



A SURVEY OF INDIA'S STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

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India is a rising power.¹ But it is rising in a turbulent environment, characterised by a “disorderly mixture of turbulence and drift in relationships among the leading powers and key regional states”.² Nationalist and populist impulses have grown in the domestic politics of states from Europe to Asia.³ China's rise has supported a decade of sustained growth in Asia, as well as placing unprecedented stress on a security order that was forged in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁴ Beijing's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative for westward economic connectivity, backed by a new and widely supported Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), is a potentially transformative project, but likely to exacerbate that stress.⁵ The American rebalancing to Asia, an economic, diplomatic and military effort known colloquially as the ‘pivot’, is in its nascent stages.⁶ Even so, Asia's hub-and-spokes alliance system is evolving as middle powers question Washington's commitment, grow more active, and forge deeper ties with one another.⁷

India fits this trend of internal and external balancing against China, moving steadily closer to the United States and Japan and so deeper into the security system of maritime Asia.⁸ In contrast to these slow-moving processes, an emerging power vacuum in Afghanistan could threaten Indian power and security much sooner.⁹ The space from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea is undergoing even more rapid state breakdown, with Saudi Arabia and Iran competing in the interstices.¹⁰

India, then, is uniquely situated between state-centric great power competition to the east and state fragmentation to the west. Each places divergent demands on Indian defence posture, at a time when India's leaders

are increasingly embracing the prospect of new security responsibilities farther from Indian soil.¹¹ Yet India faces these challenges with more partners and suitors than ever before, the United States foremost amongst these, with its domestic security environment the calmest in decades and from a position of robust, if not necessarily sustainable, economic growth.

This paper examines this strategic environment in the round. 'Strategic' refers here to politico-military aspects of international relations, particularly those with implications for the use or potential use of force in the future. Thus economic factors are considered secondarily, and only insofar as they have diplomatic and military ramifications – as in the case of Chinese infrastructure projects in South Asia, or Indian port development in Iran. This approach also sets aside what we might call 'structural' factors, such as large-scale multilateral trade deals, such as the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and sociological-demographic trends, such as relative population growth rates; although such issues necessarily influence the real and perceived balance of power over the long run. The paper begins by considering India's most salient adversary, Pakistan, before looking at the connected issue of Afghanistan and Central Asia. It then turns east to examine another rival, China, followed by the United States, the smaller states of South Asia, and finally the Middle East.

Pakistan

The relationship between India and Pakistan has waxed and waned in the recent past, with periods of dialogue and detente alternating with episodes of tension and hostility. But the structural conditions for Indo-Pakistani rivalry remain broadly unchanged, despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's landmark trip to Pakistan – the first such trip in over a decade – in December 2015.

Cross-border violence in Jammu and Kashmir has declined substantially since 2003.¹² However, Pakistan's military establishment, which largely controls the country's foreign and security policies, continues to shelter, sponsor, and in some cases direct a range of armed non-state groups who seek to conduct terrorist attacks on Indian soil and against Indian interests abroad.¹³

The largest and most threatening of these groups is Lashkar-e-Taiba, with a large and deeply entrenched presence in Punjab, but others include Al

Qaida-allied Jaish-e-Mohammed, which re-emerged in January 2016 after a period of dormancy, and the Taliban-allied Haqqani Network. Pakistan has tactically restrained these groups, typically in line with Western pressure, but they remain capable of perpetrating attacks in India. Separately, the Pakistan-based Al Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) may draw support from these groups and presents a threat to India and other South Asian states. In September 2014, AQIS claimed responsibility for an attempted hijacking of a Pakistani frigate. In February 2016, the head of Pakistan's Intelligence Bureau (IB) acknowledged that the Syria-based Islamic State group was also emerging as a serious threat, in part because of its ties to local sectarian groups like Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Sipah-i-Sahaba as well as factions of the broader Pakistani Taliban.¹⁴ It is possible that Islamic State also seeks to use Pakistan's South-Western Baluchistan province as a platform to attack Iran to the west, as well as Pakistan itself.¹⁵

