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## ALIGNMENT WITH AUTONOMY

### *India's Evolving Foreign Policy in Light of China's Regional Ambitions*

**I**ndia's relations with China were contentious in 2017 and often seemed to push the country toward greater cooperation with the United States and its regional partners. Among other developments, India has shown interest in renewing formal quadrilateral cooperation with Australia, Japan, and the United States, a multilateral partnership that has provoked strong Chinese opposition in the past.

*This push toward forging closer strategic ties, particularly with the United States, in order to address regional challenges is the most recent manifestation of the long-term tension in Indian foreign policy between retaining strategic autonomy and building cooperation and strategic partnerships. In this Q&A, Jeff Smith (Heritage Foundation) discusses Indian foreign policy in light of the tumultuous past year and comments on how New Delhi might strike a balance between autonomy and cooperation in the current strategic environment.*

**India's decision to participate in the rebooted Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) with the United States, Australia, and Japan stands in contrast to its withdrawal from the Quad in 2007. What are India's motivations for joining the Quad now, and how do you assess the outlook for the dialogue in 2018?**

First, a point of clarification: it was not India that initially withdrew from the Quad in 2007. It is true that the United Progressive Alliance, the coalition of parties in power at the time, faced considerable scrutiny and criticism over India's

participation in the Quad, as well as the multilateral Malabar naval exercises held that year. The opposition came principally from Communist and other left-leaning political parties that were then key players in the governing coalition. Yet it was the election of the Kevin Rudd government in Australia in December 2007 that sealed the dialogue's fate. In early 2008, Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, standing next to his Chinese counterpart, announced that Canberra was no longer interested in participating in the Quad. Tokyo's commitment was in doubt as well after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was forced to resign in September 2007.

Nevertheless, it is true that India's decision to participate in the Quad's revival marks a departure from the apprehensive and skeptical view it adopted after the group first dissolved. That episode left a more lasting and stinging impression on India than it did on the other three members. At the time, New Delhi was still tentatively testing the boundaries of new forms of strategic collaboration with the United States, and Australia's withdrawal seemed to reinforce a historical aversion toward multilateral security initiatives seen as overtly targeting China.

It was not until mid-2017 that New Delhi signaled it was amenable to the Quad's revival. Why? Arguably the most significant factor is the gradual deterioration of the China-India relationship over the past decade. In addition to the aggravation of legacy disputes that have shadowed bilateral relations for decades—the border dispute, Tibet, and China's patronage toward Pakistan—new sources of friction have emerged. The principal new source of tension is arguably the substantial growth of China's military strength, economic footprint, and political influence in both South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Additionally, the level of Indian comfort and trust in the United States, Japan, and more recently Australia has improved considerably over the past decade. Each bilateral dyad has seen its own indigenous growth, complemented by the creation of three overlapping trilateral strategic dialogues between 2005 and 2015. Simultaneously, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears less inhibited by India's history of nonalignment and less suspicious of strategic collaboration with the United States and its security partners than previous administrations. It also seems less enamored with the prospects of engagement with China. In other words, the push of China and the pull of the Indo-Pacific democracies have simultaneously grown stronger.

### **What are some examples of how China's growing regional ambitions have revived tensions with India?**

China's growing presence has manifested in a number of ways, from the gradual introduction of the People's Liberation Army Navy as a regular actor in the Indian Ocean since 2008, to the opening of China's first overseas



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military base in Djibouti in 2017, to increasingly high-profile involvement with Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. While India still remains the dominant player in many regional capitals, it has unquestionably ceded ground in its backyard over the past decade.

Ultimately, China's expanding westward reach, propelled by its Belt and Road Initiative, has contributed to a sense of strategic encirclement in New Delhi. This anxiety has been further stoked by the deepening of the Sino-Pakistani relationship through over \$60 billion of Chinese investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, rumors of a planned Chinese naval base at Gwadar port, and Beijing's ongoing efforts to shield Pakistan-based terrorists from sanctions at the United Nations.

At the same time, old disputes like the unsettled border between China and India have again seized headlines. Prolonged Chinese incursions across the disputed and poorly defined Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the eastern sector in 2013 and 2014 were eclipsed by the Doklam plateau crisis that unfolded in the Bhutan-China-India tri-border region in summer 2017. Many consider that multi-month standoff to be the worst border crisis since the large military buildup along the eastern sector of the LAC in 1987 or the last deadly exchange of fire at the border in 1967.

**How does India view its role in mediating maritime disputes, including those outside its immediate neighborhood? How does the maritime domain fit into India's larger strategic vision?**

India's voice on the maritime disputes in the South China Sea has gradually grown louder. Since 2011, New Delhi has become an increasingly outspoken advocate for freedom of navigation, the rule of law, and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Importantly, the Indian government was also supportive of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling delivered in July 2016, which invalidated China's nine-dash line claim to nearly the entire South China Sea.

