

# STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

The United States and India as Major Defence Partners



THE ASIA GROUP





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**The Asia Group** is the premier strategic advisory firm to the world's leading companies seeking to excel across the Indo-Pacific region. Built on decades of senior-level experience in diplomacy, finance, and industry, The Asia Group has cultivated unique networks, experience, and expertise at the highest levels of government and business across South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Our team brings passion and experience across policy, law, and banking in Asia to unlock opportunities and overcome the toughest challenges. Headquartered in Washington, DC, The Asia Group is a dynamic team of over 50 professionals with diverse backgrounds and skill sets including former senior-level U.S. diplomats, trade and investment lawyers, management consultants, investment bankers, and industry experts.



Propelled by the process of reforms initiated in the 1990s, ORF, over the past 25 years of its existence, has effectively narrated and participated in India's story as the country has acquired an unmistakable global footprint. From primarily looking inward and engaging with domestic reforms, to gradually forging global partnerships, ORF today plays a seminal role in building political and policy consensus that enables India to interact with the world.

As new powers re-emerge onto the global stage, existing systems face challenges of agreeing on a new set of rules to control and regulate the new frontiers of space, the oceans, the internet and the human mind. The world continues, also, to navigate persisting concerns related to security and strategy, economy and development, energy and resources. As India begins to play a larger role in the 21st century, ORF continues to push normative boundaries, bring new ideas into the policy discourse and provide a platform to a new generation of thinkers. It is supported in its mission by leading intellectuals, academicians, policymakers, business leaders, institutions and civil society actors.

ORF's aim is to encourage voices from all quarters, geographies and gender, both those that fall in and those that question dominant narratives. It is this plurality of thought and voice—in a country of over a billion individuals—that ORF seeks to carry abroad, while simultaneously bringing contemporary global debates to India.

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Cover image: Soldiers from 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, U.S. Army and the 2nd Battalion, 9th Gurkha Regiment of the Indian Army take part in the closing ceremonies for exercise *Yudh Abhyas 14* at Chaubatta, India on September 30, 2014.

Photographer: Staff Sgt. Mylinda DuRousseau, 1/25 SBCT Public Affairs

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Two decades of sustained focus and growing ambition have powered historic gains in U.S.-India relations and given rise to a strategic partnership that is strong, forward-looking, and ripe with potential. Shared democratic values anchor the U.S.-India partnership and converging interests increasingly unite Washington and New Delhi in a “strategic handshake.”<sup>1</sup> Both cooperate on a range of critical defence issues, from maritime security and counterterrorism, to defence production and disaster relief. Acknowledging this reality, the United States declared India a Major Defence Partner (MDP) in 2016, putting New Delhi on par with Washington’s closest allies and opening the door to Indian procurement of sensitive defence technologies.<sup>2</sup>

## Framing the Challenge

MDP is a unique designation that has cemented progress in U.S.-India relations. But it has also heightened expectations around the direction and ambition of the bilateral relationship. Nearly three years on, Washington and New Delhi have yet to fully define and operationalise the MDP framework even as they continue to advance progress on strategic

issues. Indeed, the lack of clarity around MDP is not without consequence. It generates lingering uncertainty, threatens to misalign expectations, and often leaves both sides disappointed. Amid rising geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, establishing a common understanding of MDP’s scope, aims, and focus is now more important than ever.

## Convening Stakeholders in Delhi

In line with this goal, The Asia Group (TAG) and The Observer Research Foundation (ORF) convened a high-level, closed-door roundtable in New Delhi, to examine new ways to operationalise MDP and strengthen the bilateral security relationship. The roundtable featured over 30 high-level U.S. and Indian stakeholders – including senior U.S. and Indian government officials, military leaders, think tank scholars, and industry executives. Over the course of three sessions, participants sought to (1) establish a common vision for MDP, (2) identify ways to use MDP to strengthen U.S.-India ties, (3) understand New Delhi’s assessment of MDP and U.S.-India defence cooperation, and (4) develop practical steps to build a robust U.S.-India defence ecosystem.