Jihadist violence in Pakistan has steadily declined since its peak in 2009, reaching its lowest level in almost a decade.¹⁶ This has mixed implications for India. While it reduces the likelihood of state collapse, which would impinge severely on India in the form of refugee flows, militancy, and nuclear risks, it could also allow a larger concentration of forces on Pakistan's eastern border with India after over a decade in which forces have had a great part of their attention directed westward. Domestically, India also engages with a changed Pakistani polity. While Indian engagement with civilian leaders is – at the time of writing – flourishing, Pakistan's army has consolidated its power over the elected government, buoyed by the relative success of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in the northwest and urban counterinsurgency in the restive city of Karachi.¹⁷

Pakistan's diplomatic position is also improving.¹⁸ It has preserved a balanced posture between its patron Saudi Arabia and neighbour Iran, rebuffing the former's pressure to contribute troops to the war in Yemen – and so earning Tehran's goodwill – but tactfully acceding to a toothless Saudi-led coalition, the Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (MAFT).¹⁹ It stands to benefit greatly from the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which not only passes through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir but also includes Chinese troop deployments there, thereby reinforcing Islamabad's hold on the disputed territory.²⁰ Pakistan has also played a central role in China-brokered talks over the future of Afghanistan. Finally, Pakistan plans to hold its first-ever drills with Russia – a traditional defence partner of India – in 2016, as well as

exploring the purchase of Mi-35M helicopters and Su-35 fighter jets.²¹ Russia lifted restrictions on the export of arms to Pakistan in June 2014 and signed a defence cooperation agreement later that year. Indian leaders are concerned by Russia drifting closer to Islamabad precisely at the same time that it is moving closer to another Indian adversary, China, in part as a result of Western pressure on Moscow over Ukraine and Syria. While Russia-India defence ties remain strong and Russia remains unlikely to transfer particularly sophisticated platforms, the sale of Russian arms to Pakistan in the long term would be viewed with alarm by India.

Pakistan's conventional armed forces represent one of two conventional military threats to India. Despite a renewal of hostile rhetoric on Kashmir by Pakistan Army chief Raheel Sharif,²² a Kargil-like surprise attack is unlikely. War is likeliest to arise as a result of a terrorist attack. But recent research has emphasised that India's military has little conventional advantage over Pakistan in short land wars, as has often been assumed, owing to a combination of defence-dominant terrain, the difficulty of India obtaining strategic surprise in a crisis, and slower Indian mobilisation times. The air balance has also shifted in an unfavourable direction for India. For instance, the ratio of Indian to Pakistan fourth-generation combat aircraft has nearly halved since the turn of the millennium.²³ The Indian Air Force's strength fell to 32 combat squadrons by the end of 2015 – roughly the same as a decade before, but at the low end of the 35–40 fielded from the 1970s to the 2000s.²⁴ In 2011, the IAF asked to build up to 45 combat squadrons, around 810 aircraft, in response to what it calls a “two front collusive threat” from what could be 1,500 fourth-generation Pakistani and Chinese fighters. However, the government approved just 42 squadrons and Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar suggested that “at least” 37 squadrons might be satisfactory.²⁵ The Indian parliament's Defence Committee in 2014 assessed the gap between sanctioned and existing strength as “very grim” and “dismal”.²⁶ In practice, the IAF's numerical strength over the next decade is more likely to climb back to the average of the past 30 years, rather than to jump to new heights as some hope. This will impact the broader India-Pakistan military balance.

Finally, Pakistan's nuclear weapons arsenal is growing in size and diversifying in platforms. The very existence of these weapons places fundamental limits on the scope of Indian military gains in any conflict. Moreover, Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons – widely flaunted, and reported to be built but not yet deployed²⁷ – potentially

undermine the credibility of India's own nuclear doctrine of massive retaliation.²⁸

