



**GLOBAL INDIA PODCAST
The Brookings Institution**

**“The role of the US, Europe, and Indo-Pacific partners
in India’s China strategy”**

**Washington, D.C.
December 27, 2023**

Guests:

C. RAJA MOHAN
Senior Fellow, Asia Society Policy Institute, New Delhi
Columnist, *Indian Express*

GARIMA MOHAN
Senior Fellow, Indo-Pacific Program
German Marshall Fund of the United States

Host:

TANVI MADAN
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for East Asia Policy Studies
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

India recognizes that strategic partnerships are a necessary component of its China strategy. In this episode, host Tanvi Madan speaks with two experts about how New Delhi sees the role of partners like the United States, Europe, Australia, and Japan—as well as others—in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. C. Raja Mohan is a senior fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute in New Delhi and columnist for India Express, and Garima Mohan is a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund’s Indo-Pacific Program.

[music]

MADAN: Welcome to *Global India*, I'm Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where I specialize in Indian foreign policy. In this new Brookings podcast, I'll be turning the spotlight on India's partnerships, its rivalries, and its role on the global stage. This season our conversations will be focused on India's relationship with China, and why and how China-India ties are shaping New Delhi's view of the world.

In November 2023, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh met his U.S. counterpart, Lloyd Austin, in New Delhi. In the minister's prepared public remarks, one comment in particular was striking. The minister noted, and I quote, "we increasingly find ourselves in agreement on strategic issues, including countering China's aggression."

This comment was striking because India rarely, if ever, in bilateral settings, publicly names China, particularly in public statements emerging from India-U.S. meetings, or those of the Quad, the C-word, stays unmentioned. China is almost the Voldemort of these sessions, the country that shall not be named, or as the kids would say, the Bruno of these sessions, as in, we don't talk about Bruno.

But Rajnath Singh's comment reflected the reality of India's ties with key partners--that China is not just on the agenda of these meetings, but also a critical driver of these relationships. Given India's capability gaps with China, New Delhi has recognized that partnerships are not just a choice, but a necessity when it comes to India's China strategy. Partners help build India's own capabilities, offer alternatives in the region, and shape a favorable balance of power and influence regionally and globally.

In today's episode, we'll discuss how India sees the role of partners such as the United States and Europe in its China strategy. We'll cover areas of convergence and cooperation, but also areas of divergence since India and its partners might be like-minded, but they are not necessarily same-minded, even on China. We'll also discuss how India sees other like-minded partners across Asia in East and Southeast Asia and what India calls West Asia, that is, the Middle East.

My guests today are Dr. C. Raja Mohan and Dr. Garima Mohan. Raja is a senior fellow with the Asia Society Policy Institute in Delhi and a columnist on Indian strategic affairs for the Indian Express newspaper. Garima is a senior fellow in the Indo-Pacific program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and is joining us from Brussels, where she is based.

Before I continue on to the interview with Raja and Garima, I want to thank you all for listening to or watching the podcast, providing feedback and sending me questions on social media. I want to highlight that we'll be ending this season of the podcast early next year with a special Q&A episode in which I will be answering audience questions about India-China relations. So, please do send us any questions you'd like answered or that you wish had been answered during the course of the season. You can do so by posting your question on Twitter or X with the hashtag *GlobalIndia*, all one word. Or if you'd prefer to submit your questions through email, you can send it to globalindia@brookings.edu. That is globalindia@brookings.edu.

Now let's continue on to the conversation.

Welcome to the Global India podcast, Raja.

C. RAJA MOHAN: Thank you. Nice to be here with you.

MADAN: And to you as well, Garima. Welcome.

G. MOHAN: Thank you for having me, Tanvi.

03:46 What role does India see for the US in its China strategy?

MADAN: Raja, I'm going to start with you as we talk about how India sees the role of major and middle powers, and particularly like-minded powers, vis-à-vis its China strategy. When it comes to the U.S., what has the role that India has envisioned for the U.S. in its China strategy and has this changed over time?

C. RAJA MOHAN: Tanvi, you have worked on this, the "fateful triangle" that we talk about between India, China, and the U.S. And you have other scholars like Francine Frankel who've really looked at the U.S. factor in the way India-China relations have evolved.

From the time of independence, I think, U.S. was quite central to India's strategy on China. And in fact, I can sum it up. In the '50s, the U.S. had no role. The whole idea was to keep the U.S. away from Asia, while building the partnership with China to lead Asia. That came undone in '62. And after that, as the U.S. and China got together, then I think India had to deal with that situation, which it was not expecting in a different way.

And in the in the 90s, the unipolar moment once again saw the fear of America. So, even as India-U.S. relations improved, India joined hands with Russia and China to limit the dangers of the unipolar moment.

It's only in the last decade or so or a little earlier that actually India is now beginning to see the U.S. as indispensable if it wants to maintain a balance of power in Asia that has been fundamentally transformed by the rise of China and the assertion of China in the region vis-à-vis its neighbors.

So, therefore, for now at least, the U.S. is absolutely critical for any structure of security, of peace that India wants to build in Asia. And I think this is now a definitive proposition and I think there's no escaping the logic of this, at least for the moment.

05:43 What role does India envision for Europe in its China strategy?

MADAN: Garima, Europe has also played a role in the past, albeit often member states like France that have helped India build its capabilities, for instance, or helped it with its space program. And as part of its China strategy what is the role that India envisions for Europe writ large? So, Europe as a whole, but also individual European member states? And for our audience, when I say Europe, I still include the UK, even if the UK might have different views on it.

G. MOHAN: Yeah, I mean geographically the UK is very much part of Europe. So, much like Raja was saying, the role of Europe was not clear in Indian foreign policy in general, but in particular as a response to China. And only in the last ten years or so has India found a purpose and a role that Europe can play in helping India meet its broader strategic objectives. And now this role is pretty clear.

So, one is the general idea of diversifying its partnerships that India has done elsewhere. And this is very evident in the European subcontinent. On the other hand, there's also been an increasing outreach from Europeans to India as they grapple with their China challenge. A clear example of this is Lithuania. After the trade war with China, the Lithuanian foreign minister comes to Raisina Dialogue, meets with Foreign Minister Jaishankar. And then of course, we see India announcing a historic first, that it's opening its first embassy in Lithuania, which is a, quote, "strategic region for India."

