India's Emerging Role and Economic Investment in Eastern Europe

by

Kirk Shoemaker

Introduction

India is an emerging global titan, seeking to shed its constraining ideology of non-alignment in favor of adaptive strategic autonomy.[1] Historically, Indian non-alignment focused on whom *not* to side with, while Indian strategic autonomy policies sought a more calculated approach about *with whom* to side for specific advantages.[2] As this transformation unfolds, India is emerging as a "center of gravity" and a driver of economic change, both regionally in the Indo-Pacific and globally.[3] As India rises, U.S. and European Union (EU) leaders must explore creative ways to incentivize Indian investment in Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). Investment in the CEECs not only benefits India by reducing its deep economic reliance on China but also supports U.S. and EU efforts to counterbalance Chinese economic influence in Eastern Europe. Incentivizing Indian investment in the CEECs underpins U.S. diplomatic and foreign policy goals focused on self-reliant allies and partners in a multipolar world.

The premise that India is an emerging great power seeking to pivot from non-alignment to strategic autonomy is best explored by viewing our complex, multipolar world through the lens of Power Transition Theory.[4] The Power Transition theoretical framework serves as a bridge between historical perspectives on India and illustrates how India is shifting towards global leadership and engagement. India's pivot in strategic approaches seems to align with ongoing, adjacent shifts in U.S. policies and international engagement. India is watching the United States and other leading powers, and although it cautiously engaged with the Cold War's bipolar world and the subsequent post-Cold War unipolar world, India's strategy is shifting. Unlike in the past, today's India is more willing to participate in a multipolar world and will employ creative engagement with an eye on counterbalancing Chinese ambitions and influence.

After establishing a theoretical framework and examining current multipolar realities, this study shifts its focus to practical application. In doing so, it explores how Indian economic investment can enhance resilience and counter Chinese influence across the CEECs. It recommends increasing India's economic presence in the CEECs, aligning with the current U.S. administration's Cornerstone Strategy, which posits that the U.S. should play an external, coalition-anchoring role and serve as a "cornerstone balancer" or a "very powerful state to anchor the coalition." This cornerstone approach sees India as a leading regional player, alongside Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, to serve as a counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific.[5] Building upon the Cornerstone Strategy, this paper argues that Eastern Europe and the CEECs remain critical to strategic competition between great powers, as articulated by Sir Halford John Mackinder's Heartland Theory.[6] Applying this theory, I argue that U.S. and EU leaders must explore approaches that incentivize connectivity between India and Eastern Europe via an economic corridor, which would serve as a critical link between India's economic powerhouse and the European heartland.

To illuminate why India should look to the CEECs as a viable economic partner, this research argues that the CEECs enable India to reduce its economic reliance on China and enhance its strategic autonomy. The CEECs also offer India access to an existing talent pool of highly skilled, low-cost labor with manufacturing experience and infrastructure. Not only would increasing economic investment support Indian manufacturing, but it would also provide pathways and opportunities for India's rapidly growing working-age population to travel and work abroad in significant numbers across the CEECs. If more Indians can travel abroad to find work in the CEECs, it will build India's global reputation, enhance its influence, and foster crucial cultural connectivity, laying the foundation for further cooperation.

From the perspective of the CEECs, my research shows that India's growing economy presents significant economic opportunities for Eastern Europe and the EU. Increasing Indian investment across the CEECs offers nations an Indian alternative to China's aggressive and often exploitative aid model. If the CEECs can strengthen their economic ties with India and reduce their reliance on Russia and China, this will not only support the CEECs' resilience but also align with U.S. and EU policy goals for the region.

Focusing on practical ways to strengthen India's economic investment and relationships with the CEECs, this paper offers three policy approaches. These approaches build on existing or emerging collaborative frameworks and call for increased U.S. and EU support for the planned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which, as envisioned, will link India's economy to the CEECs through the Middle East. A second approach is to increase the importance and relevance of the India Trilateral Forum, established in 2010.[7] This forum comprises U.S., European, and Indian members and could be expanded and elevated to serve as a focal point for Indian economic development in the CEECs. A third policy approach is to broaden the U.S.-India TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology) Initiative, which continues to gain traction and establish its footing. Taken together, these three existing collaborative frameworks offer a starting point for parties to explore ways to incentivize additional Indian investment in the CEECs.

While this paper advocates that the United States accept and support India's economic rise as a counterbalance to China, it is also crucial to remain clear-eyed and to consider associated risks. Looking back at history, China's rise and rapid economic growth, which led to its emergence as a Great Power competitor to the United States, were made possible in part by considerable U.S. support.[8] If Washington incentivizes India's economic investment in the CEECs, as this paper promotes, could it be self-defeating in the long term by someday building India into a power antagonistic to the United States? While encouraging India's rise is certainly not without risks, I argue that India differs from China in this respect and is more inherently aligned with U.S. and EU values, goals, and objectives. Additionally, even if there are risks inherent in incentivizing India's rise, the current challenges posed by a rising China are greater. The U.S. and EU need India as a critical counterbalance to China, and since India is primarily aligned with U.S. and EU interests, the risk is worth taking.

Shifting Power Dynamics in a Multipolar World

It is often noted that more than thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world is no longer unipolar, with the United States as its sole superpower.[9] Instead, other powers, especially China, now directly challenge U.S. dominance and the hitherto U.S.-led world order.[10] In a 1998 lecture, American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington defined a unipolar world as a world where a single state, "acting unilaterally with little or no cooperation from other states, can effectively resolve major international issues." He also defined a multipolar world as a world

> … [i]n which a coalition of major powers is necessary to resolve important international issues, and if the coalition is a substantial one, no other single state can prevent the coalition from doing that.

Huntington's assessment of what constitutes a multipolar world certainly aligns – or very nearly aligns – with today's global realities. In this changed environment, the United States and other leading and emerging powers must seek new approaches to their global engagement across the spectrum of national power.

This paper accepts the uncomfortable premise that the United States is no longer the sole superpower and that a multipolar world exists. However, building on the concept of multipolarity, it is helpful to explore Power Transition Theory, a framework for understanding periods of global power fluctuation and the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity. The Power Transition Theory holds that international stability is threatened when a rising great power, such as China today, approaches power parity with a previously dominant power, such as the United States. Risks are compounded when the rising great power, as China today, is dissatisfied with long-established international arrangements and seeks to shape global systems to its advantage.[11]

While this theory is often applied at the macro level to analyze fluctuations in global power, it is also useful for examining the dynamics of regional powers. In truth, there is no clear line between China and India as global and regional powers, as two rising great powers may indeed continually overlap in both regional and international spheres. As discussed below, India should be viewed less as a challenger to the dominant U.S. power and more as a valuable global partner and a balancer to China's aspirations for regional hegemony.[12]

India's leaders believe deeply in the value of a multipolar world. As Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has argued, "India believes that multipolarity is the key to both global peace and its own rise. It obsessively guards its strategic autonomy."[13] It is this desire for strategic autonomy that makes India a critical partner for the United States as it navigates the complexities of a shifting, multipolar world and faces persistent challenges to its position as a dominant power.

India's Pivot Towards Leadership and Engagement

India is rapidly growing, both economically and militarily, and as those changes unfold, the long-held Indian resistance to international engagement is fading. Following the Cold War, India began its gradual transition from a long-held policy of non-alignment to its current policy of "strategic autonomy." In the Indian context, strategic autonomy broadly means that, in foreign policy, it prioritizes pragmatic engagement with multiple powers while retaining the ability to make decisions that prioritize self-interest, free from external pressure, influence, or constraints.[14] This carefully calibrated approach, on its path to becoming a rising great power, is what Tellis argues is a calibrated strategy of "partnerships with all states but privileged relationships with none."[15]

Applying the abovementioned Power Transition Theory, both China and India are emerging great powers with growing global capabilities that can challenge a dominant United States. China, however, is further along on its path to becoming a great power, while India is currently behind.[16] For now, while India is still a rising great power, its influence and capabilities remain regionally centric. For this reason, the United States and its partners should seek to empower India as a regional balancer against China in the Indo-Pacific and encourage India to look beyond the region, including to the CEECs.

Geopolitically, India is well-positioned to keep China off-balance, as it sits astride global trade routes, is the world's largest democracy, and has the fourth-largest economy.[17] As India explores its emerging great-power role, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar argues that India should advance its "national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions" to reap the greatest benefits from as many links and relationships as possible.[18] While this approach is certainly of interest to U.S. India-watchers and likely concerning to China, pursuing such linkages may complicate India's assertions of strategic autonomy, at least if such connectivity comes with some degree of dependency. However, it underscores the argument that India, as an emerging great power, can derive significant long-term benefits from expanding trade and investment with the CEECs. Similarly, India's growing geopolitical role and interest in global engagement are well-timed with changes in U.S. policy and global engagement in the emerging multipolar world.

Shifting U.S. Policies and Perspectives

In many ways, the current U.S. administration, under President Donald Trump, appears to be accepting the emergence of a multipolar world and taking steps to adjust to what it perceives as new realities of global power. In stark contrast to the previous Biden administration, current U.S. leaders are shifting away from the long-held U.S.-led post-World War II international order.[19] Instead, the U.S. is now prioritizing what U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio calls "trade over aid, opportunity over dependency, and investment over assistance." Indeed, current U.S. leaders often openly argue that the U.S.-created international order is a bad deal.[20] The goal for the current administration, in Rubio's words, is thus to shift U.S. policies so that "the [United Nations], other allies, and private funds pay [for] a greater share of projects around the world … to ensure programs align with American interests and the needs of partner nations." All these dramatic policy changes are aimed at countering a rising China's "exploitative aid model and further[ing] our strategic interests in key regions around the world."

