



SURVEY OF INDIA'S STRATEGIC COMMUNITY

Dhruva Jaishankar

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Impact Series | March 2019

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

Like every major country, India has a strategic community: a relatively small group of professionals who, in different ways, direct or influence India's foreign and security policy. This strategic community includes career diplomats, bureaucrats, military commanders, and intelligence officers, as well as political leaders from the ruling party/coalition and the opposition. Additionally, reporters and commentators in the media, scholars at universities and think tanks, and members of the business community also play a role in shaping perceptions and influencing outcomes. While general attitudes and areas of broad consensus can be discerned in a variety of ways, no systematic survey of India's strategic community has been accomplished.

The following report details a survey of India's strategic community conducted in December 2018. The key findings are as follows:

1. **71% of respondents believe that economic issues constitute India's biggest domestic challenge.** These include, specifically, (1) inequality and lack of opportunity and (2) insufficient skills, education, and employment. Addressing these deficiencies, including through sourcing external investment and financing, research collaborations, and the import of technology, are considered high policy priorities by India's strategic community.
2. **54% see China's assertiveness as the most significant external challenge India faces.** There are particular concerns about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Chinese investment in the Indian Ocean. Only 2% believe that India should collaborate more with China in the event of greater U.S.-China competition. However, Chinese global dominance is not seen as assured and the strategic community considers the odds of a limited conflict between India and China unlikely.
3. **75% perceive the United States to be India's most important partner on global issues.** Additionally, a large minority of respondents (43%) are in favour of closer collaboration with the United States in the event of greater U.S.-China competition. However, trade disputes and U.S.-Pakistan relations are believed to be constraining the India-U.S. partnership.
4. **74% believe the Indo-Pacific is the dominant framework for India's extended neighbourhood.** The Indian Ocean, South Asia, and Southeast Asia are the regions of chief importance for Indian interests and the East Asia Summit is considered by the largest number of respondents to be a very important institution for Indian interests. Regional connectivity with South and Southeast Asia and maritime investments are considered among the top foreign policy priorities for India.
5. **Views are varied concerning engagement with Pakistan and partnerships in West Asia.** There are competing clusters of opinions concerning engagement with Pakistan's military, civilian government, and civil society. Opinion is also divided as to whether Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, or Saudi Arabia is India's most important regional partner in West Asia.

6. **Certain historically dominant institutions, regions, and issues are now low priorities.** These include: the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and the Commonwealth; developments in Europe, Africa, and Latin America; and nuclear and missile modernisation, foreign aid, and cultural diplomacy.
7. **Those who believe that India's most important global partnership is with Russia reflect divergent views on a number of other issues.** While only a minority (12%), they are more likely to advocate remaining equidistant between the United States and China in the event of greater competition, believe Iran is India's most important partner in West Asia, and prioritise the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS in India's institutional engagements.
8. **Minor differences are discernible between the attitudes of decision-makers and influencers.** Current and former members of the military, civil services, and political parties exhibit slightly greater wariness about engaging Pakistan than academics, think tank experts, and members of the media. They also deem military interventionism in India's neighbourhood as more likely and place a marginally higher priority on defence industrialisation and the import of technology over incoming economic investment.
9. **There are some clear differences in attitudes across age cohorts.** Those born before 1960 attribute greater importance to the United Nations and do not prioritise an expansion of India's diplomatic capacity. Those born between 1960 and 1979 generally place a greater priority on the partnership with the United States and on trade issues. Finally, those born after 1980 are more comfortable with the concept of the Indo-Pacific and are less likely to believe that sectarianism and identity politics constitute India's major domestic challenge.
10. **Strategic elites hold similar views to the Indian public except on Pakistan (and to a lesser extent on China).** A comparison with a similar survey of Indian public opinion conducted in March 2017 suggests India's strategic community shares similar views on international partnerships with the United States, including in the context of U.S.-China competition. However, the public appears to be more critical of Pakistan and slightly less concerned about China than elites, although different methodologies and timings make exact comparisons difficult.

Part I of the report details the methodology used in the survey, and provides a profile of those polled. Part II details each of the key findings listed above.

PART I: METHODOLOGY

India is a rising power today. Within the next year or two, it will have the world's fifth-largest economy. It already has the largest diaspora, is the world's largest arms importer, and is the world's third-largest energy consumer. India's companies now operate globally and its military is active in its extended region. How India behaves in its international affairs will increasingly have implications around the world. But while assessments of Indian thinking on international issues can be derived from a variety of sources – official speeches and statements, government documents, interviews, and media analyses – no systematic attempt has been made to capture the collective thinking of India's strategic community, resulting often in impressionistic assumptions about how Indians think about global affairs.

Prior surveys of India's strategic community have often proved unsuccessful. However, attempts have been made in other countries. The annual Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) survey conducted by the College of William and Mary provides a detailed overview of the state of the field of international relations among academics in the United States and around the world.¹ In 2013, the Pew Research Center and Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) conducted a survey of CFR members, as part of their regular public survey, *America's Place in the World*.² Southeast Asian policy leaders were recently surveyed on their attitudes to the Indo-Pacific and quadrilateral security dialogue.³

In India, the absence of surveys of India's strategic community is compounded by few surveys of the general Indian public on foreign and security matters. Large-scale, methodologically-sound surveys in local languages are expensive and barring a few issues – namely, relations with Pakistan, the United States, and China – the Indian public does not have strong views on many international issues. The resulting surveys show high proportion of 'no opinion' or 'don't know' responses.⁴

In an attempt to fill this gap, a survey of India's strategic community was fielded in December 2018. Email invitations to participate in a 20-question survey were sent to 290 members of India's strategic community from 14 December, 2018 onwards. Of those who received the email invitation to answer the SurveyMonkey questionnaire, 127 (44%) responded by 25 December, 2018. The survey was anonymous but linked to individual email addresses to ensure its integrity. The average time spent on the survey was seven minutes. Respondents were required to answer all 20 questions to successfully submit their responses. Estimates of the population of India's strategic community might vary between approximately 2000 (using a narrow definition of senior decision-makers in the political leadership, bureaucracy, and military, as well as key influencers) and 50,000 (if all members of major constituencies were considered). Regardless of this large discrepancy, the margin of error in such an elite survey would be approximately 7% with a confidence level of 90%.

