

## US Landpower and an Indo-American Alliance

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the importance of US landpower and an Indo-American alliance to the growing challenge of China's pursuit of hegemony over Asia.

Landpower is now rarely thought of as the core of American military might. Current US strategic doctrine emphasizes the primacy of maritime and airpower.<sup>1</sup> In a pivotal speech to the cadets at the United States Military Academy on February 25, 2011, then-Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates declared, “Looking ahead . . . the Army must also confront the reality that the most plausible high-end scenarios for the US military are primarily naval and air engagements—whether in Asia, the Persian Gulf, or elsewhere.” Indeed, to drive home the point, Gates asserted “any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or in the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined’ as General [Douglas] MacArthur so delicately put it.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet the Middle Kingdom, a quintessential landpower seeking to become Asia's hegemon, is systematically shifting the strategic calculus in its favor via its audacious Silk Road initiative unveiled by President Xi Jinping on September 7, 2013. Thus, the only realistic option to keep the dragon at bay might be to overcome the inhibitions of current doctrinal orthodoxy and forge a strategic alliance with India—with landpower as the military centerpiece.<sup>3</sup>

### Advantages of Facing the Dragon Together

A mutual defense treaty between the United States and India should be perceived as a partnership of equals and must clearly reflect a shared understanding that both are committed to fighting alongside the other to safeguard their vital national interests in a conflict initiated by China. Hypothetically speaking, such a treaty would not cover territories over which India has asserted sovereignty but does not exercise administrative control: Azad Kashmir, Gilgit, Baltistan, and Aksai Chin. Also, the pact would not cover US activities in Japan, Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, and Thailand, which are addressed through separate bilateral security agreements. Accordingly, the proposed bilateral arrangement between India and America would

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1 US Department of Defense (DoD), *Air-Sea Battle* (Washington, DC: Air-Sea Battle Office, 2013).

2 Robert M. Gates, “Secretary of Defense Speech” (speech, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, February 25, 2011).

3 “President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 7, 2013.

be consistent with the existing US hub-and-spoke security architecture for Asia. Moreover, the explicit inclusion of the military option would mirror the strong security commitment incorporated in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization agreement. Accordingly, the operative part of the treaty might be formulated as follows:

In the event of an armed attack by the People's Republic of China against the Republic of India or the United States of America in any area under Indian or American administration or international waters or airspace in the Indian or Pacific Ocean regions, the attack shall be considered against both India and the United States, and consequently both parties agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the party so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other party, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore peace and security.

According to Central Intelligence Agency statistics for 2017, the combined gross domestic product (GDP) of India, \$9.4 trillion, and the United States, \$19.4 trillion, amounted to \$28.8 trillion, a comfortable margin over China's GDP of \$23.1. The combined population of 1.6 billion people for India, 1.3 billion people, and the United States, 0.3 billion people, was also greater than China's 1.4 billion people during the period.<sup>4</sup> As per a recent estimate, the combined active military force of an Indo-American alliance would be 2.7 million servicemembers, with both countries contributing about equally. In comparison, China's standing military force is 2.2 million active duty personnel.<sup>5</sup>

By 2037, according to projections prepared by the Energy Information Administration (EIA), the statistical arm of the US Department of Energy, such an alliance would have an aggregate GDP of \$48.6 trillion (India \$22.4 trillion and US \$26.2 trillion), while China's GDP would remain slightly smaller at \$47.4 trillion.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Indian and US economies will be approaching parity by 2037 as India's GDP will be about 85 percent of America's GDP. By then, the total population of the alliance would be about 2 billion people (India 1.6 billion and the United States 0.4 billion) providing a significant cushion over China's population which will have plateaued at 1.4 billion people.<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, an Indo-American alliance, reflecting its quantitative and qualitative edge, will be able to threaten China's energy security by cutting off the country's access to oil and gas imports transported by oceangoing tankers or land-based pipelines. India's 2,659 kilometer northern border with China, which stretches from the Kashmir region in the northwest to the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the northeast, provides a unique, albeit geographically challenging, pathway for an air attack and land invasion of China's western Xinjiang province, the terminus for energy pipelines from Central Asia (and planned pipelines

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4 "The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

5 "2018 Military Strength Ranking," Global Firepower, accessed April 24, 2018, <http://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>.

