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Rohan Mukherjee

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Chaos as opportunity: the United States and world order in India's grand strategy

Rohan Mukherjee 

Division of Social Science, Yale-NUS College, Singapore

ABSTRACT

The world is in flux, both in terms of the changing global distribution of power and the declining commitment of the United States to the international order. This article argues that, unlike many other major powers, India is well positioned to benefit from the contemporary disorder. The U.S. has courted India as a strategic partner since the early 2000s, supporting India's grand strategy of developing hard-power capabilities while addressing regional threats and eventually attaining great-power status. In return, India has supported Washington's overarching goal of securing the Indo-Pacific region. Although significant challenges remain in the management of U.S.-India relations, the Trump presidency has on balance benefited India's grand strategy. New Delhi views the decline of U.S. leadership in the international order – a phenomenon whose origins precede Trump – as an opportunity to play a leading global role. However, India's predisposition toward strategic autonomy may complicate the process.



KEYWORDS

India; United States; grand strategy; international order; security; defence; strategic autonomy

Introduction: the golden age of U.S.-India relations

Uncertainty shrouds the role of the United States in the world today. Most informed observers concur that the Trump administration's ruthlessly self-centred grand strategy has begun dismantling the post-1945 liberal world order and Western alliance system (Goldberg, 2018; Kagan, 2018; Patrick, 2018; Wolf, 2018). Not only has Washington jettisoned decades-old articles of faith about U.S. leadership, the very rules and customs of modern diplomacy seem to be in disarray (Harris, 2018).

Amidst this seeming chaos, one major power is relatively sanguine about the future, and it is not China. India, neither U.S. ally nor adversary, has found the new world order a hospitable place for its ambitions of becoming a 'leading power' in global affairs (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015a). This is in no small measure due to the growing special relationship between New Delhi and Washington. Although India has not been exempted from the Trump administration's tariffs on various trading partners, New Delhi is far from the focus of Washington's ire when it comes to trade deficits. While the Trump administration has imposed sanctions on the Chinese military for purchasing Russian military platforms, it

CONTACT Rohan Mukherjee  rohan.mukherjee@yale-nus.edu.sg  28 College Avenue West, #01-501, Singapore 138533

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has declared that India will not be subject to a blanket sanction (Gady, 2020). Washington has also provided written assurance that India's construction of the strategically vital port at Chabahar in Iran will be exempt from U.S. sanctions against Iran (Manoj, 2019).

At the strategic level, India and the U.S. are now embedded in the Indo-Pacific framework. The Trump administration has welcomed India's desire to be a leading global power, and has taken a tough stance on Pakistan's role in South Asian and global terrorist networks. New Delhi is designated a major defence partner of the U.S. and is in the process of completing the necessary basic agreements with Washington to enable greater access to U.S. logistical facilities, high-tech communications infrastructure, and geospatial data. Despite intermittent hiccups, from a macro-historical perspective, U.S.-India relations have never been better.

It is not surprising, therefore, that while U.S. allies and partners in Europe and Asia grow concerned about U.S. leadership in their respective regions, India has taken the present state of the international order as an opportunity to openly pursue its great-power ambitions. This development sits well with President Trump's desire to shift U.S. global strategy to offshore balancing, or shifting the costs of balancing against China to other states and only intervening when necessary (Schweller, 2017). In the international institutions of the global order, India has perceived an opportunity to play a leading role as the Trump administration continues to withdraw from leadership. India's new approach stands in marked contrast to its long history of free-riding on the global order by benefiting significantly from it without doing much to uphold its core principles and institutions.

Despite these changes in India's approach, however, the very reason India stands apart from most states in its relations with the U.S. is also the cause of the most intractable obstacles in the way of deeper U.S.-India cooperation. Adding to issues arising from state capacity is India's desire to play an independent role in global affairs, which makes New Delhi deeply sceptical of anything resembling great-power alliances. Despite Prime Minister Modi's desire to transcend this worldview, it remains deeply rooted in the Indian establishment and will continue to act as a stumbling block in India-U.S. relations (Tellis, 2018, p. 533). Looking forward, India's increased contributions to the maintenance of global order will be juxtaposed against its frequent unwillingness to align with the U.S. – the chief architect and guarantor of the order – on matters of regional and global importance.

This article focuses on the overarching question of India's strategic calculus in the context of changing U.S. priorities. The argument proceeds in five sections. First, I examine the steady growth of the U.S.-India strategic partnership, which has developed into a robust relationship of defence cooperation, economic engagement, and strategic coordination. Second, I lay out the role that the U.S. plays in India's grand strategy at three levels: economic development, regional security, and international status. Third, I discuss some of the challenges of India-U.S. cooperation stemming from mismatched expectations, bureaucratic difficulties, and India's pursuit of strategic autonomy. Fourth, I argue that although there is a debate within India about the reliability of U.S. power and commitment, U.S. foreign policy under Trump has directly and indirectly benefited India's grand strategy. Finally, I focus on the international order, where the gradual decline of U.S. leadership that began prior to the Trump presidency has created space for India to play the leading role that it has desired under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the final analysis, India is better placed than many U.S. partners and allies to deal with present uncertainties.

