

Event Transcript

India's Post-Election Foreign Policy

The Stimson Center

June 12, 2024

Featuring:

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria, Former Indian Envoy to Pakistan

Sohini Bose, Observer Research Foundation

Jabin Jacob, Shiv Nadar University

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

Event Description

In 2014, soon after he assumed office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that his government would focus on a “Neighborhood First” policy. He sought to normalize relations with Pakistan, reach a modus vivendi with China, and invest in relationships with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal to realize the untapped potential of these ties. A decade later, a new government will come to power in a starkly different geopolitical environment. India and China have been locked in a border standoff since 2020, ties with Pakistan are on ice since the Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019, and economic turmoil or domestic politics have altered New Delhi’s equations with other neighbors.

In this panel discussion, three experts on Indian foreign policy will assess what the new Indian government’s regional foreign policy agenda may be. Panelists will examine the potential for a thaw in India-Pakistan relations, the evolving reorientation of India’s strategic focus to China, and its goals for the South Asian region writ large as it seeks to bolster its credentials as a net security provider and economic partner of choice. They will also reflect on the implications of New Delhi’s regional outreach for its ties with the United States.

More information and event video available at: <https://www.stimson.org/event/indias-post-election-foreign-policy/>

Event Transcript:

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Well, good morning, good afternoon, and good evening, everyone, wherever in the world you're joining us from. Thank you so much for tuning in, and welcome to the Stimson Center South Asia Program’s event on India's post-election foreign policy. My name is Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar, and I'm a Fellow in the program and editor-at-large of our online policy platform, *South Asian Voices*. Now, the Indian elections that concluded on June 4th with the results threw up some expected and some surprising outcomes. On the one hand, Narendra Modi came to power for a third consecutive term. Only the second Prime Minister since Jawaharlal Nehru to achieve this feat. On the other hand, his Bhartiya Janata

Party secured 240 seats, well short of the 272 seats needed for a majority in the 543 seat Lok Sabha or lower House of Parliament. This is much lower than the BJP's wins in 2014 and 2019. However, the BJP's pre-poll National Democratic Alliance was able to form a coalition government with 293 seats.

What does this reduced mandate for Modi and the BJP, which was widely expected to win by huge margins, mean for India's regional foreign policy agenda? This is an especially relevant discussion because Prime Minister Modi comes to power in a starkly different geopolitical environment than when he first did so a decade ago. India and China have been locked in a border standoff since 2020. Ties with Pakistan are on ice since the Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019, and economic turmoil or domestic politics have altered New Delhi's equations with other neighbors. And this is despite a professed neighborhood-first policy from the BJP since 2014. An idea that is found mentioned again in 2024.

So what will Modi 3.0 mean for India's relations with China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the neighborhood at large, as well as the United States? Our discussion today will focus on all this and more. Joining me today to delve into these issues is a fantastic set of panelists. I'm delighted to be joined by Ambassador Ajay Bisaria. He is a former Indian diplomat. He served as the high commissioner of India to Pakistan from December 2017 to February 2020, and most recently as high commissioner of India to Canada from 2020 to 2022. Prior to joining the diplomatic service, Ambassador Bisaria worked briefly with the American Express bank and Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited in Delhi. He is now an advisor and author of the book *Anger Management: The Troubled Diplomatic Relationship Between India and Pakistan*.

Dr. Jabin Jacob is associate professor of international relations at the Shiv Nadar University and adjunct research fellow at the National Maritime Foundation in New Delhi. He was formerly fellow and assistant director at the Institute of Chinese Studies in Delhi, and associate editor of the journal *China Report*. His research interests include Chinese foreign policy, Indian and Chinese worldviews, and center province relations in China. Dr. Jacob holds a PhD in Chinese studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University and has spent time as a researcher in Taiwan, France, and Singapore.

Finally, Sohini Bose is an associate fellow at Observer Research Foundation in Kolkata with the strategic studies program. Her area of research is India's eastern maritime neighborhood where she explores connectivity, geopolitics, and security concerns in the way of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Sohini is a 2021 U.S. Department of State IVLP fellow and a non-resident fellow at the

National Bureau of Asian Research in Washington DC. She's also pursuing her PhD in International Relations from Jadavpur University in Kolkata.

Thank you so much to all the panelists for joining us. So, since we have only about an hour, we'll dispense with opening remarks and instead I'll pose some questions of my own to each of our panelists. But I'd also like the audience to engage with our panel, and so we are going to collect questions throughout the session, and I will intersperse them into the discussion where 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.

