Not Your Mother’s Cold War: India’s Options in US-China Competition

Tanvi Madan

To cite this article: Tanvi Madan (2020) Not Your Mother’s Cold War: India’s Options in US-China Competition, The Washington Quarterly, 43:4, 41-62

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1850418

Published online: 11 Dec 2020.
Even before the 2020 China-India boundary crisis, there was some discussion about how India would approach intensifying Sino-US competition. In India, there has been a tendency to compare it to Delhi’s options during the Cold War, with many arguing that alliances are anathema and therefore India would and should remain non-aligned. Other possibilities put forth have included India as a swing state between China and the United States. Yet others—often outside India—suggest that Delhi will have to choose. Since the Sino-Indian boundary crisis broke out in May 2020, the discussion has turned to whether or not the skirmishes would, or should, lead India to “pick a side” in unfolding Sino-US competition.

However, this debate neglects two important considerations. First, India’s options vis-à-vis Sino-US competition today and in the future will not necessarily be the same as they were with US-Soviet competition during the Cold War. Second, the non-alignment versus alliance framing derived from Cold War narratives neither accurately captures the past Indian approach nor will fully explain its future stance. Ignoring these two elements will lead to assumptions and analyses in Delhi, Beijing, and Washington that could result in missed opportunities or misleading assessments.

This article first considers the Cold War analogy, examining the ways in which Delhi might find Sino-US competition to be similar to or different from US-Soviet competition, particularly given the nature of India’s relationships with China and...
the United States. Next, it explores the problems with framing India’s choices as the ones derived from the Cold War—non-alignment or alliance—pointing out the pitfalls that can follow from India, China, or the United States over-reading the Cold War comparison. The article concludes with a glimpse into what a choice between non-alignment and alliance—i.e., alignment—could look like for India’s relationship with the United States and what it would require.

The Cold War Analogy: Why It Resonates

For many, present-day great power competition has brought to mind US-Soviet competition during the Cold War, even as the debate about the suitability of this analogy continues. In 2018, speaking to the parliamentary committee on external affairs, the Indian foreign secretary alluded to this analogy, noting that the world “may be moving back into an age of bipolarity or certainly one where two countries, United States and China, have put forward ideological position[s] about what Foreign Policy consists of.” Furthermore, he spoke of China’s “community for the shared future of mankind … juxtaposed to the United States Cold War System of Alliances.”

It is not surprising that such comparisons are being made in India too. After all, there are certain similarities. Long-term competition looms between two countries with which India engages diplomatically and economically. Just as US-Soviet competition did, US-China rivalry will help shape—if not be the primary context of—the global and regional environment facing Indian policymakers. And this competition is likely to play out across multiple domains—geopolitical, economic, technological, and ideological—as well as a number of regions and international institutions.

As in the Cold War, actors beyond the superpowers will matter to the broader balance of power, and they will try to exercise agency based on their own perceptions and interests. India will seek to do so too. Just like in the past, Indian policymakers will try to maintain as much strategic and decisional autonomy as possible while ensuring the country’s security and prosperity. In part, they will do so by playing a role on the global and regional stage to shape India’s environment.

And, just as it did during the Cold War, Delhi will try to achieve these objectives by using Sino-US rivalry to elicit benefits from both antagonists. While hoping that competition does not escalate to conflict or destabilize India’s neighborhood, Delhi will also—and perhaps to a greater extent—worry about potential cooperation between the two antagonists that could adversely affect its interests, including by constraining its choices or diminishing its utility. During the Cold War, for instance, Delhi looked askance at US-Soviet cooperation on non-proliferation.
Delhi will also have concerns about the main antagonists deepening ties with India’s rivals. During the Cold War, these concerns arose from a few different sources: the US partnership with Pakistan in the 1950s, 1971, and after 1979; the Sino-Soviet alliance; Soviet flirtations with Pakistan in the mid-to-late 1960s; and US-China rapprochement in 1971. Each of these complicated India’s options.

During US-Soviet competition, Delhi sought to work with other countries to help navigate bipolar competition, attempting to pursue a strategy of diversification by seeking partnerships with a number of major and middle powers. It did so to create space for itself, avoid overdependence on one partner (and the strings that came attached with that), and hedge against the uncertainty about or unreliability of Moscow and Washington as partners. Delhi will likely pursue this path again, for somewhat similar reasons.

