

Event Transcript

Understanding India's Security Role in the Indo-Pacific

The Stimson Center

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Featuring:

Aditi Malhotra, Editor-in-Chief, Canadian Army Journal and Author, 'India in the Indo-Pacific: Understanding India's Security Orientation Towards Southeast and East Asia.'

Harsh Pant, Vice President, Studies and Foreign Policy, Observer Research Foundation

Walter Ladwig, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, King's College London

Akriti Vasudeva (moderator), Fellow, South Asia, Stimson Center

Event Description

Join us for a discussion of Dr. Aditi Malhotra's new book [*India in the Indo-Pacific: Understanding India's Security Orientation Towards Southeast and East Asia*](#). This conversation will explore the drivers of India's growing strategic role in the Indo-Pacific over the past two decades and how this behavior has been shaped by Delhi's relations with the United States, China, Japan, Vietnam and others. With remarks from Indo-Pacific scholars Dr. Harsh Pant and Dr. Walter Ladwig, the panel will also consider prospects for greater Indian maritime engagement in the region as well as any constraints that may be at play.

More information and event video available at <https://www.stimson.org/event/understanding-indias-security-role-in-the-indo-pacific/>

Event Transcript

Akriti Vasudeva: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us. We are just waiting for the Zoom Room to fill in and for people to trickle in, so we'll start in about one minute. And to those of you just joining, we will be starting in about a minute, we're just letting everyone fill in the Zoom room. Thank you so much for joining us.

Well, good morning, good afternoon, and good evening everyone, wherever in the world you're joining us from. Thank you for tuning in and welcome to the Stimson Center South Asia Program's first event of 2023. My name is Akriti Vasudeva, and I'm a Fellow in the South Asia program. And let me take this opportunity to wish you all a happy, healthy, and productive new year.

Today is an exciting day, it's one of my favorite types of events to do because it involves highlighting new scholarship on a policy relevant issue. On behalf of the South Asia program, I am pleased to launch today

Dr. Aditi Malhotra new book, *India in the Indo-Pacific: Understanding India's Security Orientation towards Southeast and East Asia*. This book is an examination of the drivers of India's heightened security cooperation with Southeast Asia and East Asia over the last two decades with the aim of understanding India's evolving security role and identity conception in the Indo-Pacific more broadly. At its heart, the book is a study of Indian foreign policy and how domestic and external factors shape New Delhi's behavior, with insights on why India's political rhetoric sometimes does not match its policy actions on the ground. So our conversation today will be focused on the book, but also go beyond it a bit to understand India's growing strategic role in the Indo-Pacific, as I mentioned, how has its behavior been shaped by Delhi's relations with the United States, China, Japan and others, and further, what are the prospects for greater Indian maritime engagement in the region as well as any constraints that might be at play.

To discuss these aspects and more, I'm delighted to be joined today by the following: the author of the book, Dr. Aditi Malhotra, who is the editor-in-chief of the Canadian Army Journal. Her research focuses on Indo-Pacific security and geopolitics, nuclear deterrence, and changing trends in warfare. She's the author of this book, obviously the one that we're launching today, as well as another one that I believe just came out titled, *Understanding Security Role Evolution of the U.S., China and India: Setting the Stage*. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Münster, Germany, and an MA in International Studies from the University of Sheffield, in the UK. And luckily for us, she is a former Stimson Center Visiting Fellow and a regular contributor to our online magazine, South Asian Voices. It's a particular pleasure for us to welcome her back to Stimson.

Dr. Walter Ladwig is a political scientist specializing in U.S. foreign policy, South Asian security, irregular warfare, and the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. His first book, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency*, examines the often-difficult relations between the U.S. and local governments it is supporting in counterinsurgency. He's currently writing a book on Indian defense policy, and particularly relevant to this discussion is his extensive work on the potential for and limits on U.S.-India cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Last, but certainly not least, Dr. Harsh Pant is Vice President, Studies and Foreign Policy, at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi and a Professor of International Relations with King's India Institute at the King's College, London. His research focuses on Asian security issues, and his most recent books include *India and Global Governance: Arising Power and Its Discontents*, *Politics and Geopolitics: Decoding India's Neighborhood Challenge*, and *America and the Indo-Pacific: Trump and Beyond*.

So since we only have an hour, we will dispense with opening remarks and instead what I'll do is pose some questions of my own to Aditi and to Dr. Ladwig and Dr. Pant on the book. And also, I'd like to engage the audience in our discussion as well. So we are going to be collecting questions throughout the session, and I will intersperse them into our discussion wherever they're relevant. So if you'd like to ask our panelists something, please type your query into the Q&A box at the bottom of your Zoom screen and direct them to me, and I'll try to get to as many as I can. And like I said, I'll post them directly to the panelists today.

So let's get started, we have a lot to cover. Aditi, I'll come to you first to talk to us about the themes of the book and the main argument. You argue that India's foreign policy strategy is not binary, that it is not one of friends and enemies, specifically with regard to its relations with the great powers. So help us understand, what then characterizes India's foreign policy, and how does India conceive of its role conception in the Indo-Pacific?

