

The Perils of Power Asymmetry in the Indo-Pacific

What Should New Delhi Do about It?

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India's approach to the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific is determined primarily by the interface between its own great-power aspirations and the limitations imposed by its power asymmetry vis-à-vis the United States and China. The Indian foreign policy establishment seemingly finds succor in Washington's recognition of India's role as an aspiring leading power in the Indo-Pacific and ancillary pronouncements such as India becoming a major defense partner of the United States. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs, responding to the release of the US *National Security Strategy (NSS)* in December 2017, announced: "We appreciate the strategic importance given to India-US relationship in the new National Security Strategy released by the US. A close partnership between India and the US contributes to peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific Region as well as to the economic progress of the two countries."¹ A number of US government documents during the Donald Trump administration, apart from the *NSS*, such as the *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, the *National Military Strategy (NMS)*, the Department of Defense's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, and the Department of State's *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Report* have categorically ushered in the Indo-Pacific era within US grand strategy. What remains for New Delhi to accomplish is a multiagency push to pull India closer into the US orbit in the intensifying balance-of-power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. All these documents unequivocally project a greater role for India-US strategic engagement to build and sustain what Washington calls a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."²

However, New Delhi still has not completely bought into the prospect of an alliance with the United States to contain China in the Indo-Pacific.³ Why does New Delhi exhibit a behavior of inconvenience toward any design of a US-China power contestation? Why does New Delhi berate Washington whenever the latter does not categorically chide China's aggressive behavior toward India but at the same time negate any overtures from Washington that appear to push New Delhi to get tough on Beijing? In the latter case, New Delhi often has been seen giving Washington a we-know-better-how-to-deal-with-Beijing sermon. Even as the

apex for the Indian foreign policy cerebrum argued for an unsentimental break with the past, if required, and to get the country more accustomed to playing with fire if the outcomes are tangible material benefits, there is a deeper continuity seen in India's peculiar balancing act—while trying to make it appear New Delhi does not do so.

Primarily, this article attempts to explain what makes India behave the way it does in its approach to the Indo-Pacific, a behavior that one Indian analyst prefers to call “evasive balancing.”⁴ The answer to such a behavior, this article contends, is found in the balance of power or, more specifically, in India's considerable power asymmetry relative to the United States and China in addition to the decreasing power gap between the United States and China. India's economic and military growth puts it below the United States and China in the hierarchy of differing capabilities, and China has been reducing its power gap with the United States. Such a scenario is bound to put limitations on India's foreign policy choices. Outright hostility with China, or entering into a formal alliance framework with the United States, is unlikely to be a decision that New Delhi makes easily. As such, a continuation of its current approach of alignment with a distant power such as the United States while negotiating a fraught relationship with a proximate power such as China toward a more peaceable status quo is likely to continue. However, recent events on the India–China border have made it incumbent on New Delhi to find ways to increase the cost of any future offensive maneuvers by Beijing.

This will not cause New Delhi to squander its practice of strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, there is now an appreciation for a bigger toolkit of policy options when it comes to handling tensions with China, which includes a much closer strategic embrace with the United States. There is now an acceptance that protection and promotion of Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific will not be preordained and that doing so will require New Delhi to work closely with the United States, particularly in the domains of defense and security.

In the absence of a dramatic shift in India's fortunes as far as its power position in the international system is concerned, or a formal alliance with the United States, what would be New Delhi's strategy to deal with the reconfiguration of interest and intent in the Indo-Pacific? First, this article reflects on the evolving power configuration in the Indo-Pacific and problematizes the perception that this new geopolitical region is multipolar or at least destined to become such. Next, it unravels how the asymmetry between India's national power compared to that of the United States and China creates limitations for India's balancing act between the two powers. Finally, considering that this dilemma is unlikely to end,

the article explores the merits and demerits of deepening New Delhi's commitment to the Indo-Pacific and adopting a more assertive position on China.

The Indo-Pacific: Wither Multipolarity

More than anything else, the confrontational streaks in American and Chinese behavior are driving the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Other powers, including India, are responding to the repercussions of these new great-power dynamics in the region. India's Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, in *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, contended: "As with many other developments in the world today, the trigger for Indo-Pacific too is the change in the American stance and the rise of China."⁵ Robert Kaplan wrote, in *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, that "the Indian Ocean is where the rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific interlocks with the regional rivalry between India and China."⁶ C. Raja Mohan, in the opening pages of *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*, contended "that a rising China and an emerging India are turning to the seas in ways they did not before. This fact alone has the potential to alter the world's maritime environment."⁷ A number of primary documents released from different agencies of the US government since 2000 have made clear that US grand strategy in the twenty-first century has been directed toward containing the rise of China as a peer competitor. The primacy of countering peer competitors is a constant feature, and yet it is a dynamic one for great-power politics.