6 "International Energy Outlook 2017, Table: World Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by Region Expressed in Purchasing Power Parity, 2015–2050," US Energy Information Administration, accessed April 9, 2018.

7 "International Energy Outlook 2017, Table: World Population by Region, 2015–2050," US Energy Information Administration, accessed April 9, 2018.

from Iran via Pakistan). Indeed, India, by virtue of its long border with China as well as its vast strategic depth, is the only option for the United States to use landpower to counterattack the Middle Kingdom's weakest militarily points—Tibet and Xinjiang provinces. Just as important, India straddles the crucial energy trade's sea lines of communication and maritime choke points of the Indian Ocean—from the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Gulf of Aden to the Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda Straits that are the gateways to the South China Sea and the western Pacific Ocean.

Beijing's dependence on energy imports is its most important vulnerability; severing China's energy lifeline will trigger the collapse of its economy and immobilize its military. According to EIA estimates for 2017, Chinese oil imports of 8.2 million barrels per day (bbl/d) represented about 64 percent of its total oil consumption, and natural gas imports of 2.6 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) accounted for about 34 percent of its total natural gas consumption. By 2037, China's oil imports will rise to 12.2 million bbl/d to meet about 72 percent of its total oil consumption of 17 million bbl/d, and natural gas imports will increase to 6.4 Tcf to satisfy about 34 percent of its total gas consumption of 18.9 Tcf.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, the bulk of Chinese oil and gas imports, which are purchased primarily from the Middle East and Africa, are transported along the choke points to various ports along the eastern coast of China.<sup>9</sup> In a bid to end the Middle Kingdom's dependence on seaborne energy imports, however, Beijing has embarked on an ambitious modern-day Silk Road project also known as the One Belt, One Road initiative.

Over the next two decades, these land routes, which are beyond the effective military reach of potential adversaries, will connect China to friendly major oil and gas producers. Specifically, the energy security strategy involves expanding existing pipeline systems from Russia's Siberian oil and gas fields to Daqing, in northeastern China and from Kazakhstan's oil fields and Turkmenistan's gas fields to Urumqi in western China's Xinjiang province. The strategy also proposes constructing a new energy pipeline system to transport Iranian resources via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Kashgar, also in Xinjiang province.<sup>10</sup> Within a generation, China will have an independent land-based energy transportation infrastructure.<sup>11</sup>

With an alliance, the Indian and American naval fleets will have the combined capability to blockade all five relevant maritime trade choke points in the Indian Ocean.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the alliance's land and

8 Calculated imports reflect the difference between consumption and production. See "World Petroleum and Other Liquids Production," EIA, accessed April 9, 2018; "International Energy Outlook 2017, Table: World Liquids Consumption by Region, 2015–2050," EIA, accessed April 9, 2018; and "Energy Outlook 2017, Table: World Natural Gas Consumption by Region, 2015–2050," EIA, accessed April 9, 2018.

9 "China," EIA, May 14, 2015.

10 "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at Pakistan's Parliament," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 21, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpdjstjxgswbbydnxycyflrhyhwlhy60znjnhd/t1257288.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpdjstjxgswbbydnxycyflrhyhwlhy60znjnhd/t1257288.shtml).

11 For a skeptical view of China's alternative pipeline strategy, see US Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017* (Washington, DC: DoD), 43.

12 "World Oil Transit Chokepoints," EIA, July 25, 2017. Indian and American naval forces could extend their "choke-points" blockade to cover some of Beijing's maritime silk road ports such as Gwadar, Pakistan, on the Arabian Sea and Maday Island, Kyaukpyu, Myanmar, on the Bay of Bengal.

air forces will have the capability, if necessary, to attack from India's northern border to control a crucial swathe of territory in Tibet and Xinjiang and to shut down the terminals in Kashgar and Urumqi, thereby severing China's land-based access to oil and gas imports from Iran and Central Asia.