No meeting today with a European foreign minister like Baerbock, or von der Leyen, or India and France, can be done without addressing the China challenge. In fact, it is a big part of it.

So, in terms of the role that Europe can play, India sees it as helping India build its national capacities and resilience by focusing on certain areas, which I think we can go into later. But these include security and defense, technology, trade and investment. In all of these, India is sort of turning westwards.

MADAN: For our listeners who don't know the Raisina Dialogue which Garima mentioned is the premier foreign policy conference that the Indian Foreign Ministry co-hosts with the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi every year.

08:05 Which other countries does India see as potential partners in its China strategy?

Raja, Garima talked about Europe, you talked about the U.S. What about other actors, particularly in the Indo-Pacific writ large? How is India seeing and who is India seeing as potential partners as it thinks about a balancing or managing China strategy? How is it thinking about partnerships all the way from the Indo-Pacific and Northeast Asia to the Middle East, which India calls West Asia?

C. RAJA MOHAN: I would say the two major U.S. allies in Asia, Japan and Australia, have inevitably become another part of the Quad. Japan has second largest economy in Asia, third largest in the world, and a neighbor of China. It's quite critical. But we see that Australia, too, after initial doubts about Australian role, today India and Australia have really stepped up their relationship.

So, India's not only working through the Quad, that is, through U.S. and its partnerships, but it has had historic relationships with, say, with Vietnam. In fact, in the 1980s, India worked with Vietnam to balance China in the Indochina region.

So, the strategy would be, look, while focusing on the Quad and the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations], because ASEAN, with all its limitations still remains the only large multilateral institution. So, I think the strategy is to, one, build up with the U.S. and U.S. allies, which really have the heft, work through other

institutions like ASEAN, and build wherever India can bilateral strategic partnerships with Singapore, with Vietnam in the East. And in the West, I would say now increasingly what India is doing with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel. So, you have a network, not all of them have China component as the dominant one. But the idea that India needs to develop a range of partnerships in this region to be able to shape the larger balance of power in Asia.

G. MOHAN: I think the idea of building flexible issue-based coalitions, whether it is with partners in the Indo-Pacific or in the Middle East, is a new model of partnerships India has pursued very successfully with the Quad where we've seen a proliferation of these forums. The I2U2, the various trilaterals that we've seen with Japan, with Indonesia, with France, Australia, so many other places in the Indo-Pacific.

I think that's an interesting development for Indian foreign policy, whereas in the past India was often reluctant to have external players in its so-called backyard neighborhood. And now it is increasingly open to work with a number of different countries. Okay, we are like minded on these certain issues, why don't we work together?

And it is incredibly important, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region where the institutional architecture is so weak that you need these minilaterals to step in and deal with various China-related challenges, whether they're named explicitly or not.

MADAN: Just adding, I2U2 is a grouping which is U.S., India, Israel, and the UAE. We've also seen some one-offs like India, U.S., Saudi and UAE national security advisors meeting; the newly announced India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor—some of which I think have China components, some of it, as Raja said, are for broader economic and technological objectives that India has as well.

11:32 What is India seeking from the US in India-China competition?

Drilling down, and I will come back to this question of minilaterals, but this kind of range of bilaterals and minilaterals that have been developed. Raja, for example, with the U.S., when we're thinking about India-China competition, what specifically is India looking for from a country like the U.S.?

C. RAJA MOHAN: I would say that, one, how does India build its comprehensive national power to deal with China? And the gap between the two national capabilities has dramatically widened in favor of China. So, whichever way India looks at it, whether it's economically, technologically, politically, that it needs the partnership with the U.S. to boost its own capabilities so that it can bridge the gap with China. It can't be done unilaterally, so it can only be done in partnerships and in coalitions.

So, I would say across the board, and I think that's what we've seen emerge. Today the U.S. has become India's most comprehensive economic partner. There is a growing defense cooperation. There is growing technological cooperation. So, I think this sense today that, overall, the development of India as a power in the near term will depend a lot on the kind of and the quality of the cooperation that India has with the U.S.

So, even with or without the China factor, that India's rise depends a lot today on U.S. cooperation. And I think that is understood as the U.S. has framed this, U.S. will help India rise. And I think initially India was skeptical. But today India sees that is something that we can we can actually work together.

13:03 Has the China factor affected the areas of cooperation between India and Europe?

MADAN: Garima, what about in the case of Europe, has this shadow of China, China factor, changed the agenda of cooperation, the areas of cooperation between India and Europe?

G. MOHAN: Certainly. As I mentioned earlier, that the reason why India took a renewed interest in Europe and vice versa—European member states across the board were interested in talking to India— was because of the China factor, and the respective challenges the two countries were facing in their own theaters due to the rise of China.

The areas of cooperation have actually broadened to more than just China, although they do have an impact on, as Raja said, building India's national capacities and resilience. And this is where Europe factors in as well. But of course, to a much lesser extent when compared to the United States.

So, there has been a massive explosion of diplomatic and security interactions between India and Europe, and we've charted that at GMF [German Marshall Fund]. The areas of cooperation in every single Europe-India MOU you'll see with Italy, Germany, France, the EU, always across the board it is, number one, security and defense, including helping build India's capacities and working through make-in-India formats, et cetera.

Second is trade and investment. The EU and India are also in the middle of negotiating a free trade agreement. They are much closer to a resolution than they've ever been in the past. Not promising that it would lead to anything!

Third is technology and innovation. EU and India, for example, just signed an MOU on semiconductors. But this is also a part of every single conversation with Europe.

And fourthly, it's migration and mobility. Where do we want people-to-people exchanges and businesses and all of that. It's not going to China. It's going westwards.

So, I think these are the areas where a few years ago, both India and Europe were at a loss. How do we move forward on these topics? And now, because of often the China factor, it's an accelerator in moving these conversations forward, even though they might not have direct implications on India's particular challenges with China.

