

**INDIA'S
STRATEGIC CHOICES**
China and the Balance of Power in Asia

Rajesh Rajagopalan



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About the Author

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Summary

India is a rising power, but its transformation is occurring in the shadow of China's even more impressive ascent. Beijing's influence will almost certainly continue to grow and has already upset Asia's geopolitical balance. India must decide how to secure its interests in this unbalanced environment by choosing among six potential strategic options: staying unaligned, hedging, building indigenous military power, forming regional partnerships, aligning with China, or aligning with the United States. A closer alignment with Washington likely represents India's best chance to counter China, while efforts to foster regional partnerships and cultivate domestic military capabilities, although insufficient by themselves, could play a complementary role.

Challenges Posed by China's Rise

- China is a direct military threat to India, particularly in light of the two countries' border disputes. Though India has considerable military power, China's forces are already stronger and better-funded; Beijing's outsized wealth will likely allow it to outspend New Delhi for the foreseeable future.
- Beijing's influence in both established international organizations like the United Nations and in new institutions China is setting up, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, gives Beijing opportunities to hamper Indian interests and goals in multilateral forums, especially when it comes to reforming these institutions and giving India a greater voice in global affairs.
- China's alignment with Pakistan and deepening relations with other South Asian countries represents a significant challenge to India's position in the region, which New Delhi has dominated for decades. Beijing's ability to provide financial assistance and balance against New Delhi may tempt India's smaller neighbors to play one power against the other, undermining India in its own backyard.
- China's economic power allows Beijing to spread its influence around the world, which could be used to India's detriment.

India's Potential Policy Responses

- A strategy of nonalignment, hedging, or alignment with China likely would not serve India's interests because China's power, geographical proximity, and policies already represent a clear danger to India's security and global interests.
- A closer alignment with the United States, further along the same policy path that India is already pursuing, represents the best way to meet the challenge of China's rise, because the United States is the only power that is stronger than China. Further, New Delhi and Washington share a common interest in balancing Beijing.
- Among India's other strategic options, efforts to build indigenous military power and forge regional partnerships are necessary and complementary means of countering China, but are by themselves insufficient, because China is already wealthier and stronger than India or any combination of other Asian powers.

Introduction

India faces critical strategic choices. In ordinary circumstances, the country's rapid economic growth might afford it greater control over its external environment, but India's rise is taking place in the shadow of China's even more dramatic growth. China's rise, even aside from the aggressive behavior it has exhibited in places like the South China Sea, would be a challenge for India because it opens up the possibility of China dominating its neighbors, including India. China's wealth and the influence that it brings to bear on international politics is just as great a challenge, especially when India's interests clash with those of China. Beijing's growing assertiveness demonstrates in stark relief the consequences of an unbalanced Asia. This is the central strategic problem that India faces: how to secure itself and promote its national interests in a grossly unbalanced strategic environment.

Still, India is not bereft of choices in the face of China's rise. A balance of power analysis suggests that New Delhi has a number of strategic options to consider. Over the past decade or more, as China's power has gradually grown, Indian policymakers have been constantly debating these choices. Just as importantly, through incremental policy decisions, India also has been making its choice. But this debate and India's policy responses to date have been less than satisfactory because they are being carried out largely in a fractured manner. The debate mostly has been taking place in op-ed columns focused on headline news. There has been perhaps only one previous attempt to consider India's strategic choices in depth: an effort by an independent group of analysts that resulted in the much-discussed *Nonalignment 2.0* report in 2012.¹

Indian strategic policy appears, at least from the outside, to be largely responding in piecemeal fashion to immediate events rather than following any deliberate plan. Though the strategic instincts of Indian decisionmakers have in many instances served the country well, thinking through India's choices in the current Asian strategic environment in a comprehensive way is necessary to clarify their logic and implications and to make Indian policy

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more consistent and effective. There have been few efforts to consider India's choices from a balance of power perspective outlining the consequences of relative power dynamics for strategic policy—an approach that requires considering both India's strengths and weaknesses.

With this in mind, Indian decisionmakers face at least six choices for how to deal with the strategic environment in Asia: nonalignment, hedging, internal balancing (that is, building indigenous defense capabilities), regional balancing, alignment with China, and closer alignment with the United States. None of India's potential strategic choices are easy or obvious. Every option has advantages and shortcomings. No choice by itself will give India everything it wants. The objective should be to pick the best out of this series of imperfect choices as a primary strategy and supplement with other complementary approaches as needed. But deliberating and making a decisive choice is better than being forced into one. Though India might end up lucky and circumstances might work out in such a way that New Delhi ends up with a good outcome even if it does not make a choice, such a lottery-ticket approach is inadvisable because, as with any lottery, the odds are stacked against winning.

After weighing the advantages and disadvantages of these respective choices, and given Asia's current balance of power, India's strategic interests would likely be best served by the sixth option: a closer alignment with the United States. In

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recent years, India has already begun to cultivate a deeper strategic relationship with the United States. This policy instinct has been a sound one, and such a partnership should be advanced even more. The goal here is to articulate why this choice offers New Delhi a higher chance of success than the others. If closer ties with the United States should prove difficult to attain, a regional balancing strategy with other powers in the Indo-Pacific offers India an alternative approach, and such regional partnerships could also be a potential supplement to an augmented U.S.-India alignment.

As for the other potential choices, internal balancing is a necessary but insufficient means of balancing China, while the other three options—nonalignment, hedging, and alignment with China—are not feasible for India in its current strategic environment and will likely become even less so as time passes. This analysis frames these choices not in the context of specific foreign policy issues, but as broad grand strategic approaches—that is to say, the mix of military, diplomatic, and economic tools used to promote national objectives.² Once these overarching approaches are outlined, specific policy choices can be determined accordingly.

It is worth noting that the type of alignments or partnerships that India may pursue would not necessarily be formal military alliances, though such alliances would not be excluded outright. Rather, such relationships would be

chiefly grounded in informal but deep strategic cooperation targeted against a common threat. This mind-set is intended to convey a special relationship of strategic empathy much like the ties that India has had with the Soviet Union and later Russia, those that Pakistan continues to have with China, and the type of relationship the United States and China shared between 1971 and the end of the Cold War—none of these alignments were based on formal treaties.³ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unprompted, instinctive defense of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 is a good example of such strategic empathy.⁴ International alignments are generally viewed with great suspicion in India, but they should not be. Such partnerships and even military alliances tend to be temporary and focused; they are troublesome in many respects but also unavoidable, especially in situations when the balance of power is unfavorable.

Balancing, or policies and behaviors that countries adopt to counter external threats, generally can take two forms. Internal balancing involves efforts to build up domestic military muscle by raising new forces, improving existing ones, or buying weapons. By contrast, external balancing refers to building partnerships or alliances with other countries, usually as a consequence of a given country not having sufficient capacity to meet a given threat with its own resources alone. An alternative to external balancing is bandwagoning, which means aligning with a threatening country to mollify it—though sometimes a country may also resort to such behavior to exploit opportunities that come with being aligned with a strong power.

India's China Challenge

It is clear that India faces a profound strategic challenge as a consequence of China's rise, although this is not the only threat New Delhi must manage. China's spectacular economic growth gives it great wealth as well as the power and influence that come with such prosperity. Yet an argument could conceivably be made that Pakistan and its asymmetric strategy of supporting terrorism against India represents a more immediate threat. Even so, China's recent aggressive behavior—toward India (including its recent reassertion of territorial claims on Arunachal Pradesh, as well as its pressure on the India-Bhutan-China trijunction) and toward other neighbors (in the South China Sea, for example)—makes it difficult to assume that China is any less of a short-term threat to India than Pakistan.

Furthermore, Beijing poses a graver threat to New Delhi than Islamabad does. Even if it constitutes a more immediate threat, Pakistan is far weaker than India by most measures, save nuclear weapons. Its gross domestic product (GDP), for example, is approximately 13 percent of India's.⁵ Pakistan's inclination to resort to nuclear threats and asymmetric warfare is a reflection of weakness, not strength. India has sufficient military capabilities to counter

this threat—even when one accounts for China's assistance to Pakistan—and Delhi would require little help from others to do so.⁶ India's army is roughly twice as large as Pakistan's, while India's navy has almost three times as many major warships and its air force has nearly twice as many combat aircraft.⁷ India also has greater influence and support in the diplomatic arena. In short, India's inability to deal with Pakistan up until now speaks to the failure of Indian strategy, not to inadequate material capacities. By comparison, China is a far greater strategic challenge because of the large power imbalance between it and India, which will likely continue to widen. The strategic choices that India faces with regard to China are thus far more consequential.

China's growing power poses at least four challenges to India. First, it represents a direct military threat. China actually has slightly fewer ground forces (1.15 million troops) than India (1.20 million troops), but the former enjoy critical terrain advantages along the Sino-Indian border, accentuated by far superior transportation and communications infrastructure in bordering Tibet. Meanwhile, China fields almost twice as many modern combat aircraft (of the Mirage-2000 vintage or newer) as India (653 to 349) and nearly three times as many major surface combat vessels (79 to 28) and submarines (53 to 14).⁸ China is also

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building its own fifth-generation fighter jet and a new aircraft carrier that will be larger than any Indian carrier.