Afghanistan and Central Asia

India views Afghanistan as an integral part of its neighbourhood, despite the lack of a common border, and Central Asia as an increasingly important part of its extended neighbourhood. Over a decade of US-led war in Afghanistan has failed to defeat the Taliban, eliminate Al Qaida, or create an effective state. As foreign troops have drawn down the Taliban have made large territorial gains, Afghan security forces have suffered unsustainable losses, political divisions have widened, and Islamic State is establishing a presence.²⁹ The Afghan government's outreach to Pakistan over 2014–15 has been divisive and yielded nothing, but the US and China both continue to encourage Pakistan to deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table.³⁰ A Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States was convened in Islamabad but their interlocutor, the Taliban, insisted that their leader had not authorised participation in talks, and that it would not do so until conditions, such as the withdrawal of all foreign troops, had been met.³¹ The Taliban continue to suffer from internal divisions, which may worsen if and when the peace process advances.³²

While all regional powers have expressed rhetorical support for the Afghan government, their responses and interests differ in important ways. Russia has been paid by third countries including India to provide arms to Kabul, but its priority is on preventing contagion into Central Asia and it would be likely to adopt a pragmatic approach to any settlement that reduced violence.³³ Iran has maintained good ties with Kabul, but hedged its bets by simultaneously arming, training, and supporting particular Taliban factions.³⁴ This suggests its attitude to peace talks is likelier to be shaped by the specific participants rather than blanket opposition to the Taliban's empowerment.

In this context, India is somewhat isolated. It has viewed peace talks with greater concern than any of these powers,³⁵ in part because any settlement that empowered Pakistan-backed Taliban factions could disproportionately hit Indian interests.³⁶ This could include the closure of Indian consulates, an end to India's training of Afghan military officers, and curtailment of valuable intelligence cooperation between Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies – not to mention more threatening

possibilities still, similar to the hijacking of IC-814 in 1999. However, it should be recognised that India would also face serious problems if the conflict continued unabated, especially if Western financial support to Kabul were to dwindle and India's anti-Taliban partners from the 1990s, Iran and Russia, were to align with or acquiesce to China and Pakistan in favour of an imperfect settlement. India has only a limited ability to launch a sustained, effective, and independent challenge to such an outcome.

These changes in Afghanistan should also be seen in the wider context of Central Asia. In July 2015, India (alongside Pakistan) became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after a decade of observer status, and Modi undertook a major visit to five Central Asian countries.³⁷ In geopolitical terms, the space from the Caspian Sea to Xinjiang is where China's expanding sphere of influence runs into that of Russia. The \$7.6 billion TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) natural gas pipeline is intended to become operational by 2019, in competition with Iranian supplies.³⁸ However, the project faces serious challenges. It requires India to pay transit fees to Pakistan, which may become untenable during periods of tension, and crosses unstable parts of Afghanistan.³⁹ Central Asia is also important because India may depend on Central Asia – specifically Tajikistan, where India has long involvement with small military facilities⁴⁰ – to project power into Afghanistan in the future, but its own access to the region depends on good relations with Iran and Russia, and stability in Afghanistan. Yet Tehran and Moscow are both experiencing warmer ties with Islamabad, while Afghan security is deteriorating. India may therefore face a more hostile environment inside Afghanistan, with fewer allies outside it.

China

China presents a large, long-term, and multifaceted challenge to India: on the disputed border in the east and west, on India's land and maritime periphery, to the survivability of India's nuclear weapons, and throughout the Indo-Pacific. In the past decade, China's economy has grown from being three times the size of India's to over five times as large.⁴¹ Its defence budget has grown from being a little over twice as much as India's to nearly four times larger (\$190 billion, to India's \$50 billion).⁴² Domestically, President Xi Jinping has consolidated political and military power since 2013.⁴³ However, in 2015 China faced its

slowest growth rate in a quarter-century (6.9 per cent)⁴⁴ and other long-term challenges, such as dysfunctional capital markets,⁴⁵ an ageing population,⁴⁶ and a lack of close allies or partners other than Pakistan, of little help in maritime Asia, and North Korea, more liability than asset.⁴⁷

China's presence and influence in India's traditional spheres of influence have grown at the expense of India, although this process is uneven and reversible. It is most durable in Pakistan. China is crucial to Islamabad's military modernisation, notably combat aircraft, its civil nuclear programme, and diplomatic protection in the UN Security Council from efforts to put pressure on Pakistan over its relationship to terrorist groups.⁴⁸ Chinese arms exports are also disproportionately targeted at India's neighbours. During 2011–15, Chinese arms exports doubled, with 35 per cent going to Pakistan, 20 per cent to Bangladesh, and 16 per cent to Myanmar.⁴⁹