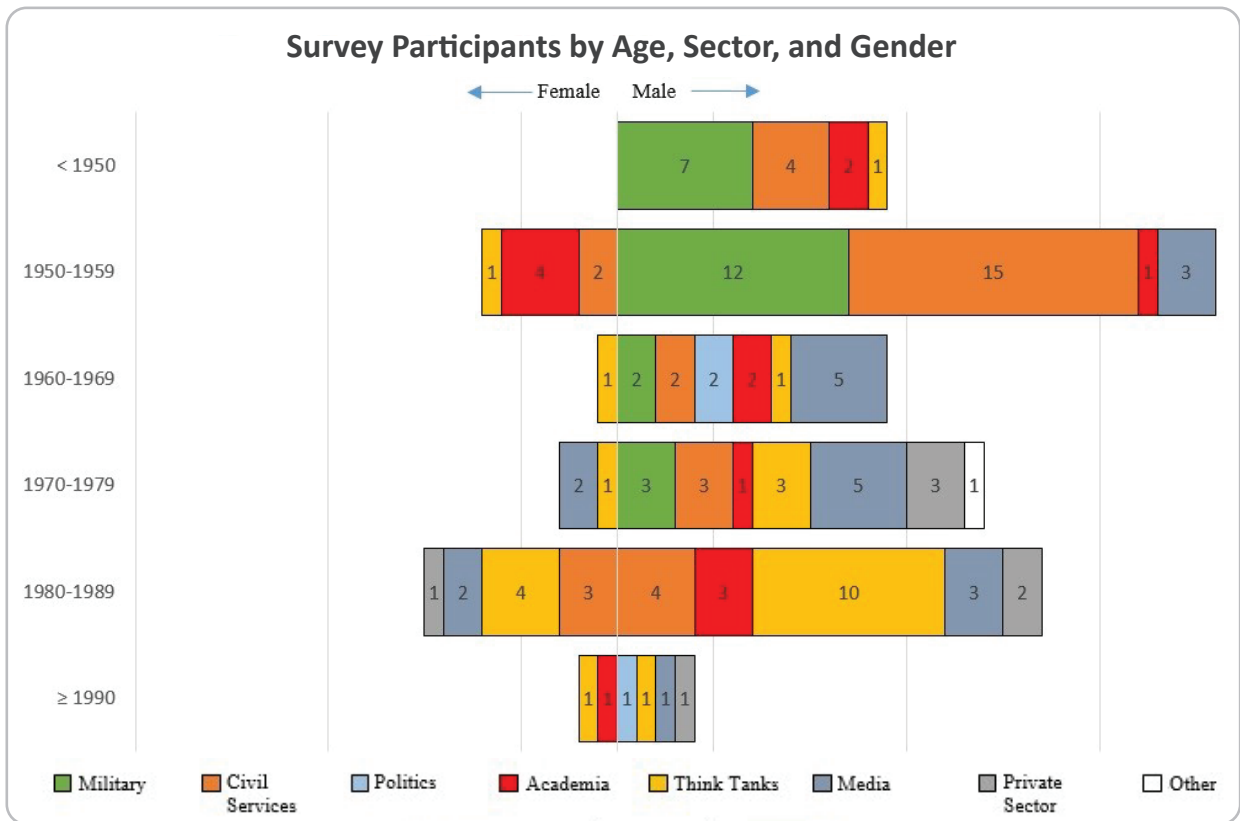
¹ Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, Ryan Powers, and Michael J. Tierney, TRIP Faculty Survey, Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations, 2014.

² "Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips," Pew Research Center, 3 December, 2013.

³ Huong Le Thu, "Southeast Asian Perceptions of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 2018.

⁴ Bruce Stokes, Dorothy Manevich, and Hanyu Chwe, "Three Years In Modi Remains Very Popular," Pew Research Center, 15 November, 2017; Simon Jackman, Gordon Flake, et al., "America's Role in the Indo-Pacific," U.S. Studies Centre and Perth US-Asia Centre, 31 May, 2017.

Among the respondents are serving and retired officers of the military and civil services. These comprise 13 Indian Army, eight Indian Navy, and two Indian Air Force officers, including three former service chiefs. Among civilian government officials, respondents include 27 serving and retired Indian Foreign Service officers (including 15 ambassadors), four Indian Administrative Service officers, three intelligence officials, 12 others who currently or formerly served in the Indian government in some other capacity, and four individuals involved primarily in party politics, including from the two largest national political coalitions. Together, those who had spent *most* of their professional careers in the military, civil services, or party politics – current and former **decision-makers** – comprise 47% of respondents.



Additionally, a large number of responses come from university professors, think tank academics, journalists, and a handful of business executives. Together, these **influencers** comprise 53% of the survey respondents. Because members of India’s strategic community frequently move across fields – such as from academia to government, journalism to think tanks, civil services to party politics, or the military to the private sector – respondents were asked to identify only the sector in which they had spent the *most* time in their professional careers. While some distinct trends can be perceived among decision-makers and influencers within India’s strategic community, the boundary between them has been, and remains, somewhat permeable.

The responses also reflect a distribution across age profiles. Those born before 1950 comprise 11% and those born between 1950 and 1959 comprise 30% of respondents. These individuals, all born **before 1960**, are generally at the peak of their careers today or in mentorship roles. These might include retired diplomats who remain strategic commentators or think tank leaders, or senior editors at newspapers. Additionally, 12% of respondents are born between 1960 and 1969 and 17% between 1970 and 1979. Those born in **1960-1979**, generally comprise individuals at the apex of their careers in the near future. They might include mid-ranking bureaucrats such as joint secretaries; colonels, commanders, or group captains in the military; or senior think tank scholars. Finally, 25% of respondents are born between 1980 and 1989, and 5% after 1990. The generation born in and **after 1980** could be considered future strategic leaders and influencers. They might include doctoral students, junior bureaucrats, and beat journalists in the media. The results have been analysed only along these three age cohorts (pre-1960, 1960-1979, and post-1980) to ensure a higher degree of statistical significance.

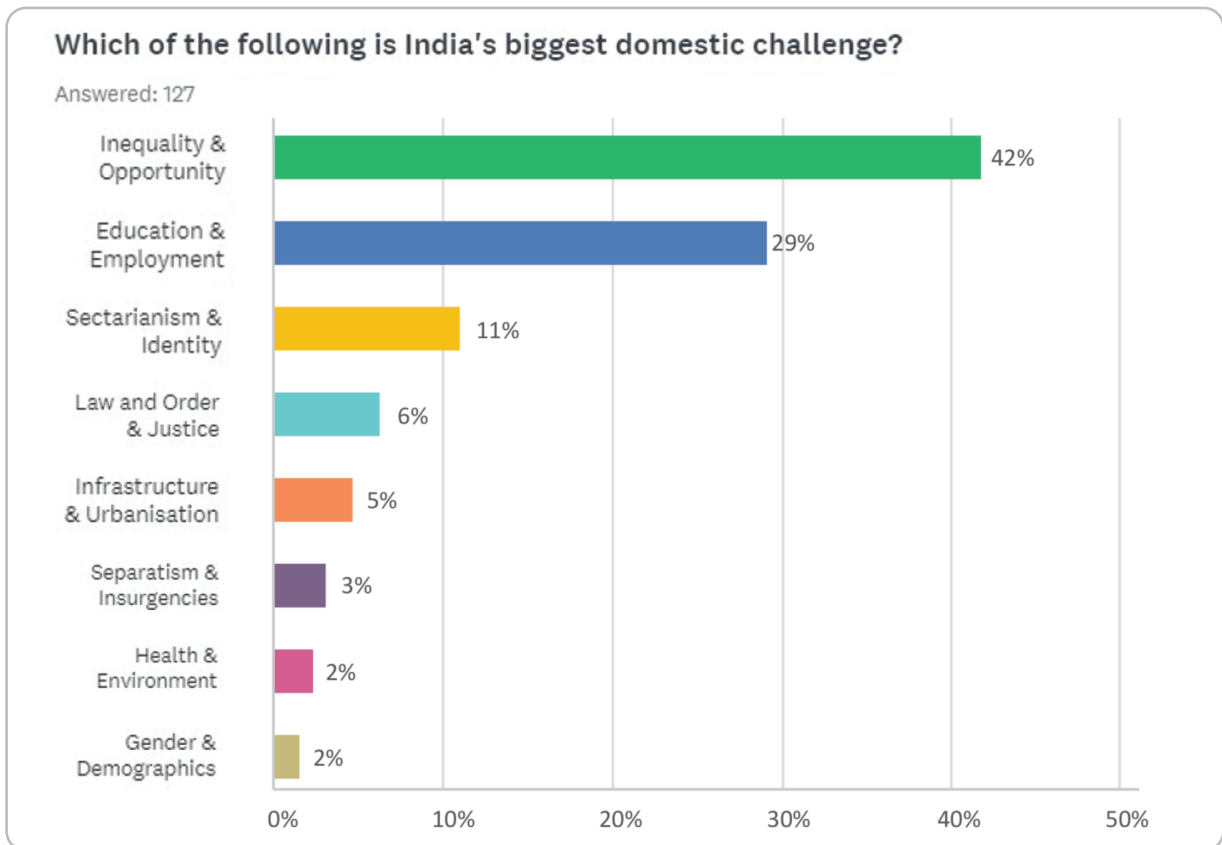
Overall, 18% of respondents are female. Female participants in the survey are better represented among younger respondents and among influencers (with no female participants from the military). While responses are sometimes different across sectors and across age profiles, no significant differences are discernible between the responses by male and female participants in the survey.

