

**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**

*Form Approved*  
OMB No. 0704-0188

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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 02/23/2021	<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master of Military Studies Research Paper	<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> August 2020 - April 2021
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<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> US-China Competition: India's Role as a Counterbalance	<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A
	<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A
	<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A

<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Seagroatt, Thomas P., Major, US Army	<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A
	<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A
	<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A

<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068	<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A
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<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A	<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A
	<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A

**12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**  
Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

**13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES**  
N/A

**14. ABSTRACT**  
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**15. SUBJECT TERMS**  
India; China; United States; Great Power Competition; Balancing; India-China Rivalry; US-India Relations; US Counter-PRC Strategy.

<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b>	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b>	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b>			Marine Corps University/Command and Staff
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU	23	<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b> (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

*United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

**MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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US-China Competition: India's Role as a Counterbalance

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AUTHOR:**

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AY 2020-21

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## *Executive Summary*

**Title:** US-China Competition: India's Role as a Counterbalance

**Author:** Major Thomas Seagroatt, United States Army

**Thesis:** India provides a limited counterbalance against the People's Republic of China (PRC). Within this context, the US can and should enable India's rise as an Asian power in support of US strategic counter-PRC objectives.

**Discussion:** The 2018 US *National Defense Strategy* identifies "long-term, strategic competition" with China as the primary US Department of Defense priority. Although the US maintains global dominance over China, China increasingly challenges US economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific region. India is a regional rival to China and the world's third-largest economy in terms of gross domestic product by purchasing power parity. As such, it is positioned to enable the associated US strategic objectives of "maintaining favorable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific...sustaining [regional] Joint Force military advantages...detering adversaries from aggression against [US] vital interests...[and] ensuring common domains remain open and free." Though many scholars have examined India's bilateral relationship and capabilities relative to China, few have addressed the extent to which India represents a counterbalance to China in terms of US interests. Further, while much recent research has focused on the feasibility of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or potential US-India alignment through the lens of converging and diverging interests, there has been limited discussion regarding if or how the US can reinforce India's position vis-à-vis China, both generally and from a military perspective.

India provides a limited counterbalance against the People's Republic of China. The US can and should enable India's rise as an Asian power in support of US strategic counter-PRC objectives. This paper unfolds in five parts. First, it examines US-China competitive approaches to provide context. Second, it argues that India, in pursuit of its national interests, intends to rival China as a leading power in the Indo-Pacific. Next, it reveals that despite this intent, India's existing military and economic capabilities provide only a limited counterbalance to China. Fourth, it posits that the US can and should enable India's rise through measured diplomatic, economic, and military partnership. Finally, it refutes contemporary arguments that Indian human rights practices should preclude increased US relations with India.

**Conclusion:** India intends to compete with China for regional dominance but lacks the capability to do so in a meaningful way without US enablement. The Biden administration must carry forward the Trump administration's positive momentum with New Delhi by pursuing a more formalized Quad, economic support to Indian- and Japanese-led infrastructure development alternatives, and increased military interoperability. India's human rights practices present a moral dilemma for the US. However, it is likely that, as China's recent aggression has pushed India closer to the US, China's future actions will determine the US stance toward India in the next four years. The US has the opportunity to exploit China's behavior and India's associated insecurity to create a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

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Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8/98)  
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39.18

## *Preface*

The United States is at a critical juncture as it transitions national leadership and seeks to preserve its national interests in the Indo-Pacific while managing US domestic friction and COVID-19. India will play a significant role in US-China competition, and regardless of India's prioritization of strategic autonomy, US and Chinese approaches to their India relations will largely determine India's role in US-China Competition. My observations and arguments regarding India's role as a counterbalance to China benefit from the ideas and diligent work of many scholars across the international relations and security studies fields. However, the guidance and mentorship from Marine Corps University faculty members Dr. Andrew Scobell and Dr. Douglas Streusand warrant specific acknowledgment.

The 2018 US *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* identifies “long-term, strategic competition” with China as the primary US Department of Defense (DoD) priority.<sup>1</sup> Although the US maintains global dominance over China, China increasingly challenges US economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific region. India is a regional rival to China and the world’s third-largest economy in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) by purchasing power parity (PPP). As such, it is positioned to enable the associated US strategic objectives of “maintaining favorable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific...sustaining [regional] Joint Force military advantages...detering adversaries from aggression against [US] vital interests...[and] ensuring common domains remain open and free.”<sup>2</sup> Though many scholars have examined India’s bilateral relationship and capabilities relative to China, few have addressed the extent to which India represents a counterbalance to China in terms of US interests.<sup>3</sup> Further, although much recent research has focused on the feasibility of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or potential US-India alignment through the lens of converging and diverging interests, there has been limited discussion regarding if or how the US can reinforce India’s position vis-à-vis China, both generally and from a military perspective.<sup>4</sup>

India provides a limited counterbalance against the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The US can and should enable India’s rise as an Asian power in support of US strategic counter-PRC objectives. This paper unfolds in five parts. First, it examines US-China competitive approaches to provide context. Second, it argues that India, in pursuit of its national interests, intends to rival China as a leading power in the Indo-Pacific. Next, it reveals that despite this intent, India’s existing military and economic capabilities provide only a limited counterbalance to the PRC. Fourth, it posits that the US can and should enable India’s rise through measured

diplomatic, economic, and military partnership. Finally, it refutes contemporary arguments that Indian human rights practices should preclude increased US relations with India.