China's growing military muscle would be a concern for India even in the absence of any direct disputes. But India and China have unresolved territorial disputes that led to a war in 1962 and several subsequent skirmishes. The possibility of another war might appear remote, but the combination of China's military power and its proclivity to use military force—as most recently illustrated in the South China Sea—represent a serious threat, as senior Indian military officials informed the Indian Parliament in the spring of 2015.⁹ In addition, China's naval foray into the Indian Ocean could also represent an emerging threat.

Second, China's power in international institutions ranging from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) has at times proved to be an obstacle to Indian foreign policy ambitions. Most recently, in 2016, China thwarted India's efforts to join the NSG. China is likely to continue to obstruct India in this manner, and its capacity to do so will only grow as its power increases. Moreover, as its power grows, China has also started establishing international institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and has also been shaping other multilateral organizations to promote Chinese interests, such as the BRICS (a group consisting of Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Third, China's willingness to play the role of an external balancer against India in South Asia is a serious challenge, and, in some cases, a military threat. China's support has bolstered Pakistan's military capabilities and (at the very least) accelerated the development of Islamabad's nuclear weapons and missile programs. Moreover, the possibility of a two-front conflict pitting India against China and Pakistan simultaneously also worries Indian national security policymakers, a concern accelerated by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Parts of this infrastructure corridor traverse Indian-claimed territory in Pakistan-occupied portions of Kashmir. Aside from Pakistan, the enhancement of China's relations with some other Indian neighbors—including Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—provides an understandable temptation for these smaller states to attempt to use China to counter India's natural domination of the region.

Finally, China's great economic power allows it to spread its influence around the world, which it could use to India's detriment. Beijing has used its aid and trade policies to promote its interests, and it is not difficult to imagine that it could use these tools to pressure others, especially developing countries, to support China in a potential disagreement with India. For example, Beijing has used economic boycotts to punish countries like Norway and South Korea for actions deemed to be unfriendly to its interests. China has also used aid to advance its foreign policy objectives in its relations with countries like the Philippines.¹⁰

Why India Must Choose

When a country reassesses the critical strategic decisions it is facing as India currently is doing, the importance and potential path dependency of such decisions can often create a temptation to put off making a final determination. An additional difficulty in the case of India is the country's lack of well-defined institutional structures for deliberating and deciding on matters of grand strategy.

Still, it would be unwise to put off making a decision for a couple of reasons. First, New Delhi has a limited window of opportunity, as India's strategic choices may narrow over time.¹¹ If New Delhi does not choose, it risks having the choice made for it by others. Whatever decision India makes must be deliberate, not one that is forced on it by others because New Delhi has refused to make a choice itself. A second reason for decisiveness is that strategic capabilities have long lead times and cannot be built up quickly. This is true for all of India's choices. The domestic military capacity building that internal balancing entails cannot be done in a hurry, for example. After all, it takes time to determine what kind of military forces and equipment India needs, to buy or build these assets, and to deploy them. Likewise, building strategic alignments also

requires time. Expecting India to find a suitable strategic partner after a crisis has already developed would be risky: potential partners may not be available when New Delhi needs them. And even if there were willing partners in such a situation, it might not be possible for them to deliver help quickly enough to make a difference. The longer India waits to decide, the harder these decisions become. It is even possible that some choices may no longer be available.

Indian decisionmakers must also resist the temptation to postpone critical short- and medium-term strategic decisions in the hope that long-term economic development will suffice to address the challenge that China poses. There is no doubt that balancing short-term and long-term needs is complicated, and these choices are never easy. An excessive focus on short-term strategic needs would hurt India's long-term security. On the other hand, not providing for the country's pressing short-term security needs would likely derail India's long-term prospects too. New Delhi's experience with defense budgeting in the 1950s would be a good guide: sacrificing security preparations for long-term economic development would ensure that India has neither. For any state, security has to be the preeminent concern because without it no other national objectives can be pursued, including economic development.

India is a powerful state that dominates South Asia, a condition that has given New Delhi a large margin for error and has historically encouraged Indian decisionmakers to take a much more relaxed attitude toward its security than is healthy. But China's rise is significantly reducing India's margin for error, and Indian policymakers need to recognize this changed reality. For all these reasons, India cannot afford to wait.

India's Foreign Policy Tools

In response to the challenges China represents, India has four types of tools at its disposal: military power, potential partnerships with other countries (including China), multilateral diplomacy, and international economic integration. India needs to cultivate and enhance these tools as much as possible.

The first tool is military power. States are ultimately responsible for their own security, and for most states—except especially weak ones—military power is a form of insurance that cannot be ignored. It is the most basic instrument that states have, and it is ultimately the only instrument that is entirely under the control of the state. That said, military power is often by itself insufficient, and expending too much effort in this area can potentially have deleterious consequences.

Building sufficient military capabilities could conceivably allow India to deter China from using force against it or, if deterrence were to fail, to defend itself. Having such military capabilities may also give India a freer hand in a potential confrontation with its long-time rival Pakistan, because greater

military strength in New Delhi would likely lessen the incentive for Beijing to open a second front in such a conflict along the Indian border with Tibet. The Indian Army is now larger than China's, but a significant portion of Indian troops are dedicated to the western front, including all three of India's existing strike corps—though a new mountain strike corps is being formed for the Chinese border; some Indian troops are also dedicated to counterinsurgency duties in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and in insurgency-afflicted states in northeastern India. The army also suffers from equipment shortages, especially artillery.¹² In addition, there are concerns about the adequacy of the army's reserves,¹³ as well as a shortage of officers¹⁴—issues that could potentially affect combat effectiveness.¹⁵

Second, in addition to military strength, India also needs strong partners who can help balance against China and possibly help India enhance its own capabilities. This is because China is far wealthier and militarily stronger than India, and this reality is unlikely to change much over the next two decades because the gap between the two is already very wide. China's continuing high growth rate makes it difficult for India to significantly reduce this gap, especially since India's growth rate is not much greater than China's. Indeed, a 2015 study by PricewaterhouseCoopers projected that although the Indian economy would overtake that of the United States in size (in terms of purchasing power parity) by 2050, the former's economy would still be almost a third smaller than China's.¹⁶

This makes partnerships necessary for New Delhi, although such partners should share India's concerns about China and be capable and willing to use their own military forces to counter China's military power. Equally important, they should have enough clout in the international arena to be able to support India's interests. Additionally, they should be both able and willing to help India develop its own economic, technological, and military power so that it can better balance against China.

The third strategic tool at India's disposal is multilateral diplomacy. India could potentially use multilateral institutions such as the United Nations to undermine the legitimacy of and constrain any aggressive Chinese behavior in the international arena. In addition, although India is not a permanent UNSC member, New Delhi could conceivably garner support on issues it deems important from other states, especially more powerful ones like the United States, and, in so doing, attempt to isolate Beijing and deter China from acting against India's interests. Admittedly, China could opt to veto such proceedings in the UNSC, but it would likely pay a diplomatic cost for doing so, and such veto power does not extend to the UN General Assembly. Meanwhile, in some situations, New Delhi could also conceivably partner with Beijing in such venues, in order to give China an incentive to be more accommodating of India's interests.

India has four types of tools at its disposal: military power, potential partnerships with other countries. . . , multilateral diplomacy, and international economic integration.

Finally, international economic cooperation and trade may also be useful tools for India. But Indian policymakers need to have a clear understanding of what this can and cannot achieve. Trade and economic cooperation are useful tools for growing the Indian economy, generating greater wealth, and developing India's technological capacities. Greater wealth and technological capacities are essential building blocks of military power and greater international influence, both of which are necessary for meeting the challenge China poses. But the pacifying effects of such economic integration on international conflict are often exaggerated, and expectations that commerce will lead to cooperation in other areas are usually misplaced. So India can use trade and economic cooperation with China as one way of enhancing Indian economic growth, but New Delhi should be careful about buying into the idea that such cooperation can ameliorate potential conflict with Beijing. More broadly, greater trade and cooperation with friendlier countries and blocs, from the United States and the European Union to Japan and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, can also help expand India's wealth and power.

India's Strategic Choices

The first three of India's six potential policy choices are variants of nonalignment strategies, while the latter three consider possible alignment strategies. Although India will probably employ a combination of these approaches, it is likely that even such a combination will lean consistently in the direction of one particular approach. For example, for much of the Cold War, India followed a strategy of internal balancing, although this was occasionally supplemented with an alignment with the Soviet Union.

Admittedly, actual policies are too complicated to hew to such neat categories and, in this sense, the choices presented below are ideal types deployed to clarify the logic of each choice for heuristic purposes. Such ideal types are useful for exploring the outlines, logic, advantages, and limitations of each of these strategies. In this case, such an exercise forms a basis for judging how useful a given choice would be for India in its current strategic environment. This is, of course, a subjective judgment based on the existing balance of power. It is possible to imagine that in a decade or (more likely) two, the situation may be different, even radically so. A different balance of power context may result in very different strategic choices. But India's current plans have to be made based on the prevailing conditions of today, not based on expectations about the distant future. Moreover, strategy has to be built, if not on the worst case scenario, at least not on the rosier one, which unfortunately has been an Indian tradition.

