



Hearing on “India, China, and the Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific”

February 17, 2026

Opening Statement of Commissioner Hal Brands

Good morning, and welcome to the first hearing of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission’s 2026 Annual Report cycle. Thank you to our witnesses for sharing your expertise and for the work you have put into your testimonies, and thank you to our staff for the preparation that went into today. I would also like to thank the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for allowing us to use their hearing room and the Senate Recording Studio for their assistance livestreaming this event. All written testimonies and a transcript of this hearing will be posted on our website, USCC.gov.

Today’s hearing addresses the critical role of India in U.S.-China competition. India is the world’s largest democracy, most populous country, and a major economic and military power. It is the only power in South Asia capable of balancing China over the long term. Yet India faces a militarized border, the risk of a two-front contingency involving Pakistan and expanding Chinese influence in neighboring states from Nepal to Bangladesh. China also continues to bolster its naval presence in the Bay of Bengal and across the Indian Ocean, giving rise to a new theater for rivalry between the Asian powers.

Despite political, economic, and military pressure from Beijing, New Delhi has strengthened its own capabilities and signaled that it will not acquiesce to a Sino-centric South Asia. At the same time, India remains committed to a policy of strategic autonomy, engaging in renewed dialogues with China as it continues to seek economic and security partnerships with the United States.

For the United States, the implications are significant. If China constrains India’s strategic position, the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific will tilt decisively in China’s favor. If India remains a confident and capable counterweight, the outlook for the future of a free and open Indo-Pacific is much stronger.

While areas of friction tested U.S.-India relations over the past year, both India and the United States have signaled ongoing commitments to one another. These have included the October 2025 Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership and the recently announced interim trade framework. Against this backdrop, our witnesses will provide their insights on the key geopolitical and economic challenges shaping India-China relations and how the United States might respond.

I will now turn the floor over to my colleague and co-chair for this hearing, Commissioner Jon Stivers.