Another area of resonance will be Beijing and Washington’s interest in Delhi’s portfolio of partners. During the Cold War, Moscow and Washington closely watched Delhi’s partnerships, especially to assess the impact on the balance of power. They approved of—and even encouraged—India’s ties with their own partners. However, Delhi’s relationships with their main rival and the rival’s allies and partners created uneasiness and complicated their own ties with India. For instance, the Soviet Union frowned upon and tried to limit Indian engagement with the United States and China at different times. Washington, for its part, was wary of Delhi’s ties with Beijing and Moscow. Its discomfort partly stemmed from concern that these ties would lead India to limit its cooperation with the United States either preemptively or resultantly (reprised by American concerns today, for instance, about India’s acquisition of Russian military platforms). This unease ironically led Washington itself to limit cooperation with India, particular in the defense supply realm.

**Five Reasons Why This Competitive Era is Different**

However, there are some key dissimilarities from the Cold War that will affect Delhi’s perceptions and options today.

**Interdependence**

Compared to the Cold War, today’s two major competitors (and particularly their economies) are more intertwined. In some crucial ways, they are more interdependent on each other than they are with India. The stock of US Foreign
Direct Investments (FDI) in China and India in 2019, for instance, was US$116 billion and US$46 billion, respectively; Chinese and Indian FDI in the United States for that year was US$59 billion and US$17 billion. At US$558 billion in goods alone, US-China trade dwarfs US-India trade (US$92 billion) and India-China (US$82 billion) trade. This was not the case during the Cold War, when India was in many ways more connected with the Soviet Union and the United States than they were with each other.

This Sino-US interdependence will continue to fuel Indian policymakers’ worries—greater than any Cold War concern about a US-Soviet grand bargain—that a US-China condominium, deal, or G2 will materialize. On the flip side, it could also magnify the frictions and expand the battlespace between the two countries in ways that could benefit or harm India’s interests. On the one hand, Delhi shares many of Washington’s (and Europe’s) concerns about Beijing’s economic policies and practices, including the lack of reciprocity. A collective or coordinated approach toward China in this regard is much more likely to be effective than any efforts Delhi might alone make with Beijing. On the other hand, Delhi will closely watch how any Sino-US decoupling or disentangling plays out—if couched or applied broadly, some American trade, investment, and immigration policies sparked by China competition could adversely affect India too. Moreover, there is concern about the implications for India of a fragmented digital space resulting from Sino-US technology competition in ways that are very different from and more widespread than the Cold War.

**Configuration of Power**

The global configuration of power, as historian Melvyn Leffler put it, is also different today, hence the debate about bipolarity versus multipolarity as the best descriptor for the present and likely future context. There are a number of major and middle powers, particularly in Asia. And while many, including India, might be more like-minded with the United States, they also have ties with China. Most have not joined—and do not want to join—one bloc. This landscape of like-minded powers, a number of which are seeking to retain their strategic autonomy in part through diversification, will give Delhi more potential partners, in line with its own desire to diversify. However, those countries’ ties with Beijing could also limit how far and fast some of them will wish to cooperate with India.
India’s own power and position are different today. Delhi played an active role in Asia and even globally during the first decade and a half of the Cold War, but there was a sense that it was punching above its weight. In 1947, the US government considered India to be in the category of least important countries from its perspective, lacking military-industrial capacity and skilled manpower.9 Today, India is a state that has one of the largest militaries in the world, nuclear weapons, an economy that is larger than three of the P-5 countries (which has made it an aid donor rather than a major aid recipient), and membership in a number of key institutions. It is a country that is being actively sought out as a partner. This position gives India more space, but it will also make staying aloof from key discussions and debates more difficult.

**Location, Location, Location**

Another key difference from the Cold War is that Asia—or the Indo-Pacific, if you prefer—is likely to be the primary theater for this competition, not a secondary or associated one as it was in the Cold War. One of the great power antagonists is India’s neighbor, unlike the Cold War when the two main competitors were relatively distant actors. Part of Delhi’s approach then was to try to resist their competition spilling over into South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, but today’s Sino-US competition is literally taking place at India’s doorstep. That proximity makes sitting the competition out, as some have suggested, an unrealistic option for Delhi.10 But having China as a neighbor also shapes India’s perception of the Chinese threat and makes it vulnerable to a different kind of leverage than either of the superpowers had with India during the Cold War.

