

China and Indo-U.S. Relations: An Emerging Triangle? India Caucus Q&A with Shivshankar Menon

By John Ryan

India and the United States have increasingly similar conceptions of the drivers of Asian security: both want cooperation with China in building a network of relationships with the other significant powers in Southeast and East Asia, while neither wants China to emerge as the dominant regional power. While this strategic convergence is likely to continue, India does not simply “fit” into U.S. policy, given Indian strategic autonomy. How can policymakers promote a closer U.S.-India relationship without triggering either Chinese concerns about containment or Indian concerns about entrapment?

In this Q&A, Shivshankar Menon argues that despite increasing convergence between the United States and India on China, a strategic triangle has not yet emerged. He maintains China is not a key driver of Indian engagement with the United States and that the deepening Indo-U.S. relationship has not caused a Chinese response. Although Indian concerns of a Sino-U.S. “group of two” remain, Menon suggests strengthening bilateral Indo-U.S. cooperation and initiating new trilateral dialogues.

1. Although China is not the primary issue in the India-U.S. relationship, there is a growing strategic convergence between the United States and India on this subject. John Garver, for instance, identified a weak U.S.-China-India triangle emerging (as opposed to the strong strategic triangle of the Soviet Union, China, and the United States in the Cold War). Do you agree? Is India in a period of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis China? How can India engage China while hedging against its rise?

I am not really sure you can think of the relationship between India, the United States, and China as a triangle, weak or otherwise, for several reasons. First, there is an evident asymmetry in the relationships and relative power between the three. Second, both China and India are more comfortable talking to the United States. India is not a major issue in China-U.S. relations, and I do not think China is a key driver of India-U.S. relations, although it is an issue discussed bilaterally. While security is a subjective concept without an absolute metric, I do not see the next ten years as a period of strategic vulnerability for India; in fact, I believe Indian vulnerability has reduced over time in every respect. From the Indian point of view, India-U.S. relations primarily are about bilateral actions and the ways this relationship assists in the transformation of India. Nonetheless, there is no question that there is increasing strategic congruence—India and the United States share fundamental values, including the

desire for an open and inclusive security order in Asia. All that is true, but I do not see a U.S.-India-China triangle yet.

2. The surprise appointment of Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as foreign secretary, replacing Sujata Singh, whose tenure coincided with the Khobragade incident, has been interpreted as a signal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's commitment to a deeper relationship with the United States. How shared is the commitment to good India-U.S. relations in key entities, such as the Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and the military services? What bureaucratic opposition remains in India to closer ties?

It is clear that Secretary Jaishankar is very competent, has a great deal of experience, and will make a great foreign secretary. But why he was appointed and whether it was an expression of a policy preference is difficult to say. In terms of your broader question about India-U.S. relations, the strength of the partnership has been that it is a bipartisan effort on both sides. On the U.S. side, the real transformation and improvement started in the Clinton administration, was carried forward by the Bush administration, and is continuing under President Obama. On the Indian side, the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership initiative was signed in the first National Democratic Alliance government under Prime Minister Vajpayee, while Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the United Progressive Alliance government concluded the civil nuclear initiative and the Defence Framework Agreement in 2005. This cooperation has been carried forward under Prime Minister Modi. Both India and the United States are willing to express an increasing strategic convergence, which was clear during President Obama's January visit with the issuance of the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

As democracies, India and the United States share one thing—they argue about everything. There will always be those who question the utility of relationships, but when you look at public opinion polls in India they show very consistent support for deepening the India-U.S. relationship. Institutionally, since 2005, the United States and India have started a whole series of dialogues across every conceivable sector—28 separate dialogue mechanisms at last count—indicating institutional buy-in across a broad

spectrum, including functional areas such as energy, defense, trade, and environment. While simply having a dialogue does not produce agreement, the point is to be able to have those differences and work around them. Differences are to be expected given how different the United States and India are.

3. Ashton Carter's appointment as defense secretary has similarly been heralded as a boost to the India-U.S. partnership. Ashley Tellis, for example, has written about the difficulty of convincing policymakers in the United States of the value of courting India without an immediate, transactional return on investment. Is the United States capable of a new type of partnership in which India will continue to stake out its own positions, even in opposition to the United States on some issues, while cooperating on others?

