

India's Slow Emergence as a Regional Security Actor

As a matter of policy, Washington has in recent years encouraged India to take a greater role in regional security. After years of warming bilateral relations, in 2009 then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced that the United States would “look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”¹ This formulation, of India as a net security provider, was then codified as a U.S. policy preference in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and the 2015 National Security Strategy. While the Trump administration’s policy on India, as on other matters, remains skeletal, it has shown early signs of remaining broadly congruent with the recent past. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster visited India in April 2017, and reiterated that the United States remained committed to continued deepening cooperation with India.²

The precise parameters of such a role are ambiguous—but in most interpretations it would involve anything from capacity-building for smaller partners, to evacuation and emergency relief operations, to guaranteeing open and secure international shipping lanes, and possibly even to deterring or defeating conventional military threats to regional stability. Washington hopes to see India take such a security role primarily in the Indian Ocean and its littoral—although it would probably also welcome coordinated Indian military activity from the Middle East to the South China Sea. Successive joint statements, such as the 2015 Joint Strategic Vision, have left little doubt that the principal challenges to security in this extended region come from China’s growing assertiveness and transnational terrorism.³ Washington’s strategic policy for the Indo-Pacific rests

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on the assumption that an increasingly powerful India will also be increasingly active in regional security—and that this will be good for America.

What stands in India's way? The conventional wisdom is that India currently lacks the wherewithal to be a net security provider because of insufficient national power or debilitating bureaucratic inefficiencies. A 2015 Council on Foreign Relations task force report argued that "India's transformation depends on tackling formidable challenges," and that it would not become a great power until it embraced massive economic, social, and political reforms.⁴ The *Economist* has lambasted India for lacking a strategic culture and having a "ridiculously feeble" foreign service, among other maladies; it would remain "a nearly-power that cannot quite get its act together" until it undertook extensive institutional reforms.⁵ Indeed, U.S. policy has also targeted bureaucratic inefficiencies in the relationship. The landmark Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), for example, was founded in 2012 to streamline and synchronize U.S. and Indian defense acquisitions processes.⁶ Such policy initiatives are important, but bureaucratic solutions alone will not spawn the regional security partnership that Washington craves.

India's slow emergence as a regional actor reflects its long-standing strategic preferences.

India's slow emergence as a regional actor is only partly the result of capacity shortfalls. American policymakers must understand that it also reflects India's long-standing strategic policy preferences, which remain dominant under the Modi government. Most importantly, India's security priorities are continental, fixed on its insecure periphery. Pressed up against its powerful rivals, Pakistan and China, India must continually prioritize

defense against local threats on its northern land borders. Territorial integrity is a non-negotiable imperative for every state, but it is a security policy priority for India in the sense that it attracts considerable expenditure of resources and attention—which detracts from its capacity for an expeditionary posture. New Delhi's freedom to pursue new, regionally assertive policies is also constrained by vested interests in other strategic relationships—including with China, Russia, and across the Middle East—and by domestic political constituencies which are reluctant to pivot too quickly to new policies. This tension between India's abiding strategic priorities and its newer regional missions will limit the extent to which India can assume the role of net security provider in the Indian Ocean region, and even further restrict its willingness to partner with the United States in contentious security actions in the Middle East or East Asia.

The remainder of this paper unfolds in three parts. First, it argues that India has taken some steps to extend its influence in the region, but its security priorities

remain fixed on its periphery. Second, it explains that its regional posture and partnership with the United States will remain limited because of its military threat perceptions, its other relationships, and the domestic constituencies that favor policy continuity. Finally, it concludes with some implications and recommendations for U.S. policy on how to maximize potential policy convergence.

India's Security Priorities Are Continental, Not Regional

India has begun to extend a sustained policy focus on the Indo-Pacific region, from the Persian Gulf and East Africa to East Asia. Greater national power has allowed it to expand its strategic horizons, building capabilities to protect its maritime trade and energy supply routes, and to assert a nebulous claim to regional leadership. But India's priorities are unchanged. It undertakes these newer regional missions to the extent that it can, with incrementally increasing capabilities, without compromising its traditional security focus on its northern periphery.

