

# Marine Rotational Force-India

A case for a rotational deployment in India to balance the pacing threat

by 1stLt Tianxing Hu

The greatest security challenge the Marine Corps will face in the future operating environment is competing with a peer adversary that can outspend and outman it. U.S. military primacy, and as a result U.S. geopolitical influence, has been guaranteed for decades by the largest defense budget in the world. In a future when that may no longer be the case, the United States and the Marine Corps must find other ways to maintain our leverage and to compete. The key to doing so lies in our ability to promote a credible regional challenger to balance the rise of China. As the world's largest democracy and with the second largest military budget in Asia, India is a natural ally for this cause.<sup>1</sup> To support this effort, the Marine Corps should deploy a rotational force in India to conduct regional engagement, enhance interoperability, and posture for contingency and crisis response.

## The Pacing Threat

The People's Republic of China has been the world's largest economy since 2017, as measured by gross domestic product at purchasing power parity.<sup>2</sup> It will soon be the world's largest economy in nominal terms as well.<sup>3</sup> Beijing has used this newfound wealth to modernize and expand its military in a way described as "unprecedented in scale and depth."<sup>4</sup> By some estimates, after adjusting for accounting and other differences, the Chinese defense budget in 2017 amounted to \$467 billion or 87 percent of U.S. military spending for the same year.<sup>5</sup> When, as some projections show, China's economy is three times the size of America's in 2040, it is inevitable that Beijing will be able to

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outspend Washington on defense.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond pure spending, Beijing has aggressively pursued technological advancements across the full spectrum of modern weapon systems, including space and cyberspace.<sup>7</sup> This is in addition to their success in developing traditional capabilities like their sophisticated long-range precision strike platforms.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, China will always have the manpower advantage from a numerical perspective.

In the future operating environment, U.S. military preeminence cannot be taken for granted. Instead, the United States and the Marine Corps must look outward to build a strong alliance of like-minded nations to counter the rising behemoth that is China. The most critical country for this strategy is India.<sup>9</sup>

## The Republic of India

India has the third largest gross domestic product in the world by purchasing power parity, behind China and the United States.<sup>10</sup> India overtook China to become the fastest growing major economy in the world in 2015.<sup>11</sup> Demographically, it has the world's second largest population.<sup>12</sup> However, unlike China, India's population is very young. About half of its population is below



*U.S. forces have increased bilateral training and exercises with India in recent years. (Photo by Maj Kelly Haux.)*

the age of 25. The average age is 29, compared to 37 for China. If taken advantage of, this “demographic dividend” can fuel a meteoric rise in India’s economy even as China’s growth begins to slow down.<sup>13</sup>

India also maintains the second largest active duty military force in the world, with approximately 1,455,550 personnel in 2019 compared to China’s 2,035,000 and America’s 1,359,540.<sup>14</sup> It is a nuclear power with access to the nuclear triad of delivery methods.<sup>15</sup> India also has one active aircraft carrier.<sup>16</sup> As India’s economy grows, its investment in defense can be expected to grow as well. It is only a matter of time before it develops fully into a leading military contender.

Also of note is the fact that India has engaged in a series of border disputes with China, starting with the Sino-Indian War in 1962. The most recent of these events resulted in dozens of military deaths in the June 2020 skirmishes.<sup>17</sup> This unresolved rivalry can be used to justify closer cooperation between India and the United States.

### A Lesson from History

This is not the first time in history a hegemon has had to manage the rise of two emerging powers. It is easy to see the parallels between the geopolitical landscape today and the turn of the 20th century. The U.S. and German economies eclipsed Great Britain’s in 1870 and 1910, respectively.<sup>18</sup> After reigning as the world’s most dominant power for a century, Great Britain recognized the economic and military realities were shifting. In evaluating its options, it came to the conclusion that it should accede some influence to the United States in order to better focus on Germany. The United States shared a language, political culture, and social values with Britain. Such was not necessarily the case with Germany. Britain felt it could rely on the United States to carry these shared values and institutions forward even in a world where Great Britain was no longer dominant. Indeed, British forbearance during this time laid the foundation for the “special relationship” with the United States that has since endured through multiple

world wars. Today, many of the traditions and principles that Great Britain values continue to be championed by the United States.

Like Great Britain before us, we are now facing the rise of two ambitious nations. On the one hand, China is a revisionist power that has shown little interest in being a responsible stakeholder in the international rules-based arrangement that the United States has led since the end of the Second World War. China has pushed for a number of ideas and organizations that challenge the Bretton Woods system of rules and institutions that the United States helped establish.<sup>19</sup> The current Chinese regime is authoritarian, hierarchical, and an anathema to individual liberties. As Beijing’s clout continues to grow, their political and moral values will spread in direct competition with America’s advocacy for a free and open world order.

On the other hand, India is a capitalist liberal democracy whose institutions mirror their U.S. counterparts. As a Commonwealth nation, it is committed to core beliefs, including democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, and rule of law.<sup>20</sup> It is also the country with the second largest population of English speakers, only behind the United States.<sup>21</sup> India is a nation the United States can trust to promote some of the same political culture and social values that are important to Americans. As it gains in prominence, it will naturally act as a counterbalance in Asia to China and its competing world view.

As such, the United States is already engaging with India across the political spectrum. It has supported India’s desire for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council and backed greater representation for Indian interests in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.<sup>22</sup> What the United States should pursue more actively is military engagement with India. Progress is being made, such as when the United States and India signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement in 2018, but more work needs to be done.<sup>23</sup> To that end, a rotational MAGTF in India is the right target to aim for.

