a “creeping disappointment and doubt about the relationship’s long-term viability.”<sup>1</sup> From the American side, there is concern about India’s “strategic promiscuity” as it retains strong relations with nations in its neighborhood and beyond (such as Russia) that are at odds with U.S. policy positions. Two American commentators asked, “Is the United States giving too much

and getting too little?”<sup>2</sup> At every instance of friction in bilateral relations, Indian analysts express suspicion about U.S. intentions and question the relationship’s reliability.<sup>3</sup> Even the proper label for the relationship itself is a hotly contested topic, so we must ask whether the United States and India are transactional partners, strategic partners, or informal allies.

The debate over semantics on both sides of the relationship underappreciates

the degree to which it is growing into an important strategic arrangement. Systematic review of the bilateral relationship reveals an alignment of strategic aims and a military-to-military interface that is already equivalent to America's closest Indo-Pacific allies. Driven by the pressing threat posed to their liberal democracies by China's strategic rise and authoritarian tendencies, the United States and India are on course for even closer strategic convergence.

To the extent that friction and doubt remains, what are the main contributing factors and what might be done in Washington and New Delhi to moderate them? During a recently completed year as an exchange officer in the Indian National Defence College, the author solicited the frank and anonymous views of senior leaders in both India and the United States. This study made it clear that both nations insufficiently understand each other's strategic culture and political constraints, which leads to frustration and predictable friction in relationship implementation. This article showcases the major gaps in strategic empathy found in an analytical survey of Indian and American strategic leaders and offers ways that policymakers on both sides of the relationship might best execute targeted reform.

### **Divergent Views of Partnerships and Alliances**

To understand why India and the United States view interstate relationships differently, one must understand each nation's ingrained institutional preferences. During its first 40 years of independence, India espoused a policy of nonalignment. Given its insecure neighborhood and a colonial legacy of troops fighting on the frontlines of British wars, India's founding fathers felt entangling alliances would distract attention from internal development. In fact, India was a founding member of the 120 state Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>4</sup> To this day, merely the use of the term *alliance* within a political context generates intense debate and resistance.

This historical scarring and aversion have not stopped Delhi from pursuing

alliance-like arrangements under the labels of "partnership" or "strategic partnership." India sought a military partnership with the United States in the 1960s in the wake of its war with China but was rebuffed.<sup>5</sup> In 1971, India secured support from the Soviet Union that enabled it to prosecute its war against Pakistan with less fear of Chinese intervention or of U.S. posturing in support of Islamabad. The late 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation was, in effect, a limited alliance that provided guarantees of military support and deterred Beijing from attacking India again like it did successfully from the Himalayas in late 1962.<sup>6</sup> It also chilled U.S.-India relations for more than two decades.

India's post-Cold War economic opening to the world economy and rapid economic growth in the 1990s have been accompanied by the adaptation of India's traditional approach toward strategic partnering. Over the past 30 years, Delhi has established a web of partnerships to advance its interests without taking sides in geopolitical rivalries that would restrict its ability to address its primary strategic challenges—Pakistan and China. Indeed, at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted that a diversity of partnerships is the "measure of [India's] strategic autonomy."<sup>7</sup>

Recent Chinese actions are changing Indian strategic calculus. Although Sino-Pakistani strategic alignment against Delhi has been a reality since the early 1960s, Beijing's escalating support of Pakistan raises the troubling potential of a two-front war. China is also leveraging its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to increase its influence in the Indian Ocean region. India's rejoining the Quadrilateral Security Forum (QUAD) in 2017 and engaging in 2+2 dialogues with the United States, Japan, and Australia signal a new approach to tighter coupling with like-minded security partners. Indeed, then-Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale asserted that "India is today an aligned state—but based on issues."<sup>8</sup> The Chinese sudden and unprovoked attack on India's northern border in 2020 is accelerating this strategic shift.

In contrast to India's historic wariness of binding strategic relationships, the United States has long asserted that "allies and partners are [its] strategic center of gravity."<sup>9</sup> Defined and committed interstate relationships are the American comfort zone. Indeed, U.S. strategic documents typically sort interstate relationships into ally and partner categories which drive prioritization within its vast bureaucracy. In the Indo-Pacific region, the United States is in the middle of a multidecade effort to strengthen its existing alliances, establish a network of opportunity-based partnerships, and forge multilateral groupings. In contrast to its Cold War-era reliance on formal security pacts, U.S. policymakers now employ a more flexible approach that seeks to progressively build trust, connectivity, and commitment with a broad array of countries. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described this effort as "one of the most important tasks of American statecraft . . . to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, Indian and U.S. terminology do not align. India prefers ambiguity, and the United States is explicit in defining relationships. Nevertheless, each nation is adapting its approach while avoiding the use of terminology that creates resistance in each nation's polity. So if the terms *alliance* and *partnership* are decreasingly relevant, what is the status of the India-U.S. relationship?

