The past 20 years have seen a great deal of progress in the US-India relationship. The non-aligned status of the Indian Government during the Cold War, and the US’s relationship with Pakistan, precluded a close partnership between the two countries, even if they shared similar political systems. The end of the Cold War brought new opportunities for the two democratic giants, as India liberalized its economic and trade policies and US presidents, starting with Bill Clinton, began to court the mercurial Asian power. President George W. Bush continued to develop the relationship by widening trade ties, making exceptions for India’s nuclear program through a more understanding interpretation of India’s place in American non-proliferation policy, and through an increase in defense ties that is beginning to truly bear fruit. The Obama Administration has continued to encourage strong diplomatic ties with the Indian state through its open and functional support of Indian efforts to secure a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and highly publicized bilateral initiatives and state visits. The relationship has continued to thrive amidst diplomatic impasses, economic stagnation, and political uncertainty.

While the US-India relationship continues to develop on all fronts, the changing dynamics of global and regional relative power have increasingly highlighted the importance of India to the US’s foreign policy in Asia. With the new Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, comes an opening for progress and innovation in US-Indian relations, in which an increase in economic and defense ties could act as a safeguard for the maintenance of the current regional order in Asia and, by extension, the global order implemented after the Second World War. In pursuit of a much closer relationship with India, the United States can approach the opportunity through many different long-term strategies, but questions concerning the formality of the relationship will consistently color the debate. Before the US and India can continue to develop ties, there must be a general framework that informs the nature of the relationship and the logic of its political and legal elements. In order to move forward in this vein, current and subsequent American presidential administrations must decide whether they want an informal partnership with India built on shared political values and regional interests, a relationship based on the codified aspects of bilateral and multilateral institutions and treaties, or a hybrid model, combining both legalistic and informal connections.

**A Flexible Relationship**

Here, the United States could continue to expand its de facto defense and economic ties with the Indian government and encourage a melding of the two countries’ private sectors by actively lobbying for the removal of bi-lateral trade barriers. The US-India relationship has many inherent qualities that foster increased development of national connections without the formality of treaties and institutional overlays. In terms of informal defense ties, arms sales and limited technology transfers would feature heavily in the US-India security relationship. Sales of US weapons to India grew from $237 million in 2009 to $2 Billion in 2013, surpassing Russia’s arms trade with India for the first time. In addition to arms sales, the Indian military conducts more military exercises with the United States than any other country. While these developments illustrate strengthening security ties between the two nations, they do not explicitly bind American foreign policy to that of India’s in the case of a regional conflict. Although, it does send a clear message to potential aggressors that the United States includes the South Asian giant in the calculations of its Asia-Pacific interests.

US defense ties to India also, in their current state, illustrate that American support of Indian security interests goes beyond rhetoric, but is not set in stone, thus providing the US government the opportunity to conduct a flexible national security policy. In keeping with this policy, arms sales and stipulated technology transfers should take precedence over formal ties like the Defense Framework Agreement, renewed this summer for an additional 10 years. Economic relations should also maintain an informal quality, given the fact that Indian domestic interests don’t always suit the objectives of the American business community and are, at times, seemingly downright hostile to US efforts to encourage development.

For example, the 2005 civil nuclear agreement has been stuck in somewhat of a holding pattern since the introduction of more stringent Indian liability laws. American companies are unwilling to invest and the economic opportunity afforded to the Indian state by the US deviation from its nuclear non-proliferation policies has been heretofore squandered. This is, of course, illustrative of the types of issues that come up in the relations of two democratic nations with complex domestic political systems that can often prove to make the alignment of priorities difficult, especially when the perceived welfare of their respective citizenry is involved. Nurturing an informal economic relationship, outside of trade treaties and multilateral trade agreements, gives the US options in how it approaches its economic relationship with India – which has been quite fruitful as a whole for US corporations – while giving both parties the ability to modify it in ways they deem fit.

**Full Commitment**

In this case, the US would actively pursue a formalization of all aspects of the US-Indian relationship, across security and economic ties. This would allow for the
most expedient and meticulous promotion of a binding relationship between the two nations, and begin to codify an affiliation that could transform the geopolitical and economic direction of Asia in the 21st century. The consummation of this relationship lies in bilateral and multilateral agreements and treaties that would improve the strategic standing of both countries through increased cooperation in the areas of defense and trade. In formalizing the defense ties between India and the U.S., the first order of business has already been carried out, the renewal of the Defense Framework Agreement, which has been partially responsible for the enormous increase in US arms sales to India, and an impetus for the discussion of increased defense technology transfer and joint development. This agreement will include stepping up military-to-military contact at senior levels, collaboration on the orientation of joint communications and logistics, and joint strategic planning.

While US-Indian cooperative statements on issues like terrorism and the South China Sea are productive and send a message about the stance of the two nations on important contemporary security issues, the provision of a legal status to the US-Indian defense relationship creates opportunities for projecting their respective national security interests into the future. It will not only provide an environment for the long-term strategy and operational planning of both the US and Indian national security establishments, but may also provide a solid context within which potential systemic usurpers may consider the increased costs of upsetting the international order.

Formal security relationships make economic integration necessary, not just because of the implications for the efficiency of future activations of those security agreements, but also through fostering the long-term economic growth and cultural exchanges that accompany intensive trade relationships. These connections, outside of being lucrative in the absolute sense, then strengthen the agreements themselves through shared experience and mutual benefit. With this in mind, the US should work with the Indian government to conclude the bilateral investment treaty that has been on hold for over 10 years and look towards overcoming the obstacles to a bilateral free trade agreement.

**Mix and Match**

The US could consider a combination of the two policies mentioned above, mixing and matching the formal and informal trade and security relationship with India as it deems fit for the national security and economic interests of the country. An informal trade policy with formal security ties to India will allow for a united Asian front to form without sacrificing additional diplomatic and political capital. The lack of formal economic ties will also spare both the US and Indian markets from unforeseen problems that could harm economic growth or good relations in general. Of course, formal allies that are economically linked might be better prepared for the complex resource sharing and coordinated production that makes a combined war effort easier to prosecute. In considering heterogeneous policy combinations, the pairing of formal trade links with an informal security partnership might make the most sense of the two combinations. This would create the opportunity for a melding of economic and political interests between the U.S. and India, while maintain strategic flexibility for both nations.

**Shaping Future Endeavors**

The formal model would best suit the future geopolitical and economic interests of the United States and India. Formal trade and security links between the US and India will begin a process that has been made necessary by an increasingly complex international environment. A strong and legalistic US-Indian relationship will leave no doubt about the orientation of regional and global forces when it comes to the maintenance of the current order. It will manufacture the types of red-lines that send important signals to those who might test the structural integrity of that system. A codified security relationship, without sufficient economic ties, would be functionally weak. While there is a much stronger case to be made for the opposite configuration, the lack of a security element would preclude preparations to defend the mutual economic interests which would form in such a trade relationship between the US and India. A serious military threat to one country in this scenario would probably bring in the other nation anyways, given their closely associated economies.