Beijing would then be completely dependent upon Russian oil and gas supplies delivered to the terminal at Daqing.<sup>13</sup> Given its distant location, the most likely threat to this terminal would be an intermediate-range ballistic missile launched from northeastern India that might periodically disrupt the complex, but perhaps not achieve an extended closure. In any event, China's capacity to sustain a major war effort would be seriously, if not fatally, impaired. Faced with such a credible threat to its energy security, China is unlikely to undertake actions that would jeopardize the vital interests of the United States or India.

### **An Indian Perspective**

China is, and will remain, India's foremost national security threat. In a serious conflict with China, India is unlikely to prevail, or even manage a draw, singlehandedly. China has seven pathways to launch an armed attack on India: (1) from Xinjiang through Aksai Chin; (2) from Tibet across the Sino-Indian border in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh; (3) from Xinjiang through Pakistan; (4) from Tibet through Nepal; (5) from Tibet through Bhutan; (6) from China through Myanmar; and (7) from China via the South China Sea through the Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda Straits into the Bay of Bengal. The last five options would involve China violating the sovereignty of a neighboring country, although Pakistan, China's ally for over a half century, may be a willing accomplice.

Undoubtedly, defending India is an enormous undertaking considering Beijing gets to choose the time, place, and manner of attack. Only a nuclear attack might be ruled out since India and China have sufficient second-strike capabilities—via land, sea, and air—for mutual assured destruction. A nuclear war would not be planned, but it could be the tragic, unintended consequence of a conventional conflict if escalatory dynamics are seriously miscalculated and spin out of control.

In 1962, India and China fought an undeclared border war over competing sovereignty claims with respect to the Aksai Chin area of Indian administered Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh. India was completely routed. In a second urgent letter to President John F. Kennedy on November 19, 1962, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged India's peril and requested American aid: "With the advance of the Chinese in massive strength, the entire Brahmaputra Valley is seriously threatened and unless something is done immediately to stem the tide the whole of Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Nagaland

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13 The previously mentioned EIA projections for 2037 forecast Russia's total oil exports (calculated as the difference between production and consumption) to be 7.5 million bbl/d and total natural gas exports to be 11.2 Tcf. With domestic production and 60 percent of Russia's available energy exports, which would be 4.5 million bbl/d of oil and 6.7 Tcf of natural gas, China could meet 55 percent of the nation's total consumption requirement of 17 million bbl/d of oil and 100 percent of its natural gas consumption requirement of 6.4 Tcf.

would also pass into Chinese hands.”<sup>14</sup> China, perhaps to preempt the possibility of a major US military intervention, unilaterally decided to retain Aksai Chin, whose vital corridor linking Tibet and Xinjiang was a strategic priority, but withdrew completely from Arunachal Pradesh without relinquishing its sovereignty claims over the area.

More than half a century later, India continues to suffer a huge power disparity relative to China. India’s gross domestic product in 2017 was about \$9.4 trillion or about 41 percent of China’s GDP of \$23.1 trillion, and India’s foreign exchange reserves of \$407 billion were a mere eighth of China’s \$3.2 trillion.<sup>15</sup> India’s estimated defense spending as a percentage of GDP in 2016 was 2.5 percent compared to China’s 1.9 percent.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, since India’s GDP is only 41 percent of China’s, to achieve parity in absolute terms Indian defense spending would have to be 2.4 times the Chinese rate of 1.9 percent, or 4.6 percent. As India spent 3.9 percent of GDP on defense in 1987, it is reasonable to assume that India could step up to a 4 percent spending rate on defense over time.<sup>17</sup> India, nevertheless, cannot grow out of its relative power deficit based upon forecasts for 2037 that indicate India’s GDP of \$22.4 trillion would be only 47 percent of China’s \$47.4 trillion.<sup>18</sup>

New Delhi continually struggles to balance the very real scourges of malnutrition, disease, and illiteracy that sap the country’s vitality with the contingent risk to national security posed by China. As early as November 18, 1950, Prime Minister Nehru grappled with this issue: “If we really feared an attack [by China] and had to make provision for it, this would cast an intolerable burden on us, financial and otherwise . . . there are limits beyond which we cannot go at least for some years.”<sup>19</sup> This agonizing quandary of guns versus butter continues today.