India's approach to wider regional security issues is even starker when contrasted with China, which has rapidly grown its force projection capability and deployed it to assert territorial claims, especially in the South and East China Seas. India's military expenditure is less than a quarter of China's; Indian defense spending grew by almost half in the past decade, whereas China's nearly tripled.⁷ China's procurement and doctrine are designed to extend its control and fight decisively at greater distances from its mainland.⁸ And while India cooperatively resolved a longstanding territorial dispute with Bangladesh, China's land reclamations in the South China Sea have sought to forcibly change the regional status quo. No one in Washington suggests that India should behave like China, but China's military expansion and assertive policies show, by contrast, how incrementally and slowly India—claiming to be Asia's other rising giant—has reached into its region.

India has invested considerably less material and political capital in projecting influence into its region, in favor of defending its borders. These priorities are revealed in two ways: its program of military capability development, and its operational posture. First, India's ambitious program of arms acquisitions includes some systems that improve its ability to project power into the region, but only in tightly circumscribed ways. Its new P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, for example, should give it unprecedented situational awareness of its maritime approaches. Its new C-17 and C-130J transport aircraft enable the deployment of special operations forces as well as relief supplies out-of-area. They both allow India to project force into

India has revealed its priorities by its military capability development and its operational posture.

the region, far beyond its periphery. But even these acquisitions cannot be used to their fullest potential until they are accompanied by other ancillary capability developments. For example, the P-8Is still lack some communications and electronic warfare capabilities because they lack the necessary U.S.-sourced equipment, in turn because India has not signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) with the United States.⁹ India's reluctance to sign the Agreement (along with another such foundational agreement, known as the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, regarding geospatial data exchange) is rooted in overblown fears that it would compromise Indian security or sovereignty.¹⁰ Until then, these capabilities remain suited mostly to non-warlike conditions, conducting operations in relatively permissive environments.

The Indian Navy does have more ambitious plans to project combat power. These include a modernized submarine fleet, to include nuclear ballistic missile boats, and a second indigenous aircraft carrier, perhaps involving some joint technology development with the United States. But these programs will not reach full operational capability for at least the next decade, if not longer. Until then, the erstwhile goal of Indian sea control in the Indian Ocean will remain purely aspirational.

Moreover, such force projection platforms are the exception in India's procurement program. The vast majority of Indian procurement activity is focused on modernizing its existing capabilities to deter and fight on its land borders. The largest and longest-running procurement programs—from the Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft to the M-777 howitzers—are incremental improvements to existing capabilities, designed to execute traditional deterrence and warfighting missions. Thus, while India has rapidly grown to become one of the world's largest arms importers, these domestic and foreign acquisitions reveal a broad consistency, rather than a rapid change, of military planning priorities.

Second, India's defense posture—its dispositions, exercises, and operations—has also begun to reach into the region, but only tentatively. India has begun to develop offshore facilities to project power, upgrading and expanding some of its bases in the Andaman and Nicobar islands.¹¹ With recent infrastructure upgrades, this island chain has recently sustained deployments of P-8Is¹² and missile corvettes,¹³ and stands as a significant extension of Indian military reach screening the Strait of Malacca. Doctrinally, the Indian Navy released a new maritime strategy in late 2015 which highlighted its role in managing non-traditional threats, region-wide military diplomacy, and protecting regional shipping lanes.¹⁴ This doctrine reflects a web of already-existing security relationships that India maintains with Indian Ocean states. For example, it has agreed to conduct maritime domain awareness and search-and-rescue missions for Mauritius and Seychelles.¹⁵ Institutionally, India established the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium in 2008,

which stands alongside a plethora of other multilateral and bilateral maritime dialogues including, most recently, a new maritime dialogue established with the United States.