### **Context and Assumptions: US-China Grand Strategies and Competitive Approaches**

China threatens US interests in the Indo-Pacific region. As a revisionist power, China aims to disrupt the US-led international order to establish more favorable conditions for its regional hegemony. China's goals, as identified in the 2020 RAND study titled *China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*, center on security, sovereignty, and development in support of "National Rejuvenation."<sup>5</sup> Although Beijing prioritizes internal stability, it perceives significant threats to its security and sovereignty from India on its periphery and the US across all four rings of its insecurity (the homeland, the immediate periphery, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world).<sup>6</sup> Due to these perceived threats, China's Indo-Pacific strategy relies upon the use of regional multilateralism and coercive economic diplomacy to gain and maintain influence in the South and East China Seas, the Western Pacific, and the Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup>

To increase its influence in the region, China has established a regional security architecture consisting of organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA).<sup>8</sup> As part of this multilateral approach and in pursuit of Asia-centric partnerships, China has increasingly integrated security and economic networks through efforts such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>9</sup> China has also most recently expanded its regional influence through participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Forum (RCEP), an Association of Southeast Asian Nations-led (ASEAN) free trade agreement.<sup>10</sup>

The overall US strategy centers on China's threat to US interests and prioritizes an ally and partner-based approach to competition. The 2017 *US National Security Strategy* identifies China as a challenger to US power, security, and prosperity.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent *NDS* identifies the primary US defense priority as “long-term, strategic competition” with China.<sup>12</sup> Nested with these strategies, the *US Strategic Approach to the Peoples Republic of China* outlines two objectives: “first, to improve the resiliency of our institutions, alliances, and partnerships to prevail against the challenges the PRC presents; and second, to compel Beijing to cease or reduce actions harmful to the United States’ vital, national interests and those of our allies and partners.”<sup>13</sup> Specific to India, the 2019 US DOD *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* emphasizes US and Indian converging interests and common outlooks, highlights the US-India “broad-based strategic partnership,” and looks ahead to increased cooperation and interoperability.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning US competition with China, there are three key assumptions related to US-India-China balancing. First, through the lens of the US DOD Joint Competition Continuum, the US will seek to prevail through “Cooperation” and “Competition Below Armed Conflict” rather than escalate to “Armed Conflict.”<sup>15</sup> Second, using the 2020 RAND *China's Grand Strategy* report as a framework, the US will compete against a “triumphant” or “ascendent” China with a “colliding” trajectory in the next three decades. These frameworks establish a scenario in which China will realize all or most of its grand strategy goals and perpetuate a competitive relationship with the US.<sup>16</sup>

Third, and despite recent increases in US-India defense cooperation, India will maintain its traditional non-alignment policy rather than conducting outright hard balancing with the US or bandwagoning with China.<sup>17</sup> This assumption is based on India's goal to retain strategic autonomy – rooted in its colonial history and tied to the contemporary Indian National Congress

platform – and the Hindu nationalism espoused by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).<sup>18</sup> Despite treating this as an assumption, this paper examines India’s foreign policy options to provide context for US-India-China balancing discussions. Together, these assumptions establish a most probable competitive environment for US policy consideration.

In discussions of US-India-China relations, several key terms enable understanding of state actor behavior. International relations scholar and India expert T.V. Paul, drawing on the ideas of Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, has outlined the most relevant concepts for this context. First, “balancing” refers to a foreign policy behavior intended to “prevent a rising power from assuming hegemony” – it is a method used to limit the power of an adversary in order to maintain the status quo or achieve a balance of power.<sup>19</sup> Within this concept, “hard balancing” refers to a state’s strategy to establish formal alliances and strengthen its military capabilities relative to an adversary. “Soft balancing” refers to activities short of formal alliance: limited security cooperation, limited military build-up, combined military exercises, and cooperation through multilateral institutions. State actors may employ these policies in limited forms or use a combination of them in “mixed balancing.”<sup>20</sup>

Two additional concepts permeate Indo-Pacific policy discussions: “bandwagoning” and “hedging.” Bandwagoning refers to a weaker state’s practice of aligning with a stronger, rising state to benefit as the potential hegemon grows.<sup>21</sup> Strategic policy scholar Evelyn Goh has provided the most applicable definition of hedging: “[hedging refers to] a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon...balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.”<sup>22</sup> Although this paper will show that India has and will increasingly continue to engage in mixed balancing with the US against China, these concepts collectively provide a framework to understand potential US-India-China relations.