Ultimately, an India determined to defend itself alone faces a strategic dilemma in confronting a significantly larger, and equally determined, adversary such as China. The amount of resources India can mobilize for its defense is limited by the size of its economy, and once that limit is reached, New Delhi must either accept the hegemony of the more powerful adversary (and the attendant diminution of India’s sovereignty) or seek an alliance as an equal partner with a powerful state that is in competition with the common foe, which would imply sharing sovereignty with the ally with respect to certain national security issues.<sup>20</sup>

Since the fundamental strategic calculus is not in New Delhi’s favor, there is only one realistic solution to India’s strategic dilemma—an

14 Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to President John F. Kennedy, telegram, November 19, 1962, 10:01 p.m., Nehru Correspondence, November 1962, 11–19, JFKNSF-111-016, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

15 “World Factbook,” Central Intelligence Agency.

16 “Military expenditure (% GDP),” World Bank, accessed March 20, 2019.

17 According to a 2016 Indian public opinion survey, about 63 percent were in favor of increasing defense expenditures. See Bruce Stokes, “India and Modi: The Honeymoon Continues,” Pew Research Center, September 19, 2016, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/09/19/india-and-modi-the-honeymoon-continues/>.

18 “World Gross Domestic Product (GDP),” EIA.

19 “The History of Sino-Indian Relations and the Border Dispute between the Two Nations (5),” *Resurgent India*, March 23, 2015.

20 Crafting hub-and-spoke bilateral security arrangements with smaller Asian states such as Japan, Australia, Vietnam, and Singapore as an alternative to an Indo-American alliance will not materially change India’s adverse security calculus relative to China.

alliance with the United States. Arguably, from the time of Prime Minister Nehru's brief encounter with President Kennedy in 1962 to more recent flirtations over the past 25 years of Prime Ministers P.V. Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, and Narendra Modi with Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, and the warm embrace of current Prime Minister Modi with President Donald Trump, New Delhi appears to be signaling its willingness to shed its commitment to nonalignment and strategic autonomy, and albeit gingerly, enter into an arranged partnership if not marriage.<sup>21</sup>

### Can India Pivot to an Alliance with America?

In his seminal address to a joint session of Congress, Prime Minister Narendra Modi confidently declared, "Today, our relationship has overcome the hesitations of history. A strong India-US partnership can anchor peace, prosperity and stability."<sup>22</sup> And, in a reassuring sign of strategic continuity, the joint communiqués, issued at the time of Prime Minister Modi's visit with President Obama in June 2016 and his visit a year later with President Trump, were remarkably similar and stressed three key themes: freedom of navigation, peaceful settlement of territorial and maritime disputes, and sharing critical defense technology with India on the same basis as the closest US allies.<sup>23</sup>

While a formal Indo-American alliance may be in sight, it is prudent to consider possible obstacles—such as India's legacy commitment to nonalignment and strategic autonomy, doubts about the reliability of the United States as a strategic partner, and possible adverse economic consequences of provoking China—of which none are insurmountable obstacles.

Since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1947, India has embraced nonalignment as the best way to preserve sovereignty and to avoid becoming entangled in the bipolar conflicts of the Cold War. As a practical matter, nonalignment and neutrality became synonymous, although rhetoric from New Delhi had a decidedly pro-Soviet tilt. With the end of the Cold War, India adopted a doctrine of nonalignment, rebranded as strategic autonomy, to reflect a multipolar world.<sup>24</sup>

Any attempt to sacrifice an Indo-American alliance on the altar of nonalignment and strategic autonomy is likely to fail. Adherents of this legacy doctrine would have to demonstrate that India, sans the proposed alliance, will have the capability to defend itself in a serious nonnuclear kinetic confrontation with China. Given the significant economic disadvantage, there is no credible basis for believing New Delhi can

21 For different perspectives on the likely trajectory of US-India relations see Sumit Ganguly, "Has Modi Truly Changed India's Foreign Policy?," *Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 131–43, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2017.1328929; and Rajesh Rajagopalan, "U.S.-India Relations under President Trump: Promise and Peril," *Asia Policy* 24 (July 2017): 39–45, doi:10.1353/asp.2017.0042.