A remarkable trajectory

For much of the Cold War, the United States and India had a complicated relationship, often finding themselves at loggerheads due to their strategic and ideological commitments. Starting with Jawaharlal Nehru, India remained deeply suspicious of U.S. power, especially on the economic front (McMahon, 1994, p. 41). The bilateral relationship was further jeopardised by Pakistan's evolution as a major U.S. ally and recipient of arms.

Following the Cold War, India was compelled to adjust to American primacy, not least due to a balance-of-payments crisis at home that required economic liberalisation and increased trade with developed countries. A slow rapprochement that began in this manner was jolted by India's nuclear tests of May 1998. Washington imposed economic sanctions and launched a diplomatic effort at the UN to punish India for defying the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Although the Clinton administration subsequently rolled back most of the sanctions and took a more even-handed approach during the 1999 Kargil War between Pakistan and India (Talbot, 2004, pp. 154–169), there was clearly 'a crisis of trust' in the relationship (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 216). Indeed, lack of trust shaded into outright hostility among Indian elites, many of whom viewed the U.S. as 'a quasi-colonial power, determined to deny India both its rightful dominant role in South Asia and its status as an important player on the larger global stage' (Kapur & Ganguly, 2007, p. 647).

The George W. Bush administration built on the momentum of rapprochement after the Kargil War to actively court India despite divisions in Washington over South Asia policy and the potential impact on Pakistan. In January 2004, Bush issued a statement on the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership with India (NSSP), jointly agreed upon by him and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (Department of State, 2004). In it, the two governments agreed to expand cooperation in three specific areas – civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programmes, and high-technology trade – in addition to expanding their dialogue on missile defence.

In June 2005, the U.S. Secretary of Defense and the Indian Minister of Defence signed the New Framework for the India-U.S. Defence Relationship, which outlined four shared interests: security and stability (with no geographical referent), defeating terrorism and violent religious extremism, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and 'protecting the free flow of commerce via land, air and sea lanes' (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2005). In order to achieve these interests, the two countries resolved to (among other things) conduct joint military exercises and exchanges, expand defence trade and opportunities for co-production and technology transfer, increase intelligence exchange, and maintain a secretary/minister level dialogue on key issues pertaining to international security.

In July 2005, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh issued a joint statement resolving to 'transform the relationship between their countries and establish a global partnership' (Department of State, 2005). The centrepiece of this document was the official recognition of India as a 'responsible state with advanced nuclear technology' that deserved 'the same benefits and advantages as other such states' (Ibid). In what came to be known as the U.S.-India nuclear deal, the U.S. modified both domestic and international law in order to create exceptions for India to be recognised as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state, thus granting it access to internationally controlled supplies of

nuclear fuel and technology despite being a non-signatory of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). In return, India separated its military and civilian nuclear facilities and placed the latter under international safeguards.

The deal was unprecedented in all respects, essentially rewarding India despite its principled and vociferous objection to the NPT since the late 1960s. It was also remarkable in the extent to which a U.S. president spent considerable political capital at home and abroad (at the Nuclear Suppliers Group) in order to accommodate a country that had a long history of anti-Americanism in its foreign policy (Mukherjee & Thyagraj, 2012, p. 16) and whose elites even during the deal's negotiation could not be certain that they wanted it (Mistry, 2006).

The most concrete and immediate result of the nuclear deal was an increase in defence sales from the U.S. to India. Prior to the deal, India had been subject to a global regime of technology denial, which had gradually expanded to include numerous technologies that were considered dual-use. Once Indian defence manufacturers were allowed access to international markets, commerce in high-technology sectors, especially defence, took off. In the decade prior to the deal, the U.S. accounted for an average of 0.2 percent of India's annual defence imports. In the decade after the deal, this figure jumped to 8.3 percent (SIPRI, 2019).

In 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta launched the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) with India, which aimed to minimise the bureaucratic obstacles in the way of deeper bilateral defence cooperation (Department of Defense, 2015b). In September 2013, during Prime Minister Singh's visit to Washington, the U.S. and India issued a Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation. Although brief, it contained an important sentence: 'The United States and India share common security interests and place each other at the same level as their closest partners' (Government of India, 2013). The declaration identified technology transfer, trade, research, co-development, and co-production in defence as priority areas for partnership.

President Barack Obama's visit to New Delhi in January 2015 resulted in the landmark U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (The White House, 2015). While previous documents had contained allusions to international security and stability, this was the first joint strategic document between the two countries that went beyond bilateral cooperation and focused concretely on regional issues in the Asia-Pacific. More than previous documents, its language echoed official U.S. rhetoric on regional connectivity, economic integration, freedom of navigation, and support for democracy and human rights. The two governments also concluded a Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship, essentially renewing the previous framework agreed upon a decade earlier (Department of Defense, 2015a).

While these agreements have expressed a bilateral convergence of vision and intent, the crux of defence and security cooperation are three foundational agreements that the U.S. typically signs with its allies: a Logistics Supply Agreement (LSA), a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), and a Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA). In August 2016, India signed a modified LSA that would allow the militaries of both countries to rely on each other for material support during out-of-area operations. In September 2018, after strenuous negotiations, India signed a modified version of the CISMOA, allowing the sharing of the most

sophisticated and proprietary communications technologies associated with U.S. defence platforms. Only the BECA (for the sharing of geospatial intelligence) remains to be negotiated.