Separately, China's OBOR initiative – a vast, prospective network of Chinese-funded land and maritime infrastructure stretching from Asia to Europe, intended to stimulate China's western and southern provinces – will also have strategic consequences. On the one hand, it could stimulate regional growth and benefit India. Some former senior Indian national security officials have expressed the view that India ought to exploit the opportunities created by Chinese connectivity projects.⁵⁰ But parts of the infrastructure (such as Gwadar port) might have future military utility, such as to sustain and assist Chinese naval vessels in the Indian Ocean, while the lure of Chinese capital is likely to increase Beijing's regional influence. For this reason, Indian elites remain largely sceptical of Chinese efforts.⁵¹ The Modi government has avoided direct criticism, but expressed scepticism in guarded language, implicitly rebuking OBOR as a “unilateral” project and an “exercise in hard-wiring”.⁵²

India's Act East policy, building on an earlier Look East policy which dates to the 1990s, is in some ways a parallel of China's effort to build ties on India's periphery.⁵³ India has invested especially significant diplomatic capital in a trio of key Asian states. This includes the Indian construction of a satellite tracking and imaging station in Vietnam,⁵⁴ civil nuclear cooperation and defence dialogue with Japan,⁵⁵ and joint naval exercises with Australia.⁵⁶ East Asian countries concerned by China's rhetoric and behaviour around claims in the South and East China Sea, and particularly by the reclamation and militarisation of territory over 2014–16,⁵⁷ have welcomed Indian engagement in the Pacific, both bilaterally and through ASEAN. However, India has greater constraints in its

engagement than China. India's partners in East and Southeast Asia are richer and less politically pliable than China's in South Asia; while they seek Indian engagement as a counterbalance to China, they have less need of India than, say, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka have of China. Moreover, OBOR's strength is state-backed capital, while capital-hungry India has fewer resources. India's position in South Asia is discussed further below.

The military imbalance on the Sino-Indian border has eased over the past decade with India's concerted effort to improve transport links, reactivate airstrips, and raise new mountain infantry units.⁵⁸ However, China has also made investments in civilian and military border infrastructure in Tibet, including significant spending on roads and railways.⁵⁹ Some analysts have argued that China is deploying a new generation of lighter, and therefore more road and rail-mobile, tanks on the Tibetan plateau, with the "firepower, range and electronics to effectively stop the [Indian] Bhishma [tank] in its track".⁶⁰ India has also slowed plans to raise a new mountain strike corps – its fourth strike corps, but the first intended to face China – for budgetary reasons.⁶¹ China intends to unify the two military regions responsible for India (Chengdu and Lanzhou) into a new 'West' zone that will stretch from Central Asia to the Korean Peninsula and contain a third of land forces.⁶² It is unclear whether this involves changes in force sizing or how this might affect India.

India will also be affected by Chinese efforts to extend the reach of its naval forces. These include the construction of a second aircraft carrier, submarine modernisation, and increasing naval activity in the Indian Ocean such as the planned construction of a proto-base in Djibouti.⁶³ India has been especially concerned by Chinese submarine dockings in Sri Lanka and Pakistan.⁶⁴ The geographic position of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a 470-mile chain of 572 territories, represents both a vulnerability and an opportunity in this respect. Several Indian civilian analysts and military officers have raised the possibility that "some inimical power does a Falklands" on India's island possessions.⁶⁵ "The only place where the Chinese can strike without facing any real opposition", claimed one Indian officer in September 2015, "is the Andamans."⁶⁶ However, the islands are also an important platform for Indian power projection eastward over the Malacca Strait and thence into China's near-seas. In March 2016, India agreed to collaborate with Japan on upgrading civilian infrastructure on the islands, a project that

could facilitate longer-term defence and intelligence cooperation between the two countries.⁶⁷

Chinese nuclear forces are modest in size and defensive in configuration. But advances in American missile defence and long-range precision-strike conventional missiles could stimulate compensatory growth in Chinese warhead numbers or a change in Chinese nuclear posture (such as a shift to launch-on-warning) that would affect the survivability of India's own relatively modest arsenal.⁶⁸ Over the longer term, changes in India's nuclear posture or doctrine might in turn affect Chinese behaviour.⁶⁹ And as the submarine leg of India's nuclear weapons triad matures over time, firming up its second-strike capability, New Delhi is likely to feel more confident in its overall strategic position vis-à-vis China.