Nonalignment

Countries can pursue a strategy of nonalignment to avoid entanglement related to the balance of power in the international system, thus enhancing their own strategic autonomy while also seeking benefits from all sides of the great power equation. This was the strategy that India followed during the Cold War. It allowed New Delhi to simultaneously be the top recipient of U.S. economic aid from Indian independence in 1947 until 2012 and a significant beneficiary of Soviet military and diplomatic support during the Cold War.¹⁷ India essentially played the two sides against each other to get benefits from both.

In the case of present-day India, there would be at least four benefits to adopting a nonalignment strategy. First, nonalignment arguably could offer the same benefits for India in dealing with the rise of China that India received during the Cold War. Proponents of such a strategy assert that India could adopt a modified version of this same strategy. Because India is presumed to be a sought-after economic and strategic partner, it could leverage this attractiveness into deep engagement with all sides for its own needs, but also as a hedge against threatening behavior by one of the two great powers.¹⁸ India could conceivably benefit from China's economic dynamism while leaning on the United States for security. The argument goes that this approach promises the best of both worlds: India can continue to benefit from both sides while committing to neither.

Second, it could be argued that nonalignment would promise India a measure of strategic autonomy by avoiding the potential pitfalls of alliances. Forming any alliance represents some loss of autonomy because it requires dependence on other autonomous actors that, almost by definition, may prove to be undependable. States in alliances face well-recognized conflicting pressures between avoiding entrapment in others' wars and abandonment by allies.¹⁹ Consequently, one of the greatest fears expressed in New Delhi about a closer relationship with the United States is that India would be dragged into the latter's wars. In addition, most alliances raise issues related to burden sharing and buck passing by some or all partners. Nonalignment eliminates these complications.

Third, nonalignment would likely reduce tensions with other great powers over India's partnership choices. After all, any alignment with the United States would be viewed unkindly by Beijing and seen as part of a U.S. attempt to contain China; this would affect India's ties with China and thus, potentially, also hurt India's economic prospects. An alignment with the United States could also hurt India's ties with Russia—a country with which India has a strong military relationship—especially given the increasingly tense relationship between Moscow and Washington. Similarly, pursuing a potential alignment with China could harm India's strategic and economic ties with the United States, which is still the world's most powerful state and largest economy.²⁰ Nonalignment would avoid these pitfalls.

Finally, nonalignment would help India avoid divisive internal debates about whom India should align with. There has been a general foreign policy consensus in India, but it is possible that this consensus could break down over questions of foreign alignments. Such internal divisions could weaken the country, allowing other countries to take advantage of India's factional politics.

Despite all of this, however, there are four reasons why nonalignment ultimately would not be a feasible strategy for India. First, nonalignment is difficult to pursue without a relatively benign security environment. Nonalignment is not a feasible option for countries that face significant security threats that cannot be countered by internal balancing alone. When internal balancing is insufficient, external balancing becomes necessary. India did face security threats from Pakistan and China during the Cold War, when it was nonaligned. However, India was far stronger than Pakistan, and the power differential between New Delhi and Beijing was not as stark during the Cold War as it is today. India built a significant military capacity to defend itself against China in the 1960s, and just in case this should have proven insufficient, it also built a close security relationship—short of a formal military alliance—with Moscow. This relationship also provided India with considerable international diplomatic support.

Nonalignment is not a feasible option for countries that face significant security threats that cannot be countered by internal balancing alone.

This is no longer the case today because of China's rise and the large power imbalance between China and India. New Delhi could conceivably opt to be nonaligned today if it were strong enough to defend its interests with its own resources. This would require not only defensive and deterrent military capacities but also sufficient power to protect and promote India's other global interests in multilateral venues. But India simply does not have such capabilities today. On many issues, especially on which India's interests clash with those of China, India is just not strong enough to convince other states to support its cause. So, on issues like the NSG, India has had to depend on friends such as the United States to convince other states to support the Indian cause (although, in that case, Washington ultimately could not convince Beijing to drop its opposition to India's membership).

Similarly, on the military front, consider the issue of defense spending disparities alone. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates that Indian and Chinese defense budgets were roughly comparable in 1989 at around \$20 billion each (calculated at constant 2015 prices and converted to U.S. dollars).²¹ By 2015, China's defense budget had increased tenfold, to almost \$215 billion annually, while the Indian budget was less than a quarter of this, at slightly more than \$51 billion. Weaker powers do have strategic options, but nonalignment might not be one of them.

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Second, nonalignment might actually hurt India's pursuit of strategic autonomy. States pursue alignments because a power imbalance can be a

greater threat to freedom of action. When a country is facing serious threats, alignments can actually enhance strategic autonomy. Even during the Cold War, New Delhi felt the need to drop its nonalignment stance twice when threats developed suddenly—in 1962 (when India sought U.S. assistance in its war with China) and in 1971 (when India sought Soviet assistance to balance against the U.S.-China-Pakistan axis). Recall that the Soviet Union had to cast several vetoes in the UNSC during the Bangladesh War—India's position would have been quite precarious without this support. Moreover, India did develop a quasi alliance with the Soviet Union that was designed to deal with any residual threats from China if India's military defenses had proven to be insufficient. As C. Raja Mohan has pointed out, "India has not had difficulty entering into alliances when its interests so demanded."²² These historical examples suggest that even during a period when India was supposedly benefiting most from nonalignment, it found reason to change course multiple times.

Third, China's geographic proximity to India coupled with its military strength severely impinges on Indian security and constrains the possibility of New Delhi pursuing nonalignment. India was able to practice nonalignment during much of the Cold War at least in part because it was neither a neighbor nor in other ways threatened by either of the international system's leading powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Nonalignment would require some distance between India and the key powers both in geographical and political terms. This type of distance existed during the Cold War but not now. Today, India neighbors one of the world's two key powers, China, which makes Beijing's military power more of a potential threat. More importantly, India has an active territorial dispute with China, which makes it difficult for New Delhi to be neutral between Beijing and Washington. What is equally concerning is that China's rise threatens to make it the hegemonic power in Asia, which would not be in India's interest. Given these factors, it is safe to assume that there is greater strategic sympathy between India and the United States than between India and China.

Finally, it would be difficult for India to be nonaligned considering that China is already seeking to balance against it. Beijing's balancing efforts are long-standing and include efforts to supply Pakistan with nuclear and missile technology. China also supplies a substantial portion of Pakistan's military equipment, and the two countries have conducted a number of joint military exercises. China is also building a port in the Pakistani city of Gwadar, which could potentially house Chinese warships and submarines. More recently, China has stepped up its balancing efforts, not just in terms of developing military capabilities but also in terms of undercutting India in multilateral institutions, most recently in the NSG. China objected to India getting an NSG waiver in 2008 as part of the U.S.-India nuclear deal, although Beijing ultimately

dropped its objection. But by 2016, when India sought membership in the NSG, China hardened its objections and refused to budge. China also refused to accept an Indian attempt in the UN to label Masood Azhar, the leader of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorist group, a UN-designated terrorist. Such Chinese balancing attempts require India to respond to protect its interests, making any Indian effort to be nonaligned considerably difficult because such responses require strategically sympathetic partners. Many of China's balancing efforts are not directed at countering India's military capacity but at constraining India in multilateral venues, where nonalignment would leave India with little support against China.

These disadvantages are much too serious for India to consider nonalignment a viable strategy today. As far as military power goes, India can source military technology and equipment from both the United States and Russia, but being nonaligned may prevent India from acquiring the best technology from either country. Considering that the balance of power is heavily tilted in favor of China, India requires relationships that go beyond being arms suppliers. India needs strong partners who can not only coordinate with India to balance China's military power but also counter its political and economic clout in multilateral institutions. This could change to some extent if the relative balance of power between India and China shifts sufficiently so that India becomes capable of balancing China on its own. But such a shift is likely a long way off, and until it happens, India would be ill-served by a strategy of nonalignment.

Hedging . . . Hoping?

Hedging is a variant of nonalignment that states can pursue in the context of multiple significant security threats. In India's case, one could hypothetically assume that either of the major powers stronger than India, the United States and China, could conceivably pose a threat to India. Hedging is the strategy of remaining neutral between two major security threats until one becomes sufficiently dangerous to require siding with the other. Indeed, some proponents of contemporary nonalignment may actually be hedgers, which would suggest that India should be prepared for the possibility that "threatening behaviour by one of the major powers could encourage or even force it [to] be closer to another."²³ Thus, while nonalignment is presumed to be a rigid ideological strategy, hedging is a pragmatic means of retaining a choice to pick sides if need be, while hoping that such a day never comes. The advantages of such a strategy are similar to the advantages already considered for nonalignment: double-wagoning (that is to say bandwagoning with and drawing benefits from both sides), avoiding tensions with either side, and skirting the troubles of alliance formation and the domestic controversies it may spark.

There are at least two additional benefits to a hedging strategy over nonalignment. First, a hedging mentality is sharply attentive to the international

security environment in a manner that a nonalignment mentality is not. Because a nonalignment strategy typically is adopted in a relatively benign security environment, national decisionmakers could end up being much less careful about changes in the international security environment that might adversely affect their country. They could also be overconfident about their capacity to manage their environment. For example, the makers of India's grand strategy during the lead-up to the 1962 Sino-Indian War assumed, with little basis, that China would be deterred from attacking India because a Sino-Indian war would potentially become a world war.²⁴ Such overconfidence can be a danger in the case of a nonalignment policy. Hedging can overcome this disadvantage. Although hedging does not guarantee strategic wisdom, such a strategy could encourage decisionmakers to be much more pragmatic and less prone to such mistakes.