There are immediate transactional benefits in the relationship for both sides, as well as long-term strategic interests and benefits; it is not an either-or proposition. The question is which transactional benefits each side wants. Obviously each side tries to negotiate for what suits its interests—that's the normal business of what states do with each other—but for India working in a close partnership with a superpower across a whole range of sectors is a new experience. The United States, likewise, has experience in dealing with clients who comply and allies who follow, but not in dealing with partners who have an opinion on most things and are ready to express it. Thus, there is a learning curve for both the United States and India.

The United States finds strategic autonomy a difficult concept to understand, but there are an increasing number of achievements in the bilateral relationship showing progress in mutual understanding. One area where conventional wisdom may indicate that there is no immediate transactional benefit—the commercial relationship—is exceeding expectations. Bilateral trade has quintupled in the last fifteen years to \$100 billion. Over that period, Indian companies have invested \$11 billion in the United States, and American companies have invested \$24 billion in India. Even formerly divisive areas like climate change have seen great progress. The Defense Trade and Technology Initiative

has also borne fruit since its inception in 2012, such as the new agreement in aircraft carrier technologies and a list of coproduction items.

4. Given India's legacy of nonalignment, it is difficult for the country to engage in policies associated with an alliance relationship, such as signing a logistics support agreement (LSA) with the United States. In lieu of an LSA, some have suggested a fuel-sharing agreement. Can the two countries pick and choose elements of an alliance—essentially formulating alliance policies without the political baggage of an alliance? What are the limits of engagement from strategic autonomy?

Form should not be confused with substance. With or without an LSA or a fuel-sharing agreement, the United States has been fueling Indian ships in the Mediterranean and around the world. There has been reciprocal Indian fueling of U.S. ships when the United States has requested it, but the United States has its own arrangements throughout the region. One should recall that India refueled U.S. aircraft during the first Gulf War. With a focus on form—the signing of an agreement—there will always be arguments between the two systems, but the United States and India can surprise others and themselves with what they are able to accomplish by focusing on common interests and goals—such as in antipiracy, search and rescue, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR). Both countries have big bureaucracies wedded to their pieces of paper and forms, especially in defense, but the most important things are the determination to get the job done and strategic clarity of purpose from both sides.

5. India pulled out of a 2013 trilateral naval exercise with the United States and Japan, reportedly due to concerns about the Chinese reaction. The Indian Ministry of Defence was similarly resistant to participating in the 2014 RIMPAC until China's participation was confirmed. After President Obama's recent visit, a Chinese editorial said that under Western influence, "India is sliding...into a zero-sum game." How has China reacted to increased Indo-U.S. cooperation?

India will obviously follow its own interests. The narrative that India would not attend RIMPAC because China was not coming, or that India was sensitive to Chinese concerns, is not true. The reason

India was not going to attend was that Red Flag, the big air force exercise to which India had committed, was postponed a year by the United States for budgetary reasons. India was then committed to participate in two massive exercises—RIMPAC and Red Flag—in the same budgetary year without adequate fiscal provision. India eventually lowered its level of participation in Red Flag and maintained participation in RIMPAC, but the media read all kinds of things into this—for example, that India only joined RIMPAC after China decided to join.

In regard to the Chinese media, there is the same mirror imaging in the Indian media about Chinese behavior in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Arunachal Pradesh. States do not function on the basis of media reports, and one is better served examining Indian actions, such as the fact that India engages in more exercises with the United States than with the rest of the world combined. Public commentary in India or China does not drive government and armed forces decisions. Indian policymakers do not base decisions regarding Indian engagement with the United States on relations with China—only on calculations of Indian national interest.

6. Chinese policymakers have assessed the United States to be in a relative and occasionally even absolute decline since the 2008 financial crisis. What is India's assessment of the United States' staying power—both in terms of its foundations of national power and its commitment to the rebalance and remaining an Asian power after Iraq and Afghanistan? How strong and widespread are concerns in India about the possibility of a “group of two” emerging and the Sino-U.S. relationship trumping the Indo-U.S. partnership?

