

US values and interests are increasingly at odds in the case of India. The country is potentially a vital member of a nascent coalition to help arrest China's expansion in Asia, perhaps reflecting a change to its longstanding policy of non-alignment. While the other members of the security dialogue known as the Quad are tested liberal democracies (United States, Australia, and Japan), India's leading political party increasingly challenges the country's democratic culture with exclusionary interpretations of Hindu nationalism. To what extent should the United States press India to adopt a more pluralist national identity? And how committed is India to working with the Quad to counter Chinese regional influence?

India: Courting Asia's Rising Power

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Introduction

The pillar of the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy lies in promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific. The idea of "free and open" includes provisions that the U.S. will invest in "democratic institutions, a free, and vibrant civil society."ⁱ The strategy lists stalwart American allies and fellow liberal democracies Australia and Japan as key partners in attaining this vision. India—a country whose resources, demographics, and economy possess massive untapped potential—also receives special attention. The Indo-Pacific Strategy pledges to "support a strong India as a partner" in our "positive regional vision."ⁱⁱ

There is no doubt that India is a major player in Asia, and sees itself as poised to take on an even larger role. It possesses abundant resources, is experiencing explosive economic growth, and by 2030 is expected to surpass China as the largest country by population. Additionally, unlike China, India shares several national interests and values with the United States and its regional allies. It is the world's largest democracy (with 1.3 billion people) and the oldest democratic government in Asia.ⁱⁱⁱ Last year, during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to President Biden in the U.S. the two leaders reaffirmed the two nations' shared interests in a joint statement. The two leaders emphasized their commitments to: "building a strategic partnership and working together with regional groupings to promote shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond; developing a trade and investment partnership...; galvanizing global efforts to scale up climate action; [and] strengthening democratic values and institutions..."^{iv} For its part, India has taken notable actions in recent years to demonstrate that it is taking its relationship with the U.S. seriously. Given these statements and their oft touted shared democratic ideals as the world's oldest and world's largest democracies, India's inclusion in the Quad appears not only natural and obvious, but necessary.

However, while India appears committed to economic partnership with the Quad, its commitment to an enhanced security relationship is, at best, lukewarm. In addition to primary concerns about domestic prosperity and stability, its long history of diplomatic non-alignment has meant an unwillingness by India to openly confront revisionist powers, to include China. In fact, since its birth as a modern state India has fostered a long, amicable relationship with Russia, another revisionist state. As such, there remains some concern about India's willingness to

commit to the ideological and security goals of the United States and the other members of the Quad.

Domestically, critics have accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ruling coalition (the National Democratic Alliance, or NDA) of stoking religious divisions and sectarian violence in a historically pluralist, secular country. Allegations include state-sponsored religious discrimination, abuse of political dissidents, and crackdowns on free speech. Combined with an overburdened criminal justice system and corrupt policing practices, these recent developments have led Freedom House and other evaluating agencies to downgrade India's status on indices of freedom and liberty.^v Several members of the United States Congress have openly criticized the Indian government's human rights record and questioned whether the country deserves its position in the Quad.^{vi} In April, the U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken came out with a rare, direct rebuke of India's human rights record, noting that the United States was "monitoring" the developments.^{vii}

Further, the combination of India's domestic problems and its tradition of non-alignment translates into a reluctance to engage in human rights advocacy, undermining a key pillar of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Considering its massive potential but also its significant challenges, how reliable a partner is India for the United States and its vision for the Indo-Pacific? To what extent should the US press India on supporting free, vibrant civil societies in the region, while also policing up its own shortcomings in the realm of human rights? How committed is India to working with the Quad to counter Chinese and Russian regional influence?

Rising Domestic Illiberalism in India

Concerns over the Modi Administration's troubling record on domestic human rights violations fall into the two categories: ineffective oversight of internal security forces, and the administration's increasing employment of policies that marginalize religious minorities.

As a developing country, India has historically faced challenges in enforcing human rights standards amongst its police and security forces. Examples of human rights violations include instances of police brutality, prisoner abuse, and mistreatment of minorities and detainees. While these concerns have recurred throughout India's history, several critics have raised concerns that the current administration has actively facilitated the continuation of such violations:

- The 2021 U.S. State Department Report on Human Rights Practices includes a long list of allegations of human rights violations committed by Indian security forces.^{viii} It specifically references the 2019 Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) as an especially concerning development, having empowered authorities with additional detention powers to deal with "security threats."^{ix} The amendment was passed under the justification of combatting terrorism, but it has been repeatedly invoked to detain, arrest, and abuse activists protesting against the BJP.^x
- The U.S. State Department's Report on Religion in India notes an increase in communal violence between 2019-2020. Much of the violence was attributed to protests and

violence following the controversial passage of 2020 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which was criticized for its discriminatory policies towards Muslims.^{xi}