A second additional advantage of hedging over nonalignment is that it is a lot more flexible. Hedging involves recognizing the need to respond to a threatening environment and accepting that such a response might include aligning with one side or another. The rigidity of nonalignment can make rapid changes less likely until it is too late. Hedging could make Indian strategy somewhat more adaptable to changing circumstances than it has been traditionally.

Set against these advantages are various disadvantages that make hedging, like nonalignment, inappropriate for India's present circumstances. Many of the problems attributed to nonalignment are applicable to hedging too: India's lack of equidistance from the international system's two key powers, New Delhi's relative weakness compared to Beijing, and China's balancing efforts against India.

Hedging also suffers from at least four additional disadvantages. First, hedging assumes that India faces equal threats from both the United States and China. This is obviously absurd. After all, for years Indian decisionmakers have considered China to be a military threat and have sometimes said so publicly, as Defense Minister George Fernandes did in 1998 when he declared China to be India's top potential security threat.²⁵ By contrast, no shade of opinion in India considers the United States to be even remotely a military threat to India. Still, it is not wholly unimaginable that if China were to decline or collapse and India were to grow sufficiently strong, the natural dynamics of the balance of power in global politics could someday raise the possibility that India may begin to consider the United States a military threat. But this is not the case today, and, at this point, it appears to be highly unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Second, although hedging sounds viable in theory, it is not clear that a pure hedging strategy between China and the United States is possible anymore. As a recent rigorous analysis of the hedging concept and its application in East Asia points out, when it comes to dealing with China, "many regional states are

engaging in various forms of balancing, rather than hedging.”²⁶ This is equally true of India. The actions of India and most of China’s neighbors indicate that they already consider China (and not the United States) a threat, even if they are careful in their public declarations. Indian military plans are already obviously directed at balancing Beijing, not the United States. India is increasing its military capability along the border, including by raising an entirely new corps in the Indian Army to face China and by building new transportation infrastructure in the border regions. India and other countries in China’s neighborhood—such as Australia, Japan, and Vietnam—are stepping up their security consultation and cooperation, a move that is clearly driven by their concerns about China. Actions speak loudly, and India’s suggest that it is already past the hedging stage.

A third problem with hedging is that it assumes that strategic partners will be available when a country reaches a decision to stop hedging and align with one side. Refusal to take sides in time might reduce a country’s perceived credibility, heighten other countries’ suspicions of free riding, and reduce the incentives for others to cooperate. As Ashley J. Tellis has noted, to assume that the United States will be available to back India when New Delhi needs it to, irrespective of Indian policy in the interim, is highly risky.²⁷

A final related disadvantage with hedging is that even if strategic partners are available, they might not be able to effectively help deal with a rapidly developing threat if called upon to do so at the eleventh hour. Alignments take time to build, and building indigenous capabilities through alignments takes even more time. Time is a luxury that a hedging state might not have should a threat rise suddenly, especially since hedging takes place in an already tense security environment. As an example, in 1962, even if India had asked for assistance from the United States a few weeks or months earlier, this still might have been insufficient to develop Indian military strength to stave off defeat at the hands of China.

These disadvantages make hedging a risky strategy, even though it is much more pragmatic than nonalignment. As with nonalignment, hedging might make it difficult for India to enhance its military power because key countries like the United States and Russia might not be as willing to cooperate militarily with a country that is hedging its bets. But just as serious of a problem (as with nonalignment) is the fact that a hedging strategy would likely reduce the willingness of key potential partners to stand with India to manage China’s clout in the diplomatic arena.

Hedging is a risky strategy, even though it is much more pragmatic than nonalignment.

Internal Balancing

Obviously, building up India’s domestic military capabilities is necessary even if New Delhi adopts any of the other strategic choices. But internal balancing

focuses primarily on building up independent military capabilities to counter external threats in a way that ideally obviates the need for external alignments. Internal balancing is a corollary to nonalignment, in that the latter presumes that a country has sufficient capacity for internal balancing.

States generally prefer internal balancing because it offers greater control compared to external partnerships, which require dependence on others. Thus, India's suspicion of alliances and its desire for strategic autonomy is eminently understandable because this is what all states seek. In addition to allowing India to avoid the general problems of alliances, such as the twin fears of entrapment and abandonment, internal balancing offers at least three advantages. First, internal balancing would permit India to stick to some version of nonalignment, a policy that is deeply rooted in Indian strategic culture and with which the country's dominant nationalist and left-of-center political culture is comfortable. Second, internal balancing would allow India to avoid contentious domestic debates about which countries India should align with. Although internal balancing is expensive, so far there have been few domestic political controversies in India about the burden of defense spending. Third, internal balancing may reduce tensions with other countries that can result from aligning too closely with one country or another.

But these solid advantages also need to be weighed against the potential pitfalls of an internal balancing strategy. Any such strategy must be adequate to meet all potential external threats. In India's case, this means the capacity to militarily balance at least China and Pakistan.

There are four key shortcomings that make internal balancing an inadequate strategy for meeting India's needs, and these apply particularly to balancing China. First, India does not currently have sufficient military capability to counter China on its own. Besides the fact that its military is being outspent by Beijing, New Delhi also has other problems. India has much worse border infrastructure, especially the roads and rail links needed to rapidly move Indian forces and supplies to the border. India's technological edge over China is also disappearing, as China uses its larger defense budget to buy or build much more advanced military equipment than what India possesses.²⁸ On the plus side, China has multiple threats that it must prepare for, especially emanating from the United States and Japan. Moreover, India's military objective against China is deterrence and defense, not offense, which reduces the former's military burden. But even so, the gross disparity in material capabilities between the two countries is so great that India simply cannot counter China's military power by itself, making internal balancing a risky proposition.

This does not mean that India will never have the capacity to internally balance against China. India's capacity for internal balancing is likely to get better depending on its relative growth vis-à-vis China's. India's GDP growth

India does not currently have sufficient military capability to counter China on its own.

rate now exceeds that of China, and this trend is projected to continue, giving greater support to such hopes.²⁹ But prudent policies should be based on present conditions, not hopes about the future. Moreover, for India to close the capacity gap with China, it would have to grow at a pace substantially faster than China's for a considerable period of time. While this may be possible, it would not be wise to make this assumption the basis for strategic planning.

Second, even if India's growing wealth gives it a greater capacity for developing military power, New Delhi still would face at least two other challenges to converting this wealth into usable military power. One is India's dysfunctional politics.³⁰ Despite having a single-party majority in the lower house of the Indian Parliament after three decades, Indian party politics remains chaotic, potentially affecting defensive preparedness. To give only one example, frequent charges of corruption in Indian defense deals have slowed defense acquisition to a crawl. In addition, the Indian state's institutional capacity to generate military power is open to question.³¹ This raises concern about how effectively New Delhi could improve its military capabilities chiefly by domestic means.

Third, the shortfall in India's internal balancing capacities become even more worrying in light of the possibility of a two-front war involving simultaneous hostilities with both China and Pakistan. As far back as 2009, India's then chief of army staff, General Deepak Kapur talked about the need to plan for a two-front war.³² Although not all Indian strategic analysts agree that India faces the danger of a two-front war,³³ India's defense planners—including previous defense minister A. K. Antony—have expressed concerns about the China-Pakistan relationship and its impact on India's war-fighting potential.³⁴ A two-front war might appear improbable considering that neither China nor Pakistan has previously joined the other in a war against India, but Indian strategic planning cannot rule out this contingency.

Finally, an internal balancing strategy in all likelihood would seriously hamper India's capacity for dealing with China's power in other arenas, especially multilateral institutions. India's national goals go beyond just defending its territory. This includes playing a more active role in multilateral institutions to generate and bolster global norms that are in India's interest while preventing or delegitimizing norms that could constrain it. These tasks require strong and willing partners. Because a strategy based purely on internal balancing is not predicated on building strategic partnerships with other countries, India would not be able to count on help from other powerful states in multilateral bodies. New Delhi might, of course, be able to build partnerships on specific issues, as it has done on UNSC reforms. It is equally true that having strong partners might not guarantee that India will get everything it wants in multilateral engagements. Still, any assessment of the merits of a go-it-alone strategy needs to consider this a serious disadvantage.

Ultimately, India has little choice but to enhance its military capabilities to the extent that it can, irrespective of which of the six strategies it follows. But a pure internal balancing strategy would be unwise because India has inadequate military capabilities—a condition that will likely not change in the immediate future—and because India has goals that go beyond just territorial defense. A purely internal balancing strategy would not enhance India's military power because the weakness of India's domestic defense technology and production capacity necessitates international partnerships. And as with the previous two options, a pure internal balancing strategy would also leave India vulnerable to China's influence in multilateral diplomatic settings.

Regional Balancing

Regional balancing is a strategy India could pursue to align with other Asian countries in order to balance against China. Such partners could include Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam—although, in the future, Indonesia and Malaysia could potentially be incorporated. These countries are also concerned about China's rise and aggressiveness, and they may be open to India playing a role in establishing a more favorable balance of power in the region.³⁵ Over the last two decades, India's Look East and Act East policies have aimed at closer economic and strategic links with other countries in the region.³⁶ But follow-up has been unsatisfactory, as India is still trading less with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations than even Australia or Hong Kong. India's inability to improve transportation infrastructure to its east is a serious problem.³⁷

There are multiple advantages to such a regional balancing approach. First, it would allow India to balance China without the disadvantage of aligning with another great power such as the United States. There tends to be little domestic political controversy about enhancing India's ties with countries in Southeast and East Asia. Indeed, there is bipartisan consensus in India over the need to do this. If anything, any criticism of expanding ties with other Asian countries has been about the lack of delivery on initiatives like Look East and Act East.