22 "Text of the Prime Minister's Address to the Joint Session of U.S. Congress," *Hindu*, June 8, 2016.

23 "Joint Statement: The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century," White House, June 7, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/07/joint-statement-united-states-and-india-enduring-global-partners-21st>; and "United States and India: Prosperity through Partnership," White House, June 26, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/26/united-states-and-india-prosperity-through-partnership>.

24 Siddharth Varadarajan, "Interview: There Is a New China in the NSG and India Needs To Find a Way To Deal with It," *The Wire*, accessed June 30, 2016.

independently close the chasm between its capability and its intention to defend itself.

In fact, New Delhi has demonstrated that in extremis it is prepared to jettison nonalignment and strategic autonomy to safeguard national security. In 1962, with the Chinese steamroller threatening to overrun northeast India, Nehru proposed what was effectively an Indo-American defense pact that provided for an immediate infusion of US military equipment that included stationing 12 US Air Force squadrons and establishing a network of American military radar installations in the country.<sup>25</sup> Anticipating an Indo-Pak war, New Delhi signed a security pact with Moscow on August 9, 1971, that was designed to ensure India retained a continual flow of Soviet military equipment and, crucially, deter a possible Chinese intervention.<sup>26</sup>

While challenging the facts underpinning the decisive advantage of China in terms of capabilities is difficult, some who cling to a policy of nonalignment counter that Beijing's intentions are benign. These proponents believe China is willing to normalize the Sino-Indian boundary, with possible minor rectifications, and rhetoric notwithstanding, the Middle Kingdom does not have irredentist ambitions toward Arunachal Pradesh—or Southern Tibet in official Chinese terminology—which lies within India's border established by the McMahon Line.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, despite sporadic border incidents over the past 55 years, peace has prevailed along the line of actual control representing the *de facto* Sino-Indian border, which testifies to China's satisfaction with the status quo. Consequently, an Indo-American security pact would be perceived by Beijing as a threat to the current geostrategic status quo.

It is highly unlikely that fear of arousing the otherwise contented dragon would derail the prospects for an Indo-American alliance. The security pact would cover only the territory under the administrative control of India and would not extend to territory that is under Beijing's administration but could be claimed by New Delhi. Far from threatening the status quo along the Sino-Indian border, the pact would deter China from future attempts to change the *de facto* border by forcefully reclaiming Arunachal Pradesh. Current intentions do not preclude future Chinese irredentism emboldened by India's continued relative weakness. Even a successful Indian effort to craft a *modus vivendi* with China, while desirable, would not obviate the need for a security pact with America. In the absence of an Indo-American alliance, and given the disparity in relative power, India would have to rely on Chinese forbearance. New Delhi cannot escape the harsh reality of asymmetrical capabilities by invoking wishful symmetrical intentions.

This debate regarding Beijing's intentions is not new. When China proceeded to reclaim Tibet in 1950, the potential of China morphing

25 Nehru, telegram.

26 "Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation," Ministry of External Affairs (India), accessed April 9, 2018, <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5139/Treaty+of+>.

27 Shortly after the commencement of the Sino-Indian border war, the United States stated it recognized the McMahon Line as India's northeastern boundary while remaining silent on Aksai Chin and the northwestern boundary. This continues to be the American position. See "Memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kaysen) to President Kennedy," October 26, 1962, document 181, Office of the Historian, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v19/d181>.

into a serious threat to India and its sphere of interest had to be considered. Then the deputy prime minister and home affairs minister, Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai “Sardar” Patel, cautioned “even though we regard ourselves as the friends of China, the Chinese do not regard us as their friends.”<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Shri Aurobindo, an erstwhile freedom fighter and revolutionary politician who had long since withdrawn from the political arena to pursue poetry, philosophy, and yoga, bluntly warned “the basic significance of Mao’s Tibetan adventure is to advance China’s frontiers right down to India and stand poised there to strike at the right moment and with the right strategy.”<sup>29</sup>

