



**GLOBAL INDIA PODCAST  
The Brookings Institution**

**“US views of India-China ties  
and their impact on the US-India partnership”**

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*Episode Summary:*

To discuss how Washington has viewed China-India ties and the role of the China factor in the U.S.-India partnership, host Tanvi Madan interviews two guests who have served across three presidential administrations: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Lisa Curtis is senior fellow and director of the Indo-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security; Joshua White is professor of practice of international affairs at Johns Hopkins SAIS and a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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**MADAN:** Welcome to *Global India*, I'm Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where I specialize in Indian foreign policy. 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 1959, M.C. Chagla, the Indian ambassador to the U.S., in a dispatch to Delhi noted, quote, "To say that the American attitude today is noticeably friendly to India in contrast to the past, is to state the obvious. Our country seems to be on the uppermost level of consciousness of the internationally minded section of Americans. It is made obvious to us here that the main motivating factor in this context has been the fear of China."

Three years later, in 1962, U.S. National Security Council staffer Robert Komer noted to his boss Mac Bundy, quote, "what has moved India towards us in the last few years? Essentially it isn't our policy or our increasing generosity in supporting India's ambitious five-year plans. It is the Chinese pressures on the northeast frontier. Over time, the conflict of interest between Beijing and Delhi will almost certainly grow rather than decrease, and sooner or later the Indians will come to realize that the arena of conflict is not only along the Himalayas, but in Southeast Asia as well."

Both officials' comments reflected the way shared concerns about China had affected U.S.-India ties. Since then, the role of the China factor in shaping U.S.-India relations has varied in nature and in degree. Sometimes it has been a subject of friction. More recently, it has fueled the U.S.-India relationship. Today, officials' observations would be similar to Chagla's and Komer's. While China is not the only driver of the U.S.-India partnership, there is little doubt that shared concerns about a rising China's assertive behavior has driven U.S.-India cooperation and incentivized both governments to manage their differences on a range of issues.

Throughout this season of the podcast, we've considered how India sees various aspects of its China relationship. On this episode, we're looking at India's ties with China from a different vantage point, that of the United States. To discuss how Washington has viewed Sino-Indian ties and the role of the China factor in the U.S.-India partnership, my guests on this episode are two policy practitioners and scholars who are specialists not just in India and South Asia, but also the broader Indo-Pacific.

One is Lisa Curtis, senior fellow and director of the Indo-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security and former senior director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council during the Trump administration. She also served in the Bush administration.

Our second guest is Joshua White, professor of the practice of international affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution. He previously served in the Obama administration as senior advisor and director for South Asian Affairs at the National Security Council.

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Before I continue on to the interview, I want to thank all of you for listening to or watching the podcast, providing feedback and sending me questions on social media. I want to highlight that the last episode of this season of the podcast, that is the next episode, will be 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 wished 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 at brookings.edu.

And now let's move on to the conversation with Lisa and Josh.

Welcome to the podcast, Lisa.

**CURTIS:** Thank you. Thanks for having me.

**MADAN:** Great to have you on the show as well, Josh.

**WHITE:** Great to be here.

*04:24 How were China-India relations seen by the U.S. government during the 2000s?*

**MADAN:** Lisa, we're going to start this conversation with you. And I want to take us back to the 2000s when you served in the Bush administration at the State Department, and as a professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. How at that point were China-India relations being seen? And relatedly, did China factor in U.S.-India relations at that time?

**CURTIS:** Well, when the U.S. started reaching out to India and really seeing that India was going to be an important partner in the early 2000s, during the Bush administration, you know, there was a significant effort to reach out to India. I think in the back of everyone's mind was China, and the idea that India, as a powerful democracy, growing economy would be a good partner for the United States and help balance a rising China. So, that was always in the back of the mind of the Bush administration.

But in terms of India-China relations, you didn't have the kind of border tensions that we see now. So, there wasn't a lot of focus on the India-China relationship per se. And really, at that time, if you remember, in the early 2000s, there was this idea that, from the Indian perspective and the Chinese perspective that India and China could grow together, that they could be rising Asian powers together. And there was talk of, you know, Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai, the idea that there was this India-China friendship going back to Nehru's time even and this idea that India and China would grow together and be close and form a partnership.

So, there wasn't a lot of focus on the India-China border tensions because the border was relatively peaceful. There were talks between the two countries and

things were relatively settled. And in the early 2000s, the focus was more on India-Pakistan tensions. Of course, we had the 2001–2002 India-Pakistan crisis. So, there was not a lot of focus on India-China tensions per se. But certainly, from the Bush administration perspective, the idea was to build up relations with India and that would serve as a balancing factor to rising Chinese power.

**MADAN:** You mentioned the 2001–2002 crisis, at that time, for the U.S. sometimes China was considered helpful in dealing with Pakistan during these crises.

*07:06 Did the U.S. government pay attention to evolving groupings that China and India were forming (e.g., BRICS) in the 2000s?*

Lisa, just to follow up, how much attention was paid to some of these evolving institutions or coalitions that were starting to come up at the time? Russia-India-China trilateral, the BRICS, for example, in that period. Was there much attention in Washington to these groupings coming out, which were, as you said, based on this idea that China and India could be non-West countries growing together?

**CURTIS:** I remember in the late '90s, I think it was under former Russian Foreign Minister Primakov that started the Russia-India-China trilateral talks. And certainly, Washington was aware of these discussions. But I don't think they were taken too seriously. Nobody really thought they were going to go anywhere. So, while people were aware that they were happening and were watching them, there wasn't a great deal of concern.

