

Mapping the Mega Region: Identifying Opportunities for the U.S.-India Relationship

Location: Washington, DC

Date: June 4, 2026

Key points:

The workshop explored the concept of a broader strategic “mega-region” stretching from West Africa through Eurasia to the Western Pacific. Rather than treating the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, Indian Ocean, and Eurasian corridors as separate theaters, the sessions examined how trade, energy, maritime infrastructure, digital systems, seabed resources, defense technology, and great-power competition increasingly connect these geographies into one strategic space.

- Existing U.S. concepts of the Indo-Pacific divide the region in ways that do not reflect the full scope of India’s strategic environment, China’s expanding reach, or the functional systems that connect maritime trade, energy flows, data cables, supply chains, and security partnerships.
- India is facing multiple security and diplomatic challenges at once, making it difficult to manage each in isolation. However, it needs to improve relations with neighbors to become a regional power.
- An alternative to BRI must be comprehensive, but there are currently few viable alternatives. The United States, India, and partners need to offer a package that integrates infrastructure, finance, logistics, digital platforms, governance, and strategic access.
- Critical minerals cooperation between the United States and India is strongly aligned and could remain durable across administrations. The United States has a range of tools and industrial policies dedicated to critical mineral extraction, processing, and production, while India has growing strategic incentives to develop its own capabilities.
- The U.S.-India partnership has strong rhetorical support, but it often struggles to convert agreements into usable capability, coordinated infrastructure strategy, or durable institutional mechanisms.

- The most promising path forward is to identify concrete, measurable areas where the United States and India can act together: maritime domain awareness, critical minerals processing, seabed mapping, defense technology, IMEC implementation, intelligence sharing, and a more coordinated diplomatic approach to the mega-region.
-

Session 1: Framing the Mega-Region

This session defined the mega-region as a broad strategic geography stretching from West Africa through Eurasia to the Western Pacific, encompassing roughly 50–60 percent of the world’s population. The current U.S. Indo-Pacific framework is too narrow or bifurcated to capture the strategic realities facing India, the United States, Japan, and other key partners.

- The United States, India, and Japan each understand the Indo-Pacific differently which reflects different strategic priorities and must be reconciled before any shared framework can be built. Rather than defining the mega-region by fixed territorial boundaries, look at functional connections: chokepoints, trade flows, energy routes, supply chains, maritime infrastructure, digital systems, and China’s expanding strategic reach.
- China’s naval and infrastructure strategy is oriented toward this broader mega-region, rather than toward projecting power against the U.S. homeland. The conflict involving Iran has made chokepoints, especially the Strait of Hormuz, more consequential. Iran’s ability to close Hormuz is potentially more dangerous than a nuclear weapon because of the immediate effect on global energy flows and maritime trade. Commercial shipping is already rerouting around the Horn of Africa, increasing costs and transit times.
- There are many underexplored strategic assets, including seafloor mineral clusters south of Sri Lanka and near Réunion and Mauritius. These resources could become important in future competition over critical minerals, seabed infrastructure, and maritime control. Need to account for Minamitorishima, where Japan is investing a lot in extraction
- A major strategic concern is U.S. “insolvency” in the Indian Ocean. The region is not a top-tier priority for either the Department of Defense or the State Department, raising the question of who will act as the principal security provider. The logical command seam is the Strait of Malacca. This leads to the question: is India merely a

hinge state connecting multiple theaters, or should it become a net security provider across the mega-region?

- Is the United States approaching an unstated “East of Suez” moment? If U.S. capacity and attention are limited, the central question becomes who fills the resulting vacuum.

Session 2: India’s Neighborhood and Regional Security Challenge

The second session focused on India’s immediate regional environment and the challenge of managing simultaneous pressures across its northern border, maritime domain, and neighborhood relationships. India is facing multiple security and diplomatic challenges at once, making it difficult to manage each in isolation. However, it needs to improve relations with neighbors to become a regional power.