Tragically, Nehru dismissed the likelihood of a conflict with China declaring “it is exceedingly unlikely that we may have to face any real military invasion from the Chinese side, whether in peace or in war, in the foreseeable future.”<sup>30</sup> His faith in Chinese restraint, purchased with a decade of conciliatory accommodation of the dragon’s sensitivities, was disastrous. Having gambled once, New Delhi cannot afford to do so again in hopes of a more favorable outcome.

Resistance to an alliance between India and the United States could also emerge from those interested in Sino-Indian trade who may raise concerns about the potential adverse economic consequences to India, such as terminated agreements with its largest trading partner. According to Indian government trade statistics, for the fiscal year (FY) ending March 2017, total exports and imports with the Middle Kingdom amounted to \$71.5 billion, compared to the total trade with the United States of \$64.5 billion.<sup>31</sup> A more sophisticated approach to assessing the strategic importance of trade relations, and to counter misguided concerns, would focus on the relative value of Indian exports, which generate foreign exchange revenues that help fund the country’s economic growth. Namely, Indian merchandise exports to China during FY 2017 amounted to \$10.2 billion (3.7 percent of total exports) while exports to the United States were \$42.2 billion (15.3 percent of total exports). Clearly, the United States as an export market is far more important than China since the adverse economic consequences of China closing its markets to India would not be significant.

A key driver of New Delhi’s nonalignment policy is the desire to avoid conflicts, particularly those between more powerful nations that do not affect India’s vital interests. An Indo-American alliance, according to some partisans of strategic autonomy, unnecessarily intertwines the Sino-Indian border dispute with the Sino-American dispute over the South China Sea. Certainly, the fundamental quid pro quo of such a security pact would be America’s willingness to fight beside India to preserve the status quo along the Sino-Indian border in exchange for India’s willingness to join arms with America to safeguard freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. This linkage is appropriate because

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28 “Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel’s letter to Jawaharlal Nehru on 7 November 1950,” Friends of Tibet, accessed April 9, 2018, <http://www.friendsoftibet.org/main/sardar.html>.

29 Quoted in Sudhir Ghosh, *Gandhi’s Emisary* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2008), 277.

30 “Sino-Indian Relations,” *Resurgent India*.

31 “Trade Statistics: Export Import Data Bank (Annual): China PRP” Government of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, accessed April 24, 2018, [www.commerce-app.gov.in/eid/default.asp](http://www.commerce-app.gov.in/eid/default.asp).



it reflects the convergence of vital national interests and recognizes the security interdependence of both countries.

A strong case can be made that the South China Sea is a vital Indian national interest. About 80 percent of China's oil imports, which will be essential to interdict in the event of a major conflict with China, currently flow through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea.<sup>32</sup> In any major Indian conflict with China, it will be essential to interdict such energy imports. India cannot sustain an effective naval blockade without American help.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, New Delhi will need to ensure that the Chinese Navy does not cross the South China Sea and pass through the Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda Straits to attack India's east coast. Again, India will need US assistance to keep the Chinese fleet confined in home ports. Therefore, it is in India's vital national interest that the US Navy operate freely in the South China Sea.

Opponents of an Indo-American alliance could also argue the United States may be an unreliable partner. They will point out that Washington placed its interests in forging Sino-American détente to counter the Soviet Union in 1971 over India's national security concerns arising from the civil war between East and West Pakistan. Specifically, the United States assured Beijing that it would not object to intervention in support of West Pakistan, sent a US naval task force into the Bay of Bengal to intimidate India, cut off economic aid to India, and encouraged the transfer of fighter aircraft from Jordan to West Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> Currently, the United States is embroiled in a dangerous dispute with North Korea over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program and is seeking Beijing's help to pressure the Kim regime. Washington could be lured once again by the siren song of a grand bargain with Beijing, which could result in shortchanging India's vital national interests.