The survey reveals some distinct trends concerning India's biggest domestic and foreign challenges, its major global and regional partners, institutional and policy priorities, and variations across sectors and age profiles. These are examined below.

PART II: MAJOR FINDINGS

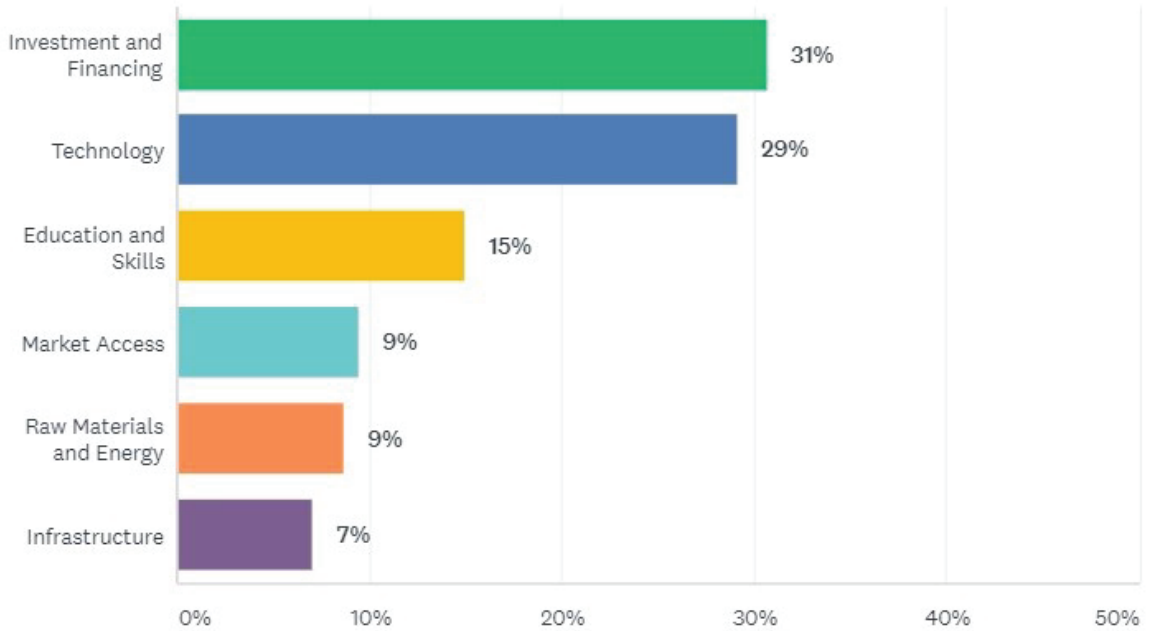
1. India's Biggest Domestic Challenges Are Economic.

71% of respondents identify economic issues as India's biggest domestic challenge. Of these, 42% cite inequality and lack of opportunity and 29% see an absence of education, skills, and employment (29%) as the gravest issues. In addressing India's challenges, respondents believe that sourcing investment and financing (31%), technology (29%), and education and skills (15%) are more important than ensuring market access (9%) or access to raw materials and energy (9%). 72% believe that India has – on balance – benefited from preferential trade agreements, but only 32% see better trade agreements as a priority for the Indian government, behind six other priority policy areas.



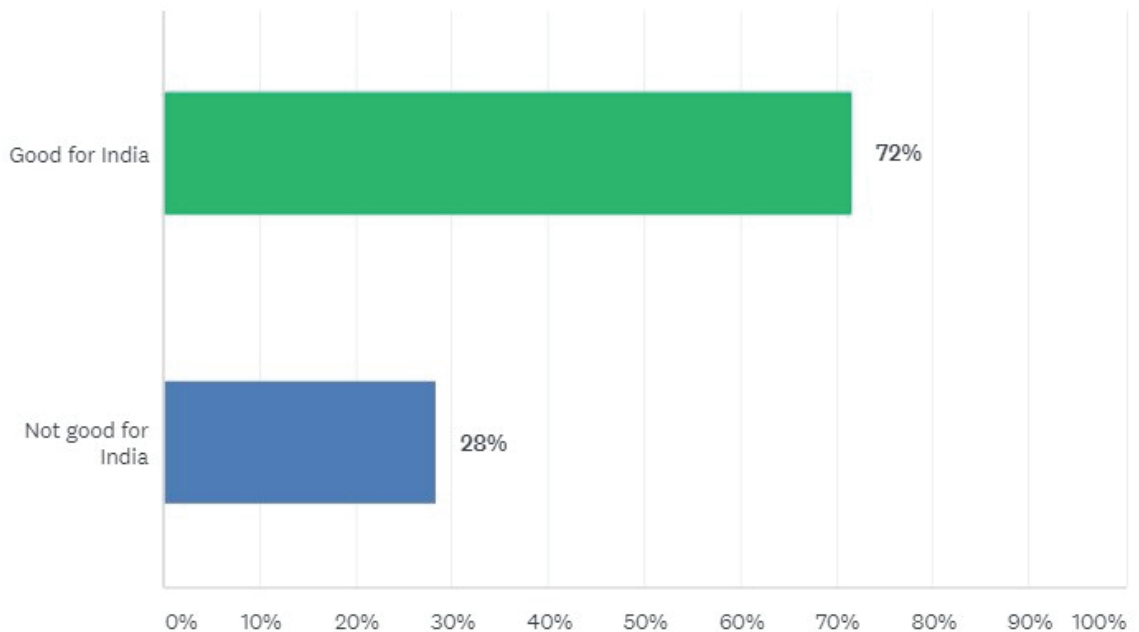
What is most important to source from abroad for India's development?

Answered: 127



On balance, preferential trade agreements involving India have been...