As suggested by the Power Transition Theory, the current period of global power flux poses significant risks to the United States as the heretofore dominant power; therefore, U.S. leaders must avoid actions that would give China, the challenger, a strategic advantage. China is interested in promoting an alternative, Chinese-led world order to fill the global leadership vacuum left by the United States' retreating power.[21] To carefully recalibrate our international presence, U.S. leaders should empower and incentivize India to act not only as a regional counterbalance to Chinese ambitions and influence, but also as a bulwark against Chinese investment and influence in the CEECs.

Countering and balancing China's rise is immensely important, and to this end, the United States must remain thoughtful and pragmatic in its approach to maintaining and cultivating international relations, partnerships, and alliances. However, not all aspects of value can be measured in dollars and cents. For example, partnerships and relationships built on years of trust, shared experience, and common goals possess immense value that is often difficult to quantify – or to rebuild if squandered. Supporting this delicate balance are two important concepts and policy approaches for U.S. leaders. These concepts are strategic depth and a "cornerstone" strategy.

Increasing U.S. Strategic Depth and Resilience

According to scholars and recent articles citing U.S. leaders, the United States is pursuing policy approaches to develop a strong, resilient Europe less dependent on the United States.[22] While strategies across administrations differ, current U.S. policies, as championed by Secretary Rubio, focus on trade, economics, and investment to ensure that European partners are capable of and willing to shoulder a greater share of their own defense burdens. Similarly, Kaush Arha and Carlos Roa argue that part of a new defensive equation is

> … [a] robust eastern front – both in defense capabilities and economic dynamism – is essential for achieving America's broader goal of fostering a Europe that can carry its weight as a key partner against shared adversaries.

Collectively, such policy shifts aim to reduce Europe's reliance on U.S. defense capabilities, enable resource reallocation, and maintain partnerships and alliances.

Secretary Rubio's prioritization of economic investment to build self-reliant partners echoes the argument for strategic depth advanced by Hudson Institute scholar Nadia Schadlow.[23] Historically, as she argues, strategic depth is rooted in geographically focused advantages that allow armies and nations to maneuver effectively across physical terrain while simultaneously stretching their adversaries' forces and supply lines.[24] However, in her recent articles, Schadlow argues that the concept of strategic depth must be understood today to include not only traditional aspects of geography but also, more importantly, "cyberspace, outer space, and our defense industrial base." Most critically for this paper, Schadlow emphasizes that the United States must defend forward through key allies and partners.[25] Not only is this helpful from a resource allocation and burden-sharing perspective, but it also helps decision-makers triage competing requirements and limit what historian Paul Kennedy described as imperial overstretch.[26]

Despite policy shifts in Washington against such relationships, U.S. allies and partners continue to provide a critical competitive advantage for the United States. As Schadlow argues, supporting allies and empowering them to defend themselves provides the United States with time and space to determine its response, develop capabilities, and exercise operational flexibility. Reflecting on World War I and World War II, U.S. leaders used a similar strategic approach to depth as they weighed when and where to provide military and logistical assistance to allies, and in what theaters to deploy and engage enemy forces.[27] Similarly, during the Cold War, U.S. leaders relied on allies and partners to surround the Soviet Union through a strategy of containment.[28]

Taken together, allies and partners provide strategic depth to U.S. decision-makers. As argued here, the United States needs economically strong partners in Central and Eastern Europe, not only to counter Russian regional aggression there but also to counterbalance China's growing economic influence. India's role in developing U.S. strategic depth across CEECs aligns well with arguments for India as a component of a U.S. Cornerstone Strategy, which aims to prevent China from achieving regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

India's Role as a Counterbalance to China

In his 2021 book, *The Strategy of Denial*, Elbridge Colby, now the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy argues that India should be viewed as a key member of an anti-hegemonic coalition that would serve as a counterbalance to China's power in the Indo-Pacific.[29] During his March 2025 nomination hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Colby's prepared remarks revealed that he views a deepening partnership between the United States and India as crucial for U.S. Indo-Pacific interests, but also sees India as a partner that could take a more leading role in regional and global security.[30]

Colby has stated that he considers India an "ally in the old sense," apparently meaning that the U.S.-India relationship is one in which both sides maintain their independence and autonomy while collaborating to address common challenges. This approach was visible during a recent September 2025 meeting between Colby and India's Ambassador to the United States, Vinay Kwatra, which focused on persistent and growing India-U.S. defense ties and the importance of the India-U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership.[31] The partnership not only underscores the deepening convergence of U.S. and Indian strategic interests but also highlights U.S. support for the planned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), an initiative aimed at boosting connectivity, trade, and sustainability across three critical regions.[32]

As a regional counterbalance to China in the Indo-Pacific, India exemplifies Colby's "Cornerstone Strategy," in which he argues that the United States should serve as a powerful external actor within an anti-hegemonic coalition focused on constraining and denying Chinese power and ambition.[33] Critical to the cornerstone role is America's ability to serve as a strategic partner to other partners and allies, while refraining from engagement in small-scale disputes. Colby argues that, as the cornerstone, the United States must see its partners and allies take a more assertive and leading role in their own defense, while America plays a non-direct, supporting, economic, and enabling role.[34] Specifically regarding India, Colby notes in The Strategy of Denial that a formal defensive alliance with India is unnecessary and overly binding, as India is already naturally opposed to China's emerging regional economic and military dominance.[35] Rather than entering a formal binding alliance – which India would likely seek to avoid in any event, as it always has pursuant to its longstanding philosophy of non-alignment – Colby believes that a U.S.-Indian policy should be grounded in "careful and serious, … hard-nosed and realistic" policies that "empower India as much as possible, not holding up progress based on differences of view."[36] In this way, India can effectively support and augment a U.S.

Cornerstone Strategy in ways that also benefit India as a rising power, not only in the Indo-Pacific but also in areas such as the CEECs.

Colby's perspective on India is essential to understand, as he was reportedly the lead author of the recently released 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS). The NDS clearly underscores many of the themes of Colby's cornerstone and anti-hegemonic coalition arguments, and one related example states that the new U.S. approach seeks to enable "allies and partners to take primary responsibility for defending against those other threats, with critical but more limited U.S. support." On this and other accounts, greater Indian regional capability and increased investment in CEECs align with the 2026 NDS themes. Colby's preference for what might be called a defensive realist approach, emphasizing the strategic prioritization of U.S. engagement and pragmatism in U.S. alliances, is core to the new NDS.[37]

An India to Europe Economic Corridor

India's desire to pivot from China-dominated regional trade in the Indo-Pacific offers U.S. and European leaders an opportunity to incentivize, expand, and deepen India's economic investment and bilateral trade with the CEECs. While India is already economically engaged with the CEECs to some extent, this engagement and investment should be further incentivized and expanded.

As previously discussed, India continues to fear its overreliance on Chinese imports, which rose significantly in 2025 to $91 billion, up from $80 billion in 2024, further widening the trade gap in China's favor.[38] Under mounting pressure to diversify trade relations, Indian leaders are likely to reflect on historic perspectives, such as Halford Mackinder's 1904 Heartland Theory, which said, "whoever rules East Europe commands the Heartland; whoever rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; whoever rules the World-Island commands the World."[39] China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region underscores its economic interests, and India is also looking to the region for economic opportunities.

The CEECs sit at a critical crossroads between Asia and Europe, offering immense investment opportunities that have yet to be fully realized.[40] Not only are Central and Eastern Europe important as NATO's eastern flank, but they also serve as an economic corridor linking Europe to the Caucasus, West Asia, and Central Asia.[41] As the region continues to gain importance, the CEECs have acquired "renewed emphasis in India's foreign policy imagination and geostrategy."

Benefit from Increased Investment Across CEECs

India has long maintained ties with Central and Eastern Europe, particularly with the Soviet Union, during the Cold War era.[42] The relationship between India and the Soviet Union carried over into the modern day, with India and Russia maintaining strong bilateral economic ties and support, despite (at least so far) the Putin regime's increasing closeness to and dependence on China. This persistent relationship is "firmly rooted in historical connections and a strategic convergence over the vision of a multipolar global order." India, for its part, has remained thoughtful and prudent in its management of relations with Russia, the United States, and the broader West,[43] often seeming to triangulate between or balance them against each other.

Many of the independent CEEC nations were previously part of the Soviet sphere of influence, including Warsaw Pact client states, and as those states now seek to live their own independence and autonomy free of the Russian orbit, there may be positive historical relationships for India to build on as it seeks to expand its economic presence in the region today. Building on its past economic relationships, India may leverage its historic regional ties as it pursues broader regional partnerships to diversify its economy and reduce its reliance on Chinese imports and trade.

As India seeks to position itself as a leading global power, it must look beyond the Indo-Pacific, where China already dominates trade, accounting for nearly half of the region's GDP.[44] In line with the previously discussed Heartland Theory, a rising India will need to reconnect with nations beyond the Indo-Pacific to reduce regional economic competition and conflict with China, and to build up its influence independently of Beijing.

India's economic reliance on China is a multifaceted challenge, rooted in a widening trade deficit. India's trade imbalance and economic interdependence with China are still important to its continued rise, are crucial for population stability, and underpin its national security interests. However, this economic reliance is a double-edged sword. For 2024-2025, India's trade with China was approximately $127.7 billion, resulting in a substantial trade deficit of $ 99.2 billion, the highest on record. This strategic imbalance and overreliance on Chinese goods, particularly in the technology and pharmaceutical sectors, leaves Indian leaders and policymakers uncomfortable and focused on developing alternative markets and trading partners.[45]

As India explores alternative trading partners, the CEECs stand out. Currently, India and the EU have a strong trading relationship, and "the EU is India's third-largest trading partner, accounting for just over 11 percent of total Indian trade." India is, in turn, the EU's ninth-largest trading partner.[46] As recently as March 2025, the two partners agreed to sign a free trade agreement to "stimulate cooperation in trade, technology, connectivity, and defense."