Aditi Malhotra:

Thank you so much, Akriti. Before I say anything, thank you so much to you and the Stimson Center for organizing this. And this is very special because I'm back at Stimson, so it feels good. And thank you to the other panelists for being here and actually discussing this book. And on this topic, yes, India does not hold binaries of friends or enemies, and this is something which I argue in the book. For long, we've seen in the current literature that very squarely India is seen as a partner to the U.S. and an enemy to China. But if we get into the details and start looking within, we do notice that there is something that I talk in the book about, which is known as the convergence-divergence phenomenon; this means that even though there are preferred partners and there are problematic relations for India as well, at the same time there are areas of convergences as well.

So even though traditionally, India and China have not always seen eye to eye, and there is what I describe as an intra-role conflict, which means that China's expectation from India as a broader actor or a security actor and India's own self-conception of its security role clash. And even though they clash, they still continue to converge when it comes to other aspects such as climate change or investments in Iran that we've seen previously, or reform of the international global governance structures. Similarly, U.S. has been one of those important partners for India wherein we see a lot of role compatibility over the last two decades. And within this, there have been expectations between the U.S. and India. A lot of them have been met, which is why we see a very strong defense cooperation and an evolving relationship. But at the same time, there are areas of divergences as well, whether it is about the whole debate of strategic autonomy or the nuanced vision of Indo-Pacific. So these are just two examples, but I just wanted to bring home the fact that everything is not in black and white, but more in shades of gray.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Aditi. And we'll definitely come back to that theme of the India-China relationship and the competition that we see inherent in that relationship. But let me bring in Dr. Pant and Dr. Ladwig, if I may, and please let me know if my voice is cutting in and out. Can you hear me now? Great. So I wanted to ask you about Aditi's book, and she cites both your works in an attempt to understand what explains India's behavior towards Southeast Asia. And she argues that it's neither balance of power theory nor constructivism that can explain it, but a new theory of role conception. So what did you think of that theory, and how do you think it helps us understand better India's security role in the Indo-Pacific? If I can go to Dr. Pant first.

Harsh Pant: Thanks, Akriti. Thanks for bringing me here as part of this conversation. And congratulations to Aditi for this book. And I think for the second book also, for which I can also take some credit — I'm the editor of the series. So it's wonderful to have two books in a row, and so congratulations. I think what Aditi and then the theoretical paradigm that she's using does is, certainly brings a certain nuance to the discussion that we have seen around the Indo-Pacific and I think it also answers some of these queries that still pervade. If you look at the discussions that are often held around India and the Indo-Pacific, India's role in the region, what is India doing with Quad, how far India is willing to go with the U.S. and with its Western partners, with regional partners like Japan and Australia... I think many of these questions people find very difficult to get their heads around. If you're looking at it simplistically and saying that, "Look, this is either a balance of power or a balance of threat argument," then it doesn't really explain all of those results that we are seeing.

So I think what Aditi's argument does is that it certainly lays that out in a way that perhaps needed to be laid out because I don't think there is any other work that does that. So I think that first of all, just in terms of the work itself, I think this is a book that perhaps is much needed because we need to come to grips academically with this idea of what actually India is doing in the Indo-Pacific. And I think her conceptualization allows us to do that to a certain extent, I would say.

I think one particular issue where I think I would try to push her and to push other scholars as well is structurally, I think what we have been witnessing now over the past several decades is a certain balance of power emerging in the region, and India along with other actors responding to that balance of power. Now, I think so long as that balance of power was precariously positioned, India had that space to maneuver and which is, I think, brought out very nicely in Aditi's work. But I think what we are now looking at is that as that balance of power is rapidly tilting in one direction, that space is getting constricted.

So I think just post-Galwan, if you look at the kind of activities that we have seen, or if you're trying to understand the Quad and its resurrection, Quad 2.0 for example, there is a certain dynamic there that one needs to understand — that look Quad 1.0 disappeared; perhaps India was very conscious of the kind of role it wanted to play in this geography. But then even without India trying much or India trying to do much, Quad 2.0 emerged and it was resurrected because the structural realities were such that certain kinds of institutional arrangements had to emerge and India had to be part of them.

So even today, you will see that discourse on what the Quad is doing, what is India's role in the Quad, whether India is a drag in the Quad, whether India is the one that is pushing it behind or not pulling up its full weight. All those questions are still there. But what I would say is that if you look at the transformation in the last two to three years, that has been quite dramatic. And I think that dramatic transformation in terms of the investment that perhaps other actors are putting in and also India is putting in, also tells a story about the structural developments in the region and how that is constraining India's domestic debate as well.

So what happened in March 2020 today has made it almost impossible for anyone to stand up and say, "Let's have an advanced policy vis-à-vis China." Because within the domestic space in India, even the communist parties won't stand up in India today and talk about nuance vis-à-vis China. So I think what those certain actions by China, what they've done is to position India's policy in a manner that perhaps will have some very long-term consequences, which I think some of the threads one can perhaps pick from Aditi's work. But we'll have to do some more work on that going forward because I think a lot has also changed in the last three years. And so I would just end here, at this point.

Akriti Vasudeva: Walter, your thoughts?