Answered: 127

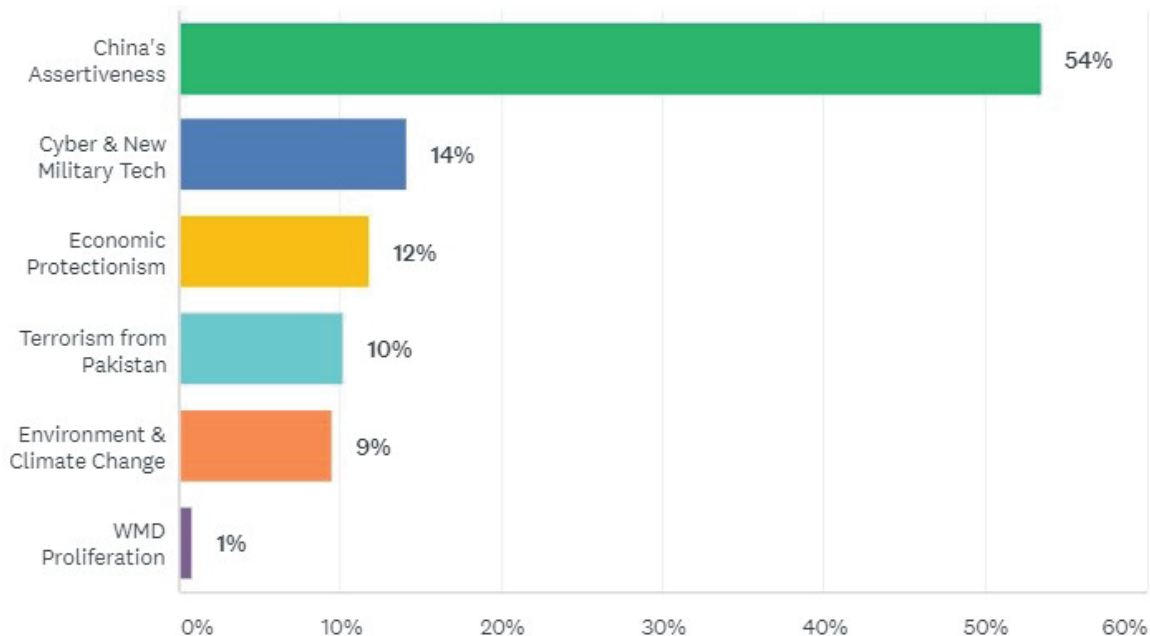


2. China Is India's Most Significant External Challenge.

54% see China's assertiveness as India's most significant external challenge. The boundary dispute (41%) and China's relations with Pakistan (32%) are seen as the biggest sources of difference, followed by China's role in the Indian Ocean (17%). Majorities identify the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (73%) and Chinese investment in Sri Lanka and the Maldives (63%) as major security challenges for India, in a question that allowed for multiple answers. At the same time, only 6% believe the world will be China-dominated by 2035, with most anticipating a multipolar (69%), bipolar (19%), or U.S.-dominated (6%) world. Similarly, only 5% think a limited conflict with China is the most likely use of overseas military force by India.

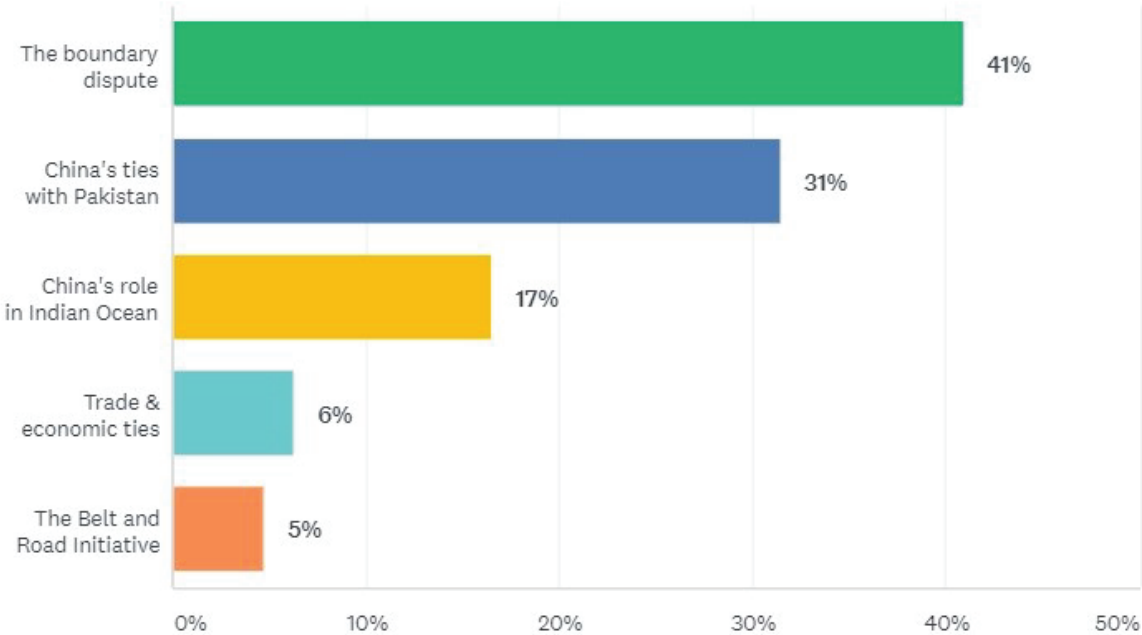
Which of the following is India's biggest external challenge?

Answered: 127



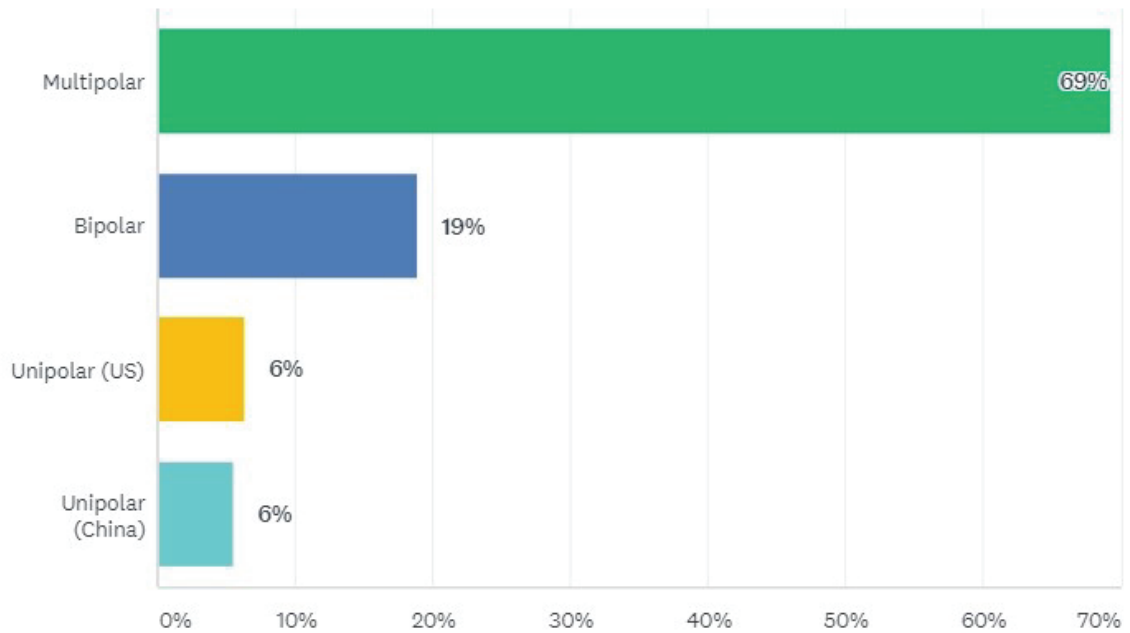
Which is the biggest obstacle to better relations with China?

Answered: 127



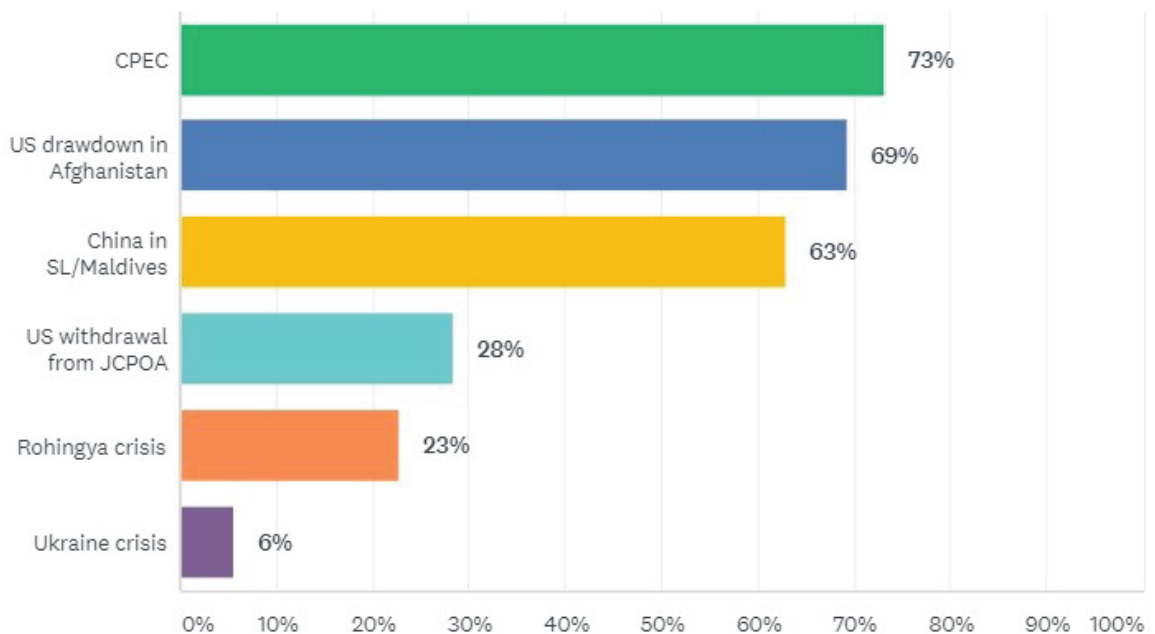
How would you expect the international system to look by 2035?