Certainly there has been a leveling of the disparity in economic power over the last twenty years or so. But in terms of the ability to convert economic power into political outcomes, and certainly in terms of overall military superiority and the hard balance of power, the United States is still the overwhelmingly predominant power. It remains the only one with the willingness and the capability to actually shape outcomes throughout the region. The United States has also shown an ability in the past to renew itself, despite predictions of U.S. decline after World War II, the launch of Sputnik, and the

Vietnam War. Indian concerns of a Sino-U.S. condominium are real. India first saw Sino-U.S. agreement in 1971 when one of the few things Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai could agree on was support for Pakistan and criticism of India. It was also seen in 1998 with the isolation of India and the application of sanctions after the Indian nuclear test. Just in the last few months, the United States committed to supply nearly \$1 billion of weapons to Pakistan, and President Xi Jinping, during a visit to Pakistan, committed to building the \$46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor from Gwadar to Xinjiang.

7. India has become progressively more vocal on the resolution of maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea, committing to the principle of the freedom of navigation and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This language was repeated in the joint U.S.-India statement after President Obama's visit in January. The statement was met with derision in the Chinese media, which commented that India lacks the capability to support its position. How can India operationalize this commitment by "acting east" without triggering Chinese opposition?

Indian statements have consistently upheld freedom of navigation and freedom of the high seas in the South China Sea and worldwide. India navigates freely and has been drilling for oil in portions of the South China Sea since the 1980s. With respect to operationalizing the "act east" policy, both in terms of trade and defense relationships in the region, India is doing a great deal. It is working with all its partners to build an open and inclusive security architecture in the region through the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, and maritime security dialogues. This is not and should not be a zero-sum competition. India is not an enforcer of the global system—other states claim that function.

8. India has viewed technology transfer as a key goal in the India-U.S. relationship and a litmus test of U.S. commitment. The United States recently agreed to transfer advanced defense technologies for co-development in India, with the Indian Ministry of Defence shortlisting five areas of cooperation: naval guns, mine scattering anti-tank vehicles, unmanned aerial surveillance, aircraft carrier technology, and jet engine technology. What opportunities exist for further cooperation? What kind of technology transfer or arms sales may prompt Chinese concerns?

In December 2006, in the midst of negotiating the civil nuclear agreement, India was still subject to eighteen different types of technology sanctions imposed by the United States after the 1974 nuclear test, including some restrictions from the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls. Today, most of these technologies have been cleared by the High Technology Cooperation Group. India and the United States have removed this accumulated detritus of the past. Looking at the rate and type of high-tech defense clearances, sales to India are now on par with sales to very close U.S. allies such as Israel and the United Kingdom. Completing discussion on the transfer of aircraft carrier technology would be a big step forward. Beyond that, there is a conversation with the Defence Research and Development Organization to find other areas of cooperation, and the U.S. Department of Defense has been talking to private industry groups to assess their interest. There has been no discernable Chinese reaction to U.S technology transfer to India.

9. The Chinese ambassador to India, Le Yucheng, stated that “trilateral relations between India, China and the United States will contribute a lot to world peace and development.” What kind of trilateral cooperation—on Afghanistan, HA/DR, climate change, renewable energy, or energy security, for example—is possible between the United States, India, and China and could mediate competition and foster trust?

Beyond the areas listed above, a key opportunity for trilateral cooperation is cybersecurity. Cooperation in this area will be difficult, but it is worth starting a conversation even without the expectation of immediate results or solutions. If all these issues are taken together, there is an agenda for what a regional security architecture should address. Whether as track 1.5 or track 2, this trilateral dialogue is worth initiating with an eye toward more institutional, official structures.

Shivshankar Menon was National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India from January 2010 to May 2014. Before that, he was the Foreign Secretary of India from 2006 to 2009. He has served as India’s Ambassador or High Commissioner to Israel, Sri Lanka, China, and Pakistan. As a career diplomat, he served in China (thrice), in Japan, and in Austria in the Embassy and the Mission to the

International Atomic Energy Agency and United Nations. He was also seconded to the Department of Atomic Energy in the early 1980s and was a member of the Atomic Energy Commission from 2008 to 2014. His professional diplomatic experience is concentrated on India's neighbors, atomic energy and disarmament, and India's relations with the major powers.