India has long claimed primacy of the Indian Ocean region, and acted on it intermittently, although its rate of activity has increased measurably in the past decade. Most importantly, it has increased the frequency and range of naval exercises and operations. Exercises have grown bolder, with a wide range of regional partners. Most prominently, India resumed participation in the now-trilateral Malabar exercises with the United States and Japan, last held in the Philippine Sea in 2016. India has also launched a number of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations in Indonesia and Sri Lanka after the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004); after cyclones in Bangladesh (2007), Myanmar (2008), Philippines (2013), and as far away as Fiji (2016); after a water crisis in the Maldives (2014); and after the earthquake in Nepal (2015). And it launched non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs) from Lebanon (2006), Libya (2011), and Yemen (2015).

These exercises, military-diplomacy visits, and relief operations have represented the extent of India's regional military activities; it has not engaged in combat operations in the region. India has traditionally assumed a conservative approach to the use of force—sometimes known as “strategic restraint”—based on a tangle of material, institutional, and normative constraints.¹⁶ It is reluctant not only to use force, but also to endorse military action by others, which it frequently sees as destabilizing and injurious to the norm of sovereignty, even if New Delhi is sympathetic to the purpose of the intervention.¹⁷ Thus, aside from minor skirmishes against non-state actors such as pirates,¹⁸ no regional issues have sufficiently engaged India's strategic or domestic-political interests to warrant a military intervention in the Indian Ocean region, and India has pointedly recoiled from supporting—let alone participating in—coalition operations further afield, for example in Libya or Syria.

India has doubled down on its top priorities on its northern periphery.

The shift in India's defense posture has thus been incremental; it has not displaced India's traditional continental focus on its land borders, where India remains decidedly more assertive. In the past two decades, even while India has gingerly stepped into a wider regional role, it has doubled down on its top priorities on its northern periphery. Twice in as many years, India launched small reprisal raids targeting militants across its borders—into Myanmar in 2015 and across the Line of Control in Kashmir in 2016. Such actions had trivial tactical effect, but were designed to signal India's willingness to fight back when provoked. Lethal artillery exchanges across the Line of Control are routine. Its Cold Start

doctrine, more recently referred to as the “proactive strategy,” sought widespread reorganization and modernization of its military for a retaliatory attack on Pakistan.¹⁹ While India’s political leadership has never officially acknowledged Cold Start, successive Army Chiefs have referred to it,²⁰ suggesting India has, at a minimum, revised procedures for large-scale ground force mobilization. Regardless of the viability of this doctrine, it illustrates India’s unwavering preoccupation with land-based conventional warfighting and deterrence.

Moreover, in the past three budgets, the Army’s share has increased—up to an estimated 56 percent in 2016–17—while those of the Navy and Air Force, the services which would project force into the region, have fallen.²¹ Much of the Army’s growing budget share is due to rapidly growing pension payments, but India still chooses to expand, rather than rationalize and modernize, its ground forces. Rare among major powers, its modernization plans involve raising massive new Army formations—most prominently, a Mountain Strike Corps for use against China.²² This is to say nothing of the large security forces, such as the Border Security Force and Central Reserve Police Force, under the authority of the Ministry of Home Affairs. They serve in effect as paramilitary forces against internal security threats in Jammu and Kashmir and the northeastern states, vastly supplementing the security presence on and near India’s land borders.

Along with its military capabilities, then, India’s defense posture has shifted only marginally. The bulk of its resources and planning are still directed toward traditional concerns regarding Pakistan and China, as they have been since independence, rather than the regional interests it trumpets in joint communiqués with Washington. But why have India’s security priorities changed only marginally? Three structural drivers shape India’s strategic priorities.

The Structural Drivers of India’s Priorities

Why does India not project its influence more assertively into the region? Inefficient institutions certainly impede rapid procurement and deployment of forces. The range of bureaucratic dysfunctions is well-known: the acquisitions process is byzantine, dominated by state-run suppliers, riddled with corruption, and unduly focused on technological solutions to capability requirements; civil-military relations are characterized by an “absent dialog”²³ which allows military planning to occur with insufficient policy direction, and the generalist defense bureaucracy to work without expert input; and the lack of a strategic review process, akin to the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review, means that security policy planning is driven by incremental and linear continuation of budgets and programs, rather than fresh strategic assessments. These institutional dysfunctions create undeniable drag on India’s policymaking process.