## Recommendations

Building on the roundtable discussions, TAG and ORF have outlined 10 core recommendations to help policymakers in Washington and New Delhi refine MDP and elevate U.S.-India defence ties. These recommendations are outlined in the chart below and covered in greater depth in the following report.

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1 Carter, Ashton. “A Firm Strategic Handshake: The India-US Partnership is Moving to Embrace Defence Tech Transfers and Maritime Collaboration.” *The Times of India*, April 11, 2016. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/a-firm-strategic-handshake-the-india-us-partnership-is-moving-to-embrace-defence-tech-transfers-and-maritime-collaboration/>

2 “Joint Statement: The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century.” The White House, June 7, 2016. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/07/joint-statement-united-states-and-india-enduring-global-partners-21st>

# 10 Ways to Strengthen and Operationalise MDP

1

Create a Dedicated India Cell within DoD

2

Conclude and Operationalise Foundational Agreements

3

Establish a Combined Disaster Relief Team

4

Create a New Visa Category to Improve Defence Exchanges

5

Redouble Focus on Exchanges and Education

6

Institutionalise Requirements and Mission-Driven Technology Cooperation

7

Focus on Co-Production Opportunities

8

Launch DTTI 2.0

9

Include Regional Strategy in the 2+2 Dialogue

10

Institutionalise MDP in Washington and New Delhi

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# Introduction

**G**rowing strategic convergence between the United States and India has transformed bilateral defence relations over the past two decades. Today, Washington and New Delhi are no longer estranged democracies of

the Cold War era, but strategic partners that share common values and an array of core interests. Both increasingly cooperate on a range of complex security challenges – from terrorism and counter-proliferation to maritime security and disaster relief. Critically, this progress has continued even amid domestic political transitions in Washington and New Delhi, a testament to the strength and momentum of the U.S.-India relationship and the uniting strategic interests that underpin it.

Looking ahead, the United States and India have an opportunity to deepen bilateral defence relations under the Major Defence Partner framework, which places India on par, for the purposes of transferring advanced technology, with Washington's closest

allies and partners. The MDP designation is unique to India. No other country has been designated a Major Defence Partner of the United States. The designation was meant to simultaneously elevate and distinguish the U.S.-India defence relationship, while also crafting an ambitious new model for positive engagement between two major powers of the 21st century. The MDP tag, while being unique, is also a template for engagement between two geopolitical partners whose cooperation will be critical to the security and management of the global commons. It offers both countries the ability to design a new framework, basis, and ethic for an intimate and expansive relationship unencumbered by past formats and existing arrangements.

However, after three years, Washington and New Delhi have yet to fully define and operationalise this concept, which engenders uncertainty and misaligns expectations. With political tensions on the rise in the Indo-Pacific, building a common understanding of MDP's scope, aims, and focus is vital.

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## U.S.-India Relations: Past & Present

**S**enior-level Engagement Drives Forward Progress: Maintaining the upward trend in U.S.-India defence relations has required sustained focus and strategic vision to help the United States and India move beyond what Prime Minister Modi described as the "hesitations of history."<sup>3</sup> Successive U.S. and Indian leaders have understood this imperative, starting first with President Bill Clinton and Prime

Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The Bush administration and Manmohan Singh government expanded these ties in 2005 through the New Framework for the U.S.-India Defence Relationship and the conclusion of the landmark Civil Nuclear Agreement. Throughout his two terms, President Obama carried this torch forward, hosting Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the White House and becoming the first U.S. president to visit India twice. Meanwhile, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi have continued to support high-level engagement on defence issues, but there is

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<sup>3</sup> Modi, Narendra. "Address to a Joint Meeting of Congress." Speech, Washington, D.C., June 8, 2016.

considerable room for both leaders to deepen the relationship further — and leave their own imprint and legacy on it — by investing greater political capital and senior-level bandwidth.

