

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing on India, China, and the Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific

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February 17, 2026

Co-chairs Brands and Stivers, members of the Commission and staff, thank you very much for your invitation to testify on India's role in the Indo-Pacific and its response to China's growing power.

For several years now, China has been one of the key lenses through which New Delhi has viewed the world. This has particularly been the case since India's competition with China has intensified over the last decade and a half, and especially since the 2020 India-China border crisis.

This has had several effects, including: (1) changing how India views China, with bilateral, regional and global frictions amplifying each other and altering the balance between cooperation and competition in Sino-Indian ties, (2) affecting Indian domestic policies, particular with a view to derisking from China in the economic and technological domains, and (3) shaping the way New Delhi perceives and approaches various international actors, functional domains, as well as regional and global issues. This has, in turn, had an impact on India's approach to the United States, and helped drive a closer US-India partnership.

As this testimony will outline a re-engagement process is underway between the two Asian giants, but this is more of a tactical thaw than a strategic reset. India's structural rivalry with its largest neighbor persists. However, shifts in US policy toward China and India can shape the extent of Indian re-engagement with China and of Indian alignment with the US—both of which will have implications for American interests in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

The China Prism

Over the last two decades, Indian policymakers have gone from seeing China primarily as an enabler to more of an obstructor in achieving Indian objectives (security, prosperity, status, and strategic autonomy). Any perception that Sino-Indian cooperation could alleviate India's security concerns—by incentivizing China to keep the border stable or to dissuade Pakistani assertiveness—has been replaced with the view of China as a significant source of insecurity. From seeing economic and technology ties with China as an opportunity, Indian policymakers now see them more as a vulnerability. From believing China could help enhance India's regional and global role, they now see Beijing as hindering India's role and interests in Asia and on the world stage. And from viewing China as helping increase India's decision-making space, they now perceive it as a major constraint on Indian autonomy.

¹ The views expressed in this testimony are solely those of the author. While I am affiliated with the Brookings Institution, I am not here to speak for Brookings, and am testifying in my personal capacity as a scholar.

Underlying this shift has been the border dispute that remains at the heart of India's rivalry with China. Since Xi Jinping took the helm in Beijing, New Delhi has accused China of unilaterally trying to change the status quo at their undemarcated boundary several times in violation of agreements. These moves resulted in military stand-offs at the China-India border (2013, 2014) and the China-Bhutan-India trijunction (2017), and a fatal military clash in 2020. They have also led to a shift in India's perception of Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait, and made it more willing to express concern about those developments.

The 2020 border crisis, in conjunction with China's lack of transparency about COVID, shifted the internal Indian debate on China. They strengthened the hands of those arguing that India's China challenge was more immediate and serious than many believed. The crisis undermined the argument that border agreements and broader cooperation, especially economic engagement, would deter China or ease political tensions. And it weakened the case of those that had argued that India should hold back on expanding capabilities or partnerships, particularly with the United States, in ways that might provoke China.

That heightened threat perception remains as does the minimal to missing trust in India that Beijing will respect any bilateral commitments. And India's anxieties have been amplified by the Sino-Indian capabilities gap that has widened in China's favor over the last three decades. While the two sides announced their troops have disengaged at the locations contested in 2020, the Indian chief of defence staff still cites the border dispute with China as India's primary security challenge. The broader prevailing attitude seems to continue to be, don't trust; keep verifying. The debate in India today is not on whether China is a threat, but on the urgency of that challenge and the desirability, extent and effectiveness of re-engagement.

Even beyond the border, several bilateral differences remain between the two countries. Beijing disapproves of the presence of Tibetans in India and the activities of the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration. India does not endorse Beijing's assertion that it has the right to appoint the Dalai Lama's successor, and has repeatedly declined to reiterate its One China policy in recent years. Beijing, on its part, routinely refuses to recognize Arunachal Pradesh as a part of India. The two countries also have differences over the Brahmaputra river, which flows from China into India (and Bangladesh). India's concerns include Chinese dam construction, potential river diversion, the erosion of its usage rights, and Beijing's suspension of hydrological data-sharing during border crises.