All right, we'll get straight into it. And Jabin, let me come to you first. So, there's been some speculation in the media and in strategic circles that a reset in India-China ties is coming post the Indian election. Now there's some evidence to support this theory in the recent reopening of the Indian market to Chinese investments, which had been restricted post the 2020 border standoff. An example of such an investment is the Chinese smartphone maker Vivo investing in a manufacturing plant in Greater Noida. So, my question to you is, is an India-China reset possible in Modi's third term? And what would its goals be if it comes to pass? Would it be a comprehensive resolution of all the issues between the two countries, or perhaps just a tactical level reset to give India a bit of a breather on the border?

Jabin Jacob:

Well, thank you, Akriti, for that question. First, I think we should get rid of the word 'reset' from the India-China lexicon. That word has been used multiple times to describe situations that are far from the reality of reset. I mean, one only needs to remember how the Indian government used the word 'reset' for the outcomes of the informal summits in 2018 and 2019. If there was a reset, I think that happened post the Galwan clash in 2020. Now, as of now, the government is publicly held firm to the commitment of no normalization of Sino-Indian ties without de-escalation and disengagement at the Line of Actual Control. But yes, there are some overtures. There have been some overtures being made, some changes, some opening in evidence. But this is not post-elections. I think this has been on since at least the end of last year when the Indian government opened up to Chinese think tanks visiting India, or at least a few Indian think tanks visiting China.

And this happened without really any change on the ground as far as the military-to-military talks on the LAC was concerned. So my reading of this is really that the government was hoping that the Chinese would not complicate matters on the LAC during election season and thus draw attention to what I think is the Indian government's primary foreign policy failure, which is in the

relationship with China in terms of how the Indian government has responded to the Galwan clashes since 2020. Now post-elections, I think in classic form, the government has made some very interesting moves. The Indian Prime Minister responded immediately to the Taiwanese president tweeting 'congratulations' on his victory. This happened on June 5th. On the same day, the Chinese Foreign Ministry also tweeted. But the Indian Foreign Ministry responded only on the 8th. So there was quite a lag between the government of India responding to the Chinese government.

And to date, Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, is the only Chinese leader that is not personally congratulated Prime Minister Modi. It's the Chinese premier who's congratulated Prime Minister Modi. So there, I think, we are already seeing the Chinese sort of scale down the level of engagement. If you remember when Prime Minister Modi went to China first on a state visit, it was the premier then, Li Qiang, who received him. And then subsequently, the relationship seemed to scale up to meetings between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping. Now it's again back down to the Chinese premier and the Indian prime minister. Overall, I think we are far from a reset post-Galwan. India's China policy needs a structural overhaul. And that I think will come from greater consultation across the political and intellectual spectrum in India.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you so much, Jabin. And you mentioned that if there was a reset, it happened post the Galwan crisis, and we are approaching the fourth anniversary of that clash this week. So let me ask you in the context of that, in terms of India's strategic reorientation towards China, recently Indian defense Minister Rajnath Singh confirmed that India will soon begin building a third aircraft carrier, widely believed to be a response to China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean. In recent months, we've seen that India has also redeployed about 10,000 troops from the border with Pakistan to the frontier with China.

Not to mention carrying on significant upgrades on the border, particularly infrastructure such as roads, airfields, and telecom towers, and India's recent Agni-V test with MIRV capability was also seen as aimed at competing with China. So do you believe these developments indicate a strategic reorientation of India's national security focus from Pakistan to China? And how would the new government deal with a potential dual challenge from Pakistan and China?

Jabin Jacob:

I think the strategic reorientation has been underway for quite some time, at least from the UPA government under Dr.

Manmohan Singh, if not earlier under Prime Minister Vajpayee. But it has taken the 2020 Galwan clash for the entire system to adopt, to buy fully into this idea of strategic reorientation. I think within the security services, this reorientation is very strong. I mean just recently, there are ministries of course within the government of India that have called for greater opening to China, ease of restrictions on Chinese FDI, visas for Chinese personnel, et cetera. So clearly the message hasn't gotten everywhere. But even so, I think there is a substantial amount of focus on what China is doing and how India must respond to it. So there is in that sense, post 2020, greater attention to China and a greater understanding of the risks of engagement with China.

Now, one could argue that of course this focus on China should have started a little while earlier, at least post-2017. But at the political level, we continue to be distracted by Pakistan and so on. I think with Pakistan, it really depends a great deal on how India understands its priorities in terms of challenges. I would argue that the challenge from China is a bigger challenge than from Pakistan. But having said that, you really can't deal with China without fixing your problems with Pakistan. I mean, that strategy reorientation has still some distance to go.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you so much, Jabin. And that gives me a great segue to bring in Ambassador Ajay Bisaria into the conversation. So Ambassador, talking about India-Pakistan relations, a lot has been made of Prime Minister Modi being only the second prime minister since Nehru to get a third consecutive term. A historic third term may potentially come with the pressure of leaving behind a powerful legacy. So could Pakistan be one of the areas where we might see these tendencies play out? There have been some mixed messages regarding Prime Minister Modi's approach to Pakistan. And Pakistan-administered Kashmir recently. On the one hand, we have seen some increasing rhetoric from the BJP politicians on reclaiming Pakistan-administered Kashmir. While on the other hand, there is some talk in the strategic community that re-engaging Pakistan could be Modi's Nobel Peace Prize moment. And as Jabin was mentioning, to fully focus on China, India needs to improve relations with Pakistan. So what would you make of these assessments, and which of these scenarios are plausible in this next term for Modi?