**The Moscow Factor**

For most of the Cold War, India found a willing partner in the Soviet Union. There were two periods when this was not the case: the Stalin years and around the 1962 Sino-Indian war when Moscow had to choose between its alliance with China and its friendship with India. It chose to either support Beijing or decline to help Delhi. However, the Sino-Soviet split removed that obstacle to India’s benefit.

The narrative and the stronger memory in India is of the period that followed, when the Soviet Union partnered with India against China and helped enhance Indian military capabilities. However, today’s close—and many argue deepening—Sino-Russian relationship is more akin to the situation Delhi faced in the early Cold War. On balance, this Sino-Russian partnership is to India’s detriment. For India, Russia has traditionally been a key part of its competitive strategy vis-à-vis China, as a balancer and a supplier of military equipment and technology. Thus, it looks askance at Moscow’s deepening military and technological ties—which
Vladimir Putin recently highlighted—and their cooperation and coordination on the global stage.\textsuperscript{11}

Delhi is hoping for a replay of the Cold War Sino-Soviet split, and that, like at one point in the 1960s, both Moscow and Washington will help Delhi balance or deter Beijing. Thus, it has been urging the West to create a wedge between China and Russia, but India will have to plan for this split not materializing—or at least not in a time frame that Delhi would prefer.\textsuperscript{12}

**India’s Relationships with the Great Power Competitors**

Perhaps the most significant difference for India is that it has major problems with one of the two great power antagonists—indeed, it sees China as its key external strategic challenge. Though Delhi had certain differences with Moscow or Washington during the Cold War, these were not fundamental disputes or conflicts of interest. Today, India has a longstanding territorial dispute with China, and even as Sino-US competition has been intensifying over the last decade, this boundary problem has flared up repeatedly. Since Xi Jinping took the helm in Beijing, there have been four significant stand-offs between the Chinese and Indian militaries after years of relative calm: at Depsang (2013), Chumar (2014), Doklam (2017), and in 2020 at multiple points in Ladakh. The latter resulted in the first fatalities at the Sino-Indian boundary in 45 years.\textsuperscript{13}

Other bilateral differences include Chinese concerns about the presence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees in India—an issue that is unlikely to stay dormant as the subject of the next Dalai Lama looms. Then there are Indian concerns about Chinese dam construction on the Brahmaputra river, its potential diversion, and the erosion of Indian usage rights. There is also a series of bilateral economic differences, including India’s concerns about its large trade deficit with China (30 percent of its total\textsuperscript{14}), lack of reciprocity, intellectual property, over-dependence on China for industrial inputs, Beijing’s influence over Chinese companies that have made inroads into key sectors in India, and the potential for economic coercion.

Another major concern for Delhi is China’s strategic relationship with India’s other main rival, Pakistan, which has deepened and broadened in recent years. The close Sino-Pakistani relationship has a number of implications for India, including for military planning. For instance, in the past, Delhi has worried about Chinese intervention in India-Pakistan conflicts (1965 and 1971) and
Pakistani activity requiring India to divert resources from the China front (1962). Indian officials have long worried about—and had to undertake planning for—a two-front war. The 2020 boundary crisis has only intensified this concern.\textsuperscript{15}

China and India also have differences in the region and divergent visions.\textsuperscript{16} Delhi has watched warily as China has expanded its strategic, economic, and political activities as well as influence India’s neighborhood—continental and maritime—contributing to India’s resistance to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, it believes that Beijing wants a unipolar Asia, while India seeks a multipolar region. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi alluded to this and other differences in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, which also indicated that India welcomed a role for actors from beyond the region (i.e., the United States) as opposed to an Asia for Asians view.\textsuperscript{18}