Sino-Indian bilateral economic and technology ties have also been a source of friction. India's apprehensions have included the trade deficit, the lack of reciprocity (especially in terms of market access), intellectual property theft, the collection and use of Indians' data, Beijing's influence over Chinese companies operating in India, supply-chain and critical infrastructure vulnerabilities, and economic coercion. Beijing, in turn, has complained about India restricting Chinese economic and other activities in India, especially since 2020.

India and China in Asia

Concern has also come to dominate India's view of and approach to China in the region. New Delhi was initially hesitant to embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific, but it has always considered itself an Asian country. And it has sought stability via a rules-based order in the region, considering that essential for India to secure itself, grow economically, and seek a larger global role where India aspires to be a "leading power." There has long been a sense that India's ties with China could either enable or disrupt that stability. In the past, that drove Indian efforts to keep ties stable, or even cooperate in the region with China. But, in recent years, their rivalry has spilled over into the regional domain as well, especially as each's interests and activities in their overlapping periphery have grown.

New Delhi has concerns about China's ambitions and intentions both in India's territorial and maritime neighborhood, and in Asia more broadly. This has contributed to India's negative view of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and particularly Chinese activities in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

China's close partnership with Pakistan has long been a problem for New Delhi. India has seen Beijing's strengthening of Pakistan's conventional and nuclear capabilities—and giving Islamabad cover for Pakistan-based terrorist groups targeting India—as designed to contain India. The Sino-Pakistani defense and security relationship has only deepened, with economic ties now added to the mix, including through BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (which involves some projects in territory that India claims).

Beyond Sino-Pakistan ties, India has worried about Beijing's expanding footprint in every one of its neighbors. China has increased its economic engagement with Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka. It has also developed diplomatic, defense and security ties with these countries—indeed, South Asia is the largest destination for China's defense exports.

These security and economic relations have resulted in unprecedented Chinese strategic influence in India's immediate neighborhood. New Delhi sees Beijing as not respecting India's sensitivities in the region and using its influence with these countries to (a) boost China's initiatives and interests (for instance, recently getting several South Asian countries to support a One China policy), (b) curb India's activities and influence, and (c) shape the political outcomes in and foreign policy choices of these countries, including vis-à-vis partners like the United States.

China's expanding interest and presence in India's extended neighborhood has also been of concern for India. Greater economic interests in the Middle East and Africa, PLA Navy capability enhancement, and Beijing's desire to reduce China's vulnerabilities—in the event of non-state actor threats or a regional crisis or a future blockade—have meant more PLAN forays, as well as Chinese port development and access in the Indian Ocean region. Several Chinese steps have worried India: the establishment of a military base in Djibouti, the enhancement of Pakistan's naval capabilities, the invoking of Admiral Zheng He's historical forays into the Indian Ocean, the naming of features, regular submarine deployments, increased military exercises with regional countries and Russia, and frequent visits by survey—or, as New Delhi sees them, surveillance—vessels. India's former navy

chief outlined India's concern: it doesn't want Beijing's South China Sea "playbook" replicated in the Indian Ocean.

All these concerns about China's role in the region have resulted in India looking askance at BRI, which it sees as having strategic impact, whether or not it stemmed from strategic intentions. It sees the initiative as a national rather than a regional project, and more supply-driven than demand-driven. New Delhi's rejection of an invitation to the 2017 Belt and Road Forum alluded to the reasons for its opposition. The statement stressed that connectivity projects should be based on "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability" and should not exacerbate debt burdens or strategic competition—suggesting that BRI did not meet these standards. Beyond BRI, New Delhi is also watching with wariness China's efforts to convene regional countries in ways that sidestep India—including through regular dialogues with its South Asian neighbors and an annual China-Indian Ocean Regional Forum.

