

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR “THE IMPORTANCE OF U.S.–INDIA RELATIONS”

DR. ARZAN TARAPORE

- Organizing Questions
- What is the current state of U.S.–India relations?
  - How have the United States and India been able to consistently and steadily improve their relationship since around the year 2000?
  - How might India’s influence in the world change in the coming years?

Summary

On 4 April 2025, Dr. Arzan Tarapore, a research scholar at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University, recorded a 15-minute video covering the importance of U.S.–India relations. In his remarks, Dr. Tarapore explains why India is important to the United States, details how relations between the two countries have improved steadily since the year 2000, and identifies challenges for keeping the relationship strong. This discussion guide complements and expands upon Dr. Tarapore’s video. After viewing the video, students piece together a timeline of relations between India and the United States. Next, they research key changes in the bilateral relationship since the video was filmed, then bring this to the next class period. Students use what they learned to prepare for a debate on the future of U.S.–India relations, then conclude with a debrief of the debate. This discussion guide is appropriate for advanced secondary students and university students.

- Objectives
- Through the course of this discussion guide, students will
- identify why India is so important to the United States today;
  - appreciate how an improved relationship with India can help the United States achieve its military and security goals;
  - understand why both countries see it in their interest to continually improve their relationship; and
  - understand why India’s global influence will likely continue to grow.

Materials

Handout 1, *Video Notes*  
Handout 2, *Key Events in U.S.–India Relations*  
Handout 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*  
Handout 4, *Preparation for Debate*  
Display 1, *Debate Question and Instructions*  
Answer Key 1, *Video Notes*

Answer Key 2, *Key Events in U.S.–India Relations*

Answer Key 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*

Answer Key 4, *Sample Debate Arguments*

Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*

Video, “The Importance of U.S.–India Relations,” online at <https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedia/us-india-relations>

Equipment

- Computer with Internet access and an HTML5-supported web browser
- Computer projector and screen

Teacher Preparation

Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

1. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts.
2. Preview Video, “The Importance of U.S.–India Relations” (running time: 15 minutes). You can use Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*, as a reference for the video content.
3. Become familiar with the content of the handouts, display, and answer keys.
4. Set up and test your class computer and projector.
5. Communicate your expectations around whether or how students can use large language models (LLMs) and other forms of generative artificial intelligence to complete the assignments in this unit.

Time

Two 50-minute class periods, plus homework before each class period

Procedures Before Day One

1. Inform students that they will be learning about the importance of U.S.–India relations for the next two class periods.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1, *Video Notes*, to each student. Instruct students to watch the video, “The Importance of U.S.–India Relations,” and complete Handout 1 before the next class period. Tell students to reserve 60 minutes to watch the video and complete the handout.

Day One

1. Organize the class into groups of six students each. Distribute one copy of Handout 2, *Key Events in U.S.–India Relations*, to each student.
2. Inform students that they have 20 minutes to work in their groups to complete the assignment. In addition to their answers from Handout 1, *Video Notes*, students can use any external resources you approve to complete this.
3. Check in on groups’ progress and use the responses on Answer Key 2, *Key Events in U.S.–India Relations*, to help any groups who are stuck.

4. After 20 minutes have passed, ask groups to stop working. Ask one group to name the first event along with its significance. Suggest corrections as needed.
5. Ask the second group to name the second event. Repeat until you have gone through all 12 events and the class knows the correct order of the events.
6. If time permits, lead a brief discussion on how the events on Handout 2 relate to the remarks in the video, "The Importance of U.S.–India Relations."
7. Collect Handout 1 and Handout 2 from each student for assessment.
8. Before the end of the class period, distribute one copy of Handout 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*, to each student. Instruct students to complete the handout before the next class period.

Before Day Two Students complete Handout 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*. Tell students to reserve 60 minutes to complete the handout.