### Military Engagement

India is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialog—or “Quad”—along with Japan, Australia, and the United States.<sup>24</sup> In what Tokyo has called a “democratic security diamond,” the Quad was initiated in 2007 in response to increasing Chinese aggression and capability.<sup>25</sup> Per the 2019 Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, the Quad is a forum focused on “rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, increasing connectivity consistent with international law and standards, and coordinating on counter-terrorism and maritime security efforts.”<sup>26</sup>

Japan and Australia both have substantive Marine Corps presences in the forms of III MEF and Marine Rotational Force–Darwin (MRF-D), respectively. India is the only Quad member that does not currently host a U.S. force. A MAGTF on the subcontinent would be worthwhile for both New Delhi and Washington.

New Delhi has long been concerned with the String of Pearls theory, which refers to the idea that China is encircling India via a “network of military and commercial facilities along [India’s] sea lines of communication” and via the Belt and Road initiative, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.<sup>27</sup> By surrounding India, some believe Beijing’s intent is to limit New Delhi’s power projection and trade routes, thus threatening its national security. Pakistan’s receipt of so much Chinese largesse through the Belt and Road initiative and the cultivation of an “all-weather friendship” between the two countries is particularly concerning.<sup>28</sup> A U.S. presence in India would go a long way towards counterbalancing the String of Pearls strategy and in fact envelope China in an “Asian arc of democracy” backed by Marines.<sup>29</sup>

The United States is already India’s largest military exercise partner. However, the reverse is far from the case.<sup>30</sup> By having a rotational presence in India, the two countries could conduct significantly more bilateral and multilateral exercises. These exercises would be a valuable way to strengthen the alliance and learn from each other. Moreover, as the two militaries become

more interoperable, this would heavily incentivize India to divest from Russian manufactured defense assets and invest in U.S. ones. Putting a MAGTF on the subcontinent under III MEF is also in line with the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. It would create another “fight-tonight, stand-in force capability to persist inside an adversary’s weapon systems threat range.”<sup>31</sup>

A similar force already exists in Australia, another Quad nation. MRF-D has made significant contributions toward improving Australia-U.S. interoperability and is a tangible demonstration of the sustained U.S. commitment to allies in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond that, MRF-D has improved the perception of Americans among Australians through their demonstrated professionalism and their support to the local economy in Darwin. For the Marines, the rotational deployment acts as an excellent training opportunity. A MAGTF in India could reap many of these same benefits if executed correctly. In some ways, India may be an even more affordable and effective option. India hosts many unique training environments and does not have a “wet season” the same way Darwin does, allowing for greater flexibility in deployment schedules.

### Counterargument

With that being said, there are many issues with this proposal. For one, while India does share many liberal democratic values with the United States, it is fundamentally an Eastern civilization that also has many cultural customs that differ from American customs. It is not nearly at the level of similarity that United States and British culture share. For example, the caste system in India is antithetical to U.S. society. While the United States may be able to rely on India to promote democracy and rule of law in the Indo-Pacific, it is less able to rely on India’s hierarchical government to promote individual liberties over group harmony. While India is closer to the U.S. politically, it may be closer to China culturally.

More importantly, India is a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>32</sup> While the movement was originally created to protect the independent



**Sustaining a presence in India can present challenges for installations and infrastructure.**  
(Photo: USAID, Historical Archive.)

sovereignty and national security of Third World countries during the Cold War, the demise of the Soviet Union does not change the fact that it can be advantageous to proclaim non-alignment while courting multiple sides to hedge one’s bets. Non-alignment makes it politically defensible, for example, to rebuff the United States by not sending troops to Iraq but working with Washington on the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal shortly thereafter.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, this perspective has caused New Delhi to historically avoid pursuing military interoperability.<sup>34</sup>

While both these points have merit, they risk ignoring a viable course of action in order to hold out for a flawless option that may never come. The greatest threat to U.S. leadership on the global stage is China. While India’s rise may propagate certain social customs that Americans do not share, it is far better than the alternative of allowing the political ideology of the Chinese Communist Party to proliferate unchecked.

Additionally, while New Delhi has traditionally practiced non-alignment to their great benefit, it also recognizes that doing so is becoming an untenable strategy in an increasingly tripolar world. With the Chinese-Pakistan relationship coalescing more and more

every year, India cannot continue to sit on the sidelines. There will soon come a point when India is expected to be a leader of the whole world, not just the Third World, and any position it takes will become its own major geopolitical alignment. If the dreams of national greatness that its people and leaders harbor are to come true, India must necessarily step out from the incompatible shadow of non-alignment. As it does so, Washington must not waste the opportunity to shape New Delhi’s rise to balance Beijing. True, a full MAGTF right away may be off the table, but similar to MRF-D, the force can start off as a company-sized element and increase in scale over time. The rotational nature of the force would also preclude the need to build U.S. bases on Indian soil.

### Conclusion

The rise of great powers in the Indo-Pacific is the defining geopolitical sea change of the 21st century. From Washington’s vision of a Free and Open Indo Pacific, to Beijing’s Maritime Silk Road, to New Delhi’s Look East policy, the major players of tripolar competition are all focusing on the same battlespace.<sup>35</sup> If the United States desires to maintain its influence and preserve the relevance of its institutions and ideas, it must be

prepared to do so without simply relying on having the largest economy and the most firepower. If India is going to look east, the United States should convince it to think west. The Marine Corps can contribute to this effort by providing a rotational force in India and using it to engage and integrate with its Indian counterparts. In so doing, we will be better prepared for the security challenges of the future operating environment.

#### Notes

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