Amid the China threat in US geostrategic thinking and policy pronouncements, it is worthwhile recalling that not long ago Cold War geopolitics resulted into a slightly different story. The Shanghai Communiqué, signed after the US-China rapprochement in 1972, stated that "neither should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony. . . . China will never be a superpower and it opposes hegemony and power politics of any kind."⁸ Although much of US foreign policy bandwidth during the two terms of the George W. Bush administration, after the 9/11 attacks, was preoccupied by its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, global terrorism, and state sponsors of terrorism, strategic minds in Washington were not oblivious to the specter of China's rise. Writing during the 2000 presidential campaign for *Foreign Affairs*, Condoleezza Rice, who later served as Bush's national security advisor and secretary of state, argued that China, despite economic interaction with the United States, remained "a potential threat to stability in the Asia-Pacific region." According to Rice, China was a country that resented "the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region" and aimed "to alter Asia's balance of power in its own favor."⁹ In one of the earliest references to

the US–India–China triangular equation in the twenty-first century, Rice contended that Washington “should pay closer attention to India’s role in the regional balance” and wrote: “There is a strong tendency conceptually to connect India with Pakistan and to think only of Kashmir or the nuclear competition between the two states. But India is an element in China’s calculation, and it should be in America’s, too. India is not a great power yet, but it has the potential to emerge as one.”¹⁰

After being sucked into the vortex of the Afghan War and the ill-premised Iraq War, the Barack Obama administration exhibited a clear intention to shift policy attention to the Asia-Pacific through the Asia Pivot policy, later renamed as the rebalancing strategy toward Asia-Pacific. Then–US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, writing for *Foreign Policy* in 2011, remarked: “One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region.”¹¹ The Department of Defense report titled *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, released in early 2012, raised concerns regarding China’s use of antiaccess/area-denial capabilities to restrict America’s ability to project power and operate freely. Such circumstances, according to the report, required the US military to implement “the Joint Operational Access Concept, sustaining our undersea capabilities, developing a new stealth bomber, improving missile defenses, and continuing efforts to enhance the resiliency and effectiveness of critical space-based capabilities.”¹² The US *NMS* of 2015, while claiming to “support China’s rise and encourage it to become a partner for greater international security,” also remarked that “China’s actions are adding tension to the Asia-Pacific region.”¹³ The Chinese military strategy white paper released in the same year raised concerns regarding America’s rebalancing strategy toward the Asia-Pacific and reflected the shape of things to come in the Western Pacific waters—ground zero for US–China military confrontations. The military strategy paper noted: “In line with the strategic requirement of offshore waters defense and open seas protection, the PLAN (People’s Liberation Army Navy) will gradually shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defense’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defense’ with ‘open seas protection,’ and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.”¹⁴

The South and East China Seas in the Western Pacific remain the battleground for US–China confrontation. While Beijing accuses Washington of disturbing the peace and stability in the region with the US offshore balancing strategy and its freedom of navigation operations, Washington pictures Beijing as the primary threat to a “free and open” Indo-Pacific given China’s militarized approach to the

region. In 2013, China announced an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, following which the United States sent two B-52 bombers to defy the Chinese ADIZ.¹⁵

China's military adventurism in the South China Sea and show of strength have raised concerns in Washington, and a survey of experts found the South China Sea to be the most likely region to see an armed confrontation in the near future.¹⁶ Moreover, China's deep economic and development partnership with countries in the region further complicates the new great-power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. The same countries are wary of Chinese unilateral activism in the region and thus welcome the United States as a security partner.¹⁷