While India has its own skilled and growing labor force and a need to create additional employment opportunities, the CEECs also possess both an experienced, lower-cost labor force and relatively sophisticated manufacturing economies that are already closely integrated with the rest of Europe. CEEC economies could be complementary to India's needs, as the CEECs' low-cost, high-skilled labor could help jump-start India's investment in the region and train future Indian employees who migrate to the CEECs for work. Compared with Western European nations such as Belgium, Germany, and France, Eastern Europe offers significantly lower-cost skilled labor for India to employ, learn from, and use to accelerate development and investment projects.[47] Countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, among others, provide cost-effective opportunities for Indian corporations seeking to expand their operations and explore growth beyond the Indo-Pacific region.[48] Additionally, the CEECs continue to market themselves as emerging, capable destinations for manufacturing, information technology, and business services.[49] According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia are all among the top 30 most competitive manufacturing exporters in the world. Meanwhile, the Observatory of Economic Complexity ranks Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic as leading exporters.[50]

One of the challenges and contradictions of Eastern Europe's low-cost, skilled workforce is that, while the region is poised to support future Indian growth, it also faces a declining overall population, which naturally affects the working-age population.[51] Eastern Europe faces challenges due to outmigration, aging, or both, with Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Latvia projected to experience population reductions of more than 20 percent by 2050.[52] To help mitigate these challenges, most of the CEECs are investing in automation, robotics, advanced machinery, and artificial intelligence. Slovenia and the Czech Republic, for instance, are leading the way in high-tech manufacturing, and according to the International Federation of Robotics, have among the highest densities of industrial robots worldwide.[53] India could play a growing role in bolstering the region's declining working-age population.

Paradoxically, although India and Indian companies are eager to draw on external sources of low-cost, skilled labor, India also needs to expand employment opportunities for its own population.[54] India's economy has grown at a remarkable average annual rate of seven percent since 1991. It continues to face challenges as it seeks to employ its young, rapidly growing population of over 1.46 billion people.[55] Currently, over a million young Indians enter the workforce each month, and to support this growing workforce, India is seeking opportunities to alleviate domestic pressures and ensure its population is productive and employed, both domestically and abroad. Because India has more workers than it can employ domestically, it continues to seek partnerships with other nations that need a source of talented, skilled workers.[56] As it has been reported, India's leadership clearly understands that

> … [w]ithout urgent intervention, factors like rapid skill obsolescence, uneven access to reskilling, and accelerating automation could undercut the country's demographic advantage.

For this reason, analysts continue to caution that unless India can overcome current labor-market shortcomings, its unemployment rate, currently hovering around 5.2 percent, will continue to hold the country back.[57] India's unemployment is a challenge that must be addressed for the economy to continue growing, and its leaders are taking note.

In 2014, the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, campaigned on a "Make in India" program aimed at boosting domestic manufacturing and positioning India as a global manufacturing hub. However, much of the promised manufacturing buildout remains unrealized, with India's growth still primarily driven by a software, financial, and services-based economy.[58] More effort is needed, and additional creative solutions must be explored not only to reduce unemployment in India but also to encourage Indians to work abroad.

To address the internal unemployment challenge, India has sought to expand its Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreements (MMPAs) and has already concluded agreements with countries in Western Europe. Recently, due to changes in U.S. immigration and migration policies, Indian leaders are pivoting to new regions and considering using Germany, with which it has a good relationship and an existing MMPA, as a conduit to the rest of Europe.[59] The idea of a conduit to greater Europe aligns with the opportunity for increased Indian presence in the CEECs, both economically and potentially through additional Indian migrant workers. Increasing bilateral collaboration provides opportunities for Indian students and skilled workers to travel abroad and establish business and partnerships with CEEC businesses, particularly in high-demand sectors such as manufacturing, cybersecurity, and energy.[60] Additionally, this collaboration will highlight India as a capable and reliable partner for CEEC businesses and investors, in contrast to aggressive Russia and exploitative China.[61]

Increasing India's Prestige and Cultural Sharing

Indians desire to travel abroad and share their culture with others. Not only are they proud of their history and culture, but many Indians also seek opportunities to live and work abroad to make their mark and enhance their personal and national status and prestige. Thanks to the Internet, movies, and other social media, Indians are increasingly viewing the CEECs as tourist destinations, with particular emphasis on cities such as Prague, Budapest, and Bulgaria, which have been featured in Bollywood movies.[62]

A key event for both India and the CEECs was Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Poland in 2024. During his visit, he emphasized the deep and diverse ties between the two nations and the rich cultural exchanges.[63] More than 25,000 Indians reside in Poland, comprising a diverse group of working professionals, students, and restaurant owners.[64] As cultural connectivity continues to grow, so will familiarity and the importance of India as a rising power and key economic partner for the region.

Economic Opportunities for CEEC Growth

While India and the CEECs maintain economic ties, trade, and investment, their economic collaboration remains well below its potential.[65] India, however, offers the CEECs a vast market in which to sell goods, provide services, and create employment opportunities for its population. Trade relations between India and the EU, of which the CEECs are a part, accounted for roughly $140 billion as of March 2025. The EU is India's second-largest trading partner, accounting for

11.5 percent of India's total trade. In comparison, the US and China account for 10.8 percent and 10.5 percent of total Indian trade, respectively. India, meanwhile, is the EU's ninth-largest trading partner, accounting for approximately 2.4 percent of the EU's trade in 2024.[66] India's investments in the CEECs are growing, albeit slowly. An example of an Indian project in Hungary is the $557 million investment in the Apollo Tyres plant.[67] Poland, the largest economy among the CEECs, has a GDP of $1.04 trillion and ranks among the world's top 20 largest economies, with a long history of relations with India.[68] Poland, in fact, is India's leading economic partner in the region, with bilateral trade between the two countries reaching around $4.53 billion in 2024.[69]

Increasing India's economic presence and investment in the CEECs not only directly benefits the economies of India and the CEECs but also mitigates regional risks rooted in historical trade ties with Russia. As demonstrated by the most recent Russian invasion of Ukraine beginning in 2022, Russia remains willing to exert direct military force as well as leverage threats of force to coerce other nations in the region.[70] Since 2022, many CEECs have made efforts to reduce their reliance on Russia and diversify their trading partners. This was especially true in the energy sector, as many CEECs and Europe were overly reliant on Russian natural gas and oil. For example, in 2021, most of the CEECs imported over half of their gas from Russia.[71] However, by 2024, Russian supplies of gas to the CEECs had dropped from an "average of 80 percent of each Eastern European country's gas to 37.6 percent."

Since Russia's invasion in 2022, India has stepped up to supply refined Russian-origin petroleum products to Europe, specifically to the CEECs. This loophole allowed CEEC nations to avoid purchasing gas and oil directly from Russia, which would violate sanctions, and instead relied on India as a critical petroleum middleman.[72] (Indeed, scholars focusing on the impact of sanctions on Russia after 2022 find that "Russia has liberalized its trade with several non-sanctioning countries, including Turkey, India, and China.") In this way, while allowing Russia to partly evade international oil sanctions, India has nonetheless given the EU and CEECs time to develop alternative energy suppliers. Not only has this elevated India as an energy broker on a global scale, but Russia's invasion has also led to a complex sanctions-avoidance regime that "may have contributed to furthering geopolitical fragmentation in the world."

India's reliance on Russian oil remains a point of friction and a source of tariff disputes between India and the U.S.[73] However, two recent developments may be helping to moderate tension over India's Russian oil purchases. In February 2026, India agreed to halt its purchase of Russian oil in exchange for reduced U.S. tariffs on Indian goods from 50 percent to 18 percent. Shortly after this agreement was announced, moreover, due to the conflicts in the Middle East, the U.S. government temporarily eased sanctions on India's purchase of Russian oil that had previously been stranded at sea as a result of American financial sanctions threats. Despite recent reprieves, however, the U.S. may continue to pressure India to limit its purchases of Russian oil. Nevertheless, while this pressure may, over the long term, constrain India's ability to buy Russian oil, it is unlikely to stifle India's role as a global refining hub.

Outside the energy sector, the CEECs continue to diversify their trade away from Russia, with a renewed emphasis on trading with EU partners, particularly Germany, Italy, and France. The top CEEC exports are cars ($104 billion), motor vehicle parts and accessories ($65.2 billion), and packaged medications ($34.3 billion). Similarly, the CEECs primarily import from Germany, China, and Italy, with Poland accounting for 28 percent of the region's total imports, amounting to $364 billion.[74]

Bolstering their economic relations and engagement with India also provides CEECs with an alternative to Chinese-led economic engagement, which is often exploitative. China has increased its engagement and is making inroads with CEECs primarily through its national programs, such as the 16+1 Framework, the BRI, and the Digital Silk Road.[75] In the first half of 2025, Chinese officials noted record trade with CEECs at "522.88 billion yuan (about $72.85 billion), which was a 6.8 percent increase, year on year." This follows a previous record high in 2024, underscoring persistent Chinese interest.

Several of the CEECs continue to welcome Chinese investment and often act as a "very effective backdoor for Chinese businesses to expand across Europe and the European Union." Current U.S. policymakers have criticized the Chinese aid model, often associated with the BRI, as being exploitative.[76] However, that may be changing, with regional states beginning a more cautious phase of engagement with Beijing.

In fact, Lithuania, a CEEC, has taken an explicit stand against what it views as Chinese malign influence and has "become the first to withdraw from the 16/17+1 initiative and to open a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius."[77] Lithuania is deliberately distancing itself from China, citing Chinese economic coercion and what has since been called "weaponized interdependence." Additionally, other European Union members are becoming increasingly aware of the risks associated with Chinese investment and partnership.[78] The Center for European Policy Analysis notes that the "Chinese Communist Party (CCP) takes an opportunistic approach to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)" and often seeks to target "central governments where possible and other sources of political, cultural, and economic influence where necessary."