- Day Two
1. Organize the class into six groups of students.
  2. Distribute one copy of Handout 4, *Preparation for Debate*, to each student.
  3. Project Display 1, *Debate Question and Instructions*, on the projector. Inform the class that they will take part in a debate to answer this question. Assign three groups to argue for the statement, and the other three groups to argue against it.
  4. Allow the class 15 minutes to prepare for the debate in their groups. Encourage them to use their responses to Handout 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*, as the basis of their debate arguments.
  5. Circulate throughout the class to answer questions. At your discretion, use Answer Key 4, *Sample Debate Arguments*, to help students prepare for the debate.
  6. After 15 minutes have passed, facilitate the debate per the instructions on Display 1.
  7. After the debate, ask the class to vote for which side they personally believe to be more persuasive.
  8. Debrief the debate with the following questions:
    - Why do you believe that the winning side won?
    - Which specific points did you find most persuasive?
    - How, if at all, did the debate change your thinking about the future of U.S.–India relations?
  9. Collect Handout 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*, from each student for assessment.

- Extension** Respond in writing to one of these questions based on Dr. Tarapore’s remarks in the video:
- How has India been able to maintain such strong relationships with countries in the “Global South”? How might these links matter to the United States?
  - In what ways do India and the United States share values and viewpoints?

- Assessment** The following are suggestions for assessing student work in this lesson:
1. Evaluate student responses to Handout 1, *Video Notes*, based on Answer Key 1, *Video Notes*.
  2. Evaluate student responses to Handout 2, *Key Events in U.S.–India Relations*, based on Answer Key 2, *Key Events in U.S.–India Relations*.
  3. Evaluate students’ notes on Handout 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*, based on Answer Key 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*.
  4. Use Answer Key 4, *Sample Debate Arguments*, to evaluate the quality and accuracy of students’ arguments during the debate.
  5. Assess student participation in group and class discussions, evaluating their ability to
    - clearly state their opinions, questions, and /or answers;
    - provide thoughtful answers;
    - exhibit sensitivity toward different cultures and ideas;
    - respect and acknowledge other students’ comments; and
    - ask relevant and insightful questions.





## KEY EVENTS IN U.S.–INDIA RELATIONS

Place these 12 key events in U.S.–India relations since India became independence in 1947 in the correct chronological order in the table on the next page.

<p><b>Post-9/11 counterterrorism convergence:</b> After the September 11 attacks, the United States increasingly saw India as a natural partner against terrorism, accelerating military dialogue and intelligence cooperation despite differences over Pakistan.</p>	<p><b>Bangladesh War:</b> India signed a treaty with the Soviet Union, and the United States backed Pakistan diplomatically when India intervened decisively in East Pakistan, cementing Indian views of the United States as a rival.</p>
<p><b>Sino-Indian War:</b> The United States provided emergency military aid to India after it was defeated by China, showing that cooperation was possible.</p>	<p><b>Mumbai terrorist attacks:</b> Mass-casualty terrorist attack drove major internal-security changes in India and led to sustained pressure on Pakistan-based militant networks.</p>
<p><b>Sudden deterioration in diplomatic and economic relations:</b> Tensions flared between both countries due to disagreement over who negotiated the May 2025 ceasefire between India and Pakistan, the U.S. imposition of unprecedented tariffs on India, and other changes to U.S. policy.</p>	<p><b>U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement:</b> The United States effectively accepted India as a responsible nuclear power outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, unlocking defense, trade, technology cooperation, and trust.</p>
<p><b>Early divergence after India’s independence:</b> When India emerged as an independent state, it chose not to align with the two major powers (a policy known as “nonalignment”), while the United States built Cold War alliances with many of India’s neighbors, especially Pakistan. This established decades of mutual distance and suspicion between the two countries.</p>	<p><b>Deepening ties based on concerns about China:</b> U.S.–India relations deepened steadily through defense cooperation, Indo-Pacific strategy, and technology integration, largely driven by shared concerns about the growing strength of China and its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region.</p>
<p><b>India’s Pokhran II nuclear weapons tests:</b> India’s overt nuclearization initially caused sanctions and tension, but in the long term forced the United States to take India more seriously as a permanent nuclear power.</p>	<p><b>India’s first nuclear test (“Smiling Buddha”):</b> India’s first nuclear test triggered U.S.-led nonproliferation pressure and sanctions. Nuclear issues became a central obstacle in bilateral relations for the next quarter century.</p>
<p><b>End of the Cold War and India’s economic liberalization:</b> India adopted market reforms after the collapse of the Soviet Union, creating a structural opening for a new phase in the U.S.–India relationship.</p>	<p><b>U.S.–Pakistan military alliance:</b> The United States armed Pakistan through two military alliances (SEATO and CENTO), creating the perception in India that the United States favored its principal rival and deepening mistrust in the relationship.</p>

**handout 2**

Timing	Event
1947	
1954–1959	
1962	
1971	
1974	
1991	
1998	
Aftermath of Sept. 2001	
2005–2008	
2008	
2015–2024	
2025	

## UPDATE ON U.S.–INDIA RELATIONS

This video was filmed on 4 April 2025. There have been significant changes to U.S.–India relations since then, with many occurring just in the nine months of 2025 after this video was recorded.

