



# The Future of US-India Strategic Partnership in the Face of Southern Asia's Nuclear Transitions

---

November 2022

By Daniel Markey

## IN REVIEW

Ashley J. Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022).

No analyst of US policy in South Asia can credibly claim to have had greater influence over US-India relations than Ashley J. Tellis, currently the Tata Chair for Strategic Affairs and senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. As the chief intellectual architect and the most effective and consistent driving force behind the US-India civil nuclear agreement formulated during the George W. Bush administration, Tellis advanced a bold and ambitious agenda for a breakthrough in the US-India strategic partnership that has carried forward into the Obama, Trump, and now Biden administration. From the start, Tellis' core proposition has been that the United States would benefit from placing a long-term "strategic bet" on building closer ties with India, an independent, rising Asian power with the heft and ambition to serve as a geopolitical counterweight to China in Asia.

Today, Washington's bipartisan support for India (and concern about geopolitical competition with China) is so mainstream that it may be easy to forget just how unanticipated—and in many quarters, unwelcome—was the Bush administration's deal to enhance ties with New Delhi. This was undertaken by freeing India from the international nuclear nonproliferation "doghouse" in a move that meant reversing decades of US nonproliferation policy and law. Washington's policy shift was even more dramatic because it followed so soon on the heels of the Indian (and Pakistani) nuclear tests of May 1998 that had temporarily led the United States to impose sanctions on both New Delhi and Islamabad. Not only did the Bush administration's deal require years

of tireless policymaking and diplomatic negotiation, but it demanded skillful political maneuvering to win passage in the US Congress and the Indian parliament. No one, Tellis included, could have accomplished all these things alone, but he played a critical role at practically every step along the way.

Thus, when Tellis now advocates for a new and “deliberate policy shift analogous to that of Bush’s nuclear deal with India,” readers would be wise to take notice, even when he buries the lede on the final page of his latest monograph. Once again, Tellis is suggesting that a special deal for India will advance US geopolitical aims and, just as before, Tellis’ focus lies in the sensitive realm of nuclear issues.

Before detailing Tellis’ proposed policy initiatives, however, it is essential to appreciate the meticulously crafted empirical, historical, and policy-oriented building blocks of his argument. Tellis uses the year 1998 as a rough baseline for a comparative analysis of Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani nuclear programs. As he correctly observes, prior to that year, all three states maintained nuclear arsenals and delivery systems that were noteworthy mainly for their small sizes, limited capabilities, and clear emphasis on deterrence rather than warfighting. Each was reasonably confident in its ability to deter nuclear use by its principal adversaries. For China, this meant the United States and its allies, India, and from the 1960s to the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union. For India, this meant China and Pakistan. For Pakistan, this meant India.

In separate chapters devoted to China, India, and Pakistan, Tellis briefly explains how each state’s nuclear doctrines, material capabilities, and operations evolved prior to 1998. He then assesses developments over the subsequent quarter century in much greater detail. Overall, Tellis concludes that although arsenals in all three states have grown, China’s—always the region’s largest—continues to outpace the others in its modernization and expansion and is, unsurprisingly, primarily intended to address the perceived threat posed by the United States. India, however, is not merely failing to keep pace with China but is actually trailing Pakistan in the growth of its arsenal and delivery systems, except when it comes to the submarine-based leg of its triad, for which Pakistan currently lacks any equivalent.

Nuclear weapons programs are by design shrouded in secrecy, so Tellis extrapolates from interviews and publicly available information. He takes pains to explain the methods by which he arrives at conclusions about the plausible number and yield of warheads in each state’s arsenal, the ability of one state to destroy specific targets in another, and so on. Even for readers without significant technical expertise (or interest) the exercise is vital because it demonstrates the physical and technical realities that circumscribe nuclear use by states that, unlike Russia or the United States, do not possess thousands of warheads or the ability to target them with extreme precision.