On the global stage, Delhi sees Beijing as limiting India’s space. For instance, China is the only P-5 country not to endorse a permanent seat for India as part of any UN Security Council reform, and it has resisted Indian membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Beijing has also blocked Indian efforts to get Pakistan-based individuals designated as terrorists by the UN’s 1267 committee, tried to designate an Indian as a terrorist, and raised the issue of Kashmir at the UN. In each case, the United States ranged itself on India’s side, helping overcome the hold in the 1267 committee and blocking the other two Chinese moves.\textsuperscript{19} There is an overarching sentiment in India that these Chinese approaches—as well as the country’s support for Pakistan more generally—reflect Beijing’s desire to prevent India’s rise and keep it bogged down in South Asia. This is a change from the 1970s and 1980s when many Indians believed this was Washington’s goal; today they find American administrations routinely endorsing the idea that India’s rise is in America’s interest.\textsuperscript{20}

Moreover, Sino-Indian competition has been playing out in the context of a widening gap between the Chinese and Indian economies and militaries. For instance, in 1989, the two economies were about the same size; in 2019, just 30 years later, the Chinese economy was almost five times that of India.\textsuperscript{21} And underlying all these developments is a low level of Indian trust in China. This problem has become more acute as a result of the boundary crisis, with Delhi seeing Beijing as having violated the existing agreements between the two countries.

Compare these grievances to the list of India’s differences with the United States. These include some economic differences, but nowhere near the scale of Sino-Indian or Sino-US divergences. India’s partnership with Russia, particularly its acquisition of platforms like the S-400 missile defense system, poses a problem for Washington. On Capitol Hill, there are a set of concerns about the state of liberalism, religious freedom, and human rights in India. Delhi,
meanwhile, worries about US decisions vis-à-vis Afghanistan and what that could mean for Pakistan. It also has concerns about Washington’s approach to immigration. Then there are Indian concerns about its options being constrained because of American approaches to third countries, like Iran, or its withdrawal from agreements, like the Paris climate agreement. But part of the reason Delhi works to manage these differences with Washington is that it sees the United States as a solution to some of the problems it has with China.

What about the argument that, like with the Cold War superpowers, Delhi engages with both China and the United States bilaterally, regionally, and in international institutions? It is true that India labels ties with both as partnerships, but its relationship with China has been fundamentally competitive for decades and is now increasingly being described as “openly adversarial.” On the other hand, Modi has publicly noted that “in every sector of India’s forward march, I see the U.S. as an indispensable partner.”

Moreover, India’s relationships with the United States and China are not equal or equivalent. Yes, the two countries are India’s largest trading partners: in 2019–20, trade in goods with the United States was US$89 billion and with China US$82 billion. But even in that context, especially when you add services, the United States pulls further ahead. Moreover, the Sino-Indian economic relationship is an unbalanced one, not just in trade but also in investment—whereas India runs a small surplus with the United States and Indian companies invest there to a greater extent.

US-India ties are also broader and better developed. For instance, there is not much of an Indian diaspora in China, with only 87,000 Indian citizens there if you include Hong Kong. On the other hand, there are 1.3 million Indian citizens in the United States, with another 3.2 million people of Indian origin. Or take a sector like tourism: in 2019, the US share of foreign tourist arrivals into India was nearly 14 percent versus China’s 3 percent.

These aspects do not even cover the close diplomatic, defense, and security ties that the United States and India have developed over the last two decades—in significant part due to their shared concerns about China’s behavior. They also don’t include US-India cooperation in groupings like the US-India-Japan trilateral and the Australia-India-Japan-US quadrilateral (the Quad), in third countries, and increasingly in international institutions like the UN. Some observers point to Indian membership in mechanisms like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Russia-India-China trilateral, and
the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as equivalent. But the motivations for India’s membership of these are different, including keeping Moscow onside, not leaving a vacuum for China and Pakistan to fill, and using these platforms to resolve contradictions and differences, as are their agenda and activities.

The fundamental point is that, unlike the Cold War, India is faced with the fact that with Sino-US competition, one of the two competitors is its main rival, if not adversary—which rules out walking the middle path strategically. Some have suggested doing so, arguing that China and the United States are similarly problematic for India—for instance, that their technology companies “bring the same baggage.” Others have argued that India can play a “swing state” role by not tilting toward either, making it “ardently sought out by both the camps.” A more proactive variant of the “swing state” framing is that India can use great power competition to expand its options vis-à-vis both actors and the global landscape more generally. However, the fact that China is India’s primary external strategic challenge—a country with which India has been recently engaged in hostilities—complicates these options. Indeed, it even makes some of them unrealistic.