The United States

Despite military setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan and the perception of retrenchment under the Obama administration, the United States exerts a profound influence on India's strategic environment. It can empower or constrain Pakistan, reinforce or abandon the Afghan government, confront or accommodate Chinese power, and transfer or withhold advanced military technology to India. The US and India have moved progressively closer together since the 1990s, with the process accelerating after 2005 and then slowing again during 2009–14, in the second term of the Congress Party-led government. More recently, the Modi government has picked up and deepened this legacy, indicating continued strategic convergence between the United States and India.

This convergence is most salient and robust in Asia. During 2014–16, India acquiesced to pointed joint statements implicitly rebuking China for its behaviour over maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and agreed to a far-reaching US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.⁷⁰ The evolving US-India relationship also reinforces India's independent and expanding relationships with US allies like Japan and Australia, which were discussed above. This is evidenced by Japan's permanent accession to the previously bilateral Malabar naval exercises and the three countries' willingness to hold 2016 exercises in the Philippine Sea close to disputed areas.⁷¹ Some analysts have talks about a US-India-Australia-Japan security 'quartet',⁷² while others – including senior US military officers – have revived the idea of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which was a short-lived

forum held during 2007–08 but abandoned in the face of Chinese hostility and Australian reluctance.⁷³ In April 2016, during a visit by US Secretary of State for Defense Ashton Carter, New Delhi agreed to sign a landmark “foundational” defence agreement, a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) - an India-specific variant of the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) - which would allow each side to assist the military of the other with spare parts, services, and other supplies from one another’s bases and facilities. Such an agreement had been debated for over a decade, and its conclusion ought to be read as a strong Indian signal of cooperation. Even so, there are limits to how far India is willing to go in overtly siding with the US against China. Indian officials have expressed irritation at repeated American suggestions of joint patrols in the South China Sea.⁷⁴ “As of now, India has never taken part in any joint patrol”, clarified the Indian defence minister, “we only do joint exercises. The question of joint patrol does not arise.”⁷⁵ Even as India signals its unease about Chinese behaviour, it will seek to keep tight control over the manner of its response, inching back if it feels that the US is encouraging an overly confrontational stance, and preferring to form independent relationships in Asia rather than becoming one more spoke attached to the US hub.

Despite the significant improvements in the bilateral relationship, India remains concerned that the US continues to engage Pakistan in ways that adversely impinge on India. This includes the proposed sale of F-16 fighter jets in line with options built into earlier US-Pakistan deals, suggestions (disavowed) of a civil nuclear deal for Pakistan akin to that which was granted to India, and encouragement of Chinese efforts to broker Afghanistan-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Taliban talks in Pakistan in ways that, as we have seen, concern India. In 2016, the US budgeted \$860 million in financial assistance to Islamabad for 2016–17, merely a 0.2 per cent decrease from 2013–14, noting that Pakistan “lies at the heart of the US counter-terrorism strategy, the peace process in Afghanistan, nuclear non-proliferation efforts, and economic integration in South and Central Asia”.⁷⁶

However, the broad trend points to a continued US tilt towards India and away from Pakistan. US arms sales to India have exceeded those to Pakistan since 2013.⁷⁷ This includes the proposed co-development of arms and possible transfer of technology pertaining to platforms as significant as aircraft carriers.⁷⁸ Such steps would meaningfully affect the military balance in the subcontinent. The US has also taken steps on India’s concerns over terrorism. In 2014–15, a wide range of Pakistan-sponsored

terrorist groups like D-Company and the Haqqanis were included in the US-India joint statement for the first time.⁷⁹ And in 2015 Washington withheld a third of payments on the grounds that Pakistan had not taken action against the Haqqani Network.⁸⁰ Some analysts have argued for a 'glideslope' that would see US aid to Pakistan progressively reduced over a number of years, thereby "insulat[ing] the United States from accusations of abandonment".⁸¹