Answered: 127



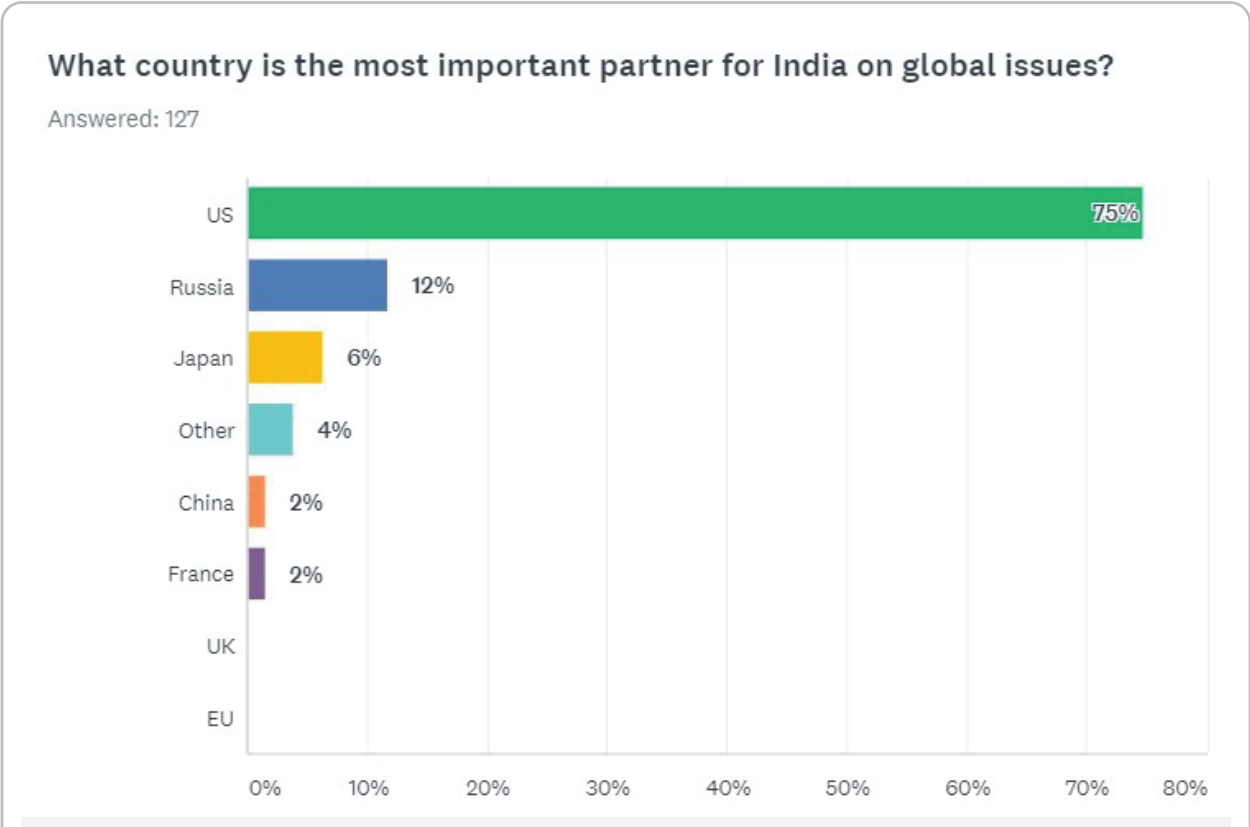
Which have presented India with a major security challenge?

Answered: 127



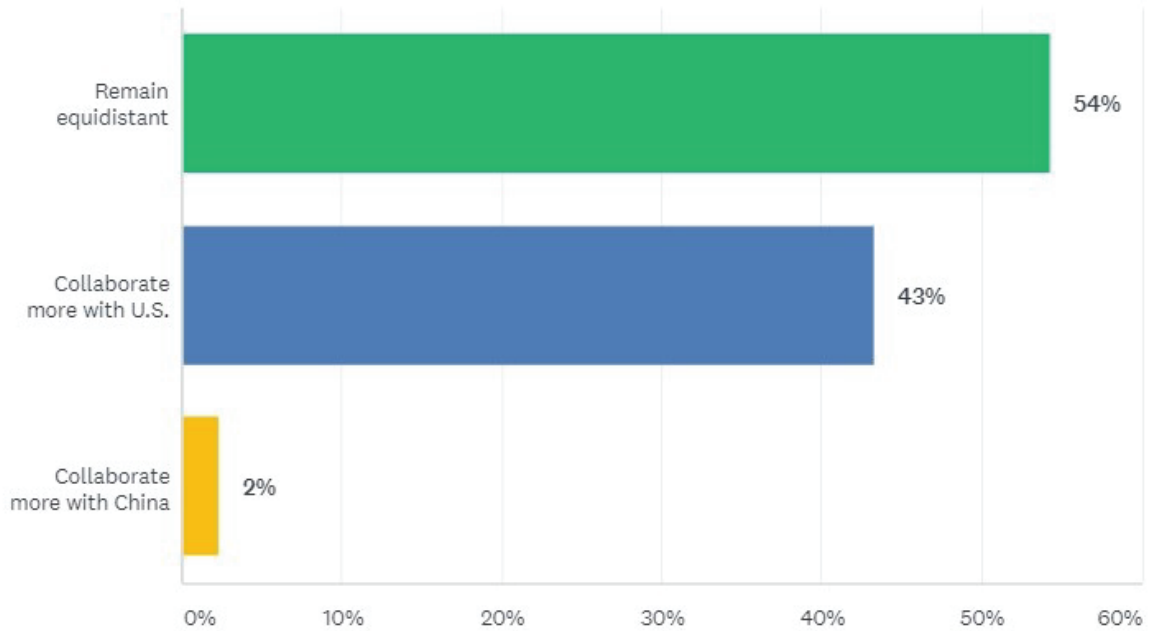
3. The United States Is India's Most Important Partner.

The United States is overwhelmingly identified as India's most important global partner by 75% of respondents. A significant minority (43%) of respondents believe that India must improve its collaboration with the United States in the event of greater U.S.-China competition, although a larger number (54%) believes that India should remain equidistant between the two. (By contrast, only 2% believe that India should collaborate more with China.) U.S. relations with Pakistan (32%) and differences over trade (31%) are identified as the biggest obstacles to better relations with Washington.