- Pakistan remains India’s most immediate and persistent security challenge. It continues to shape India’s strategic planning, military posture, and regional diplomacy. At the same time, the United States should not become overly involved in India-Pakistan disputes. India cannot become a major power, or even an effective regional power, without stabilizing and improving relations with its neighbors.
- The neighborhood assessment is mixed. India’s relationship with Afghanistan remains complicated under the Taliban, though India continues to maintain a diplomatic presence. Nepal’s current government is less favorable toward India. Relations with Bangladesh are strained, despite India’s efforts to engage with the new government. Myanmar remains uncertain, with unclear prospects for cooperation or stability. By contrast, relations with the Maldives are generally positive and better than some observers expected.
- India’s role in the mega-region depends not only on its strategic alignment with the United States, but also on its ability to manage its immediate periphery. If India is to become a more credible regional security provider, it will need stronger neighborhood diplomacy, more predictable regional partnerships, and a clearer strategy for balancing continental and maritime priorities.

Session 3: Chokepoints and Corridors

The third session focused on trade corridors, chokepoints, and whether the United States, India, and partners can build a credible alternative to China's infrastructure and logistics dominance. An alternative to BRI must be comprehensive, but there are currently few viable alternatives. The United States, India, and partners need to offer a package that integrates infrastructure, finance, logistics, digital platforms, governance, and strategic access.

- Corridors are not simply physical infrastructure projects. Successful corridors also require governance harmonization, digital systems, private-sector investment, predictive analytics, risk management, and a structure that benefits every transit country, not only the anchor economies.
- China's Belt and Road Initiative has succeeded in part because it offers a complete package: financing, infrastructure, logistics, digital systems, and strategic access. A U.S.-India alternative must compete across all these dimensions simultaneously. It is not enough to build ports, rail lines, or roads; partners must also provide the data systems, governance standards, financing structures, and commercial incentives that make corridors viable.
- China's port strategy is a deliberate maritime dominance play. Large loans to strategically important countries can create debt vulnerabilities, which are then converted into long-term operational leases and strategic access.
- China's Logink system, which controls a large share of global container logistics data, is a major concern. This makes BRI not only a physical infrastructure strategy, but also a digital dependency strategy.
- The Strait of Hormuz is uniquely irreplaceable. Unlike other chokepoints, there is no credible alternative route. Land corridors cannot fully substitute for maritime chokepoints because a single transit country can disrupt or shut down access.
- The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor — is BRI's most credible alternative because it combines transportation, energy, and digitalization. However, its viability depends heavily on India's ability to scale as lower-end manufacturer. Without a major expansion of Indian manufacturing, including both advanced and lower-end production, IMEC may struggle to become commercially viable. The corridor also has vulnerabilities of its own, including rail chokepoints, political disruption, and Turkey's potential ability to obstruct or complicate implementation.

Session 4: Seabed Minerals and the Blue Economy

The fourth session focused on seabed minerals, critical minerals, and the broader blue economy. Critical minerals cooperation between the United States and India is strongly aligned and could remain durable across administrations. The United States has a range of tools and industrial policies dedicated to critical mineral extraction, processing, and production, while India has growing strategic incentives to develop its own capabilities.

- Maritime competition is increasingly moving under the sea. Seabed activity is creating new forms of gray-zone competition, sabotage risk, and high-seas disputes that existing governance frameworks are not prepared to manage. The seabed is not just a resource frontier; it is also becoming a strategic and military domain.
- The intersection of seabed minerals with next-generation naval technology is important. Future systems may include UAVs moored on the seabed, ocean-floor sensors, undersea autonomous platforms, and surveillance networks. Whoever leads in seabed mineral development may also shape the military technologies that depend on those resources.
- China is the leading actor in deep-sea mining technology. It has multiple International Seabed Authority license holders and is targeting commercial-scale capability by roughly 2030–2035. China views seabed minerals as connected to naval warfare, AI, data centers, and infrastructure strategy, not as a standalone commercial sector. By contrast, the United States has no comparable private-sector development activity, despite having the ability to obtain licenses.
- The Indian Ocean's mineral clusters are significantly underexplored compared with the Pacific. U.S. non-signatory status on UNCLOS complicates direct bilateral cooperation through the ISA, making India and other ISA members potentially important partners for shaping the mining code.
- China may proceed with deep-sea mining regardless of whether the ISA process produces an agreed code. If China does not get the mining code it wants, it may act outside the process, creating a governance vacuum in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