Washington and New Delhi Build Habits of Cooperation: Steady high-level engagement has sparked the development of new programs, dialogues, and agreements that have bolstered U.S.-India defence cooperation since 2005. Prominent among these are the U.S.-India Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI), the landmark bilateral agreements including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Understanding (LEMOA), the

Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Strategic Trade Authorization (STA-I) designation for New Delhi. Coupled with the Modi government's efforts to improve the foreign investment landscape, these frameworks have helped power a notable rise in defence cooperation and engagement, as well as an increase in U.S. defence sales to India – from just USD 220 million in 2005 to USD 18 billion in 2019. While these gains are significant, the United States and India have far greater potential. Effectively leveraging existing policy frameworks – such as MDP – will be critical to transforming U.S.-India defence relations and industry ties.

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# Defence Partnership

## WHAT IS THE MAJOR DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP?

**Legislative History and Legal Underpinnings:** At its core, MDP provides a strategic framework for U.S.-India engagement in the defence sector and elevates New Delhi among Washington's closest allies and partners. First announced during Prime Minister's Modi visit to Washington in June 2016 through a joint statement, MDP began as an aspirational signal of intent. Since then, the U.S. Congress has worked to flesh out the MDP framework, albeit slowly and in piecemeal steps. Section 1292 of the National Defence Authorization Act of 2017, for example, directs the Secretary of Defence and Secretary of State to take “such actions as may be necessary to – recognise India's status as a major defence partner.”<sup>4</sup> Though brief, the provision made history by cementing India's MDP status as the law of the United States.

**Current Vision:** Congress reiterated its support for MDP through the Asia Reassurance Act of 2018, a critical piece of legislation that outlined the basic contours of the designation for the first time. Among its provisions, Congress articulated that the MDP designation would (1) be “unique to India,” (2) institutionalise progress in defence trade and technology sharing, (3) elevate defence trade and technology cooperation to a level “commensurate with the closest allies and partners of the United States,” (4) facilitate technology sharing between Washington and New Delhi, including license-free

access to certain dual-use technologies, and (5) advance joint exercises, coordination on defence strategy and policy, military exchanges, and port calls supporting U.S.-India defence cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

MDP is notable for what it signifies. For the United States, the MDP designation signals to India and the region the vital importance Washington affords to its growing partnership with New Delhi, while acknowledging – for historic, political, and even pragmatic reasons – that a formal, treaty-bound relationship need not be essential to achieving a partnership with New Delhi that matches Washington's ties with its closest allies. For India, the MDP designation offers a novel framework to recalibrate strategic engagement with Washington commensurate with the country's growing geopolitical weight, and in deference to India's legacy non-aligned approach to foreign policy. MDP offers a flexible strategic framework that can anticipate, evolve alongside, and enable strategic cooperation. Translating this vision into reality will require New Delhi and Washington to jointly craft and define the MDP in practical terms. Moreover, fleshing out the contours of MDP is not just an opportunity to lend clarity to the strategic dimensions of this important relationship, but also to create a norm-setting architecture that makes U.S.-India ties the centerpiece of constructive East-West engagement.

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4 National Defence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year for 2017, U.S.C. § 1292 (2017).

5 Asia Reassurance Act of 2018, U.S.C. (2018).

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# Navigating Challenges

**A**rriving at and implementing a common vision for the MDP will require both sides to deftly navigate a host of bureaucratic and bilateral challenges:

## **Lack of a High-Level Policy Champion:**

Senior leaders in successive U.S. and Indian administrations have devoted substantial time and effort toward advancing U.S.-India bilateral ties. Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, and Rex Tillerson, Secretaries of Defence Ashton Carter and James Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster were important champions of the relationship. However, with the exits of Tillerson and McMaster, and Mattis' resignation, the U.S.-India relationship lost important advocates inside the Trump administration at the cabinet level. While work continues diligently at lower levels, senior voices with a broad appreciation of the strategic dimensions driving the relationship are missing, which could make advancing cooperation and managing disputes challenging.

