



Maintaining U.S. Leverage Amid China-India Rapprochement

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growing rapprochement between China and India is a recent development with significant geopolitical implications. The United States has long relied on India as a counterweight to China, but recent tariffs and economic tensions have shifted the dynamics of this relationship. This brief will cover what the United States should do to prevent a stronger China-India partnership from undermining U.S. influence in Asia.

II. OVERVIEW

The India-China relationship is one marked by intense competition and rivalry. For one, they are the two most populated countries in the world, making up 35 percent of the entire world's population. The two countries also border each other, which has heightened tensions. Earlier in 2025, Trump imposed steep tariffs on India, including a 50 percent increase on Indian exports. Not long after, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit held on August 31st, the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, visited China for the first time in 7 years. In his bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping, Modi described their relationship as "fruitful" and based on "mutual respect, mutual interest and mutual sensitivity." Essentially, these high tariffs on India have pushed New Delhi to seek closer ties with Beijing. If this warming of relations continues, it could weaken U.S. influence in Asia and strengthen China strategically. This paper will

examine the steps the United States should take in order to reposition itself in the U.S.-India relationship and reclaim economic and political influence in Asia.

Relevance

The recent warming of ties between China and India directly affects U.S. interests in Asia, including trade, security, and regional stability. President Xi's meeting with Modi could signal a potential warming of relations between the two countries, introducing the possibility of India becoming more aligned with China economically and politically. If this occurs, the United States risks losing a key strategic partner in countering China's influence. Recently, U.S.-China relations have become increasingly competitive, with tensions over trade, technology, and regional influence intensifying. This makes it even more important for the United States to reclaim its economic and security objectives while maintaining strong partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Ever since India emerged as an independent country from Britain's rule in 1947 and the People's Republic of China (PRC) established a new government in 1949, the relationship between the two countries has been quite tumultuous with several disagreements over Pakistan, borders, and regional territories.

The Sino-Indian War began in 1962, when China invaded India over border disputes and India's sheltering of the Dalai Lama, resulting in thousands of Indian casualties. In 1989, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi met with Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to improve bilateral ties amid shifting Cold War alliances. By 2005, China and India formalized a "Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity," agreeing to address global challenges together, though not as formal allies. Border tensions resurfaced in 2017 during the Doklam standoff, when India intervened to prevent China from building a road in Bhutan, and again in 2020 during the deadly Galwan Valley clash, which left 24 soldiers dead and triggered a four-year military standoff. In 2024, both countries agreed to withdraw troops and resume pre-conflict border patrols.

Over the past 20 years, U.S.-India relations have steadily warmed, highlighted by their combined participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and joint strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific. Indian public opinion strongly supports this partnership: 78% of young urban Indians expect the U.S. to be a leading partner over the next decade, and 62% believe India should cooperate with the U.S. in the event of rising U.S.-China tensions. Indians also anticipate U.S. support in potential conflicts, with 56% expecting help against China and 59% against Pakistan. Favorability toward the U.S. has also steadily increased over the past decade, rising from 31% in 2011 to 49% in 2019, and 60% of Indians viewed the U.S. more positively than other major powers such as Russia, China, or the European Union. While disagreements remain over trade, India's S-400 missile purchases, and India's stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these issues have not largely overshadowed the broad trend of growing cooperation and shared strategic interests amongst the two countries.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders in the growing China-India rapprochement are the governments and citizens of both countries, especially those in sectors directly affected by trade, investment, and diplomatic agreements. Businesses and industries involved in cross-border commerce are impacted because improved relations can open new markets and investment opportunities. Citizens are also affected because diplomatic relations can have an influence on economic growth and job opportunities.

B. Risks of Indifference

A risk of indifference is that the United States could lose influence in Asia. India, the country that has long been a counterweight to China's growing power, plays a crucial role in maintaining regional balance and advancing U.S. interests. Thus, ignoring the China-India rapprochement could weaken America's strategic position in the region and its status as one of the most powerful nations in the world. Also, if the U.S. were to ignore the China-India rapprochement, American businesses could miss out on trade, investment, and technology-sharing opportunities between China and India. Some geopolitical risks also include that China and India could coordinate things in international forums (like the UN, WTO, or climate negotiations) that oppose U.S. policies.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

The growing China-India rapprochement has wide-ranging effects that go beyond the two countries. This influences regional security,

global trade, and the balance of power in Asia. Because of this, it is important for the United States to take an active and nonpartisan role, engaging with both nations based on shared interests rather than a political agenda. By doing so, the U.S. can help prevent misunderstandings or tensions from escalating, contributing to a more stable environment.

Closer cooperation between China and India also creates economic opportunities and challenges for the U.S. If they are on good terms, American businesses can access new markets, strengthen supply chains, and remain competitive in aspects like technology and infrastructure. Ignoring these developments could mean missed opportunities or reduced influence in shaping the economic landscape of Asia.

Finally, staying nonpartisan is important for the U.S. to keep credibility in international affairs. A fair and balanced approach shows that the U.S. is focused on constructive engagement rather than political rivalry. This helps encourage cooperation, support long-term stability, and ensures that America's role in the region remains meaningful and effective.

IV. TRIED POLICY

The United States has already tried several ways to stay involved as China and India grow closer. Diplomatically, the U.S. meets regularly with both countries and takes part in groups like the Quad, which includes the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia. Economically, the U.S. has worked on trade deals and investment partnerships with India

to strengthen ties while keeping an eye on China's influence. On the security side, the U.S. has done joint military exercises with India to support stability and a rules-based order.

These policies have helped the U.S. stay connected and influence the region, but challenges remain. The new administration and tariffs will make this even more difficult. China and India are making decisions on their own, so the U.S. still needs to take a more proactive approach to protect its interests and keep the region stable, instead of watching everything between India and China unfold without intervention.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

Given the warming of ties between India and China, the United States has several policy options to protect its influence and strengthen its relationship with India. First, the U.S. could take a more proactive diplomatic role by increasing engagement with both countries. This could include regular meetings between leaders and initiatives that encourage dialogue on trade and cooperation. Beyond meetings, the U.S. could also invest in track-two diplomacy, such as academic exchanges and cultural initiatives. This can help build trust and mutual understanding over time. By participating in these conversations, the U.S. can prevent tensions from escalating along sensitive border regions and maintain a seat at the table in decisions that affect the Indo-Pacific. Proactive diplomacy also signals to both India and China that the U.S. is committed to regional stability, which can help shape their strategic calculations in a way that aligns with American interests.

Second, and more importantly, the U.S. could lower tariffs and trade barriers with India to strengthen economic ties and incentivize closer cooperation. The steep tariffs imposed earlier in 2025 pushed New Delhi closer to Beijing, showing that aggressive economic measures can backfire. By lowering tariffs, the U.S. can make American goods and services more competitive in India's growing market. This approach would not only benefit U.S. companies economically but also create a positive feedback loop: stronger trade ties make India more inclined to align with the U.S., reducing the chance that New Delhi will fully pivot toward Beijing.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The growing ties between China and India create both challenges and opportunities for the United States. If ignored, closer China-India cooperation could reduce U.S. influence in Asia and give China a stronger position in the region. If the United States can take a more active diplomatic role and build stronger economic ties with India, then it can stay involved, protect its interests, and help maintain stability. Measures like lowering tariffs and engaging in cultural/multilateral initiatives can strengthen a long-term partnership with India while keeping American priorities in the mix. In a region that is constantly changing, staying engaged is the best way for the U.S. to remain influential and support a stable, prosperous future.

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