You are assigned with updating Dr. Tarapore’s video to reflect events since it was filmed. Use reliable resources to research answers to the questions below and bring these to the next class period. You will share your responses with your classmates and use them for a debate to conclude this module.

1. What has changed in U.S.–India relations since this video was filmed at the beginning of April 2025?
2. In what ways, if at all, do these events change Dr. Tarapore’s analysis?
3. In what ways, if at all, have these events changed your view on the direction of U.S.–India relations in the future?

PREPARATION FOR DEBATE

At the end of the video, Dr. Tarapore states that, “I think both countries see it in their interests to keep developing this relationship.”

Given the information you uncovered in the previous activity, to what extent would you still agree with this statement?

You will now argue either before or against the following assertion:

**“Despite the deterioration of U.S.–India relations in 2025, the relationship is destined to recover in the long term.”**

Your teacher will assign you to one side of this debate. Once you know which side you are arguing, list potential arguments for your side. Discuss with your groupmates which arguments are most persuasive; list these so you are prepared for the debate. Make sure to reference everything the members of your group learned while completing Handout 3, *Update on U.S.–India Relations*.

# Debate Questions and Instructions

## Statement to Debate

*“Despite the deterioration of U.S.–India relations in 2025, the relationship is destined to recover in the long term.”*

## Debate Instructions

1. At random, the teacher will select one of the three groups arguing **against** this proposition to make its argument.
2. That group has up to five minutes to state its argument. Each member of the group can speak for no more than one minute. After the first speaker’s minute is over (or they finish making their point), the speaker must “tag” another member of their team to continue making their case. Any other team member can raise their hand to be tagged.
3. After the “against” group is done, the teacher will randomly call on one of the three groups arguing **for** the proposition to make its argument. This group has five minutes to make its points, using the same tag protocol described above.
4. Next, any other person assigned to argue the **against** side can add to that side’s argument. As above, each person has only one minute to speak until five minutes have passed.
5. Finally, any other person assigned to argue the **for** side can add to that side’s argument. Again, each person has only one minute to speak; this continues for up to five minutes.
6. At this point, the debate will be over, and the class will vote on which argument they found more persuasive.

## VIDEO NOTES

1. How does Dr. Tarapore characterize the history of U.S.–India relations?

*Dr. Tarapore explains that U.S.–India relations have historically been uneven, marked by alternating periods of closeness and tension. During the Cold War, the two countries frequently disagreed, and their relationship was complicated again when India tested nuclear weapons in 1998. Despite these ups and downs, there has been a remarkable and steady shift toward improved relations since around the year 2000. Dr. Tarapore emphasizes that this recent strengthening has continued regardless of which political party is in power in either country.*

2. Dr. Tarapore discusses four reasons that India is important to the United States. What is his argument about people-to-people relations?

*According to Dr. Tarapore, people-to-people ties form the foundation of the modern U.S.–India relationship. He points out that Indian immigrants in the United States are numerous, highly educated, and economically successful, most visibly in technology and engineering fields. Their contributions strengthen the American economy and create deep social and cultural connections between the two countries. These interpersonal networks help build trust and familiarity in the broader diplomatic relationship.*

3. According to Dr. Tarapore, how does India’s geography make it important to the United States?

*Dr. Tarapore argues that India’s geographic position at the top of the Indian Ocean makes it strategically vital to U.S. interests. Some of the most important shipping lanes in the world pass through the Indian Ocean, including transport of energy supplies from the Middle East to Asian manufacturing centers and manufactured goods from Asia toward Europe. As China expands its naval presence in this region, the United States sees India as the most capable country to help maintain stability there. Because of this, India’s location directly affects global trade and security, making it a natural partner for the United States.*