Second, a regional balancing strategy would circumvent worries in some corners about a new wave of U.S. isolationism and the prospect of U.S. unwillingness to balance against China. There has been increasing concern in the United States about the cost of the country's global commitments. Some U.S. strategists have argued that these commitments are unnecessary and wasteful, calling for Washington to adopt a more restrained strategy.³⁸ These concerns became an important issue in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, though they predate it. Under U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, other countries' concern about American dependability has only increased. If India were to emphasize

building strategic partnerships with other Asia Pacific powers, regional balancing could also provide an alternative route if the United States should prove to be an unfaithful partner. Moreover, a regional alignment could conceivably supplement other forms of balancing, such as building up India's indigenous defense capabilities or partnering with the United States.

Third, unlike an alignment with another great power, India would likely be the more powerful partner in the relationships that would form a regional alignment in Asia, where only Japan is of comparable power. This would likely reduce potential concerns in New Delhi that other great powers may seek to use India as a pawn in their great power games. India's greater power relative to most neighboring countries should make New Delhi the more indispensable partner in such regional partnerships.

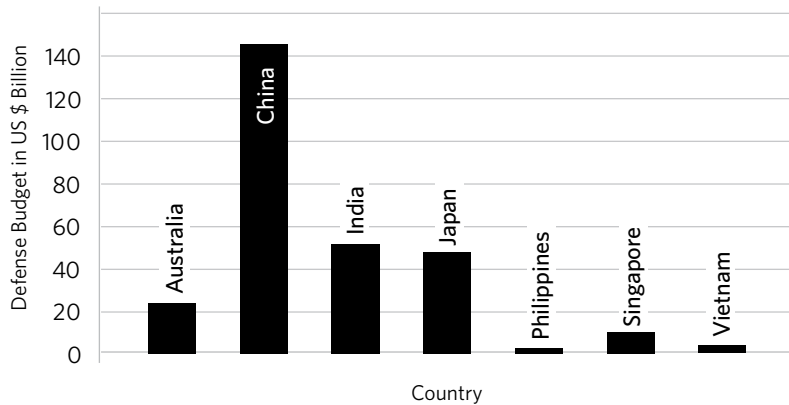
Fourth, this strategy has an inherent legitimacy. Traditionally, India has objected to great power politics that are played out in the territories of small, weak countries for the benefit of others. But a regional balancing strategy involves defending small powers against a local hegemon, which is an eminently justifiable and legitimate task. Moreover, India is part of the Indo-Pacific region, not an interloper that is exploiting the region for its own benefit.

Fifth, there would likely be economic benefits to building up such links, particularly in terms of trade-fueled economic growth. Although strategic concerns have become more prominent over the last few years, the original and continuing emphasis of the Look East and Act East initiatives has been predominantly economic, predicated on the attractiveness of linking India with an economically dynamic region. Strategic sympathy could deepen such economic ties and enhance India's power.

Despite these important advantages, however, there are some key drawbacks to a regional balancing strategy that also need to be considered. The most important one is that China is likely much too strong already for regional

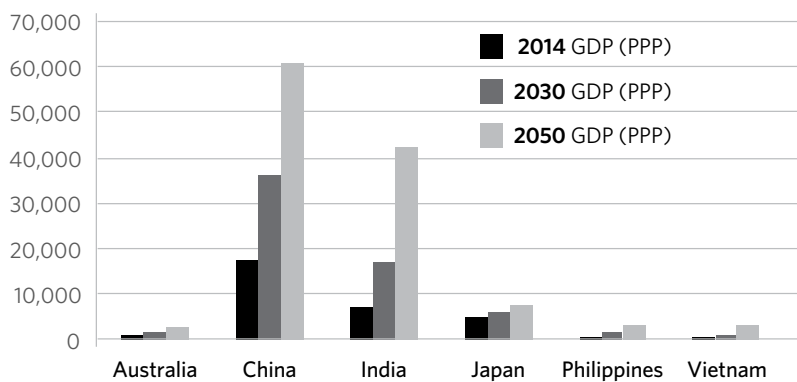
China is likely much too strong already for regional states to balance against it.

states to balance against it. Balancing becomes progressively more difficult as the power disparity between a leading power in a region and its neighbors grows.³⁹ At a certain point, when the leading power accrues close to a majority of the region's total military expenditures, balancing becomes nearly impossible.⁴⁰ In short, other things being equal, the greater the disparity in power, the greater the difficulty of balancing. Based on the data presented in Figure 1, China's 2016 defense budget (approximately \$145 billion) was already almost as much as the combined 2016 budgets of Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam (about \$147 billion).⁴¹ For India to rely solely or predominantly on regional balancing to ensure its security, then, would be exceedingly difficult and risky.

Figure 1: 2016 Defense Budgets of Select Asian Powers

Source: International Institute of Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2017*.

This pattern is likely to hold or perhaps even become more exacerbated as time goes on. After all, this same logic extends to the size of China's GDP relative to other countries, which can be seen as a rough barometer of potential capacity for future military spending. As Figure 2 shows, by 2014, China had already crossed well over the 50 percent threshold in terms of the total aggregate GDP of the countries listed above.⁴²

Figure 2: GDP Projections of Select Asian Powers

Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers' *The World in 2050* report.

Figure 2 also shows that this gap is likely to get wider in the coming decades. By 2030, for instance, China is projected to have a GDP of \$36.1 trillion, whereas the combined GDPs of Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam are likely to be only \$27.7 trillion.⁴³ If this pattern were to hold true, it would likely mean that China's future capacity to fund its military would

continue to outpace the capacities of these other countries for the next several decades.

In fact, even if one charitably assumes that China's growth rate were to hypothetically drop by a couple of points and these other countries' growth rates were to be a couple points higher than expected, it is still unlikely that India and China's other neighbors would be able to keep up with Beijing's pace of growth. This suggests that even if these regional powers were to come together, they likely would not have the material capacity to balance China in and of themselves.

Second, geography and the challenge of coordination add to the problem. India's potential regional partners against China are separated by vast swathes of water, which tends to be the most difficult geographical obstacle to military power projection. Although a couple of the Southeast Asian countries are clustered closer together, they also would be the weakest members of any such regional alliance. On the other hand, China has the benefit of internal lines of communication, which would allow the Chinese military to swiftly shift land and air forces from one theater to another, while its naval forces could stay close to its shores. Geography thus represents a significant hurdle to such a regional balancing strategy.

A third disadvantage of the regional balancing approach is that even an alliance with weaker powers does not solve some of the problems of alliance politics, such as burden sharing. There tends to be a temptation among weaker powers to let the stronger members of any alliance pull the most weight. So in a potential Asian regional alliance, Australia, Japan, and India would probably carry most of the burden of balancing China. This dynamic could lead to disputes within the alliance, weakening it further.

A fourth disadvantage is another general problem of alliances—entrapment. Weaker powers could conceivably engage in military adventurism against China that could drag alliance members into an unnecessary conflict. Indian analysts have considered the entrapment problem only in the context of an Indian alignment with the United States, but this problem could affect a regional balancing strategy too.

A final disadvantage is that even if a regional alliance were to help India militarily balance China, this approach likely could not counter China's power in multilateral institutions, which is as much of a concern for New Delhi as Beijing's military might. In such multilateral venues, China would likely be able to attract countries that are not part of such a regional alliance, especially those outside the region, to promote its interests and damage India's. Most of India's partners in a theoretical regional balancing strategy would be too weak to offer India much help with this problem. While such an alliance may provide India some international diplomatic support, these partners do not have sufficient influence, even acting together, to counteract China in multilateral forums.

In a context in which India's choices are limited, regional balancing might represent a necessary supplement or even an alternative to other balancing efforts. Despite its limitations, this approach is still worthwhile to pursue as a complementary tool because it represents a net addition to India's potential balancing efforts. Ultimately, though, despite having some advantages, a purely regional alliance would likely not suffice to bring a strategic balance back to Asia. This is because, most importantly, it is already too late to attempt this strategy, given China's current level of strength. In addition, regional balancing also would probably fare poorly in the context of the four tools that India needs to develop. Such a strategy could do little to improve India's defense capacity because the potential partners in such an endeavor are themselves arms importers and not major suppliers of defense technology or equipment. In addition, although such regional partnerships could improve India's economy at the margins through increased trade and closer engagement, it is worth remembering that all of these potential partners have stronger beneficial trade ties with China than with each other; the possibility of hurting these economic ties with Beijing might be a constraint on their individual choices.

A Theoretical Alignment With China

Given the limitations of its other potential strategies, India could also take the counterintuitive step of exploring the theoretical possibility of an alignment with China. It must be noted, again, that such an alignment would not necessitate an actual military alliance. Both India and China tend to be wary of formal partnerships, but both have worked closely with others in the past, even without the benefit of formal alliances: India with the Soviet Union, and China with both the United States and Pakistan.