This concern regarding American reliability can be overcome on the basis that vital national interests will trump commitments to others. The real question, therefore, is whether the vital national interests of the United States and India with respect to China are converging in such a way that a similar threat perception will likely be shared for the foreseeable future. The joint communiqués of 2016 and 2017 confirm the strong convergence of interests.

Importantly, in October 2017, Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson addressed concerns about American reliability and commitment to India by highlighting the centrality of the threat posed by China; reaffirming the military, geographic, and economic importance of India; recognizing New Delhi as an equal partner; acknowledging India's economy will surpass that of the United States by 2050; and predicting the strategic partnership between the two countries will endure for a century.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, issued by President Trump in December 2017, declares China to be a

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32 OSD, *Annual Report to Congress*, 43.

33 For example, China currently has an overwhelming 4:1 advantage in submarines with 68 compared to India's 15. The United States has a fleet of 70 submarines. See "2017 Military Strength Ranking," Global Firepower.

34 "Memorandum of Conversation," December 10, 1971, document 274, Office of the Historian, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v11/d274>.

35 Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2017).

national security threat for the first time: “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.” Crucially, the strategy embraces India’s ambitions to be a leading power and enshrines India as a strategic partner to address China’s threat: “We welcome India’s emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner.” To drive home the central importance of India, the strategy reiterates: “We will deepen our strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region.”<sup>36</sup> The bogey of a de facto Sino-American condominium that would trifle with India’s vital national interests is simply not credible.

The Indian public’s opinion provides grounds for optimism that an Indo-American alliance is a realistic possibility. According to a Pew Research Center survey published on November 15, 2017, 49 percent of Indians have a favorable view of the United States, while only 9 percent have an unfavorable view and 42 percent have no opinion. By contrast, only 26 percent have a favorable view of China, 44 percent have an unfavorable view and 30 percent express no opinion.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, 56 percent consider China’s increasing military power as bad for India while only 19 percent consider American power to be a negative for India. In an earlier Pew survey issued in September 2016, about 69 percent were worried about the Sino-Indian border dispute.<sup>38</sup>

It is not surprising that over the past quarter century, all Indian prime ministers, regardless of party, have supported increasingly closer strategic ties with America.<sup>39</sup> Kenneth I. Juster, the current US ambassador to India, has highlighted this bipartisan consensus: “Significantly, there has been strong, consistent, and sustained support for this [Indo-American] partnership from the major parties in each of our countries, across multiple changes of government.”<sup>40</sup> Indian public opinion, which must be cultivated and cannot be taken for granted, is unlikely to be a stumbling block for the prospective alliance.

### **An Alternative Strategic Calculus?**

For the United States, the strategic calculus, absent India, is not very attractive. Without New Delhi, Washington will suffer a continuing decline in its strategic position relative to Beijing. America’s longstanding bilateral alliances with Japan and Australia will not materially change this adverse strategic calculus. Central Intelligence Agency statistics indicate the combined GDP of the United States, Japan, and Australia in 2017 totaled \$26 trillion slightly ahead of China’s GDP of \$23.1 trillion, while the combined population of the three allies amounted to 475 million

36 Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 25, 46, 50.

37 See Bruce Stokes, Dorothy Manevich, and Hanyu Chwe, “Three Years In, Modi Remains Very Popular,” Pew Research Center, November 15, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/11/15/india-modi-remains-very-popular-three-years-in/>.

38 See Stokes, “India and Modi.”

39 The efforts of prime ministers P.V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh of the Indian National Congress and Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party to forge a strong strategic relationship with the United States indicate a favorable bipartisan interest for such an initiative.

40 “Remarks by Kenneth I. Juster U.S. Ambassador to India: U.S.-India Relations: Building a Durable Partnership for the 21st Century,” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India, January 11, 2018, <https://in.usembassy.gov/u-s-india-relations-building-durable-partnership-21st-century/>.

people compared to China's population of 1.4 billion. Based on recent Global Firepower estimates, the combined active military force of the three allies was about 1.6 million servicemembers compared to China's military of 2.2 million.