As part of China's BRI and signature foreign policy framework, China seems to be prioritizing "rail projects in Eastern Europe, including the Budapest to Belgrade line, which is funded by Chinese loans." This is problematic, as Hungary is now recognized as Europe's most pro-China country.[79] EU leaders are increasingly concerned about a growing affinity between Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Chinese interests in Europe, with Hungary as a "gateway into Europe, offering Chinese investment tax incentives and infrastructural support to build and operate factories in the country."[80]

India, however, is well-positioned to help offset the risks posed by China's BRI in the CEECs. Indian investment offers both a viable economic alternative and an increasingly crucial counterbalancing presence, serving as an offset to growing Chinese investment.[81] India understands CEEC concerns about China first-hand. As former U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster writes, "India's leaders saw China's One Belt, One Road initiative as a one-way street that would disadvantage them" and expressed "concern over China's increasingly aggressive efforts to extend its influence at India's expense."

Incentivizing Increased Indian CEEC Investment

As shown here, India is already engaged economically with the CEECs, specifically with key nations such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.[82] However, for India to act as a regional counterbalance to China and become a priority partner, U.S. and EU leaders should pursue creative approaches to encourage greater Indian investment across EU economies.

While there are several promising opportunities to deepen economic engagement among the U.S., EU, and India, three existing or emerging collaborative frameworks may offer both efficiency and familiarity. These three approaches are the previously discussed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, the India Trilateral Forum, and the U.S.-India TRUST Initiative. The following sections provide a brief overview of each of these fora and frameworks, highlighting opportunities for all three parties to collaborate and increase India's economic investment in CEECs.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

As the U.S. and its EU partners seek innovative policy approaches and mechanisms to boost Indian investment across the CEECs, the IMEC presents a unique opportunity. The IMEC should be understood as an indicator of India's renewed emphasis on the region, and the IMEC initiative aims to establish a transformational collaboration that boosts connectivity, trade, and sustainability across three geographic areas. As envisioned, the IMEC serves as a physical, relational, and influential economic conduit for India's engagement with the Middle East.

The IMEC was first launched at the 2023 Group of Twenty (G20) summit in New Delhi, India, and proposes three core pillars to drive collaboration and integration. Signed by India, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the European Union, Germany, France, and Italy, it is intended to reinforce supply chain security and reshape Eurasia's economic and political landscape.[83] Within the planned corridor, the transportation pillar serves as the backbone, aiming to build a common, interconnected rail and maritime network. The energy pillar will prioritize integrating electricity infrastructure throughout the corridor. The digital pillar focuses on establishing fiber-optic and cross-border digital connectivity. All three pillars aim to provide an Indian and partner-led alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.[84]

The IMEC can be seen as a reimagining of India's Golden Road, a sea route that Indian sailors used in the first century CE to trade across the Indian Ocean from Southeast Asia and the East Indies to the Red Sea, where they exchanged goods with faraway Roman merchants. In this way, India was able to spread its culture, religion, and advanced knowledge in mathematics, navigation, architecture, and other fields, thereby establishing itself as a significant power.[85] As a result, William Dalrymple asserts that historically, India "was the most consequential power of the ancient world, with Indian learning, Indian religious insights, and Indian ideas … among the crucial foundations of our world."

For India, the IMEC provides a vital pathway to markets as trade moves along the corridor through the Middle East and into Europe. To focus specifically on Europe, the IMEC can serve as a platform and initiative to broaden and deepen the European Union's economic investment in the CEECs, helping European Union nations reduce their reliance on trade via the geopolitically challenging Suez Canal.[86] A key area of interest for both India and the Europeans is connecting IMEC with the Italian Port of Trieste, which already serves as a critical node for European and Indo-Pacific trade. As a potential IMEC connectivity hub, Trieste is well-positioned to serve as a vital economic link between India and the CEECs. At certain points, Trieste's port depth exceeds 50 feet, allowing medium and some large-sized ships and services to dock there.[87] Trieste also offers connections to more than 400 trains a month that transport goods across the European interior.[88] As noted by Italy's IMEC Special Envoy, Ambassador Francesco Talò, "this port has traditionally been the [harbor] of Central and Eastern European countries," as it is the "closest Mediterranean access to their production [centers]."

As India continues to collaborate in the development and planning for the IMEC, the U.S. and European IMEC partners should support the selection and development of the Port of Trieste as a critical economic hub. Not only would this enable increased trade and economic investment between India and CEEC nations, but it would also support the American desire to see an increasingly resilient, economically stable, and self-reliant Europe that can provide for its own regional defense.[89] As a critical aspect of Europe's economic growth, U.S. and EU support for enabling the IMEC to link India to the CEECs via Trieste is an essential step for India and for a U.S. "broader goal of fostering a Europe that can carry its weight as a key partner against shared adversaries."

The India Trilateral Forum

A second existing framework that the U.S. and the EU could use to incentivize increased CEEC investment in India is the India Trilateral Forum. Since its establishment in 2010, this trilateral forum has advanced shared interests among the United States, Europe, and India, serving as a leading platform for policymakers, strategic thinkers, and business leaders.[90] Meeting twice a year, the three nations have used this trilateral engagement to identify shared interests and develop policies and agreements to address security and economic challenges.

In a June 2022 statement at the India Trilateral Forum, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock reiterated the importance of collaboration, saying that

> … [f]or us, India is the natural partner to sail this rough sea together ... when it comes to your most important values, most important beliefs, it's important that you share the same way of thinking.

She also highlighted that India faces many of the same regional challenges as the U.S. and Europe. These challenges include the fundamental need to "deliver for our citizens, that we serve our people – men, women, and children – without discrimination … [so] [t]hat they are free to live prosperously and safely in terms of human safety and human security." More can be done to elevate the forum as a mechanism for promoting India's economic investment in CEECs.

To increase the impact of the India Trilateral Forum, U.S. leaders should go beyond simply declaiming shared policy interests and network building among members.[91] The U.S. should send a senior diplomat with a clear agenda and plan to not only identify areas of collaboration but also use the forum to craft a trilateral draft agreement for implementation. In the past, some have argued that India's role has not been perceived as equal in the partnership, and that too should change.[92] U.S. leaders should quickly emphasize and expand this existing forum to incentivize Indian investment in CEECs.

U.S.-India TRUST Initiative

As noted earlier, a third ongoing U.S.-India framework is the U.S.-India Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) Initiative. This policy initiative, announced in February 2025, builds on the foundations laid by the Biden Administration in January 2023. The goals of this reimagined Trump Administration initiative focus on "transforming the relationship utilizing strategic technologies" and specifically emphasize growing "government-to-government, academia, and private sector collaboration." Core areas of collaborative investment and information sharing focus on defense, AI, semiconductors, biotechnology, energy, and space.

As envisioned here, linking the TRUST initiative directly to CEECs would not be difficult. A key area of overlap across all three regions, for instance, is the vulnerability and risk in currently China-centered supply chains, as well as the manufacturing costs associated with sensitive electronics and advanced technologies more broadly. As identified by the framework, a central aspect of the TRUST initiative is the promise to work through U.S. and Indian private industry to establish a "U.S.-India Roadmap on Accelerating AI Infrastructure" by 2026. As outlined in a joint leaders' statement, the roadmap will identify "constraints to financing, building, powering, and connecting large-scale U.S.-origin AI infrastructure in India with milestones and future actions." Supporting the U.S.-India AI and technology roadmap, senior leaders pledged to encourage public and private industry in new ways that expand Indian manufacturing to "build trusted and resilient supply chains, including for semiconductors, critical minerals, advanced materials, and pharmaceuticals."

It is precisely in the manufacturing and supply chain aspects of the U.S.-India TRUST initiative where the CEECs would play a pivotal role for both the U.S. and India. U.S. and EU policymakers could incentivize Indian investment in countries such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia to open new, Indian-owned manufacturing facilities that strengthen supply chains and reduce the current fragility of key components.[93] India would benefit from establishing manufacturing sites in the CEECs, gaining access to a large, qualified workforce offering skilled employees at competitive rates. Additionally, many of the CEECs possess developed infrastructure, technological expertise, and competitive economies that would underpin new Indian investment. Another positive argument is that India – if able to sidestep recent anti-immigration political trends in Eastern Europe – could offer its own large population of skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers to help offset the CEEC's "demographic challenges in the form of aging populations and low fertility rates resulting in labor shortages."

In a mutually beneficial scenario, expanding the scope of the U.S.-India TRUST initiative could enable the United States to gain access to a more secure and stable supply chain for advanced technologies. At the same time, the Indian industry would benefit from lower-cost CEEC skilled labor and developed infrastructure. For their part, the CEECs would benefit from Indian investment as an alternative to China's, and from India as a source of additional skilled workers.[94]

While there are likely other opportunities to incentivize Indian CEEC Investment, the advantage of the three recommendations above is that they are already planned or established. Additional analysis is needed to develop a wholly new U.S.-India-EU trilateral framework for the CEECs, but for now, these three options can serve as areas for deeper study.

Possible Risks of Incentivizing India's Rise?

It is the central thesis of this paper that U.S. decision-makers are well advised to economically empower and incentivize India as a counterbalance to China's rise as a great power. While my specific recommendations focus on incentivizing India's economic investment within the CEECs, it might be objected that the U.S. is developing India as a future global competitor. Such concerns are grounded in historical experiences of the U.S. role in enabling China's own meteoric rise in the 1990s and 2000s.[95] The focus of this section is thus to briefly examine the historical record and compare India with China to assess the risks; I conclude that support for India's economic expansion, if conducted thoughtfully, is likely to create a more potent U.S. partner rather than a competitor.