Walter Ladwig: Yeah, so I'll just pick up on a couple things Harsh said. First of all, one of the things I particularly like about the role conception in the framing is that the book goes within the state and looks at the role of what she called subnational actors. And so particularly with these ideas like India as a net security provider, we saw specific agencies, namely the navy, being really on the forefront of embracing this idea. Now you could say, "Okay, well navies by their very nature tend to be internationally oriented. They tend to be cooperative, they see commonalities with other navies." But there was a period of time in the late 2000s into the early 2010s where it almost seemed to an outside observer, where the navy was ahead of the MEA in pushing some of these ideas or pushing the boundaries.

And so this role conception framing, the way this idea could first take hold in the navy and then move up into other parts of the government and be taken on board, I think this really tells an important and interesting part of the story. Because there has been a lot of discussion and debate about,

"Well, how did a service that even within the armed forces is the Cinderella service — it has the smallest budget, it has the smallest numbers — how has it seemed to have successfully shaped the conversation and the discussion?" So I think having an architecture to look at the role of these ideas and how these ideas transmitted is fantastic.

I think I agree with what Harsh has said about, and I'll be slightly more blunt about it, but basically the role of China certainly in accelerating trends. So I think we can have a discussion about what set things off on the path in the first place. But there's no doubt that there's, in my mind, at least, that there's an interaction effect here where events since 2020 have accelerated existing trends. We've seen more enthusiasm on India's part towards the Quad, more activity, now not necessarily always pushing down a hard security realm. So that, of course, presents a complicating factor. But we certainly can see some of these realist considerations leading to more energy and more energetic steps.

Akriti Vasudeva: Aditi, do you want to respond to any of that or should we come back?

Aditi Malhotra: That would be great. I would love to address some of those issues. I think all the points that come from Professor Pant and Dr. Ladwig— perfect, I completely agree, even in terms of how a lot has changed when it comes to how China has played a role in facilitating India's role evolution. And I would like to mention some aspects that were covered in the book. Of course, this is my thesis, so it ended after 2020, so I did not really get into the details of what happened after 2020. But I think one of the observations of the book is that there is a pre and post-2007/2008 period for how India looks at its security role. And then there's also a post-2012 period wherein again, you see that pre-2007, it's very interesting to note that India's role was more self-driven in terms of its own desire to be a major player and an important stakeholder in regional security. So it was more driven by India's larger desire to play a crucial role.

But what changed after 2007/2008, following the world crisis, was that suddenly with China's assertive rise, it started becoming a very important driver for what India was doing then. Which is why we start noticing that every time there is an uptick on China's assertiveness, we start noticing India getting closer towards say, Quad partners or other Indo-Pacific actors. So again, after 2012, when India and China did not have the best situation — the ongoing crisis accelerated for a bit— we do notice how suddenly India's own desire of course stayed, but then China became a crucial driver. And I think this is something we've again seen after 2020, wherein the whole 2020 India-China standoff, I think, is an inflection point. And of course there is a nuance there, but at the same time it's something which makes it in a manner that India cannot return to a pre-2020 situation for that matter.

So I completely agree, I think this needs to be dealt with in more detail. And I really welcome Dr. Ladwig's remark on the role of the Indian Navy. In a lot of your work you do mention that, so it was really good to have the time and energy to actually address this issue because I personally felt, and that's what I've argued in the book, that the Indian Navy has actually played a very important domestic role for India's maritime rise broadly.

Akriti Vasudeva: Aditi, I'm glad you mentioned the 2007/2008 period because that's generally the time period that everyone ascribes to China coming out more onto the global scene, post the Olympics. It's had a steady economic growth, [it's] now really abandoning the "bide your time" strategy and coming out as being much more aggressive about what it wants to achieve. And you see that reflecting also in the India-China relationship where tensions in Arunachal Pradesh start to increase, there's the unrest in Tibet, etcetera. So I'm glad you mentioned that.

I want to return to that evolution of the India-China relationship a bit later on, but I want to go a little bit deeper into your argument, Aditi, and bring Walter and Harsh in as well. You talk about India's shifting role conception from regional power to major power to leading power and how that encompasses the auxiliary role of net security provider and stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific and how this reflects India's new strategy of multi-alignment. So how do you define multi-alignment, and what factors have actually driven India's shift from a non-alignment strategy to a multi-alignment strategy?

Aditi Malhotra: Sure. Do you want me to address this?

Akriti Vasudeva: Yes.

Aditi Malhotra: Okay, perfect. So the whole idea of alignment, I think Indian scholars and even a lot of Western scholars have been obsessed with this whole thing about non-alignment and alignment per se. But again, something that I've argued in the book [is] that there is a lot of nuance, and regardless of what India is following at the end of the day, everything is driven by India's national interest, and how it does the cost benefit analysis. So these are just tools. A lot of people like to believe that strategic autonomy or non-alignment or multi-alignment is an end in itself. I argue that it's not an end in itself. These are tools for India to go ahead and maximize its interests while minimizing the risks that they entail. So when it comes to the multi-alignment thing, we started noticing its rise in the early 2000s with India's economic rise and with India's greater interaction with a lot of global actors economically and strategically as well.