Diplomatically, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Forum were once expected to curtail China's intransigent behavior, if not contain its ambition. This optimism has dwindled, however, with ASEAN unity often falling victim to China's ability to influence the behavior of individual ASEAN member countries to veto decisions, which does not favor its interests. A good example of this is the "Code of Conduct (COC) for South China Sea," which remains a pipe dream to this day, nearly two decades since the signing of the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea." It was hoped that the signing of the COC will help bring about a peaceful settlement to the South China Sea dispute, but as of now there is not even a consensus on the geographic coverage of the COC.¹⁸ Moreover, the United States has also failed to demonstrate a consistency in its commitment when dealing with the grouping. While the Obama administration maintained regular high-level interactions with the multinational forum, multilateral diplomacy did not seem to be a very preferred means in the toolkit of Donald Trump's foreign policy. A survey conducted by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak think tank found that, although the regional countries trust China less than they do the United States or Japan, they are more likely to align with Beijing over Washington.¹⁹ More than anything else, such surveys reflect the complexities inherent in the responses to the growing US-China strategic competition among the regional countries. It is prudent on China's part to engage the region continuously, as it exists in its own strategic backyard. Moreover, China stands to gain from co-opting countries into its orbit. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for a distant power such as the United States. A change in policy direction in Washington risks leaving economically and militarily weaker countries in the lurch as they struggle to balance against China. One possible way to mitigate this used to be through signing high-level agreements for cooperation on defense, economics, technology, and the like, which granted littoral states some modicum of clarity on the trajectory of their ties and the terms of engagement with the United States. However, the foreign policy import of

Trump's "America First" rhetoric cast a long shadow of doubt on all US multilateral commitments, making it the first order of business for the Joe Biden administration to reaffirm faith in the US multilateral initiatives and signal a sense of strategic reassurance to its allies and partners.

As with all new occupants of the White House, Donald Trump accused his predecessor of going soft on China and squandering American predominance, something that Trump promised to correct by making "America Great Again" and keeping "America First."²⁰ While pulling out of the Obama-era Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Trump administration simultaneously seemed to ramp up America's Indo-Pacific push, clearly a successor to Obama's rebalancing strategy, renaming US Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command. While it may not have altered the command's area of responsibility, the rechristening sent a message of a new mental mapping in the US strategic approach to the region, straddling the two oceans.²¹

As the US-led post-World War II security and economic order experiences relative weakening, its hitherto unchallenged power projection and force posturing in the Western Pacific has had to confront a rising China that aims to establish sea control and sea denial in its maritime vicinity.

An assessment of the existing multinational frameworks in the region reveals that the United States is already in a position where it will have to play catchup to China to reestablish its influence in the region. In the strategic realm, China has been able to block any consensus-building effort by ASEAN, which is detrimental to China's own interests in the region. In the economic realm, the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership had left a void that China has now filled, to a certain extent by formalizing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), backed by loans from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a multinational financial institution created by China, has provided it significant economic leverage over most countries in the region. In recent years, the web of infrastructure and investment linkages that China's BRI has created, spanning the continental and maritime expanse of the Indo-Pacific, have pushed the United States to look for a credible response, striking new understandings with like-minded countries, including India. For instance, the Blue Dot Network is aimed at offering an alternative through "a multi-stakeholder initiative that will bring governments, the private sector, and civil society together to promote high-quality trusted standards for global infrastructure development."²² This can complement India's own economic diplomacy in the region and reduce India's material asymmetry when it comes to countering China's economic leverage in its neighborhood. However, the Blue Dot Network still remains, in

essence, prospective and is a long way from matching the ground implications of the BRI.

The first ever virtual leadership summit of the Quad countries in addition to regular ministerial meetings, the fact that all four members have become part of the Malabar naval exercise, and debates on a Quad Plus strategic alignment have added new heft to the US–India–Japan–Australia Quadrilateral Security Initiative, also called the Quad. However, there are material insufficiencies that will limit India’s ability to counter China through bilateral arrangements with the United States, Australia, and Japan. Australia and Japan are much more intertwined in the US security architecture, and all three countries are economically much more dependent on China than they are on India.²³ As a result, effective cooperation would require an alignment of strategic calculation depending on circumstantial exigencies. Indeed, having a formal structure like the Quad ensures a purposeful advancement toward a strategic objective. However, there is a long way to go, as the Quad countries are still focusing on maintaining the momentum gathered since its rebirth through bilateral and multilateral understanding among the member countries.

The Structural Constraints on Great-Power Behavior

A number of US government documents, including the *NDS*, *NSS*, and *NMS*, have reflected a growing sense of threat perceived from a rising China. China has been called out for engaging in predatory economic practices and, along with Russia, has been clubbed as a near-peer competitor challenging American primacy globally and regionally, more particularly in the Indo-Pacific. The *NDS* contended: “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security.” China is seen as a prominent “strategic competitor,” using “predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea.” Multiple agencies of the US government believe that China has pursued its military modernization with the short-term aim of achieving regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific and the long-term ambition of displacing America’s global preeminence.²⁴ Great powers have always desired unchallenged access to regions beyond their own borders while at the same time having the capability to deny the same kind of access to any other powers in its own sphere of influence. Regardless of the change of presidencies in the United States and the change of guard in the Chinese Communist Party, the explanation for the behavior of a hegemon toward a peer competitor that aims to establish its own hegemony is to be found in longer-term structural trends.