This is without a doubt the least attractive potential option for India. Indeed, this is not an option that is generally even considered in the Indian strategic debate. Even India's two communist parties, despite their harsh criticism of India's increasing closeness to the United States, do not suggest that India should partner with China: all that the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) ask is for India to maintain its "non-aligned" and "anti-imperialist" character.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, this option must be considered seriously. It is, after all, China's spectacular rise that has prompted a reconsideration of India's strategic choices in the first place. Aligning with a powerful state like China would have at least three significant advantages that should not be ignored in any Indian strategic calculation. The first is that this type of alignment could at least in theory protect India from China's growing power. An important Indian objective with regard to a powerful neighbor like China is to avoid becoming its target, and this type of bandwagoning is not an uncommon tactic in international politics.⁴⁵ Bandwagoning for security is sometimes the

only choice for relatively weaker states because they do not have the indigenous capacity to counter a great power and cannot attract—or, in India's case, may not want—external allies to help them. India's smaller neighbors, with the exception of Pakistan, have occasionally resorted to bandwagoning with India for precisely these reasons.

Another potential benefit of such an alignment is that China might then be willing to shift gears and support Indian strategic goals, such as membership on the UNSC or in the NSG. Weaker states often bandwagon with stronger states in order to benefit from their power—a strategy called bandwagoning for profit.⁴⁶ Before China's regional behavior became aggressive, many of its neighbors were essentially bandwagoning with it.⁴⁷ India's relationship with the United States after the Cold War is another example. Bandwagoning for profit does not make for as strong an alliance as bandwagoning out of security concerns because the former suggests a greater element of choice than the latter. Also, China does not yet have the kind of global normative and institutional dominance the United States has to make such a strategy very attractive for India. On the other hand, China's capacity is growing, and Beijing is beginning to self-consciously move toward establishing new institutions and norms, making the idea of a partnership with China potentially beneficial to India's larger global ambitions.

A third benefit for India from such an alignment is that it could perhaps cut away one of the strongest pillars of Pakistan's strategic policy. China is undoubtedly a more serious threat to India, but Pakistan arguably constitutes a more immediate challenge. Pakistan has benefited enormously from China's patronage and continues to do so. If India were able to successfully secure a partnership with China, such an alignment could conceivably undercut Pakistan's source of military, technological, and diplomatic support.

Set against these significant benefits are at least four important drawbacks of aligning with China that need to be considered. First, most obviously, India and China went to war in 1962 and are still locked in a territorial dispute that remains a constant sore spot in the relationship. It is difficult to align with a country with which one has fought a war and continues to have a border dispute.

A second serious difficulty to forming a Sino-Indian alignment is the lack of a common adversary. Alliances are generally motivated by enmities.⁴⁸ But there is no possible target for a balancing alliance with China. The only logical possibility is Washington because only the United States is stronger than both and could potentially represent a threat to both. But the United States is not currently, or even conceivably for the near to medium term, considered a threat to India. China's decisionmakers may see the United States as a possible threat, but that, by itself, cannot form the basis of a Sino-India alignment.

Third, bandwagoning with China would, by definition, relegate India to being a junior partner, as it is always the weaker state that seeks to bandwagon. As suggested earlier, any stable form of bandwagoning would be one

that India chooses for security purposes (or, more indelicately, out of fear) rather than for profit. That does not make it a dishonorable choice on its face, but being a junior partner comes with clear disadvantages including, most obviously, the reality that China's interests would be put ahead of India's. Given New Delhi's global ambitions, such a bandwagoning choice is also likely to be domestically unpalatable.

Fourth, and probably the most serious obstacle to this alignment strategy, is that Beijing's behavior tends to indicate that China has consistently seen India as a competitor in Asia. Since as early as the 1960s, China arguably has followed a strategy of seeking to contain India, and this shows no sign of changing. Some argue that China does not yet see India as a threat but warns that if India attempts to join an effort to contain China, "it [China] may end up adopting overtly hostile and negative policies towards India, rather than making an effort to keep India on a more independent path."⁴⁹ If Beijing were indeed neutral toward New Delhi, there would be little question that it would make sense for India to work assiduously to ensure that China does not attempt to balance against India. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that this is true.

On the contrary, in multiple ways, China has sought to balance against and contain India, mainly through its undeclared alliance with Pakistan. China's support for Pakistan has included supplying it with critical nuclear and missile technology, in addition to conventional arms. The China-Pakistan axis, an arrangement between two radically different states, makes sense from China's perspective only as an effort to balance against India.⁵⁰ China's actions over the last decade illustrate that such balancing continues. China tried (unsuccessfully) to prevent India from receiving an exception from the NSG for the U.S.-India nuclear deal, and when that failed, Beijing contravened NSG rules by supplying Islamabad with nuclear power plants.⁵¹ China also opposed India's effort to gain a permanent UNSC seat by supporting a group of countries working to prevent such expansion.⁵² Moreover, Beijing objected to India's membership in the NSG and even thwarted Indian efforts to get the UN to blacklist Masood Azhar, the Pakistan-based terrorist.⁵³ Beijing did all of these things in addition to what might be considered normal efforts to balance India through direct military and economic assistance to Pakistan.

In sum, while there may be some theoretical benefits to a potential Sino-Indian alignment, such a pairing could only be a bandwagoning arrangement. This is a serious limitation because though such a partnership may offer some potential for managing China's rise and the resulting strategic imbalance in Asia, bandwagoning alignments are inherently less attractive than balancing ones. More importantly, Beijing's consistent efforts to balance against and contain New Delhi suggest that China has already made up its mind about India. That reality almost certainly makes any alignment with China unworkable and

Beijing's consistent efforts to balance against and contain New Delhi suggest that China has already made up its mind about India.

quite possibly dangerous. If relations with China should further sour at some point, India would find itself in serious trouble without the capacity to resist China's designs. In multilateral venues, such a partnership might lead China to support Indian ambitions. But this could also lead others such as the United States or even Russia to oppose India, which would leave New Delhi no better off. It is possible that India could perhaps garner some economic benefits from a partnership with China, but the aforementioned political and strategic consequences far outweigh these.

Bandwagoning or Balancing With the United States

Aligning more closely with the United States is India's sixth strategic option. To reiterate, further advancing such a partnership does not require a formal treaty alliance—although this would not be wholly ruled out—but rather a deep and abiding relationship of strategic empathy grounded in only one shared basis: a common interest in together balancing against China to ensure that it does not become the hegemonic power in Asia. Though there are plenty of models for such an alignment, from India's perspective, the template should be the Indo-Soviet strategic partnership of the 1970s and 1980s.

Although India has developed a close relationship with the United States over the last decade, so far this relationship has looked more like a profit-driven bandwagoning relationship than one based on the requirements of balancing. India has bandwagoned with the United States to accrue various benefits—the U.S.-India nuclear deal and the NSG waiver for India are only the most important instances of this. A relationship based on balancing would have stressed military cooperation much more, but as the decade-long delay in the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement shows, India continues to remain somewhat wary of being seen as militarily balancing with the United States.

But an alignment with the United States as considered here is different in that it would involve seeking a partnership based on the common need to balance China rather than simply continuing a profit-driven bandwagoning relationship, as bandwagoning by itself is not a strong basis for a partnership. More importantly, the primary purpose of the strategic choices considered here is the need to tackle the challenge of China's rise. Even those Indian analysts who are skeptical of deeper U.S.-India ties nevertheless agree that China is “a shared concern.”⁵⁴ If so, balancing likely would have to be the basis of U.S.-India ties; a bandwagoning relationship with the United States would provide only limited benefits for this purpose.

The prospect of a U.S.-India strategic partnership has been debated for more than two decades, but it remains controversial in India. It is also the subject of much confusion about what such a partnership would involve, the balance of obligations, and its consequences. But while plenty of opinions have been

expressed about specific aspects of such an alignment, there has been little effort to directly explore its advantages and drawback.

The most important benefit of deepening such a partnership is that this would help India balance China. This is a unique benefit that by itself should suffice as the basis of a partnership, because no other country aside from the United States, or even a combination of countries, can provide India this benefit. The United States is an attractive partner because of four factors: its power, its self-interest, its external balancing strategy, and its willingness to partner with India.

The United States is the only country in the world that is stronger than China and thus the most attractive potential partner for India to balance China. Despite much talk of Washington's supposed decline, at least some analysts suggest not only that the United States continues to be stronger than China but that the former's dominance could very well last for the foreseeable future.⁵⁵ Part of this is a product of U.S. military power: the United States still "commands the commons," holding a strategic military advantage in the domains of air, land, sea, and space.⁵⁶ In the naval domain, for example, while the United States today operates eleven aircraft carriers, China's first one, a refurbished Soviet-era carrier that is smaller than U.S. carriers, was declared combat-ready only in late 2016.⁵⁷ Even China's developing anti-access/area-denial military capabilities—designed to deny U.S. strategic assets freedom of movement in these domains (and which may not be widely deployed until as late as 2040)—may not be enough to tilt this balance decidedly in China's favor.⁵⁸ In addition, the United States is bolstered by a global network of alliances and partnerships. All of this is based on U.S. economic strength: already the world's largest economy, the United States has had one of the most robust recoveries among developed economies since the 2008 financial crisis.⁵⁹

There may be other countries willing to join India to balance China, especially various other neighbors of China but, as illustrated previously, they are simply not strong enough—even together—to balance against Beijing. Russia, India's traditional strategic partner, is only a shadow of its former self. And although China's growth over the last four decades has been impressive, it is unlikely to overtake the United States in the immediate future as the world's most powerful nation because the gap between the two countries is still substantial, especially in terms of military power and technological capacity.⁶⁰ *If* China should overtake the United States as the world's most powerful nation, the benefits of aligning with the United States may diminish and India may have to rethink its choices. New Delhi would have to recalculate how useful Washington would be as a partner, because though the United States would still be very powerful in such circumstances, such a partnership would likely

The United States is an attractive partner because of four factors: its power, its self-interest, its external balancing strategy, and its willingness to partner with India.

incur China's displeasure without possibly any commensurate benefit in helping India balance China. But as long as the balance of power between the United States and China continues to favor Washington, aligning with the United States to balance China is an obvious choice.