Tellis also demonstrates that, although the region's nuclear arsenals have grown considerably since 1998, their evolution has not moved at the breakneck pace of the early Cold War. Neither has it evolved in a manner that indicates a tightly interconnected arms race in which moves by one state prompt quick counters by another. For Tellis, material differences in the arsenals of Southern Asia reflect underlying strategic aspirations, not just technological, scientific, or institutional capabilities. Whereas Pakistan perceives its nuclear program as a vital tool to deter India (and possibly the United States) from launching either nuclear or conventional attacks, China and India tend to believe that nuclear weapons are exclusively tools of nuclear deterrence, worth maintaining in numbers minimally sufficient to convince adversaries that they will pay an unacceptably high price for starting a nuclear war.

Tellis' review of the evolving strategic landscape in Southern Asia leads him to be surprisingly sanguine on several counts. This might puzzle readers who assume that hostile neighbors with steadily growing nuclear arsenals present a sure recipe for impending disaster. Yet Tellis sees little immediate cause for concern about "crisis stability" in the region. By that he means that China, India, and Pakistan are unable to launch a first strike devastating enough to preclude an unacceptably costly retaliatory strike. Facing assured retaliation, none would be tempted to try, and equally, none would be so fearful of being targeted in such a scenario that it perceives incentives to strike first, based on a "use it or lose it" logic. In this context, the "no first use" pledges of India and China are aligned with rational calculations of their respective strategic aims and, consequently, hold greater weight than mere rhetoric.

In other good news, Tellis perceives that even though India and China entered a new and more hostile chapter in their history after deadly border clashes in the summer of 2020, both still appreciate that the nature of their disagreement does not warrant serious consideration of nuclear war. In Tellis' estimation, "deterrence stability"—that is, the ability of each to convince the other that using nuclear weapons would do more harm than good—basically holds. Similarly, even though nuclear accidents cannot be ruled out, particularly given the growing complexity of all three nuclear enterprises, Tellis draws solace from observing that most, although not all, of the region's nuclear warheads are in peacetime stored separately from their delivery systems. As such, accidental or unauthorized missile launches—such as the March 2022 test of an Indian Brahmos missile—introduce a lower likelihood of sparking catastrophe.

To be sure, not every analyst would be as confident about the region's deterrence stability. Others, for instance, would place a greater weight on inherent risks of miscommunication or misperception, whereas Tellis predicts that every state in the region is highly incentivized to reduce such risks. He

takes exceptional care, however, to address claims about India's nuclear arsenal made by several prominent analysts, especially Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Vipin Narang (now on leave at the US Department of Defense) and State University of New York at Albany professor Christopher Clary (who worked at the Pentagon prior to his academic career). Tellis rejects their assessment that India has changed its nuclear doctrine or operations in ways that would render its nuclear arsenal more prone to use in conflict with Pakistan or China, either by shortening the length of time it would take to ready and launch a nuclear salvo or by developing capabilities better suited to targeting an adversary's nuclear forces ("counterforce") rather than civilian targets ("countervalue"). This debate will continue, but for his part, Tellis wants readers to understand that India is, if anything, a laggard and reluctant nuclear power deeply committed to building nuclear weapons only as a means to deter the existential threats posed by its nuclear-armed adversaries.

Yet Tellis is not entirely at ease with the nuclear status quo in southern Asia. He identifies the most serious problem as the highly "emotive" interplay between Pakistan and India, in which Pakistan's national insecurities and aspirations have led it to develop an impressive range of nuclear capabilities. At the same time, it continues to support terrorist groups that actively target India. This creates a dangerous dynamic in which India's attempts to punish Pakistan for terrorist outrages by launching conventional military strikes threaten to tip Pakistan into nuclear retaliation. Even if both sides still view their nuclear arsenals as deterrence tools rather than as practical warfighting weapons, the escalatory pressures are intense. Unfortunately, Tellis sees no easy fix; only when Pakistan stops its dangerous terrorist games and accepts the regional status quo—both territorial and geopolitical—will deterrence stability improve.