China's rapid growth in the 1990s was built upon previous reforms of state-owned enterprises, as well as investments in new technologies and forward-looking research and development. During this period, U.S. trade policies supported and enabled China's growth by incentivizing the transfer of technology and of U.S. middle-class manufacturing jobs to China, thereby lowering U.S. domestic consumer costs and increasing the supply of desired goods.[96] Additionally, China aggressively pursued admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which it knew would lead to Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with the United States, making it eligible for favorable tariff rates. China promoted the value of its WTO membership to world leaders, and many on the U.S. side were in favor of Chinese accession, arguing that China's membership "will result in a dramatic opening of the Chinese market to U.S. goods and services once China joins the WTO."

U.S. support for bringing China into the WTO and the global economic fold may have been strategically short-sighted, but it was unmistakable. A U.S. Department of State fact sheet from the year 2000, for instance, said that

> … [t]he accession agreement negotiated with China will benefit American business, workers, and farmers by slashing industrial and agricultural tariffs and opening up sectors across the board to foreign competition.

Many U.S. leaders may also have remembered Richard Nixon's 1967 warning:

> Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations.… There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation.[97]

With Nixon's warning likely in mind, U.S. leaders in Congress passed the PNTR with China bill in 2000 by votes of 237 to 197 in the U.S. House of Representatives and 83 to 15 in the U.S. Senate. The passage of the PNTR bill remains a significant moment in U.S.-China trade relations and was pivotal in China's economic rise.

China, for its part, sought to implement market reforms, attract foreign direct investment (FDI), and foster export-oriented growth.[98] World Economic Forum scholar Kaiser Kuo says China focused on "tax breaks and creating a favorable regulatory environment" to attract FDI. Using this approach, "China became a magnet for foreign capital, initially coming predominantly from Hong Kong [Special Administrative Region] and diasporic communities in Asia and North America." With this massive influx, China "systematically absorbed and adapted foreign technologies, rapidly closing the technological gap with more developed economies." As Ashley Tellis and Sean Mirski have noted, these various developments helped make China's economic rise

> … [s]imply meteoric. During the last thirty or so years, China has demonstrated average real growth in excess of 9 percent annually, with growth rates touching 13–14 percent in peak years.

China's economic growth, however, has been a double-edged sword for the U.S. as an economy and nation. Inviting China onto the world stage opened its markets and made lower-cost labor available, which not only lowered the cost of goods but also accelerated global innovation and technology development. However, as the United States outsourced high-skilled manufacturing to China to lower component costs, this ultimately hurt American workers and industries and increased U.S. interdependence with – and dependence upon – China, while also helping build that country into an increasingly powerful and self-confident competitor to the United States. Ultimately, as David Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon Hanson have observed, China's economic rise is linked to the "one-quarter of the decline in manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2007." Over the past several decades, this has not only drastically reshaped U.S. labor markets but also had an impact on "political behavior, as declining job prospects, demographic shifts, and foregone mobility fueled a concentrated and understandably bitter electoral response."

Similarly, other nations have also experienced both positive and negative long-term impacts of intertwining their economies with China. This may be especially true for smaller nations. In their data-driven research, scholars Christopher Ford and Alex Memory suggested in the pages of this journal that "China's admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 may have provided Beijing with a critical opportunity to implement such a strategy of relational weaponization." They argue that relational weaponization occurs when China rapidly increases its leverage over partner nations, making them increasingly dependent on China. Their research indicates that in this regard, "Chinese consistency is not accidental, but rather the result of a deliberate grand strategy."[99] Since much of the world followed the U.S.-led efforts to open China's market, China experienced rapid economic growth and military expansion. However, instead of open markets sparking political liberalization in China, Brahma Chellaney writes, "the Chinese Communist Party used economic growth to tighten political control and expand its military capabilities, turning economic strength into strategic leverage."

Why India is Different and More Aligned with U.S. and EU Interests

There are certainly important lessons to be learned from past actions that contributed to China's rapid economic rise. Still, U.S. and EU policymakers cannot allow the past to paralyze decision-making and restrict actions that are critically needed. Indeed, India is economically rising like China, but it is fundamentally different from China. India remains the world's largest democracy and pursues a multipolar approach to support its own strategic autonomy, not global or even regional dominance, and New Delhi lacks any clear focus upon revanchist territorial self-aggrandizement analogous to Beijing's commitment to "reunification" with (*i.e.*, conquest of) Taiwan or to its seizure and militarization of the South China Sea. By contrast, China is an authoritarian nation that appears to be seeking paths that disrupt global norms and ensure "regime security (*e.g.*, domestic stability, as well as sovereignty and territorial integrity) and social-economic development."[100]

While India remains distinct in its generally pro-democratic approach compared to Chinese authoritarianism, India's rise is not without concerns. For example, some India-watchers have identified democratic backsliding, and several official U.S. reports raise concerns about human rights issues as well as changes to the status of India's Jammu and Kashmir regions, where minority Muslim populations reside. Similarly, largely under Prime Minister Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India has taken steps to modify its citizenship laws in ways that may be disadvantageous to Muslims and, in some cases, increased religious persecution.[101] These trends remain concerning to proponents of a closer U.S.-India alignment, and raise important questions about the stability of India's democratic moorings.

The United States has said that "India is a key pillar in U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific region," and seeks to have India act as a counterbalance to China. Both countries have similar approaches and commitments to essential topics such as "combating terrorism, radicalization, drug trafficking, illegal immigration, and cybercrime." The United States and India are also long-standing, trusted trading partners, with over $200 billion in total trade in 2024, much of it in the technology and energy sectors.[102] U.S., EU, and Indian leaders must continue to explore creative and economically beneficial areas of collaboration, including common interests such as defense co-production, space exploration, and counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Western Arabian Sea.[103]

Clearly, like the United States and the EU, India is seeking to decouple and de-risk its economic and technological ties with China and to align its future with other nations.[104] India aims to develop its domestic manufacturing capabilities while partnering with friendly nations to address its economic and workforce challenges. Fortunately, India's approach to partnership is starkly different from China's and more aligned with U.S. and EU values and goals. In contrast to China's often assertive, state-led economic model – as exemplified by its flagship Belt and Road initiative – India prefers cooperative partnerships with economic and cultural dimensions. The

United States, the EU, and India all share the goal of developing their own internal manufacturing capabilities while also partnering with friendly nations to address their respective economic and workforce challenges.[105]

India, therefore, appears to be a logical partner for the United States, one that is aligned with U.S. values and exceptionally well-positioned as a counterbalance to China. Indeed, this seems so obvious that one might wonder why the U.S.-Indian relationship has not already been more firmly established. More than two decades after the George W. Bush Administration first made its opening to New Delhi in 2005, reversing years of efforts to isolate India after its nuclear weapons tests of 1998 – again driven by dreams of partnering with India vis-à-vis the PRC – what continues to hold the U.S back from enabling New Delhi as the counterbalance to Beijing? While this historic, complex, and sometimes troubled relationship deserves a separate paper, if not a book, three top-level challenges merit mention.

First, as noted earlier, India places a high price on autonomy. India historically eschews binding alliances and maintains "strategic autonomy, a defining characteristic of India's foreign policy since its independence in 1947." Unwilling to lash itself to other nations' agendas, India possesses a deep sense of exceptionalism that moderates its willingness to adhere to broad formal alliances. Instead, India emphasizes autonomy in "decision-making and maintaining the liberty to engage with diverse international entities and stakeholders." This complexity has, and is likely to continue to, stand in the way of deeper collaboration and frustrate U.S. policymakers who seek concrete commitments to shared goals and objectives. Increasingly, there is even an emerging view in the United States that India's reliance on strategic autonomy is a fault – a frequent sense of frustration with New Delhi which risks alienating India diplomatically, militarily, and economically.[106]

A second area that constrains deeper U.S.-Indian ties centers on geography. Though New Delhi is itself deeply wary of China and Indian officials have in recent years described China as "the biggest security threat facing India," India remains cautious about alliances or collaborations that would formally pit it against China. This is largely because India is economically reliant on China and has much to lose. Additionally, unlike the U.S., India and China share a contested border, which matters.[107] China's military is currently larger and stronger than India's, and India lacks an air force and navy capable of competing with China. Between 2000 and 2023, "China's military expenditures increased from 1.5 times to 3.5 times that of India's." Additionally, during the same timeframe, "the Indian navy more than doubled its tonnage, but China's naval tonnage more than quadrupled." Similarly, China's air force has a "3-to-1 advantage over India in fighters and bombers," and "China has also modernized its nuclear arsenal far faster." China's immense military advantage over India, coupled with geographic proximity and a shared, contested border, underscores India's caution about binding formal alliances that could put it at greater odds with its Chinese neighbor.

Finally, India likely remains hesitant to go all in with Washington, as it often sees U.S leadership as unpredictable with erratic policy decisions and frequently diverging approaches. From the Indian perspective, U.S. shifts in approach are a persistent historical challenge, and Indian scholars frequently cite past examples in which the U.S. has failed to honor commitments. Two such negative examples of past U.S. actions are "U.S. support for Pakistan during the Cold War and its leadership role in the international nuclear ostracism of India after its first nuclear test in 1974." More recently, adding to Indian concern, is the perceived U.S. economic hostility towards India and an aggressive tariff regime that risks unraveling decades of a critical partnership.[108] Collectively, despite a recent thaw in economic relations, the United States' unpredictable approach has done little to ease Indian concerns or build long-term trust.[109] For India, the broader theme of strategic reliability, especially during a crisis, remains a critical aspect of future U.S.-Indian relations.[110]

While all the above may be true, significant economic and geopolitical shifts are underway that are nonetheless likely to bring the U.S. and India closer together and strengthen calls for increased Indian investment in the CEECs. As Mark Mungray writes, Indian foreign policy has largely focused on "balancing bilateral relationships to safeguard its national interests." Still, current realities and "the evolving dynamics of global politics now require more active and visible participation in multilateral frameworks." The regional and global rise of both India and China, coupled with a weaker Russia, is likely to continue to reshape India's view of its historic relationship with the United States. Both India and the United States are increasingly likely to see each other not as rivals but as best-placed partners, focused on the greater threat: China.