As the above chronology shows, U.S.-India relations have improved remarkably in little more than two decades since India's nuclear tests. Today, the U.S. plays an important role in India's grand strategy at all levels: domestic, regional, and global.

The United States in India's grand strategy

India does not officially articulate a grand strategy in the way that other countries often do. However, practitioners and scholars of Indian foreign policy generally agree that India implicitly pursues a set of strategic priorities. K. Subrahmanyam, the architect of strategic studies in India, argued that India had a grand strategy at independence (in 1947) to address both internal and external challenges: 'India would promote world peace for the welfare of mankind, including its own population, and it would assume its rightful global position by developing itself to the standards of the industrialised world' (Subrahmanyam, 2012, p. 2). There are three elements in this formulation. First, world peace, or at least peace for India. Second, economic development through industrialisation. Third, assuming India's rightful position among the great powers. In November 2019, India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar articulated virtually the same set of priorities: 'greater prosperity at home, peace on the borders, protection of our people and enhancing influence abroad' (Jaishankar, 2019b). India's grand strategic objectives can therefore be summarised as developing hard-power capabilities while addressing regional threats and eventually attaining great-power status. The U.S. has an important role to play at all three levels.

At the domestic level, India's objective is to continue improving the functioning of its economy in a manner that raises national income and improves the life chances of the 224 million Indians living in poverty (Press Trust of India, 2016a). According to the 2014 election manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), achieving this objective will require building new infrastructure such as roads, railways, electric grids, irrigation networks, urban sanitation, etc., and improving the state of existing infrastructure especially in the social sector, primarily health and education (BJP, 2014). It will also involve rationalising regulation, further loosening the state's control of the economy, and vastly improving the capacity of the state to deliver basic public goods such as law and order (Joshi, 2017).

Indian elites are aware that without vital changes on the domestic front that can facilitate sustainable development and industrialisation, India's ability to create security for itself will remain sub-optimal (Mohan, 2007). Moreover, achieving domestic economic goals will require considerable international economic engagement in terms of trade and investment. Given the U.S.'s abundance of capital and India's abundance of labour, the economic complementarities are clear. Indeed, economic relations constitute a vital second pillar of India-U.S. cooperation alongside defence and security (Jaffrelot, 2009). The flow of American investment to India rose from US \$165 million in 1991 to US \$3.1 billion in 2018 (DPIIT, 2019). Bilateral trade during this period increased from US \$4.8 billion to US \$84.4 billion (United Nations, 2019).

At the regional level, India has two objectives. The first, within South Asia, is to deter serious challenges to its security from two powerful rivals with a long history of close

cooperation: Pakistan and China (Bajpai et al., 2014, pp. 20–22). Recent years have witnessed an increase in the willingness and ability of both countries to threaten India's security. In order to address these twin challenges, India has sought to grow and modernise its military capabilities. As China's defence acquisitions have increasingly focused on domestic manufacturing, India has become the world's largest arms importer, holding this rank annually from 2009 till 2015, until being overtaken by Saudi Arabia in 2016 (SIPRI, 2019). Although Russia remains India's single largest defence supplier, New Delhi has increasingly sought platforms and equipment from suppliers in the U.S. and its allies such as Israel and France. Given the sheer technological prowess of the U.S. in the military domain, Washington thus has a major role to play in India's grand strategy.

Beyond Pakistan and China, India's neighbourhood shapes its grand strategy in important ways (Saran, 2019). Historically, Indian leaders have answered the question of how to maintain order and security in South Asia by emphasising the importance of keeping great powers out (Xavier, 2017). Over the last decade, however, as China has ramped up its strategic presence in South Asia through infrastructure investments and development finance, New Delhi has built partnerships with external powers who may assist in countering China's growing presence in the region (Xavier, 2019). The U.S. and Japan have stepped in, with regular joint naval exercises and patrols. In addition, Japan and India have collectively promoted the idea of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) as an alternative to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Washington has announced a \$60 billion development fund to counter the BRI (Chanda, 2018; Panda, 2017).

India's second objective at the regional level is to ensure peace and stability in the wider arc of the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015b). Given that India depends on sea lanes for 95 percent of its trade by volume and 68 percent by value, maritime security from the Strait of Hormuz to the South China Sea is of vital interest to New Delhi (Ministry of Shipping, 2019, p. 5). It is hardly surprising therefore that India has signed onto U.S. efforts to promote freedom of navigation and maritime international law in the Indo-Pacific. While Washington's interest is to a great extent driven by the objective of containing China's territorial ambitions, India's interest lies in ensuring peace and stability for economic reasons. For the moment, these two interests are overlapping.