India's wariness of BRI also reflects a broader concern: that Beijing seeks a unipolar Asia where it gets to set the terms. New Delhi has stated that it instead wants a multipolar Asia where countries have room to make decisions independently. India has also moved away from any support for China's call of Asia for Asians, with Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar asserting that "a narrow Asian chauvinism is actually against the continent's own interest." Moreover, New Delhi and Beijing differ on the US role in Asia, with Indian prime minister Narendra Modi highlighting the US as a resident—rather than external—power in the Indo-Pacific. And in recent years, in contrast to China, India has wanted to see the American presence in region not just persist but even expand. It has indeed even sought to partner with the US and like-minded partners in the region as part of its own increased outreach in its immediate (South Asia) and extended (Middle East, Southeast Asia, IOR littoral) neighborhood to compete for influence with China.

On the World Stage

The global stage is another arena where India's view of China has shifted toward the competitive. New Delhi used to cooperate with Beijing in multilateral negotiations on trade, climate change and cyber-governance, and on issues of interest to developing countries. Seeking to expand its diplomatic space at a time it felt the west ignored its voice and interests, India also joined with China and others in non-western groupings, such as the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and eventually the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

China, on its part, found that this could facilitate its global interests. For instance, at the Copenhagen climate summit Beijing saw Delhi as a wingman; at the Doha trade round of World Trade Organisation members, India blocking consensus drew western flak toward New Delhi rather than Beijing. The two growing energy consumers also undertook some joint projects and considered forming an Asian buyers' cartel in order to increase their leverage vis-à-vis producers.

In recent years, however, there has been more Sino-Indian divergence than convergence. On certain issues, such as cyber-governance, India's own view has evolved toward accepting a multi-stakeholder

rather than multi-lateral approach. On other issues such as trade, India has come to see China as a significant part of problem—both directly in terms of India’s growing trade deficit and indirectly with China’s exports having made western countries more protectionist. In 2019, India walked away from negotiations to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, with the Indian home minister saying it could have “open[ed] the floodgates for Chinese goods to enter India” and India needed to “protect...its industries from any adverse effects that Chinese interests could have caused.”

Today, India sees China as less aligned with it—if not actively constraining it—when it comes to the international order as well. India seeks multipolarity, which it believes is not possible without a multipolar Asia. It wants reformed multilateralism, with more representative membership and agendas, while it sees China as more revisionist—and, parochially, an obstacle to Indian membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the UN Security Council. It also worries about Beijing trying to undercut or dilute India’s influence in the developing world and in groupings like BRICS (including through expanded membership). And it is wary of Beijing imposing its vision of order and standards through its global security, development, civilizational and governance initiatives, none of which India has endorsed. This also contributes to lack of Indian support for the idea of a BRICS currency that it believes would be dominated by China.

New Delhi also has little desire to sign on to Beijing and Moscow’s efforts to reshape BRICS and SCO into anti-west platforms or to build an anti-western bloc more broadly. This helps explain why India did not agree to Beijing and Moscow’s calls for a revival of the Russia-India-China trilateral at the leader level in September 2025, and why Modi did not attend Xi Jinping’s victory parade in Beijing after the SCO summit. Unlike Xi and Putin, the Indian prime minister also did not join an emergency virtual BRICS summit hosted by Brazil to discuss US tariffs, with India’s external affairs minister participating instead.

That does not mean India will exit these groupings. They serve as a platform for China-India engagement even when bilateral relations are frayed. Moreover, New Delhi would not want to leave a vacuum for China to fill.

But India has been increasingly engaging in an independent effort to deepen engagement with countries in the Global South. This has included more active diplomatic, defense, economic, cultural and people-to-people ties in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific Islands; hosting regular Global South summits; amplifying the voice of developing countries at platforms like the G-20 (for instance, India’s support for African Union membership and Modi’s attendance at the South Africa-hosted summit, which neither US President Donald Trump nor Xi attended).