- In the most recent Freedom House Index Report, India was downgraded from “Free” to “Partly Free” due to “a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters.”^{xii}
- In 2019 the administration was criticized for its revocation of Article 370. The move downgraded the status of the formerly autonomous Jammu and Kashmir and split the territory into two union territories: Ladakh and Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). This was accompanied by a huge security crackdown, weeks long communication/internet blackouts, and restriction of foreign media and observers in the area.^{xiii} China joined Pakistan in condemning the action as illegitimate under the UN charter on the disputed region.^{xiv}

There are signs that political polarization in the country has increased substantially in recent years. Critics accuse the current BJP-NDA administration of mainstreaming previously marginalized Hindu-Nationalist political movements and capitalizing on an electorate that has become polarized across religious lines. A recent study notes how during the 2019 elections, the BJP was successfully able to consolidate the Hindu vote even across caste lines.^{xv} This was a noted departure from previous elections, where the electorate was more stratified along class lines. The consolidation of votes along religious lines enabled the BJP to win the 2019 elections while still losing considerable support among religious minorities.^{xvi} Despite a longstanding tradition of secular politics in India, current trends indicate that secular nationalism is on the decline.^{xvii} Such developments are even more concerning to scholars who note that the Indian Constitution doesn't share the U.S. tradition of “separation of church and state,” and instead includes provisions that allow the state to interfere in religious affairs.^{xviii} Yet, even with the above concerns, Prime Minister Modi remains incredibly popular among the Indian public. Though he suffered a decline in popularity during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a May 2022 poll indicated that 67% of Indians approve of the PM's performance. Through effective use of mass media (including social media), Modi has successfully fostered a pious “man of the people” image and stoked religious nationalism (Hindutva) in a way that shields him from his own administrative shortcomings.^{xix} Given these factors, it appears religious sectarian tensions won't be going away anytime soon.

The scrutiny over India's domestic issues have led to problems with its relationships with key partners. For the United States, several prominent American politicians have raised questions about the BJP-NDA's policies towards Muslims and have publicly suggested making continued security assistance contingent on improvements in India's human rights record.^{xx}

Concerns about rising anti-Muslim sentiments also have the potential to reduce India's influence among Muslim majority Asian nations such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Bangladeshi leaders were recently put in the difficult position of having to balance their continued relationship with India while also having to respond to publicly released records of Indian officials making anti-Islamic comments.^{xxi} Such scandals feed into the perception that India is actively meddling in the affairs of other Muslim countries, dividing them internally while also actively trying to reduce Muslim influence in Asia.^{xxii} Regardless of whether such perceptions are valid or venture into conspiracy theories, the reputational harm being done to

India's image amongst its neighbors limits its ability to act as a regional leader. There is also concern that the continued mainstreaming of Hindu-nationalist positions could lead to more aggressive policies towards Pakistan. A recent study indicates that BJP politicians were far more aggressive in their public statements on twitter and social media than non-BJP Indian politicians and Pakistani officials during the Pulwama crisis in Kashmir, 2019.^{xxiii} While these tensions have thus far been controlled, increased tensions between India and Pakistan could threaten the stability of the entire region.

India's internal problems are not likely to go away anytime soon. The documented history of these issues raises questions about India's ability to stand with the other Quad members in advocating all elements of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Further, the rising religious polarization within India leads to India losing clout amongst other partners in the region and could spill over to increased aggression and destabilization in its relationship with Pakistan.

India and the Quad: Moving Beyond "Non-Alignment?"

Though non-aligned, India was friendly to the USSR during the Cold War and enjoyed close military and economic partnership. From the 1930's, influential Indian politicians, including Jawaharlal Nehru—a father of modern India its first Prime Minister—looked to the Soviet Union for support for India's anti-colonialist ambitions in the Soviet state and socialist ideology. The Congress Party, which dominated Indian politics during the first two decades of independence, governed with a distinctly socialist flare and built a close relationship with Moscow that grew stronger during the Sino-Soviet rift in the 1950s and 1960s. Even after the dissolution of the USSR, India has maintained a "special relationship" with Russia. Potentially particularly important, India has long relied on the Soviets and now the Russians for their arms and defense technology (70—85% of Indian military equipment is Russian made, including more 90% of army equipment and 70% of air force equipment)^{xxiv}

The continuation of this special relation was clear in March when India abstained from the United Nations vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.^{xxv} India's friendly history with the USSR, combined with its current demand for cheap Russian oil and gas to continue to grow its economy, likely played a role in the vote to abstain. Though the Indian government more recently broke precedent in August by voting against a Russian UN Security Council proposal to prevent Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky from making a virtual address, it has yet to directly condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine.^{xxvi} As Russia and China push closer together and especially if China takes the lead, the potential to widen this crack in the Russo-Indian Cold War era relationship may grow. India's economic and security interests are at best poorly served and at worse severely affronted by Chinese regional dominance, and shifting relations around the Chinese hegemon may push India further towards its democratic partners to assure its future prospects. The Quad, though still ambiguous and even ambivalent character, may be the vehicle to achieve that aim.