4. In what ways does diplomacy make India important to the United States?

*Dr. Tarapore explains that India has longstanding diplomatic relationships across Asia and Africa, regions where the United States has not always maintained consistent engagement. These ties give India influence in what is often called the “Global South,” an area whose support can shape international debates and institutions. Because the United States lacks comparable networks in some of these places, partnering with India helps Washington project its messages more effectively. This diplomatic complementarity strengthens the value of the relationship.*

5. How does India’s size make it important to the United States?

*India’s size—demographic, economic, and military—makes it impossible for the United States to ignore. It is the world’s most populous country, has the second-largest military, and ranks among the top five economies in the world. Dr. Tarapore notes that any country seeking influence in global politics, including the United States, must engage with such a large and consequential power. In the context of U.S.–China competition, India’s weight gives it particular strategic significance.*

6. What are the three ways in which U.S.–India relations have improved?

*First, the two countries have deepened military cooperation, especially as both face security challenges from China and share concerns about terrorism. Second, they are increasingly integrating their technology, research, and industrial systems, hoping to build long-term interdependence that stabilizes the relationship. Third, the United States and India have begun aligning more closely on how they view the international order, especially their shared support for a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” Together, these trends show a movement toward strategic partnership rather than short-term alignment.*

7. What were the three biggest challenges to the U.S.–India relationship when the video was filmed?

*In the video, Dr. Tarapore mentioned the following as the three biggest challenges to the relationship:*

- 1. India remains a developing country with limited resources, which constrains how much it can contribute to shared goals like maintaining international order.*
- 2. India’s security priorities center on land threats from Pakistan and China, leaving fewer resources for cooperation in the Indian Ocean, an area of high importance to the United States*
- 3. Abrupt changes in American foreign policy in 2025 made the United States less predictable. This unpredictability makes it harder for India, or any country, to confidently build long-term strategic plans with Washington.*

## KEY EVENTS IN U.S.–INDIA RELATIONS

Timing	Event
1947	<b>Early divergence after India’s independence:</b> When India emerged as an independent state, it chose not to align with the two major powers (a policy known as “nonalignment”), while the United States built Cold War alliances with many of India’s neighbors, especially Pakistan. This established decades of mutual distance and suspicion between the two countries.
1954–1959	<b>U.S.–Pakistan military alliance:</b> The United States armed Pakistan through two military alliances (SEATO and CENTO), creating the perception in India that the United States favored its principal rival and deepening mistrust in the relationship.
1962	<b>Sino-Indian War:</b> The United States provided emergency military aid to India after it was defeated by China, showing that cooperation was possible.
1971	<b>Bangladesh War:</b> India signed a treaty with the Soviet Union, and the United States backed Pakistan diplomatically when India intervened decisively in East Pakistan, cementing Indian views of the United States as a rival.
1974	<b>India’s first nuclear test (“Smiling Buddha”):</b> India’s first nuclear test triggered U.S.-led nonproliferation pressure and sanctions. Nuclear issues became a central obstacle in bilateral relations for the next quarter century.
1991	<b>End of the Cold War and India’s economic liberalization:</b> India adopted market reforms after the collapse of the Soviet Union, creating a structural opening for a new phase in the U.S.–India relationship.
1998	<b>India’s Pokhran II nuclear weapons tests:</b> India’s overt nuclearization initially caused sanctions and tension, but in the long term forced the United States to take India more seriously as a permanent nuclear power.
Aftermath of Sept. 2001	<b>Post-9/11 counterterrorism convergence:</b> After the September 11 attacks, the United States increasingly saw India as a natural partner against terrorism, accelerating military dialogue and intelligence cooperation despite differences over Pakistan.
2005–2008	<b>U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement:</b> The United States effectively accepted India as a responsible nuclear power outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, unlocking defense, trade, technology cooperation, and trust.
2008	<b>Mumbai terrorist attacks:</b> Mass-casualty terrorist attack drove major internal-security changes in India and led to sustained pressure on Pakistan-based militant networks.
2015–2024	<b>Deepening ties based on concerns about China:</b> U.S.–India relations deepened steadily through defense cooperation, Indo-Pacific strategy, and technology integration, largely driven by shared concerns about the growing strength of China and its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region.
2025	Sudden deterioration in diplomatic and economic relations: Tensions flared between both countries due to disagreement over who negotiated the May 2025 ceasefire between India and Pakistan, the U.S. imposition of unprecedented tariffs on India, and other changes to U.S. policy.