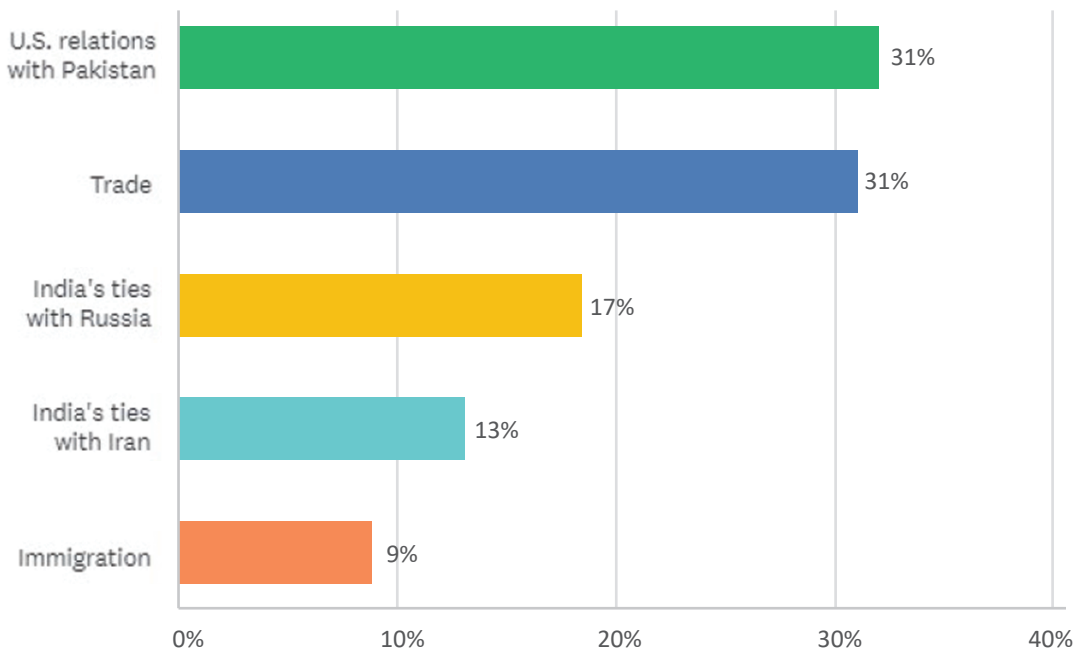
In the event of greater U.S.-China competition, India should...

Answered: 127



Which is the biggest obstacle to better relations with the United States?

Answered: 127



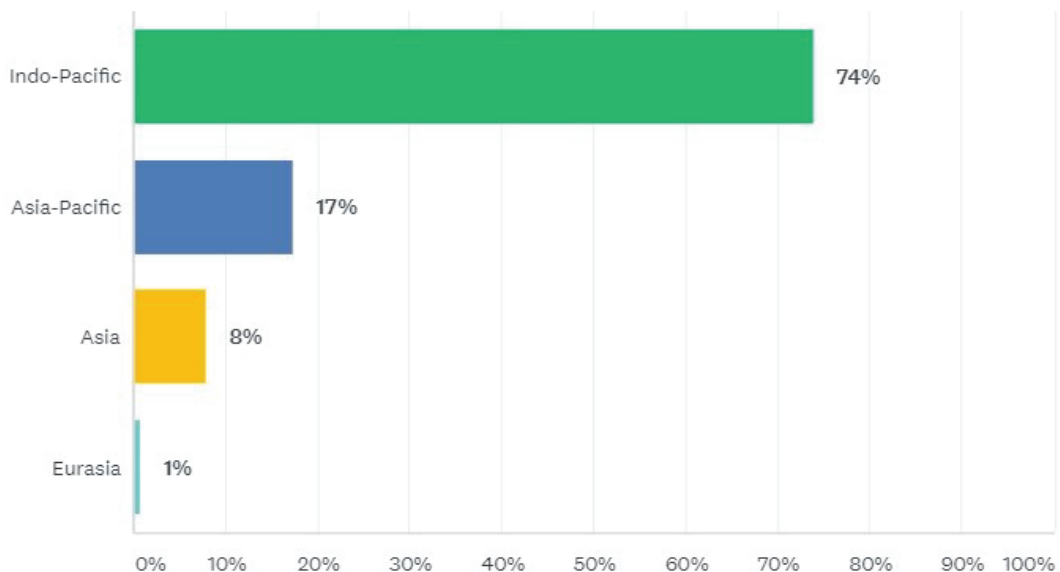
4. The Indo-Pacific Is Of Considerable Importance.

How India defines its extended neighbourhood has major implications for its policy priorities. While India has traditionally seen itself as a regional power, it has also seen itself as an Asian power from the time of independence. The Asia-Pacific construct, which became popular between the 1960s and 1990s, largely excluded India from regional architecture. In more recent years, India has been pulled in competing directions. The Indo-Pacific construct suggests closer collaboration with maritime powers, including the United States, Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asia. By contrast, the emphasis of India as a Eurasian power implies greater cooperation with Russia, China, Iran, and Central Asia. How India chooses to define its extended neighbourhood therefore provides an interesting insight into strategic priorities.

The majority (74%) of respondents believe the Indo-Pacific was the best way to describe India's extended region, over the Asia-Pacific (17%), Asia (8%), and Eurasia (1%). The largest number of respondents (88%) identify Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the Indian Ocean as a very important region for Indian interests, with Southeast Asia (74%) the most identified region of importance for India outside South Asia. Among international organisations, the largest number of respondents (73%) identify the East Asia Summit and Association of Southeast Asian Nations as very important for Indian interests, ahead of the United Nations, G20, and World Trade Organization. At 61%, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is deemed of great importance by more respondents than the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at just 25%. Cross-border connectivity with South and Southeast Asia (52%) and improved naval and maritime capabilities (49%) are deemed the top two policy priorities for India by survey participants, who were allowed to select up to three main priorities. A plurality (44%) believe an intervention in its neighbourhood or Indian Ocean region is the most likely next use of overseas military force by India, slightly higher than those who believe a limited conflict with Pakistan is more likely.

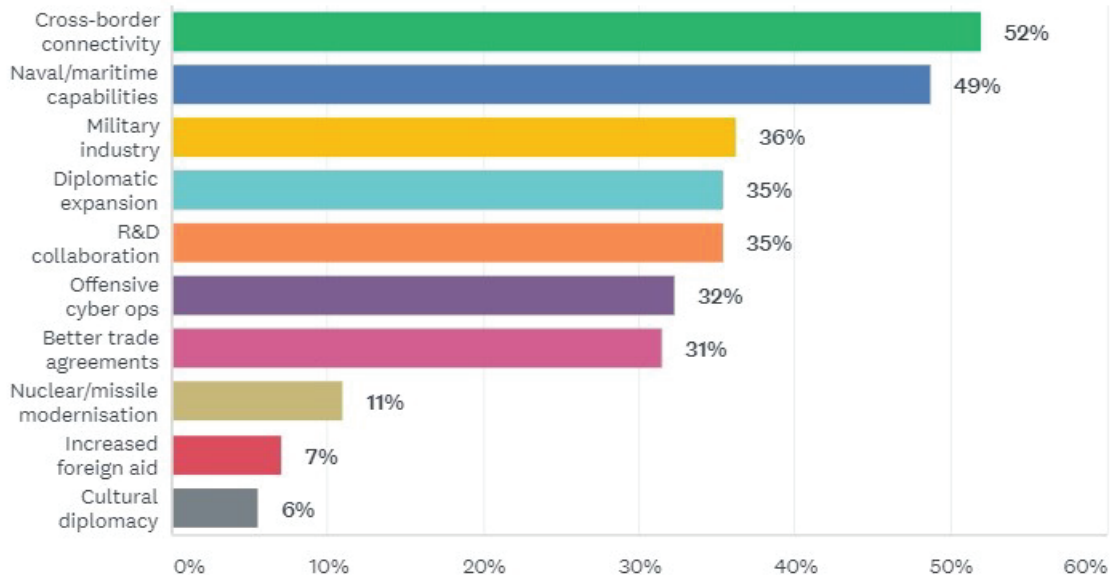
Which of the following terms best describes India's extended region?