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria: Well, thank you for having me. And I think the answer to that question is all of them are plausible. But I think apart from the legacy factor, we must also remember that Pakistan is perhaps India's most complex neighborhood relationship and the most unpredictable one as well. And this, I think, came home to us right

after the swearing in of PM Modi. There was a bit of Twitter or X diplomacy when Pakistan's most powerful politicians both tweeted. The Sharif brothers, Shehbaz Sharif as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif both tweeted their congratulations. And Prime Minister Modi acknowledged them but mentioning the issue of security. And I think what it underlines is that the Pakistan relationship is now something that India looks at from the lens of a counter-terrorism policy. And the terrorism issue really stands as a deal breaker.

If you were asking me this question a week ago, I would certainly have said that elections in both countries... That is a reason for cautious optimism and to go ahead because that means a fresh look at the relationship. The objective factors are good. But the caution always is that terrorism can be the deal breaker. And we saw that with three terrorist incidents, the first of which happened just an hour before the swearing-in when nine people were killed in the Jammu region, which happens to be a region south of the Kashmir Valley from where some troops have been repositioned to the Chinese border. So there is a feeling in the security community that is not very well guarded. I think that is precisely the kind of dilemma that Pakistan presents to India. You need to, you want to improve that relationship, but you have this deal-breaking factor of terrorism.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you so much, Ambassador Bisaria. You mentioned already the three attacks that have happened in recent days in Jammu and Kashmir killing both Indian civilians and military personnel. And historically, attacks in Jammu and Kashmir have played a spoiler in India-Pakistan relations with Delhi linking Kashmir-based groups to Pakistan. So about Modi's 3.0's appetite, even if limited to work with Pakistan towards re-engagement, are there any potential incentives that could prompt India to re-engage with Pakistan, particularly as you're saying in the context of these attacks where the re-engagement seems limited, or the opportunity for that seems limited?

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria: Yes, I would argue there are. There are incentives, particularly after the election. There were objective factors because there is a ceasefire which is held at the Line of Control for the last four years. There is a significant drop overall in the number of terrorist incidents. And some of the positives have gone on. There have been backchannel contacts through the intelligence and security establishments at both countries. So the objective factors which argue for an opening are there, apart from the fact that Pakistan itself made some overtures about trade.

So there is a bunch of low-hanging fruits. But the bottom line here would be to go ahead. India would need some significant assurances on terrorism, that there would not be a significant increase in terrorism. The political risk for India's political class always in this relationship is that the moment there is a significant breakthrough or rapprochement with the civilian leadership, there is often a sort of terrorist incident that derails the process. So I think what India would like to do now is to go ahead, but with some kind of strong assurance from Pakistan that terrorism would be curbed.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you, Ambassador Bisaria. And we'll return to this theme again a little bit later in the discussion but let me bring Sohini Bose into the conversation as we turn to the broader neighborhood. So Sohini, one of the most powerful and symbolic images from Modi's oath-taking ceremony were the seven heads of state from the near neighborhood who were present for the ceremony. And a key feature of the Modi government's neighborhood policy over the last decade has been to develop more linkages with the Bay of Bengal countries and use India's geography in the East particularly to establish connectivity with Southeast Asia. So in your assessment, what would the Modi government's report card on the Bay of Bengal be over the last decade and where are future areas of growth in Modi 3.0?

Sohini Bose: Right. Thank you, Akriti, for bringing me into this discussion. It's a very interesting topic. You're right. Because in the last decade, if we look at India's neighborhood policy, especially in the East, I think we can easily term it as a maritime decade because there have been multiple initiatives that have been undertaken to strengthen relations between India and its eastern neighborhood. And given that Bay of Bengal is the common maritime space between these countries, a lot of these initiatives have had maritime connotations. And therefore, both bilaterally and multilaterally, there have been efforts to increase shipping between these two countries and undertake joint defense exercises that have taken root and have grown in their capacity over the years. But what I would say would be the areas which would be given much more attention in the coming years would be the realm of non-traditional security threats in the Bay of Bengal.