But clearing those bureaucratic obstacles would not unleash a suddenly more regionally-oriented India. India's security policy is also hidebound by enduring strategic and political drivers which cannot be mitigated simply by optimizing bureaucratic processes. These drivers are structural, in the sense that they are features of the environment, both regional and domestic, and therefore not amenable to rapid policy changes. The rise of China and transnational terrorism are themselves structural drivers pushing India toward a greater regional role. But other constraints tie India's hands, limiting the extent to which India can engage assertively with the wider region. Three such drivers are most important: its threat perceptions, other strategic relationships, and domestic political constituencies.

Threat Perceptions

First, India's threat perceptions force it to focus on its periphery, and limit the resources and attention it can expend on regional security issues. On India's northern borders lie its two chief rivals, Pakistan and China, each nuclear-armed and commanding massive conventional forces, with a history of past conflict with India, unresolved territorial disputes, and links to sub-state armed groups in India. India has been slow to adapt to the evolution in threats from Pakistan and China, but that does not make them any less vivid as drivers of Indian policy. While India continues to emphasize preparations for large-scale direct conflict, Pakistan has placed progressively greater emphasis on its unconventional attacks and a low threshold for use of tactical nuclear weapons. Regardless, Pakistan remains a revisionist state, with a security establishment whose organizing principle is uncompromising opposition to India.²⁴ Meanwhile, as China began to conduct persistent naval operations in the Indian Ocean, India belatedly recognized the need for improved maritime domain awareness and an assertive naval presence. China seeks primacy in Asia, and with relatively minor military activity near the Indian border, can keep India off-balance while it pursues greater reach and influence through the maritime Indo-Pacific.

Even worse, these two threatening neighbors have long been joined together in a strategic partnership that is growing only deeper. China has girded Pakistan with conventional arms, nuclear and ballistic missile technology, and more recently, the promise of enormous economic and infrastructure development as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).²⁵ Pakistan is the linchpin of China's influence in the Indian Ocean region. From New Delhi's perspective, this military and economic assistance has not only propped up India's most implacable foe, it has also allowed China to encircle India. Under CPEC, the financing, development, and operation of Gwadar port and high-capacity ground lines of communication will broaden and deepen Pakistan's dependence on China for

decades. However, the China–Pakistan axis is most concerning to New Delhi in the form of a potential two-front war. A conflict wherein India simultaneously fights Pakistan and China has become an ingrained canard among Indian defense planners—a worst-case scenario which has never materialized in the several dyadic conflicts that India has fought. India is utterly ill-equipped for such a contingency, and whether or not the scenario is strategically plausible, it provides a compelling benchmark for Army and Air Force procurement demands.²⁶

India’s continued emphasis on building mass in its conventional ground forces reflects the precautionary principle of planning for the worst case, colored by historical conditioning of past conflicts. But the structural pressures of a revisionist Pakistan and an assertive China are baked into the dynamics of the region, and are inescapable for Indian planners. India lacks the “surplus security” on its periphery which would allow a more expansive security role. Its defense priorities are dominated by its immediate and immutable geopolitical challenges, reducing the resources available to provide regional public goods.

India lacks the “surplus security” on its periphery to allow a more expansive security role.

Strategic Relationships

The second key structural driver is India’s web of other strategic relationships, which limit its freedom to partner with the United States in the Indo–Pacific. Most directly, India moderates its approach to China to protect its burgeoning bilateral trade and investment relationship and to maintain stability on their land border, where China retains operational advantages. Therefore, while India holds a firm line on its core issue of territorial claims on the border, it has calibrated its posture on wider regional issues where it has less control and where the benefits of provoking Beijing are less apparent. Thus, it quite happily invited the U.S. Ambassador and the Dalai Lama to disputed border areas,²⁷ but it also rejected the notion of participating in joint patrols with the United States in the South China Sea,²⁸ and continues to stonewall Australian efforts to rejoin the Malabar series of exercises for fear of resuscitating a provocative “quad” alignment tacitly counterbalancing China.²⁹ Its approach to China is thus balanced between its imperative to deter and defend against direct threats, and its concern over prompting more inimical Chinese behavior.