More broadly, India views the maritime arena as a relative strength vis-à-vis China. That is partly because India is positioned astride China's key sea lines of communication through the Indian Ocean, which connect the Chinese economy to its energy suppliers in the Middle East. That gives India an asymmetric "home-field advantage" in most naval conflict scenarios, in contrast with its mostly disadvantaged position along the disputed border, where China has superior infrastructure and military assets. There is also arguably a less sizable gap between the capabilities of the two naval forces relative to the gap between the other services.

**Are there any opportunities for growth in security cooperation between China and India?**

If there is one potential arena for growth beyond more mundane issues like cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, it is counterterrorism. At first blush, this would appear counterintuitive: China is the primary patron of the Pakistani government, which is itself the primary patron of the terrorist groups targeting India.

On the other hand, China's counterterrorism policy, particularly as it relates to South Asia, has been undergoing something of an evolution since 2011. Several motivating factors are driving this shift. First, China's ambitious plans to build westward connectivity networks via its Belt and Road Initiative have given it a greater stake in stability in Afghanistan as well as Central and South Asia more broadly. Second, there are signs that China has grown frustrated with Pakistan's inability or unwillingness to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Third, Beijing has adopted a hard-line approach to Islamist extremism in its Muslim-majority western territory of Xinjiang. Finally, China is increasingly concerned about the safety of the growing number of Chinese citizens working and living in Pakistan.

In aggregate, these trends have created the potential for more common ground on counterterrorism. In a departure from past practice, the statement released at the 2017 BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit condemned terrorism in all forms. It explicitly identified not only Pakistan-based terrorist outfits like the Taliban and Hizb-ut-Tahrir but also, just as importantly, Pakistani-backed groups like the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Moreover, early in Prime Minister Modi's term there were some high-level discussions on counterterrorism between senior officials of the Chinese and Indian governments that the Indian side described as unusually candid and forward-leaning.

Unfortunately, those talks do not appear to have advanced any further, which is perhaps unsurprising given the series of crises that afflicted China-India ties in 2016 and 2017. Ultimately, Beijing is loath to be seen as undermining its all-weather friends in Islamabad, but there is an underlying logic to India and China bolstering counterterrorism cooperation if Beijing's calculus on the subject were to shift further.

**How does the Modi administration hope to balance India's strategic autonomy with increasing cooperation and coordination with Australia, Japan, the United States, and other countries?**


In some ways this is the defining question for Indian foreign policy in the 21st century, at least so far as it relates

to international security and great-power relations. There is a great philosophical tension that exists in Indian strategic thinking in terms of the relationship between the concept of foreign policy alignment broadly and India's relationship with the United States specifically. The obvious material benefits and strategic logic of partnering with the United States are pitted against an inherent skepticism of alliances and the perceived loss of sovereignty and foreign policy autonomy that accompanies even softer forms of alignment.

Gradually, we have seen India's geostrategic impetus to align with the United States increase and the perceived costs of alignment decrease, sapping some of that tension of its potency. Over the long term, I expect this trend to continue as India becomes more comfortable with the United States and more confident on the world stage. It is also worth noting that Indian youth are more likely to be pro-Western and pro-American and less likely to be attached to the intellectual legacy of nonalignment.

Nevertheless, there continues to exist a general fear that alignment could draw India into unnecessary foreign conflicts, force it to assume diplomatic positions against its interest, or otherwise restrict flexibility in foreign policy decision-making. Furthermore, this aversion to more formal

security commitments deprives India of some of the benefits of strategic alignment. Within the Quad, India sees the United States, Japan, and Australia as encouraging it to play a more active balancing role vis-à-vis China, including in the South China Sea and as a net contributor to regional security in the Indian Ocean. Yet, unlike Japan and Australia, which are bound to the United States by mutual defense treaties, India enjoys no security guarantees from its Quad partners, despite the fact that it is, in many ways, the most vulnerable of the group. India is the only one of the four that (1) has faced a Chinese invasion and fought a war with China in the last 70 years, (2) remains considerably poorer than China, (3) has an outstanding land border dispute with China, and (4) is wedged between two informally allied, nuclear-armed, hostile powers with which it has cumulatively fought five wars since independence.

Looking ahead, I expect Indian fears about the loss of flexibility, independence, and autonomy via alignment to continue to diminish. The imbalance both in perceived security and in security commitments among the Quad countries, however, will likely need to be better addressed to accommodate legitimate Indian concerns through creative arrangements short of formal treaties. 

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