## UPDATE ON U.S.–INDIA RELATIONS

1. What has changed in U.S.–India relations since this video was filmed at the beginning of April 2025?

*Student responses will vary and will depend on actual events. A list of major events in 2025 follows:*

- *In May 2025, India and Pakistan exchanged fire after a major terrorist attack in Kashmir. A ceasefire was announced on 10 May 2025, with the United States claiming it mediated the ceasefire. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi maintained that the ceasefire was the direct result of India's military efforts. This diplomatic disagreement injected significant tension into the relationship*
- *In August 2025, the United States imposed steep tariffs of up to 50 percent on Indian exports and on Russian-oil trade involving India. This sudden and drastic increase in tariffs came after the two sides failed to reach a highly-anticipated trade deal and eroded the trust built over years. India denounced the tariffs as unfair and argued they undermined cooperative strategic ties.*
- *Restrictions to the H-1B visa in the United States and international visa renewals for many Indian nationals strained people-to-people links and increased uncertainty for Indian immigrants in the United States.*
- *Throughout the year, Indian officials became increasingly concerned over these shifts and a potential U.S.–China accommodation, leading India's leaders to deepen their ties with other partners like Japan and Australia to avoid over-reliance on the United States.*
- *Despite these setbacks, the two countries continued their military cooperation, including combined exercises such as Yudh Abhyas in September 2025, showing that even amid trade and diplomatic turmoil, the basis for continued cooperation remains strong.*

2. In what ways, if at all, do these events change Dr. Tarapore's analysis?

*Student responses will vary and will depend on actual events. One potential conclusion based only on the events of 2025 follows:*

*Events throughout 2025 reinforced Dr. Tarapore's last major point in the video, which was that the United States' abrupt and unpredictable changes to how it engaged with the world in 2025 damaged trust and made the bilateral relationship more difficult. Dr. Tarapore ended his remarks restating that it still makes sense for the United States and India to deepen their relations due to continued structural issues.*

*The sudden U.S.–India rupture is a clear example of how states' leaders sometimes act against their countries' interests. Time will tell whether the changes in U.S. policy toward India and other international partners will overwhelm these structural issues or whether bilateral relations will strengthen in the long term.*

3. In what ways, if at all, have these events changed your view on the direction of U.S.–India relations in the future?

*Student responses will vary and will depend on actual events.*

## SAMPLE DEBATE ARGUMENTS

Potential arguments for and against the debate statement are listed below. Use these examples to help groups prepare for the debate and to debrief the debate. These are suggestions rather than a definitive list of all relevant arguments; students may make other arguments that are persuasive.

**Potential Arguments in Favor**

1. ***The United States and India still agree on major security issues, especially regarding China.***  
*Both countries see China as becoming more powerful and more aggressive in Asia. Because they share this concern, they continue working together on military cooperation and regional security.*
2. ***Technology and industrial ties are still getting stronger.***  
*The United States and India continue trying to connect their technology, research, and manufacturing systems. This means more joint projects, shared innovation, and supply chains that link the two countries. These deeper connections help make the relationship more stable over time. Despite the political turbulence, the technology and private sectors in both countries still want to deepen cooperation.*
3. ***Most forms of cooperation continue.***  
*The countries' cooperation is not based solely on the personal relationship between their leaders; they are in fact based on established connections between many institutions of their governments, including on everything from critical minerals to space cooperation.*

**Potential Arguments Against**

1. ***The United States has become more unpredictable in its foreign policy.***  
*Dr. Tarapore points out that the United States is the source of the new tension between the two countries. Since the start of 2025, the United States has dramatically changed how it deals with other countries. This sudden shift makes it harder for India to trust that the United States will remain a reliable partner.*
2. ***India has a long history of "strategic autonomy."***  
*Ever since independence, India has been reluctant to be too close or dependent on any other country. This was called "nonalignment" during the Cold War and is now called "strategic autonomy." India fell back on this tradition when its relations with the United States worsened in 2025, so it is well positioned to deepen ties to other partners as an alternative to the United States.*
3. ***India's main security concerns are still on its land borders.***  
*India worries most about threats from China and Pakistan along its northern and western borders. Because of this, India will be less inclined to reach far into the region to work with the United States in, say, the western Pacific. This means that India will never be as close an ally to the United States in security issues as Japan or Australia.*