Answered: 127



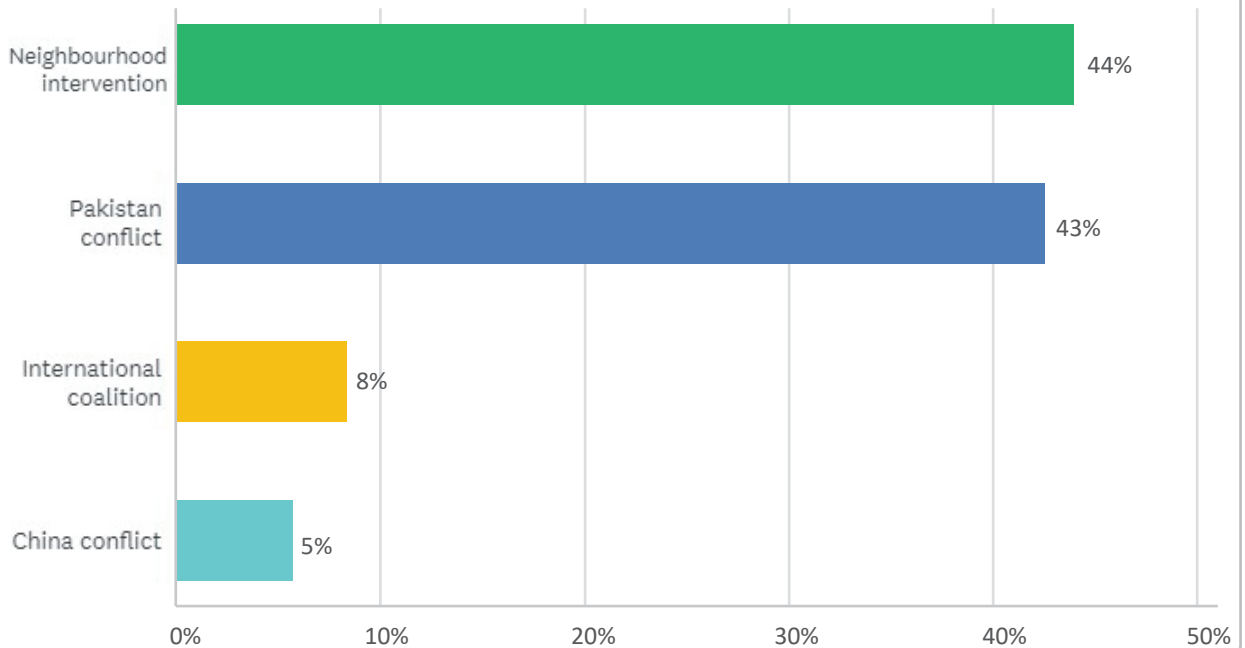
Which should be among India's top 3 priorities?

Answered: 127



When is India most likely to use military force overseas?