By 2037, however, China has a decisive advantage. Per EIA projections, the combined GDP of the United States, Japan, and Australia is expected to be only \$33.1 trillion or about 70 percent of China's GDP of \$47.4 trillion, and the combined population of the trio is expected to be 528 million people or about 38 percent of China's population of 1.4 billion. Moreover, the US alliances with Japan and Australia do not provide a geostrategic gateway along China's soft southwestern underbelly that would support an effective landpower option to counter China's Silk Road strategy. While it is likely to take two decades for China to execute fully its alternative pipelines strategy, it would be a monumental mistake to gamble on China's failure.

In 1950–51, American and Chinese military forces took the measure of each other during the Korean War. Numerically superior but technologically inferior Chinese troops fought the Americans to a stalemate. Arguably, the outcome—not winning—was effectively a military defeat for the United States. Washington grossly underestimated Beijing's intentions and capabilities. As a result, Chinese military forces were able to achieve local battlefield dominance and successfully realize Beijing's strategic objectives.

If past is not to be prologue, China must be convinced that it will be unable to achieve local area dominance along India's northern border or in the vital sea lines of communication and maritime choke points of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Only an Indo-American alliance can effectively counterbalance, deter, and contain an assertive, resurgent China bent on becoming Asia's hegemon.

### **Implications for US Landpower**

Doctrinal orthodoxy rests on the presumption of a static strategic universe and is invariably disrupted by dynamic reality. Secretary Gates's 2011 speech reflected the current reality that US adversaries, such as China, were heavily dependent upon seaborne trade. Consequently, the central challenge for the US military was to ensure continued control of the global maritime and air commons and thereby safeguard America's role as the sole global power.

China's response, announced two years later, was to launch its Silk Road initiative that essentially turns the table on America's strategic assumption of the primacy of maritime and airpower by leveraging the Middle Kingdom's historic strength as a landpower. If successful, China's Silk Road will completely bypass the maritime commons and render US naval and air supremacy irrelevant within a generation.

Current American military doctrine, given its focus on maritime and airpower, cannot deal with China's brilliant landpower counter move. Rather than doubling down on maritime and airpower, or simply hoping that China will fail, it is imperative that Washington trump Beijing's strategy with a daring decision to restore landpower as the primary military means to check the Chinese juggernaut.

An Indo-American strategic alliance incorporates the centrality of landpower since it is designed to threaten China's energy security via a land invasion across India's northern border into Tibet and Xinjiang provinces to shut down energy pipeline terminals in Kashgar and Urumqi. Putting sufficient boots on the ground, and sustaining them to ensure local area dominance, is the army's primary competency.

To assume such a Himalayan challenge, the US Army will have to ensure its troops are ready for combat in an extraordinarily inhospitable environment: frigid temperatures, ice and snow, rapidly changing weather conditions, very high altitudes, and treacherous mountains—the domain of infantry, artillery, and supply logistics. In short, the Army will have to be prepared to demonstrate that it has the capability—in terms of manpower, equipment, and training—and the capacity, in partnership with the Indian Army, to prosecute a major ground war in Asia.<sup>41</sup>

Entering into a new security agreement that potentially obligates America to fight another land war in Asia will not be easy. Given China is expected to be America's greatest national security threat by 2025, the next 5–10 years is the likely time frame for establishing a US-India mutual defense treaty to deal with the ripening Chinese threat. Transforming a tentative and hesitant relationship into a formal committed alliance will require strategic patience, persistence, and perseverance.<sup>42</sup> Yet, by leveraging their combined landpower—the crucial missing link—together with supporting maritime and airpower, the American eagle and Indian tiger, jointly but perhaps not severally, can continue to keep the Chinese dragon at bay for the foreseeable future.

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41 Joint military exercises such as the armies' Yudh Abhyas (since 2004) and the navies' Malabar (since 2002) are good building blocks for enhancing joint operability.

42 See *Hearing to Consider the Nomination of General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC, for Reappointment to the Grade of General and Reappointment To Be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 115th Cong.* (September 26, 2017) (statement of General Joseph F. Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff).