Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing on China's Influence in South and Central Asia

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Co-chairs Bartholomew and Schriver, members of the Commission and staff, thank you very much for your invitation to testify on China's influence in South Asia.

China is not a newcomer in South Asia, but its activities and influence in the region across a range of domains have been increasing in recent years. Just in the last two years, the region has garnered more attention from Beijing for several reasons including a China-India boundary crisis, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, concerns about the safety of Chinese citizens in Pakistan, the challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 has presented for Chinese interests in the region, as well as growing interest from other major powers, especially the US, in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

The US and India on China: Alignments

Over the last decade and a half at least, as Washington and Delhi's relationships with Beijing have soured, their own bilateral ties have deepened. This is not a coincidence. The US and India's strategic convergence vis-à-vis China and in the Indo-Pacific has been a key driver of the US-India relationship. This has led to closer ties, and to incentivizing the two capitals to manage their differences more effectively.

Both countries have had relationships with China that have involved elements of cooperation and competition, though in different proportion at different times. In recent years, the competitive dimensions have dominated in both the Sino-Indian and Sino-US bilaterals. Even as the US-China relationship has moved toward strategic competition, India's relationship with China has deteriorated due to a boundary crisis that started in 2020 and continues to this day. Former senior Indian officials have described the current state of the relationship with China as one of armed coexistence. Nonetheless, like the US, India also continues to maintain economic ties with China, albeit at a smaller scale, and Delhi seeks to cooperate with Beijing on some issues.

Washington and Delhi have shared, though not identical, concerns about a rising China's capabilities, intentions, and actions. Both believe the challenge is a cross-domain one, spanning geopolitical, economic, technological, and ideological dimensions. Their concerns include the nature and extent of Chinese involvement and influence in the Indo-Pacific, including in South Asia. They worry that Beijing seeks a unipolar Asia dominated by a China that sets the terms. And they see China's recent behavior as the major challenge to their vision of a free, open, and rules-based region, and as hindering US and Indian interests.

India shares several US concerns about China, including its growing military and technological capabilities and expanding footprint in the Indo-Pacific. Delhi, too, worries about Beijing not following through on commitments it has made, and its unilateral changes to the status quo with the

[1] The views expressed in this testimony are solely those of the author. The Brookings Institution does not take institutional positions.

threat or use of force, whether in the South China Sea or along the China-India border. The two countries are also aligned on several economic differences with China, particularly the lack of reciprocity in this domain. For both, friction points with Beijing include large trade deficits, limited market access, intellectual property theft, preference for state-owned enterprises and the blurring of public-private sector lines, and forced technology transfer.

Delhi and Beijing also worry about the nature and effect of Chinese economic engagement in their own countries, as well as in the broader region. In South Asia, and indeed the broader Indo-Pacific, both believe that Chinese economic involvement is exacerbating, among other things, unsustainable debt burdens. And they see Beijing as using economic leverage—and even coercion—for strategic and political ends, including curbing American and Indian influence in the region.

These concerns, and an understanding that the challenge cannot be tackled alone, have led to a closer relationship between the US and India. The past several US administrations have envisioned India as a geopolitical counterbalance, economic alternative, or democratic contrast to China. And this has contributed significantly to their view that, as a result, India's rise is in American interests and worth supporting. India, too, has seen the US as crucial as it manages its China relationship. Delhi believes that its ties with the US have at times served as leverage, with Beijing taking India more seriously in part because Washington does. In addition, the US has directly and indirectly helped enhance India's military, economic, and technological capabilities. And it is a critical node in India's network of partnerships that is designed to help maintain a favorable balance of power in the region.

The parallel US and Indian competitions with China have also led to American assistance to India in recent Sino-Indian crises, which, in turn, has increased Delhi's willingness to deepen the partnership with the US. During the 2017 Doklam crisis, Washington provided some rhetorical support and behind-the-scenes assistance (including, reportedly, through intelligence-sharing) to India. Military equipment that India purchased from the US also improved its ability to respond to Chinese activities at the boundary during the crisis. P-8I reconnaissance aircraft, for example, provided India a better picture of Chinese deployments. During the 2020 crisis, US support for India was more visible. Rhetorical support included criticism of China from the Trump administration and both sides of the aisle on Capitol Hill. In 2020, assistance to India also reportedly included the fast-tracking of certain equipment and intelligence sharing. The Indian military also extensively deployed equipment acquired from the US during the crisis. Trump administration officials were in regular touch with their Indian counterparts at the height of the crisis. The Biden administration has continued these consultations, and also continued to criticize China's "aggression on the border with India."

US-India alignment on China has also led to cooperation beyond the bilateral domain. This is perhaps most evident in the revival and deepening of the Quad, but also involves increased engagement via other minilaterals and in regional and multilateral institutions.

The US and India on China: Misalignments

The American and Indian approaches on China are not, however, entirely aligned. This is, among other things, a function of geography, the nature and extent of their relationships with China, regional commitments, and differences in how they see the balance between values and interests.

India, for instance, worries less about the ideological dimensions of the China challenge. Delhi does not dismiss the impact of the nature of the Chinese regime—Beijing's handling of COVID-19 and the lack of clarity about its motivations for the 2020 boundary crisis have made the adverse effects evident to Delhi. However, if one considers the spectrum of objectives debated in the US, Delhi would be more aligned with those arguing that the goal should be to shape the environment in which China is operating to deter it from adverse actions rather than regime change in Beijing. They are also more reluctant to frame the competition as one of democracies versus autocracies, in part because they believe that will exclude potential partners in the Indo-Pacific, including in South Asia.

In addition, there have been differences between the US and India on the question of how far and fast to compete with China, though these have narrowed somewhat recently. In Washington, there has been a sense that India's desire not to provoke China has limited its cooperation with the US and other countries. Delhi, on the other hand, has been concerned about blowback from Beijing if India is seen as a US ally. It often reminds interlocutors that its prism and range of options is shaped by the reality of being China's neighbor. Nonetheless, Delhi has overcome some of its reluctance as China has become more assertive, for instance, deepening its defense and security ties with the US, and including Australia in the India-Japan-US MALABAR naval exercise. And, while India remains less willing than the US to call China out by name, in some cases, India has gone further than the US. For instance, imposing restrictions on Chinese investment in the country and banning Chinese apps.

The US and India's different speeds and styles can lead to disappointment and doubts if not handled with care, as can the G2-A2 problem. The first involves concerns in India that China's relevance to key American priorities or a US desire to focus on other domestic or foreign policy priorities will lead to Washington making concessions to Beijing or to a US-China condominium. The second part involves American concerns that, to focus on domestic priorities and remain non-aligned, India will be drawn in by Beijing's Asia-for Asians approach and make concessions to China or cooperate with it via the Russia-India-China, BRICS or Shanghai Cooperation Organization mechanisms. These concerns are often evident when there are high-level Sino-US or Sino-Indian engagements.

American and Indian approaches to the Indo-Pacific and the China challenge therein, while largely aligned, also have differences. One set involves emphases. Within the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean region is of greater priority to India, while the Pacific has naturally received more American attention and resources, given US alliances, partnerships, and commitments in that region. Furthermore, Delhi sees the American emphasis in the Indo-Pacific as being primarily on the maritime domain, whereas it also has crucial continental concerns and considers the Eurasian landmass an arena of competition with China as well. The two countries also prioritize different issue sets: Delhi, for instance, cares far more about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) than it does developments on the Korean peninsula. They also have different relationships with Taiwan, which, in part, means they think about a contingency in the Taiwan Strait from different vantage points.

Finally, there can be some divergences on principles and partners. There are different interpretations, for instance, of freedom of navigation, with Delhi seeking to exercise greater authority in its exclusive economic zone. In terms of partners, even as India has been concerned about growing Sino-Russian alignment, it has seen Russia as a partner in its balancing strategy vis-à-vis China and in its effort to build military capability—thus, it has sought, at the very least, to avoid actions that might push Russia closer to China and wanted to incentivize Moscow to maintain other partnership options. The US, on the other hand, sees Russia as a rival. This particular US-India difference has been evident in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Another example is India's partnership with Mauritius

that, along with its stance on decolonization, has led it to support Port Louis' claim against Britain to the Chagos archipelago. That, in turn, complicates America's interests in the Diego Garcia base.

Nonetheless, shared concerns about China's involvement in the Indo-Pacific and particularly in South Asia and Indian Ocean region have helped narrow some US-India differences or helped them manage them better. For instance, today India has a different view of American power and presence in the Indian Ocean—including at Diego Garcia—than it did before. Delhi has historically not liked to see extra-regional countries be active in what it considers its backyard. But, just as in the 1950s and 1960s, as China has become more active in the region, India has become more accepting, if not welcoming, of more American and Japanese involvement in the region if it brings additional resources and offers alternatives to China's initiatives. This was evident in Delhi's welcoming of the US-Maldives defense agreement and the Japan-Maldives coast guard agreement. This attitude has also opened the door to US-India cooperation, for instance, in Nepal or coordination (for example, on COVID-19 response) in the region. Concerned about the growing activities of China in this region and thus wanting to see the US maintain and even expand its involvement in the region, it's response to AUKUS has been sanguine, if not welcoming.

China and South Asia

China is not a newcomer in South Asia. It has engaged with this subregion since the founding of the People's Republic, with the nature and extent of its interest and interactions varying over time and across countries. Today, this engagement is broader and deeper than ever before, with greater Chinese attention as it sees South Asia in terms of its broader economic and strategic interests. This engagement precedes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but that initiative reflects and has driven an acceleration in Chinese activities and desire to seek increased influence—and curb that of the US and India—in the subregion.

It is worth considering Beijing's engagement in the region in three baskets: that with (1) rival India, (2) partner Pakistan, and (3) the non-aligned smaller South Asian states.

After some initial years of cooperation, the China-India relationship turned competitive in the mid-to-late 1950s due in large part to their boundary dispute and the Dalai Lama's escape to India. From the late 1980s, there were attempts to establish a new, more stable modus vivendi. The two countries reached agreements that sought to ensure peace and tranquility at the border, which would enable the development of other dimensions of the relationship. That was the basis for a period of cooperation, which involved increased high-level interaction, the development of economic ties, and engagement in the multilateral sphere, including on issues like global economic governance and climate change and in/with institutions like BRICS, the Russia-India-China trilateral, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

However, the competitive Sino-Indian dimension never disappeared and, since the 2008 global financial crisis and particularly after Xi Jinping took office, it has arguably dominated. This competition plays out at the bilateral, regional, and global levels. It has involved the intensifying boundary dispute (with four major crises since 2013), Tibet, the sharing of the Brahmaputra river waters, economic frictions, technology concerns, the China-Pakistan relationship, China and India's increasing activities and influence in their overlapping peripheries, divergent stands in global organizations, and a lack of trust. In the last two years, the relationship has deteriorated with the worst

boundary crisis since the 1962 China-India war, and an Indian belief that China violated the boundary agreements that the two countries had signed. Given the resultant border deployments, upgrading of military capabilities and infrastructure, impact on India's domestic and foreign policies, and Beijing's framing of boundary differences now not as a historical dispute but a sovereignty issue, it is unlikely that the relationship will go back to where it stood two years ago.

The China-Pakistan relationship is almost the opposite of the Sino-Indian one. Initially, China saw Pakistan as an American ally—and Pakistan was indeed a member of the South East Asia Treaty Organization. But, as China's relations with India deteriorated, its relations with Pakistan deepened in the late 1950s and particularly early 1960s. For Beijing, this was containment on the cheap—by strengthening Pakistan's capabilities, it kept India (then seen as a US partner) tied down in South Asia. This strategic rationale for the close partnership remains today but the nature of Sino-Pakistani ties has changed in some ways. Diplomatic and military cooperation dominated the initial decades. However, in recent decades, cooperation in the economic sphere has also grown, making the relationship more than a government-to-government or military-to-military one. It has also meant that Pakistan's domestic political and security environment has become of greater interest to Beijing than it had been in the past. Beijing has at times seen American engagement with Pakistan to be in its interests, both because it distributes the burden among different Pakistani partners, and it can cause friction in the US-India relationship. However, when this engagement goes against Chinese interests and preferences, Beijing has made its unhappiness clear.