So the whole post-Cold War era, we saw that changing. And before that, India was of course non-aligned throughout the Cold War. But again, there's a nuance there as well, which I've covered in the book because it wasn't purely, purely non-aligned in that sense. So the idea of multi-

alignment actually talks about having a balanced diversity wherein you're simultaneously engaging a lot of powers. And sometimes you're engaging powers which are even at odds with each other. So on one aspect, it's about diversifying towards the West and start having partnerships with the U.S. and its allies, but also not giving up on something that we've noticed even now on [India's] partnership with Russia on some of the aspects of shared interest, and even cooperation with China. So at the same time, while India is diversifying and simultaneously engaging these different actors, what it's also doing is trying to have that space to maneuver and have the strategic and decisional autonomy.

But having said that, I think it's important to note that it's easier to have that space to maneuver when your own interests are not really being called into question. During the non-alignment movement, the whole NAM during the Cold War, India could do that because the Soviet Union did not pose a direct threat to India, so India did have that space to maneuver. But what's happening today is even if you're talking about say, the binaries of U.S. versus China, India cannot actually have that space to maneuver or multi-align genuinely at every aspect because China poses a threat to India. So India's opportunity and that area to effectively be a multi-aligned partner has been going down, and I think that's something we've been noticing, especially after 2020.

Akriti Vasudeva: Walter, I'll come to you first. What do you think of this idea of multi-alignment, and how does the Quad fit within this context? We have a question in the Q&A box that I will again pose to everyone from Robin Walker who talks about: what will India's security role look like in 10 years? Will it actually mean India as a major player in a much more militarized Quad? Will it be the leader of its own security grouping?

Walter Ladwig: If we wanted to differentiate between non-alignment and multi-alignment, I would see non-alignment as being a series of strategies for, in some respects, preventing the outside world from affecting and constraining India, whereas multi-alignment is more focused on using relationships to try to shape the world to an extent more in India's favor or India's interest. So then the key driving factors would be India's increased power and of course increased economic exposure and stakes that have come about after 1991. And so in that respect then, I see the Quad as being a tool to accomplish those goals. We already talked about China and I do think that the Quad for Delhi, a key purpose, perhaps the primary purpose, is as a political tool to sort of demonstrate to China that India will not be alone in any Sino-Indian confrontation.

It's a tool to perhaps enhance India's diplomatic clout or it's political clout in dealing with China. I think there is a military side of things though to try and weave in a bit of Robin's question. India — though not alone India, as Australia might fit into the same basket of countries as well — India has not necessarily been very enthusiastic or very forward-leaning on the hard-

security aspects of the Quad. As you noted in your question, India is often described as being the ceiling... Where can the Quad go depends on how far India is willing to go down that road. And to date, more on the vaccine diplomacy, emerging technology, when it comes to military things, it's humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, the softer side of military affairs. And these things can be beneficial, I mean joint training, joint cooperation of any kind, military familiarization is all good and beneficial. But I don't at the moment see India on a trajectory to be leading the Quad as some kind of military alliance or military partnership even 10 years out.

Akriti Vasudeva: Harsh, did you want to respond to the same question on multi-alignment and India's role in the Quad?

Harsh Pant: Yes. I think one important thing, and the way I look at it, is that non-alignment primarily was a strategy of a weak state. It was a state that was trying to cushion the impact of the international system on its own interests. So how do you create a buffer between yourself if you're a weak state, you are trying to basically focus on internal consolidation, what do you do? I think multi-alignment has become more of a process through which India is leveraging its growing economic and military power in the international system. So one argument that is often made for India is that look, India is not particularly good at leveraging the international environment and international balance of power. Chinese are very good at it, it's often argued. They understand and they're very fluid in the way they manage and they transition from one camp to another.

I think India's definition or India's approach to this question is slightly different, and multi-alignment perhaps is one way in which India's trying to do that. Now I think Aditi has pointed out, it has its own problems and challenges. But what I would say is basically two things. One is that especially under the Modi government, there has been a remarkable turnaround in terms of what you mean when you say strategic autonomy. If you go before Modi, the argument was that partnerships are bad, that we will only go so far, we will not sign foundational agreements because that was seen as constraining India's options. I think what Modi has done is reversed the trend and said, "Partnerships enhance your strategic autonomy. The more partners you have, the better you are able to leverage the international environment." And I think that has been a remarkable shift.

I would say if you're a student of Indian foreign policy, you would see that as an inflection point in terms of just the understanding of the strategic elite [on] how can you leverage these partnerships to your advantage? And that is where I would also put in this Quad debate. A lot of this would depend on how India's external environment looks like in 10 years from now. If the present trends continue, then I think India will inevitably have to take certain steps that many in India would not be positioned at this point to even contemplate. Now if you go back — I mean all of us have

been students of Indian foreign policy —10 years back, if you would've told me that India would be doing things like it is doing today, I think it would be quite baffling at that point in time to say, "Would the Quad be rejuvenated? Would we come back? And would India end up signing all these foundational agreements? Would Indian and American forces be doing joint exercises 100 kilometers from the Chinese border?" I mean these are all developments that have happened in a very limited time space.

And that one has to acknowledge has been driven by certain factors that were not in India's control in some ways. But what India has been able to do perhaps better is to leverage the kind of challenges that it faced and the kind of rise that it has seen in the interstate hierarchy to its advantage. And I would say that's where contemporary debate and multi-alignment perhaps better answer some of these questions, than say non-alignment of the past. But I would agree with Aditi that again, multi-alignment will also take you [only] so far. Given that, what does multi-alignment mean when you say China and when you are looking at China in the eye?