### **Measuring Ongoing Strategic Convergence**

Despite the ongoing debate over the relationship's name, its growth can be readily quantified. Bilateral engagement is accelerating. At the head-of-state level alone, there have been 17 leader or cabinet-level dialogues since 2010 that have generated over 110 pages of joint statements. Review of these documents reveals hundreds of ongoing initiatives launched by each nation's heads of state. Take, for example, the 2015 Joint Statement between President Barack Obama and



Indian army soldiers assigned to 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Madras Regiment, and U.S. Army paratroopers from the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, shield patient from rotor wash while conducting medical evacuation training during exercise Yudh Abhyas 21, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, October 19, 2021 (U.S. Air Force/Alejandro Peña)

Prime Minister Modi. The two leaders highlighted 79 separate national initiatives, including 28 launched during the visit.<sup>11</sup> Cataloguing the various facets of bilateral engagement, let alone assessing it, is challenging.

Economically, India is America's ninth largest trading partner and the third largest from the Indo-Pacific region. Importantly, the United States is India's largest trading partner, with almost 18 percent of all Indian goods and services exported to America in 2020.<sup>12</sup> The United States is India's largest foreign direct investor. Only Australia and Japan enjoy a larger share of U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region.<sup>13</sup> Given that India and the United States have set an ambitious goal of growing annual bilateral trade from \$146 billion to \$500 billion, economic ties will only deepen in

the future.<sup>14</sup> If economic interconnectivity leads to strategic convergence, then both Indian and U.S. objectives are on path for close alignment.

In the area of the primary shared India-U.S. strategic concern, China, alignment is increasingly robust. Facing an active border dispute with its northern neighbor, India has declined membership in the BRI, instituted screening of Chinese industries, refused to allow Chinese companies to install 5G telecommunications infrastructure, and consistently advocated for sustaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region. India is 100 percent aligned with the United States and other QUAD members. Indeed, the early 2021 image of Prime Minister Modi sitting with other QUAD heads of state, affirming joint resolve to ensure the Indo-Pacific

region is "unconstrained by coercion," signifies an unprecedented departure from India's historical preference for scrupulous nonalignment.<sup>15</sup>

The strongest and maybe most misunderstood pillar of the bilateral relationship is defense trade and security cooperation. While individual Indian defense procurement decisions, such as the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system, attract publicity and questions among U.S. commentators regarding Indian commitment to the bilateral relationship, India's defense trade is comparable to U.S. allies.<sup>16</sup> India's over \$15 billion in cumulative defense purchases is on par with America's largest defense customers. The fact that over 40 percent of these sales have occurred since 2015 demonstrates a substantive pivot in overall Indian procurement

**Table. Organizations Solicited for Survey Feedback**

	India	United States
<b>Defense Forces</b>	Active and retired officers from all services	Office of the Secretary of Defense The Joint Staff Defense Intelligence Agency U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and Service components Defense Security Cooperation Agency
<b>Diplomatic Corps</b>	Ministry of External Affairs Embassy of India in the United States Retired Indian ambassadors	Department of State U.S. Embassy New Delhi
<b>Civil Service</b>	Civil service participants in National Defence College (NDC), 61 <sup>st</sup> course	U.S. Agency for International Development Sandia National Laboratories
<b>National Government</b>	Indian Department of Military Affairs Integrated Defence Staff	National Security Council Office of Net Assessment
<b>Academic Institutions</b>	NDC University of Delhi Jawaharlal Nehru University	U.S. Army War College National Defense University Tufts University The Johns Hopkins University East-West Center
<b>Think Tanks</b>	Observer Research Foundation Carnegie India Delhi Policy Group Vivekananda International Foundation	Brookings Institution Council on Foreign Relations Center for Strategic and International Studies Hoover Institution Stimson Center Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

*Note:* To ensure anonymity, survey participants were not asked to specifically identify their organization. Instead, they chose from a selection of general categories.

decisions.<sup>17</sup> In terms of security cooperation, the United States is India’s largest exercise partner.<sup>18</sup> The frequency of Indian exercise participation, including hosting the Malabar, Yudh Abhyas, and Tiger Triumph exercises, is on par with U.S. Indo-Pacific allies not currently hosting U.S. troops. India has signed four foundational defense agreements that establish a basis for an ally-like interoperability with U.S. military formations in the future.<sup>19</sup>

This growth in procurement and military-to-military engagement is not simply a tool for building stronger relations with America; it is also a strategic necessity for New Delhi. India faces a widening gap in terms of both military capability and capacity with its northern neighbor. China’s defense budget has grown almost sixfold since 2000, while India’s has only doubled. Cumulatively, China has spent \$1.97 trillion more than India. The disparity in defense spending is accelerating. Since 2014, China’s defense budget has grown by 41 percent, while India’s has only grown by 28 percent. For the foreseeable future, India will neither match