Much of the story of American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere has meant denying the establishment of any counterhegemony in any other region.²⁵

During the Cold War, this meant Washington could join hands with Communist China to preclude the rise of Soviet hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. In the twenty-first century, strategic minds in Washington have been preoccupied with the rise of China's national power and finding means to arrest a balance of power tilted against America's favor.

A maverick and transactional Trump may have affected the character of US-China dynamics, lending it a more confrontational streak.²⁶ While the direction of Sino-US relations has been heading toward a confrontation for some time now, it can be argued that the Trump presidency increased the military risk-taking propensity for the two countries in China's near seas. In mid-January 2021, it was widely reported that China had increased the frequency and scale of its aerial incursion into Taiwan's ADIZ in an attempt to test the incoming Biden administration.²⁷ Beijing also went on to pass new legislation (effective 1 February 2021) that authorizes its coast guard to use force against foreign vessels (including military vessels) and structures in waters and reefs in the South and East China Seas, over which it maintains sovereign claims.²⁸ This dangerously reduces the threshold for conflict escalation in the region. Coast guards are responsible for carrying out a law-and-order function within the sovereign waters of a country; as such, they are not bound to adhere to any international operating procedures or bilateral agreements that act as guide to reducing accidental escalation on the high seas. In response, the Biden administration deployed an aircraft carrier strike group led by the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* for a Freedom of Navigation Operation to the South China Sea, much to Beijing's chagrin.²⁹

Joe Biden or, for that matter, Xi Jinping may not be able to dictate the nature of this new great-power competition. That script is already cemented by the structural constraints that determine state behavior based on the relative power asymmetry between the contestants. However, what differentiates and further complicates the current rivalry from the previous structural conflict (i.e., the Cold War) is that China is far more economically integrated into the global economy than any previous challenger to a regional hegemon.³⁰ This increases the cost of military conflict not only for the United States but also for every other country that benefits from the global supply chain. This will be an important factor that determines the behavior of other countries in the future and in how the US-China strategic competition plays out.

These same constraints also need to be appreciated when predicting the choices that India would have to confront in South Asia in the more immediate future. This, in turn, will also be one of the factors that determines the role India would play in the larger Indo-Pacific security architecture. An argument in favor of stronger defense cooperation between India and the United States in the Indian

Ocean can be made, owing to the relatively lopsided military balance between the United States and China in this region compared to the Western Pacific. Moreover, China's intent and ability to project power in these waters is still nascent, giving India and the United States a first-mover advantage should they muster the political will to fortify their combined naval supremacy in the region for some years to come. For that to happen, both countries need to be able to align their threat perception when it comes to Beijing.

New Delhi is currently preoccupied with the more immediate tactical threat China poses to its northern borders, while Washington is mobilizing its resources to contain an impending challenger on the high seas, one that is likely to threaten US influence in the littoral countries of the Western Pacific. Shared interests between India and the United States might not be enough for New Delhi to invest militarily into the US Indo-Pacific vision, as it stands constrained by a developing economy. Moreover, increasing hostilities with China in the maritime realm will open a new theater of conflict. Not only is this likely to affect commerce in an important sea line of communication; India also risks starting hostilities with other Indian Ocean littorals such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan who are more favorably predisposed toward Beijing and whose ports the PLAN ships and submarines often use as docking facilities.³¹

The Limits of Indian Power Influence Its Behavior

Many see, or would prefer to see, the Indo-Pacific to be multipolar, wherein no one country or two countries call all the shots.³² A multipolar Indo-Pacific might be preferable for many, including India, but what *is* the Indo-Pacific in reality? Whether the US–China strategic competition will lead to hot conflict and what would keep the two away from such an eventuality have been prominent points of discourse.³³ However, rhetoric and action point to increasing divergences and confrontation between the two in the Indo-Pacific, leaving other, less powerful stakeholders to hedge their bets, even as both Washington and Beijing publicly give assurances that neither is interested in forcing others to choose between the two.

