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PACIFIC FORUM
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The Next Generation of US Analysis of India and Indian Ocean

EDITED BY
ROB YORK

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Introduction

For all the ways that the US-India partnership is expanding, there remains an area where there is still plenty of space for growth: The training of young Americans to acquire expertise on India and the surrounding South Asian subregion.

Pacific Forum has done its part to engage Indian officials, thought leaders, and next-generation analysts through our programs, but in 2026, we chose to address the gap on the US side by launching The Seminar on Contemporary India. Taking a select number of young and emerging analysts, the seminar gave them access to reading materials by contemporary Indians political scientists, historians, and officials, gave them opportunities to lead class discussion, and allowed them to work with us in the process of drafting, revising, and publishing analysis on contemporary topics of their choice.

The writings here—covering topics ranging from energy to education to space, nuclear, and conservation issues—represent the outcome of that initiative. These six emerging analysts will carry with them that experience across what we are confident will be lengthy and productive careers in the field of international relations.

Rob York
Director for Regional Affairs
Pacific Forum

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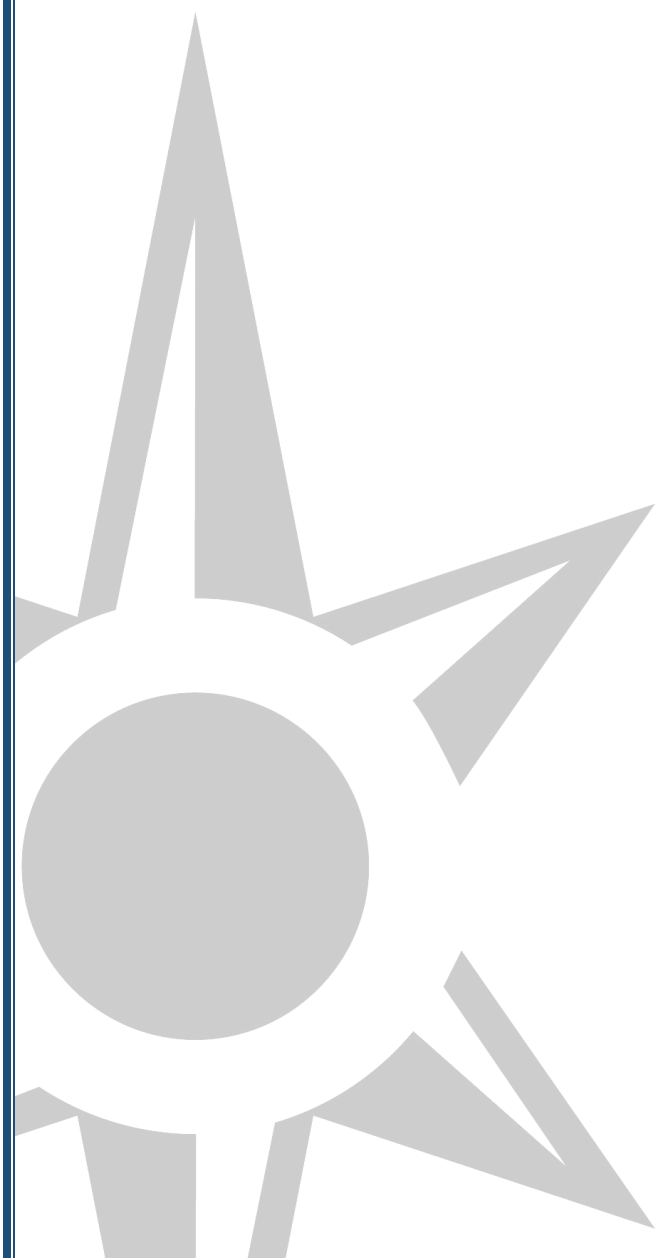
The Pivot Back: Why Washington Can No Longer Overlook the Indian Ocean

By
Riaan Dhankhar



The United States has spent the last decade refining its Indo-Pacific strategy, but the geography of competition is shifting far faster than the slow mechanics of policy. The Strait of Hormuz crisis and war with Iran are revealing the wider strategic centrality of the Indian Ocean. It is a maritime system in which trade routes, energy flows, undersea cables, island-state politics, and great-power competition increasingly converge. The Indian Ocean carries half of the world's container ships, one-third of bulk cargo traffic, and two-thirds of oil shipments; its waters connect the Gulf, East Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia into a single strategic geography. If these routes are now central to Asian prosperity, military mobility, and digital connectivity, then US Indo-Pacific strategy cannot treat the Indian Ocean as secondary to the Pacific. It must view the Indian Ocean as a theater of equal strategic importance to the Pacific, while remaining part of the larger Indo-Pacific framework, backed by deeper economic, military, and diplomatic engagement across the IOR and its island and littoral states.

The Indian Ocean has become more important because three structural changes are occurring simultaneously. First, chokepoint risk has become chronic rather than episodic. Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Suez, and Malacca are no longer just commercial arteries; they are maritime chokepoints through which conflict, piracy, gray-zone activity, and political instability can transmit shocks across the global economy. In August, Hormuz traffic had fallen to a fraction of prewar levels, with some reporting only six ships crossed Hormuz on Aug. 10 versus roughly 130–140 at prewar levels. Similarly, a Houthi attack in Bab el-Mandeb this August caused the first deaths in a Houthi shipping strike since the Iran war began. Second, the region is becoming a center of critical infrastructure. Subsea cables now carry almost all international data, and routes through the Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and Bay of Bengal make the Indian Ocean central to oil markets, financial transactions, military communications, and the digital economy. In the fog the the continuing conflict in the Middle East, Cable operators reported Gulf/Hormuz projects delayed indefinitely and Red Sea cable-laying paused. Third, maritime infrastructure has become a critical domain of strategic competition. Ports, shipyards, logistics hubs, repair facilities, and data networks shape who can operate, sustain presence, gather information, and influence political choices during crisis.

Concomitantly, China's expanding role in the Indian Ocean should best be understood not as a future *expansion* problem but as a present *access* problem. Beijing has spent more than a decade building commercial, financial, diplomatic, and logistical positions across the region. Hambantota port, a strategically located Chinese-leased access point, remains the most visible case: Sri Lanka transferred a controlling stake and 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings in 2017 after struggling with debt linked to the port's construction. In Bangladesh, Chinese financing and construction have been tied to port and transport infrastructure around Chattogram (Chittagong) and Payra, part of a broader Bay of Bengal competition over connectivity and access. In Pakistan, Gwadar provides China an Arabian Sea node near the Gulf. In Djibouti, China has already converted commercial and political presence into a formal overseas military facility. Across Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros, China is the only major power with embassies in all six Indian Ocean island states. Putting that all together as pins on a map, and China has encircled the region and has touchpoints to all four of the IOR's maritime chokepoints.

That said, the operational significance of this network should be stated carefully. Most Chinese-backed ports will not become Chinese naval bases, and regional states are not passive clients. But the relevant question is whether Chinese firms, diplomats, survey vessels, and security relationships create enough familiarity, leverage, and logistical optionality to make future Chinese naval operations easier and regional autonomous decision-making more constrained. A port that can refuel or repair a commercial vessel can, under different circumstances, support a naval visit. Oceanographic research can improve submarine operating knowledge. Long-term concessions can create political pressure during a crisis. Over time, this produces a maritime presence that won't trigger a crisis, but it is consequential enough to alter the regional balance.

The Pentagon's June decision to restore the US Pacific Command name did not change the command's geographic responsibilities, but it has revived questions about the relative priority Washington assigns to the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. The United States is not absent from the Indian Ocean, nor should its current posture be caricatured as neglect. Diego Garcia remains one of the most important US military facilities in the world. The

Fifth Fleet operates across the Gulf, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, and Arabian Sea. Washington has deepened defense cooperation with India through the 2025 Framework for the US-India Major Defense Partnership, and the security relationship is quickly becoming a foundational pillar of the bilateral relationship. The United States and India have also launched the Indian Ocean Strategic Venture to coordinate investments in connectivity and commerce.

The problem is that US policy still lacks a fully integrated Indian Ocean operating concept. Bureaucratically, the region is divided across multiple State Department bureaus and three combatant commands:US Central Command (CENTCOM), US Pacific Command (PACOM), and US Africa Command (AFRICOM). That structure reflects real historical responsibilities, but it also makes the Indian Ocean harder to see as a whole. CENTCOM approaches the northwest Indian Ocean through Gulf security. PACOM views the eastern Indian Ocean through the wider Indo-Pacific balance. AFRICOM covers the western Indian Ocean through African security and partner capacity. Each lens is necessary; none is sufficient. The result is a region that the United States can use strategically and sporadically for power projection, but has not yet fully organized as an operating theater in its own right.