And of course, the BRICS as well came along, I think, a little bit later. But the same idea that, okay, this is interesting, these emerging economies are meeting with each other, trying to find common ground. But nobody ever really thought they would result in any significant strategic bloc that would be any kind of threat to the United States.

But it is interesting that that relationship between Russia, India, China goes back that far, and there have been these talks. But if you think about it, they haven't resulted in much, at all. And especially since the India-China border crisis more recently, in 2020.

But yeah, I don't think that there was a lot of stock put into the emerging relationship between Russia, India, China. And I guess now, looking back 24 years later, we can see that that, yeah, that was probably the right assessment, because it really hasn't resulted in much cooperation or collaboration between the three countries.

*09:02 Was the Obama administration thinking much about China-India relations?*

**MADAN:** Josh, from your time in the Obama administration at the Defense Department and the National Security Council, was there much thinking about China-India relations? And—obviously, U.S.-China relations were different then—was China a facilitator or a friction point in the India-U.S. relationship?

**WHITE:** It's a great question. And I would say that the China relationship and the India relationship proceeded, from Washington's perspective, on relatively distinct tracks throughout the Obama administration. This was an eight years in which

people in Washington were gradually waking up to a different kind of China, a China that was behaving differently in Southeast Asia and in South Asia.

And I think this happened over a few different phases. The first few years, 2009 to 2012, when China was under Hu Jintao and India under the Congress government, there was sort of a growing concern about Chinese behavior. But we have to remember that the Obama administration, and President Obama in particular, was very focused on finding areas of cooperation with China, particularly on climate, on North Korea, and on Iran, the Iran nuclear deal.

So, the first couple of years, the first year-and-a-half of the Obama administration, there was a significant amount of energy focused on North Korea. So, the China relationship was seen sort of largely in that context. The U.S. announced in 2010 the pivot to Asia, but really hadn't figured out whether India was a part of the pivot, how India was a part of the pivot. So, those first few years, really distinct tracks, if you will.

Then you sort of had this period, you know, 2013 to 2014, Xi Jinping assumes power as president. Prime Minister Modi comes in in 2014, a transitional period in a sense. But this is when China's behavior, particularly in the South China Sea with land reclamation, becomes much more apparent. The Obama administration is still trying and struggling to find areas of cooperation, in large part because President Obama had his eye on the Paris climate agreement in 2015 and really saw China as a central element of making that a success. You have the Sunnylands summit. You have the announcements in 2014.

But I think what's also interesting about this transitional period in the middle of the Obama administration, is you have a small India-China border crisis in Aksai Chin, and it goes on for a few weeks. But then just a few months later, there's a significant India-China confidence building agreement that is struck, that on paper looks substantive. We all know it didn't last a terribly long time. But it does, I think, telegraph to the Obama administration that both countries are interested in a relatively stable relationship, that they don't want these kind of border crises to impair their other ambitions. So, I don't think that really changed the overall perspective that Washington brought to the India-China relationship.

The last couple of years of the administration, when I was at the White House, were quite interesting in that the United States was increasingly concerned about what China was doing. Obviously militarizing Paracels and beginning to militarize artificial islands in the South China Sea. The concerns over Chinese hacking of U.S. systems becomes much more apparent and obvious. And so, the administration as the historians have already written about, was really struggling to figure out what to do about this kind of Chinese behavior. And the tone and tenor and nature of the relationship was really changing.

That said, the conflict dynamics that U.S. policymakers who worked on South Asia were concerned about were not on the India-China front. They were on the India-Pakistan front. And this represents that line of continuity from what Lisa was talking about earlier. In 2015, we had a series of provocations, including at Gurdaspur, in 2016 at Pathankot, in 2016 again at Uri. So, there was a pattern emerging of

Pakistani provocations in India, in Jammu and Kashmir, that were really concerning. And that was really the locus of policymaker attention.

So, if you take a step back, in line with what Lisa was saying from earlier, there was a very clear sense that India was a rising power, an important emerging partner, that the logic of U.S.-India relations had some very clear grounding in the U.S. concern about China's rise, and some shared concern within India about China's rise. There was a clear sense that China was becoming more assertive, more aggressive, but these were not seen as really meaningfully connected in a significant way.

And I would say, also, it's important to note that there were very few people within the U.S. government, particularly at that time, who had experience in South Asia and East Asia. This was before the articulation of the Indo-Pacific construct and a wider frame for policy planning. And so, you didn't have a lot of that cross-boundary expertise.

*14:05 During the Obama administration, was China a facilitator or friction point in the India-US relationship?*

Now, just a word on your question about whether China was a facilitator or a friction point. In a sense, neither in a really significant way. China was a facilitator, inadvertently, in that throughout this period, it did a lot to really annoy countries across Asia, including India. Right? You see its behavior in Southeast Asia and in India: economic coercion, cyber-attacks, all sorts of things.

In the Obama administration, there was a very clear sense that we could highlight some of this to India and we could explain our concerns about China to India. And we did at times. We shared sensitive information about Chinese cyber behaviors. But at the end of the day, there was a very clear sense that India is going to have to experience this on its own if it's going to pivot in the way that it approaches China.

We did have some conversations with the Chinese about Afghanistan during this period, and South Asia more broadly. They were not highly useful, but they were worth having. And frankly, it wasn't on the top list of priorities for senior Obama officials when they had a whole range of increasingly complicated and contentious issues to engage with China.