Former Indian foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale noted recently about Southeast Asian countries vis-à-vis China that “accommodation may have worked thus far but regional prosperity has come at a mounting cost in geo-strategic terms. … In the post-COVID age, enjoying the best of both worlds may no longer be an option.” It is unlikely to be a viable choice for Delhi either, even if and when China and India emerge from the ongoing boundary crisis and try to stabilize their relationship.

All these differences with the Cold War mean that India is not facing the same landscape today, especially vis-à-vis the United States and China. And if assumptions are made in Delhi, Beijing, or Washington that Indian perceptions and choices will be the same as they were during US-Soviet competition, that could lead to faulty assessments, miscalculations, adverse consequences, or missed opportunities.

**India: The Non-Alignment or Alliance Binary**

In India, looking through Cold War-colored glasses leads to a debate that suggests that Delhi’s options vis-à-vis US-China competition are non-alignment or an alliance with the United States. Yet, not only are those not quite India’s choices, but this binary does not accurately reflect India’s own experience with China during the Cold War.

The “alliance” choice is outlined by both supporters of the idea and detractors of a closer US-India relationship. Among the former, the argument is that, given
the scale of the China challenge and the China-India capabilities gap, India should pursue an alliance or an alliance-like relationship with the United States. The China-India boundary crisis has intensified these calls. Some believe that the United States has been offering a commitment and that India should drop its reluctance and accept.

However, while American policymakers might seek a closer alignment with India, an alliance is not on offer. Even during the Cold War, when India and the United States partnered closely against China in the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations, there were doubts about bringing India into the American alliance system. By the time India sought a closer alignment in the 1960s, the 1950s heyday of alliance formation had passed. The limits, constraints, and obligations of alliances had become evident to Washington. And there was a reluctance to take on the task of committing to the defense of yet another country—particularly one with the size and geopolitical and economic needs of India.

Similarly, there is little appetite today for a new alliance with India—or anyone else for that matter—which would require adding to American obligations. Even beyond the aversion to alliances demonstrated during President Trump’s tenure, the debate on America’s role in the world and how and whether to deploy its resources abroad make an alliance a non-starter. The most recent formal commitments made have involved NATO expansion, and the last new bilateral alliance was signed in 1955. Even if the alliance option was in play, there would be the problem that Indian supporters of an alliance or alliance-like relationship do not often mention: an alliance would entail mutual obligations, not just an American commitment to India—and, absent that, any such offer is untenable, as scholar-practitioner Ashley Tellis has pointed out.

Thus, portraying a formal alliance as an option—or even the evolving alignment as an alliance—will only lead to unrealistic Indian expectations of the United States, suggesting offers and commitments that are not on the table. This was visible, for instance, during the Doklam stand-off between China and India in 2017, when there was disappointment among some outside the government in India (unaware of behind-the-scenes cooperation) about Washington’s failure to take India’s side vocally and questions about the purpose of deepening ties with such a country.

There is another associated problem. When looking through an alliance lens, it leads to the progress of the India-US relationship being measured against the metric of US ties with its allies rather than from the starting point of US-India relations themselves. And from that perspective, US-India ties invariably disappoint. From an analytical point of view, this standard leads to dismissing or failing to recognize the steps that the two countries have taken to deepen ties, especially in the diplomacy, defense, and security spheres.
Detractors of a closer US-India partnership also sometimes outline an alliance as one of Delhi’s only two options, sometimes requiring US officials to reassure Indians that an alliance is not what the United States is seeking. This critique holds that since an alliance is not acceptable because it will restrict India’s strategic autonomy, non-alignment is the only way open to India. And staying non-aligned, among other things, would require Delhi to accommodate Beijing and remain cautious about Washington. The boundary crisis might have made some drop the calls to accommodate China, but the call for caution persists. Former Indian national security advisor M.K. Narayanan, for instance, has called for Delhi to return to its historical non-alignment and avoid becoming part of any coalitions.

This belief that India has not aligned in the past—and does not align now—with other countries to balance or deter a rival is quite widespread. It finds its way into policymakers’ rhetoric, too. For instance, speaking about ties with the United States, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005 said, “we are not ganging up against any other country, least of all against China.” At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, Modi asserted that India’s approach in the Indo-Pacific was not “directed against any country” and that Delhi would not choose “one side of a divide or the other.”