A stronger US approach should be built around five reinforcing lines of effort. First, Washington should define the Indian Ocean as a distinct strategic theater within, not outside, the Indo-Pacific understanding. This does not require a major bureaucratic overhaul, but it does require a clearer interagency mechanism, regular cross-command planning, and a regional strategy that treats Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, East Africa, the island states, the Bay of Bengal, and Malacca as connected parts of one maritime system.

Second, the United States should use the Indian Ocean to deepen the momentum already visible in the US-India security relationship. After bilateral tensions last year, the partnership has continued to advance, and the IOR is a logical next space for operational expansion. That should begin with practical access: expanded US refueling at Indian ports, looser visa procedures for American service members and crew during those refuelings, and greater air access. India is the indispensable resident power in the region; the United States is the indispensable extra-regional enabler. Any US strategy in the IOR must begin with US-India collaboration.

Third, Washington needs a serious island-state strategy, beginning with a larger diplomatic footprint. The Maldives shows the gap: China's diplomatic footprint in Malé is nearly double that of the United States, and Washington only opened its first dedicated resident embassy there in 2023. That imbalance matters because influence is built through daily presence, not crisis diplomacy. More diplomats across Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, and Comoros would help Washington understand local needs and offer credible support on fisheries, coast guards, ports, and climate preparedness before China becomes the default partner.

Fourth, maritime domain awareness should become the connective tissue of US policy. In simple terms, regional states need a better shared picture of what is moving through their waters. That architecture is beginning to take shape. In May, the Quad launched a maritime-surveillance initiative to improve real-time information sharing, and on August 17, India leased two MQ-9B Sea Guardians to strengthen persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance across the IOR. Washington should build on this momentum by increasing its support for India's Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region and expand its links with partners in Singapore, Australia, the Gulf, and East Africa. This would make it easier to track illegal fishing, dark shipping, Chinese research vessels, submarine activity, and threats to undersea cables. In the Indian Ocean, stronger visibility and increased intelligence cooperation should become the basis for deterrence, crisis response, and political trust.

Fifth, infrastructure policy should be treated as a strategy. Ports, cables, logistics hubs, ship repair facilities, and energy corridors determine who can operate at scale. Asia as a whole has vast infrastrucutre needs, with the Asian Development Bank estimating that Asia will need to invest $1.7 trillion per year till 2030, if the region is to maintain its growth momentum. More specifically, however, a 2024 United States Studies Centre report estimates that South Asia and the Bay of Bengal require approximately $6.3 trillion in climate-adjusted infrastructure investment by 2030. That estimate covers only part of the Indian Ocean basin,

underscoring the scale of the wider region's cumulative infrastructure challenge. The Indian Ocean Strategic Venture, whose details are still not widely known, should focus on port modernization, secure cable routes, repair capacity, clean energy reliability, and transparent financing. The United States does not need to match China project for project, but it does need to help regional states avoid a future in which their only development options come with strategic dependency.

The central argument, then, is not that the United States must overhaul its strategy in the Indian Ocean. It is that Washington must understand the region as the place where economic security, maritime access, China competition, and US-India cooperation intersect most directly. If the United States wants a credible, durable Indo-Pacific strategy, it must be able to operate in the ocean that connects the Pacific to the Gulf, Africa, and Europe. Treating the Indian Ocean as a theater in its own right would make that strategy more coherent, more resilient, and more capable of meeting the competition already underway.

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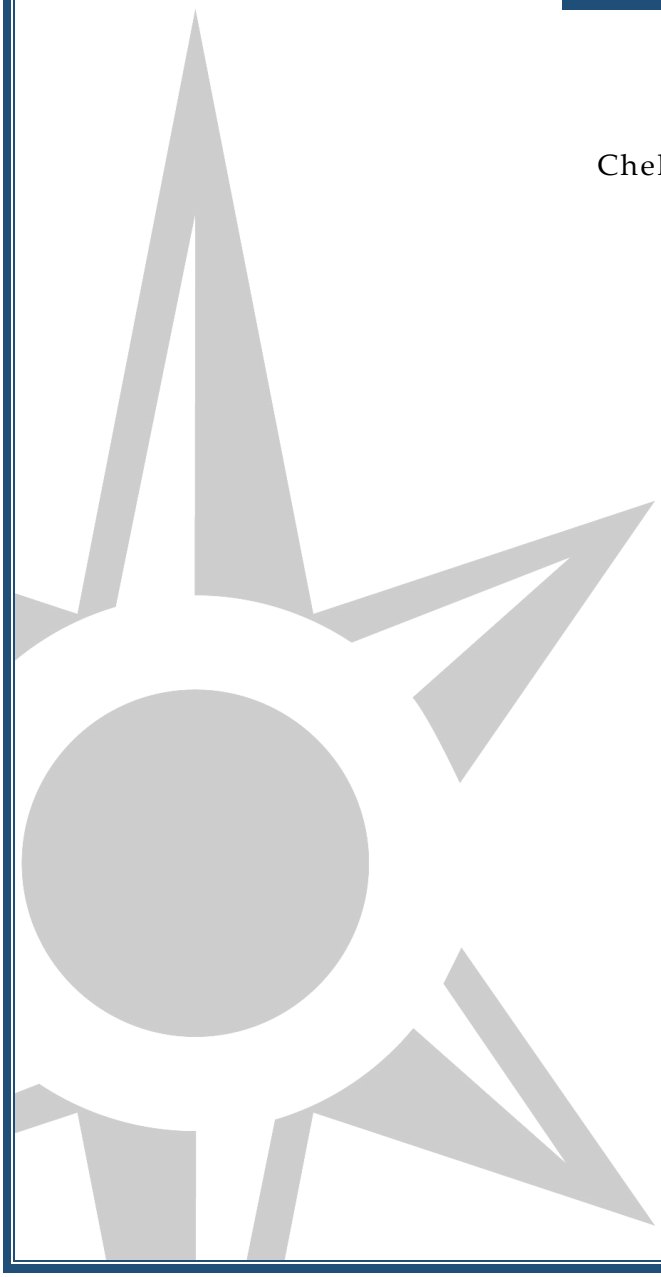
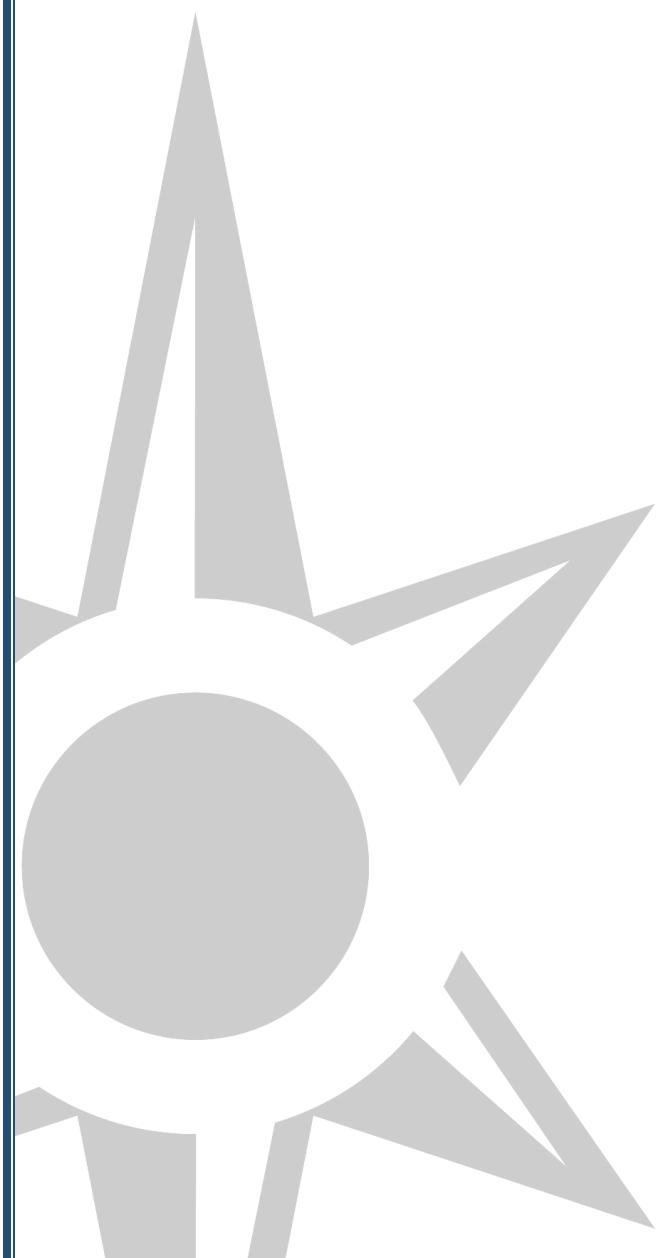
The US-India Educational Partnership is Floundering: How Can It Recover?