These are human security issues, which concern all the countries that are in this region. And some of these issues are as pertinent as conventional defense issues, such as the threat of natural disasters, the problem of illegal fishing, which is persisting in the Bay of Bengal for very many years now between India and Sri Lanka. And there is also a potential that this concern can become a

concern of significance between India and Bangladesh. So I would say human security would be at the forefront of collaboration between India and its eastern neighborhood in the coming decades. And Bay of Bengal would be the common platform in which these partnerships are executed.

In terms of natural disasters, I would say that India has already come to a memorandum of understanding on natural disasters with Bangladesh. It does undertake joint exercises under the platform of BIMSTEC as well in terms of natural disasters. So this is an area where there would also be an initiative to develop a culture of disaster preparedness in the region moving forward, as we see that the threat of climate change is growing. So from disaster response there would be an increasing shift to disaster preparedness. And I think India would take the lead in developing this kind of a culture. So environmental security will be one of the defining features of the Modi government's interactions and areas of collaboration with the eastern neighborhood.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you so much, Sohini. And you touched briefly on India-Bangladesh relations, but I wanted to go a bit deeper into that. What are specific areas that you see that the two countries can explore soon to enhance their ties? And I say this particularly in the context of China-Bangladesh ties. Especially because we've seen India's recently shifted its stance on the Teesta River and is working to support the Teesta restoration project and looking at potential collaboration with Bangladesh and India. So what are avenues that hold from strengthening ties between India and Bangladesh?

Sohini Bose: See, what we must acknowledge at the very outset is that there is a very organic mutual dependence between the two countries. Given that they have very many common resources, they have contiguous territories. And so, for the joint management of these resources, there needs to be complementarity in governance between the two countries. And with the returning governments of Modi and Hasina in India and Bangladesh over the last decade, there's a kind of natural partnership, which has matured into a very functional synergy, which has allowed both the governments to undertake cooperation, deepen them in existing areas, expand them across new horizons. But given that there is already a very functional and working relationship between the two governments, there will be continuity in the relationship in the coming years. So if I must choose amongst the very many that India-Bangladesh cooperates in, one sector which will continue to be at the forefront of India-Bangladesh relations is connectivity.

Connectivity offers two advantages. The first is it allows for trade; it allows for prosperity. The second is it facilitates people-to-people connectivity and helps improve relations between the two countries. So connectivity will be at the forefront. If we must take an assessment of the past decade, we will see that very many such initiatives have already been undertaken to facilitate better connectivity between Bangladesh and the Indian states that border it. The Bandhan Express has been launched, the Mitali Express has been launched. And not only land connectivity, but there is also maritime connectivity which I'm talking about because Bangladesh is crucially positioned to provide India's northeast with an access to the sea, very convenient access, bypassing the Siliguri Corridor. So India is interested in using the Chattogram Port and the Mongla Port. And Prime Minister Hasina's offer to India to use these ports for the development of the Northeast is very crucial to India. So in the coming years, we will see more such connectivity projects, I'm sure, and especially in the Northeast region because this is also Bangladesh's hinterland. Helping develop India's Northeast will allow Bangladesh also to trade better with Nepal and Bhutan. Nepal and Bhutan are also interested in using Bangladesh's ports for their overseas trades. So not only would the northeast benefit from this increased cargo, but Bangladesh will also benefit.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Great, thank you so much, Sohini. And we'll return to a discussion about India's relations with the broader neighborhood. But let me turn to a few questions on the Modi government's reduced mandate and whether that has an impact on its foreign policy. One potential consequence of the result is that the BJP's lost its majority in the Lok Sabha and it will need to consult its allies more and potentially weather the instability that comes with coalition governments, such as a potential for the vote of no-confidence motion. And Chinese analysts believe that the need to rely on coalition partners will weaken Modi's ability to deal with major powers. And some of them also contend that India's economic troubles are structural and will plague Modi in the third term. So this is a two-part question, first to Ambassador Bisaria. Is there a concern that the Modi government will be distracted by domestic politics at the cost of foreign policy during this term? And if so, how does that impact India's ties with its neighborhood?

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria: Well, I would argue that there is a broad consensus in India on foreign policy, and the fact of a coalition government will not really detract from the government's bandwidth to address foreign policy challenges. We've seen this in coalition governments in the past. In the Vajpayee era for instance, the BJP had on both the Vajpayee government's 182 seats, much less than the 240 that the

BJP has now with the need for only 32 seats from its coalition partners. So foreign policy initiatives were taken then. Foreign policy initiatives and risks I think will be taken now.