Finally, several scholars have used the term “regional multilateralism” to describe Indian and Chinese behaviors. Political scientist Arndt Michael defines this term as “the voluntary formation of an institutionally robust [organization] in a region in which at least three states agree on a specific, rule-based agenda in order to mutually advance in given areas of cooperation; cooperation means equality in voting and agreement on the working principles...no country being permitted to force its values and norms on other members.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Context: India’s Foreign Policy and Worldview**

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has designed its foreign policy to “protect and secure India’s integrity, citizens, values and assets, and to enable the development and transformation of India into a modern nation.”<sup>24</sup> India naturally derives these goals from its colonial history and has consistently followed a “non-alignment” or “strategic autonomy” approach to retain independent decision-making on the international stage.<sup>25</sup> Although India’s foreign policy has progressed through multiple phases, this preference for non-alignment and sovereignty in decision-making has generally not translated to isolationism.<sup>26</sup> India is strategically located between the Indian Ocean and China and is in close proximity to the straits of Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda. This geography, combined with its natural resources and development objectives, means that India has been most successful when it engages externally.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, as India has grown economically and China has risen to contest the US-dominated status quo, India has projected diplomatic, economic, and military power further into its periphery to ensure continued growth and security.

India’s transition from its “Look East Policy” to its “Act East Policy” best reflects its growth and regional security aspirations relative to China. Announced by Prime Minister

Narendra Modi at the 2014 East Asia Summit, the “Act East Policy” displays India’s intent to play an increased regional role:

Since entering office six months ago my government has moved with a great sense of priority and speed to turn our ‘Look East Policy’ into ‘Act East Policy.’ In a world of inter-dependence and globalization, there is no option but to follow international laws and norms. This also applies to maritime security. For this reason, following [the laws and norms] is important for peace and stability in the South China Sea as well. This also includes the 1982 UN Convention on Law of the Sea, which should be the basis for resolving disputes peacefully... We also have to ensure that cyber and space remain a source of connectivity and prosperity, not new theatres for conflict.<sup>28</sup>

Modi’s references to the South China Sea, not previously considered to be within India’s sphere of influence, and to the cyber and space domains, represent an expansion of India’s foreign policy goals and regional competition with China. Further, and contrary to later New Delhi perspectives, his insistence on enforcement of the UN Convention of Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) reveals an initial desire to maintain the international status quo.

India’s intent toward China, the US, and the Indo-Pacific region evolved over the subsequent five years. Although its aspirations to maintain strategic autonomy and increase internal development remained major priorities, continued growth and the evolving geopolitical environment drove or revealed new perspectives. India External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar summarized these perspectives in his 2019 speech at the 4<sup>th</sup> Ramnath Goenka lecture:

An ability to respond to a variety of situations is part of any nation’s rise...it does so taking into account the steady elements of any policy; in India’s case, a persistent striving to expand space and options. Not an end in itself, that is meant to ensure greater prosperity at home, peace on the borders, protection of our people and enhancing influence abroad...our national strategy to realize even the more constant goals cannot be static in an evolving world...[that has moved] from bipolarity to unipolarity and then to multipolarity...India’s diplomatic agenda has broadened considerably... We share with the international community the objective that a multi-polar world should have a multi-polar Asia at its core...the previous phases of foreign policy each have a neat description, how do we characterize the current one...One solution is to anchor it on India aspirations and...our goal of emerging as a leading power...taking off from non-alignment, we could perhaps speak today of multi-alignment...the difficulty is that it also appears

opportunistic, whereas India is really seeking strategic convergence rather than tactical convenience.<sup>29</sup>

Jaishankar's remarks display several critical factors regarding Indian intent under its evolving "Act East Policy" – especially in the absence of any codified Indian grand strategy. First, they acknowledge or perceive an end to US hegemony and show a desire to expand influence, or even seek regional hegemony, within a polycentric world. Second, they reveal a developing revisionist perspective – a desire to shift toward an Asia-centric world order that contrasts with Modi's 2014 deference to the established world order. Finally, although Jaishankar offers a potential shift from non-alignment, the reference to multi-alignment indicates a possible preference for hedging between the US and China rather than outright alignment with either. However, this rhetoric has not and will not likely translate into Indian hedging behavior, as outlined below.