## **Bilateral Disputes Impacting the Security Partnership:**

The United States and India do not have decades of experience managing irritants in their relationship. There is a risk that bilateral disputes in the commercial or trade sector could bleed into and affect the defence relationship, or that short-sighted policy decisions could have long-term strategic ramifications. Indeed, a number of serious challenges – most immediately, bilateral trade disputes and the potential for the United States to levy sanctions over India's planned purchases of significant Russian defence articles – threaten to precipitate a serious downturn in the relationship.

**Export Controls:** Defence technology cooperation has rightly been a major area of focus for the U.S.-India defence partnership. Extensive engagement has yielded important results, including supporting the emergence of India as a crucial element of the global defence manufacturing ecosystem, increasing partnership opportunities between U.S. and Indian defence firms, and building cooperation between

defence innovation centers, most notably between the U.S. Defence Innovation Unit (DIU) and India's Defence Innovation Organization (DIO). Despite this progress, both the United States and India continue to be frustrated by obstructive and cumbersome export controls, legal restrictions, and review procedures. Misaligned procurement processes further contribute to misunderstanding and speak to the need for improved efforts to build familiarity with acquisition, budgeting, and procurement processes. India's expectations are for the best and most advanced technologies available – a reasonable expectation for a close partner. But often missing from the Indian calculation is that these technologies are reserved for partners that cooperate with the United States in key operational areas or who engage in some degree of burden sharing for security interests in other parts of the world. This level of convergence does not yet exist between the two, and therefore, there have been practical implications in the amount and levels of technology to be shared.

**Misaligned Bureaucracy and Resourcing:** If MDP is to result in more meaningful and tangible cooperation, then both Washington and New Delhi need to ensure that the prioritization of this relationship is reflected in resourcing, bureaucratic organization, and procedures. At present, the Pentagon has not devoted personnel and resources commensurate with the lofty aspirations articulated in the MDP designation. Meanwhile, India's bureaucratic system creates bottlenecks due to insufficient manpower in critical offices and byzantine reporting structures that marginalise major stakeholders, contributing to an unwieldy and slow decision-making process.

**DTTI Frustration:** DTTI has provided a useful forum for engagement in support of building a collaborative defence technology relationship, aligning and exploring defence requirements, and developing partnerships among U.S. and Indian defence industry while also exploring ways to cut through policy and procedural red-tape. While DTTI has served as a "silent enabler" to support greater defence technology cooperation between the United States



and India, it has also generated frustration as it has often been perceived, incorrectly, as a venue for fast-tracking sole-source contracts on major defence articles. Technologies identified for co-development and production were unviable and of questionable commercial potential and operational requirements.

**Reciprocity:** Finally, it is worth noting that although both Washington and New Delhi are in many ways aligned on the broad implications of their

burgeoning defence relationship, the Major Defence Partner designation is currently one-sided United States designation, with New Delhi making no equivalent, reciprocal designation. For its part, India refers to the United States as a “strategic partner” though this nomenclature is used to characterise a number of India’s critical bilateral relationships. To add greater clarity to the relationship, India may wish to consider a unique, corollary designation for the United States.

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# Actionable Recommendations

**W**ashington and New Delhi have great opportunities to elevate the bilateral defence relationship, but they first need to address the range of challenges limiting forward progress under MDP. In line with this goal, TAG and ORF outline ten actionable recommendations for U.S. and Indian policymakers’ consideration, which can help both countries operationalise MDP and realise the full potential of the U.S.-India strategic partnership.