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

“The Importance of U.S.–India Relations”

Dr. Arzan Tarapore

Recorded 4 April 2025

Oh hi, everybody. My name’s Arzan, Arzan Tarapore. I am a research scholar here at Stanford University at a place called the Center for International Security and Cooperation. So I study international security, and specifically I study international security in Asia, and I focus mostly on India.

Now when we talk about international relations or international security, if you open the newspaper or read the news, you will see a lot of talk about wars that are happening in the world. You’ll these days hear a lot about things like tariffs. If you hear about countries, you might hear about countries like Russia or China. But I focus on a country that doesn’t appear that much in everyday talk about international politics—and that country is India.

What I want to specifically talk to you about today is that despite the fact that we don’t hear that much about India on a daily basis, it matters a great deal for the United States. And I want to explain why India matters so much for the United States, for American policy in Asia and around the world.

American relations with India have had their ups and downs. During the Cold War, there was a long history of tension and friendliness and tension and friendliness. And after the Cold War just when things started to seem to be improving, India tested nuclear weapons in 1998, and again the relationship had another series of ups and downs.

But the really interesting thing is that in the past two or three decades, the relationship has just gotten stronger and stronger and stronger. And this has been the case regardless of who the president has been in the United States, and it’s been the case mostly regardless of what’s happened in the relationship. That no matter when these two countries get frustrated with each other or have differences of opinion, they can quite remarkably look past it and keep developing the relationship to get deeper and deeper.

So this is a really interesting and pretty rare case where the U.S. has tried to deepen a relationship with a country, a major country—India—despite not always seeing eye to eye with it, and done so very steadily and very consistently and in fact quite sharply, quite quickly.

So why is that? I think that the U.S., in the 21st century, sees many reasons to work very closely with India. And I want to focus on four of those reasons in particular.

The first reason, the most basic reason, is people. I live here in Silicon Valley in California, where there are a lot of Indian immigrants. And in fact, the size of the Indian immigrant population in the United States is very large. And not only is it large, but it’s also very economically successful, educationally successful. So when you see a lot of the leadership of many of the [countries]—of the United States’, most lucrative, biggest companies—especially in the tech sector, you’ll see Indians in charge of many of those companies. So the people-to-people links, which have really flourished in the past few decades, are extremely important. Lots of Indian people come to the United States for education and for work, contribute enormously to the American economy and

society, and I think that bridge—that people-to-people bridge—is extremely important. So that’s the first reason.

The second big reason is geography. If you look at a map of where India sits in Asia and in the world, you’ll see that it sits right at the top of the Indian Ocean. And why is that important? Because the Indian Ocean carries so much of the world economy’s most important traffic.

So when all the factories in China or Japan or Korea make stuff, they need energy. And they get energy for making that stuff, those factories get their energy, from the Middle East. And when they make that stuff and ship it back to Europe, they have to go again through the Indian Ocean. And so the Indian Ocean has become this really, really vital artery of the global economy. And India sits right next to those really important shipping lanes, where a lot of the world’s energy flows go, where a lot of the world’s trade goes.

So not only is that an important part of the world, but it’s a part of the world that’s going to get more and more contested. The Chinese military is growing, and China also wants to influence what happens in the Indian Ocean, and so what we’re going to see in the next few years is an increasing presence by the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean. Now, the United States recognizes this. The U.S. gets that the Indian Ocean is extremely important and that India is the most powerful country in the Indian Ocean. And so that geographic element is a really important reason why India matters to the United States.

The third reason is diplomacy. It’s important for big countries to maintain good relations with as many other countries as they can. And as big and powerful and influential as the U.S. has traditionally been, frankly, there are some parts of the world where the U.S. just has not been paying sufficient attention. In those parts of the world, however, India has had historical connections and good diplomatic relations. So I’m thinking here mostly of some countries in Asia and lots of parts of Africa, for example.