The U.S. also plays an important role with regard to India's status ambitions and self-perceived role in the world. Since independence, successive Indian leaders have sought recognition of India's status as a major power with great-power potential (Basrur & Sullivan de Estrada, 2017). Although Washington and New Delhi have not always agreed on strategic issues, the U.S. has generally recognised India as pivotal actor in the international system. This recognition was heightened under the George W. Bush administration, which explicitly saw India as a viable potential counterweight to China in Asia (Rice, 2000). Arguably, the primary outcome of the U.S.-India nuclear deal of 2008 was not measured in material terms but in terms of recognition of India's status as a responsible nuclear power deserving of exceptions despite officially rejecting the NPT. According to former Indian Foreign Secretary and National Security Adviser, Shivshankar Menon, for the first time, the international nuclear order had changed in India's favour. 'It was an exception, and your exceptionalism was recognised by the international system ... That's a big step for a country like India, for an emerging country' (Menon, 2018).

U.S. support for a greater Indian role in global governance and Asian security has sat well with India's own ambitions as a rising power. However, India is not dependent on

Washington's goodwill for the attainment of its status goals. India enjoyed considerable diplomatic status even as a militarily and economically weak and non-aligned state in the early decades of the Cold War, particularly as a leading figure among Third World countries (Miller, 2013, pp. 66–72). Since the end of the Cold War, India's standing within this group of countries remains relatively high irrespective of the trajectory of India-U.S. relations. Meanwhile, India's standing among developed countries has been rising as India becomes an increasingly important economic and military actor in world affairs (Basrur and Sullivan de Estrada, 2017, pp. 82–111). Thus, the partnership with the U.S. can help improve India's global status but Indian elites are confident of their country making it, eventually, with or without U.S. assistance. For example, the Indian elite are confident that the UN Security Council will in time have to accommodate India's rising influence and status (Mukherjee & Malone, 2013).

Challenges of managing India-U.S. relations

Despite the obvious commonality of strategic interests and the demonstrated willingness on the U.S.'s part to bend all manner of rules to accommodate India, the bilateral relationship has not blossomed into the quasi-alliance that many in Washington had hoped for (Tellis & Blackwill, 2019). Cara Abercrombie (2019, p. 136) suggests that the baseline expectation for U.S. partnerships is 'mature cooperation', which manifests as routine bilateral engagement at all levels, from the strategic to the tactical. India and the U.S. are considerably lacking on this front. For example, the U.S. conducted 28 major naval exercises with Japan in 2017, and eight exercises with Singapore, a non-ally (Abercrombie, 2019, p. 130). By contrast, the U.S. and India conducted only one naval exercise in the same year (*Ibid.*). Although defence trade has grown since the India-U.S. nuclear agreement, India's decision in 2011 to purchase European multirole combat aircraft over the bids of U.S. companies such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing left many U.S. officials and observers questioning the value of having gone to great lengths to facilitate India's entry into the international nuclear order (Tellis, 2011).

Given the diplomatic alacrity and vision of successive U.S. administrations with regard to U.S.-India relations since the Clinton administration, the Indian side of the relationship appears comparatively inhibited. In the various agreements and declarations laid out in the section above, there is a firm commitment to the shared democratic values and strong commonality of interests that make the U.S. and India 'natural allies' in the words of Prime Minister Vajpayee, which Modi himself echoed in an address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress in June 2016 (Panda, 2016; Parthasarathy, 2000). The list of areas in which the U.S. and India cooperate has grown through successive declarations, most recently expanded to include a commitment to securing a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' in concert with Japan and Australia (Press Trust of India, 2017a).

Yet there appears to be a gulf between what the U.S. thinks India can deliver and what India can and wants to deliver. Benjamin E. Schwartz, former India Director in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, observes that 'The relationship between the United States and India is excellent proof that the dominant theory of international relations – nations form partnerships and alliances based on mutual interests or common values – is wrong' (Schwartz, 2019). If it were true, the U.S. and India would be much more closely aligned than they are today. Close alignment can be thought of as mutual policy

adjustment in order to accommodate the strategic interests of both parties. It is difficult to dispel the notion that policy adjustment in the U.S.-India partnership has been less than mutual. The table below enumerates the benefits and costs of the partnership to both sides (Table 1).

Betting on India as a robust market for defence and nuclear technologies, as well as a long-term democratic partner to help manage China's rise, the U.S. has invested considerable political capital and bureaucratic resources to help India develop its hard-power capabilities and pursue its longer-term status ambitions. India for its part has made significant concessions on Iran, especially by voting against Tehran's nuclear programme repeatedly at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and curbing oil imports from Iran in order to comply with U.S. sanctions (Kutty, 2019). India has also undertaken to ensure end-user monitoring and security for advanced U.S. defence platforms imported to or co-produced in India. New Delhi has extended diplomatic support to the Indo-Pacific strategic framework, and participated in strategic dialogues and military exercises with the U.S. and its allies Japan and Australia under this rubric.

Despite these mutual concessions, India has not been the willing partner or 'informal ally' the U.S. expected (Lalwani & Byrne, 2019, p. 43). On the economic front, U.S. firms continue to lament the difficulties of doing business in India due to the myriad infrastructural, regulatory, and bureaucratic challenges involved (Press Trust of India, 2015). On the defence front, U.S. firms and government agencies have to navigate a labyrinthine procurement and acquisition process riddled with corruption, red tape, and bureaucratic infighting (Swami, 2012). Even with regard to the flagship nuclear deal, soon after the 123 Agreement was concluded the Indian parliament tabled a bill – passed into law in September 2010 – that went against international convention in seeking to place a considerable degree of liability for nuclear accidents on the suppliers of nuclear equipment (Kumar & Patil, 2014). The law effectively diminished the incentives for U.S. suppliers of nuclear

Table 1. Benefits and costs of the U.S.-India partnership.

