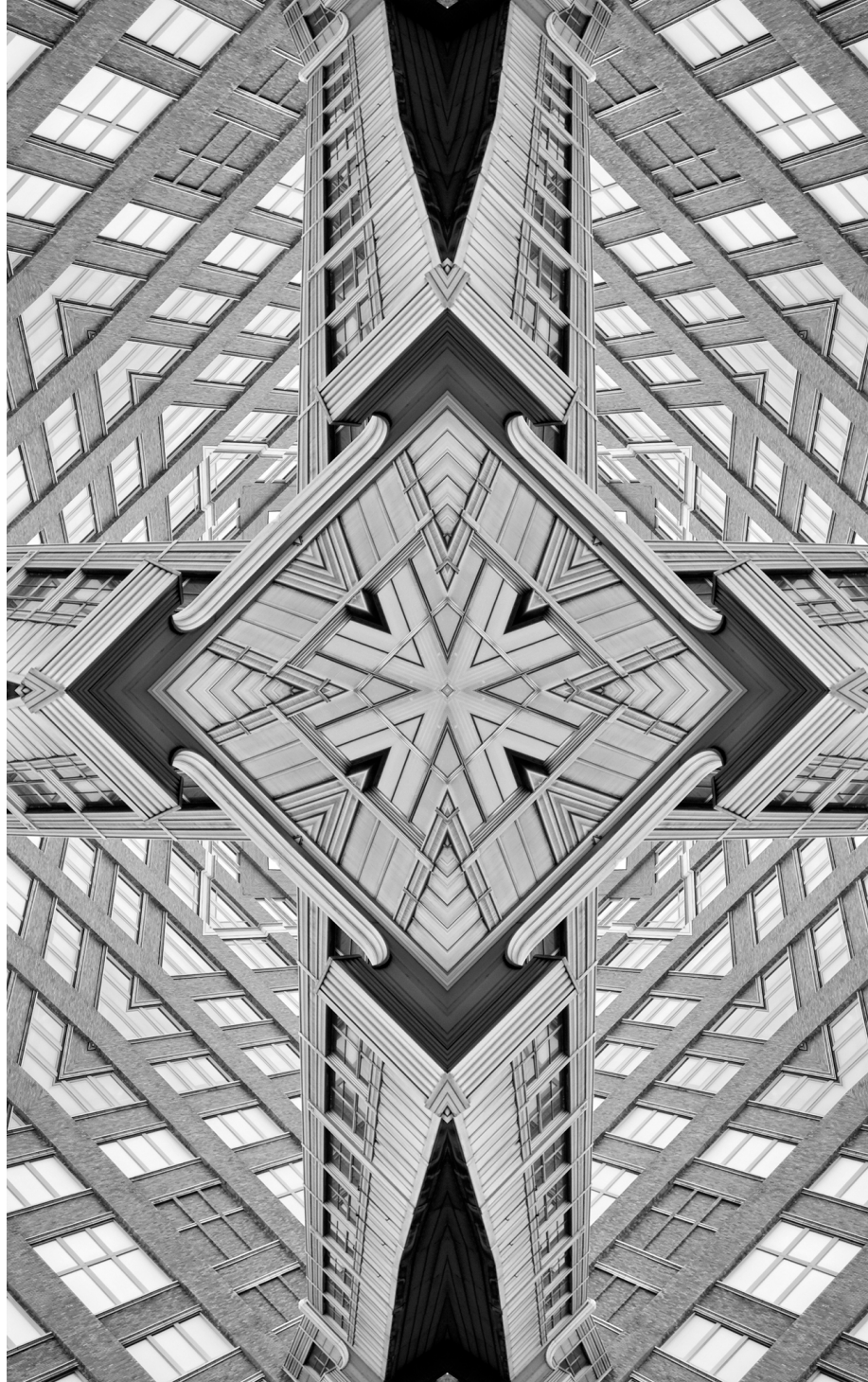


Issue

Brief

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India-U.S. Convergence in the Indo-Pacific

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The Indo-Pacific region has become a crucial area of the India-United States (US) partnership. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the two countries have increased their alignment on the Indo-Pacific, with both sides giving greater priority to the region and acknowledging sharper shared concerns about China. The US and India are also increasing cooperation via the Quad and engaging in other platforms such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). As challenges in the Indo-Pacific heighten, it would do well for both India and the US to work in closer consultation and coordination in the region.

India and the United States (US) have found more parallels between their approaches to the Indo-Pacific region in the past decade since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in May 2014. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific has become embedded in India-US relations, and bilateral cooperation has extended to the region.

Within months of taking office, Modi indicated his intention to enhance India's ties with the region. The three US administrations (of Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden) that have overlapped with Modi's tenure since 2014 have similarly sharpened and developed Washington's focus on the Indo-Pacific.

There are four elements of alignment and convergence that are of particular importance to India-US bilateral ties: (a) efforts to introduce and establish Indo-Pacific coordination and cooperation directly into bilateral relations; (b) a preference for a new set of minilateral "wires" of cooperation, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), while supporting a latticework of ASEAN-centred regional institutions such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus; (c) India's strategic distrust, and the US's growing competition with China; and (d) mixed engagement on regional economic initiatives including overlaps on the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

A net assessment is that a combination of parallelism, alignment, and convergence characterises India-US ties in the Indo-Pacific. Though not identical nor symmetrical in their approach, India and the US have fashioned ties about the Indo-Pacific that offer considerable ballast for their overall relations. Such cooperation represents a dramatic departure from the days when the two countries were essentially disconnected on issues related to the Indo-Pacific.