And in those parts of the world, what some people you might hear referring to as the Global South, India has a lot of continuing influence, diplomatic influence, diplomatic connections, and the U.S. lacks those diplomatic connections in those parts of the world. And so it really makes sense for the U.S. to be on good terms with India, to maybe coordinate policies, so that what the U.S. wants to do around the world, it can get Indian help to coordinate that diplomatic messaging around the world.

And the final reason—this is going to sound a little bit obvious, but it’s actually a really important reason—is just India’s size. India is the world’s most populous country. It is the country with the biggest population in the world, bigger than China. It is the country with the world’s second biggest military in the world, and it is the country with the fifth biggest economy in the world. So this is a country that you cannot ignore.

The U.S. has, as I said at the beginning, over the last few decades had times where it’s been closer and further apart from India. But it has recognized that you cannot ignore such a big country, especially if, as the U.S. sees itself, if you are locked in a competition over who has the most influence in the world—and the U.S. is competing with China for that—then you cannot ignore such a big and influential country like India.

So those are the four reasons I think that are driving a lot of why, in the past 20–25 years, the U.S. has so consistently tried to build relations with India. Now the question is: okay, if the U.S. has these reasons for building relations with India, what does the relationship look like, and where does it go from here?

Over the last couple of decades, a lot of the relationship has been driven by military cooperation. And this is because the two countries see eye to eye on many strategic issues, beginning most importantly with China. But over the last couple of decades, a lot of issues that have been important to both countries have been reasons for the two countries to work closely together.

So, for example, soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, we saw India as being a natural partner in combating terrorism around the world. And that's been overtaken in the past decade or two by this concern over China, the growth of China and the increasingly assertive policies of China. And so the U.S. and India see themselves as having common interests in maintaining security in Asia. So military cooperation has been a big part of the relationship.

Increasingly, though, in the past maybe five years or so, we've seen the U.S. and India try to develop an even more durable relationship. They've tried to really integrate their systems: systems of technology, research, and development; systems of industrial production. And if the two countries can tie these types of systems more closely together, then the relationship is not going to vary very much, because we'll see our future as being connected to each other. And so this is much of the calculus—that the U.S. and India can integrate these systems, especially around technology and industry.

And the third big part of the way the relationship is going is essentially how they see the international order. The two countries, as I said, have a lot of common interests, and when they see themselves as agreeing on the rules of the road or what they might call, for example, a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” and they see countries like China challenging those ideas, the U.S. and India see themselves as natural partners in trying to shore up or reinforce an international order that works for them and for the region.

Let me conclude with what I see as a couple of the challenges for the relationship going forward. And the first, most important one is that India is still a developing country. We see lots of news stories of really high-tech, really impressive, glitzy stuff happening in India. But for most Indians, it is a developing country. So it is a country with not a lot of resources to devote to things like maintaining international order or military cooperation with the U.S. So we'll continue to confront India's capacity limitations in how much it can devote to things that matter to the U.S.

The second key issue for India is that historically most of its threats have come from the north, from its land borders with Pakistan and China. And so, if your threats are continually coming from those areas, you're going to focus, very rationally, on making sure that those areas are secure. And that means you're going to have less ability to project influence into the Indian Ocean, which is the area, if you remember, that matters the most for the U.S. And so India has many problems, which are all very intense problems for India, and it has to figure out how to prioritize and balance them for its own national interests. And that sometimes is not always what the U.S. wants to see.

And the third problem is that, look, as someone who studies India, I spend my time educating American audiences about India, about the fact that it has resource constraints and difficult priorities. But frankly, over the last few months [since the start of 2025], we've had to realize that some of these problems may not be problems that come from the Indian side but from the U.S. side.

We now have a United States that has decided to completely change how it engages with the world. Now, you may agree with that, you may not agree with that, but the fact of the matter, the indisputable fact of the matter that everyone agrees with, is that it's completely

different. And it's now completely unpredictable. And when things are so different and so unpredictable—for better or worse—it makes it very hard to forge a meaningful and dependable relationship with other countries.

So these are the types of challenges that both Washington and New Delhi are going to have to deal with as they continue. And I think, you know, there will be difficulties as they try to grapple with these problems.

But if the last couple of decades are any indication, I think both countries see it in their interests to keep developing this relationship and keep working toward this relationship, which they both see as being critical to building their national power.