### **India's Intent to Balance Against China**

India is in an asymmetric rivalry with China and, as such, intends to counter China's rise. Within this rivalry, India also maintains the intent to engage in specific forms of balancing against China. However, and despite Jaishankar's contemplation of departing non-alignment for multi-alignment, India will likely continue to avoid any form of outright alliance with the US. Similarly, although India and China cooperate on multiple converging interests, the India-China rivalry will prevent any form of Indian bandwagoning, or even hedging, with China.<sup>30</sup>

China and India are the world's two most populous countries, with approximately 1.43 billion and 1.37 billion people, respectively.<sup>31</sup> Forecasts indicate that India will replace China as the world's most populous country by 2027.<sup>32</sup> In 2019, China and India were the second and fifth largest world economies in terms of GDP at \$14.3 trillion and \$2.8 trillion, respectively. In terms

of GDP by PPP, China and India were the first and third largest at \$23.5 trillion and \$9.5 trillion.<sup>33</sup> Within the Indo-Pacific region, they were the largest economies by both measures and wide margins. Although this relative economic parity makes India valuable in US-China competition, the Indian and Chinese economies' dyadic disparity presents regional power limitations for India; these limitations are discussed further below.

In terms of development, China and India are high on world rankings. In 2019, China and India were the first and third highest energy consumers worldwide. Analyses project this factor to hold through the next two decades, highlighting the likelihood of continued resource competition.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, China and India receive the second and ninth-highest foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in the world (the first and fourth highest in the Indo-Pacific).<sup>35</sup> Militarily, Chinese and Indian defense spending mirror their respective economic measures, placing them as the second and third largest military spenders worldwide.<sup>36</sup> However, China's defense spending significantly surpasses India's at \$261 billion (1.9 percent of GDP) and \$71 billion (2.4 percent of GDP), respectively.<sup>37</sup> Although the above factors do not translate directly to national power or relative military advantage, they provide context for understanding the asymmetric India-China rivalry.<sup>38</sup>

Within the above macro-regional and global measures, bilateral interdependence adds to the dyadic asymmetry. China is India's second-largest trading partner, behind the US, and is India's largest source of imports; India's trade deficit with China is over \$58 billion. China is far less dependent upon India.<sup>39</sup> In terms of multilateral engagement, the countries have overlapping participation and interests in multilateral economic institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).<sup>40</sup> Liberal international relations (IR) theorists might argue that this relationship, albeit imbalanced, would significantly

mitigate any form of conflict or aggressive behavior.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, some have argued that India's economic dependence upon China contributed to Indian restraint during the 2020 heightened border tensions.<sup>42</sup> Outside of IR debates regarding the merits of interdependence and peace causality, this argument fails to account for the myriad of rivalry factors that outweigh India's economic relationship with China. Further, the argument fails to address that, as opposed to interdependence within a symmetrical relationship, India's relative dependence increases its insecurity and willingness to balance against China.<sup>43</sup>

Economic and investment factors combine with or exacerbate territorial disputes, local resource competition, desires for increased international status, and conceptions of order to perpetuate the limited and asymmetric rivalry between India and China.<sup>44</sup> China's territorial disputes with India center on multiple contested areas along the shared Himalayan border that have seen increasing tension over the past four years.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, India views significant encroachment in China's attempts to cooperate with Indian Ocean countries and its support to Pakistan. In the maritime domain, India sees itself as the lead power in the Indian Ocean. It supports the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy, as opposed to China's more exclusive approach to the maritime commons.<sup>46</sup> Prime Minister Modi emphasized this stance during his remarks at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue: "India's global strategic partnership with the United States has overcome the hesitations of history and continues to deepen across the extraordinary breadth of our relationship...an important pillar of this partnership is our shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region."<sup>47</sup> This territory-based friction intensifies both Indian and Chinese status-seeking behaviors.<sup>48</sup>

Within the India-China bilateral relationship, status insecurities and the asymmetries outlined above contribute to India's intent to balance against China. At the macro level, desires

for increased status in the Indo-Pacific region and the international community drive Indian and Chinese foreign policy behaviors.<sup>49</sup> Both countries consider themselves to be the rightful hegemon of the region, view each other as unworthy rivals, and are uncomfortable with the other's rise.<sup>50</sup> In addition to their substantial economies, colonial histories and perceptions of low international status motivate both New Delhi and Beijing to seek increased power and status on the world stage.<sup>51</sup> Within the scope of asymmetric India-China relations, political scientist Xiaoyu Pu has characterized this dynamic most succinctly: "While China often seeks to engage India as a regional South Asian country, India wants to engage China as an equal rising power."<sup>52</sup> When combined with India's imbalanced economic dependence upon China (in terms of both trade deficit and investment) and the relative lack of attention to India in Chinese defense documents, the dyad's status-related competition reveals a foundational source of India's insecurity.<sup>53</sup>

India's existing China-focused balancing strategies also indicate that New Delhi intends to serve as a limited counterbalance in line with US competitive interests. Multiple India scholars have identified India's strategy as mixed balancing.<sup>54</sup> Within this concept, India has previously engaged in but shifted away from hard balancing. These previous activities included a larger focus on significant arms build-ups but fell far short of defense alignment with any external power. As discussed above, this aversion to any alliance will likely remain as India will continue a combination of limited hard balancing and soft balancing.<sup>55</sup>

India's limited hard balancing has taken several forms. First, it has included limited arms build-ups and, most recently, infrastructure improvement and military posturing along the contested Himalayan border.<sup>56</sup> Second, India is a Major Defense Partner to the US and holds Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status, allowing it to receive many US defense technologies.