New Delhi principally espouses an Indo-Pacific guided not by competing strategies but by the inclusivity of interests. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018, remarked: “India does not see the Indo-Pacific as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country. A geographical definition, as such, cannot be. India's vision for the Indo-Pacific is, therefore, a positive one.” Prime Minister Modi alluded to the need for all to “have equal access as a right under international law to the use of common

spaces on sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law.” The dragon in the room—China—was not mentioned by name. The Indian prime minister chose to focus on pushing forth a more sociocultural and economic web of engagements in the Indo-Pacific rather than the more strategy-oriented narrative of hegemonic quest.³⁴ By contrast, then-US Secretary of Defense James Mattis, speaking at the same event, minced no words and directly reprimanded China for its behavior in the Indo-Pacific, contending that “China’s policy in the South China Sea” stood “in stark contrast to the openness of America’s strategy.” Mattis further remarked: “China’s militarization of artificial features in the South China Sea includes the deployment of anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles, electronic jammers, and more recently, the landing of bomber aircraft at Woody Island. Despite China’s claims to the contrary, the placement of these weapons systems is tied directly to military use for the purposes of intimidation and coercion.”³⁵

The following year, General Wei Fenghe, China’s state councilor and minister of national defense, speaking at the same platform, contended that “China develops its military entirely for self-defense.” He warned the United States against bullying China and warned: “In recent years some countries outside the region come to the South China Sea to flex muscles, in the name of freedom of navigation. The large-scale force projection and offensive operations in the region are the most serious destabilizing and uncertain factors in the South China Sea.”³⁶

A multipolar order is not synonymous to an equilibrium of material capabilities among the power poles. There is a hierarchy present in the multipolar system, and how India navigates the accumulation and projection of power between the United States and China in such a system remains a primary foreign policy challenge. India, with its growing material capabilities, is indeed one of the significant poles of the emerging multipolar world order. However, when India’s national power is seen in relation to the two prominent poles—Washington and Beijing—the gaps remain glaringly obvious. As the United States and China grow increasingly confrontational in attempting to create their own favorable balances of power in the region, would a multipolar Indo-Pacific crumble even before it is realized? What would that mean for India’s traction? How could India practice strategic autonomy in such a scenario? Could India continue hedging its bets between Washington and Beijing while simultaneously balancing against China’s rise? Is the ambivalence in the Indian approach a real strategy, or is it the outcome of the country’s poorer power parameters vis-à-vis the United States and China? Finally, power limitations might restrict New Delhi’s ability to emerge from ambivalence, even if India desired to do so. This amounts to a situation

where the best New Delhi could do would be to make the ambivalence and uncertainty in India's intentions and actions a strategy to deal with the power asymmetry inherent in its relations with Washington and Beijing in the Indo-Pacific.³⁷

At the moment, what works in India's favor is (1) its relative military parity with China in its territorial conflict and (2) the limitations in China's power projection capability in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the current regime in New Delhi is more willing than its predecessors to confront China militarily and economically. This was on display in the months leading up to the June 2020 clash in the Galwan Valley. Thereafter, India showed not only an increased willingness to commit to extended periods of offensive deployments but also the ability to withstand the economic impacts of banning imports of Chinese commodities in crucial sectors as well as the diplomatic courage to cross Beijing's red line on the One China policy by deepening ties with Taiwan. At the time of writing this paper, the disengagement of troops had been completed in the Pangong area, while the situation at Gogra–Hot Springs, Demchok, and Depsang remained unresolved. While New Delhi and Beijing have both taken pains to stress the success of these disengagement talks, analysts have noted that a return to status quo is unlikely.³⁸ As of now, the disputed area between Finger 4 and Finger 8 in Pangong Lake have been declared as no-man's-land. It has been noted that this is also going to be the most likely outcome of a peaceful solution in the remaining three contested hotspots.³⁹ However, all these areas were patrolled by Indian troops prior to April 2020. While both sides continue to remain cautiously optimistic, as the troop positions on both sides allow them to spring to action at a moment's notice, a recent comment by Colonel Zhang Shuili, the spokesperson of PLA's Western Theatre Command, provides insights into PLA's tactical thinking on the India-China border. Colonel Shuili espoused a resolution to the Taiwan reunification issue before concentrating military efforts on the border dispute with India.⁴⁰ He hopes that the unification of Taiwan will reduce Washington's commitment to the Indo-Pacific architecture, making it less predisposed to aiding India.⁴¹ Thus, while the confluence of factors necessary for deepening India–US cooperation in the Indo-Pacific—be it the existence of a clear and present danger or the political will in the incumbent administrations—fortunately exists today, it is racing against the clock as to the expected material gains from this alignment.