15:23 Have recent India-China border crises changed US-India engagement?

MADAN: Raja, much of that list that Garima laid out finds echoes in—if it was not preceded by the similar kinds of cooperation between India and the U.S.—defense and security, critical and emerging technology, migration, other issues. This U.S.-India cooperation perhaps preceded, as I said, some of what is happening with India

and Europe. But have things changed recently, whether in terms of pace or areas, particularly since the Galwan clash and the border crisis of 2020? Has that changed things between India and the U.S. in any way?

C. RAJA MOHAN: Absolutely. I mean, I would even take you back to 2017, the Doklam confrontation between India and China. Historically, as we said, look, there was a period when India tried to keep the U.S. out of Asia. And the idea that India can work with China to build a regional security order. As we noted, that didn't work out.

In the recent decades, I would say, India's argument was, look, it can handle the China relationship on its own. It's a unique relationship. We don't want to be tied to anybody in dealing with China. You'll recall all the arguments about non-alignment 2.0, that we would do this on our own. We can manage the China relationship on our own. We'll find a settlement of our disputes on our own. And that we don't need outside powers to meddle in between. So, that was the argument for long.

But the series of military crises over the last decade—there was one in 2013, another one in 2014—even then, the idea that we could somehow—India, China—can work this out. But the 2017 crisis and the 2020 crisis have decisively altered the argument within India. In many ways, India and the U.S. have to thank Xi Jinping for making it absolutely clear that whatever goodwill China might have for India, that it has claims on the border, that the military balance of power might favor it to redeem those claims. And it has nothing to do with what India does or does not do with the U.S. Because for a long time there was this illusion somehow if you get too close to the United States, the Chinese will get upset. The Chinese simply are saying we have the power to redeem the claims.

So, I think that message has taken a long [time] to sink in. And once that is sunk in, I think the nature of India-U.S. cooperation has increased. And you can track actually starting from May 2017 when the Doklam confrontation took place, the revival of the Quad, the expansion of the Quad, the state of the defense relationship. Everything has changed since 2017. And I think that can be directly traced to China's behavior on the border with India.

18:00 Is Indian membership of the Quad and BRICS the same?

MADAN: Both of you have mentioned the Quad, this Australia, India, Japan, U.S. grouping that first emerged in 2007 for a brief period, but reemerged in 2017, as Raja said. One question I often get about the Quad is not about the Quad per se. The question I get about the Quad is, how is it different or isn't it the same as India being a member of BRICS, the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa grouping?

So, Garima, how do you see this? Are Indian membership of Quad and BRICS equivalent? Are they the same thing?

G. MOHAN: Not at all. And both you and Raja have written extensively on it. I think we all get this question, Why is India part of so many groupings? Well, India's participation is qualitatively different in all of these groupings. You cannot compare India's participation in BRICS to the Quad. Just look at the readouts that are coming

from these two groupings and the level of cooperation that exists. It's completely different.

If we look at the diplomatic and political will that India has invested in the Quad, it is unparalleled across the board. We don't see any other multilateral or minilateral where India has invested to this extent. And the way the four partners have coordinated and shared their threat assessments of China, which brings them together, and the issues the Quad is today working on and trying to give deliverables in the region. I think all of these, the nature of the partnership is qualitatively different. One cannot compare to, say, BRICS or SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation], or any other format, because as we mentioned before, there are these established institutions where clearly there were problems in getting fast results, getting deliverables on the table, and therefore there was a need for flexible minilaterals like the Quad. And in that sense, it has delivered quite well.

C. RAJA MOHAN: For me just to add there ... look, I think 2017, as you know, the Quad was revived. But if you look between the previous decade, it looked like the BRICS was on the rise. The regular summit meetings, expanding agenda What started out as a collaboration in the mid-'90s between the three countries expanded, [it] looked like that was becoming the principal vehicle for India's minilateralism. After all, the BRICS, too, was a minilateral institution.

But I think the 2017, I would say, changed it decisively. It was also the year, if you recall, that India publicly opposed the Belt and Road Initiative, the forum that came in in May 2017. And since then, India sits in the BRICS. Like if the BRICS has to support the BRI, they'll list all the other members and say they've supported the BRI.

So, in all the multilateral forums where India and China are part of, the divisions are quite evident. See the illusion before 2017 was that whatever the differences that India and China had on the boundary dispute, they could work together in the regional and global arena. That multilateral cooperation can proceed while managing the bilateral disputes. And it's now quite clear. The bilateral dispute is quite serious and the kind of challenge that China presents to India. So, that delusion that somehow you can isolate the bilateral problems and yet cooperate with China, that is not taking place.

And then on the economic side, India's decision in 2019 to walk out of the RCEP [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership] that India does not want to be part of a China-led economic bloc. We haven't talked much about it, but that's a very, very important factor because as the scale of India's deficits with China began to come to the fore, and the hollowing out of India's manufacturing capacity with cheap manufactured goods from China, India had to reorient its economic strategy as well.

So, on the defense, on the bilateral defense question, on the economic question, and then China's attitude to block India at the Nuclear Suppliers Group. That was in 2015–2016, when India tried to get into the Nuclear Suppliers Group, China was the principal problem. U.N. Security Council expansion, China is the principal problem.

So, therefore, the kind of construct that India made for itself, that there is a wider room for collaboration with China while managing the border dispute, it broke down

on all the premises: neither the bilateral was working and nor was the multilateral working.

And I think the source of all these problems was the fundamental, shall we say, transformation of the balance of power between China and India. Three decades ago, they seemed roughly equal. But I think in the 21st century, China is confident to say, look, it has more power, therefore it can unilaterally assert itself. And I think the moment India figured that out, it had to adopt a new strategy in which the U.S. is quite central.

22:50 How does Europe see India-China tensions?

MADAN: Garima, as Raja said, the India-China tensions—and particularly the differences on, asymmetries on the economic side—spilled over into something like India withdrawing from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. At the same time, it did lead to, as you mentioned, a deepening of or rethinking of economic ties and technology ties with Europe writ large and European countries. But if I flip the prism, how is it that Europe sees India-China tensions from its perspective?