India also has abiding strategic relationships with other states, which at times indirectly narrow the scope for cooperation with the United States. Russia, for example, was a receptive partner during the Cold War—indeed, the 1971

Treaty of Friendship firmly established Moscow as a benign ally at precisely the time that the United States issued threats of armed intervention in the 1971 war. The Cold War alignment carries a degree of path dependence, as India and Russia remain tied through long-running defense technology and acquisitions contracts. Russia retains its primacy as India's biggest source of arms, in large part because of long-term delivery schedules and life-cycle support. It is also a favorable competitor compared to the United States because it provides cheaper equipment, it does not impose the same end-user conditions or monitoring, it has shared sensitive technologies such as nuclear propulsion, and it has collaborated with India on weapons co-production and co-development, for example with the Su-30MKI fighter aircraft and BrahMos cruise missile, respectively. Unsurprisingly, then, with their historical alignment and more mature defense relationship, Indian officials and analysts often regard Russia as a more reliable strategic partner than the United States.

In an evolution of India's prized doctrine of strategic autonomy, it maintains productive relations with a range of other powers that are often hostile to each other. In the Middle East, for example, alongside its consistently strong relations with the Gulf monarchies, India has a comprehensive relationship with Iran—most recently, as it seeks to develop Chabahar port and connect it to Afghanistan—and with Israel, as it seeks to access high-tech military capabilities. Overlaid on these strategic interests, India also loudly proclaims a deeply-held allegiance to formal international regimes and institutions. This complex web of loyalties intersected in Syria: skeptical of the benefits of an armed intervention, India did not support the U.S.-led intervention; but it still approved of the invited Russian intervention in support of New Delhi's old friends in the Assad regime.³⁰ This web of interests creates a complex blend of strategic equities, often not shared with the United States, which may compel New Delhi to adopt policy positions at variance with those of Washington.

Domestic Constituencies

The third driver of Indian policy is domestic political constituencies, which resist rapid change in India's strategic posture. A defense policy which engages more assertively with regional security issues, such as managing China and terrorism, would be a marked shift for India—especially if that policy involved closer coordination with the United States—and there is little domestic political constituency for such a shift. In both elite and popular opinion, threat perceptions are dominated by security concerns on India's periphery. Terrorist attacks, presumed if not proven to be backed by Pakistan, generate heated discussion and accumulating pressure on the government to respond aggressively. Polling suggests that large majorities of Indians see threats on India's periphery—from Pakistan (86

percent), Pakistan-sponsored terrorists (74 percent), and China (67 percent)—as “serious or somewhat serious” threats; meanwhile, a minority of polled Indians are “very concerned” about regional security issues such as China’s territorial disputes (38 percent) or Iran’s nuclear weapons (28 percent)—lower even than climate change (73 percent) and the travails of the global economy (49 percent).³¹

The intellectual and bureaucratic elite still retain a notable vein of anti-Americanism.

Political attitudes toward the United States are improving, but gradually. Popular attitudes toward America are largely favorable,³² but the intellectual and bureaucratic elite still retain a notable vein of anti-Americanism. This is in part a generational matter, driven by a cadre of currently senior intellectuals and civil servants whose formative years were defined by the anti-Americanism of 1970s and 1980s India, when the two countries were in the

depths of their ideological and geopolitical estrangement. Even though New Delhi began jettisoning its ideological ballast in the 1990s, and even though the current Modi government is more eager than any of its predecessors to accelerate cooperation with the United States, it must contend with reflexive suspicions of U.S. intentions and reliability. Thus, news in 2016 that the Modi government was close to signing some technocratic foundational defense agreements with the United States was met in some Indian quarters with great alarm. Some prominent public intellectuals argued baselessly that these agreements—such as an agreement on logistics, designed to facilitate contingency operations, which the United States has signed with over 100 countries—would dilute India’s political autonomy or ensnare it in Washington’s wars abroad.³³ Such commentaries reflect a complex political constituency that, while evolving, still mounts resistance to sharp changes in security policy.