China’s yearly defense spending nor close the massive gap which has opened between the two nations’ militaries.<sup>20</sup>

### Assessing Implementation of the Bilateral Strategic Relationship

Given both the current bilateral alignment and prospects for even greater strategic convergence in the future, the question policymakers should ask is not how to label the bilateral relationship but rather how to ease the ongoing friction in its implementation. The author conducted a senior leader survey to assess implementation of the bilateral relationship. The survey received 98 responses—52 from Indians and 46 from Americans. Notably, 80 percent of the responses came from individuals directly involved in managing the bilateral relationship, and 40 percent from individuals meeting weekly with their counterparts (see table).

Anonymous feedback from the survey yielded insights into the influence of culture and constraints on bilateral interaction, each nation’s perception of the relationship’s trajectory, and the internal

challenges each nation must navigate to sustain strategic convergence.

### Efficacy of Bilateral Engagements

The first question posed by the survey was how effective bilateral interaction is. Participants assessed the tenor of meetings, the level of shared understanding of objectives and constraints, and meeting productivity. Overwhelmingly, both Indians and Americans believe that meetings are positive, and both sides understand the other’s objectives. Given Indian and U.S. historical disagreements, this result is notable. Participants did not agree, however, on engagement productivity. On a five-point scale, Americans rated this category over a full point lower than their Indian counterparts. Almost 70 percent of U.S. participants identified bureaucratic inertia as the major limitation in engagements and highlighted patience with and specifying discrete objectives for the Indians as the most important ingredients to successful bilateral engagement. In the words of one participant, “I [worry]



U.S. Army paratrooper from 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 40<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (Airborne), 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and Indian army soldiers from 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Madras Regiment, rappel down wall using “scorpion” technique during exercise Yudh Abhyas 21, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, October 21, 2021 (U.S. Air Force/Alejandro Peña)

we want this relationship more than India.”<sup>21</sup> While Indians agreed to the need for specific objectives, almost half of those surveyed felt that trust and equal treatment were the most important ingredients for relationship success. Interestingly, one-third of Indian respondents identified suspicion of American intentions as the primary engagement obstacle.

This dynamic of American impatience and Indian suspicions may be indicative of a cultural divergence. American and Asian cultural differences are well documented. U.S. culture is results oriented, with “[Americans], more than others in the world, [taking] a narrow, opportunistic view of relationships.

... Preoccupied with the economics of the deal, [they] frequently neglect the political, cultural, organizational, and human aspects of the partnership.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Asian culture places a higher value on relationships, with particular emphasis “on . . . reputation.”<sup>23</sup> Within India, hierarchy and formality guide interactions. Indian participants may not even be empowered to make decisions in an engagement without the approval of senior leadership.

Another factor affecting interaction is differing perceptions of the relationship’s history. Most Americans downplay the importance of historical disagreements, instead focusing on over 20 years of constructive bilateral engagement. Indians,

however, take a longer and more skeptical view. Instances of Indian resistance to U.S. pressure as a global superpower, whether during its liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 or while seeking nuclear weapons capability, are points of national pride.

For some Indian senior leaders, whose professional experiences stretch back to the 1990s, there is also an ingrained perception that U.S. policy toward India oscillates between disinterest and pressure to conform to Washington’s immediate policy objectives—often at the cost of India’s own. This was borne out in the survey results. Of the 14 Indian senior leaders who identified suspicion of American intentions as the biggest bilateral friction point, five responses were given by

leaders who had never actually interacted with an American. Two leaders with over 20 years of experience and three leaders with over 30 years of experience elected to answer only this question among all the bilateral engagement questions.

If cultural differences and the lingering hangover of an estranged history are the principal factors affecting day-to-day bilateral interaction, how can both partners respond? American and Indian participants recommended:

- deliberate cultural preparation for engagement participants from each nation
- initiatives to build trust below the level of senior leader
- increased education about and transparency of each nation's bureaucratic processes
- a respectful and equal tenor in bilateral meetings, and tightly defined objectives.

## Dynamics Affecting Relationship Progress

The survey next asked participants to identify the most productive areas of collaboration and prominent areas of friction. There was clarity on where India and the United States should prioritize engagement. Sixty percent of all participants identified Indo-Pacific security as the most important area, with defense cooperation, trade, and counterterrorism rounding out other inputs. There is clearly a strong bilateral basis for accelerating security cooperation.