	Benefits	Costs/Risks
India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear deal, NSG exemption, membership of export control regimes • Exemptions: S-400, Chabahar, Arms Control Export Act (in progress) • Major defense partner status (+Strategic Trade Authorization-1) • Counterterrorism cooperation • Support for permanent UNSC seat, APEC membership • FDI and trade • Defence commerce and co-production • Alliance network benefits (Japan and Australia) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compromising strategic autonomy • Domestic political opposition • End-use monitoring for defence technology • Continued U.S.-Pakistan defence cooperation • Potential dependency on U.S. weaponry
United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defence commerce • Counterterrorism cooperation • Some cooperation on Iran • Support for securing Indo-Pacific region • FDI and trade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear liability law • Political capital spent on exemptions and special status • Bureaucratic resources negotiating simple logistical agreements • Incomplete alignment over Iran • Strong opposition in international institutions • Weak support for Free and Open Indo-Pacific • Security of advanced military platforms co-located with third-party platforms • Lack of interoperability

technology to enter the Indian market and although India ratified the international Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damages (CSC) in early 2016, there is still considerable ambiguity as to the conformity of India's domestic law with the CSC (Sengupta, 2016).

India has been reluctant to balance too strongly against China through the strategic construction of the Indo-Pacific region and the democratic Quad grouping of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India. Contrary to Washington's preferences, New Delhi has sought to make the Indo-Pacific more inclusive – by including not just ASEAN countries but also China – in order to diminish the risk of an excessive American footprint in the region (Mukherjee, 2019). Similarly, India continues to cultivate Russia partly out of a need for 'balance in the Indo-Pacific' (Jaishankar, 2019a). India has also frequently gone against U.S. interests and negotiating positions in international institutions ranging from the UN Security Council to the World Trade Organization and international climate change negotiations.

These difficulties are partly the result of mismatched expectations – the U.S. is accustomed to cooperative allies in the Indo-Pacific such as Japan and Australia; India is not used to alliances (Lalwani & Byrne, 2019). Strategic considerations also play a role. The U.S.'s reliance on Pakistan as a major ally, especially in Afghanistan, has historically made it difficult for Washington to accommodate Indian interests to too great an extent. India's reliance on Iran as a strategic counterweight to Pakistan has similarly made it difficult for New Delhi to accommodate U.S. regional interests. Nonetheless, the India-U.S. nuclear deal itself was a major breakthrough undertaken at the risk of alienating Pakistan – indeed, Islamabad and Beijing have formalised and stepped up their civilian nuclear cooperation in its aftermath (Joshi, 2011; Reuters, 2017). Washington has thus been willing to deepen its partnership with India even if it comes at the cost of worse relations with Pakistan, in effect achieving the 'de-hyphenation' of India and Pakistan in U.S. policy that Indian leaders had sought throughout the Cold War (Tellis, 2008).

Part of the gap between expectation and reality on the Indian side can be explained by bureaucratic challenges of inadequate resources, bloated mandates, and a dogmatic adherence to procedure. Moreover, the danger of the U.S. becoming a political football domestically makes Indian decision-makers overly cautious in their initiatives (Mukherjee & Thyagraj, 2012, p. 17). Routine logistical agreements that the U.S. has signed with numerous countries and that require relatively low-level clearance in the U.S. defence bureaucracy take years to negotiate with India and must be signed by the defence minister (Abercrombie, 2019, pp. 140–141). U.S. officials describe 'doing anything with New Delhi' as 'pulling teeth' (Sirohi, 2016) and a 'time suck' (Schwartz, 2019). Washington's allies and other strategic partners have not proved as difficult.

Intent plays an equally significant role. An obsession with strategic autonomy, seen by critics as an outmoded vestige of Cold War nonaligned politics, continues to shape the manner in which many Indians approach the U.S. Strategic autonomy as a foreign policy goal is not unique to India – indeed, even many European allies of the U.S. seek it (see Franke & Varma, 2018). However, the nature of India's ambitions as a rising power and the nature of U.S. alliances as compacts between highly asymmetrical powers combine to make India a relatively rare case. India, not unlike China, attaches a meaning to strategic autonomy that is perhaps typical only of rising powers with great-power ambitions.

The difference becomes clear through Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty (Berlin, 1969). Strategic autonomy for most countries is akin to negative liberty, or *freedom from* external interference. Strategic autonomy for India is akin to positive liberty, or *freedom to* pursue certain goals and projects. In India's case, the primary long-term goal is to attain the status of a great power (Basrur, 2017, pp. 20–25; Nayyar & Paul, 2003), which entails recognition by other states of India's preeminent position in the international system (Abraham, 2007, p. 4209). India resists strong alignment with a much stronger power such as the U.S. because this puts India in a secondary or subordinate position.