There was this very interesting dynamic that used to be told just two, three years back that look, India perhaps is the only country that can sit in BRICS and sit in and do these kind of Malabar exercises. So you have these two different vantage points from which it could look at the world. That's classic multi-alignment —we have all these friends and partners and we are leveraging that to our advantage. So far so good. But the moment you had the 2020 episode, you had to then look back on some of these questions, and how far will you go with BRICS, how far will you go with your engagements where China is a partner? And I think all of those questions have become very relevant today, post-2020, and they will continue to be relevant so long as India's external environment decides how far it is willing to push India.

Akriti Vasudeva: I think that's a great point. I mean the greater India-China competition [is], the more coercion that we see from China, the more India has to face the question of how far will multi-alignment go? It will then have to choose and figure out which are priority partners and go ahead with those. And what you were just mentioning, Dr. Pant, also on the Quad: one of the things that I've heard recently from Biden administration officials, they've indicated that one of the reasons why the Quad has risen to where it is now is because of greater enthusiasm from India over the past few years. And also that in some ways, at least from what I've seen, the overt securitization of the Quad, that not happening is a decision that's taken by all four countries. It's not just driven by India, it's something that all four countries have decided that they need to think about when they consider ASEAN's acceptance of the Quad or responding to some of Chinese criticism of the Quad, shall we say.

Harsh Pant:

Can I add one thing here, Akriti? Because I think this is an important point you're making and I think this is not well-appreciated that there is a reason why all four countries agree on a consensus framework around the Quad. And why Quad is such an important framework, partly because if you remove India, there is no Quad. Now, if you remove India, you have three partners that are already treaty alliance partners of each other. So what's the fun element here? What's the added value here? So only when India joins in, with all its problems, with all its baggage, with all its predilections, do you start shifting the debate in a certain direction?

So I think the fact that India is there, the fact that India is playing some role and the fact that, as you mentioned, it is not simply about India being the weakest link, as it's often portrayed I think in the West, but it is also all four countries deciding that there are other actors also there. And I think that's part of the book as well. How will Southeast Asia and East Asia respond to certain kinds of security architectures that you are creating in the region? I think that is an argument that often gets lost in this debate around the Quad and what India can and cannot do there.

Akriti Vasudeva:

This has been a fascinating discussion already. I want to encourage everyone who is attending to think of a question. If you're interested in posing it, please to put it into the Q&A box. We'll continue to take much more of that from the chat box. But Aditi, now we've been talking about China already, but I want to give you the opportunity to explain how you talk about China and India in the book. And you talk about the evolution of both China and India's role conception or conception of themselves over the last 10 to 15 years, how that's changed particularly since the mid-2000s and how that seems to be in conflict and has impacted their relationship. So could you just talk through that evolution, and what does that mean for the future of India-China relations?

Aditi Malhotra:

For sure. So, of course, there's a lot which has been written, so I'll not get into the basic details. I'll just fish out the arguments that I bring in the book. And one of that is that even before India and China were independent sovereign countries, there was always this persistent ideological clash in terms of how China did not consider India as an equal in that sense. And that has continued. So that's been a common thread throughout — even when China saw India as a seeming threat, it was more because of India's growing proximity with the West as opposed to India individually.

[Now] I think that has of course changed, but the broader argument is that in terms of how China expects India to act and India's own expectations of its role, there is a very prominent clash therein. China wants India to play a limited subcontinent role, and that has been seen throughout, but what has happened is that as India's own desires have grown, its own ability and capacity to embrace bigger and broader regional roles have changed. I

think that is something which has become a problem for China. And the other problem is that apart from the fact that both of them share a territorial dispute along the Line of Actual Control, at the same time, there are both these actors which are evolving individually. So what China was say 20 years back is not what it is today. China wants to act as a great power, which is almost equal to the U.S., and what India wants to do is play as a leading power.

So clearly they are stepping into each other's areas of traditional interest and activity. And I think this is bound to happen and this is not likely to change, and the fact that of course they have an ongoing border problem, which is only going to make things worse. So I do not see much changing except the fact that the trajectory will continue. [In fact] it will get more severe — [...] I think that is the likelihood in the coming years. But that's unlikely to change, the fundamentals of that.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Aditi. I want to bring in some audience questions which relate to this Indian capacity to be able to deter China or deal with its competition with China and how that intersects with the external environment or other actors that are at play. So if I can pose this question to both Walter and Harsh. The question is from Eric Hirschhorn and he asks, "Should India be concerned that its relatively mild response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine will dampen western enthusiasm for assisting India if China misbehaves in India's northeast?" Harsh?

Harsh Pant: I would not frame it in a similar manner, I would frame it differently. But yes, I think that if you are relying on partners and if the strategy that India is now moving towards is a mix of internal consolidation and external balancing, then I think your closest partners have a right to ask this question about whether we should be looking at this disjuncture between say Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific in the way that India does or whether there are consequences. But I will also add that [...] if you look at what Aditi was mentioning [regarding] the evolution of India's China policy, it has been very interesting that with all its limited capacity issues that India has always had vis-a-vis China, if you go back to the previous decade and end of the previous decade, you see India responding to China's rise in a manner that I think often is not sufficiently appreciated.