The one area where I would say China was a particular friction point in U.S.-India relations was that there was a push in 2016 by the United States to try to get India membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, in the NSG. I think we all knew that this was not a slam dunk. This would be challenging. The strategy that we adopted was what we called "consensus minus one," which is try to get everybody but China on board, knowing that China would really resist this. And, and at that point, hope that that sort of isolation and pressure might result in finding some sort of compromise or modus vivendi with India on this. We didn't get quite to consensus minus one but had significant engagements. It was quite clear that China just had a very different posture about this under Xi Jinping and was not going to relent. That was clear after a while to us and to the Indians. And represented, I think, not a surprise, but a clear point of friction.

**MADAN:** I think also the difference between that attempt at the Nuclear Suppliers Group and what the Bush administration had managed to do, which is get India that waiver in 2008, which is also a very different and changed China that earlier had been concerned about being isolated and now didn't have those concerns.

But the other friction point that I think of when I think about the Obama administration and that U.S.-India-China triangle was in a very different way, which was during the Copenhagen climate summit—that very striking photograph of Manmohan Singh on the Chinese side of the table with President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the opposite side. A time when I think the U.S. and India generally had differences on multilateral issues, which now I think more recently has changed a bit.

*17:06 How had the US view of China-India ties changed by the time of the Trump administration? Did the deterioration in India-China ties affect US-India relations?*

Lisa, by the time you served in the Trump administration at the NSC, how had the U.S. view of China, and China-India ties changed?

**CURTIS:** Before I delve into the more recent past, the Trump administration, I did want to go back just a little bit in the 2006–2008 period, because I think that's a really important inflection point for India-China relations. And what's happening at that point? Well, the Bush administration had announced the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal in 2005. By 2008, the Congress had approved India receiving civil nuclear technology even though it hadn't signed the NPT [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons]. So, really big deal, big change for the U.S.-India relationship.

And what we see happening in terms of China's relationship with India, we see a bit of a change. We see the Chinese starting to question Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh, calling Arunachal Pradesh "South Tibet" in some of their media outlets. We see the Chinese ambassador in India making controversial comments to the same degree. And we see the Chinese start questioning Indian sovereignty over Kashmir, and not allowing government officials from Kashmir to travel to China. Things like this.

So, we certainly saw a change in China's approach to India and the border issue in particular following the announcement of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal. And remember, at the same time, we saw the quick rise and fall of the Quad. This is when former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had proposed the Quad. They had had one meeting in 2007. Then, you know, the countries started backing away from the idea. And it was disbanded until, fast forward, to 2017, when I served in the Trump administration.

So, I wanted to give that background because I think the next significant inflection point—I'm glossing over what happened in 2013, 2014, some of the border crises that we heard about from Josh already—but fast forward to 2017, summer of 2017, another major border crisis with Doklam and the Chinese trying to occupy the heights at this area that would give them a strategic position over the Siliguri corridor, or "the chicken neck," as it's called, this small sliver of territory that connects India with the seven northeastern states. So, very critical territory for India. The Chinese are trying to construct a road that would overlook this critical territory. It caused a major crisis.

Now, in 2017, it wasn't like the Indians were looking to the U.S. for any substantial assistance in facing down the Chinese. But certainly, U.S. officials were aware of it. We were watching closely. And when it was finally resolved in the fall of 2017, following that resolution, is really when we see the Indians becoming more receptive to reviving the Quad. And, of course, the first meeting of the Quad in ten years at the assistant secretary/director general level happened in November of 2017 on the fringes of the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN Summit in Manila. So, I think there is a connection between the India-China border tensions and India becoming more receptive to the idea of the Quad meeting—the Quad being, of course, U.S, India, Australia, Japan.

But if we look at the Trump administration, the relationship with India, there were several steps taken to draw India closer to the United States to enhance defense and security relations—things like giving India access to drone technology, India being the first non-NATO partner to be able to access this technology. That step was taken in 2018. Also elevating India to Strategic Trade Authorization-1 status, which was important for India to gain access to dual-use technology. And just an overall improvement in the defense, security relationship. Of course, you had the first ever 2+2 dialogue happening. This is the meeting between the defense ministers and diplomatic ministers the secretary of state with his counterpart, the Indian minister of foreign affairs, and the same with the defense leaders.

So, all of this was very important in improving the quality of the U.S.-India relationship, so that when you did have this major crisis break out between India and China in the spring of 2020—this is when China basically posted up at five different points along the Line of Actual Control, in the Aksai Chin area, in Ladakh, and even cross over into what India considered its territory at some points. And putting a lot of pressure on that border, which, of course, we all know, eventually broke out into a skirmish in which 20 Indian soldiers actually lost their lives in June of 2020.

So, when that happened, the U.S. was ready to provide India with any support that it needed in terms of military gear, in terms of intelligence, information sharing. And so, I would put that as a watershed moment for U.S.-India relations, for India-China relations as well. Because I think up until that point, Indian officials had always wondered if India got into a real crisis with China, could it depend on the United States, or would the United States sort of put its trade relationship with China first, take a more stand back position? But of course, that didn't happen. The U.S. was all in with India, provided the support that it requested. And really, I think, showed up as a partner that India could rely on in times of crises.

So, yeah, I think big change if you go from the Bush administration to the Trump administration in how India-China relations were viewed and how the deterioration in India-China relations facilitated improvement in the U.S.-India relationship. I think you can see a direct causation there, getting into the 2020s in particular.

And I guess the last point that I would make on this period was that the Trump administration had been trying to convince countries that they did not want to depend on China for 5G communications or the end-to-end technology, that this could cause vulnerabilities for them in terms of Chinese having access through backdoors, to the telecommunication systems of the countries. And I can remember in the 2018, maybe even 2019 period, that in India there was still a discussion happening about



whether to allow Chinese companies to bid for the 5G market in India because, of course, the Chinese systems were cheaper. They were more cost effective. And so, it was sort of a security versus economic argument that the Department of Commerce had a big say in India.