To understand relationship of the Quad, it is important to put the organization's legacy in perspective. The Quad initially formed in 2004 as a humanitarian taskforce to respond to a devastating tsunami that hit SE Asia on 26 December. In this first incarnation, The Quad—then

called The Tsunami Core Group—was an ad hoc collection of diplomatic and naval assets most capable of responding rapidly to the regional catastrophe. When the response wound down, the organization dissolved. Leaders in all four participating states praised their dynamic partnership, citing it as a potential future vehicle for regional cooperation, but deliberately stopped short of formalizing either its structure or mission. In 2007 Japanese PM Abe Shinzo took the lead in organizing the first attempt at a more deliberate structure, envisioning the partnership growing into a Pacific “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” to ensure a “free and open Pacific.”^{xxvii} However, following their first naval exercise, political friction—both domestic in each of the four states and international amongst their adversaries and allies in the region—scuttled aspirations for a more permanent, formal alliance. India’s PM, Manmohan Singh, disavowed any security implications for the group, emphasizing that its mission lay in areas of shared common interest such as disaster relief and the promotion of democracy and free markets. Under political strain, leaders on all sides walked back their rhetoric and expectations and the group again dissolved in 2008.

In 2017 several factors—including the return of Abe and his desire to create a “democratic security diamond”—helped reinitiate the Quad. Internally, a decade of bi-, tri-, and multi-lateral exercises between the member states and other regional partners increased diplomatic cohesion and security force interoperability, pulling the states towards a structured relationship. Perhaps more importantly, the external pressure of a more successful and assertive China has pushed these states to lean towards each other to counter the growing threat to regional security and the global rules-based economic and political order. However, the level of commitment to and consensus on the security-oriented mission of the Quad remains underwhelming in India. A CSIS survey of strategic elites within each of the four member states demonstrates India’s lower enthusiasm to formalize the alliance administration and neutral to unfavorable opinion for creating a standing military taskforce. Instead, India’s preference is for the organization’s mission as “regional economic and developmental assistance, including loans, technical development, and human rights promotion throughout the Indo-Pacific.”^{xxviii}

While the U.S. has clear primary interest in establishing the Quad as a permanent security relationship to pursue its strategic interest in containing and countering China, up to this point, India has been hesitant to embrace that intent. Japan’s view is more complementary to India’s, emphasizing the democratic nature of the states involved, and their collective buttressing effect for Asian democracy, free-markets, and rules-based order, a view India appears to support, even if not entirely upholding the former’s ideals in its own domestic institutions. India’s prime emphasis is instead on the latter components—economic partnership. This makes sense as the priority, given the poor state of regional economic integration in South Asia and need for economic partners to grow domestic prosperity. The Quad promises closer trade ties with three external partners, all with highly developed economies. There is a potential pathway to bring India along on security priorities by emphasizing the Quad’s economic benefits, but the record so far is mixed.

External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar gave a speech in August which highlighted India’s ambiguous positions on the Quad. While emphasizing that the U.S. and Australia had “legitimate interests” in Asia and subtly critiquing China’s non-adherence to international judgments, Jaishankar also made several comments that seemed to conflict with the

Biden Administration's vision for Asia: he asserted India's commitment to a multipolar world order, failed to mention any direct criticism of China's foreign policy or human rights record, and also declared that India's concerns with China came down to the single factor of "the state of the border."^{xxix} India's stand-offish attitude towards human rights has been especially notable in recent years, likely driven by a desire to prevent the West from meddling in its own human rights issues.^{xxx}

That said, Jaishankar's emphasis on the border is a sign that India is taking its security concerns about China seriously. India and China share more than 2360 miles of border, most of it unmarked and in the unpassable heights of the Himalayas^{xxxi}. Disputed zones include the western Aksai Chin and Karakorum regions near Kashmir, as well as a northern portion of Arunachal Pradesh to the east of Bhutan. China defeated India in the Sino-Indian war of 1962, establishing the Line of Actual Control (LAC) as the new border. The fifty-year history of non-lethal confrontations between border patrols has recently turned more violent; deadly skirmishes have occurred repeatedly over the past two years during ongoing border disputes between the two countries.^{xxxii} Coupled with Chinese support for and investment in Pakistan (which enjoys mutual recognition of disputed claims in the western disputed region) the upshot is an increasing recognition among Indian leaders that China poses a major security threat and that India needs to ramp up its national defense capabilities. These concerns raise the possibility for an expanded Indian security partnership—and one that addresses terrestrial as well as naval concerns—with not just the U.S., but also with the other members of the Quad, most importantly Japan.