By
Chelsea Patrick





The people-to-people element of diplomacy has been the hallmark of US-India relations. This element particularly manifests in education, especially with Indian students attending American universities and bringing the fruits of their experience home or, quite commonly, applying them to a career in the US. This migration has not only enabled the sharing of knowledge and culture but today makes both sides billions of dollars every year.

Recently, however, this pattern has taken an unprecedented turn. The Department of Commerce reported that arrival of Indians on student visas plummeted a staggering 44.5% between August 2024 and August 2025—a drop not matched by other international students and only previously exceeded by COVID-19-related disruptions.

On top of longstanding challenges, such as long visa wait times and lofty tuition costs, the second Trump administration has undoubtedly added roadblocks. These include slashed visa quotas and durations, insurmountable delays (and potential discrimination) caused by the inclusion of social media monitoring, and the president's request that some universities cap undergraduate international enrollment at 15%, with only 5% from any one country. (On Aug. 11, 2026, 30 Democratic senators wrote Secretary Rubio urging action after hearing from constituents that "no timely visa appointments are available.") Furthermore, horrific stories abound in Indian news outlets of detention and deportation of Indian workers under inhumane conditions, sudden and mass revocations of Indian student visas (based on social media activity, purported crimes, or seemingly nothing), and increased scrutiny of Muslim students over Palestine, causing anxiety for prospective students and their parents, who generally hold the purse strings. Washington's response when asked about such concerns has been less than compassionate; examples include officials from the Departments of State and Homeland Security sharply defending what they see as their authority to monitor foreign students' behavior and a government attorney arguing that claims of international student harm after sudden revocations of legal status are false because they could simply go elsewhere.

Perhaps more Indian students would consider pushing through these obstacles if they saw a light at the end of the tunnel—namely, hope for work on an H-1B visa, of which Indians hold 72%. However, President Trump has explicitly asked technology companies to stop hiring Indians, and the visa process has become much more difficult, including a $100,000 fee for employers bringing in foreign nationals as of Sept. 21, 2025, with few exceptions. (On June 8, 2026, a federal judge struck down this fee; the government plans to appeal.) There have also been reports of suddenly withdrawn visa transfers and employment offers. As other countries smooth their immigration pathways for Indian nationals (especially China and Canada), the US' appeal is faltering.

Three governmental actions must be taken to restore and improve upon what has been the status quo. First is addressing the systemic issues that make foreign student life difficult—visa timing, financial hardship, and fear of dream-crushing setbacks. Second is acknowledging that, as a letter signed by officials from 425 US universities states, "American institutions of higher learning have…the essential freedom to determine, on academic grounds, whom to admit and what is taught, how, and by whom." The same logic should apply to private companies hiring workers, and the government should limit itself to supportive oversight without discriminatory surveillance or ideological control. Third, both countries should refrain from using the lives of international students and workers as pawns in negotiation, recognizing that what may seem temporarily destabilizing to governments can have lasting repercussions for their people.

Relief of the strain in US-India educational relations can also come from elsewhere. Partnerships between American and Indian universities have been expanding, particularly in tech, which builds on interscholastic ties going back to at least 1959. Additionally, Micron, Google, Apple, and several other large companies have recently established partnerships with Indian higher learning institutions. These represent a key opportunity to expand the people-to-people relationship in a way that could withstand diplomatic rough patches.

To facilitate further development on this front, India needs to continue clearing legal and infrastructural hurdles to foreign universities and companies operating in their country. Meanwhile, both governments can follow advice given to former president Biden; they can provide funding for projects that would benefit from joint research, and they can create programs that "motivate and fund entrepreneurs—both in India and the United States,

plus linking those efforts." Academically, institutions on each side can work on making their programs appealing to students from the other, and they can build consistent communicative channels. Programs like India's VAJRA are a great way to foster exchange that can expand into deeper collaboration, and both governments can encourage that mobility, as they have done with the Fullbright-Nehru exchange program.

A couple of final notes here: first, AI should be understood as a wild card; it has the potential to reduce or increase demand for Indian workers. Working together, the US and India could navigate the different possible outcomes of the rise of AI in the workplace in mutually beneficial ways. Second, if the US' ultimate goal is to reduce the need for H-1B visas and fill specialized roles with American-born workers, then embracing educational partnership may actually help more Americans gain the skills to supply that domestic market.

Third, there has been a surge in the US of online hate against Indians, some veiled under supposed concerns about American employment rates or national security and some blatant enough to openly embrace white supremacy, that must be eradicated. This type of racist backlash has been growing over the last five years or so but seen a visible increase in Trump 2.0. Furthermore, hate speech and misinformation regulations on social media have eroded in recent years, and a surge of preemptive rollbacks between Trump's 2024 election victory and his inauguration (Meta CEO Mark Zuckerburg explicitly listed "recent elections" as a motivator for removing rules about immigration-related content) leave South Asians more exposed. Thankfully, there has been no significant increase reported of in-person threats, but the fears are understandable that posts could spur personal attacks or even racist policy. (This paper is focused on content plainly targeted at Indians, but of course anti-Muslim content, which has also been abundant, discriminates against many Indians as well).

Attempts by the Trump administration to address this exist but are sporadic and slow-going. Vice President JD Vance's messaging has not been consistent, but after a slew of attacks on his Indian American wife, Usha, he said, "Antisemitism, and all forms of ethnic hatred, have no place in the conservative movement." Additionally, a bipartisan House resolution condemning racism against South Asians is in committee, but it has been there since October, and one directive from the top will not compel societal change alone. Of course, the US government cannot directly control private companies, but it is clear that social media responds to its priorities. Additionally, this racist content spikes most during political shocks (domestically or in US-India relations) so increased vigilance at those points would be wise.

All in all, there is certainly potential for the US-India educational partnership to recover and thrive through governmental, entrepreneurial, academic, and societal action. Ideally, these components should come together to reinforce the people-to-people dynamic. The US and Indian governments should allow organic connections to grow unimpeded, encouraging openness and imagination.

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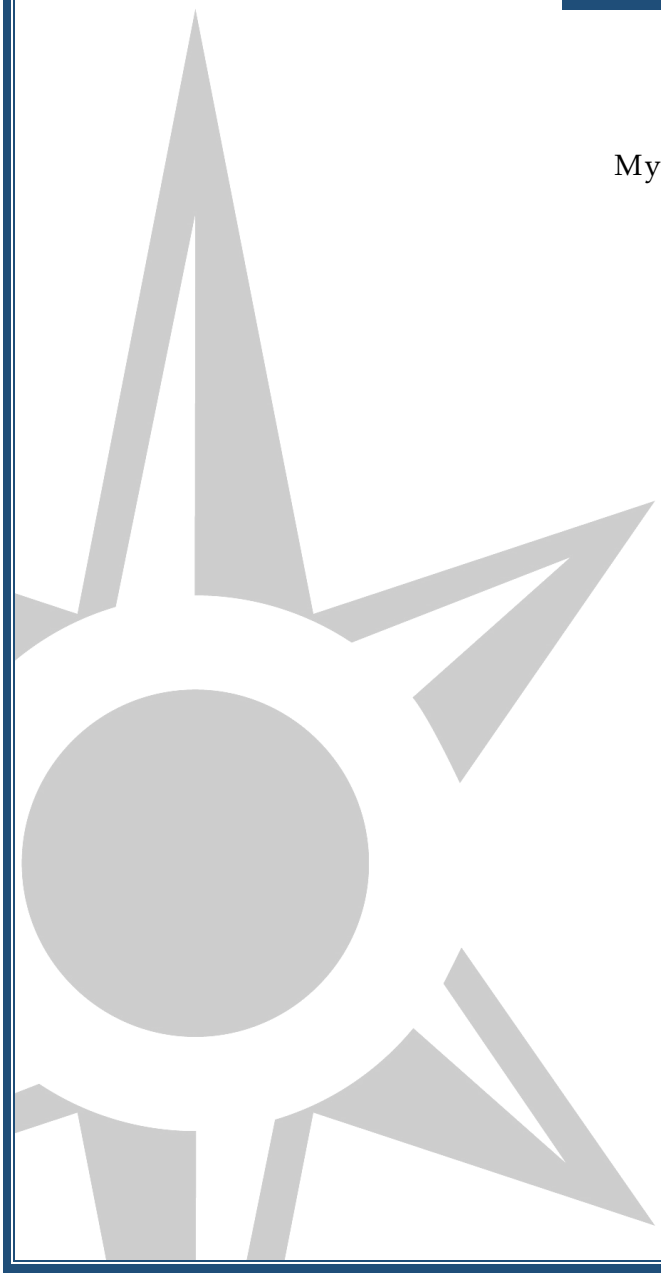
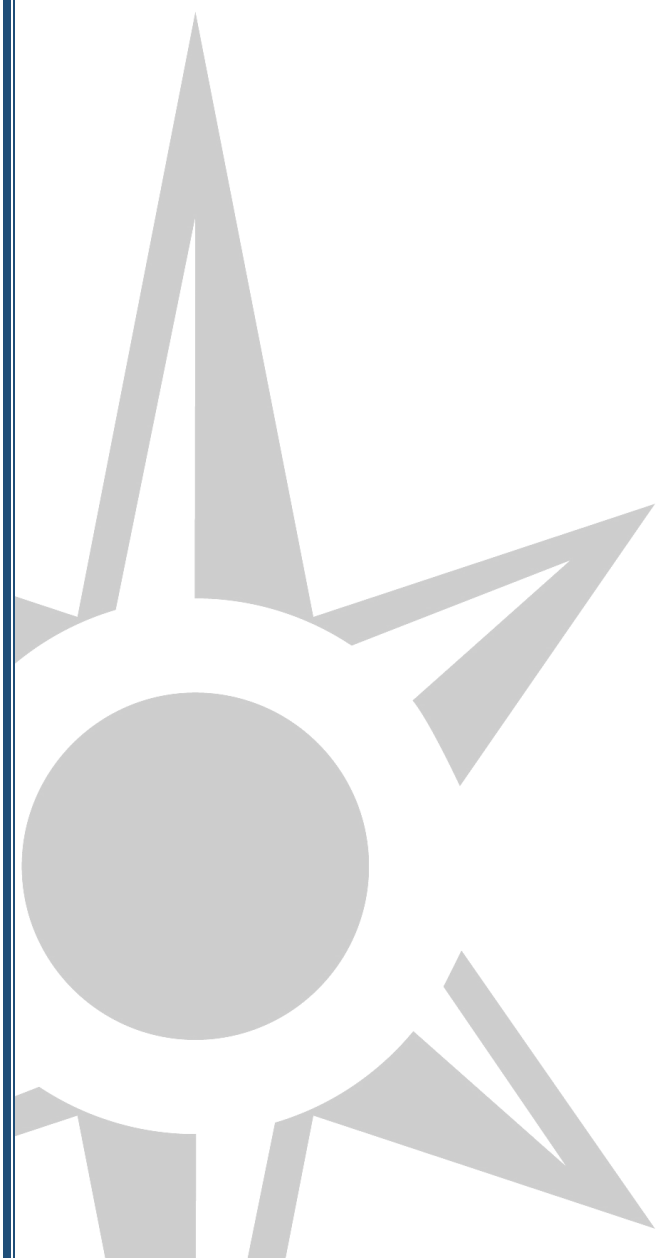
Navigating India's New Nuclear Neighborhood and China's Growing Power