G. MOHAN: That's a really good question, Tanvi. And I think the European troubles with China came to a head after COVID. During COVID as well, I think we had seen simmering primarily economic tension as companies from Europe were facing harder conditions of working both within China and also competing with Chinese state-owned enterprises across the world. And there was a reckoning almost, that, okay, Europe has messed up by putting all its eggs in the China basket in Asia, and it now needs to look at other partners.

And this is where a rediscovery of India comes in for Europe. In a sense that, okay, in terms of what is another lucrative market, what is another great destination for moving manufacturing to? Where can our companies seeking a China-plus-one model of diversifying go and invest? And, therefore, India became important.

The India-China tensions, there was very little mention in mainstream European media when Doklam [2017] happened, and very few mentions of the clashes in 2020. I think it was quite hard to comprehend that geography for folks in Europe. And also to understand that conventional crises and challenges on the border can still happen.

And Ukraine changed that perception. Then massively after Ukraine, when Europe sort of awakened to the realities of geopolitics and understood that conventional warfare is not something of the past. That is when a lot of European leaders started taking the lessons from Ukraine and applying it across the world. And the India-China border, of course, came as a greater flashpoint. And therefore, counter-intuitively, even though India's position on Ukraine has not been what Europe has wanted to see, it has in fact led to greater convergence and greater understanding in Europe of the challenge India is facing on the border with China.

C. RAJA MOHAN: I would just say that the French were probably the first to see India as a strategic partner going back to '98, even before the nuclear tests. But the rest of Europe was not really focused on India. So, there I would say the expansion

of the U.S.-India relationship, and the U.S. framing of India as a rising power needed for Asian balance, that was critical to get the rest of the Europeans on board, because as we know, barring France, the rest of Europe is hardly geopolitical. And I think the U.S. leadership in that sense was quite critical to see this is where the U.S. is going. And, therefore, it I think provided the framework while at the same time the deteriorating relations between Europe and China too. But I think the U.S. initial lead was critical for the Europeans to feel comfortable to do what they're doing. France, of course, was doing it on its own.

26:12 How does India see U.S.-China relations today?

MADAN: It's interesting, I've actually heard this, Raja, even about Japan, which is that Japan started seeing India differently around that mid-2000 point when the U.S. started framing its relationship with India differently. And as you said, you've seen—I guess this is an ancillary benefit of the U.S.-India relationship for India—but thanks to China, thanks to Xi Jinping, as you said, this deepening of defense and security cooperation between the U.S., critical and emerging technologies, other areas. And as Garima said, in ways that India's shed its own shibboleths as K. Subrahmanyam, the Indian strategist, used to term it.

But in that context, while India-China competition has helped drive, fuel—maybe not alone, but nonetheless fuel—U.S.-India relations, in that context of India-China tensions, how does India see U.S.-China relations today?

C. RAJA MOHAN: Look, I think there are multiple views on that in India. There are a whole bunch of people that always lose sleep at the night worrying about the U.S.-China rapprochement, the G-2, Sino-U.S. condominium. And the worst scenario, worst kind of reminder for this is Bill Clinton's visit to China in June 1998, just weeks after the India's nuclear tests, where joint statement that came out of that saying U.S. and China will work together to promote peace in South Asia.

So, I think that is the nightmare scenario for a large number of people. But others, I think, are realists who see that, look, there have always been structural contradictions between China and the U.S. For all the talk about a consensus in the U.S. on China policy, there never was a complete consensus within the U.S. When Reagan came to power in 1980, it was not clear he would simply accept the one-China policy. And '89 we saw the breakdown of the what little consensus there was.

So, I would say there is a realist school in India to say, look, you can be confident that even if the U.S.-China become buddies again, that there'd be enough for India and the U.S. to do with each other.

So, I think as India's own relative weight in the hierarchy goes up—of course, it's eventually become the third largest economy, distant third from the U.S. and China—but I think there is a level of confidence that you can manage the shifts in the great power relations as opposed to thinking ourselves as a little innocent one that is simply going to be swamped out by these two guys, other guys. So, I mean, India's no longer that little innocent child on the international stage. There was always, I think through the 1950s, a surprising underestimation of India's own strengths,

because even in 1950, India was the sixth largest economy. We've taken 75 years to get back there. That's another story.

So, this notion of somehow India is vulnerable to great power manipulations, I think that was always overstated. India's weight, its size would always give it the room to deal with the U.S. on its own. And even if the U.S. and China come together again, I mean the U.S. would still want to keep its allies—more than India, Japan would be the first one, Taiwan, there are others in the region would depend on U.S. security guarantees.

So, I would say that diffidence, that fear that the G-2 will somehow push India into the margins, it is there, it's a real fear. But as for me and maybe other realists in Delhi, that's really a farfetched concept. And as India grows, in partnership with the U.S., its ability to manage shifts in great power relations would improve.

After all, we're not in a marriage, right? We are not in a state where China and the U.S. or any of the great powers take vows that they're going to be eternal friends. If you look at last 75 years, I mean, the shifts in U.S.-China relationship, the shifts in U.S.-Russia relationship, and the shifts in China-Russia relationship, every one of them has gone through turbulence.

And I think that the relative movement within the great power dynamic will always be there. I think India today is far more self-confident that it's in a position to manage it. And hopefully as India grows, it can be one of the constellation, even if the weakest of the constellation, but it can still be in the constellation without having to really worry about the G-2 or our American friends can stop worrying about A-2, that India and China would try to do that. We're beyond that today.

MADAN: I mean, I'm probably preaching to the choir here, but this is one of the reasons I actually think, for all the talk in U.S.-India relations about new initiatives to encourage STEM education and STEM learning—science, technology, engineering, maths—that you really need more social science and humanities education, learning about the other country. And I think one thing that Americans will learn about India is **that** how deep India-China frictions go and how this is not going to change overnight. And I think what Indians will learn about the U.S. is that this is really a structural shift in terms of U.S.-China competition that for all these initiatives of stabilizing the relationship, aren't actually going to get reversed overnight. There's not going to be some grand bargain. It's more, as people have called it, setting the floor.

31:19 How does India see European outreach to China?