Japan has worked tirelessly over the past decade to increase its own security ties with India. Before his death in 2022 former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Quad's original and strongest proponent in its 2007 and 2017 incarnations, had formed a strong personal relationship with both former PM Singh and current PM Modi, a rapport that translated into improved ties between the two nations^{xxxiii}. During Abe's administrations, the two nations saw enhanced economic ties as well as increased cooperation on nuclear energy, security, and defense issues.^{xxxiv} Former PM Abe had clearly "placed India at the heart of his foreign policy for the Indo-Pacific region," and played an integral role in bringing in India to form the Quad relationship alongside the US and Australia.^{xxxv} Despite India's apparent hesitation to frame the Quad as a security relationship against China, Japan continues to court India as a security partner. During a bilateral meeting of foreign ministers, Japan proposed an increase in military drills, as well as for "cooperation in the development and transfer of military equipment and technology."^{xxxvi} The move came amid concerns from Japan towards India's participation in a joint military exercise with Russia and China.^{xxxvii} Japan's success in this realm indicate that India is open to expanding its security relationship with others, if done correctly.

While there seems to be a clear incentive for India to step up security cooperation, a Quad relationship that includes a robust security component remains thus far unrealized. India has also been reluctant to join other Quad priorities and initiatives pertaining to building democratic institutions and building civil society. It remains to be seen how committed India is to achieving these objectives.

Conclusion

All of the above factors raise legitimate concerns about India's willingness to support the United States' larger objectives for the Indo-Pacific. India's hesitance to condemn Russia's aggression into Ukraine and its often ambiguous stance toward China raise doubts about the Indian leadership's commitment to enhanced security ties with the U.S. and the Quad. Its own lackluster record on human rights and instances of rising illiberalism creates concerns over India's adherence to shared democratic values. It seems clear there are still many significant obstacles that must be overcome before India can be considered a reliable U.S. partner in Asia.

Yet, looking to the future as the US pivots its focus to Asia and renewed era of great power competition with China, the potential to bring an economically successful, democratically inclined, and militarily interoperable India to our side is an alluring prospect. While the U.S. does have reliable allies in Asia (Japan, UK, New Zealand, South Korea), India is the only country on mainland Asia with the population and growth potential to rival China. The U.S. and India already share economic goals. Convergence on security interests seem destined to follow: India is threatened by China's rapid military modernization, involved in an ongoing border conflict with China, and increasingly concerned by China's aggressive actions in the region. An improved security relationship with India could open the door for more robust cooperation and dramatically enhance India's ability to act as a bulwark against further Chinese aggression in the region. U.S. policy moving forward must weigh this potential against the many concerns listed above.

Discussion Questions

- What options does the U.S. have in working more closely with India? Consider this question using the instruments of national power (DIME: diplomatic, informational, military, economic).
- Should the United States continue to pursue increased cooperation on security matters, despite India's ambivalence towards revisionist powers such as China and Russia? Should it pursue increased economic cooperation as an avenue to broader collaboration?
- Could an Indo-Pacific security partnership without India still be effective?
- Should the U.S. ignore India's domestic illiberalism? If not, how might the United States engage India on this problem? What impact do India's domestic issues have on U.S. interests?
- How much should it matter for the United States that India emerges as an established democracy? Despite American concerns over illiberalism and the violation of human rights, is it sufficient for American interests that India is not a repressive autocracy like China? Or is India's political regime simply too different from that of the other members of the Quad? Is it reasonable for the U.S. and India to emphasize "shared values" under these conditions?
- Do U.S. security interests of strengthening India as a counter to China outweigh American concerns over human rights issues? Could this calculus change in the future?
- Should Washington be concerned that India might become a hindrance to the Quad's efforts in Asia? What are the risks to emphasizing a robust role for India?
- What is India's relationship with its regional neighbors? What is its reputation? Do these considerations enhance or limit India's value as a partner in the Quad? Do they matter?

- Does the United States and its allies have other viable powers they could try to court if India continues to be hesitant about committing itself to a security relationship?

Suggested Readings

- CSIS gives a nice summary of the history of the Quad:
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- Akshay Ranade, "How India Influences the Quad," *The Diplomat*, May 30, 2022, at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/how-india-influences-the-quad/>

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