Overall, while there are likely to be future challenges to the U.S.-Indian relationship, India's approach to global economic engagement appears restrained, collaborative, and pragmatic. In contrast, China's approach seems aggressive and aimed at reshaping global norms to its own benefit.[111] Could a future India eventually lose its democratic moorings and collaborative approach to economic investment? Yes, possibly. Are there risks associated with the approaches recommended in this paper that seek to incentivize Indian economic investment in the CEECs to counter Chinese influence? Yes. Is it possible that, despite all the currently aligned interests, the United States could be promoting India today only to compete with and be concerned about a future Indian rival? Yes. However, these risks are only modest, and economically incentivizing India is still worth the cost. India offers the United States, the EU, and their allies and partners a much-needed, democratically aligned, and collaborative partner that shares a desire to balance China's rise as a great power, not only regionally in the Indo-Pacific but also in places farther afield, such as the CEECs.[112] Forging this critical collaboration between the CEECs on democracy and the economy is a crucial first step that strengthens all three partners.[113]

Conclusion

This paper began with the premise that India is a rising great power seeking to transition from its historic non-alignment to a more adaptive (though still not formally aligned) approach to strategic autonomy. As argued throughout this paper, the United States and the EU should build upon this landmark shift in Indian strategy and incentivize India's economic rise to counter a rising China. One essential aspect of enabling India to serve as a counterbalance to China, in turn, is to develop and employ creative policy approaches that incentivize Indian investment across the CEECs. Not only would this approach align with the realities of a multipolar world, but it is also closely linked to shifts in U.S. strategy that favor an increasingly resilient, economically stable, and self-reliant Europe capable of providing for its own regional defense.[114]

Similarly, increased Indian investment benefits the EU and CEECs, as well as India. The EU and CEECs are seeking opportunities to avoid the economic and exploitative pitfalls inherent in China's BRI and other initiatives. India, for its part, needs to diversify its economy, which is overly reliant on China for much of its trade, while avoiding increased competition and conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific. As I have outlined, the CEECs offer India an immense opportunity to leverage its working-age population by capitalizing on the CEECs' existing manufacturing infrastructure and ability gainfully to employ low-cost, high-skill labor in a sophisticated, globally integrated economy. Taken together, the U.S., the EU, and especially India can benefit from creative policies that incentivize Indian investment in the CEECs.

While it remains unlikely that the United States can directly restrain or contain a rising China, it must build partnerships to balance China. As I have argued here and elsewhere, India should be viewed as a priority partner with critical economic and social capital and democratic values aligned with those of the United States and Central and Eastern Europe. Investing now with an eye on the future, U.S. leaders should prioritize India, incentivize India, and not squander what may be the most critical relationship of the century.[115]

* * *

About the Author

Kirk Shoemaker *is a doctoral student at Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies. He is also an active-duty U.S. Army nuclear and counter-WMD officer (FA52) who serves as a technology Program Manager at the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA). Before becoming an FA52, Kirk served in the U.S. Army Special Forces and was stationed in Europe.*

The views in this article are those of the author and do not represent the policies or positions of any part of the U.S. government, the U.S. Army, or the Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

Notes

1 Nirupama Rao, Dhruva Jaishankar, Lisa Curtis, & Ashley J Tellis. "What Kind of Great Power Will India Be?" *Foreign Affairs*, July 30, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/responses/what-kind-great-power-will-india-be?check_logged_in=1.

2 Jeff M. Smith, "Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-Indian Relations," Heritage Foundation, November 9, 2020, https://www.heritage.org/china/commentary/strategic-autonomy-and-us-indian-relations.

3 Anand Mahindra, "Globalization 2.0: India Well Positioned to Emerge as One of New Centers of Gravity," *Economic Times*, June 29, 2025. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/globalisation-2-0-india-well-positioned-to-emerge-as-one-of-new-centres-of-gravity-anand-mahindra/articleshow/122144987.cms?from=mdr.

4 For more on strategic autonomy in light of global trends, *see* Shashi Tharoor, "India's Strategic Balancing Act," Project Syndicate, October 8, 2025, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-thaw-with-china-and-chill-with-the-us-not-what-they-seem-by-shashi-tharoor-2025-10; Shivashish Narayan, "Non-Alignment Revisited: Strategic Autonomy in India's 21st Century Foreign Policy Doctrine," IMPRI Impact and Policy Research Institute, September 12, 2025, https://www.impriindia.com/insights/non-alignment-revisited-strategic/; Davide Donald, "India between Superpowers: Strategic Autonomy in the Shadow of a Pacific Conflict," Council on Foreign Relations, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/blog/india-between-superpowers-strategic-autonomy-shadow-pacific-conflict.

5 Christopher J. Coyne, "Book Review: The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict, by Elbridge A. Colby," Independent Institute, 2022, https://www.independent.org/tir/2022-summer/the-strategy-of-denial/.

6 Matt Rosenberg, "Is Mackinder's Heartland Theory Now Outdated?" ThoughtCo, September 10, 2018, https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-mackinders-heartland-theory-4068393.

7 *See, e.g.*, Annalena Baerbock, "Opening Statement by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the India Trilateral Forum," German Federal Foreign Office, 2022, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/india-trilateral-forum-2567858; *see also, e.g.*, Manjeet Kripalani, "India Trilateral Forum: Building Bridges," Gateway House, September 15, 2016, https://www.gatewayhouse.in/india-trilateral-forum-towards-equality/.

8 Assistant Secretary of State David R. Stillwell, remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Csis.org, December 12, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/speech-assistant-secretary-state-east-asian-and-pacific-affairs-david-r-stilwell.

9 Nuno Monteiro, "Theory of Unipolar Politics | Department of Political Science," politicalscience.yale.edu, 2025, https://politicalscience.yale.edu/publications/theory-unipolar-politics.

10 *See, e.g.*, Munich Security Conference, "Munich Security Report 2025, Executive Summary," Securityconference.org, February 14, 2025, https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2025/executive-summary/; Suisheng Zhao, "The Collapse of the US-Led World Order: China Gains Ground but Not Ready to Replace It," *Asan Forum*, May 12, 2025, https://theasanforum.org/the-collapse-of-the-us-led-world-order-china-gains-ground-but-not-ready-to-replace-it/.

11 "Power Transition Theory," Center for International Relations and International Security (CIRIS), February 11, 2023, https://www.ciris.info/learningcenter/power-transition-theory/.

12 Andrew Forrest, "It's Time to Imagine How China Would Act as Regional Hegemon," *The Strategist*, April 2, 2025, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/its-time-to-imagine-how-china-would-act-as-regional-hegemon/; Jake Sullivan & Hal Brands, "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 22, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/05/china-has-two-paths-to-global-domination?lang=en; Andrew Latham & Arta Moeini, "Unraveling China's Grand Strategy: Its Aim Is to Erode U.S. Global Hegemony, Not Seek World Domination," Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, February 26, 2025, https://peacediplomacy.org/2025/02/26/unraveling-chinas-grand-strategy-its-aim-is-to-erode-u-s-global-hegemony-not-seek-world-domination/.

13 Ashley J. Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions," *Foreign Affairs*, June 17, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions.

14 *See generally, e.g.*, "Strategic Autonomy: Preserving India's Independent Decision-Making in Foreign Policy," Political Science Institute, January 31, 2024, https://polsci.institute/india-foreign-policy/strategic-autonomy-india-foreign-policy/#what-is-strategic-autonomy; Pankaj K. Choudhary, "India's Doctrine of Strategic Autonomy," GSpedia, August 28, 2025, https://upscgspedia.com/indias-doctrine-of-strategic-autonomy/; "Power Transition Theory," CIRIS.

15 Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions."

16 *See, e.g.*, Jennifer Lind, "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power," *International Security*, vol, 49, no. 2 (2024), 7–55, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00494; Hely Desai, "Beyond Comparisons: India's Strategic Reckoning amid China's Military Modernization," *War on the Rocks*, April 9, 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/04/beyond-comparisons-indias-strategic-reckoning-amid-chinas-military-modernization/.

17 Mayashree Acharya, "World GDP Ranking 2025 List," Cleartax, 2025, https://cleartax.in/s/world-gdp-ranking-list.

18 Minister for External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, "MEA | about Us," www.mea.gov.in, October 31, 2025. https://www.mea.gov.in/eam.htm; *see also generally* Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions."

19 Zhao, "The Collapse of the US-Led World Order: China Gains Ground but Not Ready to Replace It."

20 "Munich Security Report 2025, Executive Summary."

21 Zhao, "The Collapse of the US-Led World Order: China Gains Ground but Not Ready to Replace It."

22 "President Trump's Leadership, Vision Drives NATO Breakthrough," The White House, June 26, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/06/president-trumps-leadership-vision-drives-nato-breakthrough/.

23 *See generally* Nadia Schadlow, "Rebuilding Strategic Depth," Hudson Institute, October 7, 2025, https://www.hudson.org/defense-strategy/rebuilding-strategic-depth-nadia-schadlow; Nadia Schadlow, "New Dimensions of Strategic Depth," Firstbreakfast.com, June 10, 2025, https://www.firstbreakfast.com/p/new-dimensions-of-strategic-depth.

24 Schadlow, "New Dimensions of Strategic Depth."

25 Schadlow, "Rebuilding Strategic Depth."

---

26 Michael Cox, "For over 30 Years, Paul Kennedy's the Rise and Fall of the Great Powers Has Been the Backdrop of the Shifting Debate over American Power," USAPP, December 4, 2023, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2023/12/04/long-read-for-over-30-years-paul-kennedys-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-great-powers-has-been-the-backdrop-of-the-shifting-debate-over-american-power/.

27 Thomas Bruscino, "American and Joint Origins of Operational Depth," Usmcu.edu, July 23, 2021, https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/Expeditions-with-MCUP-digital-journal/American-and-Joint-Origins-of-Operational-Depth/.