Participant responses to areas of friction clarified the major Indian and U.S. differences. While over 60 percent of Indian participants agreed on Russia as the leading single point of friction between the two nations, their viewpoints widely diverged. American participants felt Russia's authoritarian actions should dissuade democratic governments, such as India, from engaging them. Also, many U.S. leaders felt that linkages between India and the United States are now much stronger than the India-Russia relationship. U.S. bilateral trade with India is almost 20 times higher than Russia's (\$146 billion versus \$7.5 billion), and

FDI since 2000 is not even comparable (\$340 billion versus \$18 billion).<sup>24</sup> Thus, India's continued engagement in select sectors, such as defense and nuclear energy, and silence on Russian behavior in international forums generate friction.

Indians, however, still see their relationship with Russia as a necessity. Over 60 years of military procurement from Russia has created path dependence. Russian-origin military platforms make up 70 to 85 percent of all Indian weapons systems, and Moscow has supported the development and maintenance of India's civil nuclear industry and the sea leg of its nuclear deterrent.<sup>25</sup> Delhi recognizes that dependency is a vulnerability, however, and is diversifying its supply network and decreasing foreign arms purchases. This has led to a 33 percent decrease in total arms imports.<sup>26</sup> Indian leaders see their cumulative \$15 billion of arms purchased from the United States, only slightly less than the \$20 billion to \$30 billion spent by America's leading defense customers, as a significant commitment to the bilateral relationship.<sup>27</sup>

The chief source of disagreement in the survey was Pakistan. While the U.S. view of India's western neighbor is changing, this issue remains central to India's relations with any security partner. U.S. participants cited recent policy changes and growing economic and security integration with India as evidence that it recognizes India's concerns. At the same time, they questioned India's continued fixation on Pakistan given New Delhi's growing economic clout and Great Power aspirations. Numerous U.S. senior leaders questioned why India has not "moved on" from this legacy dispute. Indian participants, however, asserted that the United States has serially misjudged Pakistan to the detriment of India's security. They highlighted the ongoing military confrontation along the Line of Control between the two nations, Pakistan's support to terrorism, and its growing complicity with China as reasons the United States should take a stronger line against Islamabad alongside its Indian partner.

Cutting across all Indian responses was an assertion that Americans do

not appreciate the unique context of India's democracy and the constraints that shape its strategic approach. Indian independence was both the triumphant culmination of the long struggle to gain freedom from the British and a defining moment of national trauma. India was immediately thrust into a struggle to develop its own approach to democracy, stabilize the economy, address rampant sectarian violence, and, only 60 days after its birth, fight its first war with Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> Today, India is the world's largest democracy, with over 120 different recognized languages and over 1,000 separate ethnicities. As such, Indians feel they face a different set of challenges than America and reject commentary on their internal affairs as uninformed and paternalistic.

While India has the sixth largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world, it also faces internal challenges that U.S. policymakers may not fully comprehend. India's population is four times larger than America's. Thus, American GDP per capita is over 30 times higher than India's.<sup>29</sup> In the Indian participants' view, this should both moderate U.S. requests and give additional weight to the contributions that India makes to the bilateral relationship.

Indian participants also highlighted two constraints that shape its strategic decisionmaking. India is situated adjacent to its two primary adversaries, with which it has fought 5 wars and shares almost 4,300 miles of unsettled and militarized borders. This is India's primary strategic problem, requiring Delhi to prioritize regional security. Access to energy also drives Indian strategic choices. While the United States has largely achieved energy independence, India's dependence on imported hydrocarbons is perhaps its greatest strategic vulnerability. India imports almost 90 percent of its oil, 50 percent of its natural gas, and 15 percent of its thermal coal.<sup>30</sup> Almost 60 percent of India's oil comes from the Middle East, and Delhi's energy challenge will only increase in the future. Demand for imported energy is forecasted to increase by 129 percent between 2015 and 2035, and India is projected to be the largest source of hydrocarbon demand until 2050.<sup>31</sup>

Gaps in shared understanding are present across both nations' senior leaders, even those tasked with relationship implementation. Both Indians and Americans overestimate their understanding of each other and seek conformity in partner engagement.

### The Relationship's Trajectory

While quantitative analysis demonstrates Indian and U.S. strategic convergence, do leaders in both nations recognize this? The survey next asked participants to assess the status of the relationship and where they believed it might progress into the future. They chose from a set of relationship definitions drawn from both countries' strategic documents and public statements—although without identifying the specific national origin in the survey question:

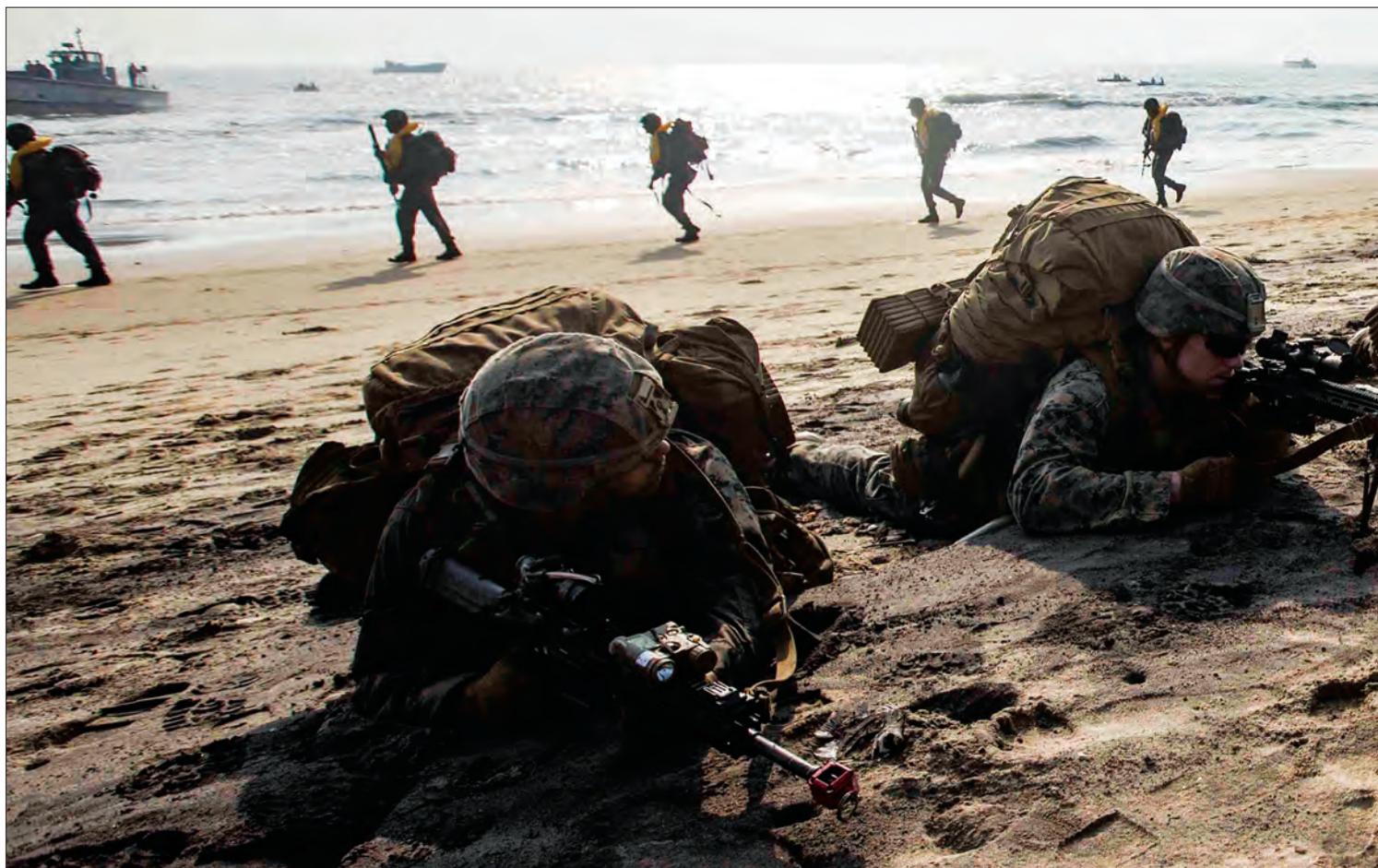
- Basic level of bilateral cooperation: Transactional, based on technology transfer and trade.

- Indian strategic partnership definition: Strategic alignment based on shared interests and issues of concern.<sup>32</sup>
- U.S. strategic partnership definition: Combining efforts to address common challenges, share costs, and widen the circle of cooperation.<sup>33</sup>
- U.S. alliance definition: Standing side-by-side against common threats and adversaries and working together to advance our shared interests and values.<sup>34</sup>

When assessing the current relationship, 60 percent of all survey participants chose the Indian definition, and 15 percent viewed it as purely transactional. It therefore appears that both Indian and U.S. leaders may underestimate the extent to which both nations have already strategically converged. This is an important result because a lack of recognition of growing bilateral interdependence could lead to friction in interaction.

The future relationship, however, has an overwhelmingly positive trajectory. Only 1 of the 98 participants believes the future relationship will be transactional. Indian survey participants assess that both nations will be closely aligned in the future, with a narrow majority choosing alliance language. Only 35 percent of participants chose the Indian strategy partnership definition. U.S. responses also show a dramatic shift in perceptions. While 83 percent of Americans assess the current relationship does not meet the threshold for the U.S. partnership or alliance definitions, 78 percent felt the U.S. language was appropriate in the future. As with the Indian participants, 39 percent of U.S. responses favored the alliance language. Thus, for both Indian and U.S. participants, the trajectory of the relationship points toward close strategic alignment.