India has signed several significant defense-related agreements and initiatives with the US that, although not reaching the level of mutual defense treaty, signal Indian desire to strengthen its military readiness through US partnership. These include the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA).<sup>57</sup> Finally, India has maintained routine military exercises with the US and other partners. The most significant of these exercises, Malabar, most recently grew to include Australia and, therefore, all members of the nascent Quad.<sup>58</sup>

In terms of soft balancing, India has attempted to counter China's regional multilateralism through its participation in select international organizations.<sup>59</sup> India and China are both members of the ADB, AIIB, SCO, and CICA.<sup>60</sup> Notably, India has not participated in China's BRI. Instead, India has sought to counter Chinese economic-security encroachment (specifically the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and China's "String of Pearls" strategy, aimed at increasing Chinese presence around the Indian Ocean) through its open multilateral economic engagement.<sup>61</sup> The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is the most significant of India's regional soft balancing efforts. Although BIMSTEC has not realized its full potential, as discussed later, it is significant because it joins Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand to "harness shared and accelerated growth through mutual cooperation" in fifteen sectors, including technology, trade, agriculture, and counterterrorism.<sup>62</sup>

India's asymmetric relationship with China might lead some to argue that India will pursue a hedging strategy between the US and China. However, this argument does not account

for India's status-seeking behavior and view of itself Indo-Pacific region's rightful hegemon.

Further, as the political scientists Jurgen Ruland and Arndt Michael argue:

We expect rising powers such as China and India to rely on 'soft balancing' to effect changes in the regional or global power equilibrium because so far neither of them has had the military capacities to solve disputes among such powers by force...[b]y contrast, 'hedging' denotes a [behavior] in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects...[w]e expect South and Southeast Asia's small states to engage in hedging against China and India.<sup>63</sup>

Ruland and Michael's argument points out that India sees itself as a rising power and, with its enduring goal of strategic autonomy, does not stand to benefit from a hedging strategy. Within the past five years, the US designation of India as a Major Defense Partner, increasing US dedication to competition with China, and heightened China-India border tensions have reinforced India's tendency toward balancing.<sup>64</sup> Despite this increasing resolve, India's existing capabilities present only a limited counterbalance against China.

### **India's Capability to Balance Against China**

India's economic size results in two critical capability shortfalls. First, India cannot compete with China's regional development spending, limiting India's ability to offer relevant development or multilateral investment alternatives to the BRI. Second, India's economy is not large enough to support the military power required to deter, coerce, or prevail in bilateral conflict against China.<sup>65</sup> In terms of national power measurements, this paper examines gross indicators of economic and military strength. Acknowledging, as argued by Michael Beckley in "The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters," that gross indicators do not account for significant production, welfare, or security costs, the use of multiple gross indicator-based frameworks provide valid evidence that India only has the capability to serve as a limited counterbalance against China.<sup>66</sup> Although not included in the comparative assessment below,

India's continued exclusion from the UN Security Council warrants identification as a factor that significantly limits its diplomatic power and exacerbates its insecurity relative to China.

The comparative measures examined include an overview of GDP, FDI outflows and regional development initiatives, defense expenditures, a basic military power assessment model, and a broad military equipment comparison. In terms of economic limitations using the 2019 GDP data outlined above, China's gross GDP was over five times the size of India's. In terms of PPP, China's GDP was more than double that of India's. Finally, China's 2019 foreign investment outflows (\$117 Billion) were almost ten times the size of India's (\$12 Billion).<sup>67</sup> These factors significantly inhibit India's ability to match China's regional influence.