Alliances with a hegemonic power such as the U.S. can be thought of in terms of authority, or rightful rule (Lake, 2009). States that ally with the U.S. typically comply with U.S. preferences to varying degrees because they concede some amount of authority to the U.S.. The weaker party sees or comes to see the alliance as legitimate to some extent. In exchange, it enjoys the benefits of security and political order. Thus, any talk of strategic autonomy by U.S. allies is about seeking greater independence of action *within* the limits of a legitimate alliance. India, by contrast, is unlikely to form an alliance with the U.S. in the first place – though India might ally with a weaker or similarly positioned power – precisely because India is unlikely to consider legitimate the authority of another state. In other words, given India's desire for the freedom to pursue great-power status, India imbues strategic autonomy with a more potent meaning than an ordinary reading of the concept might suggest.

Within the matrix of U.S. allies and adversaries, Indian elites see their country as a unique actor, a country that 'does not pose any strategic challenge to the U.S., but at the same time ... does not automatically fall in with America's desires and seeks to advance its own interests' (Raghavan, 2011). Particularly in contrast to Pakistan – which many see as a 'client state' of the U.S. (Aiyar, 2015) – Indians are confident that even if the U.S.-Pakistan alliance falters, 'New Delhi will not replace Islamabad as Washington's willing and subservient ally' (Sarkar, 2015). India will zealously protect its autonomy in any relationship with the U.S. and seek to play the role of an equal partner rather than a subordinate state.

Some observers have suggested that India under Modi is abandoning this obsession with nonalignment and autonomy, with 'not one member of his Cabinet' publicly referring to the doctrine (Ganguly, 2017, p. 132). However, Modi himself has paid lip service to the continuation of Indian non-alignment (Wall Street Journal, 2016), and revived the concept of strategic autonomy in reference to India-Russia relations in his keynote address at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). On the latter occasion, Modi also said, '[India's] friendships are not alliances of containment. We choose the side of principles and values, of peace and progress, not one side of a divide or the other' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Nonalignment reappears as the doctrine that shall not be named.

Unsurprisingly, then, deep divisions exist within the Indian establishment on relations with the U.S., especially when juxtaposed with Sino-Indian relations (Hall, 2016, p. 282). As a consequence of these internal divisions, India-U.S. relations have moved forward hesitantly, with Washington conceding to New Delhi more than it has to any other non-allied state. Even Israel, a non-signatory of the NPT along with India and Pakistan, has not received the Strategic Trade Authorization (STA-1) that India received from the U.S.

in 2018 (Schwartz, 2019), which is a status normally only given to countries that are members of all four nuclear export control regimes (India is not a member of the NSG). Strategic autonomy also carries significant costs in terms of India-U.S. military cooperation. India's desire to diversify its strategic partnerships leads to cooperation spread thinly across multiple countries – for example, India's 2020 Milan naval exercise (now postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic) was due to host the navies of 41 countries (Bhalla, 2019) – leaving scarce resources for developing genuine interoperability with the U.S. navy (Abercrombie, 2019, p. 129).

U.S. power and commitment from Obama to Trump

Sceptics aside, there exist a number of influential Indian policymakers and analysts who firmly advocate stronger ties with the U.S. as a way of balancing the growth of Chinese power and influence in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard there is true common interest between Washington and New Delhi. As veteran strategic affairs journalist Manoj Joshi has observed, 'India needs the U.S., as much as the Americans need us' (Joshi, 2018). On the ground, this has led to closer cooperation with Japan and the United States in the Indian Ocean, epitomised by the annual U.S.-India Malabar naval exercises to which Japan was invited in 2007, excluded after Chinese protestations, and then re-invited from 2015 onward (Associated Press, 2015).

There is a clear sense in which having the U.S. on India's side – with Japan and Australia as a sizeable bonus – in any potential conflict with China is going to be beneficial for New Delhi (Madan, 2017). To this extent, U.S. support for India's efforts to kick-start its domestic defence industry and for India's interests regarding China are exactly the kinds of U.S. power from which Indian elites feel they can benefit without getting mired in domestic debates about autonomy. Washington for its part encourages India to in fact be the autonomous power it wants to be, by taking a leading role in patrolling the northern Indian Ocean, for example (United States Government, 2017, p. 50).

Strategic autonomy comes at a price. India is still a considerable distance from being able to militarily hold its own in a protracted conflict with China. The events surrounding the standoff on the Doklam plateau in mid-2017 are instructive. Although the Indian military boldly crossed over into territory that was contested between China and Bhutan, and subsequently showed resolve in refusing to back down until the standoff was diplomatically resolved, the months after the incident saw China rapidly building a military presence close to the plateau. A future standoff will likely not end as benignly as it did for India the first time (Bhat, 2018). The fact that China is able to mobilise men and materiel this quickly relative to India should give Indian strategists pause as they contemplate the benefits of strategic autonomy, since U.S. assistance – diplomatic or otherwise – will likely be required for India to successfully deter or repel a significant military challenge from China.

Yet, U.S. assistance is far from guaranteed in such an event. Even those Indians who hold an optimistic view of the potential U.S. power holds for India's interests remain worried about U.S. commitment and leadership in Asia. During the Obama administration, this anxiety centred on Washington being willing to sacrifice Indian interests where it counted the most: Pakistan and China. Early in his first administration, Obama planned to appoint Richard Holbrooke as a special representative tasked with Afghanistan, Pakistan

(AfPak), and India, the latter included specifically to explore the possibility of a resolution to the Kashmir conflict (Wright, 2010). New Delhi reportedly 'went berserk' at the suggestion that India and Pakistan be hyphenated once again (Packer, 2009).