By
Mya MacNeil





India's transition to nuclear power status began in 1974 following its first nuclear test, and 24 years later in 1998, declaring itself a nuclear-weapons state. Since then, the country has undergone rapid arsenal expansion. Initially, this started as a deterrence strategy against Pakistan. However, this strategy has since broadened to include China. In today's multipolar nuclear world, India's long-standing doctrine of maintaining "credible minimum deterrence" is being challenged by China's rapid expansion and modernization of its nuclear arsenal.

India's nuclear strategy is being tested in the shadow of China and questions arise on how India will balance deterrence regional stability. In this environment of proliferation, regional stability is at stake because decisions by one country will inevitably affect the decisions of other nuclear powers in the area. This article examines the nuclear dimension of India's relationship with China and argues that China's expanding nuclear abilities pressure India to modernize its own arsenal, increasing the risk of regional instability in the Indo-Pacific.

Historically, India has committed to a no-first-use policy. Moreover, the development of Indian nuclear weapons has mostly focused on establishing a deterrent against Pakistan. This posture reflects India's emphasis on restraint and its pursuit of a credible minimum deterrence, designed to ensure survivability and second-strike capabilities rather than parity with other nuclear powers. However, this framework is complicated by China's expanding nuclear capabilities. Compared to both India and Pakistan, China possesses a far larger and more technologically diversified arsenal. As a result, India's longstanding commitment to no-first-use and restrained force posture is tested by an evolving environment no longer defined by a single adversary but by a two-faced nuclear dynamic involving both Pakistan and China. This raises questions about whether India's traditional approach can continue to provide credible deterrence without adaptation in response to China's threat.

Evidence suggests that India is putting increased focus on its relationship with China. When India conducted its nuclear test in 1998, it mentioned China's threat as a reason for developing nuclear weapons. However, India has not released public statements specifically regarding China's rapid nuclear expansion. In 2021, India's chief of defense staff stated that China has emerged as India's foremost security threat.

The Sino-India relationship, while containing elements of a cooperative bilateral relationship, also emits tension regarding territorial and military disputes along their shared border. For example, India has expanded major infrastructure to allow faster troop movement to the border, reducing China's previous advantage in this area. Since 2009, the Indian Army has created mountain divisions and formed its first mountain strike corps for potential offensive operations against China.

In 2016, it also approved a unit to operate a supersonic cruise missile designed for use in mountainous terrain in Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh, India has also built advanced landing grounds where Su-30 MKI fighter jets can take off and land. Also, at the time, Chinese analysts believed the Agni-5 missile was not yet fully operational, but they saw it as an important step in India developing a deterrent capability against China.

The 2017 Doklam standoff resulted from a border dispute between Chinese and Indian troops near Bhutan. This was followed by another interaction in a June 2020 clash, resulting in fatalities on both sides. Additional casualties were documented in subsequent engagements in January 2021. All of these encounters likely resulted in the 2024 announcement from the Indian government that it had successfully tested an Agni-V ballistic missile with MIRV technology, signaling the ability to target China's mainland.

Taken together, these developments reflect India's desire to mitigate the power asymmetry with China. As India expands its capabilities in response to perceived Chinese advancements, the introduction of advanced systems suggest a potential departure from its traditional doctrine. This also raises important questions about whether India can maintain its commitment to minimum deterrence in an environment that no longer revolves solely around Pakistan's threat, but also balancing Chinese modernization. At a regional level, this atmosphere perpetuates a dangerous pattern of nuclear proliferation. Overall, the India-China nuclear dynamic underscores a potential future defined by an increasingly uncertain and competitive nuclear order in Asia, where enduring competition is steadily

weakening the foundations of regional nuclear stability.

The existing literature demonstrates that the foundation of the Indo-Pacific is being challenged by the changing dynamic of the Sino-India relationship. Specifically, the nuclear aspects including modernization and expansion of China's arsenal and capabilities. By implementing advanced early warning systems and an intentional expansion of US intelligence-sharing on the People's Republic of China's nuclear capabilities, India can more successfully navigate the difficulties that China is posing. Early warning systems would lower the risk of escalation by providing a greater sense of security for both the Pakistan and China threat. Secondly, expanding US intelligence-sharing on the People's Republic of China would allow for India to better predict provocations, thereby lowering the chance of conflict. In sum, India's original strategy of implementing a nuclear arsenal to deter Pakistan has grown to include China. How India chooses to navigate this changing landscape will greatly determine the future of the Indo-Pacific region.