But it was really that 2020 border crisis, I think, that finally convinced India that, no, the security issues were urgent. And India, of course, made the decision to not allow Chinese companies to bid in the 5G trials in India.

So, again, we have this border crisis, which really impacted some major decisions in India that matter to the United States.

**MADAN:** We've often heard this idea of 2020 being an inflection point in India-China relations. It's striking, Lisa, you also talk about that it was an inflection point in U.S.-India relations. And the other thing I remember being striking was India doing certain things or publicizing certain things during that period, which at another time during an India-China crisis, they would have actually either not done with the U.S. or not publicized it.

And the couple of ones that I remember off the top of my head was the leaking from the Indian side, or at least revealing, that a U.S. P-8 had been allowed to land for refueling in the Andamans. And I think the other one was there was a U.S.-India aircraft carrier exercise in the Bay of Bengal while the crisis was still ongoing. Not to mention further Quad meetings and a few others.

*26:33 What was the Chinese approach to the India-Pakistan crisis during the Trump administration?*

Lisa, one follow up on the Trump administration: Josh had mentioned the U.S. and China having discussions about South Asia and Afghanistan. And of course, during the Trump administration, there was not just the China crises in 2017 and 2020 for India, but also an India-Pakistan crisis in 2019. How did you see or experience China's approach to that crisis? Was it different from what used to be the case during Kargil in 1999 and then the 2000s crisis early in the Bush administration? During that period, you saw a China that was trying to de-escalate or trying to perhaps work with the U.S. What was the Chinese approach to the U.S. or to the India-Pakistan crisis in and of itself at that time?

**CURTIS:** I think China's response to the 2019 Balakot crisis following the attack, the horrific attack on the Indian soldiers on February 14th of 2019 in Kashmir, this was significant escalation of tensions between India, Pakistan. It happened very quickly. I think it was just 12 days after that major terrorist attack in Indian Kashmir that you had the Indians retaliate against the camp in Balakot in Pakistan. And then 24 hours later, you had a dogfight between Indian and Pakistani jets. An Indian jet goes down. Thankfully, the Indian pilot survived and was eventually returned to India, which helped de-escalate the crisis. So, it escalated very quickly, but then it de-escalated quite quickly as well.

But really, in that period, China did not play a helpful role. I mean, it did happen quickly. So, that's one aspect. But I think there was even some thinking that China was playing an unhelpful role in raising alarm bells, in telling Pakistan that India was

doing unhelpful things or getting ready to do unhelpful things. So that actually China contributed to escalating tensions between the two, that it did not play any kind of helpful role.

And perhaps that was a function of India-China relations not being very good at the time. And/or China just not being interested in helping to de-escalate the tensions. But certainly, a different response than we saw, like you said, at Kargil crisis where they really did seem to want to play a helpful role in de-escalating the tensions.

And the other thing that happened was, shortly after the 2019 crisis there was a major move to list Masood Azhar, the leader of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, which is the group, the militant who attacked in Indian Kashmir in February 2019, claimed allegiance to. So, he was a member of that group. There was a major push to list him as a terrorist, which ended up being successful, finally, because the Chinese had been holding up that process. The U.S. had been pushing for several years, I think, during Josh's time at the White House as well, to have Masood Azhar listed as a terrorist in the UN. But it wasn't until after this crisis the U.S. made another major push and finally got China's agreement to do the listing.

So, again, that shows that China was still supporting Pakistan in many ways at that time. And so, really was not in a position to be able to be helpful in de-escalating tensions between India, Pakistan. As China's very much seen as being a major supporter of Pakistan. And the U.S., I think, still can play that role. I think the U.S. showed in 2019 that even though we've been building up relations with India, we still have a decent relationship with Pakistan. And in times of real crisis, I think both countries do look to the U.S. to try to help de-escalate the situation.

So, this continues, I think, to be an important role for the United States. That I think it's a role that the U.S. should continue to value and continue to try to exercise. That's different. There's no role for the U.S. in mediating the Kashmir issue. That's a different kettle of fish. That is something that is between the two countries. But when it comes to crises where it looks like the two might actually go to war, which could potentially turn nuclear, then the U.S. does have a role and an interest in trying to de-escalate, however possible, the tensions between the two sides.

**MADAN:** If I remember correctly, during the 2019 crisis, the country that offered to, surprisingly, mediate and was pushed back by India was Russia, which was a bit odd given that Moscow usually knows how India feels, which is not very nicely about countries wanting to mediate between India and Pakistan.

Lisa, you also highlight from your talking about the Trump administration and as you said, the Obama administration before, really trying to work with India at the UN in the 1267 committee to get these terrorists designated—that these have often been blocked by China.

And there's a sense that the U.S. and India have only clashed at the UN Security Council going back to 1971. But the more recent experience has been the U.S., India, perhaps France at times, actually working together on some of some of these initiatives, which are often where China has been the obstacle.

*32:28 Has there been continuity or change in the Biden administration's perspective of China and India-China ties compared to the Trump administration?*

Josh, fast forwarding a bit to the Biden administration. How have you seen both the administration's perspective of China, but then also China-India ties, how has that changed? Or has it remained consistent since the Trump administration? Lisa talked about the border crises in 2017 and 2020. The 2020 one continued into the Biden administration. From a U.S. perspective, what was the sense that India should be doing about that border standoff as well?

**WHITE:** I think the story is largely one of policy continuity from the Trump administration. The border crisis during the Trump administration did change the way that Indian elites approached China and the degree to which they were willing to cooperate with the United States in more sensitive areas. So, I think the Biden administration looked at what happened during that border crisis, and I think noted that this creates more space for U.S.-India cooperation. But also, it was a real signal that China was just much more willing to assume significant risk in its relationship with India.

