



Decision Brief | 2018.004 | September 6, 2018

Designate Indian as a ‘Major Non-NATO’ Ally

Decision: In conjunction with a necessary downgrading of Pakistan’s status as a “[Major Non-NATO Ally](#)” (MNNA), the United States should begin negotiations with New Delhi to establish India as its primary partner in South Asia, with a view ultimately to designating India as an MNNA.

Reason: The strategic realignment underway in South Asia makes a stronger formal relationship with India long overdue. Pakistan has chosen a route at odds with the security and other vital interests of the United States, as explained in the Center for Security Policy’s [Decision Brief 2018.003](#). India, on the other hand, is an increasingly important bulwark against Sharia-supremacism and the jihadism it commands and against an expansionist and ever-more-aggressive Communist China. India shares the U.S. and Japanese commitment to freedom of navigation on the high seas and has a mutual interest in security in the Indo-Pacific region.

Pushback: Some in the Pentagon and Congress view U.S.-Indian relations through the Cold War lens of the U.S. relationship with Pakistan, through that of India with the Soviet Union and through the prism of Pakistan’s more recent, post-9/11 assistance with respect to the resupplying of U.S. forces and their allies in Afghanistan. These paradigms have, however, been overtaken by more current events and should no longer be permitted to obscure today’s divergent strategic realities.

Background: For two decades following India’s independence, the U.S. had some notable military ties with New Delhi and even provided military assistance in India’s border war with China in 1962. The Soviets aggressively courted India, though, even as the U.S. courted Communist China and later Pakistan, causing strained relations between Washington and New Delhi from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. The U.S. nonetheless began annual naval exercises with India in 1992. And while the U.S. imposed sanctions on India in 1998 for nuclear testing, most were eased within a few months, and finally lifted altogether in 2001.

The relationship between the two nations has steadily improved in recent years, especially as a result of the jihadist attacks to which both have been subjected and intensifying concerns about China’s imperialist inroads in Asia and the Pacific. Bilateral defense trade has increased from near zero to over [\\$15 billion](#), making the United States India’s [second largest arms supplier](#). Today, the United States is India’s [top military exercise partner](#), including those they conduct with Japan as permanent members of the annual [Malabar naval exercise](#).

The U.S. and India signed a bilateral defense and strategic cooperation agreement in 2005, which was [extended in 2015](#) for another 10 years. In 2016, both countries signed a [Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement \(LEMOA\)](#), and the U.S. designated India as a “[Major Defense Partner.](#)”



The U.S. has also granted India [Strategic Trade Authorization-1](#) (STA Tier-1) status, a move that greatly facilitates the exchange of high technology and strengthens defense collaboration. Most STA-1 countries are NATO allies. India is the third Asian country, after Japan and South Korea, to have STA-1 status. And it would, with appropriate understandings in place, be a good candidate for the United States' major regional ally and, in due course, the alternative to Pakistan as our Major Non-NATO Ally in South/Central Asia.¹

Policy considerations: Among those understandings must be that India is aligned with the United States with regard to the need to help the Iranian people liberate themselves from a regime that represses them and threatens others. Secretary of State Pompeo has hopefully reinforced during his visit with Secretary of Defense Mattis to New Delhi, India's reported [willingness to end](#) to its purchases of Iranian energy. India will have an opportunity to buy all the oil it needs from a successor government in Tehran, but should not be party to efforts to perpetuate the present one – whether through energy purchases or other means. The same would apply to the Chabahar Port project which would afford India a means to bypass the overland trade route through Pakistan in order to access Afghanistan, while also serving India as means to effectively counter Chinese-Pakistani designs on the Indian Ocean.

Similar alignment will be needed with respect to India's ties to the Kremlin. India's 20-year "agreement of friendship" with Moscow was signed in 1971 and, although it ended decades ago and Russia has been drawing dramatically closer to China and [Pakistan](#), the Indians have yet to adjust the relationship with the Putin regime to reflect the new reality that they are facing increasing encirclement by adversaries.

In addition, consistent with the Trump administration's commitment to religious freedom, New Delhi must undertake to prevent India's 64 million Christians from persecution by Hindu extremists, in and out of government.

The Bottom Line: India is a bitter rival of Communist China that needs strong allies to resist Beijing's expanding hegemony. It is a bulwark against Islamic extremism. It is a rival of the untrustworthy Pakistani government. It is one of the world's most populous countries and markets, and the world's largest democracy. India is also a strong emerging power in a region where the U.S. too needs powerful allies, and it is one of the few non-NATO countries with top Strategic Trade Authorization-1 status. The recommended termination of the U.S. designation of Pakistan as a "Major Non-NATO Ally" should clear the way for achieving the conditions for a U.S. strategic alliance with India.

¹ The authority to designate a country as an MNNA resides with the President, under [Title 22 US Code § 2321k](#). The imminence of a common threat from external aggression and the existence of common regional security concerns justifies U.S. authorization of such a designation.