India is also participating in minilaterals that are designed in part to off-set Chinese advantages regionally and globally. It is cooperating with China’s rivals to shape the leadership and agendas of multilateral institutions. Reports indicate Delhi has also worked to block both Chinese attempts to garner endorsements for its Global Security Initiative and criticisms of AUKUS at the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Globally, Sino-Indian competition has some ideological dimensions as well. For instance, New Delhi has highlighted its democratic nature as a reason for it to be a trusted technology partner and a safer space for investment. Chinese commentators, in turn, highlight their own model and deride the messiness of Indian democracy. This is also spilling over into the Global South where New Delhi is making the case that its way—for instance, on digital public infrastructure and open RAN in telecommunications—offers more transparency and alternatives. And contestation has returned to the spiritual realm as well, with both countries leaning in on their Buddhist links.

Selective Re-engagement

Even though the balance in Sino-Indian ties has tilted toward competition, engagement has not disappeared. New Delhi continues to want to prevent crisis escalation and manage its border with its largest neighbor not just through deterrence but also dialogue. China remains one of India's largest trading partners—and a source of industrial inputs and expertise as India seeks to enhance its manufacturing capacity and take advantage of other countries' diversification (or China-plus-one) strategies. And on the global stage, India does share certain views with China. For instance, they are both sovereignty hawks and resent interference in their domestic affairs, and both oppose western sanctions (and have backed BRICS and other efforts to support trade in local currencies).

In October 2024, the two sides, moreover, took steps to stabilize or set a floor to their relationship. Modi and Xi met after five years., and India and China announced that they had completed troop disengagement at the border, a key step on the path to normalizing relations. Since then, Modi has traveled to China for the SCO summit and Xi is expected to travel to India this year when India hosts the BRICS summit. New Delhi and Beijing have restarted border talks among their special representatives, and several other diplomatic meetings have taken place at the ministerial and senior official level. They have also revived political and civil society exchanges, and restarted direct flights between the two countries. India is once again issuing visas for Chinese tourists, and China has restored access for Indian pilgrims to Kailash Mansarovar. In addition, it has invited Beijing to its AI Impact Summit in February 2026. And there have been signs of selective economic re-engagement, with Indian business leaders visiting China and Chinese imports of Indian goods increasing.

It was clear from spring/summer 2024 that both sides had reasons to try to ease the situation between them. For India, these included the desire to prevent another escalation at the border; the recognition that it needed time to build its capabilities and partnerships; its need to grapple with adverse strategic, economic and military supply chain fallouts of global crises, including the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts; the uncertainty about the next American president's approach to China; concern that outreach efforts toward China by several of India's partners could leave India vulnerable; and calls in India to re-engage economically with China (including from some American companies).

China, on its part, had its own incentives. It had been facing strategic and economic headwinds, including flagging growth, pressure from the US, concern in Europe about Chinese support for Russia, and moves in the west to limit Chinese economic inroads. An improved equation with New Delhi could stabilize one part of China's periphery, potentially open the door for Chinese investments in and exports to the largest market in the Global South, make India more cautious regionally, and garner

Indian cooperation—or at least confrontation—on the global stage in ways that enabled China’s interests. More importantly, it could stem the deepening of India’s ties with China’s rivals, particularly the US.

India doesn’t loom as large in China’s worldview as China does in India’s. Beijing has given a higher priority to the US, Europe, Russia and Japan. Nonetheless, China clearly thinks more about India than it did in the past—to some extent, because of the increase in India’s capabilities and regional activities, but more significantly because it has tended to see India through a US prism. And Beijing has watched warily as the US partnership with India has grown. There has long been a debate in China about whether and to what extent India’s desire for strategic autonomy will limit US-India ties. And, for now, Beijing might see an opportunity, particularly at a time of friction in India-US ties, to throw a spanner in the works and strengthen the hands of US skeptics in India. Xi has thus reiterated his 2018 call for a dragon-elephant tango.