- The U.S.-India cooperation agenda on seabed mining ranges from low to high ambition. Near-term opportunities include joint seafloor mapping, technology platform development, drones and remote operations, midstream processing cooperation, and targeted resource development in each country's exclusive economic zone.
- IIT-Caltech collaboration is one possible scientific and technical pathway. Midstream processing is most practical near-term entry point. Exxon's geological data is a potentially underused asset that could be repurposed for rare earth and seabed mineral exploration. India has conducted small expeditions and tested a small-scale collector vehicle but remains constrained by resources, making it a plausible partner for targeted cooperation.

Session 5: Defense Technology and Implementation

The fifth session focused on defense technology, implementation, and the persistent gap between U.S.-India strategic agreements and operational capability. The central failure is gap between agreement and delivery. The relationship produces many statements, dialogues, and frameworks, but too few deployable capabilities.

- India should no longer be treated simply as a market for U.S. defense exports. It is a strategic partner with its own industrial ambitions.
- The India-Israel model is a more useful template: sensors, radars, precision weapons, aircraft integration, and deep operational cooperation. That level of integration is what the U.S.-India relationship should aspire to but has not yet achieved.
- The key challenge is converting agreements into deployable capability. This requires a different kind of relationship than the United States currently has with India. Promising early test cases include maritime domain awareness, unmanned systems, logistics, surveillance, data-sharing, and production capacity. These areas are attractive because they are concrete, measurable, and directly relevant to the mega-region.
- Priority technologies identified for the mega-region included persistent surveillance, AI-enabled data sharing, electromagnetic spectrum management, unmanned systems, and logistical coordination among like-minded partners.

- India has a defense innovation “Valley of Death” — the gap between prototype and production. Indian defense startups may develop promising technologies, but financing gaps, unclear demand signals, and procurement barriers prevent them from scaling.
- Ukraine’s rapid iteration model is an operational template India has the tools to replicate but has not fully absorbed, partly because of its continuing ties to Russia and legacy procurement patterns.
- Potential partners beyond the United States and India include Israel, Germany, Singapore, South Korea, France, the Netherlands, Sri Lanka, and Italy. These countries could contribute technology, operational expertise, logistics capacity, or regional access.
- A significant structural risk is the declining level of attention to the U.S.-India relationship in Washington. Trade disputes and other priorities have crowded out strategic focus. If this continues, the broader mega-region agenda could lose momentum.

Session 6: Toward a U.S.-India Action Plan

The final session focused on how to translate the workshop series into an actionable U.S.-India agenda.

- Consider five priority buckets: security and defense, technology, infrastructure, extraction, and diplomacy.
 - The security and defense bucket includes intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness, weather pattern cooperation, surveillance, logistics, and defense technology implementation.
 - The technology bucket includes AI-enabled data sharing, digital corridor systems, undersea technologies, and dual-use innovation.
 - The infrastructure bucket includes ports, corridors, IMEC, maritime logistics, and digital connectivity.

- The extraction bucket includes critical minerals, seabed mining, energy, and midstream processing.
- The diplomacy bucket includes regional coordination, neighborhood strategy, multilateral engagement, and institutional mechanisms that make cooperation durable.
- A U.S.-India trade deal is the single greatest enabler of the relationship. Congressional codification of the strategic partnership could provide durability across administrations.
- Explicit U.S. support for IMEC should be institutionalized through the Department of Commerce.
- Indus-X should be restructured around more focused attention and specific targets.
- Critical minerals processing cooperation in India is a near-term achievable goal. Intelligence sharing should be formalized. Unified Command restructuring should be considered, with a logical seam at the Strait of Malacca.