China's ties with several other South Asian states also go back historically, but they have grown in recent years, albeit to different degrees. Ties with Bangladesh have gone from China resisting its creation to becoming its largest supplier of defense equipment. Ties with Nepal and Myanmar—two other countries that are part of China and India's overlapping periphery—have also deepened, as have China's interests in two Indian Ocean countries, Maldives and Sri Lanka. In each case, China's diplomatic, economic, technology, defense, public diplomacy, and even political engagement has increased. In Afghanistan, Beijing has been engaging with the Taliban and joined Russia in a de facto recognition of the new government in Kabul (including through high-level engagement). One exception to such Chinese engagement in South Asia has been Bhutan, which has not established diplomatic relations with China. However, the two countries are engaged in border negotiations, and Beijing has sought ways to increase its influence in Bhutan, as well as put pressure on that country's close ties with India.

China has also been attempting to engage with the region as a whole, often sans India. Delhi has resisted upgrading China's status as an observer in the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation to full membership. However, Beijing has created its own mechanisms akin to forums it has created with other regions in the world. For instance, it has convened various collective dialogues, including on COVID-19, with several South Asian states, and participate in or hosted discussions of Afghanistan's neighbors (that included one non-neighbor—Russia—while excluding another, India).

China's motivations for engagement with various countries in the region has varied. In each case, today those involve economic interests. But even beyond India and Pakistan, where Chinese strategic interests have driven its interactions, there have also been specific security considerations that have sometimes dominated. In Nepal, for instance, these involve controlling Tibetan transit. In Afghanistan, Chinese concerns about the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and the Islamic State have driven its engagement with the Taliban. In the Indian Ocean islands, flag has followed trade, with increasing PLAN interest and activities as its economic footprint has expanded across the Indian

Ocean littoral. Whatever its initial intentions, the desire to protect these interests have now also led to a greater Chinese interest in the political dispensations and developments across the region—and in shaping them. Beijing's role in Nepal, for instance, has made evident that Chinese interests take precedence over any principle of non-interference.

Beijing's involvement in the region has not been without setbacks. These have included questions in some countries about the lack of transparency of BRI contracts and the terms involved, the inability of countries to repay debt (with fiscal problems exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war as evident in Sri Lanka), difficulties that Chinese companies have faced where they have had to navigate local conditions with less support from the capitals, security concerns, public backlash to China's increased economic and political influence that have made this an election issue, and questions about the costs and quality of China's COVID-19 assistance, including vaccines.

The US, China, and South Asia

Beijing's intensifying competitions with India and the US have affected its engagement in the region. While the primary area of Sino-US competition will remain in East Asia and the western Pacific, Beijing largely sees Washington, and particularly its ties with Delhi, as part of its challenge in South Asia. And it sees most American actions, alone and in conjunction with other major and middle powers, as complicating the landscape and Chinese interests. Chinese analysts have often publicly highlighted the US presence in the region as a net negative. They have even suggested to Indian counterparts that Washington is the source or instigator of China-India problems. Beijing has actively also dissuaded the smaller South Asian states from deepening ties with the US. For instance, the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh warned against engagement with the Quad, and Beijing was active in trying to scuttle Nepal ratifying a compact with the US-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) that will also enable deeper India-Nepal economic engagement. Some reports indicate it also played a role in Colombo discontinuing a MCC compact (and in encouraging opposition to a status of forces agreement with the US, and the Sri Lankan government scrapping a Japan-funded light rail project and an India-Japan-Sri Lanka project to develop the east container terminal in Colombi). China's missions in the region furthermore regularly deploy propaganda deriding the US or praising the Chinese model in contrast—this has been particularly evident during the course of the pandemic.