While participants agreed that the overall relationship trajectory is positive, analysis by experience grouping reveals



a generational divide. When the survey data was sorted into the 0–20-, 21–30-, and over 30-year experience groups, it became clear that the two younger demographic blocks see greater potential for progress than those whose professional service stretches back to a more troubled period in bilateral relations. Seventy-six percent of responses in the 0–20-year group and 83 percent in the 21–30-year group saw the relationship progressing to U.S. definitions. Importantly, 47 percent of the rising senior leaders in the 21–30-year group chose alliance language. This is a stark contrast with those currently serving and retired leaders with over 30 years of experience, where only 54 percent of respondents chose U.S. definitions. This trend is further cemented by looking at those respondents in each experience category who kept both their current and future assessments the same. For the youngest category, only 20 percent kept the relationship static. In the

21–30-year group, 28 percent kept the relationship static. In the over 30-year experience group, this percentage jumps to 43 percent.

What do these results tell both nations? First, there is clear desire to advance the bilateral relationship across national and experience demographics. Second, both those implementing the relationship in the trenches and the rising strategic leaders favor deepening bilateral commitment. Finally, it is in the oldest, most senior group where mutual strategic suspicions remain most salient.

### Internal Tensions

The final topic explored by the survey was the competing views within each nation of the bilateral relationship. By examining the closing comments provided by each survey participant, it was possible to characterize the internal narratives that policy implementers must manage.

One group of Indian participants viewed U.S. relations as temporary and transactional. In their view, American interest in India “is only to serve . . . recent [U.S.] interest in the Indo-Pacific” and is “too transactional to be relied upon in a meaningful way.” For them, every perturbation in the relationship offers a fresh opportunity to cast doubt on the value of U.S. partnership. Others, however, see a deepening bilateral relationship that is “on an upward trajectory” that “will only strengthen in times to come.” Furthering the relationship, in the view of these participants, will “require shedding of dogma on both sides.” Even in this group, however, there is concern about moving too fast. In the words of one participant, “trying to outpace a natural pace of growth, even under influence of an external factor/player/event, may create differences in India-U.S. bilateral relationship.” Additionally, participants recognized that a pivot toward



Members of Indian military and U.S. Marines currently under 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, establish security during exercise Tiger Triumph, on Kakinada Beach, India, November 19, 2019 (U.S. Marine Corps/Christian Ayers)



Indian army soldiers assigned to 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Madras Regiment, and U.S. Army paratroopers from 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 40<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (Airborne), 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, advance on objective while conducting joint field training exercise for Yudh Abhyas 21, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, October 28, 2021 (U.S. Air Force/Alejandro Peña)

America is a strategic risk, as described by one senior Indian participant:

*Americans see India as a quasi-ally, with common security and military objectives. This, for the U.S., is the key driver of both strategic and operational cooperation. India's core concern is how much will such a support impact the [India-China] balance of power, particularly as China continues to coerce India? Can U.S. military equipment and technological support along with other inductions help shape strong dissuasive posture, preventing escalation of regional tensions?*

India's internal challenge is balancing two opposing viewpoints on the bilateral partnership, while at the same time pursuing deeper U.S. collaboration on terms that are suitable to its domestic population.

From the U.S. perspective, there is an undercurrent of skepticism about how far

the relationship can progress. Some view India's desire to retain strategic autonomy as an "attempt to play all sides to maintain its freedom of movement that . . . discourages further engagement." This view, however, was in the minority. Many participants expressed surprise at how rapidly the defense relationship has progressed and recognized that a U.S. "failure to see the problem set through the lens of the Indians" is one of the primary handicaps to the relationship's progression. They also recognized India's challenge managing internal constituencies, but emphasized the rate at which the challenge to Indo-Pacific security is growing:

*Like the United States, Indian bureaucracy is not monolithic and can be driven by personalities and interests internal to their system. This will contribute to the time necessary in forging a meaningful relationship. Unfortunately, the threat of China will outpace that timeline and the*

*relationship will unlikely catch up to the threat. This will manifest in the form of unrealistic expectations that will be unmet, unless India or the U.S. (or both) lean even harder into the relationship.*

Considering the internal dynamics revealed in the survey, it appears American impatience for progress and Indian suspicion of U.S. intentions may be feeding each other and slowing bilateral progress. The U.S. challenge is to apply a measured pace to interaction and control internal frustration, while at the same time influencing India to accelerate partnership in selected areas required to balance China.

## Recommendations

The 98 surveyed senior leaders see a positive and progressing strategic relationship with tremendous future potential. There is agreement on fruitful areas for near-term collaboration,

and those elements of the relationship that should be prioritized. Perhaps most important, both nations recognize the urgency of the threat that is driving bilateral convergence.