I mean, we look back at that crisis, which Lisa lived through, and we still don't, I think, really know why China did something that was operationally clever and strategically counterproductive. They had done operationally clever and strategically counterproductive things across Southeast Asia and with other neighbors and partners. But there is a way in which China's behavior is somewhat inscrutable, driven by domestic concerns or pressures or dynamics that we don't have a lot of visibility into.

And so, I think that formed a more sophisticated risk assessment drawing from that experience, for the Biden administration, that of course, this is a challenge that's principally India's to manage, but is unpredictable in ways that we didn't really expect.

Lisa mentioned the technology dimension to this, but I just want to underscore that when India decided to ban Chinese apps in the wake of this crisis, there was a lot of laughter and eye rolling in Washington. It's like, oh, you know, you're going to ban some apps? It's really a tough response.

But in retrospect, I think this was something of an important inflection point. It was a demonstration—that India has since followed through on—of its willingness to limit Chinese imports of sensitive technologies and to signal that it wants to disengage from the Chinese tech ecosystem.

And then the Biden administration came in as an administration from the top down really focused on technology and focused on the technological dimension of competition. And came into office with the belief that technology will, to a very significant extent, shape the global balance of power and the global order in the next decade or two. And that the U.S. wants India, if not completely bought into U.S. technology stacks and technology ecosystems, to at least not be in the China-Russia camp of technology governance.

And so, I think what the Biden administration did was see that opening and that opportunity that was created by the border clashes during the Trump administration. And that's created an opening for iCET, this Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies, which is not something that the administration has done only with India —with many of its partners it's trying to build out new initiatives on emerging and critical technologies—but it created an opportunity space that was very significant that the Biden administration took advantage of, and that's become really one of the most positive parts of the U.S.-India bilateral relationship. One of the most interesting parts of the relationship. And it was in many ways enabled by that realization that China is going to do what China is going to do.

I think the view within subsequent administrations starting from the Obama administration that India was often self-deterred by China. It would choose not to take steps that it thought might provoke Beijing. And I think what we saw with the Doklam crisis is that China is going to do what China is going to do. And I think that message was somewhat internalized by the Indian leadership.

*36:58 What has been the sense in the US about what India should be doing along the border with China?*

Now to your second question about what the United States thinks India perhaps ought to be doing along the border to strengthen its deterrence. This is, of course, a question principally for the Indians, it's their borders. They're closest to it. But I think there are things that I know the United States has been encouraging India to do that I think are wise to encourage India to do. Some of this was very ably covered in one of your fantastic earlier episodes by Walter Ladwig and Raji Rajagopalan.

But to overly simplify it, the way that I think about what the U.S. should want India to be able to do is in two parts. The first is to get a lot better at seeing its environment. And the second is to think very carefully and strategically about where it wants to be able to respond, the capabilities that it wants to have to be able to respond to that environment.

So, on the seeing side, this is a huge challenge for India. India has long, high altitude, topographically complex, historically ambiguous borders with China on the continental side. It also, for those who are thinking about what sort of capabilities India needs China has a very high-altitude plateau, and the Indian topography is just a lot more challenging. You have a lot of these valleys that run perpendicular to that plateau, and it's hard to move across those. And so, you really need to be able to see what is going on. On the maritime side, this means tracking Chinese surface ships and submarines, which is a extremely complex challenge.

So, here what does India need? It needs persistent, reliable, secure surveillance. Some of this can be from small drones, tactical drones. Some of it has to be from high altitude, long endurance drones. Some of it has to be from satellites. These are areas with a lot of cloud cover and storms. So, it just presents an array of challenges.

But I think from the U.S. perspective, we want India to be able to see things quickly because if it doesn't see them, it's always going to be put in a position of being reactive. The U.S. has helped in some of these areas. But I think this is task number

one for finding areas of cooperation is to help India see its environment. It is just that important. How India chooses to respond to any given perceived incursion, is a different question. But that visibility has been lacking, and I think is critical.

The response capabilities, I mean, this is a bit of a longer game. Some of your earlier episodes have touched on this as well. I think Walter Ladwig did. India's built a lot of road infrastructure, which is quite significant, along its continental frontier. India needs more precision strike capabilities from aircraft, from artillery. It needs at sea more versatile platforms, which are not always the same as prestige platforms. I think aircraft carriers are less helpful than a variety of very flexible surface vessels. And it needs to develop more creative and nimble operational plans. When Chinese forces take part of a border area that India believes is its own, it has to decide, Indian leadership has to decide, do they push them out? Do they take an equally sized patch of ground somewhere else to try to create some trade space? But again, all of that requires an ability to see very quickly the environment as it's developing.

So, the priority in my mind should really be on these sensing platforms and on building on some of the good work that started when I was in government and continued during the Trump administration to be able to cooperate more quickly, in real time, on sensitive topics as they develop. I think that really forms the core of what the U.S. and India can be doing that ultimately benefits India's defensive capabilities, and from a U.S. perspective helps India manage its own security environment in a way that, over a longer term, could enable India to be a more capable and broader security provider across the Indian Ocean and the wider region.

*41:13 What should be the US role in any future India-China border crisis?*

**MADAN:** Lisa, I don't know if you want to add anything on that aspect, but I also do want to ask you, you had a great report, very thoughtful, which we'll link to in the episode notes, about how the U.S. should be thinking about a future Sino-Indian crisis particularly at the border and how it should respond. How do you think the U.S. should be thinking about such a crisis and what the U.S. role could or should or should not be, for that matter?