There have been some exceptions to the Chinese view of the US as a problem in the region, and the US and China have even cooperated or consulted in response to crises. However, their intensifying rivalry could change that dynamic, too.

Sino-US interactions during India-Pakistan tensions make this evident. After the Cold War, like the US, China wanted stability in South Asia, and it sought to cooperate with India. Thus, there were instances of Beijing either working alone or on a parallel track with Washington to try to defuse India-Pakistan tensions when they boiled over or threatened to do so. This was perhaps most evident during the Kargil conflict in 1999 and after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008. During the last India-Pakistan crisis in February 2019, however, the US-China rivalry and Washington and Beijing's respective relationships with Delhi and Islamabad seemed to shape their lack of consultation. The Trump administration even saw China as being unhelpful.

Washington and Beijing's future desire and ability to work together in South Asia will likely depend on the nature and extent of their rivalry, their relationships with India and Pakistan, and their

assessments of the leverage they have with Delhi and Islamabad (and their willingness to use it). One complication is that China's relationship with Pakistan is partly motivated by its rivalry with India. Washington, on the other hand, does not benefit from strained India-Pakistan relations—indeed those have often created problems for the US. So, while the two countries could seek stability in the region broadly, their motives and equities vis-à-vis India-Pakistan tensions are not necessarily the same.

Washington and Beijing have also cooperated in Afghanistan, where the two countries have worked together or at least pulled in the same direction at times (including in collaboration with Pakistan). They continue to engage via the extended troika mechanism after the Taliban takeover of the country though their interests are not entirely aligned. Given some shared security concerns, this could be a future arena for cooperation or at least coordination, particularly in the event of a terrorist attack.

Even beyond Afghanistan, there could be a shared interest in the security situation in Pakistan, given increasing Chinese concerns about the safety of its citizens and facilities there. However, Washington has also found that, by giving Islamabad a non-US option, China has reduced American leverage with Pakistan and made the Pakistani leadership less willing to take action Washington desires, especially on counterterrorism. For example, China had been willing to use its leverage with Pakistan to curb the activities of ETIM but not of the Haqqani network or Lashkar-e-Taiba.

In the broader region, in the past there has also been interest in China, the US and India in cooperating or at least working in parallel on certain regional and global issues. For example, they have shared an interest in maritime security in some realms, including anti-piracy. Each has responded to disasters in the Indian Ocean region—sometimes separately, sometimes coordinating. They have also at times aided each other in evacuating citizens in emergencies.

The challenge, however, has been differences in the US and China's approaches, as well as these issues getting caught up in Sino-US rivalry. When that happens, instead of helping alleviate tensions, these domains become another arena for competition—as, not just Sino-US interactions during recent India-Pakistan tensions, but also the competitive responses to COVID-19 demonstrate. And sometimes these issues themselves can contribute to competition.

Intensifying Sino-US have also altered views in Washington of Chinese activities that were earlier seen as benign or even beneficial. For example, initially the United States took a more sanguine view of CPEC, hoping it could contribute to Pakistani economic development, reduce Islamabad's demands of Washington, and incentivize China to seek stability and security in Pakistan. In recent years, however, American officials have expressed concern about CPEC, questioning its costs, effect on Pakistan's debt burden, lack of transparency, and effect on employment.

The American view of the smaller South Asian states has also changed as a result of competition with China in ways that Beijing dislikes. For one, this rivalry has put South Asia and the Indian Ocean region under a bigger spotlight because this is seen as an important arena in which China is increasing its activities, presence, and influence. Indeed, the Chinese project at Hambantota in Sri Lanka contributed to Washington's seeing BRI from a more competitive prism.