For example, on BRI, India was the first country to openly express disappointment, going against the advice of all Western countries, which were advising India that, "Don't do this, you will get isolated." But India went ahead and decidedly portrayed a position. It was of course partly around sovereignty issues, but also around normative issues that I think are today part of the discourse on BRI across the Western world. So I think India has taken positions alone vis-à-vis China, India has also stood up to China almost alone. India is one of the few countries that is fighting Chinese forces. How many Western countries are actually fighting Chinese soldiers on the ground? So in a sense, there is greater confidence

that gives India, that if India can stand up to China on its own at a time when it was relatively isolated, then certainly India can withstand some of the Chinese assaults later on. Of course, this can be an overestimation and this will be a problem.

But I think India is also relying on an argument that increasingly is being made that ultimately if the Indo-Pacific is the real theater of operation, is the center of gravity of global politics, if the West is really interested in the Indo-Pacific, then without India there can't be any strategy of the Indo-Pacific. You can't really have a Western strategy, American strategy, or European strategy if India is not part of that equation. So I think there is some element of that as well in India's case that India is standing on its own. It's quite capable of managing some of that turbulence in one part of the Indo-Pacific theater. Now whether it happens the way India is envisioning or not, that's a different matter. But certainly I think this question is not going to go away anytime soon about Ukraine or about the Indo-Pacific.

But what India I think increasingly is [*trails off*]... If you go back to February 2022, there was a lot of doom and gloom surrounding India. I mean a lot of the people were saying. "What will happen now? India will have to take sides, India will be pushed towards one side or the other. India will have to abandon Russia." A year has passed, I think Indian diplomacy has been relatively capable, has proven to be relatively capable of navigating some of this turbulence. Now if it escalates going forward, what will happen? One doesn't know. But certainly I think what it is also embedded in is perhaps a better realization in the Western capitals that India-Russia relationship was already weakening. So even before Ukraine, the legs on which the India-Russia relationship was standing were getting wobbly. So I think there is a better appreciation of this in Western capitals today. Post-Ukraine, of course, you see a better appreciation. But I don't think the conversation itself is going to go away anytime soon.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Aditi, I'll let you come back on this a little bit later if you wanted to add something. But Walter, I wanted to come to you with something that Aditi addresses in the book. She talks about a conception-performance gap where India's rhetoric on its role in the Indo-Pacific doesn't necessarily align with its policy actions. She also talks about a conception-divergence dynamic where external actors' perceptions of India don't match with India's conception of itself. And to my mind, obviously Aditi talks about how India's engagement with Southeast Asia has increased, but both of these dynamics do describe how India is perceived by Southeast Asia, in the sense that there has been a lot of engagement both economically and security wise, but it has fallen short of expectations. So how would you characterize India's engagement with Southeast Asia? Where has it succeeded in its cooperation, and where has it not stepped up enough?

Walter Ladwig:

So I think we can see that India has two real key partners in the region. One is Singapore, and then to a lesser extent, Vietnam. Singapore has really been the key actor who has been drawing India in and encouraging India to play a key role. And so the relationship there is solid, there's good political and military cooperation. In no small part, again, to circle back to the elephant in the room because the two countries have shared the same degree of wariness but desire for engagement historically with China. I think they've seen eye-to-eye on that. The second partner is Vietnam and probably not as advanced as the Singaporean relationship, [but] politically, very well-aligned relations between New Delhi and Hanoi, I think are quite good. But there have been over time issues in the conflictual intense relationship between Vietnam and China where India has backed Vietnam and has supported it to a certain extent, but then there have been lines that it has been unwilling to go past.

But once you've moved past these two actors, a lot of the other relationship in Southeast Asia are very nascent. They're not very well developed. And so there's a lot more to do on a bilateral basis. In terms of functional areas, we see obviously maritime is one key area where India has strength. I think particularly taking that relationship and that work forward in the realm of maritime law enforcement, so cooperation with the coast guards or maritime law enforcement agencies of various countries. And again, there's a lot of, on the softer side, collective goods. So we've seen the navy involved in things like anti-piracy patrols, counter-terrorism things, but we could look at going into other areas like fishing and resource exploration and protection and things like that. India, historically when it's done capacity building in these areas, it's primarily been in the Western Indian Ocean, working with some of the small island states, but there could be opportunities for both training and equipping with respect to some Southeast Asian states.

But I think more significantly, and this really undergirds India's approach, is in the realm of economics, not security; economics is the foundation on which everything stands. And the degree to which India can offer some degree of economic diversification for this region, when it sits outside of RCEP and it sits outside of the CPTPP really needs to be thought about very carefully. And if those two institutions are not things India is likely to join, what can India do to make itself a more attractive economic partner and to deepen its relationships in the region?

I think there are things India can do to look within about enhancing the quality of port infrastructure, reducing non-tariff barriers, making it easier to do trade. These are things that the Modi government has talked about doing anyway. Because there are a lot of areas where you could see a potential for greater economic engagement, not just in terms of IT, but FinTech and e-commerce, pharma, education. There's a lot more that could be done economically with ASEAN. And if India can leverage its growing economy to bring more people in, in the same ways that the

United States has done historically and China is doing today, then all of these other political and security relationships will follow.

Akriti Vasudeva: Aditi, do you want to respond to that, talking about India's engagement with Southeast Asia and where the rhetoric doesn't meet expectations or policy actions?