A strengthening of China's foothold in Western Pacific will likely eat away at the US commitment to the Indo-Pacific, thereby possibly limiting the scope of India–US cooperation in the Indian Ocean. This increases the urgency on New Delhi to forego the strategic flexibility it prefers traditionally and set course on a

policy direction accepting the costs that come with it—including setbacks to its bilateral ties with Russia. In return, India will expect the United States to be more sensitive to its threat perception and more forthcoming in assisting its strategic aspirations. This can take the form of increased technology sharing and cooperation for facing the territorial threat India faces from China, a reevaluation of Washington's defense ties with Islamabad, and diplomatic support for India's goals in multilateral forums.

While having a sure-footed foreign policy gives more clarity to the likely strategic gains and challenges that the future holds, New Delhi seems to be overtly pronouncing its material ambitions while also trying to assert ideational influence at the moment. For example, Foreign Minister Jaishankar argued that it was imperative to undertake an “unsentimental audit of Indian foreign policy,” saying: “Hedging is a delicate exercise, whether it is the non-alignment and strategic autonomy of earlier periods, or multiple engagements of the future. But there is no getting away from it in a multi-polar world. This is a game best played on the front-foot, appreciating that progress on any one front strengthens one's hand on all others. In that sense, it is having many balls up in the air at the same time and displaying the confidence and dexterity to drop none.”⁴² This hints at a foreign policy establishment with a higher threshold for risk tolerance. It does not necessarily portend a change in India's foreign policy behavior in the near term but indicates a willingness to handle multiple sets of complex interactions simultaneously to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

Some voices view hedging as a strategy that is doomed to fail and have already proposed a strong alignment with the United States in balancing against China.⁴³ However, an overriding and perhaps more establishmentarian view would be to argue that there is more logic in India's quest for strategic autonomy, either through nonalignment in the past or multialignment now.⁴⁴ However, this does not necessarily mean that India prefers the status quo ante. If anything, its foreign policy decisions in recent years indicate a willingness to wither the hesitance to confront China, which goes beyond just their bilateral equation.

Strategic Inertia in India's Foreign Policy

As New Delhi's drive to be recognized as a leading power by virtue of its material capabilities and ability to shape political outcomes in the external environment increases, so shall the need to realize the limitations imposed by power asymmetry vis-à-vis the United States and China and the need to align New Delhi's foreign policy playbook in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁵ Power asymmetry complicates India's practice of strategic autonomy in its response to a rising China and New Delhi's strategic embrace of the United States. While New Delhi must

exercise restraint and choose its fights with Beijing wisely, New Delhi and Washington, despite converging broadly, continue to face difficulties in aligning each other's threat perceptions and respective responses.⁴⁶

How can India extract benefits from America's balancing strategy against China without really committing to being a balancer under the US traditional alliance system? While pure geopolitical rationale might make it prudent for New Delhi to balance against China, India is deterred at the same time by the asymmetry between its own and China's national power. As a result, New Delhi propagates a narrative that India, unlike the United States, does not intend to contain China. Fareed Zakaria, writing about the rise of new powers in Asia and their dynamics with Washington, contended: "The process will not be mechanical. As one of these countries rises (China), it will not produce a clockwork-like balancing dynamic where its neighbor (India) will seek a formal alliance with the United States. Today's world is more complicated than that."⁴⁷ Rather than balancing against a threat, India seems more at ease in balancing between two stronger powers. For India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific, balancing, hedging, and evasive balancing are all means to extract favorable outcomes for India. However, such behaviors are made incoherent by power asymmetry. The inconsistency in India's approach to dealing with China's behavior in the Indo-Pacific is a product of power asymmetry, which complicates the behavior of building a partnership with a distant power (the United States) to balance against a proximate power (China).

India's Indo-Pacific strategy does not maintain equidistant positions between the United States and China. Developments in the military sector—such as the burgeoning defense trade; military-to-military exercises; envisioning greater technology transfers and coproduction of military equipment; the signing of foundational agreements; and the designation of India as a major defense partner—all signal an unmistakable shift toward greater alignment with the United States. Counteracting China's unilateral designs in the Indo-Pacific remains a joint concern, and in strategy there is indeed a convergence between the forward-based US deployment in the Western Pacific and the Indian Navy's emphasis on mission-based deployment.⁴⁸ In addition, improving India's maritime domain awareness and antisubmarine warfare capabilities in the Indian Ocean remain mutual interests.⁴⁹ However, in India's foreign policy discourse, there is still a lingering fear of being seen as too close to Washington and thus being perceived as having compromised the famed Indian strategic autonomy.⁵⁰