Garima, Europe has such a spectrum of views on China, but how has India seen various kinds of European outreach to China? How did they, for instance, see Macron's visit, the French president's visit, to China this past year, or, you know, other initiatives that Europe has taken?

G. MOHAN: India and the U.S. are on the same page, I think, when it comes to a lot of China-related challenges. And the U.S.'s approach to competing with China has found resonance in policymaking circles in Delhi.

Europe is the problematic partner in both of these situations. Across the Atlantic, there are lots of tensions when it comes to the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council that is supposed to deal with a lot of China-related issues—always bickering.

India, too, is always skeptical of where will Europe fall on China. Partly it is true because Europe is currently undergoing a reckoning of its China policy. But on the other hand, I think there's also a certain level that we don't see from Delhi— the intensity of the debates and how far the mood has changed in every single member state except one or two across the board in Europe. And the language that is coming out of Brussels is now extremely belligerent. When you look at the upcoming EU-China summits, the EU came with a list of complaints, and that never used to be the case in the past. And I think these nuances are sort of not seen very well in New Delhi.

And of course, there's a difference in our reaction. When President Macron went to China and gave really friendly statements it irked European leaders more than it did Indians. Indians were very understanding because we have a trusted and strong relationship with France. So, they were very understanding of it.

Compare that to a statement that comes out of the German industry body that says we shouldn't withdraw completely and decoupling is not possible. That would lead to a furor in New Delhi. And people would be like, we always told you, Europe has not made up its mind yet.

So, I think there's a bit of truth to it, but also a need for more interactions on China, but also on Russia-China alignment, where I think Europe and India have more to say to each other than they currently are.

33:47 How does India see its other partners', such as Australia's, outreach to China?

MADAN: I want to come back to how Russia plays in all this in a bit.

Raja, we've talked about U.S. and Europe, but does it keep India up at night or not when it watches, for example, its **kind of** newest partner in some sense, Australia's outreach to China, or is it just more comfortable with Australia bilaterally today? And how does it see some of these other partners we've mentioned—South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, , Saudi Arabia, Israel—when these countries partner with China, how does India see that? Does it have concerns? Or they just shrug and say, you know, that's the normal course of things?

C. RAJA MOHAN: I wish we had just shrugged and take it as part of life. I mean, look, after all India is sitting with China in the BRICS and RIC [Russia, India, China], or SCO. To say that, look, everyone else will simply drop all engagement with China, that is the headline. But if you look at the quality of that engagement, the disputes, and nothing has improved since China-Australia relations. There was a prime ministerial visit, partly the Labour Party is differentiating itself from the Liberals in Australia to show that, look, they're much more reasonable. But China has not given them any quarter. Okay, on the economic side, yes, they got some concessions. But on the political side they have not. So, this stuff will go on.

And I think one way of dealing with that, look, is that China is so big, such a large economy. So, I wouldn't blame the Europeans or the Australians that they want to do business with China. And I think that's understandable.

And the question is, what does India do to make itself more attractive rather than complaining about what's going on between China and the others? We know that there will be an element of cooperation between China and its neighbors, including Japan, including Australia, because if you look at all these countries, there is a pro-China faction running through every one of these Asian neighbors. That's the reality of politics in all these countries. There are always people in many of these countries who say, "look, why are we fighting with the Chinese? Americans are declining." So, those arguments will always be there.

So, the question for us is, what does India do to make itself a better business partner for Europe? Because every single European country has something to offer. So, that, I think, requires more work on our side. I think India has really devoted significant diplomatic energies to working with the U.S., and understanding the U.S., developing a strategic partnership. I think we're only beginning to do that with Europe. Of course, this will be much harder. It's a divided region. Each one of them have their own problems.

But the kind of thing, you followed it, between India and the U.S. since 2000, there was a systematic effort at changing the dynamic. And I think a similar thing can be done with Europe. And Australia, we've seen the changes already taking place.

So, I would say I would more focus on what India needs to do while this is par for course. Right? Countries want to keep some measure of stability, avoid war, do more business. So, that must be taken as part of life. And within that framework, how does India make itself a better partner for these countries? That'll give us better results than constantly worrying about what others are doing. There's enough and more for India to do with Europe and with Asia.

36:58 What are the divergences that India and Europe have on China and the Indo-Pacific?

MADAN: Garima, we talked a little bit about convergences. As India sees these countries and their views of, and particularly European views, of the Indo-Pacific, we've seen Europe much more active in this region of which China is also a part. And we've heard talks about India and Europe sharing visions of or having overlapping, if not identical, visions. What are the differences, though, that Europe and India have on the Indo-Pacific, other than geography (but obviously that shapes it)? But what are these differences that, or divergences that, India and Europe have on China or the Indo-Pacific more broadly?

G. MOHAN: I think the biggest divergence currently in Europe-India relationship, or a source of friction, is Russia. India's relationship with Russia is not understood in Europe very well. The history of it, the dynamics currently, how it is shaping at present, that is not understood. The close Russia-China coordination at G-20 and at the BRICS Plus expansion, all of these things are somehow not registered in Europe—that this is a concern for India as well. And similarly, a lot of folks in India

did not understand or have different views on Ukraine and the role Europe played, NATO expansion, et cetera.

So, they have fundamental differences there which stem from a lack of understanding of each other. And in the Indo-Pacific, yes, there's a lot of interest in Europe, but it is a faraway theater. And currently they are occupied at their own borders. I think Europe needs to do a little bit more in understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region and vice versa. I think India needs to invest more in understanding European geopolitics as it is shaping up today.

So, Russia definitely is a source of divergence, but here again, I think there are opportunities for convergence. Some of us have been talking that India and Europe need to have a dialogue on Russia. We've been saying that for years. But Russia-China alignment presents a new opportunity for both India and Europe to look at, you know, this development through fresh eyes and sit together and actually change this divergence into a potential convergence. Because the impact and fallout of that will be quite closely felt in the European continent. It is being felt right now currently as developments in Ukraine and the question of whether China supplied weapons, et cetera. It's still something that is being debated.