Aditi Malhotra: For sure. So there's no disagreement. I agree that within Southeast Asia there have been very few countries with which India's cooperation has been established, if you will, in that sense. And of course, Vietnam and Singapore are two very important examples. And there's complete clarity on the fact that there is very little that has happened apart from maritime capacity building and anti-piracy operations. In terms of traditional security cooperation, there is a gap. And that largely doesn't always exist because of India's own inability or perhaps unwillingness. It is a lot to do with the fact that within the ASEAN region or within these ASEAN members, there is no unanimity about what security role do they want India to play. So you know what the Southeast Asian countries have been doing for a lot of decades have been following this thing known as the omni-enmeshment strategy, which is not my concept. It actually comes from Dr. Evelyn Goh, who actually talks about how these countries are engaging all the major actors to check each other and they believe there's greater value in having a group of powers checking each other, so there's no single dominant actor.

It's broadly the idea of creating equilibrium between these partners. So the Southeast Asian countries have the room to maneuver and have their own autonomy in that sense. But what has happened is that most of those expectations from India, from Southeast Asian countries, [are] largely in the area of economic interactions. And that is where I think there is a lot of scope for India to do, but it's not done as well as it could have. But in terms of security on traditional aspects, even if India would have wanted to do something, there is no unanimity within the region. And unless the region does not want India to play a stronger security role, it is unlikely to become an effective actor in that sense. Of course, there's no denying that there's a lot of cooperation in terms of capacity building for a lot of these countries. But it's only so far that India can go because there has to be compatibility in what the region wants and what India can deliver as a security actor.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thank you so much, Aditi. We have a lot of questions in the chat. I'm going to try to group a few of them together. Since we were talking about India's economic capacity and providing economic alternatives to China, there's a question in the chat from Harris Samad, and I'll post this to all three of you, "How should we think about regional security architecture as India develops international partnerships, but South Asia remains polarized and very unintegrated? Is this sustainable? Can India play a role

in bringing the South Asian region together?" Who wants to start on that?
Walter?

Walter Ladwig: I think it's going to be tough. I think typically, we would think of concentric circles that states are able to play a bigger role beyond their immediate region when their immediate region is relatively settled; they've resolved border disputes, they've established good economic relations with their neighbors and then they move out from there. At the very least, I'd say, I think India's position would be much more solid and would have a much greater foundation if it's trying to forge these partnerships further afield. If we see BIMSTEC flowing then into the Southeast Asia engagement on the landward side, then into the maritime side, that would present sort of a coherent idea or coherent approach if we don't see all of South Asia able to be integrated in such a manner.

Akriti Vasudeva: Aditi?

Aditi Malhotra: So I'll just add to that point that, of course, there are strong challenges when it comes to improving ties, whether it's with Pakistan and now even Nepal has become a more complicated case. And I think this is something which remains a persistent challenge for India. And this is something that I have brought out in the book, that even though India has risen as a maritime actor and it's trying to diversify away through BIMSTEC and I2U2 and other frameworks, but at the same time, a lot of its diplomatic and financial energies are actually being consumed by continental priorities as well. And this is a lot to do with the fact that there are land border problems that India is facing, whether it's vis-à-vis China or Pakistan. And this is something which takes away; if these problems did not exist or if the problem of South Asia that India faces did not exist, India could have been a much more effective international actor or a regional actor because it could have diverted those resources that are needed for continental priorities towards maritime priorities. So I think this will remain a persistent challenge in the coming years as well.

Akriti Vasudeva: Harsh, last word to you on this question.

Harsh Pant: I will just add, Akriti, that certainly regional role for India is essential. But I would just add that in my opinion, and which people may not take very seriously, but one of the most interesting things that has happened in the last decade, is that India has put paid to this notion that India has to talk to Pakistan. And I think that is a very important development. I think Indian diplomacy was being overburdened by this fact that somehow India first has to find the solution to the Pakistan problem and only then something will happen.

We are all students of international relations and Indian foreign policy. So many books have been written on the India-Pakistan peace process, why it

is so necessary for India to have a peace process with Pakistan. I think what India has shown in the last seven to eight or nine to ten years is that it doesn't matter if you don't have a peace process with Pakistan. I think India is quite capable of moving on and doing other things. And what it has also done is that the focus has shifted from Pakistan to China, which I think has given India certain strategic clarity. If you're constantly trying to resolve the Pakistan conundrum, which in some ways is unresolvable in my opinion as of now, then you are also ... all the nice things that Walter and Aditi are saying, you would not be able to do it because partly you are always constrained, being told you have to find a modus vivendi with Pakistan. The big debates in India used to be whether to talk to Pakistan or not talk to Pakistan.

I think by putting paid to that notion, Indian diplomacy has really taken a step forward in my opinion. Now I think the other neighbors, of course India has to make a case to its other neighbors that it is serious about regional leadership, it is serious about regional integration. Now, we saw some movement initially with BIMSTEC, but again it's underperforming. It has to perform very well because there is a seamless logic to it, I think as Walter mentioned. That if you start reimagining your periphery as not simply the SAARC countries, but also countries like Thailand and Myanmar, with whom you share borders, then you organically become part of Southeast Asia. Then India doesn't have to be invited to Southeast Asia as an external partner. You can say that India is linked to Myanmar, India is linked to Thailand, and we are a Southeast Asian country in our own right. So I think in that sense, your regional imagination takes a new high.