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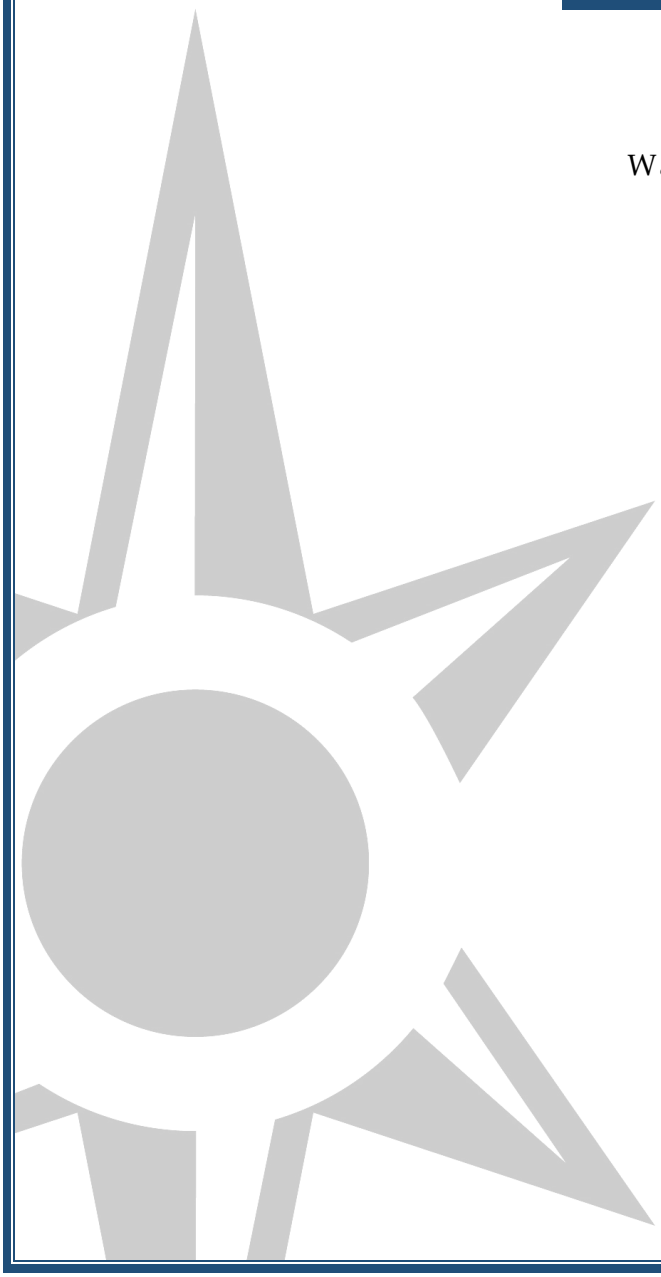
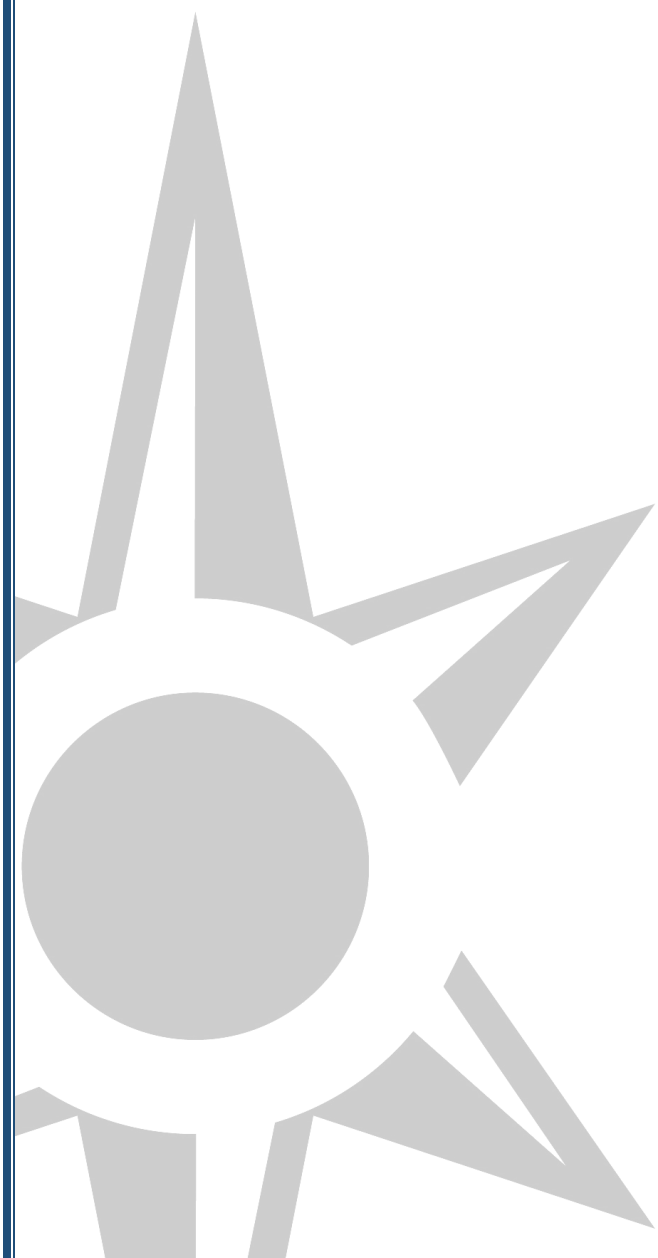
Meeting India's Energy Needs Through US Collaboration

By
Walsh Kern





India's growing energy appetite has created a persistent vulnerability: the country consumes vast quantities of fossil fuels but remains heavily dependent on imports to fuel its economy. While India targets energy independence by 2047, the nation still imports over 40% of total energy needs, including over 85% of crude oil.

Given this exposure to disruption, India has made an effort to diversify its oil basket. Before 2005, over 70% of crude oil came from Gulf countries. Over the next 15 years, India broadened its supply sources by boosting imports from Africa and the Americas. Then, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine completely reshaped India's energy position. Amid painful economic consequences across Europe, India was able to capitalize on the moment. As a result of United States and EU sanctions on Russian energy exports, India secured a steady supply of Russian crude oil at a roughly 14% discount. Prior to the invasion, India sourced fewer than 2% of its oil exports from Russia. By 2023-2024, this soared to 35.9%, saving India billions of dollars and making Russia India's largest supplier of crude.

By the beginning of 2025, the purchase of Russian crude stabilized to about a third of India's oil imports. The remaining mix included 40-45% from the Middle East, 10-12% from the Americas, and 8-10% from Africa. Additionally, over 50% of LNG and 60% of LPG demand were imported, with both coming primarily from the Middle East. This reliance is especially clear for LPG, the primary cooking fuel in a vast majority of Indian households, where 90% of imports cross through the Strait of Hormuz.

India's energy position has become increasingly precarious since President Donald Trump came into office in January 2025. Despite the warm relationship developed between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi during Trump's first presidency, India was not spared by Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs. However, the real shock came on Aug. 5, 2025, when Trump announced that on top of India's 25% "reciprocal" tariff, he would be imposing an additional 25% tariff due to India's purchase of Russian oil, creating a major rift in United States-India relations. Trump supported increases as high as 500% if India continued to purchase Russian oil. Since trade negotiations began, Russian imports have remained a point of contention, with Trump announcing that India agreed to stop buying Russian oil, despite no public signal on this matter from the government of India.

With no trade agreement through July 2026, the long-run impact of purchasing Russian oil on India's diplomatic and trade relations with the United States remains foggy. The launch of Operation Epic Fury against Iran and the subsequent closure of the Strait of Hormuz in early March, on the other hand, had immediate reverberations across India's economy.

With the strait closed, India lost access to roughly 90% of its LPG imports. Following an order that OMCs supply LPG only to domestic consumers, commercial consumers were left scrambling. Black market cylinders were fetching double their regulated price, causing many restaurants to scale back operations or even close down. In Mumbai, around 20% of restaurants and hotels shut down within two weeks of the conflict's start, leaving many customers and workers stranded.

In May, after leaving prices unchanged for nearly four years, state-owned petrol companies raised prices four times within 10 days. While India's economy posted strong growth and low inflation at the end of last year, the energy price spikes have led commentators to pump the brakes on the nation's economic outlooks.

In the wake of these two threats to energy security, conversations between American and Indian officials have increasingly centered on the possibility of deepening US-India energy ties. In April, Indian Oil Minister Hardeep Singh Puri and US Ambassador Sergio Gor met to discuss ways to "strengthen our comprehensive energy relationship." Soon after, when Secretary of State Marco Rubio visited Prime Minister Narendra Modi on May 23, Secretary Rubio pitched American energy products and suggested Venezuelan crude oil as an alternative to diversify India's energy purchases.

Beyond diplomatic signaling, India's energy consumption has taken a distinct turn towards the Western hemisphere. In May, the US emerged as India's biggest LPG supplier, providing over 55% of imports. Venezuela also re-entered the fold for India, becoming the third-largest crude oil supplier. In the face of heightened supply vulnerability in the Middle East and American pressure on Russian oil, this newfound partnership appears to have the potential for expansion.

However, while this shift offers an immediate win-win, American-led fossil fuel imports are unlikely to provide a long-term solution to India's larger energy security challenges. Refining barriers and higher shipping costs for American energy imports will make a return to cheap supply from the Middle East hard to resist once stability returns. Further, a shift to relying on Venezuelan oil would amount to trading in one energy security risk for another. Additionally, despite American resistance, Russian oil remains a source of consistent and affordable crude that has stopped Indian energy prices from rising further.

While this latest shock is leading India to again attempt to sufficiently diversify its supply of fossil fuels, the risks remain. As Prime Minister Modi has consistently stressed, long-term energy security for India is rooted in expanding renewable energy, an area in which India has already made impressive strides. Non-fossil fuels now account for over 50% of India's installed energy capacity, and renewable energy generation is becoming increasingly important to the nation's energy mix. This current crisis will only accentuate the value of domestic generation and serve to accelerate this transition further.

However, as India moves at full speed towards renewable energy, it must ensure that the instability of fossil fuel imports isn't substituted for a full-blown dependence on China for the critical minerals and components needed for solar panels and lithium-ion batteries. India has made some strides in panel and battery manufacturing, but remains almost completely reliant on China for the key components of these materials. Responding to this supply-chain vulnerability, India launched the

Even as Trump has shifted focus away from renewable energy, his administration has made securing critical minerals partnerships a foreign policy priority. In December 2025, the White House announced its Pax Silica initiative, aimed at coordinating global efforts to secure the supply chain of critical minerals used for advanced technologies. While not included in the first group of countries, India officially joined Pax Silica this February. On a visit to Washington, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar also announced his support for America's Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement (FORGE). Then, during Rubio's most recent trip to New Delhi, this was expanded into an official bilateral Critical Minerals Framework.