Simultaneously, despite an evident power asymmetry vis-à-vis China, New Delhi has, in many instances, also purposefully stood its ground against Beijing's attempts at bullying, be it India's decision to stay out of China's ambitious BRI or the military standoffs at Doklam and the Galwan Valley.⁵¹ It would be an

understatement to say that the contours of the India–China relationship are complex, mixed with optics and substance. Tense events like the Doklam and Galwan standoffs have been followed quickly by informal leadership summits such as the one Prime Minister Modi and President Xi held in Wuhan and Mamallapuram, India. These efforts to drive the relationship from the top are instantly recognizable as inevitable efforts to build on the positives while managing and addressing the negatives.⁵² A pertinent question in this case would be to ascertain the impact such a dalliance in India–China relations has on Washington. There are those who believe that, while Washington would not welcome an India–China conflict given its escalatory risks, the US bureaucracy also harbors a belief that manageable India–China tensions in the continental and maritime space could expose New Delhi’s weaknesses relative to China and push India closer to Washington.⁵³ Even while New Delhi tries distancing itself from any stark game of checkmating China, the Indo-Pacific at its core is predicated on the ways and means of counteracting China’s unilateral adventurism. In the prevailing circumstances, New Delhi is focused on precluding a rising perception by others that India is being increasingly pulled inside the US orbit, aimed against China in a polarized Indo-Pacific.⁵⁴ There are costs to be paid for foreign policy choices. The challenge is in not only knowing the costs but to also engage in a clear-headed calculation of which costs India can and cannot afford.⁵⁵ Despite a broad convergence over the goal to deter Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, the United States seems more willing to respond to Chinese actions in the Western Pacific than in the Indian Ocean.

Will Delhi’s Dilemma End?

Issues of convergence and divergence in the Indo-Pacific largely revolve around operationalizing the common interest of managing China’s rise. Both India and the United States have deeply intertwined relationships with China, something that is bound to impinge on the ways New Delhi and Washington perceive and evolve their own strategies in the Indo-Pacific, with implications for their bilateral cooperation in the region. It might be fair to say that Prime Minister Modi has been reaching out to countries far and near and powers big and small, including those that were hardly in the travel itineraries of former Indian leaders. This perhaps is one of the elements of a policy of multialignment, which India’s foreign minister described as “more energetic, more participative as compared to an earlier posture of abstention or non-involvement.”⁵⁶ However, there is more continuity than change in India’s foreign policy trajectory.⁵⁷ New Delhi’s dilemma of choosing new partners and paying the cost incurred is reflected in India’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Even while there is a consensus on the attractiveness of the Indo-Pacific

construct compared to the earlier references to India as a linchpin of America's rebalancing strategy toward the Asia-Pacific, there is a continuing ambivalence as to how far India should go in aligning with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Despite India's prominent role as an Indian Ocean power in America's Indo-Pacific strategy, there continue to be deep hesitations in becoming a front in the great-power competition between the United States and China.⁵⁸ Some are of the view that "older models of regional engagement, which view different parts of Asia and the Pacific and Indian Oceans as requiring distinct approaches and multilateral partnerships, are still seen as relevant," relative to a prominent approach that views the Indo-Pacific in terms of China-rivalry and partnerships that are exclusive and not inclusive in intent.⁵⁹

Understanding India's predicament in the Indo-Pacific cannot be decoupled from the complex contemporary history of US-China relations. America's relationship with China has gone through the kinds of difficulties that have become a classic case of the dynamic geopolitical landscape and how the rise of new powers impact great-power behavior, leading to significant ramifications in balance-of-power politics. Despite some occasional hiccups and differences emerging because of deeper engagement across the political and economic realms, the overwhelming logic of India-US strategic convergence remains shared concerns over China's behavior in the regional and global scheme of things.⁶⁰ However, India's Indo-Pacific strategy is designed to counter China in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, whereas the US Indo-Pacific strategy is primarily meant to counter Chinese intransigence in the Western Pacific. Bridging this gap will not be easy, and the challenge is made more consequential for India given its power asymmetry relative to the United States and China. India's former national security advisor and foreign secretary, Shivshankar Menon, wrote: "The more India rises, the more it must expect Chinese opposition, and it will have to also work with other powers to ensure that its interests are protected in the neighbourhood, the region and the world. The balance will keep shifting between cooperation and competition with China, both of which characterise that relationship. The important thing is the need to rapidly accumulate usable and effective power, even while the macro balance will take time to right itself."⁶¹

How much of this "usable and effective power" will come from New Delhi's strategic engagement with Washington? The complex competition-cooperation dynamic in the India-China relationship and in the US-China relationship will constrain New Delhi's ability to shape India's strategic embrace with the United States completely to its taste. So, if India's power asymmetry relative to the United States and China is prominent and remains so, what strategic realities should New Delhi keep in mind while negotiating its global and regional aspirations

with India's finite capabilities? In a way, the path to an effective strategy in the Indo-Pacific may not lie in envisioning an end to New Delhi's dilemma but in recognizing that India will have to negotiate the implications of this power asymmetry by aligning its aspirations and capabilities.⁶² Invoking greater realism and evolving an effective grand strategy to emerge as a leading power could depend on a sober appreciation of not only India's rising national power but also its deficiencies.