## 1. **Create a Dedicated India Cell within DoD.**

To enhance operational cooperation and coordination, as well as address “seam issues” that arise along the geographic boundaries of each U.S. combatant command and between ground and naval forces, the United States should develop a dedicated, cross-functional India planning cell (India Cell) involving elements from INDOPACOM, CENTCOM, AFRICOM, the Joint Staff, and OSDP. The India Cell should focus on a range of issues, including (1) developing and executing bilateral and multilateral exercises to enhance critical war-fighting capabilities such as anti-submarine warfare and counterterrorism, (2) enhancing jointness among India’s services and interoperability with key partners, (3) strengthening U.S.-India Army-to-Army ties, and (4) exploring forward-leaning opportunities to operationalise foundational agreements like LEMOA and COMCASA. To help break down stove-pipes across the department, and add greater

impetus behind advancing MDP initiatives, the Secretary of Defence should designate a senior official – the Undersecretary of Defence for Policy – to oversee the overall U.S.-India defence relationship and drive the Department’s various efforts to further the relationship.

## 2. **Conclude and Operationalise Foundational Agreements.**

The United States and India should quickly conclude negotiations on the ISA and BECA. Meanwhile, the COMCASA and LEMOA, signed in 2018 and 2016 respectively, must be further operationalised. As India and the United States expand cooperation enabled by these important new agreements, the partners should begin discussions on intelligence sharing under the 2002 General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), with a particular focus on regional issues.

## 3. **Establish a Combined Disaster Relief Team.**

The Pacific Rim and the Indian Ocean regions are prone to natural disasters – a threat expected to grow increasingly over the coming years. The United States and India each have considerable experience and are highly skilled at responding to humanitarian emergencies both at home and abroad, but could amplify their lifesaving effectiveness in the region by cooperating more closely. A Combined Disaster Relief Team would coordinate bilateral disaster response planning and training, which could enhance interoperability, help operationalise foundational agreements like LEMOA, and demonstrate to skeptics and adversaries alike of the good the US and Indian militaries can achieve together.

4. **Create a New Visa Category to Improve Defence Exchanges.** The United States and India should take steps to promote and streamline exchanges and greater cooperation through the creation of a special visa category, through which senior officials would be able to travel on a regular basis without the entry visa being tied to a specific trip. India could offer a reciprocal program to support the ease of travel for senior U.S. officials. Although this is a simple example, it is indicative of a relatively easy step that could have outsized effects in the relationship by demonstrating commitment to MDP and serving to enable greater cooperation.
5. **Redouble Focus on Exchanges and Professional Military Education.** Defence exchanges and education should focus on a mixture of operations training, strategic planning and military doctrine, and military professionalization, among other subjects. The number of defence educational exchanges between the United States and India has stagnated in recent years. This trend should be reversed. To better leverage and direct resources to support these and other cooperative education opportunities, the United States and India should each nominate a “senior defence official” or office to oversee and provide leadership on this issue, and set measurable and ambitious targets to ensure professional military education is prioritised.
6. **Institutionalise Requirements and Mission-Driven Technology Cooperation.** As part of assisting the Indian defence establishment adopt a threat-based planning process, the United States and India should reorient their defence technology cooperation towards mission-driven and requirements-based collaboration. This will ensure that bilateral technology cooperation is designed to satisfy capability requirements to address specific and mutual challenges or threats. Such mission-driven, requirements-based technology cooperation will help satisfy U.S. policy requirements that technology cooperation and transfers clearly advance U.S. national security interests. Some immediate areas of focus should be on maritime domain awareness, undersea domain awareness, anti-submarine warfare, and integrated air and missile defence. This may require further export control reform on the U.S. side to reflect India's unique status as a Major Defence Partner. For example, Congress should also advance amendments to Title 22 – specifically to sections 2571 and 2767, the Arms Export and Control Act – as well as Title 10, section 2350, to specifically recognise India's special status as a Major Defence Partner and facilitate greater cooperation, including on advanced defence technology.
7. **Focus on Co-Production Opportunities.** India has made clear that it wants to move beyond a buyer-seller relationship with the United States. Therefore, both countries should be more aggressively exploring co-production opportunities, particularly in next-generation areas that would give a needed boost to the partnership. Additionally, India and the United States should consider how to leverage India's access to markets in South and Southeast Asia, and in Africa to help India develop into a defence export hub to these regions. Such an initiative would support India's goal of becoming a major defence exporter while also providing alternatives in countries traditionally reliant on Chinese and Russian defence equipment.
8. **Launch DTTI 2.0.** DTTI should be reinvigorated, with an explicit mandate to drive cooperative research, development, and production of defence technologies. Key to DTTI 2.0 will be in identifying platforms and systems most relevant operationally to the strategic objectives of Indo-US defence relationship. The DTTI must develop further ties with Indian industry, for example through establishing a council of industry representatives as part of the DTTI structure. In addition, governments on both sides must cultivate interest in Indian and American universities that can help incubate joint R&D projects, especially “blue sky” endeavors with little expectations of immediate return. As a word of caution, while there exists appetite for big ticket items, budgetary constraints and operational utility must be considered when identifying projects.
9. **Include Regional Strategy in the 2+2 Dialogue.** There remains in Delhi some distrust and misperceptions about U.S. objectives in South Asia, as well as a lack of clarity in D.C. of Indian intentions. Much of this is historical in nature due to long periods of strategic divergence. Rebuilding trust, developing habits of cooperation, and fully understanding each other's

