

A Frozen Line in the Himalayas

By Richard M. Rossow, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., and Kriti Upadhyaya

AUGUST 2020

THE ISSUE

The United States has changed rules and created novel programs to strengthen defense ties with India. However, to many Western analysts, India remains largely absent from key conflicts the United States considers globally significant. This report contends that Washington must use a different lens in judging India's involvement: looking beyond the periphery of the United States and its allies, it should instead consider India's growing role as a regional security provider in Asia. One region where India's influence is strongly felt is the Himalayas, where the territorial integrity and security of smaller nations across China's western border hangs in the balance. Through satellite imagery analysis, this report presents how India is on the front line of China's expansionist territorial ambitions.

U.S.-India defense ties continue to expand and deepen, but questions linger in Washington as to whether there is merit in these efforts. The United States has changed rules and created novel programs to strengthen defense ties with India. However, to many Western analysts, India remains largely absent at the front line of key conflicts that the United States considers globally significant. But this is the wrong lens to interpret India's growing security role. India faces key challenges of its own outside of the U.S. periphery, one of which lies in the cold reaches of the Himalayas, where the territorial integrity and security of smaller nations across China's western periphery hangs in the balance.

Government-to-government relations between the United States and India were chilly during most of the latter period of the Cold War. Strategic choices by both nations created a gulf between them, and the merits of spending heavy political capital to bridge this gulf were

viewed as insufficient to change course. India chose a position of non-alignment during the Cold War, which was incompatible with Washington's "black and white" view of the world. The United States chose to build stronger relations with India's two regional rivals, China and Pakistan, as part of Cold War calculations; meanwhile, India cemented security ties with the Soviet Union in order to gain access to modern military platforms.

U.S.-India strategic ties only started gaining momentum when U.S. policy leaders recognized that their relationship with India required a new type of partnership. This new relationship would not fit neatly into past boxes, such as "treaty ally," and it meant that the United States would have to put some big ideas on the table that it had rarely—if ever—offered any partner. Examples include shepherding India into the club of declared nuclear powers and looking for novel ways to transfer defense technologies that India could use to build up its own military industrial base.

Washington's strategic leaders often question "when" the partnership with India will bear fruit but spend insufficient time pondering the question of "where" it is likely to do so. India has not played a leading role in many of the global struggles the United States believes are crucial for a stable world order, such as Russia's incursions in Europe, the rise of the Islamic State, and China's destabilizing pursuits in the South China Sea. India is directly impacted by the last two conflicts, yet it has hesitated in taking any type of coordinated action in either case.

However, if Washington wants to judge the merits of the emerging partnership between the United States and India, it would be best suited by focusing on India's role as a regional security provider. For example, the Himalayan region is one where analysts will find that India's actions support peace and stability. The fact that India is playing an active role in its neighborhood should inspire U.S. policy leaders to further strengthen defense cooperation with India.

Through satellite imagery analysis, this report presents how India faces another front in China's expansionist territorial ambitions, one which flared up at the India-China-Bhutan trijunction point in 2017. While few Western analysts have considered this area as strategically significant as regions such as the East China Sea, the Straits of Taiwan, and the South China Sea, this view is slowly evolving. As India struggles to maintain peace and security in the region, it is imperative that the United States support its effort to impede China's territorial pressure through defense trade and cooperation.

THE BORDER QUESTION

The line of actual control (LAC) is a [3,488 km](#) undemarcated border that runs between India and China and is divided into three sectors: the western sector (Ladakh), the middle sector (Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim), and the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh). A contested border, the LAC's ambiguity has prompted many flare-ups and has even resulted in two battles between India and China. Treaties from the British colonial era in South Asia lie at the heart of these disputes. India believes it [inherited firm borders](#) from the British, while China considers the border question unsettled. When the People's Republic of China assumed power in 1949, it [renounced](#) all prior foreign agreements as unequal treaties imposed upon it during the century of humiliation, demanding a renegotiation of all its borders.