So I don't see the government getting distracted by the coalition compulsions in Delhi in the way it acts abroad. And I think in a legacy Modi term, there would be greater risks being taken in foreign policy in general. But I would agree that the proposition that there would be a bigger focus on domestic issues because I think that was part of the discourse in the election, that is part of the mandate in the election. And the focus will be on the economic ambition to be a developed economy by 2047. And I think that would be a guiding principle, even for some of the foreign policy moves.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: All right, thank you, Ambassador. And if I can just follow up briefly on the fact that we have a stronger opposition now led by the Indian National Congress, which has historically proposed and worked on bilateral dialogue with Pakistan. Will that have an impact on Pakistan policy under the NDA government, in terms of checks and balances and greater role from the opposition on directing engagement with Pakistan?

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria: I would argue that the opposition will not have a big say in what the government decides to do in its neighborhood policy and Pakistan policy. Perhaps the coalition partners will. So the two major coalition partners are from Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, and they may have a limited influence on the way the government acts. But we've seen in past coalitions that the coalition partners tend to give the mandate to the Prime Minister and ask him to do what is best in the national interest. So I see in domestic policies a bigger attempt at forging consensus, particularly for major structural reforms. But I don't see the opposition playing a major role in determining or influencing government policy, particularly a government which already has 10 years of experience in rolling out policy.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you for that, Ambassador. Jabin, let me bring you in here, since I was mentioning that Chinese analysts are potentially looking at the NDA government as weak and professing that potentially will impact the government's ability to take its relations with major powers and take stronger action. What do you think is the consequence of China considering India as weak, potentially, in this new government? There's also a similar question from one of our audience members, Anand Krishnan, "Given the new government," he says, "which is a coalition government in a real sense, do you foresee any impact of that on the China policy?"

How does China seeing India as weak really impact India-China relations?

Jabin Jacob:

I think it would be a mistake for the Chinese to see India as weak because of a coalition government. I mean, I would refer these Chinese analysts back to their own history, the history of the Communist Party of China, which before 1949 was engaged in coalition politics. They called it the United Front with the KMT. And as soon as the Japanese threat in World War II was done, the CCP essentially defeated the KMT in civil war and took power. Today, the constitutions have changed to acknowledge the supremacy of the CPC in power. I mean, ditto with the BJP. I don't think the BJP, with the experience of 10 years in government, is going to let coalition partners overrule it on foreign policy issues. But perhaps on China, the opposition could draw greater attention to issues on the LAC.

And I think this is an area of weakness for the Modi government because it's not managed to get a China policy in place in this past decade. So perhaps greater discussion and openness in Parliament will help direct its China policy in a better fashion than has been the case over the past decade. One thing I'd like to draw attention to is the fact that in this administration we only have two ministers of state or two deputy ministers in the MEA. In the last administration, we had three deputy ministers in the MEA. I mean, maybe we'll have seen an expansion, but currently both the deputy ministers also have other briefs, not just external affairs. So I wonder what that says about the government's foreign policy priorities. So that might be a challenge for Indian foreign policy in general, the fact that the government might not have enough bandwidth to devote to foreign policy.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thanks, Jabin. Let me take a question from one of our audience members. And I apologize if I'm mispronouncing your name, but this is from Joaquin Laksheide. He asks, "What are some of the steps or approaches you would like to see the Indian government take in its relations with China?"

Jabin Jacob:

Okay, first and foremost, I think the government, the MEA could use professional help. I think it needs to expand. The MEA certainly needs to expand its capacity. The government needs to have broad-based consultations with both the political spectrum, across political spectrum and the intellectual spectrum in India to get the best inputs on China. And while it's happening in parts of the system, it's not happening across the system. And I think that is a serious problem. The government certainly needs to scale up on its multilateral engagements. I think there are certain positive

moves such as, say, the sale of weapons to Philippines and so on. But the government cannot say, "We will only do this and not that." I mean, it must understand that the China challenge extends beyond South Asia. And in terms of what the government conceives as its neighborhood, I mean the neighborhood isn't simply South Asia.

The government ought to be ready to face and deal with China-related problems in its extended neighborhood, in the Indian Ocean region, and the Quad. I think the Indian government's approach on the Quad is very limited, very limiting to say that this is not a military alliance to only focus on non-traditional security threats. I mean, it's pointless because the Chinese will still view this as a military alliance, as a military grouping. So India is doing itself no favors by trying to deny the fact that this has a potential for military cooperation as well. It needs to grab the bull by its horn and say, "Look, call a spade a spade."

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thanks, Jabin. You mentioned multilateralism a couple of times. And Sohini, I want to bring you in on that, especially because there's a question in the chat box from Anil Jaysingh on BIMSTEC. He says, "BIMSTEC has been around a while. In 2019, the BIMSTEC heads of government were at the inauguration of the Modi government. Has that gesture translated into any tangible outcomes in the last five years?"