The greater US concern about China in South Asia, and especially the Indian Ocean region, has led to more attention to these countries in both the Trump and Biden administrations, and increased engagement and assistance. Over the last few years, Washington has hosted several of the region's

foreign ministers, with several American officials traveling to the countries as well. Last year, the deputy secretary of state hosted a meeting with interlocutors from several South Asian countries on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting. There have been new agreements, such as the MCC contract with Nepal and a defense agreement with the Maldives, intentions to expand the American diplomatic presence in the region, and some increased security and development assistance, and help in dealing with COVID-19.

Whatever American—or Indian—concerns about China's involvement in the region, however, the reality is that it has had both push and pull elements, i.e. this engagement has been sought or at least welcomed by most countries in the region. For many, China provides economic and military resources that others will not or cannot—particularly at the pace and scale and on terms that Beijing offers. Moreover, the China option gives them leverage with other major powers, particularly with India, which had alone dominated the region for several decades.

Thus, the smaller South Asian states will prefer not to choose sides or align with the US or China. For them, US-China competition—and China-India competition—has brought with it not just greater attention from the US (and China and India) but also an ability to play one benefactor against the other to maximize gains and their strategic space (Pakistan had long taken this approach though it has been less successful at making the argument today that the US should engage it to wean it away from China, given the close Sino-Pakistani partnership and level of Pakistani dependence on China). An additional benefit from some governments' perspectives (for example, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka): major power rivalry has reduced the extent to which US concerns about their internal political developments have impeded Washington's interaction with them. Thus, these countries' preference will be to maintain ties with several larger powers, use major power rivalries for their own benefit, and try to avoid getting squeezed by these competitions.

The Road Ahead

In the context of competition with China, the US will continue to put India at the heart of its South Asia strategy. However, the rest of the region should garner attention from the administration and Congress as well.

First, it will be important to recognize the diversity of opinion within South Asia on China. American expectations and approaches will have to be tailored accordingly. And it will require different efforts with different aims. Vis-à-vis India, which has been aligning with the US to balance China, these could involve trying to increase the scope, scale, and speed of alignment. It should entail discussing potential contingencies, including related to Taiwan and the China-India boundary, and clarifying expectations. And it should involve proactively discussing and managing or resolving difference in the region or on China, and keeping each other in the loop to avoid the G2-A2 concerns that arise intermittently and lead to uncertainty.

Vis-à-vis Pakistan, the expectations might have to be more limited—i.e., minimizing the support that it might offer China or finding ways to mitigate the consequences of that support. Vis-à-vis the other South Asian countries, the aim should be to encourage alignment, but if that is not possible or likely, then to ensure that they maintain a balance rather than bandwagon with or support Beijing. If their alignment isn't on the table, non-alignment is the next best option.

Second and relatedly, in South Asia and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, Washington will need to develop strategies for dealing with the new non-aligned in the context of intensifying US-China competition. In this regard, there are some lessons to be learnt from the Cold War. One lesson is with regard to framing. The new non-aligned in South Asia are unlikely to be attracted by—and might even be repelled by—a "with us or against us" framing, and/or by efforts to punish them for their non-alignment. Instead, there must be a willingness to accept their freedom to choose along with an effort to offer more attractive choices and to incentivize alignment.

Countries are also likely to distance themselves from a strategy that involves messaging focused on countering China. A democracy-vs-autocracy framing is also likely to limit South Asian buy-in—not necessarily because of the nature of their own regimes but because many in the region are sovereignty hawks and believe that outsiders have used ideological framing to intervene in countries. Far more effective and attractive messages will be those focused on the importance of the rules-based order and a region where countries are free to make choices, and on shared interests

Third, and relatedly, the US should frame its approaches to the smaller South Asian states more broadly than as a response to competition with China—even if that is the prism through which Washington will see these countries and the reason these countries are garnering greater interest. Being responsive to local priorities will make these relationships more sustainable, increasing the attractiveness of the US as a partner across more constituencies and limiting the blowback these countries are trying to avoid from China. And such an approach could still meet American objectives—for instance, a maritime security framing for Indian Ocean countries could cater to both American China-specific objectives, and be attractive to countries such as Maldives and Sri Lanka that are worried about both traditional and non-traditional security threats, and are interested in building their own capacities.