As outlined in the discussion above regarding intent, India's regional multilateralism focuses on ensuring free and open access to the maritime commons through cooperation with countries within its desired sphere of influence. Although Modi's 2014 and 2018 remarks regarding the 'Act East Policy' and a Free and Open Indo-Pacific show New Delhi's general regional aspirations, his 2015 remarks in Mauritius provide an appropriate context for bridging discussion of Indian intent to capabilities:

Our vision for the Indian Ocean Region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region; and, to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home...One, we will do anything to safeguard our mainland and islands and defend our interests. Equally we will work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region that delivers us all to the shores of prosperity...Second, we will deepen our economic and security cooperation with our friends in the region[,] especially our maritime [neighbors] and island states. We will also continue to build their maritime security capacities and their economic strength. Three, collective action and cooperation will best advance peace and security in our maritime region. We seek a future for [the] Indian Ocean that lives up to the name of SAGAR – Security and Growth for All in the Region.<sup>68</sup>

As with the 'Act East Policy,' India has not codified or tangibly enacted SAGAR. The concept can find economic foundations in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and potential BIMSTEC FTA. However, the countries

involved in both agreements lack the coordination and economic power required to match China's BRI spending or the investment opportunities enabled by the recently established RCEP.<sup>69</sup>

The central issue with any Indian attempt to counter China-dominated investment mediums is that, as indicated by GDP and FDI values, India simply cannot outspend China alone or in cooperation with smaller Indo-Pacific countries.<sup>70</sup> As a like-minded partner concerning Chinese activities, New Delhi has engaged with Tokyo to explore mutually supporting resource pooling and alternatives to the BRI. Although Japan lacks the spending potential of China, Japan was the largest foreign investor in 2019. When combined with India's geography and relative economic size, Japanese and Indian resource pooling would benefit both countries.<sup>71</sup> However, India's indecisiveness regarding the project, known as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), has caused stagnation.<sup>72</sup> This initiative, discussed below under recommendations, can assist India, the US, and Japan with countering Chinese economic influence. Regardless of such opportunities, India's inability to provide alternative development solutions logically reduces India's influence in the region.<sup>73</sup>

India's military capability, tied to its relative economic power, similarly limits India's multilateral security cooperation with other Indo-Pacific countries. India has varying levels of defense cooperation with other significant regional powers, such as Australia, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. These agreements and activities range from information sharing and training to defense partnerships and dialogues.<sup>74</sup> India has also established and increased cooperation with smaller regional ASEAN members such as Myanmar, Malaysia, and Thailand. Further, it has enhanced defense cooperation with ASEAN proper through the "ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity," as well as

participation in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus dialogue.<sup>75</sup> Despite this existing cooperation, India's economic and military power is not strong enough to break smaller Indo-Pacific countries away from their regional hedging policies or establish stronger region-internal balancing coalitions.<sup>76</sup>

A full India-China relative combat power analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. This omission is due to the fallacies inherent in both qualitative and quantitative analyses that cannot account for both conventional and strategic weapons imbalances, relative disparities along the Himalayan border, regional maritime advantages, or the likely involvement of external actors, such as the US or Pakistan, in a conflict.<sup>77</sup> However, as with economic discussions, macro-level analysis of Indian and Chinese national power measures displays India's unilateral counter-China limitations and its requirement for external balancing. First, although India allocated a higher percentage of GDP toward defense spending (2.4 percent to China's 1.9 percent, acknowledging China's defense spending opacity), China's defense budget was still almost four times the size of India's. This spending does not account for purchasing power or efficiency but establishes a capability baseline.

India's military power is significantly less than that of China. Using the Sulek Model, created by the Polish economist Miroslaw Sulek, China's military power was over twice as large as India's in 2018.<sup>78</sup> By comparison, the model rated US military power at over twice the value of China's. The Sulek model views military power as the product of military expenditures, the number of active-duty service members, and the size of the geographic area.<sup>79</sup> The model has apparent issues: it does not include efficiency or modernization in military spending, intangible qualities such as training or experience, equipment and capability asymmetries, logistical capacity, the ability to mobilize resources, or qualitative geographic analysis.<sup>80</sup> As examples, the

model does not account for increased Chinese military modernization relative to India, maritime or land-based comparisons, or India's higher level of experience with ground combat operations and joint and multinational training exercises.<sup>81</sup> Despite these shortfalls, the measure provides a foundation for understanding China's asymmetric military advantage over India.

Numerically by capabilities and systems, China generally outmatches India by a ratio between two-to-one and four-to-one. This measure includes aircraft carriers, naval aviation, nuclear ballistic missile submarines, strategic weapons systems (with India limited to air- and ground-based systems compared to China's nuclear triad), combat aircraft, and mechanized or armored ground systems.<sup>82</sup> India's military is more combat-experienced than China's, primarily through Pakistani border operations and regional counterinsurgency operations. Despite a lack of modernized equipment and continued grounding in Cold War-era doctrine, it is also well trained. Due to its relatively high levels of combat experience and training, India's force possesses more joint interoperability than China's military.<sup>83</sup> China's military is more modernized and has placed higher priority upon information-related capabilities but is considerably less joint-capable and lacks recent combat experience.<sup>84</sup> Despite several of India's relative advantages, the preponderance of factors points to a significant asymmetry in China's favor.

India's asymmetry with China limits its ability to increase meaningful influence in the region. Although India is a major Indo-Pacific power by all measures, its national power instruments provide only a limited counterbalance to China's rise and prevent it from establishing a more robust, competitive sphere of influence. Regardless, India's limited capabilities provide the US with mechanisms to reinforce India and prevent China's usurpation of the established international order.

