

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the Indo-Pacific to the Mega-Region: Opportunities for the U.S.- India Relationship

Hoover Institution | March 12, 2026

Overview

This workshop introduced the concept of a Pacific–Indo–Middle East “mega-region” as a more accurate framework for understanding the current Indo-Pacific region. As its built today, the Indo-Pacific construct underestimates the growing strategic interdependence between East Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East. It misaligns geographical boundaries, accounts for a largely Western view of the region and ignores growing relationships between key players.

In the mega-region, maritime connectivity, the search for natural resources and cross-regional competition are central to future global order. Within this system, India emerges as a pivotal linking actor, though its ability to serve as a “hinge state” depends on overcoming structural constraints, including its inability to project power and its poor relationships with regional countries. Critically, the U.S. and India also need to rebuild strategic trust to overcome gaps in economic and defense coordination.

Panel 1: Opening the Aperture

How the region is defined shapes strategy and redefining the region is important. The Indo-Pacific framework orients India eastward, while the mega-region highlights its growing role westward, especially in the Middle East. Given this, there is a need to structure strategic thinking about the region around maritime geography rather than land-based divisions.

India is a key strategic actor within this framework. India’s power derives less from military projection and more from its economic connectivity and diplomatic reach. Its relationships with Iran, Israel, and Gulf states position it uniquely across regions. At the same time, China’s long-term expansion in the Indian Ocean, particularly through port access and maritime activity, remains a central strategic concern.

Panel 2: The Blue Economy and Economic Competition

The blue economy will shape the region’s future. India has prioritized the blue economy, including through development of its coastline, ports and fisheries sector. However, the United States lacks a comparable strategy. Indeed, its failure to sign onto UNCLOS and lack of infrastructure for subsea cable protection suggests it has no interest in the Blue Economy.

Subsea cables, seabed resources, and maritime infrastructure are critical areas of vulnerability and opportunity. Potential U.S.–India cooperation could focus on:

- Subsea cable security
- Ship repair and maritime infrastructure
- Seabed mining and critical minerals

Despite opportunities, creating a structure for implementation could be challenging. One possibility is to go through existing bodies, such as AUKUS or the Quad. Other challenges include regulatory constraints, limited industrial capacity, and uncertain commercial scale.

Session 3: From Deterrence to Defense: Security Relationships in the Mega-Region

While the U.S. and India have established multiple defense agreements, most are under-implemented. Cooperation remains uneven due to bureaucratic friction and differing expectations.

India prioritizes co-development and co-production, particularly in:

- Drones and autonomous systems
- AI-enabled technologies
- Maritime domain awareness
- Defense supply chains

India has good, actionable defense relationship with Israel, but not the U.S. It's unclear why. It may be because of trust deficits with the U.S. India's ties to Russia continue to limit deeper integration. **A joint fusion center based in India could be a small step to overcome this trust deficit.**

Session 4 – India as the Hinge State of the Mega-Region

India seems to be converging on American interests in a lot of regions and is taking steps to move away from Russia. India has the geographic and diplomatic potential to serve as the hinge state of the mega-region, linking East and West Asia. However, several constraints remain:

- Persistent U.S.–India trust deficits, including how each would respond during a conflict with China.
- The complicating role of Pakistan, U.S.-policy toward Islamabad and Pakistani nuclear policy.

To help improve U.S. trust, India must strengthen relations with neighboring countries and balance defense spending with domestic economic priorities.

- Economic cooperation offers a potential pathway for rebuilding trust.
- Opportunities exist in areas such as energy cooperation, trade agreements, and expanded economic integration.

Session 5 – The Mega-Region in 2040: Alternative Security Architecture

U.S. Perspective:

For Washington, the central question is whose side will India choose in a conflict with China.

- U.S. is not sure there is a clear answer to this question. It's a large question mark for the US.
- Fear in New Delhi is that U.S. will not come to India's assistance in the conflict.
- Could the U.S. be looking for a new special partner given strained relations with Europe? Could India be that partner?

Participants suggested that traditional alliances are unlikely to define the region's future. Instead, flexible, issue-based partnerships will dominate, given many countries' economic ties with China.

India Perspective:

Current seams in Indian ocean are not helpful for how U.S.-India can work together.

- Military command structures may require reform. Existing structures rely heavily on land-based regional divisions that do not fully reflect maritime strategic realities.
- Possible alternatives include establishing an Indian Ocean Command or assigning clearer operational responsibility for major maritime chokepoints.
- Traditional formal alliances appear less viable in the region because many countries maintain strong economic relationships with China. Instead, flexible partnership-based frameworks and minilateral cooperation may provide a more realistic model for India.

Middle East perspective:

The Middle East will likely remain strategically important even if the United States seeks to reduce its presence in the region.

- Ongoing interests related to Israel and the Strait of Hormuz will continue to draw the United States into regional security issues.
- Countries lack legitimacy in the region. If Iran falls, then another country will need to adopt anti-Zionist stance to maintain legitimacy.
- Alternative security structure will come in a post-conflict state.

Several cross-cutting themes emerged:

- A persistent trust deficit constrains U.S.-India cooperation
- Small, actionable items are more important than wholesale reform to rebuild trust
- India and Israel have a strong defense relationship. It's unclear why the U.S. and India cannot emulate this relationship.
- The Indo-Pacific is outdated from the Indian perspective. Increasingly, India is looking West to the Middle East.
- India still struggles to play a sizeable role. It has strained relations with regional countries and rarely project power.

Priority areas for action include:

- Building operational trust (e.g., maritime domain awareness, joint initiatives)
- Advancing blue economy cooperation (especially subsea infrastructure)
- Expanding defense-industrial collaboration (AI, drones, supply chains)
- Strengthening institutional and educational exchanges
- Understanding the mega-region

Conclusion

The transition to a Pacific–Indo–Middle East mega-region reflects a fundamental shift in how Eurasian security and economics are organized. India’s role as a potential hinge state is central to this transformation, but realizing that role will require greater trust, deeper economic integration, and more effective implementation of existing initiatives.