These three structural drivers are enduring, but they are not immutable. Structural conditions do change, albeit slowly. India’s strategic calculus could shift if, for example, there was a significant reduction in the threats on its northern border—for example, with an unlikely final settlement on Kashmir or its territorial dispute with China. Even less likely, such a political resolution would only translate into defense policy if New Delhi had enough confidence in the other party’s commitment to that settlement, and was agile enough to adjust its posture in ways it has never done since independence. More probably, India’s defense posture might accelerate its shift toward the region if it confronts a step-change in security threats in the Indian Ocean region. Such changes in structural conditions—or a more unpredictable, high-impact, low-probability event—might impel New Delhi to reassess its capabilities and posture. Only changes of that magnitude would alter India’s structural constraints. Short of that, any improvement in

New Delhi's bureaucratic dysfunctions would not address its underlying conditions.

Implications and Recommendations

Assuming the underlying structural conditions do not change, India will continue to grow more powerful, but will only slowly emerge as a regional security actor, and only unevenly align with the United States. This is still a positive outcome for U.S. policy. The concept popularized by Asia scholar Ashley Tellis is fundamentally sound: encouraging the rise of regional powers, especially India, is the only way the United States can manage regional threats and uphold the increasingly challenged international order.³⁴ But Washington should be under no illusions that a richer or more powerful India will obligingly retool its preferences. India's expanding naval capabilities over the next decade will not automatically translate into more aggressive operations, for example, in the South China Sea. Its national interests in the region—centered on maintaining the balance of power, combating terrorism, protecting diaspora populations³⁵—are unlikely to change significantly; and so is its conservative approach to the use of force.

This matters because regional threats are growing and will probably require more of a robust response than India has been accustomed to mounting. To date, the demands on Indian leadership in the region have been manageable—typically humanitarian aid or security assistance in permissive environments. India has met these demands at little cost; but sharper challenges are likely in the future. The region's cyclones will be replaced by determined adversaries such as a hostile Chinese Navy or Islamic State insurgents. Those challenges will demand a higher level of Indian defense preparedness, and expose India to greater risk. If India maintains its current ordering of strategic priorities—even with continued improvements in capabilities—it will struggle to meet tougher security challenges.

In the meantime, India will pursue its own idiosyncratic approach to regional issues—more likely in parallel with the United States than in concert with it. India will never be a formal ally of the United States. Quite apart from India's general hesitancy in binding treaties with any country, the United States' alliances were forged in a unique and distant historical moment that is unlikely to ever be repeated. But the fact that the two countries routinely refer to their shared regional interests is no trivial matter—after a Cold War history of distrust, they are now broadly aligned in declaring their common support for the international order in the Indo-Pacific.

India is more likely to change in parallel with the United States than in concert with it.

But even in pursuing those regional interests that it shares with the United States, especially managing the rise of China and transnational terrorism, India's policy approach will not always align with Washington's. On issues of policy divergence, India is now more likely to simply opt out rather than oppose U.S. actions in the region. Under current structural conditions, the U.S.–India defense relationship will continue to develop, but incrementally and within limits.

Policy divergences will be most pronounced when the United States or India judge the other's use of force to be regionally destabilizing, regardless of the justification. India remains a militarily more conservative state, more skeptical of the utility of force, than the United States. Thus, India looked askance at U.S. interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, and would probably distance itself from potential U.S. actions that provoke China, unless Indian security is directly threatened. Disputes over the use of force are more likely to occur to India's west—in and around the Middle East—than in East Asia. In large part, that is a result of the nature of the security issues: aside from headline-grabbing skirmishes in the South China Sea, most of the security competition in East Asia is played out in the diplomatic and geoeconomic arenas, and in regional states' military modernization programs. Threats in Southwest Asia are more likely to be manifested as long-running armed conflicts or rivalries that tempt the United States to intervene. This is especially true given the Trump administration's stated objectives to fight ISIL and pressure Iran—neither of which will win Indian support.