Looking to the future, Tellis seems primarily concerned that China's nuclear investments—spurred in large part by its competition with the United States—could prove so overwhelming as to diminish India's ability to threaten a credible retaliatory response to a Chinese "splendid first strike." If, for instance, China pairs a vastly increased number of missiles with improved intelligence about the Indian arsenal's location and more robust missile defenses to parry whatever trickle of Indian retaliatory strikes survive, Beijing could then enjoy an overwhelming—and, hence, destabilizing—advantage.

Faced with this prospect, Tellis predicts that India will be inclined to take two steps. *First*, because New Delhi lacks a proven thermonuclear capability (its 1998 test clearly failed in this respect), India will be tempted to return to hot testing. Once India is demonstrably armed with awesomely destructive thermonuclear weapons—each capable of knocking out a city on its own—Beijing would face a guarantee of massive retaliation even if only a handful of India's warheads managed to survive a Chinese first strike. *Second*, to further improve the survivability of India's nuclear arsenal, India will aim to enhance

and expand its fleet of nuclear submarines, arguably the most difficult platforms for China to find and destroy.

Neither of these moves by India would be easy, a reality Tellis appreciates better than most. One trouble with testing is that by the terms of the US-India civil-nuclear deal, new Indian tests would terminate US cooperation and, as a consequence, threaten a serious bilateral rift. One trouble with expanding India's nuclear ballistic missile submarine force is that, despite years of Russian technology sharing, India has so far failed to master the many exceptionally difficult technologies required to build them indigenously.

For Tellis, the solution to both of these problems lies, at least in part, with the United States. This is what finally leads him to advocate "a deliberate policy shift" along two fronts. *First*, he proposes that the United States should be prepared to live with Indian thermonuclear tests when they happen and should appreciate that they would be a price worth paying to ensure India's nuclear deterrent at a time of increasing Chinese geopolitical assertiveness. *Second*, he suggests that the United States should actively encourage a nuclear submarine technology partnership between France and India akin to what the United States has entered into with AUKUS, the trilateral security pact with Australia and the United Kingdom. Doing so, he advises, is more realistic than attempting direct US technical assistance to India, but only Washington's explicit endorsement of French technology sharing with India would give Paris the boost of confidence required to pursue such sensitive cooperation.

Such US policies would almost certainly be welcomed in New Delhi, as they would address Indian security concerns at a lower material or political cost than any realistic alternative. They would represent a next step in the project of normalizing India's nuclear program and could lend even greater weight to the US-India strategic partnership that, as Tellis has long envisioned it, serves America's geopolitical purpose of counterbalancing China.

Tellis' case is compelling. Would any US president actually be prepared to sacrifice strategic partnership with India on the altar of nonproliferation if New Delhi returned to nuclear testing as a means to guarantee its nuclear deterrent? Moreover, given current US concerns about both Russia and China, would Washington fail to appreciate the value of an arrangement that simultaneously severs India's nuclear submarine technology ties with Russia and builds new ones with France? No doubt, Tellis' proposals will find ready takers in Washington—and in Paris as well.

That said, Tellis' recommendations would not be implemented without a cost and a fight. For those who opposed the earlier US-India civil nuclear agreement on nonproliferation grounds, his new policies would add insult to injury. Even some supporters of that earlier agreement would bridle at these

new proposals because they touch India's nuclear weapons program directly in ways the original deal never did, contributing to the size, destructive potential, and complexity of India's arsenal. They would pave the way for, and possibly encourage, accelerated testing and proliferation in Pakistan, China, and perhaps elsewhere as well. Other critics will doubt that India, still opposed to a formal security alliance with the United States and at times vocally skeptical about the liberal, Western-led world order, should be trusted in ways roughly analogous to how Washington trusted Paris during the Cold War. These critics will wonder whether India's ability to deter China could be achieved through other less costly or provocative technical and political means.

Yet even Tellis' critics will find tremendous value in this book. The depth and sophistication of his research alone make it required reading for anyone seeking to understand southern Asia or the current nuclear order. Readers will be brought up to speed on the region's post-1998 history and ongoing developments. Most important, if Tellis' policymaking track record is any indication, readers may even catch a glimpse of the future of US-India strategic partnership.



**Daniel Markey** is Senior Advisor for South Asia at the United States Institute of Peace.