The United States also shares India's interest in ensuring that China does not dominate the Asia Pacific. Each side has slightly different reasons: for India, China's hegemony over Asia would be a direct security threat that would severely constrain New Delhi's strategic autonomy. For the United States, China is not (yet) as direct a military threat, but China's potential domination of the Asia Pacific is an unprecedented challenge to U.S. global dominance.⁶¹ The United States will have to balance China not only because China seeks hegemony in Asia but also because none of the other Asian powers are likely to be strong enough to balance China.⁶² This small difference in rationale is likely unimportant in practical terms because what matters is that both India and the United States have sufficient incentive to counter China's power. This common interest was the basis of both the U.S.-India joint statements at the conclusion of Modi's summit with former U.S. president Barack Obama in 2015 and the end of the summit with President Trump in 2017.⁶³

As China becomes stronger, Indian and U.S. interests in balancing China will likely only grow. Unsurprisingly, if China weakens in the coming decades, India and the United States would no longer have this common strategic interest. This may hurt India more: it is unlikely that China would weaken sufficiently to no longer be a serious threat to India, but it is probably somewhat more likely that it could weaken sufficiently to reduce American worries about it and, consequently, Washington's interest in balancing it. This would be the worst outcome for India, because it then would be left to fend off China alone and would be reduced to using a combination of internal and regional balancing. There are recent examples of this: the last three U.S. administrations began their terms in office by attempting to form some variations of a G2—that is, a U.S.-China geopolitical condominium—because Washington did not consider China to be a sufficiently serious threat to require balancing against it. But for the time being, the combination of China's growing power and its assertive behavior ensures that the United States and India share a common interest in balancing China.

In addition, the United States appears willing to align with others to balance China. Though the enormous power the United States wields means that it could conceivably afford an internal balancing strategy, it has chosen an external balancing strategy by building or reinforcing alliances with China's neighbors who are even more worried than the United States about China's power and behavior. This is a sensible strategy for the United States because such alliances reduce its burden. There are admittedly voices within the U.S. strategic community that suggest that Washington should adopt an offshore balancing strategy, conserving U.S. strength until a serious challenger emerges,

but even proponents of such a strategy concede that the United States might have to step in to balance against Beijing because China is simply too strong to be balanced by other Asian states.⁶⁴

If the United States were to decide to adopt a purely internal balancing strategy or an isolationist foreign policy, Washington would no longer be an attractive strategic partner for India. This is not a concern yet, however, because the United States so far has seemed committed to an external balancing strategy. Even though there have been some concerns that President Trump does not share the traditional U.S. interest in alliances, he has reaffirmed the United States' commitment to alliances such as NATO, and senior officials in the administration have done the same for U.S. alliances in Asia.⁶⁵ As the U.S.-China power differential narrows, the American imperative for balancing China is likely to increase, as is Washington's need for allies.

Finally, over the last decade, the United States has also demonstrated an implicit willingness to align with India to balance China. For instance, the 2015 Joint Vision Statement after the Obama-Modi summit mentions the need for ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight and also opposes the threat or use of force to settle territorial or maritime disputes—an apparent reference to China's attempts to take control of features in the South China Sea.⁶⁶ In addition, the United States has sought to bolster India's naval capacities, both through military exercises such as the MALABAR series and by supplying India with advanced maritime reconnaissance technology, such as the P-81 Poseidon aircraft.⁶⁷ The United States could have decided otherwise: it has plenty of strategic partners already, including relatively strong ones such as Japan. But Washington likely recognizes that New Delhi brings substantial capacities to the table and that balancing China would be easier with India in the mix. Building a partnership with the United States would be difficult, or at the least more expensive, if the United States were reluctant to form such a partnership with India. The value of having a willing ally should not be underestimated, especially considering that India might not be able to count on Russia much because of deepening Russian dependence on China. U.S. willingness to ally with India is often seen by Indian commentators as an indication that Washington needs New Delhi more than India needs the United States. This is a mistake: the United States has other choices, but India does not.

Thus, the greatest benefit of aligning with the United States is that such a partnership can help India in balancing China, as a combined result of U.S. capacity, self-interest, external balancing strategy, and willingness to partner with India. Though they pale in comparison, a few other advantages of aligning with the United States are also worth mentioning.

A closer strategic partnership with the United States would be a continuation of a general but slow trend that has been visible in Indian strategy over the last decade.

A second benefit to partnering with the United States is that this may be the most viable way of attempting to ensure that no single Asian power dominates. Admittedly, in the current context, the only Asian power that could dominate Asia is China, which might make this benefit appear redundant. But Japan did make a bid for Asian dominance less than a century back. More importantly, this speaks to a larger point: India, like any large power, should be interested in becoming the dominant power in Asia, but geography—specifically India's location to the west of the Asian continent and away from the Asia Pacific maritime hub—makes this highly unlikely. If it cannot dominate the region itself, India should be interested in ensuring that no other regional power does so either. Though U.S. power could in theory become oppressive, a distant great power is much more preferable to a local power because greater distance makes them *less* of a threat. This is why small states usually seek help to balance dominant regional powers with the help of outside great powers. This is a logic that India should be familiar with considering how often India's smaller neighbors have looked to China or the United States to balance India.

A third benefit of a strategic partnership with the United States is related to U.S. capacity to advance Indian interests in multilateral forums. It is often forgotten that multilateral institutions also reflect material power, even if they do so much more indirectly than the military balance of power. India has already benefited from the United States' enormous capacity in such settings: under the U.S.-India nuclear deal, the United States single-handedly changed the global rules regulating nuclear commerce to exempt India from some of these rules. China's growing power does provide it with greater capacity in such venues too, and this has reduced—relative to the past—U.S. dominance, but it would be foolish to underestimate this advantage. As India's failed bid at NSG membership in June 2016 illustrated, U.S. power cannot necessarily ensure that India will get its way every time, but without U.S. support, India would not even be a player. New Delhi will continue to look to Washington to support it, not only in the NSG but also in other technology control regimes. In addition, India will need U.S. support in its pursuit of a permanent seat on the UNSC and possibly on other global governance issues.

A fourth advantage of a strategic partnership with the United States is that New Delhi has no major disputes—especially territorial—with Washington. This makes for an easier alignment—especially, as suggested earlier, since India's territorial disputes with China make it difficult for New Delhi to build a strategic partnership with Beijing. India had a number of significant political disputes with the United States throughout the Cold War, including the U.S. support for Pakistan during the 1971 war. But that history does not necessarily preclude future cooperation between New Delhi and Washington.

A fifth advantage of such an alignment is that it would enhance India's autonomous technological and military capabilities. The United States remains the world's leader in high-tech research and development, and this

is particularly true when it comes to advanced weapons technology. India can benefit from this U.S. advantage. The United States has often been reluctant to pass on technologies or weapon systems that employ advanced technology, but this is at least partly because Washington and New Delhi have not developed a sufficiently close strategic partnership. Over the past decade, as this partnership has bloomed, so has U.S. willingness to enhance India's capabilities. India's acquisition of the P-81 Poseidon aircraft, probably the most advanced maritime reconnaissance aircraft in the world, is one example, and New Delhi is also negotiating to acquire the next-generation Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System catapult system for India's indigenously built aircraft carrier. A closer strategic relationship would likely increase U.S. willingness to enhance Indian capacities, especially in areas such as avionics.

Finally, a closer strategic partnership with the United States would be a continuation of a general but slow trend that has been visible in Indian strategy over the last decade—something that both major Indian domestic political camps have contributed to.⁶⁸ There is thus an evolving political acceptance of such a partnership. Added to this is the strong societal linkages between the two countries, which include the large and successful Indian-American community in the United States, as well as Indians' relatively favorable public opinion toward the United States.⁶⁹ Therefore, a deeper partnership with the United States would not represent a radical break with India's foreign strategy, even if acceptance of this fact has not yet achieved a full consensus.

Still, there are some disadvantages to a closer partnership with the United States that also need to be considered. Some of these are unavoidable; others are not significant.