Despite high-level agreements on shared partnerships, which have existed in various forms since 2023, coordination leading to concrete results have been extremely limited. Reporting from August 2025 indicated that the US and India were discussing joint investment in African critical mineral depositories, but no agreement ultimately surfaced.

As India continues to feel the effects of energy disruptions in the Middle East, the United States can offer a useful source of diversification in the short run. However, this arrangement is unlikely to be sustainable beyond the current conflict. A more fruitful pathway to strengthening US-India energy collaboration lies in securing critical mineral supply chains.

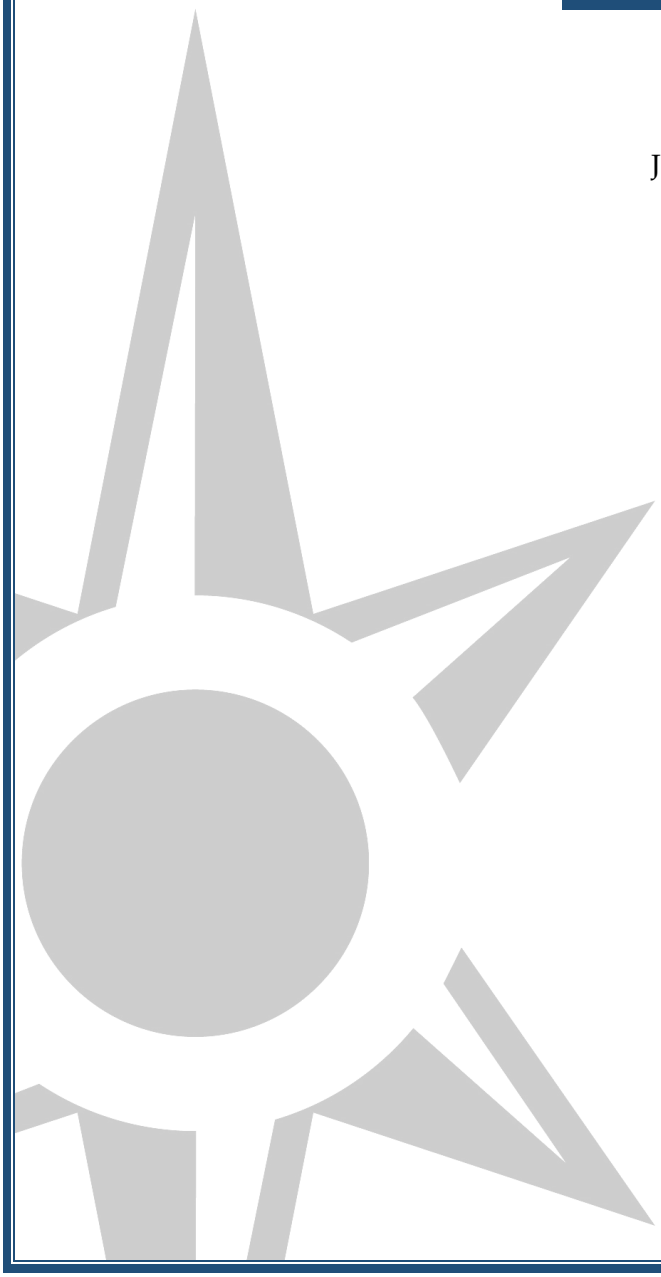
The recent momentum in bilateral energy engagement provides a valuable opportunity to turn existing critical mineral partnerships into tangible progress. India has the world's third-largest share of rare earth reserves, but domestic mining, processing, and refining capabilities remain limited. Additionally, bids for these minerals have received little interest due to their high risk perceptions. Upcoming bilateral engagements should prioritize the creation of a financing mechanism to de-risk American investment in India's emerging critical-minerals sector. This could help bring the capital and technological expertise needed to build out India's nascent capabilities, creating a mutually beneficial opportunity for both countries.

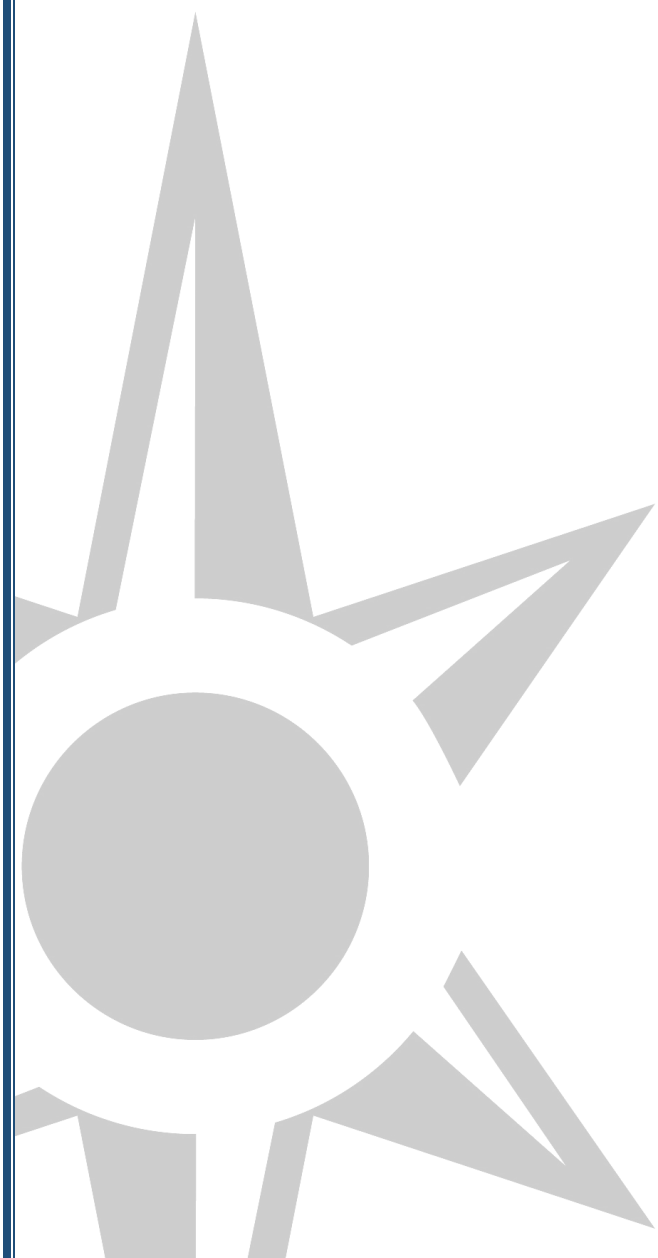
Before India's inclusion in Pax Silica reaches its one year mark in February 2027, the United States and India should secure a joint investment in a critical mineral project in a third country. This could build on earlier ventures that ultimately fell through and would serve as a model for future overseas projects, helping to build confidence among private investors and laying the groundwork for a broader portfolio of investments in critical mineral projects.

PACIFIC FORUM
INTERNATIONAL

Indian Space Diplomacy: Boosting Engagement with Southeast Asia

By
Jeff Otto





India's national space agency, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), has achieved stellar success in space missions—particularly in engineering and reliability—with a remarkable record of cost-effectiveness. Financially, India aims to increase its space economy to $44 billion by 2033, a fivefold jump from the current valuation. Diplomatically, India has formal space agreements with 61 countries and five multilateral organizations. The most recent was Seychelles in June, when India signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation in the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes. Since its formation in 1969, ISRO has earned its place among the world's elite space agencies.

Furthermore, India is nurturing a new generation of experts into the space domain via the ISRO Space Science and Technology Awareness Training (START) program, which prepares high-calibur students to become future leaders and professionals in space science and research. Despite enduring accomplishments, India can do more to ensure the peaceful exploration and use of space, as outlined in the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. Notably, it can do this by helping to foster the next generation of Southeast Asian talent into the celestial sector. Successful engagement would boost India's space prestige and establish its leadership capacity in the international arena, thereby positively influencing the future of space governance.

Existing Policies, Projects, and Programs

The Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP) and the Act East Policy (AEP) are pillars of India's foreign policy, conceived to strengthen ties and advance peace and prosperity through trade, connectivity, and people-to-people contact. NFP gives primacy to countries in India's immediate periphery, while AEP focuses outward to the Indo-Pacific, with ASEAN as its cornerstone. Although AEP is intended to be action-oriented and outcome-based, it is often argued to have fallen short of its goals (e.g. the incomplete India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway). Space diplomacy offers a means of advancing these policies with pragmatic steps for shared regional benefit. The South Asia Satellite, also known as GSAT-9, is a prime example.