And yet, non-alignment did not mean no alignment. India has aligned in the past, partnering closely with the United States in the late 1950s and the 1960s and with the Soviet Union after 1971—specifically to tackle its China challenge. These partnerships, of course, were not to align with one superpower against the other, but to align with them against China. In both cases, the alignment was designed to help India build its own military and economic capabilities, deter malign behavior from Beijing, and, from India’s perspective, to serve as an insurance policy in the case of another round of hostilities with China (particularly given that, at that point, India did not have an independent nuclear deterrent). As then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru indeed acknowledged after the 1962 war, “There is no nonalignment vis-à-vis China.”

India’s American and the Soviet partnerships were not formal alliances per se. However, they did include Delhi making or eliciting obligations or at least assurances. In the case of the United States, this was largely unilateral on the part of Washington. The Air Defense Agreement of 1963 noted that “the United States Government will consult with the Government of India, in the event of a Chinese Communist attack on India, regarding possible United States assistance in strengthening India’s air defenses.” Secretary of State Dean Rusk confirmed to President John F. Kennedy that “consult” actually meant a commitment to defend. In the case of the treaty with the Soviet Union in 1971, Delhi, too, had to make a commitment: “in the event of either Party being subjected to and attack or a threat thereof, the High Contracting Parties shall immediately
enter into mutual consultations in order to remove such threat and to take appropriate effective measures to ensure peace and the security of their countries.\textsuperscript{47}

Therefore, when it was in Indian interests, Delhi did align with another power against Beijing. This approach included diplomatic cooperation and coordination; the building of Indian military, economic, and technological capabilities (that, over time, helped enhance its strategic and decisional autonomy); intelligence sharing; and agreements and mechanisms that made it easier for India and its superpower partner to cooperate with each other. This alignment, however, did not mean agreement on everything, Delhi giving up its other partnerships, or unlimited acquiescence—Indian governments, for instance, differed with the US approach in Vietnam in the 1960s and refused access to Indian bases that the Soviets sought in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{48}

Thus, as India’s own history shows, there is an option open to India between non-alignment and alliance: \textit{alignment}. Assuming India must stay non-aligned forecloses options that are in India’s own interests and that might be necessary to protect its security, particularly given COVID-19-related resource constraints. The differences between US-Soviet competition and US-China competition make such an Indian alignment more likely—and necessary. But they also give Delhi greater flexibility in some ways today because of its own capabilities and the availability of other partners that could help its desire to diversify. And it would be more worthwhile to focus on figuring out the terms, structures, opportunities, and boundaries of such an alignment with the United States and other like-minded partners than debating the non-alignment versus alliance options.

\section*{China: India as a Stooge or Strategically Autonomous}

Chinese officials and analysts also tend to yo-yo between the non-alignment and alliance framings when thinking about India’s options. This has been evident in recent months as well. The first argument suggests that India is too independent and too invested in strategic autonomy to move toward or work closely with the United States. The alternative argument is that India is already allied with the United States and acting on Washington’s behest or colluding with it.\textsuperscript{49}

Both framings lead to the conclusion that India’s choices are pre-determined and that Beijing’s actions will have little or no impact on Delhi’s decisions regarding the United States. In this reading, Beijing can take actions such as endorsing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor or unilaterally trying to
change the status quo at the boundary repeatedly without consequence, because Delhi either will not move toward Washington or because the two countries are already allied.

But this is a serious misreading of what has led India to seek a closer partnership with the United States, especially in the defense and security sphere. Both during the Cold War and in more recent years, Beijing's assertiveness has caused Delhi to reevaluate the balance between its desire for autonomy and its need for alignment in order to protect Indian interests. While Indian policymakers would like to retain maximum strategic autonomy—and sometimes seem to envision it as an end in itself rather than a means to an end—the country's security takes precedence. Thus, over the last two decades, India's concerns about a rising China's behavior have been a key driver of its partnership with the United States. Heightened Indian anxieties about China's approach and intentions, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis when they perceived an increase in Chinese assertiveness, and recognition of India's own capability constraints have led Delhi to shed its reluctance and undertake actions with the United States that would have been considered anathema (and unnecessary) in other circumstances.