But this will also, of course, have an impact on the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Whether we are able to maintain a multipolar Indo-Pacific will be impacted by this development. So, I think there is more for Europe and India to do. And I don't say this because this is my day job, but in fact, I think this divergence should be addressed head on.

MADAN: If India has questions or concerns about U.S.-China and the U.S. has concerns about India-China, that these are things countries should talk about. So, India should have a dialogue on the China questions.

40:03 What are the divergences between India and the US on China and the Indo-Pacific?

But I do want to ask on that front, compared to India-Europe, the U.S. and India **have** there's far more of a shared vision of the Indo-Pacific, they've shared views of the concerns about China. But what are the divergences here between the U.S. and India on China and on the Indo-Pacific approach as well?

C. RAJA MOHAN: I would say the differences have significantly come down. As I said, we already talked about the worry that the U.S. and China might form some kind of a condominium. That worry is not just India and Japan and others have it too. That has significantly declined in the last few years as we see where the U.S.-China relationship is going.

I think the difference is, I would say one is the organizational form. Some in the U.S., like say Trump administration, was hoping to create a military bloc with India when it revived the Quad in 2017. And the Biden administration has bought into the Indian argument that, look, let's not make it a military alliance. Let's make it a public goods providing institution. There will always be groups of people in the U.S. who say, look, it should be more explicit military balancing of China. Well, India is saying, no, let's keep most of the military bilateral, use the Quad to do other things.

The second aspect I think is the differences there are on trade-related issues, which India's part of IPEF [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework]. There I would say, in fact, the differences were far more when the U.S. was the main preacher of globalization, the U.S. was all for free trade. But Biden administration and Trump administration have not been. But they still think India needs to do a lot more on its market access issues and that there's, like all our partners, India is not trade friendly with anyone. But I would say in spite of the trade differences the trade volumes are rising, so, there is that aspect.

But what is the economic architecture for Asia? There, India was not part of APEC ever. It's now part of the IPEF, but not part of the trade. But then the Biden people, their own domestic politics had made it very hard to pursue the economic track.

I would say India's own sake and how it thinks about long-term economic architecture in Asia, it needs to have a strategy that would work with others in the region, including the U.S. And if India does not want to be part of a China-led regional bloc, then it has to create an alternative framework. So, doing more in the IPEF, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, becomes important.

On the technology issues, even as we come together on the critical and emerging technologies, the governance of technologies: how do we regulate these areas, of just of course not limited to Asia or Indo-Pacific, but broader global domain? There again, there's a lot more convergence today. But differences too of how exactly we shape the rules. For example, on artificial intelligence. India's working with the U.S., but at the same time, they're not fully aligned on the kind of measures that the world ought to take.

But these are far less consequential than the kind of differences we had in the past—very fundamental in terms of thinking about a distribution of power, thinking about security order in this region—that has changed. And the expanding economic cooperation and technological cooperation puts us on a good wicket. I think there will always be differences. Even the U.S. and Japan, which are allies, tight allies, even that there will be problems. So, some of that will be part of life. But I think we need to remove existing differences and deepen the areas of cooperation.

43:31 How would India see contingencies in Asia compared to the US?

MADAN: One area I want to ask both of you about, if it comes up in your thinking is something like contingencies in the region. So, for instance, the one that often comes up is a Taiwan Strait contingency. But you could say that there could be a South China Sea one as well. Not that this is a subject of difference between, say, India and the U.S. or even India and Europe for that matter, but that India does see these things differently because of its vantage point and its other priorities, including the border issue.

How much of a difference do you think this will be down the line? Or is this actually a potential area where you could see coordination, consultation, collaboration between the U.S. and India? Could you see these as areas of opportunity or will they be areas of potential divergence between the U.S. and India?

C. RAJA MOHAN: Everyone frames the Taiwan issue, South China Sea issue as a problem in terms of whether they can actually cooperate. I would say the Indo-Pacific theater is a very, very broad one. It's a vast theater. If you have common strategic understanding on stability and balance of power, it does not mean India has to sail its ships every time American ships sail to any corner of the world. Maybe Britain does it, Australia does it, India's not going to do it.

But we can think of burden sharing arrangements where India picks up slack in some areas in the Indian Ocean, making it easier for the U.S. to address contingencies in South China Sea. So, I would say both geographically, militarily, it is possible to share the burden in a manner that everyone benefits in the region. And it doesn't have to be India marching shoulder-to-shoulder with its troops and ships with the Americans wherever they go. There is enough and more to be done in this theater. And I think there's huge room for coordination, consultation, and burden sharing in the security management of this Indo-Pacific theater.

45:24 What is driving India-Europe cooperation in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific?

MADAN: Garima, Europe and India are already doing more in the maritime security domain in the Indian Ocean region. What is driving that?

G. MOHAN: Just coming back to the Taiwan contingency. I think that the fact that India is talking more about it, would sit almost in the same boat as Europe—and already we are seeing signals from the European side that this is, okay, an interesting topic that we can talk about in terms of coordination and the role of external players who might not necessarily be involved with ships in the water immediately.

But also the India-Europe conversation on other contingencies in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with the island countries and climate-related existential challenges, not only the Indian Ocean island states face, but also the Pacific island states. I think that is a very interesting area of cooperation for both Europe and India. They have capitalized on the Indian Ocean region, particularly with member states like France, that have equities in the region and have invested in institutional frameworks, et cetera. The India-France cooperation on all aspects of maritime security, both traditional and nontraditional, is very deep in the Indian Ocean.

But I think even the Pacific island[s] conversation is one that needs to develop further, because Europe has a lot of resources and money invested in the region. India has been welcomed by the Pacific islands as we saw when Prime Minister Modi was there for certain visits. How even the states made it clear to see that they perceive India's role differently than they do China and other actors. So, I think that's also an area of cooperation.

And finally, on infrastructure, and we've been hearing this a lot, but maritime infrastructure is part of what Europe is looking at as part of its Global Gateway. It did not get off the ground for years, but looks like finally there is some movement. India is part of the only two countries in the world the EU has signed a connectivity partnership with, the first being Japan. So, hopefully that will be channeled into the Indo-Pacific as well.