But it is evident that, overall, China continues to see India as intruding on its regional and global space. It looks askance at New Delhi’s partnerships with Southeast Asian countries that have expanded in quantity and quality. India has gone beyond consolidating traditional ties with Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam to now include defense ties with a new partner like the Philippines and to repairing relations with Malaysia. And China continues to be concerned about India’s growing partnerships not just with the US but also Australia and Japan, including via a revived Quad—all of which China sees as part of an American encirclement strategy. India is also cooperating with these and other partners—e.g. European ones, Canada, UK—globally as well. And New Delhi is actively using their concerns about China—and their desire to derisk from it—to enhance its strategic and economic capabilities.

India’s concerns about China have also not disappeared and thus there have been limits to Sino-Indian re-engagement. Chinese and Indian troops have not gone back to their pre-2020 deployments. India has expressed concern about China’s announcement of a massive dam project on the Brahmaputra river that could adversely affect downstream India. The countries have clashed rhetorically over the Chinese treatment of an Indian visitor from Arunachal Pradesh, and an India denial that its foreign minister had told his Chinese counterpart that “Taiwan is part of China.”

India’s trade deficit with China has only increased, and it remains reluctant to lift certain restrictions on Chinese activities in India, particularly in the technology domain. And Beijing has demonstrated its willingness to weaponize New Delhi’s dependence and to limit India’s manufacturing and infrastructure ambitions: for instance, with restrictions on exports to India of rare earth magnets and fertilizers, the supply to India of tunnel-boring machines produced by a German company in a Chinese manufacturing facility, the transfer of certain technology to India, and the travel of technical experts from China to multinationals’ factories in India.

In May 2025, China also supported Pakistan diplomatically and militarily during the India-Pakistan military crisis. India, on its part, has made clear that it will continue to strengthen ties and compete for influence across the Indo-Pacific, and during summit-level exchanges with leaders from East and Southeast Asia, has reiterated its position against unilateral changes of status quo or the use of force or coercion in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

This persisting sense of rivalry—combined with an understanding that the Sino-Indian capabilities gap limits what India can achieve alone—also means that India will continue to seek to deepen partnerships, including with the United States.

The US in India's China Strategy

Over the last two and a half decades, New Delhi has seen the US as a useful, even essential, partner as India has sought to transform itself economically and technologically, expand its diversified portfolio of partners, and bolster its regional and global role. Significantly, policymakers have also perceived the US to be a crucial part of the solution to India's China problem. New Delhi has seen Washington as being supportive during Sino-Indian crises, helpful in building capabilities, facilitating India's ties with American allies, providing alternatives to China's initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, and shaping a favorable balance of power and influence in the region—and thus ensuring a multipolar Asia.

Thus, it has been more responsive than in the past to US efforts to engage India as a partner in the Indo-Pacific. It has recognized that the US rivalry with China has made it more willing to cooperate with India, including in the defense, economic security, and technology domains. And, at least till 2024, a Washington that saw India through a China competition prism also prioritized it more. New Delhi understood that it also incentivized the US to manage differences with India, including over partnering with each other's adversaries (e.g., Russia, Iran, Pakistan) and the best approach in South Asia (e.g., Bangladesh).

India's perception of China as a challenge—and their capabilities gap—has also made New Delhi more willing to manage those differences. It has brought other changes as well. It has contributed to India's readiness to join US initiatives like the Mineral Security Partnership (and, in the future, Pax Silica), as well as minilaterals such as the Quad—and to adding security components to them. And it has made choices in the technology domain that will align it more with its western partners.