## **Recommendations: US Policy and Indian Partnership Opportunities**

The US can and should enable India's rise as an Asian power in support of US strategic counter-PRC objectives. First, the US must perpetuate its recent positive momentum with India through the 2021 US presidential transition and in the context of increasing Chinese encroachment toward India's interests. This line of effort should focus on formalizing the Quad as a disaster (and pandemic) relief mechanism, regional investment consultation and coordination body, and framework for increased security cooperation. Second, the US should leverage the Quad to empower the AAGC as an Indian and Japanese-led development financing mechanism that operates with, or instead of, the nascent Blue Dot Network (BDN). Third, the US should promote and support India's posture as a maritime power to enable freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. Within this line of effort, the US must also acknowledge and support India's enduring requirements to defend its border with China and remain postured for potential conflict with Pakistan.

The existing US desired end state for India's role in the Indo-Pacific is appropriate. The recently declassified 2018 US *Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* best captures these aspirations:

India's preferred partner on security issues is the [US]. The two cooperate to preserve maritime security and counter Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia...India maintains the capacity to counter border provocations by China. India remains preeminent in South Asia and takes the leading role in maintaining Indian Ocean security, increases engagement with Southeast Asia, and expands its economic, defense, and diplomatic cooperation with other [US] allies and partners in the region.<sup>85</sup>

As evidenced by the recent establishment of additional defense-related agreements, the US and India have shared a positive trajectory toward increased cooperation. Further, the increasingly hardened US stance toward China has overlapped with China's heightened aggression toward India to drive India closer to the US.<sup>86</sup> Joint statements following 2019 and

2020 India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogues, as well as the February 2020 Trump-Modi visit, reflect this growing commitment: “The Ministers reiterated their commitment to a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Appreciating the convergence in their respective Indo-Pacific visions...they reaffirmed that closer India-U.S. cooperation is instrumental to promoting security and prosperity in the [region] and beyond.”<sup>87</sup> These trends point to opportunities for the US to enable India as a rising regional power that can lead counter-China initiatives to support US interests.

The Quad presents the best opportunity for the US to enable and leverage India in competition against China. Although the US, Australian, Japanese, and Indian grouping must initially remain ostensibly focused on interests unrelated to China and defer to ASEAN centrality in regional dialogues, it is essential for the US to promote regional security while countering perceptions of undue US influence.<sup>88</sup> Along with sustaining the Quad’s original mandate of disaster relief, the group should provide third-party oversight of BRI projects and prioritize the enablement of infrastructure development alternatives to the BRI. As a second priority, the Quad should support increased military interoperability to reinforce overarching diplomatic and informational efforts while also preparing for potential armed conflict.

US, Australian, Japanese, and Indian formalization of the Quad as an intergovernmental organization with a standing secretariat would increase efficiency and unity of effort. The formalized group, consisting of the world’s first, third, fifth, and fourteenth largest economies (in terms of gross GDP), will enable the collective members to more effectively counter China’s coercive economic practices and limit its revision of the existing international order.<sup>89</sup> In terms of economic resources, the Quad members’ combined GDP (approximately \$30.1 trillion) was more than double that of China (approximately \$14.3 trillion) in 2019.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, FDI

outflow analysis reflects that aggregate Quad investments accounted for approximately 28 percent of global investment in 2019 compared to approximately 8.9 percent from China, reinforcing the GDP-based measure of aggregate Quad member economic capacity relative to China.<sup>91</sup>

Aggregated economic strength would allow the Quad to serve as a vehicle, through funding and regional legitimacy, for consultation regarding BRI projects and to realize the nascent AAGC or BDN.<sup>92</sup> The secretariat, enabled by development funding from member countries, could provide centralized capacity and continuity to offer and manage alternatives to the BRI, provide objective advice on BRI projects and environmental considerations, and negotiate terms on behalf of countries involved with BRI projects.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, this framework would reduce regional perceptions of unilateral US interference, allowing the US to distance itself while empowering India to take a leading role.<sup>94</sup> Finally, this economic focus would allow the US to offset both ASEAN and Chinese concerns of increased Quad security cooperation in the region.

The stagnant India-Japan supply chain initiative, the AAGC, is the most promising framework for the US to increase India's economic, diplomatic, and informational influence. The US has established the BDN as a multi-stakeholder (US, Japan, and Australia) and private sector-driven global infrastructure development initiative.<sup>95</sup> However, the AAGC offers an Asian-led option that would empower US regional partners and allow the US to maintain a degree of separation from direct economic competition, thereby countering China's BRI while reducing regional perceptions of US zero-sum-driven competition with China.<sup>96</sup> The BDN and AAGC both have positive values for US interests and need not be mutually exclusive. However, the US

should prioritize the enablement of the AAGC to achieve a higher competitive advantage over China.