At the same time, gaps in shared understanding and a lack of strategic empathy are hampering progress. Leaders in both nations appear to underestimate bilateral strategic convergence. There is both a cultural disconnect and insufficient appreciation of each other's constraints. The internal dynamics of Indian suspicion and U.S. impatience may also be feeding each other in counterproductive ways.

To address these issues, the following recommendations are derived directly from survey feedback.

**Focus on Implementing Initiatives, Not the Name.** Given the differences in Indian and U.S. perceptions, there is little value in pressing for overt formal commitments. Instead, U.S. policy implementers should internally acknowledge progress in the bilateral relationship and take a measured approach to advance the relationship within bounds that are mindful of Indian constraints. Survey participants expressed frustration with both the ambiguity of the relationship as well as the lack of progress on priority initiatives. India's Major Defense Partner (MDP) designation by Washington and the decade-old U.S. Defense Technology Transfer Initiative (DTTI) are relevant examples. While both nations' leadership endorse these initiatives, they remain nascent. Both nations should identify and prioritize those initiatives requiring time-bound accomplishment.

**Conduct a Bilateral Net Assessment.** The U.S. and Indian response to the China challenge is disorganized. Indian requests for technology, U.S. requests for increased exercising and joint operations, and both nations' information-sharing are still conducted in an ad hoc way. A critical step recommended by a senior U.S. study participant is to conduct an in-depth net assessment of both states' capability to respond to the pacing threat in the region. This is the foundation for a coherent strategic partnership and will inform decisions on investment, technology transfer,

capability co-development, information-sharing, and exercising. It will provide a roadmap for implementation of the security pillar of the bilateral relationship and inform both MDP and DTTI. Critically, this effort requires a high level of trust and a 50/50 effort to have meaningful outputs. Its impacts will far outweigh the front-end investment.

**Strengthen Bilateral Mechanisms Below the Senior Leader Level.** While national-level engagement is robust, the survey demonstrates that mid-level engagements are affected by misunderstandings, bureaucratic friction, and restrictions. As a result, progress is slow on jointly agreed initiatives. The survey conducted for this article is, to the best of the author's knowledge, the first of its kind. Both nations should examine how they periodically assess the progress of initiatives below the senior leader level and what mechanisms are in place to assess the efficacy of bilateral engagement. Within the business world, there is a whole discipline—alliance management—that focuses on sustaining the health of the relationships between companies. For the sorts of mechanisms that businesses use to be effective, however, transparency and trust are the key ingredients.

**Reform Bureaucratic Processes and Increase Interaction.** Forty-two percent of all participants identified bureaucratic inertia as the primary area of friction. The survey also identified productivity as the lowest scored engagement category. Clearly, *progress* is being negatively affected by *process*. Both nations should consider establishing direct coordination channels and empowering junior leaders both to engage and to make working-level decisions. The requirement for review and approval for written correspondence and bilateral meetings and lack of direct, secure communications is generating unnecessary friction. While counterintelligence vetting is expected, direct communication is essential between close partners.

**Address the Cultural Understanding Gap.** This article shows that cultural differences and a lack of empathy inform the friction points both nations repeatedly face. To address this, the following steps should be considered:

- Conduct deliberate cultural preparation for all engagements. Most bilateral interaction occurs during short-term engagements when participants are unlikely to have ever worked with someone from the other nation's military. As such, the potential for misunderstanding is high. India and the United States must invest in preparing for and managing every interaction.
- Expand bilateral education and training. Exchanges between the two nations are insufficient. The limited slots in each nation's premier educational institutions should be prioritized for Indian and U.S. participation. While over 700 Indian leaders have been educated in U.S. military schools since 2010, India has the second largest military in the world with over 2 million servicemembers. With only 3 slots allocated in Indian military schools for U.S. officers each year, there are as few as 30 Indian-trained U.S. officers since 2010.<sup>35</sup>
- Align bilateral training with positions managing the relationship. For both nations, the dearth of experts on the other's culture and systems is affecting progress. As the number and quality of leaders chosen for training increases, consideration must also be given to how they are employed.

Regardless of the name used to describe their bilateral relationship, India and America's strategic convergence is ongoing today and will be a future reality. The mutual value from better strategic collaboration to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific is clear. There are no structural impediments that stand in the way. Instead, it is misapprehension of each other, lingering historical suspicion, and a deficit of strategic empathy that threaten future progress. These sources of friction are manageable if they are acknowledged and systematically addressed. The time to do so is at hand. JFQ

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, "The India Dividend: New Delhi Remains Washington's Best Hope in Asia," *Foreign*

*Affairs*, September/October 2019, available at <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2019-08-12/india-dividend>>.

<sup>2</sup> Sameer Lalwani and Heather Byrne, “Great Expectations: Asking Too Much of the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (October 2019), 46.