In addition, Washington should assess the value of certain trade-offs that will come into play in South Asia. For example, the foreign economic policy debate will shape the economic incentives and options the US can offer, and American strategic imperatives will not always reconcile with values-based imperatives in the region. Both, for instance, will affect the American approach to—and options available vis-à-vis—Bangladesh.

Washington should also be prepared to deal with trade-offs between its ties with India and the smaller South Asian states. The latter prefer to maintain an independent relationship with the US while India desires its neighborhood interests to be considered, if not prioritized, by its major power partners. The US can square the circle by forging independent ties with other South Asian states while keeping Delhi in the loop on sensitive matters (such as security ties).

Fourth, it will be important for the US to offer substantive solutions and alternatives to these countries—and not just wait for China to make mistakes. South Asian countries' willingness to cooperate or align with the US—or even stay neutral—will depend on their sense of American interest in and commitment to the region. This will require Congress resourcing the Indo-Pacific lines of effort, including those in South Asia. It will call for continued engagement in the region from both the executive and legislative branches even as the European theater demands American attention—in this regard continued visits by senior officials to and from the region will be helpful, as would members of Congress adding other South Asian states to their itineraries when they visit India or Pakistan. And it will require being responsive to the concerns of countries in the region, including the challenges to their security and prosperity.

The US should have realistic expectations about the approach South Asian countries will take vis-à-vis China (or not). However, they are more likely to align with the US or at least not bandwagon with China if they believe they have options, and that China can be deterred from not just the use of force but also coercion. Thus, steps that members of Congress can take or encourage the administration to take to offer strategic and economic alternatives, strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, and ensure the maintenance of a rules-based order will be crucial.

Fifth, given competing priorities at home and abroad and other constraints, it would also be helpful for the US to encourage and enable its like-minded partners to be responsive to the concerns and needs of countries in South Asia. But even as Washington works with India (and/or other partners like Australia, Japan, or the United Kingdom) in the region, this cannot be a substitute for developing and investing in independent relationships with these countries.

Sixth, in the near term, any steps that the US can take—alone or with partners—to mitigate the adverse economic, energy and food security consequences of the Russia-Ukraine crisis for countries in South Asia would be helpful. They would also help counter Sino-Russian messaging that it is Washington's rather than Moscow's decisions that are responsible for their predicaments. Relatedly, the US should try to ensure that its approach to South Asian countries on their positions to the current crisis in Europe does not hinder their willingness or ability to align with the US in the Indo-Pacific.

Seventh, the US should plan for any spillover from other subregions in Asia to South Asia in both the continental and maritime domains. Thinking across regional bureaucratic divisions should not necessarily involve whole-scale reorganizations of bureaus or combatant commands, but a better, more flexible ability to work across these seams. The creation of the Indo-Pacific coordinator position at the National Security Council is a step in the right direction. Further informal or formal mechanisms could help as well, including more regular exchanges between bureaus and commands and their counterparts in the region. Members of Congress might also recommend that the administration encourage diplomats to serve across these seams and thus develop "Indo-Pacific" expertise.

Eighth, US efforts in South Asia would benefit from investing in the development of a better understanding of the strategic, economic and political landscape in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, as well as China's regional interests and intentions there. This could include funding for the study of this region and countries in it, more visiting fellowships for experts and students from the region (and vice versa), the inclusion of these countries in more university study abroad portfolios, and increased opportunities for policymakers and experts to travel to the region and engage with key stakeholders and counterparts there.

Finally, US-China competition should not preclude cooperation with Beijing on shared concerns in South Asia and for crisis prevention and management. However, expectations for progress should remain realistic. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, areas that were traditionally considered ripe for cooperation, such as global health security, can also turn competitive. Moreover, the desire for greater cooperation with Beijing should not lead to accepting or ignoring malign behavior or unilaterally ceding their own interests or those of their partners. Although it could seem like an attractive option in the short term, that approach will only invite further instability in the future.