Sohini Bose: Right. Thanks, Akriti. Yes, BIMSTEC has been at the forefront of discussions as far as India's foreign policy and multilateralism is concerned in the last five years, more than it has ever been before. BIMSTEC has come into existence in 1997, and I think the most discussions about the organization have been in the last five years. And that is precisely because of the strategic importance that the Bay of Bengal is gaining right now, and the importance that the project has been viewed with by the major powers. And that is what makes BIMSTEC stand out at this strategic moment. And of course for India, because it wants to act east and BIMSTEC is a very natural platform for its engagement with these countries in multiple purviews, including trade, human security, connectivity. So yes, I think BIMSTEC is an important organization for India now. But the only constraint that could I see for BIMSTEC is that it has been making baby steps in the last one or two years.

It has just bought itself for charter and it has sought advice from the ADB on how to build connectivity, better connectivity in this region. But at the same time, BIMSTEC, there is some institutional weaknesses within the organization. It lacks that financial backing that is needed for it to undertake major initiatives. So I think that needs to be resolved. There was the talk of a BIMSTEC

development fund, but we have not heard much more about it since the talks were initially made. So yes, there are promising agreements on the skyline. There is a talk of maritime transportation agreement being undertaken within BIMSTEC. There are several agreements which are slated to be signed again in the... as far as illegal activities are concerned in the Bay of Bengal region. But even in terms of natural disasters, BIMSTEC has held a few exercises, but these need to be done with more liquidity, more regularity. And it is only then that the BIMSTEC will get the credibility that it seeks for. But as on paper yet, BIMSTEC is an important organization for India.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thanks for that, Sohini. And you as well as Jabin both mentioned the importance of India developing partnerships, both in its neighborhood and with major powers to build capacity to be able to compete with China. And here I want to ask you, Sohini, about the United States and India's coordination in South Asia because both countries consider it to be an important region, is particularly driven by their shared concerns about China's expanding influence in the region. But it was, I think interesting to a lot of onlookers in Washington when the U.S. and India were on opposite sides about the election in Bangladesh earlier this year. And I think the potential for US-India tensions on coordination in South Asia is ripe. So post-elections in both the countries, how can Delhi and Washington better manage their differences in South Asia? And where would you see them work together towards building capacity, particularly in Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh?

Sohini Bose: Thanks, Akriti. Let me just begin by saying, India and the United States have been partner countries for a long time and they have collaborated across multiple sectors. But it also needs to be stated that although both countries can have converging interests, differences are bound to exist between both the states. This is only natural. And if you have followed a recent quote by our external minister, Dr. Jaishankar in The Sunday Guardian, he says that it's time that people understood that the world functions on convergences. And you will agree on some, differ on some. And India and the United States differ in positions as far as the Bangladesh election. I think it must be viewed in that perspective. Now given that, and now that the election is over in India and United States do have shared interests in the Bay of Bengal region. So let me concentrate on Bangladesh because that is what I work on. And let me highlight some areas in which the three countries can work together for more regional stability. Absolutely, the first would be the northeast, as I have already mentioned, because this is not only India's area of interest, but it also wants to develop this

region to better connect with its eastern neighborhood. It is the only land connection that India has with these countries. But at the same time, it is also the hinterland of the Bay of Bengal, which as you know is that the receiving end of much strategic attention. It is Bangladesh's hinterland as well. So for Bangladesh also this region is very important for this to be developed, for it to enhance its commercial relations, its connectivity with the other countries of South Asia. So I think it would help if the US collaborated with India and Bangladesh in developing this region, as Japan is very invested right now.

So connectivity projects in the northeast would be one area in which these countries can work together. The second area that I think is very important in which these countries can work together is Southern Bangladesh. Southern Bangladesh, as you know, is the mouth of the Bengal Delta, and it is a very environmentally vulnerable region because major rivers are flowing into the Bay of Bengal here, and there are very many physical vulnerabilities that exist in this region. And to top that, there is also the threat of cyclones. There is the threat of storm surges and sea level rise, which is a major concern for Bangladesh right now. And given this vulnerability, Prime Minister Hasina has already asked for Chinese investments in this region to develop disaster resilient infrastructure. But what is more important is that no doubt, this area is vulnerable to natural disaster, but this area is also very, very economically important for Bangladesh.