<sup>3</sup> K. Alan Kronstadt et al., *India-U.S. Relations*, R46845 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 19, 2021), 2, available at <<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R46845.pdf>>.

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., “Allies and Partners Are Our Strategic Center of Gravity,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 87 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2017), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/1325218/from-the-chairman-allies-and-partners-are-our-strategic-center-of-gravity/>>.

<sup>10</sup> Premesha Saha, *From “Pivot to Asia” to Trump’s ARIA: What Drives the U.S.’ Current Asia Policy?* ORF Occasional Paper No. 236 (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation [ORF], February 2020), available at <[https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ORF\\_OccasionalPaper\\_236\\_ARIA.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ORF_OccasionalPaper_236_ARIA.pdf)>.

<sup>11</sup> The author analyzed every national-level joint statement issued since 2010. A number are notable. For the bilateral shared vision, see “U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region,” The White House, January 25, 2015, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint>

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<sup>12</sup> “India Exports by Country,”

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<sup>13</sup> “India,” Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, available at <<https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/south-central-asia/india>>.

<sup>14</sup> “U.S.-India Joint Statement,” The White House, September 30, 2014, available at <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>>.

<sup>15</sup> “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad,’” The White House, March 12, 2021, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>>.

<sup>16</sup> John Bolton, “India’s S-400 Missile System Problem,” *The Hill*, November 10, 2021, available at <<https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/580864-indias-s-400-missile-system-problem>>.

<sup>17</sup> Data for the table are derived from multiple sources, including the U.S. State Department Country Information Web site, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency’s *Historical Sales Book*, and information provided by U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Lynch III, “South Asia,” in *Charting a Course: Strategic Choices for a New Administration*, ed. Richard D. Hooker, Jr. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2016), 282.

<sup>19</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation with India,” fact sheet, Department of State, January 20, 2021, available at <<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/>>.

<sup>20</sup> Indian and Chinese defense expenditure analysis was conducted using the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database, available at <<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>>.

<sup>21</sup> Quotations from the bilateral survey are drawn from free text response questions. To preserve anonymity, only the nationality, occupation, and years of experience were collected from survey participants.

<sup>22</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “Collaborative Advantage: The Art of Alliances,” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1994, available at <<https://hbr.org/1994/07/collaborative-advantage-the-art-of-alliances>>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. and Russian trade with and investment in India were derived using the Indian Ministry of External Affairs fact sheet

on India-Russia cooperation, the U.S. Trade Representative Country data for India, the U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Aid Explorer, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

<sup>25</sup> Sameer Lalwani et al., “The Influence of Arms: Explaining the Durability of India-Russia Alignment,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, January 15, 2021, available at <<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2473328/the-influence-of-arms-explaining-the-durability-of-indiarussia-alignment/>>.

<sup>26</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020* (Stockholm: SIPRI, March 21, 2021), available at <[https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs\\_2103\\_at\\_2020\\_v2.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020_v2.pdf)>.

<sup>27</sup> Dinshaw Mistry, *Aligning Unevenly: India and the United States*, Policy Studies No. 74 (Honolulu: East West Center, 2016), 42.

<sup>28</sup> Jyotika Saksena and Suzette Grillot, “The Emergence of Indo-U.S. Defense Cooperation: From Specific to Diffuse Reciprocity,” in *Engaging India: U.S. Strategic Relations with the World’s Largest Democracy*, ed. Gary K. Bertsch, Seema Gahlaut, and Anupam Srivastava (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 1999), 146.

<sup>29</sup> “India,” Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

<sup>30</sup> Sunjoy Joshi and Lydia Powell, *India: Energy Geo-Politics*, ORF Occasional Paper 173 (New Delhi, ORF, October 2018), 15, available at <[https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ORF\\_OccasionalPaper\\_173\\_Energy.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ORF_OccasionalPaper_173_Energy.pdf)>.

<sup>31</sup> BP, *Energy Outlook: 2020 Edition* (London: BP, 2020), 53, available at <<https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/energy-outlook/bp-energy-outlook-2020.pdf>>.

<sup>32</sup> Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, “Indian Foreign Policy: Preparing for a Different Era,” video, 1:00:17, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 1, 2019, available at <<https://www.csis.org/events/indian-foreign-policy-preparing-different-era>>.

<sup>33</sup> *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), 10, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *The U.S.-India Partnership: Ambition and Achievement* (New Delhi: Embassy of the United States of America, December 2020), 4, available at <<https://in.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/71/Book-Ambition-and-Achievement-1.pdf>>. The number of slots for U.S. officers in the Indian Defence Services Staff College and the Indian National Defence College were gathered through informal engagement with the Office of Defense Cooperation, U.S. Embassy New Delhi.