This trend precedes the Modi government, but its tenure is a good example of how Beijing's actions can shape how far and fast Delhi will cooperate with Washington. The prime minister came to office in May 2014 seeking to broaden and deepen ties with China. In his first four months, there was more high-level engagement with Chinese officials than with American ones. Modi even talked of China and India potentially settling and not just managing their boundary dispute. However, what was expected to be a historic Xi Jinping visit to India in September 2014 was accompanied by what Delhi saw as a unilateral Chinese attempt to change the status quo at the boundary—the second such attempt in just over a year. That action, combined with Xi's subsequent endorsement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, despite Modi's concerns, made evident the limited possibility for a major reset. It also opened the door for the deepening of India's ties with the United States in ways that might have been vetoed at another time because of concerns about China's reaction, including the inclusion of Japan in the annual India-US maritime exercise and the signing of the US-India joint strategic vision on the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

In the aftermath of another boundary crisis at Doklam in 2017, Delhi did work with Beijing to stabilize relations. These efforts included the Wuhan summit in
2018 and being more accommodating of certain Chinese sensitivities (for instance, tempering its criticism of BRI and government engagement with Tibetan leaders). But the 73-day Doklam standoff, the longest in two decades, also contributed to—if not caused—another push to deepen ties with the United States and other like-minded partners. This push included overcoming earlier Indian reluctance and signing a Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement as well as reviving the Quad.

The most recent boundary standoff has resulted in India shedding even more shibboleths. Usually, in the middle of a crisis with China, Delhi hesitates from taking high-profile steps that it thinks could further rile up Beijing. However, in recent weeks, India has agreed to just such activities—an in-person Quad ministerial, a maritime exercise with a US aircraft carrier, and the refueling of an American P-8A reconnaissance aircraft at Port Blair (Andaman and Nicobar Islands). The basic message is this: if Beijing will not be responsive to Indian sensitivities, why should Delhi be ultra-sensitive to Chinese ones? Beijing, through its actions, has made the very alignment it has worried and complained about more of a reality.

The United States: Erroneous Expectations

In the US context, the alliance-nonalignment framing can create one of at least two problems. “Alliance” talk can fuel the idea that India will seek to be, or should be, a US ally or on its side. In recent months, for instance, this has been evident in headlines like “India Picks a Side in the New Cold War” and assessments that the boundary crisis “may have just delivered [deeply nonaligned] India to the US for the next several decades,” as a former US official put it.50 There’s a sense that Delhi was not previously forthcoming with the United States but has suddenly woken up to the challenge posed by China and will now make “a clear choice” or even consider a formal alliance with the United States.51

This framing creates certain challenges, particularly with the high expectations it can set. For one, it underestimates or ignores India’s long-standing concerns about China and how much it has already moved closer to the United States as a result. More significantly, it risks overestimating how far and fast Delhi might move forward with the United States. It can also lead some to expect Delhi not just to move away from Beijing, but from Moscow too. Or it can suggest convergence on a number of issues and lead to expectations of cooperation from Delhi even when there might be divergence on some of them (in the past, unmet expectations of a defense deal and cooperation on Iran, for instance, led to questions about the value of the India relationship).52 Or that India will cease to engage with China—after Doklam, a version of this
expectation led many to be surprised and disappointed by Indian efforts to return to dialogue with China.53

An “allies” lens can also lead observers and officials to measure progress in the US-India relationship according to an alliance metric. For instance, Delhi’s actions or inaction are compared with and assessed according to what London or Tokyo might or should do rather than whether India’s policies actually signal change within the context of the US-India relationship itself. Broadly, this framing risks establishing expectations that Delhi will not meet, leading to US disillusionment about the relationship. As mentioned above, public alliance or alliance-like talk—such as recent statements from Secretary Pompeo54—can also generate unrealistic expectations among the Indian public of what the United States can and will do for India. Or it could create discomfort in the Indian establishment if it is seen as too provocative on China, fueling the very hesitation that Washington has been trying to urge Delhi to overcome.

However, the opposite view in the United States—that Delhi is invariably non-aligned—can also be problematic. Assuming that India will remain non-aligned or be a fence-sitter can lead to low expectations. This can result in preemptively assessing that India will not do something and missing opportunities to move the ball forward. This attitude could have prevented the India-US civil nuclear deal, the revival of the quadrilateral, or many of the defense deals with India.