Bilateral Indo-Pacific Coordination and Cooperation

PM Modi took office in May 2014 at just over the 30-year mark of India's 'Look East' policy, which began in 1991. During his first attendance at the EAS, he announced that India would launch an 'Act East' policy—signalling an increased commitment to the region. A year later, in an end-of-year assessment, his administration noted the Act East policy, “which was originally conceived as an economic initiative, has gained political, strategic and cultural dimensions including establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation.”¹ The priority given to East Asia was evident in the December 2015 official review of India's foreign relations, titled 'A Year of Smart Diplomacy: Milestones 2015': In the review, the section on 'Act East Policy: Vision, Vigour and Plan of Action' followed discussion of 'Neighborhood Diplomacy', and before the part on 'Engaging Major Powers'.²

It was in this context that India and the US issued their Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region in January 2015, when Obama visited India as the chief guest on India's Republic Day.³ Modi then said, “For too long India and the U.S. have looked at each other across Europe and the Atlantic. When I look towards the East, I see the Western shores of the United States.”⁴ The fact that both the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are mentioned in this first-ever India-US bilateral statement on the region is significant. It signals the mutual recognition of priorities where the US, primarily focused on the Asia-Pacific, maintains interests in the Indian Ocean, while India, historically focused on the Indian Ocean, has growing interests in the Asia-Pacific. The net effect is a convergence shared by the two countries about the connection of the Indian and Pacific oceans in what is now referred to as the Indo-Pacific region. The pattern set by this Joint Strategic Vision is carried forward in subsequent statements of the partnership and respective national strategic and policy articulations.

For instance, in his 2018 keynote address at the Shangri-la Dialogue, Modi described the Indo-Pacific as a pillar of improving bilateral India-US ties: “India's global strategic partnership with the United States has overcome the hesitations of history and continues to deepen across the extraordinary breadth of our relationship. It has assumed new significance in the changing world. And an important pillar of this partnership is our shared vision of an open, stable, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region.”⁵

The Trump administration kept apace on such alignment. For example, a 2019 Department of State document, ‘A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing A Shared Vision’, referred to India 33 times and declared that “[a] strong U.S.-India partnership is vital to the U.S. Indo-Pacific vision.”⁶ Additionally, an unclassified 2021 US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific articulated comprehensive and high-expectation objectives for cooperation with India. It aimed to solidify a strategic partnership relevant to working in the Indo-Pacific region in areas ranging from South Asia to the Indian Ocean.⁷

India-US alignment on the Indo-Pacific is continuing under the Biden administration. The administration’s February 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy states: “[W]e support a strong India as a partner in this positive regional vision [to advance freedom and openness and offer ‘autonomy and options’].”⁸

Lastly, together, India and the US have pursued alignment and cooperation through associated frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative announced by Modi at the 14th EAS in Bangkok in November 2019, as well as the Indian Ocean Rim Association.⁹

Minilaterals and ASEAN-Led Regional Institutions

Alignment on approaches, strategies, and policies towards the Indo-Pacific—including on Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean—find their most structured expression in India-US cooperation (with Japan and Australia) in the Quad.¹⁰ The revival of this minilateral arrangement brings together the threads of respective Indian and US engagements with the Indo-Pacific through cooperative activities aimed at providing regional public goods. The significance of this development cannot be underestimated, even as opportunities to expand and enhance Quad deliverables remain. The US and India are no longer disconnected in the region; the two countries are also working within mostly ASEAN-led regional institutions and have a bespoke alliance-partner configuration—the Quad—through which to work together.

Convergence on China

Another critical area of convergence is China. The India-China relationship has plummeted since the 2017 stand-off at the disputed Doklam Plateau region. Despite India and China both being in the G20 and the BRICS groupings, land disputes brought bilateral relations to a near standstill. Meanwhile, the


US has identified China as a pacing threat, and the most recent US Annual Threat Assessment ranks China as the biggest threat amidst the Ukraine and Gaza wars.¹¹ The convergence comes, for example, in the US's recognition in its Indo-Pacific strategy that China's coercion and aggression is expressed in the conflict on the Line of Actual Control. This has led to concrete cooperation between India and the United States, including the sharing of information and intelligence.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

India and the US are also engaged in new regional economic initiatives. India, for example, has joined three (supply chain, clean economy, and fair economy) of the four pillars of the Biden administration's IPEF while remaining an observer for the fourth and final pillar of trade.¹² Given that neither India nor the US are parties to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, the IPEF is one area of alignment in the commercial space supplementing bilateral trade and investment ties.¹³

In the past decade, India and the US have had parallel interests in the Indo-Pacific. Bilateral ties have increasingly aligned and converged on key elements, ranging from strategy and policy to the Quad, China, and commercial initiatives. In the years since Modi announced India's 'Act East' policy, laid out the country's notion of the 'Indo-Pacific', and articulated the maritime concept of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, India-US ties have grown steadily in the Indo-Pacific—as individual nations, with each other, and with close allies and partners via the Quad.

The Indo-Pacific will likely be an enduring and sustainable facet of India-US bilateral ties for the foreseeable future. The bilateral relationship has progressed, moving from an era in which US strategy documents did not make a single reference to India in its discussions about the region, and India itself was only slightly engaged in Indo-Pacific regional institutions and initiatives. Today the two countries refer to each other in their respective strategy and policy pronouncements about the region and have developed new focused initiatives for the region, such as the Quad.

To be sure, however, the Indo-Pacific is neither the sum total nor the end state of a broad global partnership between the US and India forged over at least the past decade. India-US ties have multiple functional and regional intersections upon which to build. The Indo-Pacific, nonetheless, is one critical and prominent element of expanded and enhanced India-US ties. 

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