Several senior US officials have expressed increasing exasperation with Pakistani behaviour. In January 2014, former US Secretary for Defence Robert Gates wrote in his memoirs that "although I would defend them [Pakistan] in front of Congress and to the press to keep the relationship from getting worse – and endangering our supply line [into Afghanistan] from Karachi – I knew they were really no ally at all".⁸² "In every instance where we provided a heads-up to the Pakistani military or intelligence services", Gates noted, "the target was forewarned and fled." In June that year, former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton described the relationship as "very troubled", complained of "double-talk deception from certain quarters in Pakistan", argued that "we could not trust Pakistan", and declared that "elements in the Pakistani intelligence service ... maintained ties to the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other extremists".⁸³ Clinton also noted, in her description of the administration's deliberation over the raid that would eventually result in Osama bin Laden's death, that "our relationship with Pakistan was strictly transactional, based on mutual interest, not trust". In March 2016, it was reported that President Obama "privately questions why Pakistan, which he believes is a disastrously dysfunctional country, should be considered an ally of the US at all".⁸⁴

Washington's interest in avoiding Pakistani state breakdown, maintaining influence in Pakistan rather than allowing China to dominate, and perceived dependence on Pakistan to broker a settlement in Afghanistan – or at least a perception that US pressure on Pakistan would result in more active non-cooperation – are, taken together, likely to preserve important 'transactional' elements of the relationship, including limited financial support and arms sales. This will continue to be an irritant in the US-India relationship. Moreover, the US and India remain divided on a number of regional and global issues, ranging from the Syrian civil war to global trade talks. However, despite these continued differences, the bipartisan US political consensus on supporting and accelerating India's rise is likely to hold; changes of government in India may retard this process, but are unlikely to reverse it altogether.⁸⁵

South Asia's smaller powers

As a large power surrounded by smaller ones, India has long faced the traditional dilemma of losing influence, worsening threats, and provoking third-country involvement through an excess of either strength or weakness.⁸⁶ Over the last several years, New Delhi has benefited from more pro-India governments and regimes in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh,⁸⁷ and Myanmar⁸⁸ in particular, while India's relationships with Afghanistan,⁸⁹ Nepal,⁹⁰ and the Maldives⁹¹ have grown more complicated over 2014–16.

India's controversial effort to coerce Nepali elites during their constitution-writing process in 2015 through diplomatic pressure and economic blockade, and Kathmandu's ensuing - if ultimately limited - efforts to court Beijing, illustrates India's challenge, and the ebb and flow of relations on India's periphery.⁹² Successive Indian governments have sought to strike the right balance in their neighbourhood, most recently by stressing regional economic integration, currently abysmally low,⁹³ and opting for lower-profile, often intelligence-driven interventions as in Sri Lanka in early 2014.⁹⁴ The region remains characterised by low state capacity, porous borders, and zero-sum politics that can result in countries veering between alignment with and estrangement from India as different factions assume power.

From independence onwards, and especially so at the turn of the 1940s/50s, the early 1960s and again in the 1980s, India has sought a pre-eminent position within South Asia, defined at first as the exclusion of great powers from the region and later as a high degree of influence over strategic developments.⁹⁵ But despite being the single largest state, India has rarely if ever reached this level of superiority. Over the past 15 years, India has seen particular threats to its security in the inter-related challenge of growing Chinese influence in South Asia and political changes within smaller regional powers that weaken New Delhi's sway and enhance that of Beijing.⁹⁶

Apart from the strategic consequences of China's presence, other Indian challenges in South Asia include illicit cross-border flows of weaponry, narcotics, and radical non-state groups. For instance, India's north-eastern insurgencies are intertwined with cross-border narcotics trafficking into Myanmar,⁹⁷ Bangladesh has been a hub for arms trafficking,⁹⁸ and Indian agencies have long been concerned by ties between Pakistani intelligence and Islamist networks in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the