Many scholars have debated the merits or feasibility of the Quad.<sup>97</sup> Arguments against the Quad generally center on India's traditional non-alignment policy or concerns regarding the Quad as a potential North American Treaty Organization-like (NATO) alliance tied to questions of ASEAN centrality.<sup>98</sup> First, as discussed regarding India's intent, India is trending toward increased counter-China cooperation – short of an outright military alliance – based on recent Chinese actions and increasing US commitment. Second, the Quad framework described above offers a model that will assuage ASEAN concerns, limit Chinese insecurity, and increase habitual Quad member cooperation toward common interests.

Militarily, and as identified in the 2018 US *Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, the US should strive for an India that can defend its land borders but ultimately serve as a maritime power focused on securing freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and the adjacent straits. Some have argued that India must remain a continental power to defend its borders, support potential conflict with Pakistan or China, and avoid a maritime rivalry with China.<sup>99</sup> There are mutual US and Indian benefits for this approach. India must maintain sufficient land-based power, augmented by strategic weapons, to deter land-based conflict with China or Pakistan and secure key upstream water sources in a crisis.<sup>100</sup> Increased Indian prioritization of land-based power would provide the US with potential, albeit limited, access to western China and disenfranchised populations in the event of a conflict. This factor, at a minimum, would present China with multiple dilemmas and provide potential, limited pathways to bypass Chinese Anti-Access / Area Denial (A2/AD) advantages in the South and East China Seas.<sup>101</sup>

The continental power perspective fails to account for several factors. First, India's economic interests are not served by land-based trade but by its strategic position along critical maritime trade routes.<sup>102</sup> The same terrain restrictions that prevent worthwhile continental trade pathways – the Himalayan mountains – limit mobility and avenues of approach for major US, Indian, or Chinese military operations in a potential conflict.<sup>103</sup> Within this context, India's growth, economic security, and US interests are best served by Indian maritime power combined with a land-based economy of force. The US can enable this development through increased technology and intelligence cooperation. This cooperation should include increased consideration of foreign military sales for platforms like the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and capability collaboration in areas such as cyber defense.<sup>104</sup>

Overlaid with technology-based cooperation, the US should sustain its existing combined training exercise architecture with India and other like-minded partners. Exercises like Malabar provide valuable opportunities for the US to increase naval interoperability with India, thereby increasing India's capabilities relative to China and providing opportunities for information-related lines of effort targeting smaller, hedging Indo-Pacific countries. As with the nature of the proposed Quad framework, these exercises should remain at a level that reflects multi-purpose security cooperation and avoids escalating toward military conflict with China.

Existing literature generally points to two primary barriers to increased cooperation with India. First, India's relationship with Russia presents concerns that Russia may gain access to privileged US military technology.<sup>105</sup> Although this concern is valid, the US must overcome this barrier through deliberate oversight mechanisms of India's shared technology or through refined agreement stipulations that US counterintelligence efforts can verify. India's interoperability

with US systems and rise as a counterweight to China outweigh the mitigable risks of capability exploitation.

Second, India's domestic human rights practices – rooted in the BJP's Hindu Nationalism – conflict with US ideals and established international norms, thereby presenting the US with a moral dilemma: supporting India despite abuses that the US condemns elsewhere, such as China.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, the BJP's Hindu Nationalist perspectives limit New Delhi's willingness to conform to external pressure regarding domestic policies. The US should not endorse India's domestic behaviors, tacitly or otherwise. However, India's geopolitical value in US-China competition is too significant to waive in the context of India's status-seeking behavior and deeply held view that the UN Declaration on Human Rights violates its sovereignty. The US should engage in a measured, diplomatic approach to curb Indian behavior but continue to enable India's growth in the region and remain sensitive to India's sense of autonomy. This argument is a consequentialist one: enabling India is likely to contribute to greater collective welfare in the long term than US estrangement of New Delhi.<sup>107</sup>

### **Conclusion: Looking Ahead**

India represents a limited counterbalance to China in the Indo-Pacific. It maintains the intent to compete with China for regional dominance but lacks the capability to do so in a meaningful way without US enablement. The Biden administration must carry forward the Trump administration's positive momentum with New Delhi by pursuing a more formalized Quad, economic support to Indian- and Japanese-led infrastructure development alternatives, and increased military interoperability. President Biden may take a harder stance against India's human rights practices and subsequently sacrifice balancing opportunities. However, his

previous positive relations with India indicate that he will leverage India's value as a potential counterweight to China. It is likely that, as China's recent aggression has pushed India closer to the US, China's future actions will determine the US stance toward India in the next four years. The US has the opportunity to exploit China's behavior and India's associated insecurity to create a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

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