Similar anxieties were raised when influential members of the U.S. foreign policy community suggested that the U.S. and China form a Group of Two (G-2) in order to avert great-power conflict and jointly manage global challenges (Li, 2016). In November 2009, during a visit to Beijing, Obama and Hu Jintao agreed to 'work together to promote peace, stability and development in South Asia', a statement that caused great consternation in India (Polgreen, 2009). Although Obama subsequently announced the rebalance to Asia, considerable doubt lingered in India about the U.S. commitment to protecting Indian interests in the region.

By contrast, the Trump administration has shown a willingness to challenge China on a number of fronts ranging from trade practices to Beijing's economic statecraft in South and Southeast Asia. Then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's speech in Washington in October 2017 bluntly criticised China for 'at times undermining the international, rules-based order even as countries like India operate within a framework that protects other nations' sovereignty'. Tillerson called out Beijing's 'provocative actions in the South China Sea' and – in a first – its 'predatory economics' in the Indo-Pacific, which he argued saddles many countries with 'enormous levels of debt', threatening their 'sovereignty and their future control of their economies' (Tillerson, 2017).

Trump himself has repeatedly applied pressure on Pakistan to stop funding terrorists on its soil, going to the extent of accusing Islamabad of giving Washington 'nothing but lies & deceit' in return for billions of dollars of military and economic aid (Hussain & Gowen, 2018). Trump's tweet to this effect – his first of 2018 – caused a senior Indian official to declare that India's stance on Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorist groups had been 'abundantly vindicated' (Shukla, 2018). Beyond the rhetoric, the Trump administration in 2017 decided to withhold US\$1.15 billion in military aid to Pakistan due to the latter's perceived unwillingness to crack down on terror networks (Roy, 2018).

All in all, Trump's grand strategy has had a salutary effect on India's grand strategy at least on the security front. While there is no doubt that trade tariffs may hurt in the short-term, it remains to be seen if India will face any lasting economic fallout from Trump's 'America first' economic policies – for example, via potential cuts to H-1B work visas, 70 percent of which (roughly 127,000 visas) in 2016 were given to Indians (McCarthy, 2017). Recent changes to H-1B allocation criteria already seem to have impacted the ability of U.S. companies to hire foreign high-skilled workers (Semotiuk, 2019).

The opportunities of a changing world order

Indian leaders were in fact not unwise to the opportunity presented by the election of Donald Trump. Less than ten days after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, then Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar visited the U.S. and met with members of Trump's transition team (Press Trust of India, 2016b). At a think-tank dialogue in Mumbai three months later, he said, 'Don't demonise Trump, analyse Trump. He represents a thought process. It's not a momentary expression' (Press Trust of India, 2017b). Indeed, most members of the Indian strategic community see Trump as a symptom of larger changes in the global order brought about by the changing balance of power between the U.S. and

China. The global financial crisis, a weak U.S. rebalance to Asia under Obama, China's growing assertiveness, and the Trump presidency have cumulatively thrown the future of the Western liberal order into grave doubt. Correspondingly, India under Modi has sensed an opportunity to refashion global rules in a manner that will better serve India's rise to great power status.

India has consistently criticised the Western-led international order as exclusionary and undemocratic, especially as it manifests in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Bretton Woods Institutions, the Asian Development Bank, and other institutions (Pant, 2017, p. 8). New Delhi increasingly recognises that its history of global governance activism has yielded little. In fact, breaking international rules – for example, by covertly conducting nuclear tests – has garnered greater attention and gains than patient attempts at reform. The U.S.-India nuclear deal presented a clear example to Indian leaders that Washington would accommodate New Delhi's exceptionalism despite the potentially adverse impact this might have on the international order itself (Narlikar, 2010).

At the same time, India has benefited significantly from the U.S.-led global order since 1945 without paying substantial costs for the order's maintenance. For example, according to UN rules for contributions to its 2020 general budget – which are based on a country's level of national income, debt burden, and population – India's contribution is assessed at only 0.8 percent, compared to 22 percent for the U.S., 12 percent for China, 8.6 percent for Japan, 2.9 percent for Brazil, and 2.4 percent for Russia (United Nations Secretariat, 2019). In return for this contribution, India has benefited from a wide array of UN institutions and programmes while also being elected a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council seven times since 1945. At the World Bank, with a capital subscription of approximately US \$7.3 billion (3.1 percent of total capital) (World Bank, 2019a), between 1945 and 2019 India has been the largest recipient of loans, grants, and credits, worth a total of US \$114 billion (10.3 percent of the Bank's total outlay) (World Bank, 2019b).