Over the years, India and China have attempted to address the border dispute. High-level border talks started in 1981

and broke down in 1987 after eight rounds. In 1988, following Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China, a Joint Working Group (JWG) was [set up](#) "to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution on the boundary question." From 1988 to 1993, border tensions were reduced through confidence-building measures (CBMs), including "mutual troop reductions, regular meetings of local military commanders and advance notifications of military exercises." [Fourteen](#) rounds of talks were held under this format through 2003. During Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003, the two sides agreed on the appointment of special representatives (SR) for consultations aimed at reaching a boundary settlement framework on which to base the process of delineation and demarcation of the border. The SR consultations replaced the JWG process. The [22nd round of SR talks](#) were held in December 2019, with national security adviser Ajit Doval as India's SR.

CBMs have established mechanisms for maintaining peace at the border. The mechanisms have been established through five agreements signed between the two countries:

1993: The two sides agreed that "pending an ultimate solution to the boundary question between the two countries, the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the line of actual control." "Each side will keep its military forces in the areas along the line of actual control to a minimum level compatible with the friendly and good neighbourly relations between the two countries." Further, if problems arise at the border, the "two sides shall deal with them through meetings and friendly consultations between border personnel of the two countries."

1996: It was agreed that "neither side shall use its military capability against the other side." India and China also established protocols for preventing intrusions on the border, including air intrusions.

2005: India and China decided that "differences on the boundary question should not be allowed to affect the overall development of bilateral relations." The agreement also established that the "boundary should be along well-defined and easily identifiable natural geographical features to be mutually agreed upon between the two sides."

2012: The agreement established a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), which would ensure peace and tranquility in the India-China border areas. The WMCC held [14 rounds of talks](#) between

2012 and 2019. However, the mechanism was not intended to be used to discuss resolution of the boundary question.

2013: India and China laid out ways to implement border defense cooperation, which included sharing information and increasing meetings.

CHINESE AGGRESSIONS AT THE LAC

Despite these multiple rounds of talks, the border question remains unresolved. China and India have only [exchanged maps](#) of the middle sector, and China remains [ambiguous](#) in its border claims, thwarting any resolutions. Furthermore, despite the existence of CBMs, Chinese transgressions and incursions continue. Most notably:

- In [1956](#), China built a road ([national highway or G219](#)) through the disputed Aksai Chin, connecting Tibet with Xinjiang.
- In 1967, clashes occurred at Nathu La and Cho La, leading to the Second Sino-Indian war.
- In October 1975, per the [Indian government](#), a patrol of the Assam Rifles comprising a non-commissioned officer and four other soldiers was ambushed by about 40 Chinese soldiers in an area well within Indian territory which had been regularly patrolled for years without incident. A [CIA cable](#) notes “that the Chinese were ‘penetrating’ Indian territory; and that the penetration implied a ‘change in China’s position’ on the border question.” This incident also marks the [last time](#) shots were fired at the LAC.
- In [June 1986](#), Chinese incursions occurred in Sumdorong Chu valley.
- In [April 2013](#), before Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s state visit to India, Chinese incursions occurred at the LAC. A PLA paramilitary unit put up tents and an administrative base 19 km inside the area India considers the LAC at Raki Nala in Depsang plains. Chinese officials denied any trespassing and claimed the land as theirs, resulting in a standoff in Daulet Beg Oldie and Chumar.
- In September 2014, India and China locked horns in a [standoff at Demchok](#), with the backdrop of President Xi Jinping’s visit to India. The standoff was ignited by the Indian construction of a canal in response to a request for waterworks in the region by residents of Demchok. The Demchok and Chumar standoff is notable because the “Chinese were trying to alter the ground situation by demanding to stop a civil work

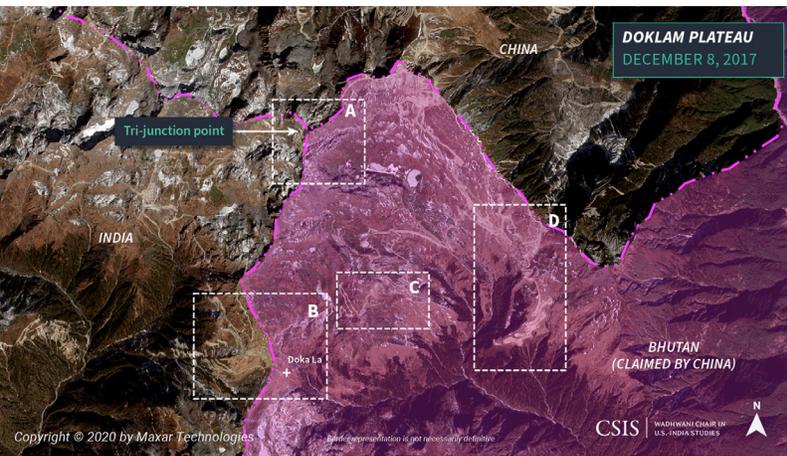
under MNREGA scheme and by trying to build a road in Indian territory across the international boundary (not LAC).”