MADAN: And I think that actually also points to another area where I think India has found the U.S., Europe, Japan, Australia useful, which is helping provide alternatives in the region beyond helping shape the balance of power in the region. Also really helping provide high-quality alternatives because as, Raja, you said, India doesn't have the capacity to do that alone.

48:00 What are the most promising areas for India-US cooperation on China?

Raja, if you were thinking about the road ahead and what the most promising areas for India-U.S. cooperation vis-à-vis China or when thinking about China, what do you think what they are likely to be or what you think they should be?

C. RAJA MOHAN: I would say two areas. One is defense. That addresses both the China question, as well as the Russia question. That India finally after decades of completely relying on Russia is trying to diversify last few years. But now, far more consequentially, the Modi government is saying they want to build weapons in India.

So, I think there is here a big moment for both American capital as well as European capital to invest in India to produce weapons in India. And that would inevitably and more structurally reduce Indian dependence on Russian weapons as well as make India stronger in relation to China to be able to deal with the military balance of power issues on the border. And then it will also make ability to support other countries in the region. For example, today, if Sri Lanka wants a fighter aircraft, India has none to give, while China and Pakistan say, look, take a free gift from us.

So, I think creating defense industrial capabilities in India, which actually surprisingly were pretty good in 1947. But the kind of policies that India pursued really eroded India's defense industrial base as well as made us totally dependent on Russia. So, I would say both the Europeans and Americans can make money; India can construct a base. And I think if the deeper connection on the supply chains, on the defense issue, on the defense production issues, what I think would benefit all three of us—there would be, of course, competition between U.S. and Europe—but I think structurally in Indian industry tying into the European and the American defense industrial supply chains, I think would have a transformative effect on the entire region.

This, of course, is also linked to the advanced technologies where I think we are just starting out. Here I think many of these—artificial intelligence, semiconductors—many of these are going to shape the balance of power in the world, in Asia, between U.S. and China. So, I think U.S., India, Europe, doing a lot more would also create a basis for non-autocratic countries actually being able to retain the leadership in the technological domain.

I would say finally on the global governance issues relating to technology: we tended in the past to instinctively move towards, say, statist positions of China, Russia. But in the last ten years on whether it's internet governance, whether it is management of AI, semiconductors, I think we're beginning to [move] closer to the U.S. And there, of course, U.S. and Europe have different positions.

But I think India working more closely with the like-minded countries in U.S. and Europe to be able to shape the new rules for the global technological order, which is

changing fundamentally, there I think we have a lot more work to do. But I think some of that India joining Artemis Accords, for example, is one example where on space governance India is willing to work with the U.S. and Europe. So, that's a step in that direction. And I think there's a lot more to come on AI, on managing the biotechnology, and the whole range of other issues that are going to come up before us.

51:14 What are the most promising areas of cooperation and the limits between India and Europe?

MADAN: Garima, what are your most promising areas of cooperation that you think about, and also, what are the likely limits that you see when you think about the road ahead?

G. MOHAN: I mean, I second what Raja said about defense cooperation and as well as on technology. But a potentially promising area which can also be challenging is the need for economic reform in India, and India serving as an alternative—a true alternative—to China when it comes to investment and economic policies.

A lot of the European problems with China hinge on China as an economic actor. Yes, of course, they see it as a security challenge as well. But mostly it's an economic challenge. And this is what is pushing them to diversify. And it would be easier for them to go to say, a Thailand, a Vietnam, or even Mexico if India does not deliver on those promises. And I think this is where we've done very well with working in flexible formats and delivering here and there. But we need this sort of systematic change and the ability to attract companies that we want to. We say we want to attract companies looking for a China-plus-one model. We need to provide an attractive, lucrative destination for this investment. Otherwise, I think all of these promises will be lost somewhere down the line. So, I think this is something we urgently need to work on.

It is great to see that the India-EU FTA conversation has moved as far as it has. And, of course, it has been because both sides, including India, have made important concessions. But we cannot remain stuck on these things and say, okay, we're going to move on certain issue areas and say rhetorically that, yes, come to India and we are the next best partner and then not be able to deliver. I think in the long run, that would be a challenge for the Europe-India partnership.

MADAN: It's kind of the *a la carte* approach to reform where some things are picked up on but not others. And you really need that comprehensive multicourse menu to offer a really comprehensive alternative and attractive alternative.

53:26 What are the likely limits to India-US cooperation in the future?

Raja, what are the limits that you think will lie ahead? And I do want to particularly ask on the U.S., is it a concern in India whatever happens in the 2024 election in the U.S., vis-à-vis the issue of China in particular?

C. RAJA MOHAN: Look, I think we've seen with both the Trump and Biden, people didn't expect Biden to pursue the policy of Trump on China far more vigorously. So, I would say, I mean, India has the least to worry about 2024. It would be Europeans I

see having sleepless nights on what happens to the alliances, et cetera. So, I think India's done quite well, successive administrations of different political hues in the U.S. So, I think that is not a major concern for Delhi at this point.

But I think the concern for Delhi would be the kind of demand for... while today the U.S. and the Biden administration talks about, look, we're not looking for complete alignment, we are looking for partners who can share burden, rather than we're all allies in a classical sense. So, the kind of latticework of partnerships that Jake Sullivan talks about. In that clearly India has significant room.

But there will always be groups of people saying, look, we want to see India become like a Britain or a Japan. But that's not going to happen.

And in India, the constant expectation that U.S. would behave like Russia, always say great India, great India, that there would be no operational problems or differences.

I think for both India and the U.S., it's a tough love. It's a tough love that has to be managed and it is done well. But I think it needs to be tended constantly against all kinds of unexpected meteors and others that keep striking it all the time.

MADAN: And I think this is where we talk often about how China has fueled cooperation between the U.S. and India or Europe and India. But it's also actually that convergence **on India**, I think **helped give both sides or** [that's] incentivized both sides of these equations to **actually** manage differences in a way that would, I think, have become bigger deals or much bigger deals earlier. As, Raja, you said, these things have to be handled with care because at the end of the day, we think of them as old relationships, but in this phase they're quite new.