At the World Trade Organization (WTO), India has benefited from the liberalisation of trade in services while resolutely protecting its own interests in blocking liberalisation in agriculture and opposing WTO rules on food subsidies and stockholding. On climate change, India has not diminished its dependence on fossil fuels – especially coal – while insisting on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, thereby placing the onus of mitigation on developed countries. Although India does contribute significantly in a handful of areas such as UN peacekeeping, India's overall approach represents a rational strategy of free-riding, or 'shirking' (Schweller & Pu, 2011, p. 45), that other rising powers such as China and Brazil also follow. However, it leads U.S. policy-makers and analysts to claim that India cannot be a responsible actor in the international order (Narlikar 2013).

It is significant therefore that the Modi government has decided to make a bid for greater global influence premised on doing more to uphold the international order. A little over a year into Modi's tenure, Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar delivered a lecture in Singapore in which he laid out India's new ambition to be a leading power. 'The transition in India is an expression of greater self-confidence', he said, 'Its foreign policy dimension is to aspire to be a leading power, rather than just a balancing power. Consequently, there is also a willingness to shoulder greater global responsibilities' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015a).

The Trump administration has responded with open arms: the U.S. 2017 National Security Strategy clearly stated, 'We welcome India's emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner' (United States Government, 2017, p. 46). Correspondingly, Trump's withdrawal from various global governance arrangements in the areas of climate change mitigation, arms control, international trade, and security have opened up space for India to manoeuvre itself into the upper ranks of the international order. India has already shown signs that it is able and willing to provide leadership on global efforts to combat climate change (Tellis, 2018, p. 531).

While there are many downside risks to the decline of U.S. hegemony, India also faces strategic opportunities in an increasingly multipolar world in which the U.S. is gradually abdicating leadership. Virtually every criticism levelled at Trump's grand strategy has an upside for India. For example, Trump is accused of shaking the confidence of U.S. allies and taking a more transactional approach to diplomacy. India was never a U.S. ally, has only sought to be an equal partner, and is content to do business on transactional terms. Internally, a weak and divided U.S. establishment gives India more leverage over Washington's strategic priorities and policy process (Mohan, 2017). On international trade, New Delhi had no medium-term plan of joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), therefore the latter's death under Trump does little to hurt India economically.

Trump's policies toward Pakistan and Afghanistan, while risking blowback for U.S. interests in both countries, are welcomed in India (Press Trust of India, 2017c). His 'America First' military strategy of strengthening the U.S. at the expense of allies and passing on the costs of Indo-Pacific stability to major powers such as India, Japan, and Australia is also a welcome development in the eyes of those in New Delhi who seek to benefit from U.S. equipment and military exercises without paying significant costs in terms of strategic autonomy. Even Trump's approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict fits well with Modi's unprecedented outreach to Israel and the rapidly growing India-Israel defence trade and strategic partnership.

The upside of uncertainty

India's relations with the U.S. have deepened considerably since the early 2000s, due in large part to their nuclear agreement which cleared existing bottlenecks in defence trade and built an unprecedented level of trust and familiarity between the two bureaucracies. India has increasingly relied on the U.S. for capital, technology, and diplomatic support in pursuing its grand strategy at the domestic, regional, and international levels. At the same time, significant portions of the Indian establishment have remained sceptical of U.S. power and commitment in Asia, preferring to adhere to a policy of strategic autonomy in managing India's external relations. India's desire for autonomy presents a significant obstacle to deeper U.S.-India partnership. Put simply, India will never cooperate as closely with the U.S. as the latter's allies do.

Nonetheless, the advent of the Trump presidency has shifted the terms of U.S.-India engagement in a direction preferable to New Delhi. India now enjoys the benefits of U.S.-India defence cooperation in an international order that is more fluid and uncertain than before. Even before the Trump administration, Indian leaders had seen the writing on the wall with regard to U.S. leadership and relative power following the Global Financial Crisis and China's increased assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike U.S. allies who remain

dependent on U.S. power and commitment, New Delhi seized the opportunities offered by the changing regional and global landscape to fashion a new and more assertive role for itself in the Indo-Pacific as well as in the architecture of global governance.

While the U.S. shift to offshore balancing and disengagement with the international order has benefited India in many ways, it also portends a potentially major downside, sharper since the events of mid-2017, and that is Beijing's increased opportunism and willingness to push the limits of U.S. power and resolve across the Indo-Pacific with an eye to eventually stepping into the role of regional hegemon. The extent of India's China threat depends largely on the timeframe involved. Given the time and assistance to sufficiently build up its military capabilities, India will be in a position to deter Chinese adventurism in South Asia and perhaps even beyond. This time horizon is of course both long and dynamic, i.e. it will take India a number of decades to develop its capabilities, during which time China will also be modernising its military.

In any event, a window of opportunity has opened for Beijing in which Washington is unlikely and unable to intervene on India's behalf in a potential crisis. The Doklam episode supports this assessment and might act as a future template for China's approach to the border dispute with India, with potentially disastrous consequences. In the absence of such an outcome, India will continue to benefit from the increased uncertainty of the international order, and will in turn seek greater leadership roles in various international institutions. It remains to be seen if the West (and China and Russia) can peacefully make room for India's growing ambition.

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Notes on contributor

Rohan Mukherjee is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale-NUS College in Singapore. His research focuses on the grand strategies of rising powers and their impact on international security and order, with an empirical specialisation in South Asia and East Asia.

ORCID

Rohan Mukherjee  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6712-6949>

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