28 George Friedman, "The Strategy of the United States," Fa-mag.com, February 23, 2016, https://www.fa-mag.com/news/the-strategy-of-the-united-states-25292.html?print.

29 Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press, 2021).

30 *See also* Senate Armed Services Committee, "To Consider the Nomination of Mr. Elbridge A. Colby to Be under Secretary of Defense for Policy," March 4, 2025, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-consider-the-nomination-of-mr-elbridge-a-colby-to-be-under-secretary-of-defense-for-policy.

31 *See, e.g.*, FP News Desk, "Pentagon's Colby Hosts Indian Envoy Kwatra, Eyes to 'Elevate Critical Defense Cooperation with India.'" *Firstpost*, September 18, 2025, https://www.firstpost.com/world/pentagons-colby-hosts-indian-envoy-kwatra-eyes-to-elevate-critical-defence-cooperation-with-india-13934964.html; The White House, "United States-India Joint Leaders' Statement," February 13, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-india-joint-leaders-statement/.

32 India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), "India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)." January 1, 2023. https://www.imec.international/.

33 Kevin Beard, "Elbridge Colby's Concept of a US Defence Strategy," Royal United Services for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales, March 1, 2026, https://www.rusinsw.org.au/Papers/2026AU04.pdf.

34 "Assessing the Strategy of Denial," *The Hamiltonian*, July 15, 2022, https://hamiltonian.alexanderhamiltonsociety.org/issue-two/assessing-the-strategy-of-denial/.

35 Kelley Jhong, "Reviewing the Strategy of Denial," Strategy Bridge, February 9, 2022, https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2022/2/9/reviewing-the-strategy-of-denial.

36 *See also, e.g.*, Tom O'Connor et al., "Why India, China's Bitter Foe, Won't Become a U.S. Ally," *Newsweek*, April 11, 2023, https://www.newsweek.com/why-india-chinas-bitter-foe-wont-become-us-ally-1792564; Elbridge A. Colby, "Why US Needs to Ply a More Adaptive Diplomacy with India," *The Economic Times*, June 22, 2023, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/why-us-needs-to-ply-a-more-adaptive-diplomacy-with-india/articleshow/101171733.cms?from=mdr.

37 Andrew Day & Senator Eric Schmitt, "The Time Has Come for Trump's America-First Realism," *The American Conservative*, July 30, 2025, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-time-has-come-for-trumps-america-first-realism/.

38 Manoj Kumar, "India Considers Easing Certain Chinese Import Curbs amid Growing Reliance, Say Sources," *Reuters*, October 17, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/india-considers-easing-certain-chinese-import-curbs-amid-growing-reliance-say-2025-10-17/.

39 *Quoted in* Eldar Ismailov & Vladimer Papava, *Rethinking Central Asia* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2010), 86, https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/1006Rethinking-4.pdf.

40 Digital Current Affairs, "India-Central and Eastern Europe Relations," September 11, 2024, https://visionias.in/current-affairs/monthly-magazine/2024-09-12/international-relations/india-central-and-eastern-europe-relations.

41 Manasi Singh, "India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, December 19, 2024, 83–103, https://doi.org/10.51870/uotg2755.

42 Ivan Lidarev, "Central and Eastern Europe's Emerging View of India," Observer Research Foundation, September 21, 2020, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/central-eastern-europe-emerging-view-india.

43 Singh, "India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics."

44 Antoine Bondaz & Marie Desbonnets. "Fact Sheet No.8: Economic Cooperation and Business Promoting Trade and Exchanges with the Indo-Pacific," Fact Sheet No. 8, La France en Indo-Pacifique, December 18, 2023, https://frstrategie.org/en/publications/fiches-indo-pacifique/n8-economic-cooperation-and-business.

45 Soumya Bhowmick, "India's Trade Strategy with China Will Have to Rely on a 'Managed Rivalry,'" Observer Research Foundation, June 30, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-s-trade-strategy-with-china-will-have-to-rely-on-a-managed-rivalry.

46 "EU Trade Relations with India." European Commission, 2026, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india_en.

47 "These Countries Have Skilled Labor Forces," US News, 2024, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings/skilled-labor-force; Singh, "India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics."

48 Servet Yanatma, "Labor Costs across Europe: Where Are They Highest and Lowest?" *Euronews*, April 19, 2025, https://www.euronews.com/business/2025/04/19/labour-costs-across-europe-where-are-they-highest-and-lowest.

49 "Labor Market in CEE," Statista, April 30, 2025, https://www.statista.com/topics/12036/labor-market-in-cee/#topicOverview.

50 Marek Grzegorczyk, "The Future of Manufacturing in CEE: Transitioning to a High-Tech, Added-Value Era," Emerging Europe, June 10, 2024, https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/the-future-of-manufacturing-in-cee-transitioning-to-a-high-tech-added-value-era/.

51 "Countries with Declining Population 2021," World Population Review, October 31, 2025, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-declining-population.

52 Jordan King, "Europe's Population Crisis: The Nations Getting Smaller," *Newsweek*, March 29, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/europe-population-crisis-birth-rate-fertility-rate-2051601.

53 Grzegorczyk, "The Future of Manufacturing in CEE: Transitioning to a High-Tech, Added-Value Era."

54 Vikash Mishra, "Indian Workers Quietly Run the World: OECD Confirms," *Skillbee Blogs*, January 24, 2026, https://blogs.skillbee.com/2026/01/24/indian-workers-quietly-run-the-world-oecd-confirms/.

55 David Born, "India's Remarkable Economic Ascent: A Distinct Story of Growth," Roland Berger GmbH, January 21, 2025, https://www.rolandberger.com/en/Insights/Publications/India-s-remarkable-economic-ascent-A-distinct-story-of-growth.html.

56 "Turning to India for Talent: India's Highly Skilled Labor Force Is the Answer to the Global Talent Crunch," UK India Business Council, February 15, 2023, https://www.ukibc.com/reports/turning-to-india-for-talent-indias-highly-skilled-labour-force-is-the-answer-to-the-global-talent-crunch/.

57 Rhik Kundu, "India's Unemployment Rate Edges up to 5.2% in September, Urban Women Hit Hardest," *Mint*, October 15, 2025, https://www.livemint.com/economy/india-unemployment-rate-september-periodic-labour-force-survey-plfs-september-2025-urban-unemployment-india-11760530539725.html; "Unemployed Youth Are Still the Achilles Heel of India's Buoyant Economy," *International Banker*, September

9, 2024, https://internationalbanker.com/finance/unemployed-youth-are-still-the-achilles-heel-of-indias-buoyant-economy/.

58 Soutik Biswas, "India's Jobs Crisis Is More Serious than It Seems," *BBC News*, January 6, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59870297.

59 Travelli, Alex. "India's Most Valuable Export: Tens of Millions of Workers." The New York Times, October 24, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/24/business/india-labor-mobility-migration-germany-japan.html.

60 Singh, "India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics."

61 Jakub Bornio Priya Vijaykumar Poojary, "Central and Eastern Europe's Emerging Relations with India in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War," *New Eastern Europe*, June 7, 2022, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/06/07/central-and-eastern-europes-emerging-relations-with-india-in-the-context-of-the-russo-ukrainian-war/.

62 Lidarev, "Central and Eastern Europe's Emerging View of India."

63 Pritam Sarbabidya, "PM Modi's Visit to Poland: A Different Outreach to Europe," *Modern Diplomacy*, August 24, 2024, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/08/24/pm-modis-visit-to-poland-a-different-outreach-to-europe/.

64 Polish Ministry of External Affairs, "India-Poland Relations – Political Relations," October 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Poland-oct-2024.pdf.

65 Lidarev, "Central and Eastern Europe's Emerging View of India."

66 "EU Trade Relations with India." European Commission, 2026, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india_en.

67 Dhruva Jaishankar, "Welcome to Zscaler Directory Authentication," Brookings Institution, September 5, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/heres-why-central-and-eastern-europe-may-become-an-area-of-promise-for-india/.

68 Daniel Tilles, "Poland Joining 20 Largest World Economies, IMF Figures Show," Notes From Poland, October 15, 2025, https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/10/15/poland-joining-20-largest-world-economies-imf-figures-show/.

69 Government of Poland, "Poland in India," October 19, 2025, https://www.gov.pl/web/india/bilateral-relations.

70 Sava Janković & Volker Roeben, "The Threat of Russia's Force in Ukraine," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, September 20, 2023, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5061636.

71 Maximilian Hess, "How Eastern Europe Overhauled Its Natural Gas Market," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 22, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2025/04/how-eastern-europe-overhauled-its-natural-gas-market.

72 John Basquill, "EU Urged to Close Russian Sanctions 'Loophole' as India Fuel Exports Soar," Gtreview.com, November 13, 2024, https://www.gtreview.com/news/europe/eu-urged-to-close-russian-sanctions-loophole-as-india-fuel-exports-soar/; Michael Race, "Russian Oil Getting into UK via Refinery Loophole, Reports Claim," *BBC*, February 5, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-68018660.

73 Masahide Takahashi, "The Oil Policies of India Are Torn between the United States and Russia," International Information Network Analysis, September 16, 2025, https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/takahashi_07.html.

74 "CEE Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners," Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023, https://oec.world/en/profile/international_organization/cee.

[75] *See generally, e.g.*, Alfred Gerstl, "China's 16+1 Format in Crisis – Not yet an Obituary," Mapglobalchina.com, 2019, https://mapglobalchina.com/chinas-161-format-in-crisis-not-yet-an-obituary/; James McBride, Noah Berman, & Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, February 2, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative; Marta Makowska, "China's Digital Authoritarianism vs. EU Technological Sovereignty: The Impact on Central and Eastern Europe," Council on Foreign Relations, May 19, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-digital-authoritarianism-vs-eu-technological-sovereignty-impact-central-and-eastern.