**CURTIS:** Well, thanks, Tanvi, and appreciated all of your advice on that report, given your vast background on India-China relations. And I really don't have anything to add in terms of everything that Josh beautifully laid out in terms of what India needs and what the U.S. can provide in terms of defense technology.

But I will say that that my motivation for doing the India-China border report that came out last April was really because when I was at the National Security Council, most attention when it came to black swan events or conflicts that could break out was on India-Pakistan. And that makes a certain amount of sense. We did have a very serious border crisis, as we just discussed in 2019. But I did feel that when the India-China border crisis broke out, the U.S. was unprepared, that we had not spent a lot of time understanding that border and understanding China-India dynamics, that the number of people really versed in India-China relations, beyond the three of us, is really very small.

And so, I thought it was important to really raise up this issue, because we could see another crisis. We know that China they have de-escalated at three out of the five

tension points. But they're still mobilized at these two particular areas. And we could still see another border crisis.

So, I thought it was important to explain the background of the India-China border issues, what's at stake, how the U.S. should think about it, that the U.S. shouldn't really remain just a neutral observer, that we really needed to make sure India has the capabilities it needs to face the China challenge, the border challenge, and to be prepared in the event that another border crisis broke out. So, those were really my motivations.

And I think the United States can prepare itself, it can do war games, think about how it can support India now in getting ready for some of these activities and just really try to watch on a daily basis, monitor much more closely what is happening. Notice the small changes that happen along the border, things like the road construction or redeployment of troops. And really pay attention. Not think of well, that's a very distant, issue, and it's not going to flare up. Not dismissing what's happening there.

I think that's really what the U.S. needs to do is monitor much more closely, talk with India more, be ready to, you know, share intelligence information, and do what's necessary in terms of Indian capabilities, which gets into the realm of co-production. And I was happy to see that the Biden administration has approved the co-production of jet engine technology with India, which is really a major deal. This is really a historical step in the relationship, that will allow India more access to technology that will allow it to improve its own defense industrial base, which is something the United States should definitely be supporting.

So, I think these are some of the things that the U.S. can do.

Now, if we're going to talk about India's perspective, one thing that I would just point out is that, given the increasing isolation of Russia over its invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions that Russia is facing on technology, I think that India needs to really think about how much it can count on Russia if there were a future India-China border crisis. I know in 2020, Russia did play a role, I think Russia facilitated the meeting of the India, China defense ministers at one point. But I don't think India is going to be able to count on Russian support in the event of a future India-China border crisis. I think Russia is becoming more dependent on China as it becomes internationally isolated over its invasion of Ukraine, and that this will force it to be more of a junior partner to China. So, that would be my only thought on India and how it's strategizing to meet the China challenge.

**MADAN:** I think you definitely see these concerns in India about a future contingency. And I think the concern now is not to try to get Russia onside but keep it neutral. I think the difference comes in the prescription where you hear people saying, well, actually, to keep Russia neutral, you actually want to maybe not increase purchases but give Russia enough of an incentive to keep at least in the near-term, India's ability to keep a ready and prepared military till India has other options, whether domestic or diversified with other partners.

And so, in some ways, you actually see that very concern you talked about but leading to perhaps a different policy prescription at least in the near term.

Josh, I don't know if you want to add anything on how the U.S. should be thinking about its role in the crisis, but I also want to get to this aspect of the broader Indo-Pacific. Along with working on South Asia, both of you have looked at the broader Indo-Pacific and Asia as a whole. And, given that the broader challenge of China is not just at the India-China border, but in the region and even globally, what do you see as the scope for U.S.-India cooperation? And what are what are U.S. expectations of India?

**WHITE:** It's a good question. Let me just say something first about the Sino-Indian border crisis. I think from a U.S. perspective, there's some good news to reflect on. One is that India's template for dealing with China border crisis thus far has been somewhat more cautious and somewhat less publicity seeking than it's standard template for dealing with a crisis on its other border with Pakistan. And as I've written about with respect to India-Pakistan crises, India in many ways has not sought deterrence so much as it's sought catharsis. It's used this for political gain. If anything, it's the opposite problem in India, where you have political leaders denying that there's any problem whatsoever along the border with China when there are clearly some Chinese incursions. But I think directionally that's good news.

The other piece of good news is that, as some of your earlier guests have pointed out, India has begun to think through more carefully the military weaknesses, the gaps in deterrence that it has inadvertently created over time and repositioned some of its ground forces, think about the kinds of assets that it needs.

I would like to build on what Lisa said with the defense industrial base piece of this. Already India's experience with China, since the Trump administration, I think has led it to take a more capabilities-oriented view of what it wants to procure from partners like the United States and what it wants to build indigenously. This is already a step forward. You know, when I was at the Pentagon ten years ago, India did not take a capabilities-oriented view of its engagement with the United States on technology. It took a widget-oriented view. We would hear from the Indian system, you have this secret widget, and we want it. We'd say, so, what are you going to do with it? Never mind, we want it. This was the technology elite within the defense establishment seeking specific things. And I think the broader experience along the Sino-Indian border has led to more thinking about priority capabilities.

I would like to see that conversation increasingly shift—and I know it's starting—to the next phase, which is a scenario-based conversation. What challenges might you face? Let's game those out together. And then we're not going to tell you what you will or ought to do, but how can we use those scenarios to think through the capabilities that you might want to have, and the ways that we can be prepared to provide them in advance, in the moment, or quickly if those scenarios develop.

And I think that that could really just drive a natural evolution, and a very constructive evolution, so that our conversations with India are not quite like they are with our East Asian allies but are more of the caliber and the forward-looking quality, they have a forward-looking quality that, that our conversations do with close allies and partners in other parts of the world.