- In September 2015, Indian troops and the PLA faced off in [Burtse](#) after Indian troops destroyed a watchtower the Chinese were building on the mutually-agreed patrolling line.
- In 2017, India and China were locked in a 72-day standoff in the disputed Doklam region claimed by both Bhutan and China.
- So far, 2020 has seen the Chinese opening up multiple fronts with India along the LAC. At the heart of the issue have been Chinese concerns with India’s long-delayed infrastructure-building activities on the Indian side of the LAC. Indian and Chinese troops have reportedly clashed in at least five flashpoints: Naku La in North Sikkim and Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley, Hot Springs, and Depsang Plains in Ladakh. Although no shots were fired, the clashes turned bloody in Galwan; 20 Indian soldiers were killed, along with an unconfirmed number of Chinese deaths. The standoff continues well into its third month, even as senior commanders of the two sides met three times in June. Diplomatic engagements are continuing in parallel, and a meeting of the WMCC was held on June 24. The two countries’ SRs had an emergency [phone consultation](#) on July 6.

Transgressions are becoming common between the two countries. [Per India’s Ministry of Defence](#), “the number of transgressions in 2017 ha[s] increased from 2016 indicating PLA’s assertiveness and sensitivity to its claims on the Northern Borders.” Although transgressions [decreased](#) in 2018, there were still about [1,025 transgressions](#) between 2016 and 2019. Transgressions picked up again in 2019, and multiple fronts opened in 2020. The intensity and duration of standoffs are also increasing, even if there are no shots being fired. Chinese assertions over neighbors’ territorial claims are also growing more frequent overall.

One region where China’s invigorated expansionism has worsened relations with India is at Doklam, the disputed territory claimed by China and Bhutan, which lies close to India’s own border with both nations.

DOKLAM



The Doklam Plateau; boxes A, B, C, D indicate areas of analyses.

CSIS prepared imagery analysis covering activity on a portion of the Doklam Plateau (also known as Zhoglam or Donglang) during the three years from 2017 to 2019. The Doklam Plateau lies at the junction of the Bhutanese, Chinese, and Indian borders and is considered to be Bhutanese territory by most of the international community. China, however, has repeatedly expressed territorial claims over the area and has undertaken large-scale encroachment activities, as shown in the imagery in this brief.



Image from 2017. China is present in Doklam. Indian military post at Doka La lies to the left.



Same area; image from 2019. China is present in Doklam. Indian military post at Doka La lies to the left.



The Trijunction Point (Batang La) between China, Bhutan, and India. China is present in Doklam.

THE DISPUTE

The Doklam dispute is grounded in the Chinese belief that the “[Thibet-Sikkim Convention](#) [sic], 1890” settled the border issue (the Chinese have been selective in their renunciation of British treaties). However, Bhutan was not party to the 1890 convention. China holds that Mount Gipmochi is the trijunction point, while the Indian and Bhutanese governments claim the trijunction point is near Batang La. Despite claiming Gipmochi as the trijunction point, the Chinese have been reluctant to formally articulate their view on the location of Mount Gipmochi. The confusion is amplified by the existence of Mount Gyemochen near Mount Gipmochi, thereby complicating the location of the [real Gipmochi](#) and Chinese claims. The 1890 convention does not provide any maps, nor was any survey done, which leaves much to the imagination. The [first survey](#) of the Bhutan boundary and the first official map of Bhutan were made with the help of the Survey of

India; the Bhutan-India boundary was demarcated in 1963, with boundary pillar work completed by 1971. According to Indian and Bhutanese maps, Doklam is part of Bhutan's territory, with the trijunction about 200 meters from Batang La. The Indian-Bhutanese claim is "based on actual surveys which show that that it the true water-parting point between the Teesta and the Amo Chhu."