India has also set aside its preference for extra-regional actors to stay out from the Indian Ocean region to now encouraging an American presence there. For instance, in contrast to how it might have reacted in the past, New Delhi welcomed a US-Maldives defence agreement in 2020, did not oppose AUKUS, facilitated the UK-Mauritius agreement on the Chagos Islands that would ensure a continued US military presence there, and has even participated in joint exercises from Diego Garcia.

Even as India has recognized the need to align more with a like-minded partners such as the US to compete with China, there continues to be a debate in India about how far and fast to deepen ties with the US. And even though India will not hedge between the US and China in the same way it did between the US and Soviet Union during the Cold War, it will likely continue to hedge against overdependence on and uncertainty about the US to protect its security and autonomy. It will do so through indigenization (building its own capabilities) and diversification (investing in other partnerships). The latter has been complicated by Russia's closer ties with China, but India's expanded portfolio of partners now includes Australia, Canada, France, Japan, South Korea, the United

Kingdom, several like-minded countries in India's extended neighborhood (Southeast Asia, West Asia), Europe, and the Global South.

This instinct will only be reinforced by New Delhi's current concerns about the US approach toward not just India but China as well. Recent US-India frictions over tariffs, Pakistan and Russia have once again raised questions in India about the conditionality that comes with a partnership with the US. Meanwhile, US-China engagement has revived Indian concerns about a US-China accommodation or a "G-2," which New Delhi would see as weakening its strategic hand. Both these concerns have increased doubts about US reliability. If they persist, it could limit certain kinds of sensitive Indian cooperation with the US and increase the ceiling of Sino-Indian re-engagement.

Recommendations

If the recent US-India agreements on tariff issues are implemented and can sustain, it can remove certain obstacles and enable crucial cooperation between the US and India—even though there will be lingering effects of recent strains. This last year has demonstrated both that this partnership has fragility but also that it is more resilient than in the past, with functional cooperation—including in the defense and security sphere—having continued.

There are several steps that can be taken in the US-India relationship more broadly to bolster and expand this resilience. However, some recommended steps specific to the subject of this testimony that can be taken include:

- Encouraging the administration to undertake regular and updated assessments of India-China dynamics. This should include issues such as the possible extent of Sino-Indian re-engagement and the implications for the United States; and likely India-China contingencies, potential Indian asks, and US response options. If possible, discuss with India these and other possible regional contingencies and potential expectations of each other.
- Undertaking assessments of what capabilities would make India a more effective US partner—and burden sharer—in balancing China in the Indo-Pacific, and enabling or encouraging allies to enable those Indian capabilities
- Reviving or updating key dialogue mechanisms for US-India consultations on cyber defense, space, nuclear issues, and artificial intelligence and emerging technologies.
- More frequent and regular US-India dialogue on China to exchange perspectives and discuss response options. This should ideally include pre-briefings and de-briefings about outreach efforts to China that could assuage concerns in both Washington and New Delhi about the nature and trajectory of India-China and US-China ties. Track 1.5s bringing in relevant non-government stakeholders that have domain expertise should also be encouraged.
- Undertaking a US-India dialogue on Chinese activities in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, which can serve to enable more effective collaboration and coordination, avoid duplication at a time of resource constraints, and to deconflict New Delhi and Washington's approaches in the region.

- Bilateral or Quad consultation ahead of key regional and global summits and ahead of leadership elections in key international organizations (including standard setting ones)
- Stepping up Quad activities quantitatively and qualitatively in the security, economic security and technology domains. This could include a mapping of supply chain vulnerabilities in key sectors (e.g. critical minerals, pharmaceuticals, batteries, semiconductors) and of proposed or existing Chinese regional infrastructure projects that have strategic implications. It should also include identifying gaps and opportunities to cooperate with regional countries that the Quad members can undertake as a group, unilaterally or bilaterally.
- More frequent Congressional exchanges with Indian counterparts on China and the Indo-Pacific, to include engagement with members of the Indian parliamentary committee for external affairs if feasible. Ideally, more visits by members and staff to India focused on a China/Indo-Pacific agenda.