GSAT-9 is a geostationary communications and meteorology satellite built by ISRO to share scientific data with its South Asian neighbors. This project demonstrates India's successful use of space diplomacy by providing communication, broadcasting, and disaster management support and can serve as a model for expansion. Six Southeast Asian countries have active space programs (but lack launch capabilities), and several already partner with India to launch their satellites. South and Southeast Asia rank among the top three population hubs and are positioned to lead global economic growth for the next decade. Enhancing engagement and encouraging support for public-private space projects will maximize demographic potential and drive both region's economies for future generations.

The Asia-Pacific Regional Space Agency Forum (APRSAF) is the largest space-related conference in the region. Its purpose is to promote and expand peaceful uses of space activities for socio-economic development via workshops and working groups. Many countries, companies, and organizations participate and sponsor the events, including India. The India Space Congress is a more recent conference and exhibition, serving as a platform for global space collaboration and innovation. Both conferences have nascent youth components but more coordination is needed to nurture the next-generation of space pioneers to address the most critical concerns for the future of space governance. A talent-network program is needed to raise awareness, recruit high-calibur students, and cultivate them for tomorrow's space sector by sponsoring research, fellowships, and internships throughout the region.

Figure 1. Map of the seven South Asian countries participating in GSAT-9 (green) and the six Southeast Asian countries with established space agencies (blue). Source: Map generated by ChatGPT, August 27, 2026.

India and Southeast Asia: Advantages of Closer Cooperation Enhanced public-private synergy in the space sector—cultivated through strategic engagement, joint ventures, and data sharing in the

public-private space sectors—will bring significant diplomatic, economic, and technological dividends while simultaneously reinforcing regional security and stability. Sponsoring next-generation programs will prepare for future challenges and ensure cooperation in the exploration and uses of space for peaceful purposes.

Diplomatic:

- Enhance strategic policy alignment and mutual understanding
- Promote good will, community bonds, and people-to-people contacts
- Establish a framework for mediating and resolving space disputes

Economic:

- Monitor weather patterns to improve agriculture efficiency
- Improve agricultural production by sharing data from weather monitoring satellites
- Create an economy of scale with shared resources and infrastructure development

Innovation:

- Facilitate joint ventures of satellite technology and ground based systems
- Establish universal data sharing protocols for communication efficiency
- Promote research projects for future technologies in outer space

Security:

- Combat transnational crime, human trafficking, cybersecurity threats, and piracy
- Mitigate natural and human-amplified disasters with early warning systems
- Coordinate communication for maritime safety and supply chain resiliency

Next-generation:

- Foster a new generation of creative space pioneers
- Support critical thinking and outside-the-box ideas
- Prepare for future challenges in space governance

In addition to the mutual advantages listed, India and Southeast Asia each benefit from specific considerations aligned to their national goals.

Benefits for India. The Act East Policy (AEP) is reinvigorated with action-oriented, outcome-based space infrastructure projects. The market for Indian technology and expertise is expanded. India acquires a greater share of the satellite launch market, as well as consultation work for Southeast Asia's first spaceport. For India, the space economy is national security. As India's soft power grows, it is able to posit its own vision of the use of space for peaceful purposes.

Benefits for Southeast Asia. The ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is strengthened, and progress is made in implementing the Plans of Action. Public and private enterprises learn from India's space experience, and can share their expertise on the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) economy model. Southeast Asia diversifies their satellite launch options, receives training for human-flight missions advice for its first space port development. The ASEAN bloc sets its sights on the stars and is welcomed as the newest spacefaring region.

Recommendations: Pilot, Expand, Launch

While working within existing frameworks is feasible, circumventing institutional bureaucracy often serves as a more expedient alternative. The following 3-step approach to boosting engagement with Southeast Asia would begin with low-stakes practicality, learn and build upon early success to expand India's credibility, and project international leadership, legitimacy, and influence to advance an alternative vision for peaceful space governance.

Step 1. Pilot a space infrastructure and next-generation engagement program with one Southeast Asian country.

- Facilitate a joint venture on a ground-based, satellite monitoring station
- Promote a data sharing initiative to track weather patterns, climate change, and impending natural disasters
- Sponsor high-aptitude students and emerging space professionals to attend ISC 2027 in New Delhi

Start with concrete, actionable goals that are easy for achieving early success. Thailand stands out as

India's nearest neighbor with an established space program. Moreover, Thailand is already a member state of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), with established sectors promoting cooperation in technology, climate change, and people-to-people contact. The opportune place to lay the groundwork for this pilot program would be the Thailand Space Expo 2026 in October.

Step 2. Expand the pilot program to other Southeast Asian countries and establish working groups to promote integrated space development.

- Coordinate closer cooperation with APRSAF and ISC conferences, including next-generation initiatives
- Encourage international working groups for developing satellite data sharing protocols and space infrastructure development
- Enhance public-private space enterprises to foster better space sector innovation and partnerships

Learning from the pilot program in *Step 1*, India can replicate bilateral success and expand to other Southeast Asian countries with established space agencies, and next-generation inclusion for those without current space programs. A talent network for identifying and fostering future space professionals should be developed and supported through research projects, fellowships, and internships at top space companies, research institutes, and government organizations.

Step 3. Launch an Indian Ocean space forum regional space cooperation network with the goal of creating space governance norms and use of space for peaceful purposes.

- Expand upon frameworks built with Southeast Asia to incorporate regions surrounding the Indian Ocean
- Initiate an annual Indian Ocean space forum of workshops to provide insights from diverse perspectives on the future of space governance
- Coordinate with other space agencies and share findings with multilateral institutions for universal adoption

India can expand its success further and propose an Indian Ocean Space Forum (IOSF) connecting the regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, Africa, and the Middle East for deliberations on the future of space governance, promoting a collective vision on cooperation in the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes. Key findings can be presented to the UN for adoption, updating the outdated Outer Space Treaty of 1967. This will establish India as a space leader on the world stage and showcase its soft power and influence, achieving the international recognition and prestige it seeks.

Figure 2. Imagined insignia representing an Indian Ocean Space Forum (IOSF) connecting the regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, Africa, and the Middle East for deliberations on the future of space governance. Source: Image generated by ChatGPT, September 18, 2026.

Conclusion

The international community shares a responsibility to preserve space as a global commons to serve the common good. While India is a signatory nation to the US-sponsored Artemis Accords—emphasizing principles a for safe, peaceful, and prosperous future in space—neither China nor Russia are parties to the agreement. The US Space Force recently disclosed deploying orbital weapons, citing China's own militarization strategies and Russia's space warfighting domain doctrines in defense of US interests. Without international intervention, this is likely to create a militarized space race scenario rather than its stated aim of deterrence. India's growing investment in the space economy can be coupled with a greater diplomatic presence, with special regard to helping foster the next generation of space leaders. With the influence that comes with prestige, India has the opportunity to ensure a peaceful vision for space governance.

Indian space diplomacy is a critical, yet underutilized, tool of soft power. Increased engagement with

Jeff Otto

Southeast Asia will provide positive prospects for the region and the world. The celestial domain offers a chance for humanity to move beyond endemic terrestrial conflict and strive toward a more perfect universal peace. While it may seem merely aspirational, India has the wherewithal to launch such a moonshot—not because it is easy, but because it is hard. After all, let's recall the words of John F. Kennedy in 1963 when announcing the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. He referenced the *Tao Te Ching* (often misattributed to Gandhi) saying, *"According to the ancient Chinese proverb, 'A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step,' [original text 千里之行始於足下]."* Now is the time for India to take this first small step, which may one day become a giant leap for humankind.