*50:41 What does the US expect—or what would it like to see—from India in the broader Indo-Pacific vis-a-vis China?*

To your second question, what does the U.S. expect from India or what do those expectations look like? I've long been of the view that the United States does need to take a wider view of what we now call the Indo-Pacific, to think about the dependencies between East and South Asia, to understand better the Sino-Indian dynamics. It's clear that from economic policy to defense and nuclear dynamics, there are all kinds of ways in which we have not really understood and studied and invested in the interconnection between these two areas.

At the same time, I, as someone who looks at this from the U.S. perspective, would be wary of expecting India or even wanting India to become too engaged outside of the Indian Ocean region for the foreseeable future. I think it's great that India is engaged in the Quad, that it engages with Southeast Asia. But frankly, India has very significant security challenges in the Indian Ocean. I think it faces a security environment that is degrading, not getting better. If you look at the PLA Navy presence in the Indian Ocean, what's happening along the border, the recent experience in the western Indian Ocean with Houthi pirates and attacks, India has a lot to manage simply in shoring up its own security environment, much less being a robust and reliable security provider in its own very large neighborhood.

I would like to see India focus there, rather than thinking about activities east of Malacca or elsewhere. But that's long been my view. India has significant capabilities but has a rather limited defense capital budget. And it is limited in what it can do, and it needs to prioritize.

So, I think that can go along with India's diplomatic engagement and economic engagement and some security engagement with partners in East Asia. But it needs to focus on the challenges it faces at home. And those go back to the kinds of capabilities that I discussed earlier: sensing—see the environment—and then some really focused capabilities to respond to shore up some deterrence gaps. That's where I'd like to see the conversation stay and deepen, if you will.

**MADAN:** At the risk of confusing our non-American listeners, you're suggesting zone defense from the playbook, same question to you: what would you think India should be doing in cooperation with the U.S. in the broader Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China? And what do you think the limits of that cooperation might be?

**CURTIS:** I think really India's most important role when it comes to stabilizing, securing the Indo-Pacific is really the role it plays in the Quad. The Quad is a significant policy tool, I think, for each of the four countries in standing up to China, in managing China's influence, its rise. So, I think that really that's India's most important role, and that's why it's so important to keep the Quad momentum that we've seen. There's been tremendous momentum over the last couple of years, and I think we need to continue that.

And even if the Quad is not doing military or defense activities, it's still playing extremely important role. And having these four democratic naval powers working together, working on things like maritime domain awareness, technology cooperation, space, you name it. There are so many areas where these four



countries are finding convergences and collaborating, and I think this is extremely helpful.

Second, I think India plays a bridging role to Southeast Asia. I think there's a lot of trust and confidence in India among the Southeast Asian nations. And India has independent, very good relationships with countries like the Philippines or Vietnam or Indonesia. And so, I think that's helpful: India engaging in the broader region. I know Josh just talked about the limits of like naval presence in the Pacific and going too far East. But I would argue that the diplomatic, political engagement, even economic engagement with these countries is still very important.

And then third, I would point to India's role as providing alternative manufacturing hubs to China. And this may take time, but I think this is something that India can do. Welcoming more investment and being able to be that diversified supply chain, being part of that supply chain that is providing alternatives to China. So, I think those are those are some of the roles that India can play.

*55:40 What might be the limits of U.S.-India cooperation vis-à-vis China?*

In terms of limits, I think it would come back to sort of the military realm. And there's been a lot of discussion if there was a contingency either in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, what role would India play? I am more skeptical that India would play any kind of serious military role. I think India would do what was good for India and not want to provoke China on its border. So, I think its role would be rather limited, maybe provide some logistics support, access to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, for example, something like that. But certainly, India is not going to get deeply involved militarily. And the U.S. should not think it can count on India like it does other allies like Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea.

So, that is a limit, I think, the degree to which the U.S. could really count on India in the event of a military crisis in the Indo-Pacific region. And I'm not saying that in a negative way. I'm just saying it in a very realistic way. Like, I think it's important for the U.S. to realize some of those limits and have realistic expectations. But with all of that said, still acknowledging that India has an extremely important role to play in the Indo-Pacific as part of the Quad and something that the U.S. needs to nurture and continue, and just always make sure that India is part of that Indo-Pacific strategy.

**MADAN:** Josh, what do you see as the likely limits of U.S.-India cooperation in the Indo-Pacific or vis-à-vis China? Are there key differences between the U.S. and Indian perceptions of China?

**WHITE:** I think Lisa captured beautifully the likely realistic Indian response to a U.S.-China conflict surrounding Taiwan or the South China Sea. There are certainly some people in the U.S. system who would be hoping or even expecting India to respond more like a treaty ally in such a circumstance. But realistically, I think India has its own complicated interests. In East Asia, I think it would quietly be helpful, with an emphasis on quietly. And I think it's probably not productive to expect much more.

There will be a number of limiting factors across domains in the U.S.-India relationship on advanced defense technologies. There are still outstanding questions about how India's procurement of the Russian S-400 air defense system will impact

the kinds of things the U.S. and India can do together. There are concerns about whether the trajectory of India's domestic politics will affect cooperation.

But in the context of thinking about the China relationship, I think it's valuable to take a step back and not be too focused on the present moment. I mean, we're living in a moment now in which China has spent a considerable number of years under Xi Jinping demonstrating a very assertive approach to its partners in East Asia, to its neighbors, a very confident approach to its rise. That may well continue, that may be baked into not only the way that Xi Jinping is as a leader, but the kind of ways in which the Chinese elite think about how to secure the kind of status and benefits that go along with being a very significant power on the world stage.