Since China has raised claims to Bhutanese territories, India and Bhutan [contend](#) that the convention only settles the boundary "on the basis of alignment." [China has agreed](#) to this, accepting the watershed principle and committing itself to maintaining status quo per the 2012 Common Understanding between the Indian and Chinese SR.

CHINESE CHANGE IN STATUS QUO

The [Doklam 2017 standoff](#) was not the first time that People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops have transgressed in this region of Bhutan. However, the most recent standoff is particularly relevant due to its [strategic implications](#): "the PLA came with the objective of changing the *status quo* because they came in substantial numbers and brought along construction equipment with them." The Doklam standoff became the longest such confrontation between the two countries in modern times.

Owing to the persistent Chinese transgressions, Bhutan wanted border issues with China to be raised as early as 1961 during the Sino-Indian border talks. By 1981, Bhutan announced its intention to directly engage China over the boundary question. The first round of talks on the matter was held in Beijing in April 1984; since then, Bhutan and China have had [24 rounds of talks](#). Until the fifth round of talks, the Bhutanese delegation was led by the Bhutanese ambassador in New Delhi. In the fifth round of talks, Bhutan and China reached an [agreement on the guiding principles](#) for the settlement, and once these were established, substantive talks began by the sixth round in Beijing in 1989. The official map was given to the Chinese at this sixth round of talks. The last boundary talks were the 24th round, held in Beijing on August 11, 2016. The [25th round](#) of talks were expected to take place in 2017 but did not happen.

The most notable breakthroughs in the boundary talks happened with the [1998 agreement](#) between China and Bhutan on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility Along the Sino-Bhutanese Border Areas. Both parties agreed that "prior to the ultimate solution of the boundary issues, peace and tranquility along the border should be maintained and the status quo of the boundary prior to March 1959 should be upheld, and not to resort to unilateral action to alter the

status quo of the border." Subsequently, in 2012, India and China reached a [Common Understanding](#) between their SRs, determining that "the tri-junction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalized in consultation with the concerned countries. Any attempt, therefore, to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding."

China's actions in Doklam are in violation of the 1988 guiding principles, the 1998 agreement, and the 2012 understanding. [Chinese actions since Doklam](#) have caused "a significant change in *status-quo* on the ground with serious security implications for India and amounted to unilateral determination of the tri-junction point between India, China and Bhutan." The settlement of the India-China boundary issue remains elusive; China, however, has disregarded all existing conventions and laid claim to Doklam. As our new satellite imagery shows, there is strong evidence that China considers these moves permanent.

INDIA: BHUTAN'S SECURITY PROVIDER

India and Bhutan share a "[special relationship](#)," with close [geographical and religious-cultural](#) ties. India plays a crucial role in Bhutan's economic development, remaining its largest development partner. Bhutan has been perceived as a quasi-protectorate of India, with India handling its foreign affairs and controlling its arms imports—an understanding formalized in the [1949 Treaty of Friendship](#). In 2007, this treaty was [updated](#) to reflect contemporary values, and an element of equality was added, stating that both countries "shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests. Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other." Bhutan did [not have any diplomatic](#) relations with China until 1991, relying solely on India to engage on its behalf. Even today, China and Bhutan [do not have a formal bilateral diplomatic](#) relationship; communication between the two countries occurs primarily through the Bhutanese Embassy in New Delhi.

On June 16, 2017, the PLA began constructing a road in Doklam—the disputed area controlled by Bhutan—unilaterally changing the status quo. The Indian army had to intervene to protect Bhutan's territorial integrity. It is worth noting that beyond securing Bhutan's security and sovereignty, Indian intervention was also guided by its own interests, as the Chinese move had security implications for India: to the south of Doklam is the [Jampheri Ridge](#), which overlooks India's [Siliguri Corridor](#)—the vital connection link to India's northeastern states.

The Doklam standoff was a unique opportunity for India to prove its emerging role as a bulwark against Chinese westward expansionism. After a 72-day face-off, Indian and Chinese troops disengaged. Per a Lok Sabha Committee report:

After the disengagement process, the Chinese troops, equipment and tents were removed from the face-off site, while our troops returned to positions. This effectively addressed a challenge of potential road construction activity by China in Southern Doklam and a concern about China’s unilaterally pushing the tri-junction points southwards. At the end of the day we believe that it was triumph of diplomacy and political maturity.