The most serious disadvantage is that a closer partnership with the United States would have the potential to create problems for India's relationships with others, most seriously Russia. Russia has been a relatively reliable strategic partner for decades. It would be of great benefit if India could count on both Moscow and Washington to balance Beijing. Though Russia is also concerned about China's power, increasing animosity between the United States and Russia is forcing Moscow to seek closer ties with Beijing, thus making it a less dependable partner for India. Russia is also relatively weaker today than it was before. But even if it were stronger, that would not matter much to India because if Russia were to be dependent on China, that dependence would ensure that Russia would not be of much help to India. Russia's choices are understandable given its strategic requirements—but India's should be too. Indian decisionmakers could help by seeking, to the greatest extent possible, to isolate the broader India-Russia relationship from these developments, but this may prove difficult.

Closer ties with the United States may also lead to further deterioration of India's ties with China. But critics who blame closer ties with United States for deteriorating India-China ties are wrong: China has consistently seen India as

a competitor and has consistently balanced against New Delhi, going back to the 1960s. And there is little correlation between the state of U.S.-India ties and India-China relations. China has balanced against India even at times when U.S.-India ties were—at best—cool. If China is striving harder to balance India today, it is likely not because India has gotten closer to the United States but perhaps because India's increasing power is concerning Beijing. And China's balancing and containment strategy against India would be unlikely to cease even if India did not partner with the United States. It would be better for India to have the means to respond adequately to China's containment efforts than to increase China's relative advantage by failing to exploit all of India's possible choices.

Another disadvantage is that New Delhi will likely need to be much more circumspect about U.S. global policies with which India may disagree. This is the natural cost of any strategic partnership: India repeatedly held its tongue about various Soviet actions such as its invasions of Afghanistan, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary during the Cold War. India and the United States would have to discuss their disagreements in private, much as India and the Soviet Union did during the Cold War, in order to avoid letting disagreements about unrelated policy issues poison their relationship. This might be somewhat more difficult because India and the United States are democracies with vibrant media sectors, legislative committees and opposition parties that scrutinize government policies, and active public policy debates.

Many of the other disadvantages that are outlined in the Indian policy debate over whether to deepen ties with the United States relate to the level of commitment that India would have to make in a deeper relationship. For example, there are frequently expressed concerns that India might become embroiled in U.S.-supported wars that have little to do with Indian interests, especially in the Middle East.⁷⁰ Another concern is that India would potentially be left in the lurch if U.S.-China relations improve.⁷¹

Such views misunderstand geopolitical alignments: such partnerships are not permanent legal commitments but simply temporary arrangements to deal with a pressing security concern; this applies even to formal, treaty-based alliances. To give only one example, Pakistan's informal alliance with China to balance India has been a far deeper and longer-lasting one than the multiple formal defense treaties Pakistan signed with the United States.⁷² Any U.S.-India partnership will last only as long as its primary driver—the China threat—remains. Neither the United States nor India will be able to hold each other to the commitments they make unless both sides think that it is in their self-interest to do so. In this sense, all international partnerships are coalitions of the willing. This does require India to be vigilant, because it is quite possible that under some circumstances the United States will have less of an interest in balancing against China than India does. If such a situation should arise, India would have to also change its policy. But this is a natural issue inherent to

any international strategic partnership, not just a U.S.-India one—and in the case of New Delhi and Washington, the shared interest of preventing China from becoming the dominant power in Asia will likely remain in place for the foreseeable future.

There is another, related, disadvantage. Both India and the United States have a tendency to oversell the relationship, which could lead to unrealistic expectations. For example, India and the United States are not natural allies or at least no more so than any other two allies. There are no natural allies in international politics unless the term is meant to imply the naturalness of expediency and self-interest. While such characterizations may be understandable in diplomacy, they should have little role in academic and policy discussions. India should partner with the United States for the same reason it partnered with the Soviet Union and later Russia for decades: to balance against China's power, not because India and the United States are natural allies.

One example of such overselling is a tendency for the United States and India to refer to the fact that both countries are democracies. They are, but this fact may not be especially relevant to a U.S.-India strategic partnership. If this were a relevant factor, India would have partnered with the United States a long while back instead of partnering with the authoritarian Soviet Union and later Russia.

The last but probably most important unwarranted expectation that comes up in the Indian debate over strengthening ties with the United States is about Pakistan and terrorism. Alignments are generally about countering one dominant threat, not all possible threats. A deeper U.S.-India security partnership is no different because it, too, should have only one objective: balancing China. It is possible that Indian and American interests would converge on other issues too, such as Pakistan. India should generally expect U.S. assistance with enhancing its capabilities, because that would directly help to meet the larger mutual objective of balancing China. But the purpose of this proposed deeper partnership is not about balancing Pakistan. As stated in the introduction, Pakistan is a relatively weak state, and India does not require a partnership with the United States to counter it, though this could reduce India's burden. To the extent that Indian and U.S. interests do not converge on Pakistan, New Delhi needs to follow its own interest in dealing with Islamabad with its own resources. There is little reason for India to submit to U.S. interests on issues related to Pakistan. Efforts to make Pakistan the litmus test of the relationship though, by either side, would only harm their far greater common interest in balancing China.

Given all these considerations, a closer strategic alignment with the United States offers India the best chance of balancing China. Though there are undoubtedly some disadvantages to such a partnership, these are far less costly than its potential benefits.

Summing Up India's Choices

China's growing military power represents a significant challenge that India must meet, especially in the context of the countries' unresolved border dispute, China's willingness to partner with India's neighbors to balance against New Delhi, and Beijing's influence in multilateral forums. A deeper partnership with the United States seems to offer India the greatest chance of success-

Regional balancing and building indigenous defense capabilities are necessary but supplemental strategies to a strengthened U.S. alignment.

fully managing these challenges. Regional balancing and building indigenous defense capabilities are necessary but supplemental strategies to a strengthened U.S. alignment, and these options could serve as alternatives if U.S. willingness should be in question.

A brief consideration of an extreme but possible security contingency can illustrate this conclusion. If India and China were to find themselves in a serious military confrontation on the border, India's nonalignment-related choices would likely all be found wanting. For instance, nonalignment itself may, to some extent, enhance India's economic and military capacity to be better prepared to meet this contingency. But this approach is unlikely to be anywhere near sufficient to match the power that China could bring to bear, and India could expect little help in multilateral forums. In essence, India would stand alone against a far more powerful China.

If India were to instead adopt a hedging strategy, the outcome would likely be not much different; India would not have sufficient time to build or benefit from security partnerships if New Delhi were to wait to cultivate them until after a crisis is already upon it. Only a slowly evolving crisis, taking years to develop, might offer somewhat greater odds for India. Even then, New Delhi would have to contend with the possibility that seeking an alliance after a confrontation has developed might actually worsen the crisis because of the pressure Beijing may feel to seek a resolution through force before India benefits from the partnership it is building. A purely internal balancing strategy, on the other hand, would probably leave India even worse off because India is already far behind China in terms of military power and the economic means such power is based on. India would simply not have the indigenous capacity to meet such a contingency. This does not mean that India can ignore the need to build its own defense capabilities, just that this alone would not suffice to balance China.

India's other potential strategic choices would also be of limited utility in the event of a border conflict with China. A regional balancing strategy might fare better than the aforementioned nonalignment options because such a strategy would perhaps help India develop more military muscle than it could on its own, and, furthermore, India could conceivably have a better wealth base to

build from through greater international economic cooperation. Regional allies standing with India might complicate China's plans against India by forcing Beijing to divert at least some of its military forces away from India, and such allies could offer India some diplomatic backing. A determined China probably could overcome all of these military and diplomatic obstacles, of course, but a regional balancing strategy would likely raise the cost to China of such a confrontation even if it did not stop it. A successful partnership with China, on the other hand, might prevent such a confrontation from taking place at all—though this would also possibly require India to make serious compromises with Beijing to avoid such a confrontation. But if a confrontation were to take place in spite of such concessions or because India got tired of making compromises, India would suffer grievously.

The effect of a deeper partnership with the United States—India's final strategic choice—on such a confrontation with China will depend on the kind of alignment India builds. A formal military alliance—an unlikely possibility—could bring direct U.S. military involvement to India's side or even prevent a confrontation because China might seek to avoid conflict in order not to tangle with the United States. But even a less formal strategic partnership would significantly increase India's prospects in such a confrontation: Washington, for example, could coordinate with New Delhi to divert Beijing's attention even without going to war on India's side—much like the United States attempted (unsuccessfully, though) to divert Indian attention by sending the USS Enterprise aircraft carrier battlegroup into the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Bangladesh War. At an even lower level of partnership, India could significantly boost its military capacity as well as the economic base it rests upon through such a partnership. And India could depend on sizeable diplomatic support from both Washington and its allies to ensure that India would not be isolated diplomatically. A consideration of this hypothetical military contingency is a helpful way of illustrating the differing probable consequences of India's potential strategic choices.

There is only one effective strategic choice for India to protect its interests and safeguard its security: a closer alignment with the United States.

Conclusion

It bears repeating that India's choice of strategy is not stagnant and has to be based on the prevailing balance of power. If this changes, the strategy also has to change. For example, if India's power were to become roughly comparable to China's, India would not even need alliances but could balance China with its own internal resources (though partnerships may reduce the burden).

Similarly, if China declines, the United States could reign supreme as the global hegemon, leading to different choices. But these are not the conditions that prevail today. The current context is one in which China, a neighbor with which India has territorial disputes and which has been attempting to contain India, is the dominant power in Asia and likely will be for some time. In these circumstances, there is only one effective strategic choice for India to protect its interests and safeguard its security: a closer alignment with the United States.

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