The Way Forward

Given the differing spatial focus between India and United States in the Indo-Pacific, is a strategic alignment possible between the two countries to meet the common threats emanating from a rising China, which grows increasingly capable of and intent on using force farther away from its borders? Not unless Washington spells out what it can offer India to allay New Delhi's strategic concerns regarding China and vice versa. If both countries focus their resources in regions where they each see a threat, then the purpose of organizing a cooperative mechanism is moot.

This does not require either India or the United States to do anything differently. They can start by better coordinating their existing policies to meet the other's strategic concerns regarding China. India's Act East policy sees New Delhi engaging in deeper defense cooperation with countries in South East Asia, especially Vietnam. While Vietnam's Three Nos policy (No basing rights to foreign troops; No to alliances; No teaming up with one side to combat against another) limits its ability to deepen ties with the United States, India is perfectly placed to initiate backdoor negotiations to soften Vietnam's stance. Both India and the United States deepened their engagements with Taiwan in the face of hostility from China. India and the United States can work together to strengthen Taiwan's economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region through joint development projects while also extending diplomatic support for integrating Taiwan in regional and global multilateral frameworks on issues concerning development and public health.

Given the high likelihood of resurgence in Sino-Indian border tensions, New Delhi needs to accept the limitations in its foreign policy maneuverability vis-à-vis China. In no way does this need to become a unidirectional policy approach. A deeper strategic alignment at the cost of maintaining autonomy might yield results in terms of more policy options. It would also mean working harder and with more clarity of purpose in convincing Russia that an intransigent China in the Pacific is not in any country's interest. A nascent attempt at co-opting Russia into the Indo-Pacific architecture was made in early 2021 by exploring a track

2-level India–Japan–Russia trilateral as a part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Act Far East policy.⁶³ Russia had been seeking Japanese and Indian presence and investment in the Russian Far East amid the growing Chinese presence.⁶⁴

India has also signed reciprocal bilateral logistics pacts with France, the United States, Singapore, South Korea, and Australia to allow the navies to use each other’s ports for replenishment during transit. This takes India a step closer to formalizing a mechanism for increasing interoperability among the major navies patrolling the waters of the Indian Ocean. India also took a step toward shredding its reticence regarding joint patrols with foreign partners by engaging with France in March 2020.⁶⁵ So far, India has engaged only in joint patrol with its maritime neighbors. However, increasing tensions on the India–China border resulted in increased frequency of Indian naval exercises in the South China Sea in 2020. This included the passage exercises with Vietnam, Russia, and the United States; coordinated patrol (CORPAT) with Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Thailand; and the Malabar Exercise in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea with Quad countries, which saw the participation of Australian Navy after 13 years. The Indian Navy also undertook exclusive economic zone surveillance with Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius. This indicates that India is willing to inflict a cost to China for any territorial dispute in the maritime realm.

It will be prudent for New Delhi to initiate dialogue with Beijing on a mechanism for defusing tensions in the event hostilities break out between the two navies in the Indian Ocean, in the form of an “incidents at sea” agreement (which existed between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War).⁶⁶ At present, the codes for unplanned encounters at sea are applicable only to the air force and the navy. A crisis management mechanism for coast guard vessels needs to be formalized.

It has been argued that the United States proposes more exercises than India can accept. Under the Quad 2.0 framework, the United States could consider a diplomatic push toward non-Quad Indian Ocean countries and organize less complex countercoercion exercises with India and other smaller states in South Asia.⁶⁷ India and the United States could also start an Indian Ocean Cooperation and Training Exercise, similar to the one in Southeast Asia, with a focus on counternarcotics, counterpiracy, and counterterrorism.⁶⁸

Another area where the United States and India can cooperate is by expanding the scope of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum to address the issues of debt relief for countries in the Indian Ocean region where countries such as Maldives and Sri Lanka are under major debt distress due to Chinese loans.⁶⁹ Smaller Indian Ocean littoral states are unlikely to be enthused by defense

cooperation and would need economic inducements to wrestle their way out of the economic leverage that Beijing wields over them. 🌐

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