Since the standoff, there have been continued media reports of Chinese presence in the Doklam region. However, the Indian and Chinese governments have both categorically denied any change in status quo in Doklam. The Lok Sabha Committee seemed unconvinced about Chinese intentions and actions in Doklam, and noted: “while dealing with China, it is always better to have a sense of ‘healthy skepticism.’ The Committee would, therefore, urge the Government not to let its vigil down in order to prevent any untoward incident in future.” Despite the Indian government’s position, the Ministry of Defence’s [2019 annual report](#) confirmed the PLA presence in Doklam, stating that “post the disengagement on August 28, 2017, after the 72 days standoff at Doklam, troops of both sides have redeployed themselves away from their respective positions near the face-off site. The strength of either side has, however, reduced. The Indian Army is continuously monitoring Chinese activities in the area and is adequately prepared to respond to any contingency.” [General Bipin Rawat](#), then chief of army staff, had also indicated the PLA’s continued presence in the area, even after the standoff formally ended.

IMAGERY ANALYSIS (2017–2019)

Analysis of satellite imagery indicates that Chinese activity in Doklam to date consists of extensive road construction and the establishment of a network of small military facilities, defensive fighting positions, and helicopter landing pads.¹



Chinese road passing through Doklam with military facilities, defensive fighting positions, and helicopter pads. Image from 2017.



Same area zoomed in; image from 2019. Paved roads and ongoing road construction by the Chinese.



Same area zoomed in; image from 2017. Chinese defensive military positions and ongoing construction activity.

1. The Doklam Plateau and the territory claimed by China encompasses the 609.51 km² Bhutanese Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve. The reserve was originally established in the mid-1990s as the Toorsa Strict Nature Reserve but was subsequently renamed during 2014 as the Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve. See http://www.dofps.gov.bt/?page_id=234 and http://www.wfwbhutan.org.bt/projects/_/bhutan_biological_conservation_complex/jigme_khesar_strict_nature_reserve_/.



Same area zoomed in; image from 2019. Chinese defensive military positions, ongoing construction activity, and new communication towers.



Same area zoomed in; image from 2019. Chinese helicopter pads.



Chinese defensive positions, ongoing construction activity, military base development, and helicopter pads. Image from 2017.



Same area zoomed in; image from 2019. Chinese helicopter pads.



Same area; image from 2019. Chinese defensive positions, ongoing construction activity, military base development, paved roads, and well-developed helicopter pads.



Paved road, basketball court, on-going road construction, and military base development by the Chinese. Image from 2019.

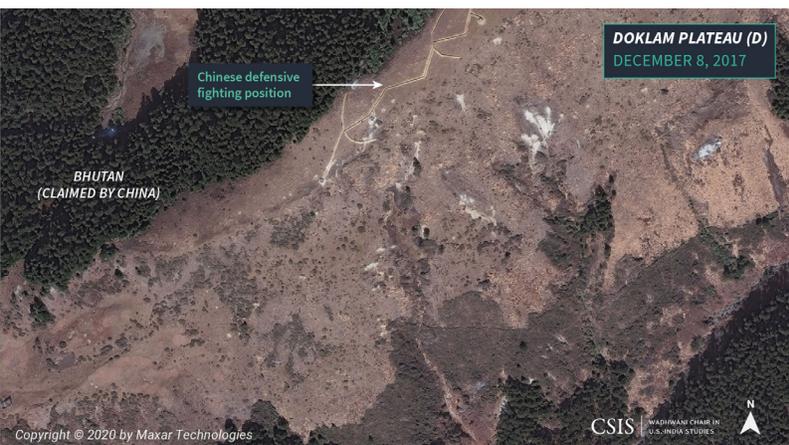


Same area zoomed in; image from 2019. Paved road, basketball court, and military base under development by the Chinese.

Construction is apparently being undertaken primarily by military units—likely with the assistance of some civilian contractors—as indicated by the predominance of camouflaged structures and military-type vehicles seen throughout the imagery. This construction activity has been undertaken in some of the most challenging terrain in the world, as indicated by the altitude and numerous (one might say tortuous) road switchbacks to accommodate the extreme steepness of the terrain.



Chinese road switchbacks in Doklam; made to accommodate extreme steepness of the terrain. Image from 2019.



Same area zoomed in; image from 2017. Only defensive positions present.