The assumption of a non-aligned India can also contribute to the perception of it as a country that is unreliable because it hedges vis-à-vis US-China competition. Looking through this lens it could seem like only the boundary crisis, as one US analyst argued, might have “jolted India closer to Washington’s more competitive approach to Beijing.”55 However, as Indian international relations professor Rajesh Rajagopalan has noted, India has not been hedging between those two major powers.56 To the extent that Delhi has hedged, it is not between Beijing and Washington, but against uncertainty about the United States—and overdependence on it. Delhi’s view of China as a challenge has been longer standing and more consistent than Washington’s view of Beijing. Arguably, it is Washington that has moved closer in recent years to Delhi’s and other Asian countries’ perceptions of Beijing.

The recent comparisons of the Quad to NATO encapsulate both these problems that come from looking at developments, and India, through a Cold War lens.57 Both supporters and critics equate it with an “Asian NATO.” Advocates want the Quad to be more like NATO or assess its performance based on what that transatlantic alliance does, while

Comparisons of the Quad to NATO encapsulate the problems of looking through a Cold War lens

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**Comparisons of the Quad to NATO**

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critics fear this scenario. Supporters risk setting objectives and expectations for the grouping that are unlikely to be met, if not unattainable, and on the flip side, might miss different opportunities that a coalition like the Quad could present. Skeptics, measuring the Quad against NATO, either see it as not doing very much and destined to fail, or believe it will be an exclusive club that will neglect others’ interests and views and preclude cooperation with non-members.

Yet, the Quad is not part of old-style alliance formation in Asia but rather of the new-style network formation that has been taking place over the last decade or more. It is a coalition of the willing and capable that has come together to consult and cooperate on certain issues, and does not preclude its members participating in other groupings.58 The Quad is also reflective of the kind of approach that India is likely to take that does not fall easily in either the non-aligned or allied boxes; rather, it is the result of alignment on a certain set of issues and objectives. The Quad, as well as the relationships between the four countries (in bilateral, trilateral, and other plurilateral formats), is a sign that India has aligned closely with the United States and other partners as part of its balancing strategy regarding China. But, at the same time, Delhi does not see it as precluding other partnerships, platforms, and policies. For instance, Australia and India also have trilaterals with France and Indonesia.

Indeed, the Quad is also reflective of the fact that, if the Cold War was an era of alliances, this is more likely to be an era of coalitions—with issue- or interest-based groupings that include some allies but also other states willing to align on areas of convergence.59 And as then Indian foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale noted in 2019, India will align—but on the basis of issues rather than ideology.60 For his part, a few months before he became India’s foreign minister, S. Jaishankar was asked if India would take a side. He responded that it “should take a side—our side.”61 And, as the last few years have shown, that side will often, though not always, be where the United States and its allies and partners also stand.

Looking Ahead: Pragmatic Ambition

One reason why the state of the US-India relationship is where it is today is that key policymakers have not fallen into the binary “either non-alignment or alliance” trap. Policymakers in Beijing, however, seem to have—and their error has fueled the US-India partnership.
For American and Indian policymakers, the best approach would be to be ambitious and realistic at the same time. That would mean proposing imaginative ways to broaden and deepen cooperation, some of which might be unthinkable or unfeasible today. It would mean not forcing a decision, while staying alert for the right window of opportunity to move the ball forward.

For the United States, it would mean showing India what is possible and what is on offer. Doing this has facilitated, for instance, American defense sales to India and Delhi signing agreements that enable interoperability and intelligence sharing despite India’s initial reluctance. For India, it would mean not automatically saying no and considering possibilities that might at first glance seem like a bridge too far from a non-aligned lens. And for both sides, it would mean not just saying that they tolerate differences, but actually doing so. This path would entail adjusting their systems and mindsets that are still structured for and constrained by the Cold War framing (especially the alliance-nonalignment binary) for a relationship that is more than a regular partnership and less than an alliance.

Notes


44. Modi, “Keynote Address by the Indian Prime Minister.”

45. Madan, Fateful Triangle, 147.

46. Madan, Fateful Triangle, 164.


