

[Skip to main content](#)

open

Programs

submenu

Experts

open

Regions

submenu

open

Topics

submenu

button-close

Primary Menu

Analysis

Programs

Experts

Regions

Topics

Events

Digital Reports

Podcasts

Newsletters

Videos

Microsites

About CSIS

open

About CSIS

submenu

Main menu

Home

About CSIS

Leadership & Staff

Financial Information

Membership Groups

Media Requests

iDeas Lab/Multimedia

Congressional Affairs

Executive Education

Careers & Culture

Location & Contact

About Menu

open

About CSIS

submenu

Main menu

Home

About CSIS

Leadership & Staff

Financial Information

Membership Groups

Media Requests

iDeas Lab/Multimedia

Congressional Affairs

Executive Education

Careers & Culture

Location & Contact

Live Now

PONI 2024 Capstone Conference

May 1 ? 2, 2024

Video On Demand

DOD's Gaza Pier and the Maritime Corridor?Gaza: The Human Toll

May 1, 2024 ? 9:00 ? 10:00 am EDT

Video On Demand

Lessons from Myanmar

May 1, 2024 ? 10:00 ? 10:30 am EDT

All Events

About Menu

open

About CSIS

submenu

Main menu

Home

About CSIS

Leadership & Staff

Financial Information

Membership Groups

Media Requests

iDeas Lab/Multimedia

Congressional Affairs

Executive Education

Careers & Culture

Location & Contact

a-d

Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy

Aerospace Security Project

Africa Program

Americas Program

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative

Asia Program

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Defense-Industrial Initiatives Group

Defense 360

Defense Budget Analysis

Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project

e-m

Economics Program

Emeritus Chair in Strategy

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Missile Defense Project

n-z

Project on Critical Minerals Security

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Project on Nuclear Issues

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Project on Trade and Technology

Renewing American Innovation Project

Scholl Chair in International Business

Smart Women, Smart Power

Southeast Asia Program

Stephenson Ocean Security Project

Strategic Technologies Program

Transnational Threats Project

Wadhvani Center for AI and Advanced Technologies

All Regions

Africa

Americas

Arctic

Asia

Australia, New Zealand & Pacific

Europe

Middle East

Russia and Eurasia

All Topics

American Innovation

Civic Education

Climate Change

Cybersecurity

Defense Budget and Acquisition

Defense and Security

Economics

Energy and Sustainability

Food Security

Gender and International Security

Geopolitics

Global Health

Human Rights

Humanitarian Assistance

Intelligence

International Development

Maritime Issues and Oceans

Missile Defense

Nuclear Issues

Space

Technology

Trade

Transnational Threats

Water Security

Executive Ed Navigation

Global Policy Courses

Custom Programs

Leadership Development

University Programs

Course Catalog

About

Contact Us

U.S.-India Ties: Getting Past the 'Building Trust' Phase

Photo: JONATHAN ERNST/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

Commentary

by

Richard M. Rossow

Published November 13, 2023

The recently concluded U.S.-India 2+2 summit was most remarkable for its lack of splashy new announcements. Clearly, with two leader summits in the preceding five months, consolidation of earlier announcements is critical. But an increasing amount of joint work requires longer horizons for tangible outcomes. That is a welcome sign of the maturation of the relationship.

Building trust has been a recurring theme in U.S.-India relations across the last two decades. Successive Indian governments have publicly and privately voiced concerns that the United States is an unreliable partner. There were fears that the nascent relationship could quickly be severed as U.S. foreign policy shifted its gaze toward new threats and pushed its allies to follow suit. India does not want to be in a position to feel coerced at such moments due to over-reliance on the United States.

Some U.S. policymakers have their own concerns about the upside of pushing for deeper relations with India. The history of U.S.-India is replete with occasional periods of modest hopes for stronger ties?quickly crushed by harsh realities stemming from vastly different worldviews. Despite 20 years of improving relations, it can be hard to point to specific examples where India is playing any kind of meaningful role in regional security?at least, when viewed through a U.S. lens, which is sometimes narrow.

Concerns on both sides, paired with the nearly inevitable coming together over shared concerns about the rise of China have triggered an ongoing desire to push for big ideas and quick wins. India has taken critical steps to show its interest to the United States, such as allowing U.S. naval vessels to stop in India for repairs, signing a range of ?defense enabling agreements,? making the United States its top defense exercise partner, allowing an U.S. liaison officer at the Indian Ocean

Information Fusion Centre, and more.

The United States, for its part, has also taken significant steps to show its deep interest in creating a powerful partnership. This includes opening the door for civilian nuclear cooperation, pushing the U.S. defense industry to accelerate technology transfer to Indian partners, accelerating approvals of sales of advanced weapons, and allowing Indian liaisons at our regional combatant commands.

Of course, not every big idea has yielded results. The United States has not yet supplied any material for India's nuclear power industry. The Defense Technology and Trade Initiative has not been able to facilitate joint production. The Pentagon's "India Rapid Reaction Cell" has folded. Still, pushing ahead with such big ideas has improved confidence on both sides.

Trust has also been built through other actions. Perhaps most notably, the United States did not make India's light position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine a "red line" for cooperation. India's continued engagement with "anti-West" groups like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are not treated as deal-breakers. And while U.S. officials privately raise concerns about human rights and religious tolerance to Indian leaders, this, too, is merely one facet of consultations and does not determine the overall narrative.

The outcomes from the November 2023 U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue were fairly modest. Perhaps the most notable announcement was that India will become a full member of Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in Bahrain. This is a real step that will improve India's interoperability with the United States and dozens of other nations cooperating in the Indian Ocean on real threats. This comes just over a year after India joined CMF Bahrain as an associate member. The two sides also expanded their work in space to include "planetary defense" and "space commerce." Otherwise, most of the document revolves around joint comments on global issues and stock-taking of progress related to earlier bilateral announcements.

Taking a step back, a transition in high-level engagements is taking place. While earlier high-profile announcements have not yielded much tangible benefit, the trust deficit is being eroded. And the drive for fast, punchy deliverables is giving way to planting the seeds for longer-term cooperation.

Pushing a private company to initiate technology transfer for less-than-market rates is hard. But connecting defense startups and conducting joint research could be more straightforward, though with a longer time horizon.

Elections in both nations could put new stresses on U.S.-India relations. While successive administrations in both nations have generally pushed to improve ties, changes in key officials can alter the specific areas of focus and potentially induct new areas of friction. A recent example is the Trump administration's escalation of trade pressures even while improving security ties. Economic policy discussions between the two nations remain underwhelming, though agreements to drop disputes in the World Trade Organization this summer helps. But the steady transition away from "quick wins" to "long-term partnership" is evident and should provide key ballast.

Richard M. Rossow is senior adviser and the Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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Richard M. Rossow

Senior Adviser and Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies

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Footer

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Programs

Topics

Regions

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Center for Strategic and International Studies

1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20036

Tel: 202.887.0200

Fax: 202.775.3199

Media Inquiries

H. Andrew Schwartz

Chief Communications Officer

202.775.3242

aschwartz@csis.org

Samuel Cestari

Media Relations Coordinator, External Relations

202.775.7317

scestari@csis.org

See Media Page for more interview, contact, and citation details.

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