So I think it is very important for India to now take the eastern periphery, the Bay of Bengal periphery, very very seriously and move ahead with all the kinds of things that it needs to do, primarily maritime because it's a maritime geography. And it is again very integral to the wider Indo-Pacific narrative that India is trying to fashion. But I think on Pakistan, I think India has done a great job.

Akriti Vasudeva:

There are many more questions that I would like to ask, but we're coming to the end of this discussion. So I do want to take our gaze forward a little bit and just pick up from what Harsh, you were saying about India's role in the Indo-Pacific going forward. So again, this question is for all of you. Looking ahead, what areas is India likely to prioritize in its engagement with Southeast Asia? And where can it burden share with partners like the U.S., like Japan, like Australia? We had a question in the chat from Amelie Chalivet about France and Indian cooperation in the Indo-Pacific as well. But what priority areas do we see in India's engagement in Southeast Asia going forward? We'll start with Aditi, then come to Harsh, and then end with Walter.

Aditi Malhotra: So I think there is a lot of potential. We've already seen a lot when it comes to Quad and when it comes to other frameworks, all the diversity of things where India can cooperate. But I think in the coming years, I think of course maritime capacity building for regional actors would be one of the areas where India would like to deliver, on its own and also in partnership with other countries.

I think the other area would be infrastructure development. India's already working with Japan in third countries wherein they're talking about building sustainable infrastructure. So I think that's another area where we are going to see more progress. And I think last I would like to mention semiconductors. If you look at the Quad partners as such, I think the idea should be not to replicate every stage for each country. India should not try to master the complete semiconductor cycle, if you will. I think it's important for each Quad country or each Indo-Pacific actor to play to its strength. And I think this is where playing by individual strengths, I think India can actually contribute greatly on that front as well.

Akriti Vasudeva: Harsh, same question, priority areas and perhaps priority countries as well for India in Southeast Asia.

Harsh Pant: One of the things that the China challenge over the last few years has done for every major power is to make every country so much more aware that, "Look, you really cannot take on China individually." So partnerships are seen today as integral to the way most key players are envisioning their role. India is no exception. I think what we were discussing earlier is that it would be very important for India increasingly to make an economic argument to the region. India has not made that argument so far. India is seen as an outlier and in a certain way, that protectionism that we are witnessing or that deglobalization that we are witnessing across the world, that's not simply an Indian phenomena, it's a global phenomena (sic). Almost every country is doing that.

But given that India today is the only major economy that is growing, I think this is a unique opportunity for India to project itself as a leader in the region that can also take other countries along into the high growth trajectory if possible. And I think that's an argument that India has not made in the past, but today, given the confluence of forces that we see around us, perhaps it's well positioned to make.

Other areas where I think India will have to work with other countries, which it is already doing like what Aditi mentioned, is how do you work with your partners like the U.S. Japan, European Union, and then your France, for example? How do you make sure that your credibility as a country that delivers gets enhanced? And that gets enhanced when you work with countries that have a reputation for delivery. Because one of the problems India faces is over commitment and under delivery. So I think that problem gets resolved if you have partners who are able to make that

case for you. So I think those are some of the ways we will see India progressing and moving forward, some of that we are already witnessing.

Walter Ladwig:

Just to pick up on what Harsh said and the question of burden sharing. I think then, with respect to Southeast Asia, the important question becomes which partners where. Because the ones that you've named are all members of the Quad. The Quad elicits a certain degree of concern or disquiet amongst countries in the region, in no small part because they're concerned about ASEAN centrality being displaced. So although collectively these countries are working on things that do resonate and do have interest in the region, whether it's infrastructure development, climate, not to mention the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief stuff that's already been talked about, it might not be the case that even trilateral burden sharing or cooperation is going to be the way forward, but perhaps on a bilateral basis, countries that don't have particularly tough relationships. So you'd be cautious about where you partner with the Americans or where you'd partner with the Australians with respect to certain states.

I would think Indonesia would certainly be a priority state for India just on the basis of geopolitical weight itself, not to mention the questions of handoffs from the G-20 presidency and the ability to send a consistent and coherent message. And then lastly, France, India, and the Western Indian Ocean are really important partnerships. We've already seen some joint maritime patrols, and that's a relationship that definitely needs to be taken forward.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you, Walter. We have barely scratched the surface, I think, on Aditi's fantastic book and her scholarship. But I want to thank you all for joining us, both the panelists as well as everyone who attended the session today. A fantastic discussion. And I would really recommend Aditi's book to all of you. It is available on Amazon for purchase, the physical copy. But Aditi has also done a great service to scholars and analysts who work on the Indo-Pacific by making it actually available open access, so you can download it for free as well and we will share those links in the chat. But thank you again for joining us and the discussion video as well as the transcript will be available on the Stimson website if you're interested in checking it out after this. And please do look out for our events and programming this year, we have a lot of exciting things coming up. But until then, thank you so much and goodbye.

Aditi Malhotra:

Thank you so much, Akriti for having me. And thank you, Professor Pant and Dr. Ladwig.