Same area; image from 2019. Chinese ongoing road construction.



Chinese ongoing road construction and recently installed concrete batch plant in Doklam. Image from 2019.



Same area zoomed in; image from 2019. Chinese ongoing road construction and recently installed concrete batch plant in Doklam.

The observed Chinese activity has developed along three axes: (1) west, toward the trijunction point where the Bhutanese, Chinese, and Indian borders are generally accepted by the international community to meet, (2) southwest, toward the Doka La peak, and (3) south, in the

general direction of Gyemo Chen.² Preliminary analysis suggests that this activity follows a general pattern:

- Extension of the Chinese road network to the Bhutanese border;
- Extension of these road networks across the Bhutanese border into the Doklam Plateau area;
- Establishment of small Chinese military bases and defensive fighting positions;
- Construction of helicopter landing pads;
- Paving of the newly graded roads; and
- Further expansion to the southwest and south.

To date, no large military facilities have been constructed by the Chinese in the area under study. However, satellite imagery taken in 2018 and 2019 shows that an excavation area of approximately four hectares has been undertaken near the Chinese border on the southern axis (27.316316° by 88.953954°). The size, layout, and location of this excavation suggests that it could be used for the establishment of a larger military-related facility. The validity of this supposition, however, requires future observation and study.



Chinese ongoing excavation for large facility in Doklam. Image from 2019.

While no helicopters or heavy weapons (e.g., tanks, armored personnel carriers, or artillery) have been observed in any of the imagery analyzed for this report, the imagery still indicates that, from a military standpoint, the Chinese have made excellent use of the terrain in siting their installations, defensive fighting positions, helicopter landing pads, and bases. The size, distribution, and layout of the Chinese activity indicates that they view their activity on the Doklam Plateau to be for the long term, if not permanent.



Another basketball court built by the Chinese in Doklam, indicating permanent presence. Image from 2017.



Same area; image from 2019 showing considerable development.

U.S.-INDIA DEFENSE COOPERATION

As outlined in this report, the India-China military standoff at Doklam in 2017 was not an isolated event; border tensions have increased over time. This presents an opportunity for the United States to widen the lens in terms of how it thinks of its emerging defense relationship with India. India is playing a greater role in contributing to security and stability in its own neighborhood. U.S. support for this role will require continued attempts to carve out unique steps that will strengthen India's capabilities while enhancing the U.S.-India strategic partnership.

India's nuclear tests in the spring of 1998 were both a low point in the relationship as well as a launchpad for the strategic partnership the two nations enjoy today. While triggering onerous sanctions against India, the tests forced the United States to think more deeply about India's growing power, the overlap of the two nations' respective values, and shared security objectives in the region.

2. The names and spellings used here are based upon those accepted by the U.S. National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA).

Over the last 20 years, the United States has taken many important steps to expand defense cooperation with India. Each involved senior-level leadership in the U.S. administration and forced the United States to think deeply about their long-term vision for the relationship.

Among the highlights:

- **TPQ-37 Firefinder Sale (2002):** India agreed to a \$140 million deal with Raytheon to procure eight TPQ-37 counter-battery artillery radar systems. This was the first modern U.S. defense sale to India.
- **Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (2004):** Workstreams were established for India to access high-end U.S. technology related to civilian nuclear activities, civilian space, and other forms of high-technology defense trade.
- **New Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship (2005):** This formalized the frequency of senior-level military engagement.
- **U.S. India Civilian Nuclear Agreement (2005):** Announced in July 2005, the Civilian Nuclear Agreement laid down the path for India to formally join the world’s “nuclear club”—having nuclear weapons while being able to procure equipment and fuel for its nuclear power program.
- **Defense Technology & Trade Initiative (DTTI) Projects (2015):** While technically launched three years earlier, the DTTI came to life during U.S. President Barack Obama’s visit to India in January 2015. During the visit, the United States and India announced a series of joint projects and working groups to expedite defense technology cooperation.
- **U.S. Department of Defense Creates India Rapid Reaction Cell (IRRC) (2015):** The IRRC’s role is to accelerate defense technology collaboration with India.
- **The United States and India Sign Defense “Enabling/Foundation” Agreements (2016, 2018, and 2019):** India and the United States have signed three agreements to further enable technical aspects of defense cooperation. First was the [Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement \(LEMOA\)](#) in August 2016, which was followed by the [Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement \(COMCASA\)](#) in September 2018 and the [Industrial Security Annex \(ISA\)](#) in December 2019. Only one agreement remains to be signed—the Basic Exchange and Cooperative Agreement (BECA).