It's also the case that we look at some of the warning signs today in China's economy. China's economy looks significantly more fragile than it did 4 or 5 years ago. China's demographic future looks more bleak than it did 4 or 5 years ago. And the wonky political scientists that I hang out with have different ways of thinking about what this might mean for Chinese behavior.

I mean, one is that it could prompt over the next ten years an increasingly bellicose or provocative posture as China feels like this is its moment. It needs to seize the moment, maybe even seize Taiwan, because its relative power may decline as its economic prospects grow more dim, as it ages and so forth. And so, this is a dangerous decade that we have ahead.

But it could also be that China takes a different tack. You can't rewind the clock to 2012 or 2013, but it could be that the Chinese leadership, Xi Jinping and his successors, decide to pursue some kind of rapprochement with regional partners to appear less threatening, to find ways to try to erode the ties that the United States has built economic, but particularly political and military ties with countries across the Indo-Pacific. And that it adopts a somewhat different strategy. I think in such a scenario, there's probably a lot of path dependence and continuity with the concerns that India is going to have about China. Some of these are on technology and other things very difficult to unwind. But it could change the calculation. And I think we have to think about futures that aren't just direct, linear extrapolations from how people in Washington feel about India and China today and think about what those different futures might look like.

**MADAN:** And, you know, that's related to a question that I get pretty much almost every week. One from a number of Indian interlocutors, which is, is there going to be a G2? Whether that's in a second Trump term scenario or even when people see the Biden administration engaging, or for that matter Australia and China engaging. Which is are they going to be these condominiums between its partners and China. And then the flip side of that that I get is people in Washington ask me about another scenario, which is, is there going to be an India-China grand bargain of some sort? So, I call that the G2-A2 problem. But it does reflect that there have been different scenarios in the past. I think the prospect might not be as high as it was, and as you said, there's some lock in effect or domestic politics involved, but nonetheless important to think through scenarios.

*1:02:15 Lightning Round: What is the biggest myth or misunderstanding about U.S. response to China-India relations?*

**MADAN:** Lisa, before we wrap up the episode, one of the things we do is a lightning round. So, very quick answer to the question, what is the greatest myth or misunderstanding you hear about U.S. views or a myth about the U.S. response to China-India relations.

**CURTIS:** Well, I think the biggest myth is that the U.S. would want to see some kind of India-China conflict, Like, that would be in the U.S. interest. Because certainly it would not. This would be extremely destabilizing for the world, really, these two major powers if they were ever to come into conflict. So, certainly that would be a myth. And then, I guess along the same lines that this idea that if there was a contingency involving China in either the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, that the U.S. would want India to provoke something on the border with China, to distract China. I think that that is not a good strategy because, again, that would lead to serious tensions and possibly conflict between India and China, which is something nobody wants. So, I think those are two of the myths that that I would point to.

**MADAN:** Josh, what about you? What is the greatest myth or understanding that you hear about the U.S. response to China-India ties or how the U.S. sees India-China ties?

**WHITE:** I think the myth that I hear is that the United States wants or even expects India to adopt the same kind of discourse on China that is prevalent here in Washington. In Washington today, the acceptable spectrum of discourse on China is that you can be a China hawk, or you can be a super China hawk. Those are the left and right limits of what you can put forward and say.

And I think for some very sensible reasons. We look at the series of behaviors that the Chinese Communist Party has engaged in, particularly since 2013. And across domains it really is striking the way that American policymakers articulate that—through a public frame of competition, through concerns in a very direct way about the implications of China's rise on the global stage, what that means for American interests and prosperity and power, what it means for the interests, prosperity, and power of our friends—can be quite blunt.

I think the reality is that the United States does not expect India to adopt that same tone. That wouldn't fit with the complexity of how India finds itself in the region. I think what the United States does want is for the Indian leadership to have and act on a realistic view of China's willingness to act subversively—particularly on technology and in the intelligence domain—coercively—we've seen the coercion in economic policy and, some extent, along the border—and aggressively, particularly in border disputes.

And so, China thus far has made this case for the world. But I think the perspective in Washington is, look, regardless of what India says about this, we would like them to have a realistic view and we'll try to help them have a realistic view, as we see it, of what China's doing on the global stage around the world, but also within India's borders.

As I said earlier, there is ... I think it's good news that Indian leaders have been relatively subdued in their public comments about Sino-Indian clashes; that prevents escalation. We shouldn't pocket that as a given, that it will always be that way in the

future. You have an Indian leadership under Prime Minister Modi that really has no effective national opposition and hasn't for a while. It's a political environment that actually allows for considerable flexibility and freedom of movement as to which issues you take up and when and why. And this could be an issue that is more instrumentalized domestically in the future. But I think the U.S. is okay with the fact that the Indian political leadership treads gently around this topic and around these politics.

And what's most important for us in Washington who care about the U.S.-India relationship is seeing the Indian leadership and the United States take advantage of the shared view, the shared realization that China poses some very significant challenges in South Asia, globally, when it comes to global technology regimes on the international stage. And that we can work on those even if we speak rather differently about what China is doing and about China's role on the global stage.

Thus far, we've managed that pretty well. And so, I'm hopeful that the differences in discourse will not get in the way of the kinds of deeper cooperation that are valuable to both countries.

[music]

**MADAN:** With that, thank you, Lisa, for joining us on the podcast.

**CURTIS:** Well, thank you for having me. It's been a real pleasure, Tanvi.

**MADAN:** Thank you, Josh, for joining us on the podcast as well.

**WHITE:** My pleasure.

**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.

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