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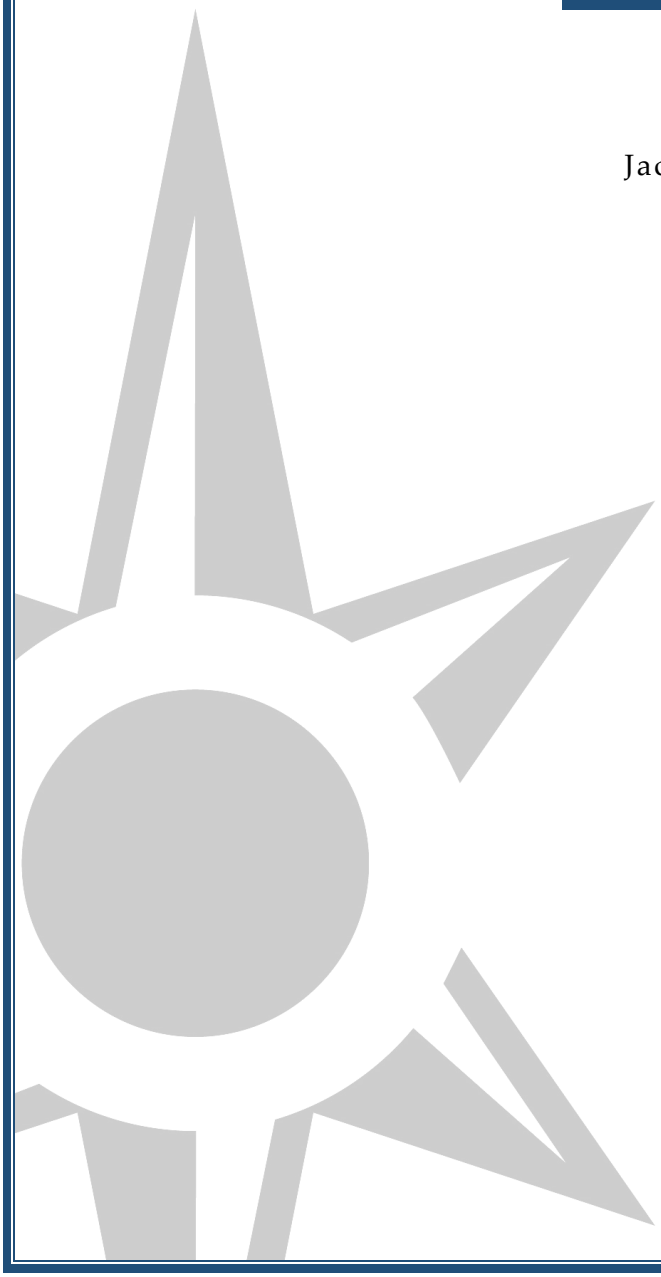
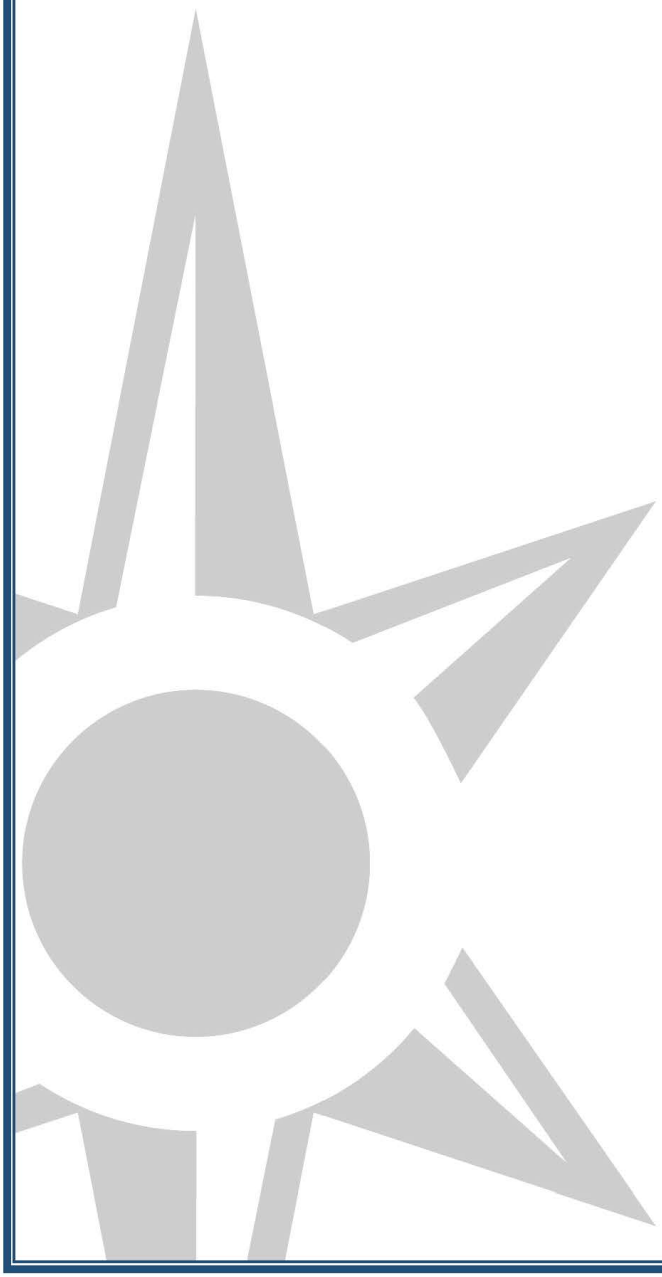
Ships and the Shompen: Why Modi Should Reverse Course on the Great Nicobar Project

By
Jack Powers





The more-than-$8 billion dollar (₹81,000-crore) Great Nicobar Project places the Modi-led Indian government at a crossroads: protecting Scheduled Tribe communities or prioritizing economic growth, and Modi's track record shows that a last-minute reversal is possible in the countdown toward destruction for one of Great Nicobar Island's Scheduled Tribe communities.

This project seeks to develop an international airport that would be capable of welcoming 1 million visitors for the opening year and further expand to 10 million annually; an international container and transshipment terminal aimed at enhancing national security and the economic position of the country; and a township that would construct the necessary urban infrastructure to accommodate the island's new inhabitants. The Great Nicobar project would undoubtedly bring incredible economic benefits to India, but at what cost? In May 2026, Vikrant Bhuria, a Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly member of the opposition Congress party, criticized the Modi government, labeling the administration anti-tribal and accusing them of displacing Scheduled Tribe communities for economic gain under a facade of advancing national security.

Shompen—the Scheduled Tribe community of around 300 inhabitants of the Great Nicobar Island — have lived on the island for 10,000 years, and this hunter-gatherer community that has remained mostly uncontacted by the broader world is now threatened by this development project. This project will impose severe changes to the land that the Shompen traverse for food and resources. In 2024, more than 30 genocide experts described the project as a "death sentence" for the Shompen.

So, will Modi reverse course, or sail on with one of India's most ambitious maritime development projects of the 21st century? History sides with the former, and that must happen to ensure the survival of an entire community.

Modi's Track Record of Reversal

During an April 2019 election rally, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi alleged that the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party government had made a law that would allow officers to shoot at tribal communities in India. This was incorrect: there was no such legislation signed by Modi. But a leaked draft amendment to the colonial-era Indian Forest Act of 1927 included language to allow the use of firearms by officers. However, that was only a draft amendment and outrage ensued, resulting in Modi's government removing the draft amendment.

In another example from 2019, Modi's government stepped in following a Supreme Court ruling that would have evicted over a million forest dwellers. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 protects communities like the Shompen, and in this example the forest dwellers from eviction without rehabilitation and settlement. For this reason, many land claims were made, and Modi's government halted the decision to allow for land claim cases to be processed by the specific states.

Examples like these show that Modi can reverse decisions, particularly when tribal communities are in the crosshairs, and the Great Nicobar Project is the most recent example.

As in previous cases, Modi must reverse course.

India's Next Move

It is no secret that India's giant neighbor, China, is expanding militarily in the Indian Ocean, and it is important that India keeps up, but destroying a tribal community is not the way to do it, especially as pressure mounts against the BJP.

This summer's push towards change in India from thousands of Gen-Z protesters backed by the mockingly named online political movement, "Cockroach Janata Party" took to the streets to protest leaked entrance exams, however the protests and movement took on more angles. A Message scarred onto a curated "Wall of Shame" included the phrase "Jal jangal jameen" which directly translates to Water, Forest, and Land. The phrase which is heavily associated with India's tribal communities fight for land rights and coined by early 20th century tribal rights leader, Komaram Bheem serves as a reminder of domestic pressures facing Modi's government and a reversal of the project could alleviate some of the pressure from this summer's Gen-Z protests.

China's two ocean strategy and expanding naval capabilities put pressure on India to try to keep up through large development projects, but India's answer may already be unfolding and without the need for a Great Nicobar Project.

Satellite imagery reveals India's expanding nuclear submarine arsenal, with subsequent infrastructure and secret underground submarine facilities having been constructed or are under current construction. These smaller and more focused facilities and projects aimed at deterrence through nuclear submarines may produce more benefit in India's pursuit of naval security and close the gap with China in the Indo-Pacific. The Great Nicobar Project would not allow for expanded submarine development or testing, given how trade and tourist centered the project is, and that would not address the root of the project, which is national security.

This project doesn't even fully address the underlying exigence for the project, which is an expanded presence to expand national security posturing in the Indian Ocean. The already built naval air station, INS Baaz on the southern portion of Great Nicobar Island can be expanded on a smaller and more calculated scale to meet security needs while also not disrupting tribal communities.

However, Modi can and must change this by reversing course and protecting a tribal community to focus fully on submarine development and smaller expansion of existing infrastructure, which would yield stronger naval power developments for India and cause less disruption to tribal communities. Considering the BJP champions itself on instilling the traditions and culture of India, it should listen to the revived historical messaging of protecting *jal* (water), *jangal* (forest), *jameen* (land).

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