security and strategic objectives in the region is critical to advancing the MDP concept. Regional strategy should be an explicit area of focus for the U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial and working-level meetings. To ensure a comprehensive discussion, the 2+2 should include representatives from the Joint Staff, PACOM, CENTCOM and the corresponding Indian commands and Integrated Defence Staff, as well as from State, DoD, MEA, and MOD. These discussions could help with information sharing about emerging threats, and how to avoid duplication of effort or infringing upon critical national interests. It could also help develop new modes of cooperation such as in the Western Indian Ocean, and not just in East and Southeast Asia. Along these lines, it would be critical to ensure the key personnel are in place. Therefore, the Trump administration should advance the nomination and confirmation process for the position of Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs without further delay. Finally, the United States and India should resume holding regular meetings of the

Trade Policy Forum, particularly given ongoing bilateral tensions in this area.

10. **Institutionalise MDP in Washington and New Delhi.** In recent years, the U.S. Congress has taken steps to institutionalise the Major Defence Partnership designation for India, as well as flesh out the concept – both through the 2017 National Defence Authorization Act (NDAA) and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act. India's Parliament should consider taking similar steps to first develop and enunciate an Indian corollary designation to MDP to better frame its relationship with the United States, and then similarly pursue legislative initiatives to build out this framework together in partnership with their counterparts in the U.S. Congress. Working together, Members of Congress and India's Parliamentarians can help to better define and drive the relationship forward while also updating laws to facilitate greater cooperation and ensuring that the future of this strategic partnership is not dependent on individual personalities.

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## The Way Ahead

As both countries seek to build, define and operationalise MDP, TAG and ORF hope these recommendations will aid in the bilateral discussions. Clearly, each nation will have to advocate for and advance its own national interests, which for India includes the need for strategic autonomy consistent with its traditions and regional interests. This should not, however, create obstacles to an uninterrupted and serious dialogue on critical bilateral issues such as MDP. Beyond the strategic benefits, both countries and their citizens will want to see the economic benefits of more advanced defence partnerships, which would include new opportunities for industry, academia and start-ups that yield a vibrant U.S.-India defence ecosystem. And as this report outlines, continued complexity and further integration in joint training

exercises will leave both sides better prepared to handle contingencies as they arise, focusing on those areas of key strategic relevance. Increased intelligence sharing will be a natural byproduct of this deeper cooperation, which will further secure preparedness in both nations. In sum, MDP can and should be the model of cooperation that: a) elevates India on par with America's closest allies, including NATO partners, in order to achieve strategic and operational parity across services and domains and; b) recognises that the India and US partnership, one between the largest democratic economies in this century, will be unlike any other in which both partners will pursue their own geo-political objectives even as they deepen their bilateral engagement for the good of our people and to strengthen the global liberal order.

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