55:34 More broadly, how does India view the West?

Before I get to the lightning round question, I do want to ask you one question that affects this cooperation that India has with the U.S. and Europe, not just vis-à-vis China, but also writ large for India's objectives, economic and technological ones, which is how does India actually view the West? I am asked this question, which is often what people see or hear is not the voices that are coming from government. but often from elements of the strategic community in India, the social media debate, there's a sense people think Indians are anti-Western, that India is anti-West. So, I'm going to ask both of you about, you know, that debate within India, where it stands on the West writ large, but particularly Europe and the U.S. Garima, is India anti-Western?

G. MOHAN: I mean, if you look at Twitter comments, then I don't think you would be wrong in concluding that. But if we look at trends of where do Indians want to live? Where do Indians want to study? Where do Indians want to do their business? Where do we want more people-to-people contacts? It has been the West writ large. And we don't really see an influx of Indian students going to Moscow. Ukraine had more Indian students at the eve of the war that we had in Russia, for example.

And then, of course, the government outreach has made it very clear where India's priorities—and the arc of Indian foreign policy in terms of more and more

partnerships—where it's leading. So, I think there is, of course, there will be a dissonance between public discourse, a lot of which is rooted in nostalgia. A lot of it is rooted in the idea of the identity of India as a post-colonial state. And I do think that there are issues with Europe in particular when Europe raises issues on human rights, et cetera.

There are legitimate concerns about overstepping and that India couches often in language of criticism of the West, not all of which is unfounded, because I do think there are some differences ideologically how we position ourselves and how we see things, particularly on issues like climate and otherwise. But that gap is narrowing. It's not as stark as it used to be, say, in the '90s or earlier than that.

And I think particularly with Europe when we first started noticing this trend of the Indian government is actually investing more time and money in engaging with Europe, and we would write about it, the comments on Twitter would be, no, that's not true. We don't really care about Europe and we don't need it. Why do we need Europe?

And I think one must look at government policy and practice rather than the rhetoric, which has its...I wouldn't say you can dismiss it completely because we do use it often strategically at times as well. But that gap is narrowing in terms of the vision that we have for the world and the balance of power that we seek to create today.

C. RAJA MOHAN: Garima is right. There is a lingering anti-colonial residue that continues to dominate the—certainly the upper middle classes that send all their children to the U.S.—I mean, there is this posturing against the West.

Partly it's also the way the independence of India and partition played out. But if you look at 100-year period, India contributed the largest number of troops for the First World War, the Second World War. So, India was very much part of the allied victories in the First and the Second World Wars.

But it's really the partition of the subcontinent, the Anglo-American alliance with Pakistan and then with China that really put us in a situation where the distrust kept multiplying. But I would say in the last 20 years, we've bridged a lot of that. A lot of that differences have been bridged. And my sense is, as Garima said, which our foreign minister also talks about, that the street is looking to the West. That's where—whether it's a business, Main Street or the Wall Street as Americans say, I mean the financial industry, the tech industry, tourism—everything is geared to the U.S. and Europe. And I think that's a reality.

And I think some of that post-colonial chip on our shoulder from my generation to the next generation has already come down fairly significantly. And I think there is a new sense of confidence that we can deal with the West. And I think what was missed in 1947 that India and the West could have come into the postwar world as partners. That didn't happen in spite of Indian contribution to the building of the new order. But today, I think we're inch by inch getting back to a situation where India works with the West in constructing a new order in the world.

MADAN: I also find it a bit funny that actually even the loudest anti-Western voices on social media in India are all using American platforms, whether that's WhatsApp, or X, or Twitter or whatever we want to call it, or Facebook.

C. RAJA MOHAN: I just want to add one thing, as one of American friends told me India's thing with the bristling tone to the West, it's just like the Americans towards the British. You love the British, and the Europeans, but you don't like the wine and cheese crowd, the coastal elites, which are anglicized, too Europhone. You don't like that. So, there is that bristling thing against Europe, the old world. Similarly I think that will linger on for a while.

G. MOHAN: I mean, that bristling tone even exists with the UK and Europe. So ...

1:01:00 Lightning Round: What is the greatest myth about the role of India's partners in its China strategy?

MADAN: As we saw thanks to Brexit. You've both been very generous with your time. I do want to take just a couple of more minutes and maybe ask you the lightning round that we always do at the end of each episode and ask you about the greatest myth or misunderstanding you hear about the role of partners in India's China strategy. Raja, I'll go to you first and then to you, Garima.

C. RAJA MOHAN: I'll just rob your framework, and I'd say G-2, that U.S. and China would always be about to get together. Or A-2, what you talked about, India and China coming together. So, a lot of Americans worry about India and China going to come back. I think neither of these is going to happen. But the myth endures. But my sense is the more we build together, these myths would lose their potency. They're already beginning to lose a lot of their potency.

G. MOHAN: It's an easy answer I think for Europe: that's a general misunderstanding everywhere that Europe is soft on China. Europeans don't understand the challenges of China. They don't understand the threats that China poses in the world today. I think that really misses a very deep structural debate that is happening across European capitals today on the threat from China which is fundamentally changing the way they view the world, including partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

[music]

MADAN: Thank you so much to both of you for spending this time with us. Raja, thank you to you.

C. RAJA MOHAN: Wonderful being here.

MADAN: And thanks to you as well, Garima.

G. MOHAN: Thank you for having me.

MADAN: Thank you for tuning in to the *Global India* podcast. I'm Tanvi Madan, senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. You can find

research about India and more episodes of this show on our website, Brookings dot edu slash Global India.

Global India is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network, and we'll be releasing new episodes every two weeks. Send any feedback or questions to podcasts at Brookings dot edu.

My thanks to the production team, including Kuwilileni Hauwanga, supervising producer; Fred Dews and Raman Preet Kaur, producers; Gastón Reboledo, audio engineer; and Daniel Morales, video editor. My thanks also to Alexandra Dimsdale and Hanna Foreman for their support, and to Shavanthi Mendis, who designed the show art.

Additional support for the podcast comes from my colleagues in the Foreign Policy program and the Office of Communications at Brookings.