Most of its cultivable land is found in this region and this area is very important for fishing as well. And, the ports that are in this region, they are essential for connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region. So disaster resilient infrastructure is vital for both survival and prosperity of Bangladesh, in Southern Bangladesh. So this is an area in which India and USA can for collaboratively offer competing offers of development infrastructure in this region, as does China. And that gives Bangladesh more alternatives to choose from in the coming years.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thanks, Sohini. Yeah, just in the interest of time, we'll move on to a couple of questions. We have about 15 minutes, and I really want to get to some audience queries. But thank you so much for that. Ambassador Bisaria, coming to you next. We have a question from an audience member, and he asks, "What changes do you expect the Modi government to implement in its Kashmir policy in the next five years? Could there be a cementing of the LAC and LOC as permanent borders? Or is there going to be an aggressive military posture towards territories along the LAC or Pakistan-administered Kashmir?"

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria: Well, I would think that the way to frame the Kashmir policy is that it is still a work in progress. So what the government believes is that the moves of August 2019 on removing the special status and changing Article 370 is something that is beginning to pay a peace dividend. But the work lies ahead because what we expect is a supreme court-directed election in Jammu and Kashmir by September this year. And perhaps soon thereafter or even before, an announcement of statehood for Jammu and Kashmir. I think the attempt would be to continue to have a very strong anti-terrorism grid, a counter-terrorism grid, a counter-infiltration grid to make sure that there is peace and security, and then to work on the healing touch and on prosperity. Another message that I think is clear in the government's policy is that it no longer conflates its Kashmir and Pakistan policy.

Pakistan policy is an external policy, is a foreign policy, and Kashmir policy is a domestic conversation. And the two will not be conflated now, because India's belief now is that Pakistan does not have a locus standi on the Kashmir issue. You could conceivably have a conversation about the LOC, just like you could have conversations with the Chinese about the Line of Actual Control. But it would not be a conversation tri-laterally between the Kashmiris, the Pakistanis, and the so-called Indians separately because that is what it tends to be Pakistan's position. So I think that has changed. And what India would hope is that the peace dividend in the next five years comes clearly in terms of prosperity to the region, which would be predicated on bringing peace through very strong policing of the region.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: All right, thank you so much for that. Jabin, let me bring you in on another audience question, and I'll reframe this slightly. Shubham Ghosh asks, "How do you see India's ties with the US and UK under Modi 3.0?" But I would add, particularly considering the context of India-China relations and India trying to build its comprehensive national power and capacity to deal with the China challenge, how do you see India's ties with the US and UK in that context?

Jabin Jacob: Well, I don't know so much about the UK. I mean, I'm one of those who believe the UK is well past its prime. So the US relationship is obviously the more important. And maybe I'll throw Russia in there in the context of the China relationship. I mean, clearly there are tensions in the US-India relationship. And the Chinese have often raised the issue of ideological differences between India and the US. That's their way of conveying a certain degree of discomfort at the closeness of the India-US relationship. But this I think is a relationship that is here to stay and to grow. I think what

is more interesting is how the India-Russia relationship develops in the context of the India-China relationship or the Russia-China relationship. And again, I think it's interesting that the Russians were part of the MILAN Naval exercises with India, the last exercises with the Indians where the Americans are also involved. So clearly the Russians want to be involved very strongly with India. I think they see India as an opportunity and an option vis-a-vis China.

As close as the China-Russia relationship gets, I think India still has plenty of work to do with respect to Russians. I would say that how the India-US relationship or the India-Russia relationship develops in the context of China is how India... I mean, it depends on how India itself responds to China. The most strongly India can respond to Chinese provocations, the better it is for India's bilateral relationships with the other great powers. And if India is seen as weak or waffling or taking its time responding to China, I think that also affects India's credibility with the great powers. And not just with the great powers. Also with India's neighbors. I think the reason why China has had something of an ingress in India's neighborhood, immediate neighborhood in South Asia is because I think these countries see India's responses to Chinese transgressions somewhere weak or lacking. So India also needs to up its game, if it must better its sides with both the great powers as well as smaller neighbors.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Let me do a quick follow up on that. So what do you make of the debate that's happening in Indian strategic circles over the past two years about the China-Russia relationship? The sort of famous no-limits partnership moniker and the fact that on one hand India needs Russia for defense because of its overall reliance on defense equipment and weapons. But on the other hand, that relationship is a hurdle in developing further the partnership with the US, for example. So both in terms of national security considerations of China and Russia getting closer together, but India needing to still have avenues open for defense partnerships with the US. How do you see that whole mix and how would you advise if you were an advisor to the Modi-led NDA government on how to deal with US, China, and Russia?

Jabin Jacob: Well, I would say that India needs to continue staying strong on its Russia policy. And I think it's a very limited approach that the Americans and the Europeans take in trying to put pressure on India on the Russia question. And India has not been an uncritical supporter of the Russians, like the Chinese have been. India has criticized Russia. India has spoken frankly to the Russians behind closed doors. And India is really an opportunity for the West to

engage with Russia and to bring Russia around. That's not an opportunity that the West will have with China. Because in the case of the Chinese, their engagement with Russia is purely ideological. It's purely driven by anti-West sentiment. And so, I think the West should realize that India's close relationship, strong relationship with the Russians is an opportunity for introducing an element of moderation in Russia's policies, in Russia's foreign and security policies.