- **India Given Tier-1 Status Under Strategic Trade**

Authorization (2018): U.S. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross announced that India would be given Tier-1 status under the U.S. Strategic Trade Authorization (STA) rules. This provides India with easier access to a range of embargoed technologies related to defense, policing, medical research, and more.

Beyond specific bilateral initiatives, the United States has also played a crucial role in helping secure India’s membership in global nonproliferation regimes. Despite some hurdles—mainly presented by China’s intransigence—India is now a part of three of the four main global nonproliferation regimes, including the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Australia Group. The Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) is the only regime India is not yet a part of.

Some of the steps outlined above are generally reserved for the United States’ closest security partners, such as those holding STA-1 status. Some are more general in nature, such as the “Enabling/Foundation” agreements, which nonetheless demonstrate a strong directional willingness of the United States to tangibly improve defense ties with India. But other steps are truly unique—initiatives created only for India—such as the IRRC and the DTTI. Another step the United States has taken falls into a similar camp, where the United States voluntarily pushed ahead with allowing technology release for defense platforms that India desired but for which it had not yet offered a formal procurement process. Accelerating such approvals without a formal request to buy from India takes energy and some amount of political capital within the U.S. government agencies that have a hand in such processes.

Given these unique programs, a question often comes up in Washington: when will the United States see the benefits of all this heavy lifting? In other words, when will India take up its role as a “net provider of security in the region?” Otherwise, how can the United States continue to press forward with offering groundbreaking programs and technologies to India but not to other nations?

India does not often talk up its own actions, but the list of its security initiatives is growing. For example, India was the first major nation to publicly raise concerns about China’s One Belt, One Road program. India helped organize refugee missions out of conflict zones, notably Operation Raahat, which evacuated international citizens from Yemen in April 2015. But the most striking instance was India’s defense of Bhutan’s territorial integrity during

the fall 2017 standoff with China in the region where the Chinese, Bhutanese, and Indian borders merge.

Reports indicate that the United States was willing to find ways to support India's position during the 2017 standoff as well as the more recent border tensions, but India demurred, preferring to handle the situation directly. Still, U.S. defense cooperation with India has directly boosted India's ability to handle such confrontations, and this will only increase in the future.

- **Defense Sales:** U.S. sales of key defense platforms such as the CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopter increase India's mobility in difficult terrain. Today, the Indian air force operates 15 Chinook helicopters; the first was delivered just a year ago. Apart from moving troops and weapons into tight spaces, the Indian government wants to leverage the Chinooks' heavy-lift capabilities to support the construction of infrastructure along the border. The M-777 "ultra-lightweight" howitzers supplied by BAE Systems again assist the Indian army with mobility and firepower. BAE Systems will supply 145 howitzers to India, with domestic production underway.
- **Enabling/Foundation Agreements:** The defense-enabling agreements outlined above will allow the United States to assist India's military capabilities, including along the border. For example, the COMCASA agreement will allow the United States to sell India more advanced detection systems, while the BECA will allow the United States to share classified geospatial information and technologies.
- **Joint Exercises:** Launched in 2004, the annual [Exercise Yudh Abhyas](#) focuses specifically on mountain warfare.

If the United States only considers a narrow list of threats to be the scorecard against which to rate India's effectiveness as a security provider—for instance, China's expansionist tendencies in East and Southeast Asia or the fight against the Islamic State—it may take much longer to see a payback for U.S. efforts. But if the United States instead considers India's existing role in pulling South Asian nations out of China's orbit and in defending the territory of smaller nations such as Bhutan, then India is already stepping up in meaningful ways. ■

Richard Rossow is a senior adviser and holds the Wadhvani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. **Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.** is a senior fellow for imagery analysis for the iDeas Lab and Korea Chair at CSIS. **Kriti Upadhyaya** is a research associate with the Wadhvani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies at CSIS.

This report is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this report.

CSIS BRIEFS are produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2020 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.

Cover Photo: ED JONES/AFP via Getty Images