Maldives.⁹⁹ India's relationship with these states, shaped by the broader India-China balance, influences how well it is able to meet these challenges. For instance, friendlier governments are likelier to allow Indian military action (as Myanmar has done repeatedly) or intelligence collection, while more hostile regimes may resist such steps. It should also be noted that India increasingly sees itself as a net security provider for smaller Indian Ocean island states; this enhanced role presumably secures greater Indian influence, as reflected in an unfolding series of coastal surveillance radars in the Seychelles, Maldives, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka.¹⁰⁰ It may also bring with it challenges, such as balancing decisions to intervene militarily, as India did in the 1980s, against the risk of provoking a backlash and opening new space for Chinese influence.

Middle East

The risk factors manifest within South Asia – weak states, permeable borders, powerful non-state actors – occur in extreme form in large parts of the Arab world, exacerbated by the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and uprisings in Arab states from 2011 onwards. Great powers and their allies – the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran – compete for influence in new power vacuums. The US-led security architecture forged in the 1980s, and designed for state-on-state conflict, is buckling under these new conditions of diffuse insurgency and proxy warfare. President Obama has underscored his eagerness to limit military involvement in the region, declaring that “there is no way we should commit to governing the Middle East and North Africa. That would be a basic, fundamental mistake”.¹⁰¹ Although Obama's successor may revise this posture, a number of structural factors – US energy independence, frustration with Turkey and Persian Gulf allies, and a growing focus on Asia – are also pushing American policy in this direction. Meanwhile, Russia has returned to the Middle East in force, transforming the military balance in Syria and resulting in deeper Russian ties with Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt.¹⁰²

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear deal agreed between Iran and six other powers, has greatly lowered the risk of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁰³ It has also made it easier for India to deepen its ties with Tehran, albeit when Iran's economic attention is directed to Europe and security attention to Iraq and Syria.¹⁰⁴ India has long been interested in developing Iran's Chabahar port, with a \$150 million line of credit approved in February 2016 after years of slow

progress. Chabahar is less than 200 km from Pakistan's Gwadar port, developed by China. But in strengthening Iran's finances and enabling US-Iran dialogue, the JCPOA has also sharpened Arab fears of American abandonment – or even an American pivot to Iran – and fuelled Saudi-Iran competition in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. Saudi Arabia continues to spend several times more than Iran on defence, but Iran's military expenditure rose by 29 per cent in 2015 and several Iran-Russia deals – for advanced air defence systems and combat aircraft – are likely to further narrow the gap over the long-term.

In this environment, the threats to India are manifold, if reasonably distant. Indian officials have expressed concern over Islamic State recruitment and propaganda within India,¹⁰⁵ although the threat appears limited at present. Fewer than two dozen Indians have joined Islamic State, with six killed and two returned; 26 have been arrested en route, and slightly more have been detained more quietly.¹⁰⁶ More broadly, Indian nationals have repeatedly required evacuation from conflict zones over the past several years,¹⁰⁷ while some have come under direct attack, as in the mass abduction and suspected killing of Indian workers in Mosul by Islamic State.¹⁰⁸ Of the 25 million overseas Indians, there are large communities in Saudi Arabia (2.8 million) and the UAE (2 million).¹⁰⁹ As a proportion of native population, Indians are also a significant minority in the UAE (32 per cent), Kuwait (22 per cent), Bahrain (19 per cent), Oman (18 per cent) and Qatar (16 per cent). This presence of overseas Indians also results in a substantial annual remittance flow to India, the largest of which comes from the UAE (\$12.64 billion), US (\$11.18 billion), and Saudi Arabia (\$10.74 billion).¹¹⁰

India is also affected by oil price volatility resulting from regional instability. The Indian government heavily subsidises both public-sector domestic oil companies and consumer oil products, and is therefore heavily exposed to adverse shifts in price – particularly if the rupee falls relative to the dollar. India spent a sizeable 1.75 per cent of GDP on compensation for oil marketing companies in the fiscal year 2012/13 and 1.4 per cent of GDP on overall fuel subsidies since 2008.¹¹¹ Although petroleum subsidies were slashed by half in 2015, they were still expected to amount to around \$4.5 billion – equivalent to roughly a tenth of the defence budget.¹¹² India's net oil-import dependency jumped from 43 per cent in 1990 to over 70 per cent by 2012.¹¹³ The sources of Indian oil have fluctuated considerably month to month in recent years, in part owing to sanctions on Iran, but as of late 2015 the Middle East made up 54 per cent of Indian imports.¹¹⁴