India has that bandwidth. India has that credibility with the Russians. So I think India needs to stay strong on that front. Now, specifically with respect to India's military ties with Russia. I mean, there are certain concerns and Russians have sort of opened to the Pakistanis, for example, so there is a certain, shall we say, lack of consistency also in the Russian policy. But this I think we need to take in our stride. I mean, the Russians are going to respond to greater India-US cooperation, and because this is also something of an existential threat that the Russian regime sees in the United States. Well, to sort of navigate this is the stuff of foreign policy. I mean, nobody said foreign policy would be easy. And India, as an aspiring great power, should welcome these challenges.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you, Jabin.

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria: If I might just jump in and support what Jabin has said, I would agree with him that the way India sees the world now is that its central strategic challenge comes from China. And many of its relationships, it will see from the prism of that relationship and that strategic challenge. Therefore, there is great merit in a much closer relationship with the US. Often by itself is important, this relationship, but also for the China factor. And it also sees merit in engaging more deeply for that reason with China's closest ally, which is Russia. And both these happen to be core national interest for India. So the Russians understand that the US relationship is a core national interest for India, just as the United States has an understanding now that the Russian relationship is a core national interest, is a relationship of great importance to India and a legacy relationship, and that these will continue. So I think India is comfortable in its skin in being able to explain to its partners each of these relationships.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: All right, thank you so much, everyone. We are coming to the end of this discussion, and so I will just get to our last prompt and ask each of our panelists to just share any concluding thoughts in one minute, since we don't have much time left. But I did want to bring the topic back of India's neighborhood-first policy that has been a

professed desire of India's over the last decade. But despite that, we've seen a lot of topsy-turvy ties in the neighborhood that India has had, particularly with Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives. And we have seen that the new government has again professed a neighborhood-first policy. What do these competing messages signal about India's current approach or future strategy towards its neighbors? So essentially, what do you expect as, say, the top one or top two, top three things happening in the region with respect to India's neighbors? We'll go to Ambassador Bisaria, then Jabin, and then Sohini.

Ambassador Ajay Bisaria: Sure. So I would say that the neighborhood-first policy will continue with, including Pakistan if possible, and with Pakistan exceptionalism if necessary. And that will depend on the terrorism factor and the various assurances India gets on this.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Jabin?

Jabin Jacob: Yeah. So I would sort of take on from what Sohini said. I mean, stress the element of connectivity. I mean, neighborhood-first cannot work without physical connectivity, people-to-people connectivity, economic integration. And while the great deal of progress has been made in the last decade, there's a great deal more that needs to be done. And I think we shouldn't be afraid of learning at least few lessons from the Chinese on this score, which is see how the Chinese have deployed their Global Development Initiative, the global security initiative, and see what we can do to both counter as well as to build some of our own strengths in these areas with respect to our neighbors.

One thing I want to flag is the South Asian University. I mean, the way India has run the South Asian University is a classic case of how poorly we have run neighborhood issues in the past. And I think that's an opportunity that we really cannot let go of. I mean, there's a lot of things that we can do to improve the South Asian University based in Delhi as well as create new initiatives, more scholarships, more think tankers from the region coming in, more government officials to be trained in India. I think that's the way to go.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Sohini, any final thoughts in the last 30 seconds?

Sohini Bose: Oh. I'll just pick up the point from Jabin, and I'll just say that it is excellent that the governments share goodwill with one another. But it's very important that the people of the countries and the region also have goodwill towards one another. We have seen that often this kind of goodwill gets politicized with the narratives of

competing parties, political parties, such as has happened at Bangladesh with the India Out campaign and the boycotting Indian products campaign. So I think while collaborative efforts in very many domains are important between India and Bangladesh, it is also important that the governments decide to engage in initiatives which will bring the people of the two countries together. This can be done abundantly through digital media and social media. So there is need for initiatives which will bring the people of the two countries together and remind them of their commonalities and how they can work together for the betterment of the region.

Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar: Thank you so much, Sohini and to Jabin and Ambassador Bisaria for this fascinating discussion. I think it's clear that we have a lot to watch about Modi 3.0 in terms of its foreign policy. Let me just say that the video recording and transcript of this event will be available on the Stimson website, if you want to return to it. And now I do want to welcome you all to please join the Stimson Center as we host U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell for a fireside chat exploring historic tensions, emerging competition, and new opportunities for strategic partnership across the Indo-Pacific. That will be in less than five minutes on our website. But thank you to all of you for joining us.