[76] *See, e.g.*, Marco Rubio, "Making Foreign Aid Great Again," U.S. Department of State, July 2025, https://statedept.substack.com/p/making-foreign-aid-great-again.

[77] Konstantinas Andrijauskas, "Chinese Influence in Lithuania," CEPA, August 2, 2022, https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-lithuania/; *see also generally* William Yang, "Lithuania Faces Tough Balancing Act over Ties with China," *Voice of America*, December 21, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/lithuania-faces-tough-balancing-act-over-ties-with-china/7909134.html; Stuart Lau, "Lithuania Pulls out of China's '17+1' Bloc in Eastern Europe." *Politico*, May 21, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-pulls-out-china-17-1-bloc-eastern-central-europe-foreign-minister-gabrielius-landsbergis/.

[78] Valbona Zeneli, "China's Comprehensive Exploitation of Europe's Western Balkans Flank," IWM website, 2022, https://www.iwm.at/publication/iwmpost-article/chinas-comprehensive-exploitation-of-europes-western-balkans-flank.

[79] Andrzej Sadecki, "Hungary's Orbán Walks US-China Tightrope," CEPA, April 3, 2025, https://cepa.org/article/hungarys-orban-walks-us-china-tightrope/.

[80] Nikkie Lyubarsky, "A Trojan Horse Approach? Chinese Infrastructure Investment in Europe," Soufan Center, July 29, 2025, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-july-29/.

[81] Zhong Nan, "CEEC Doing Brisk Business with China," *China Daily*, May 22, 2025, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202505/22/WS682e7826a310a04af22c0d4a.html.

[82] *See generally, e.g.*, Embassy of India in Poland, "Indian Companies in Poland," 2020, https://www.indianembassywarsaw.gov.in/page/com-india/; Lidarev, "Central and Eastern Europe's Emerging View of India"; Singh, "India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics"; Embassy of India in the Slovak Republic, "Economic Relations," 2025, https://eoibratislava.gov.in/economicrelations.

[83] *See generally, e.g.*, "Great Expectations: The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor," Arab Gulf States Institute, January 29, 2025, https://agsi.org/analysis/great-expectations-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/; Araq Hussain & Nicholas Shafer, "The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Connectivity in an Era of Geopolitical Uncertainty," *Atlantic Council*, August 27, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-connectivity-in-an-era-of-geopolitical-uncertainty/.

[84] Hussain, Afaq, and Nicholas Shafer. "The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Connectivity in an Era of Geopolitical Uncertainty." Atlantic Council, August 27, 2025. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-connectivity-in-an-era-of-geopolitical-uncertainty/.

[85] Tony Richardson, "India's Golden Road," Anticapitalistresistance.org, December 12, 2024, https://anticapitalistresistance.org/indias-golden-road/.

[86] Satyam Singh, Waseem Raja, Sandeep Kumar, Akriti Uppal, & Neeta Rani, "India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: A Strategic Energy Alternative," *Energy Research Letters*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2025), https://doi.org/10.46557/001c.123649.

[87] "Port of the Month: Port of Trieste (Italy)," European Sea Ports Organization, June 30, 2017, https://www.espo.be/news/espo-port-of-the-month-port-of-trieste-italy.

88 "Gateway to Europe," The Trieste Summit, 2026, https://triestesummit.org/home/gateway-to-europe/.

89 Kaush Arha & Carlos Roa, "Trieste and the New Golden Road," *National Interest*, January 30, 2025, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trieste-and-the-new-golden-road.

90 German Marshall Fund, "India Trilateral Forum." GMFUS, 2025, https://www.gmfus.org/india-trilateral-forum#.

91 German Marshall Fund, "India Trilateral Forum."

92 Manjeet Kripalani, "India Trilateral Forum: Building Bridges," Gateway House, September 15, 2016, https://www.gatewayhouse.in/india-trilateral-forum-towards-equality/.

93 Embassy of India in Poland, "Indian Companies Poland"; Lidarev, "Central and Eastern Europe's Emerging View of India"; Singh, "India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics"; Embassy of India in the Slovak Republic, "Economic Relations."

94 Singh, "India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics."

95 Attorney General William J. Barr, remarks at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, July 17, 2020, in *A Collection of Speeches Laying out the Most Significant United States Foreign Policy Shift in a Generation*, (Robert C. O'Brien, ed.) (November 2020), 73, 79 ("…[N]o one should doubt that America made China's meteoric rise possible. China has reaped enormous benefits from the flow of American aid and trade."), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Trump-on-China-Putting-America-First.pdf.

96 Assad Raza, "Assessing U.S. 1990s – 2000s China Trade Policy's Effects on U.S. National Security," *Divergent Options*, June 5, 2023, https://divergentoptions.org/2023/06/05/assessing-u-s-1990s-2000s-china-trade-policys-effects-on-u-s-national-security/.

97 *See also, e.g.*, P.K. Mallick, "Rise of China, History, Technology, Policies: Implications for India," Vivikananda International Foundation, October 9, 2019, https://www.vifindia.org/monograph/2019/october/09/rise-of-china-history-technology-policies-implications-for-india.

98 Kaiser Kuo, "China's 40-Year History of Economic Transformation," World Economic Forum, June 19, 2025, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/06/how-china-got-rich-40-year-history-of-economic-transformation/.

99 Christopher Ford & Alex Memory, "The Ties That Bind: A Data-Driven Analysis of Oceania's Dependency on China," *Defense & Strategic Studies Online*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn 2024), 5, https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/DASSO_Volume_1_Issue_1_Ford_and_Memory.pdf.

100 *See also, e.g.*, David C. Kang, Jackie S. H. Wong, & Zenobia T. Chan, "What Does China Want?" *International Security* 50, no. 1 (2025), 46–81. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.a.5.

101 *See, e.g.*, Shayerah I. Akhtar & Alan K. Kronstadt, "India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Report R47957, June 16, 2023, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47597; Vedavi Kavoori, "Is India Facing Democratic Backsliding?" Democratic Erosion Consortium, February 14, 2026, https://democratic-erosion.org/2026/02/13/is-india-facing-democratic-backsliding/.

102 Alex Travelli, "The Trade That Binds the Indian and American Economies," *New York Times*, August 21, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/21/business/trump-tariffs-india.html; "What to Know about India's Growing Global Role," Johns Hopkins University, May 30, 2025, https://washingtondc.jhu.edu/news/hopkins-india-conference/.

103 Kaush Arha & Samir Saran, "The US Needs a New Paradigm for India: 'Great Power Partnership,'" Atlantic Council, April 1, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-us-needs-a-new-paradigm-for-india-great-power-partnership/; Khyati Singh & Gaurav Sen, "India's Anti-Piracy Missions

Were Years in the Making," *The Diplomat*, February 29, 2024. https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/indias-anti-piracy-missions-were-years-in-the-making/.

104 Joshua Sullivan & Jon Bateman, "China Decoupling beyond the United States: Comparing Germany, Japan, and India," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 8, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/01/china-decoupling-beyond-the-united-states-comparing-germany-japan-and-india?lang=en.

105 *See, e.g.*, "India Approves $626 Million in Projects to Boost Electronics Components Manufacturing," *Reuters*, October 27, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-approves-626-million-projects-boost-electronics-components-manufacturing-2025-10-27/; "The Sharpest Knife Cuts the Cleanest: Technology as a Lever in the U.S.-China Decoupling," Building Our Future, October 27, 2025, https://open.substack.com/pub/buildingourfuture/p/the-sharpest-knife-cuts-the-cleanest?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=web.

106 Maqbool Shah, "India's Strategic Autonomy Has Become a Liability," *Asia Times*, January 27, 2026, https://asiatimes.com/2026/01/indias-strategic-autonomy-has-become-a-liability/.

107 "India between Superpowers: Strategic Autonomy in the Shadow of a Pacific Conflict," Council on Foreign Relations, December 16, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/articles/india-between-superpowers-strategic-autonomy-shadow-pacific-conflict.

108 "Trump's Tariffs on India Could Unravel Decades of Strategic Partnership," Council on Foreign Relations, September 25, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/articles/trumps-tariffs-india-could-unravel-decades-strategic-partnership.

109 The White House, "Fact Sheet: The United States and India Announce Historic Trade Deal," February 9, 2026, https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2026/02/fact-sheet-the-united-states-and-india-announce-historic-trade-deal/.

110 Lavina Lee, "Assessing the Quad: Prospects and Limitations of Quadrilateral Cooperation for Advancing Australia's Interests," Lowy Institute, May 20, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/assessing-quad-prospects-limitations-quadrilateral-cooperation-advancing-australia-s.

111 Didi Tang, "At UN, Beijing Makes Clear Its Intent to Remold Global Norms," *AP News*, September 29, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/li-qiang-united-nations-speech-world-order-7a9dad1ecb5c190251c9ed65da87ac9c; Global Engagement Center, U.S. Department of State, "How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment," GEC Special Report, September 28, 2023, https://2021-2025.state.gov/gec-special-report-how-the-peoples-republic-of-china-seeks-to-reshape-the-global-information-environment/.

112 Stacey Glaser, "Partner, Not Pawn: India's Place in America's Asia Playbook," One World Outlook, August 23, 2025, https://oneworldoutlook.com/opinion/partner-not-pawn-indias-place-in-americas-asia-playbook/.

113 Task Force on U.S.-India Relations, "The United States and India: Forging an Indispensable Democratic Partnership," Center for American Progress, January 14, 2018, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/united-states-india-forging-indispensable-democratic-partnership/.

114 Arha & Roa, "Trieste and the New Golden Road."

115 Kirk Shoemaker, "India Is a Priority Partner for the US in Central and Eastern Europe," *The Strategist*, January 7, 2026, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/india-is-a-priority-partner-for-the-us-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.