In this rapidly changing context, India has kept good relations with nearly all the major players. Most notably, India has successfully balanced its relationships with the antagonistic trio of Israel, Iran, and the Arab states. In 2016, India's foreign secretary emphasised that "we are no longer content to be passive recipients of outcomes" in the Middle East.¹¹⁵ Deepening Indian involvement would throw up new challenges, as India's contentious abstention from a July 2015 vote in the UN Human Rights Council on Israeli actions in Gaza demonstrated.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

This paper represents a brief survey of the strategic environment that India finds around it as it grows in economic size, diplomatic repute, and military power. The relatively narrow geographic focus here should not be taken to mean that Africa, Europe, Russia, and Latin America are unimportant to India. They represent important economic and diplomatic partners for New Delhi; indeed many are more natural allies on structural issues – such as reform of the UN Security Council or international financial institutions – than the security partners discussed above. Russia is especially important as a provider and co-developer of arms, including high-end combat aircraft, and as a supplier of technology that few other states would be willing to transfer, such as nuclear propulsion for India's semi-indigenous ballistic missile submarine programme.¹¹⁷ Moscow's moves towards China and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan therefore upset India's traditional alignments, forcing it to choose whether to shore up old ties by slowing convergence with Washington or adapting to this change.¹¹⁸

More broadly, India also faces an environment in which the 'global commons' – air, sea, space, and other domains like cyberspace – are perceived to be under stress,¹¹⁹ weakening the liberal international order on which India depends for stability and trade.¹²⁰ Pessimists point to, inter alia, China's militarisation of reclaimed islands in the crucial sea-lanes of the South China Sea, the development of anti-satellite weaponry and the problem of space debris, competition in resource-rich Arctic waters as the Northwest Passage opens up, and the intensification of cyber-espionage. The proliferation of borderless encryption technology is challenging sovereign states' historic retention of the ability to intercept citizens' communications.¹²¹ As the world becomes more networked, these domains are as much part of India's strategic environment – and

therefore considerations for politico-military strategy – as traditional geographic zones.

Even so, India's strategic environment – and particularly those aspects that pertain most closely to issues of defence, to war and peace – is shaped above all by South Asia, Asia-Pacific, and the Middle East, with all three bound together in the inclusive terminology of the Indo-Pacific.¹²² As we have seen, these regions present radically different challenges. Broadly speaking, we might describe this as state fragmentation to the west and great power competition to the east. Srinath Raghavan draws a historical parallel with India's pivotal position during the Second World War: "today, India again stands at the centre of an Asia whose eastern end is unsettled by the rise of a new great power and whose western end is in the throes of ideologically driven turmoil."¹²³ Common to both is that older US-led security architectures, hub-and-spoke in Asia and Gulf-centred in the Middle East, are under strain from a changing balance of power, changing threats, and changing perceptions of US resolve and involvement.

India's ability to shape outcomes in these places will depend on how deeply it wishes to become involved and bear risk.¹²⁴ For now, particularly in maritime Asia, it has secured influence without intervention largely as an expanding force-in-being. As Raghavan astutely observes of New Delhi's Cold War-era non-alignment, "India's policy ... mattered in world politics only because of India's potential value as an ally."¹²⁵ Indian strategy requires a balance between signalling this continued value to a wide range of disparate partners, and avoiding entanglement in disputes and circumstances where Indian interests are only weakly engaged. This balance is being continually reappraised and readjusted, as India's evolving rhetoric on the South China Sea amply demonstrates. At the same time, India's "value" will itself be shaped by, inter alia, continued economic growth, overdue economic and military reforms, Indian messaging around foreign and security policy, and social and political stability at home.¹²⁶

NOTES

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