The U.S.–India policy divergence on Middle East security issues is also exacerbated by U.S. organizational structures. In particular, the seam between Pacific Command (PACOM) and Central Command (CENTCOM) areas of responsibility lies on the India–Pakistan border. This creates an institutional pull for Indian equities to be considered in the context of the Asia–Pacific, but not Southwest Asia. PACOM is institutionally charged with military cooperation with India, especially in the context of managing security issues related to China. In contrast, CENTCOM has spent over a decade consumed by warfighting, less concerned with considering the regional strategic interests of countries beyond its horizon, including India.

The Afghanistan war amplified this distortion. Since the U.S. campaign plan relied so heavily on ground lines of communication through Pakistan, the United States—in large part at the behest of CENTCOM—became particularly receptive to Pakistani interests, often at India's expense. Although the Afghanistan campaign is winding down, CENTCOM will probably be preoccupied with irregular conflicts for the foreseeable future—especially, under the Trump administration, against ISIL—and will continue to prioritize immediate operational imperatives and relationships.

With these shared interests and strategic constraints in mind, what steps could Washington take to enable greater policy convergence? Drawing from the analysis

above, there are four policy recommendations. First, accepting that India is unlikely to attract the same high-level political attention under the Trump administration as it previously did, the U.S. military should seek to consolidate working-level relations. Summit- and cabinet-level discussions are valuable because, aside from their theatrics, they offer important forcing functions to develop working-level connections. But even without them, a wide range of combined military exercises help to build familiarity and habits of cooperation which, no matter how modest at this stage, are a much-needed improvement on the prior level of military-to-military relations. Interoperability is a distant goal, but combined exercises and operations are a necessary first step.

Second, as far as possible, the United States should not frame the relationship in terms of reciprocal, transactional ventures. Initiatives that depend on lock-step progress or reciprocity build frustration in America and distrust in India. DTTI, for example, is an important mechanism for sustained communication on defense technology transfer, but is too restrictive as a model for the wider relationship. In contrast, the cooperation on law enforcement and intelligence-sharing after terrorist incidents demonstrates how task-oriented collaboration—designed to achieve specific policy outcomes rather than testing and refining processes—is intrinsically important. Such an approach also yields other important results, shifting the residual Indian narratives of a venal and untrustworthy United States.

Third, Washington should internally synchronize its own regional policies, not only between government agencies, but also within them—especially to de-conflict each agency's policies on India, China, and Pakistan. The best initiatives on India may be compromised by uncoordinated initiatives on, say, Pakistan. Washington should regard regional contingencies from the outside-in, rather than the inside-out; that is, regional strategic policy should be a central priority of contingency operations, not an afterthought. The U.S. approach to Afghanistan, for example, should be evaluated not only by how it shapes the tribal balance in Kandahar, but more importantly by how it leaves the regional balance among China, India, and Pakistan. Washington's relations with major powers should not be an incidental casualty of the war. At an organizational level, this synchronization demands that Indian equities should not be considered only in the halls of PACOM—India should be invited to coordinate with CENTCOM. In other high priority policy agencies, India “mission managers” should cut across seams that might divide U.S. bureaucratic efforts on Indo-Pacific issues.

Finally, and most ambitiously, if Washington wants a more regionally-active India, it should consider how it could help to ameliorate India's structural constraints. Simply demanding that India focus more on the region—in essence, that it reorder its security policy priorities—would be imperious and ineffective. But helping to mitigate the security threats on India's northern borders, or at

least reducing their resource-intensiveness, should help to free New Delhi to devote more effort on regional security issues. This must obviously be balanced with avoiding the appearance of undue interference in India's defense policy. But discrete assistance with, for example, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities on India's borders should act as a force multiplier, enabling a more streamlined Indian military posture there. It would serve as a powerful tool of U.S. military diplomacy, and allow India to more confidently advance shared interests in regional security.

Notes

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