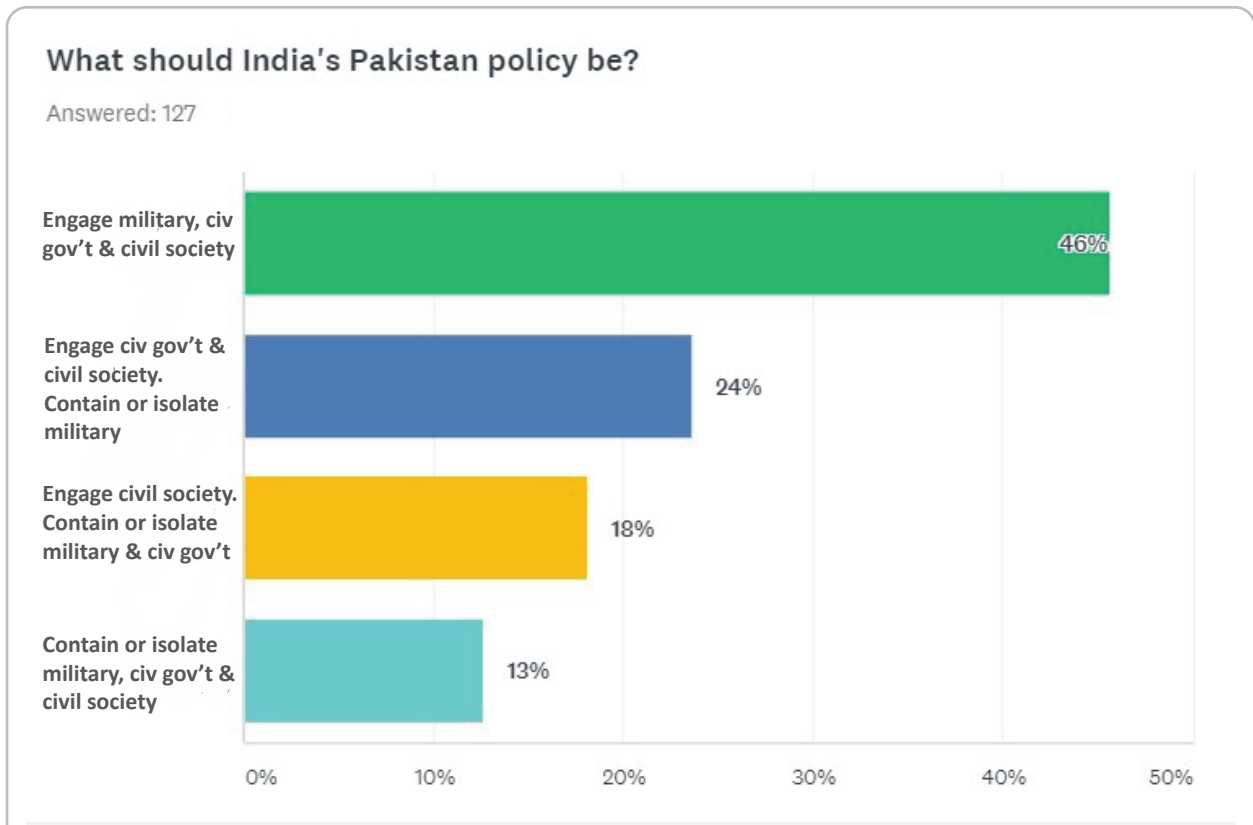
Answered: 127



5. Responses On Pakistan And West Asia Are Varied.

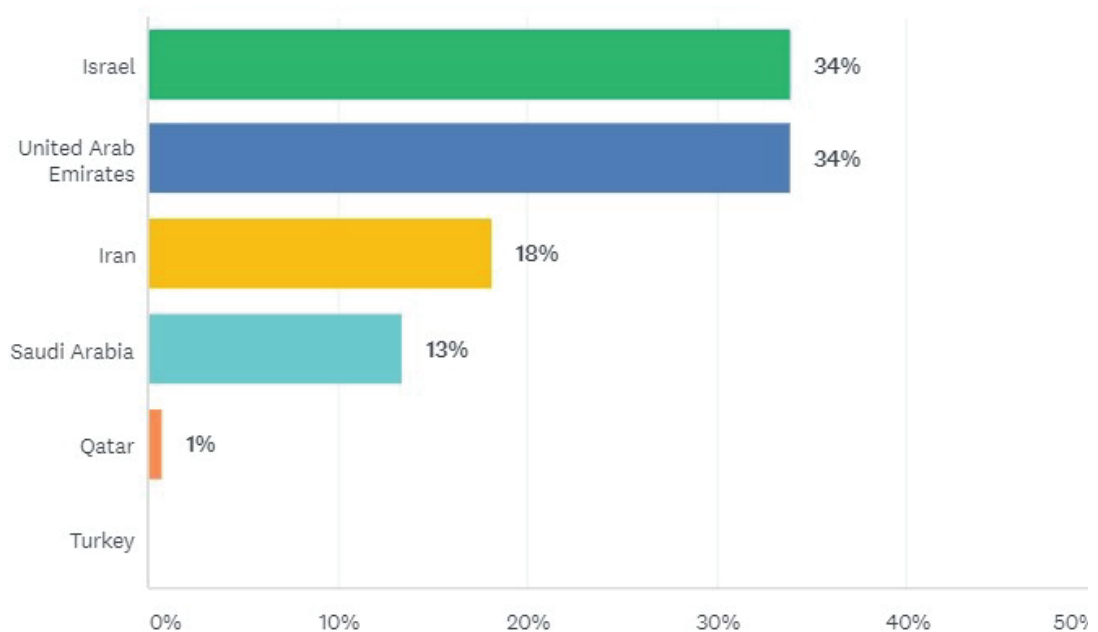
The survey reflects a broad consensus that the United States’ and China’s relations with Pakistan are impediments to better relations, that the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan (69%) is a major security challenge to India, and that a limited conflict with Pakistan represents the most probable next use of overseas military force (43%). But there are differences on India’s approach to Pakistan. A plurality (46%) believe that India should engage with Pakistan’s military, civilian government, and civil society. However, 24% believe that India should contain or isolate the Pakistan military, while engaging other actors; 18% favour containing or isolating both the military and civilian government in Pakistan while engaging civil society; and 13% prefer containing or isolating Pakistan’s military, civilian government, and civil society. Thus, while 88% of respondents favour engagement with at least some elements of Pakistani society, about 54% also favour containment or isolation of at least some portions. It is important to note that this survey was conducted before the terrorist attack of February 14, 2019 at Pulwama, after which attitudes towards Pakistan may have shifted.

Differences also extend to West Asia. The largest number of respondents identified the United Arab Emirates (34%) and Israel (34%) as India’s most important regional partners followed by significant numbers for Iran (18%) and Saudi Arabia (13%). Although a similar survey is not available for comparisons with past attitudes, the answers for this question would presumably have changed quite significantly over the last one or two decades, in favour of fast-growing Indian relations with Israel and the UAE.



Which of the following is India's most important partner in West Asia?

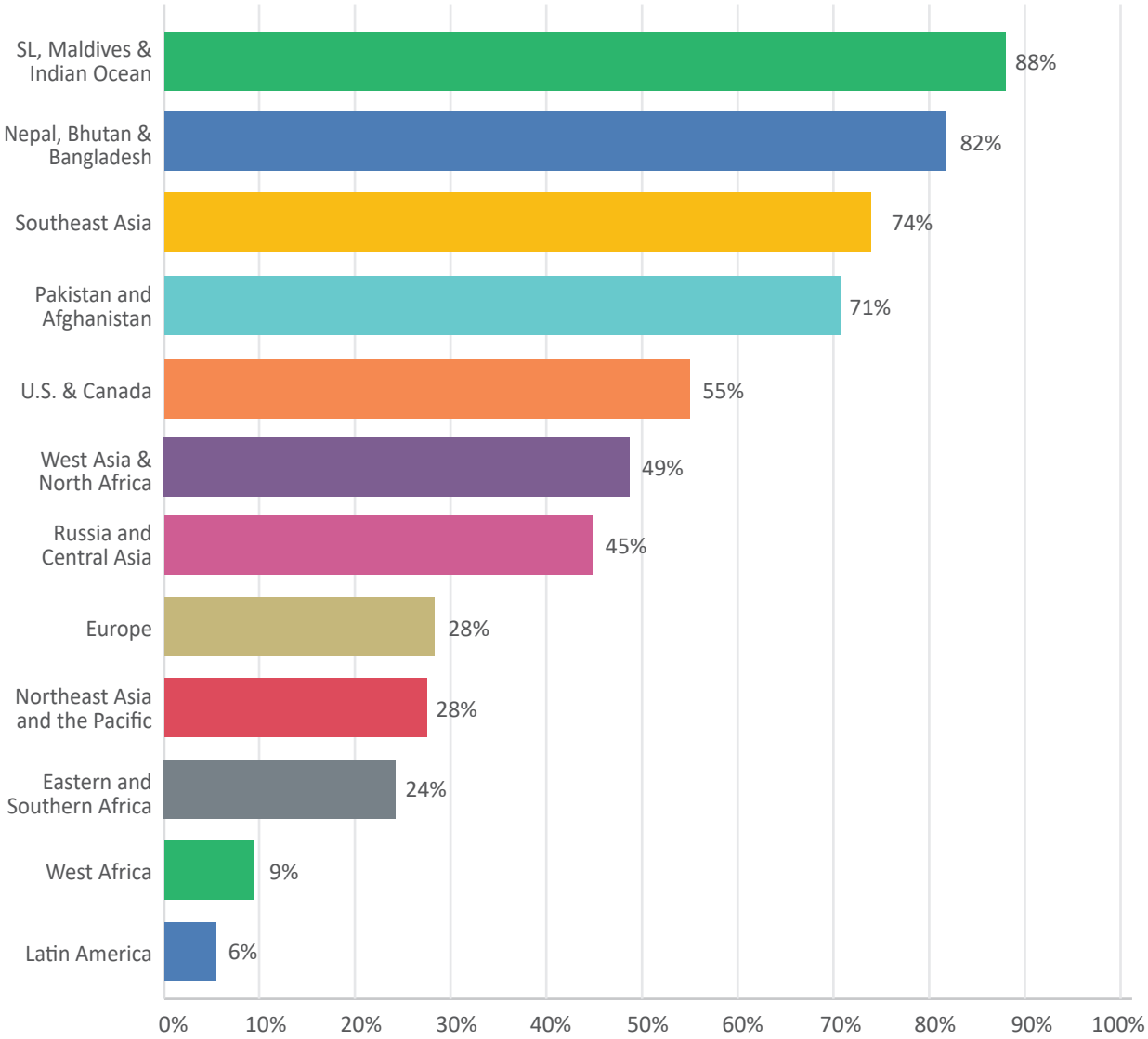
Answered: 127



- 6. SAARC, NAM, Europe, Aid, And Nuclear Issues Are Low Priorities.** The survey reveals many issues to be low priorities among India's strategic community. For example, separatism, insurgencies, and domestic terrorism (3%); public health and environmental concerns (2%); and gender inequality and demographics (2%) are not seen among the top tier of domestic challenges. In a question to which multiple answers were allowed, only 28% believe Europe or Northeast Asia and the Pacific are very important regions for Indian interests, with West Africa (9%) and Latin America (6%) the lowest priority regions for India. Among international partners, China (2%) and France (2%) feature far behind the United States, Russia, and Japan, and zero respondents perceive the United Kingdom or European Union as India's preferred partner on global issues. In West Asia, neither Qatar (1%) nor Turkey (0%) are identified as India's most important regional partner. Only 1% see the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as India's most important external challenge, and only 6% identify the Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions on Russia as resulting in a major security challenge for India. Among international institutions, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (25%), Non-Aligned Movement (9%), and Commonwealth (4%) are deemed the lowest priorities, when respondents were allowed to select multiple choices. Similarly, as strategic tools, nuclear and missile modernisation (11%), enhanced foreign aid (7%), and cultural diplomacy (6%) are deemed relatively unimportant. In terms of external military force, respondents think Indian participation in an ad hoc international coalition (8%) or a limited conflict with China (5%) is unlikely.

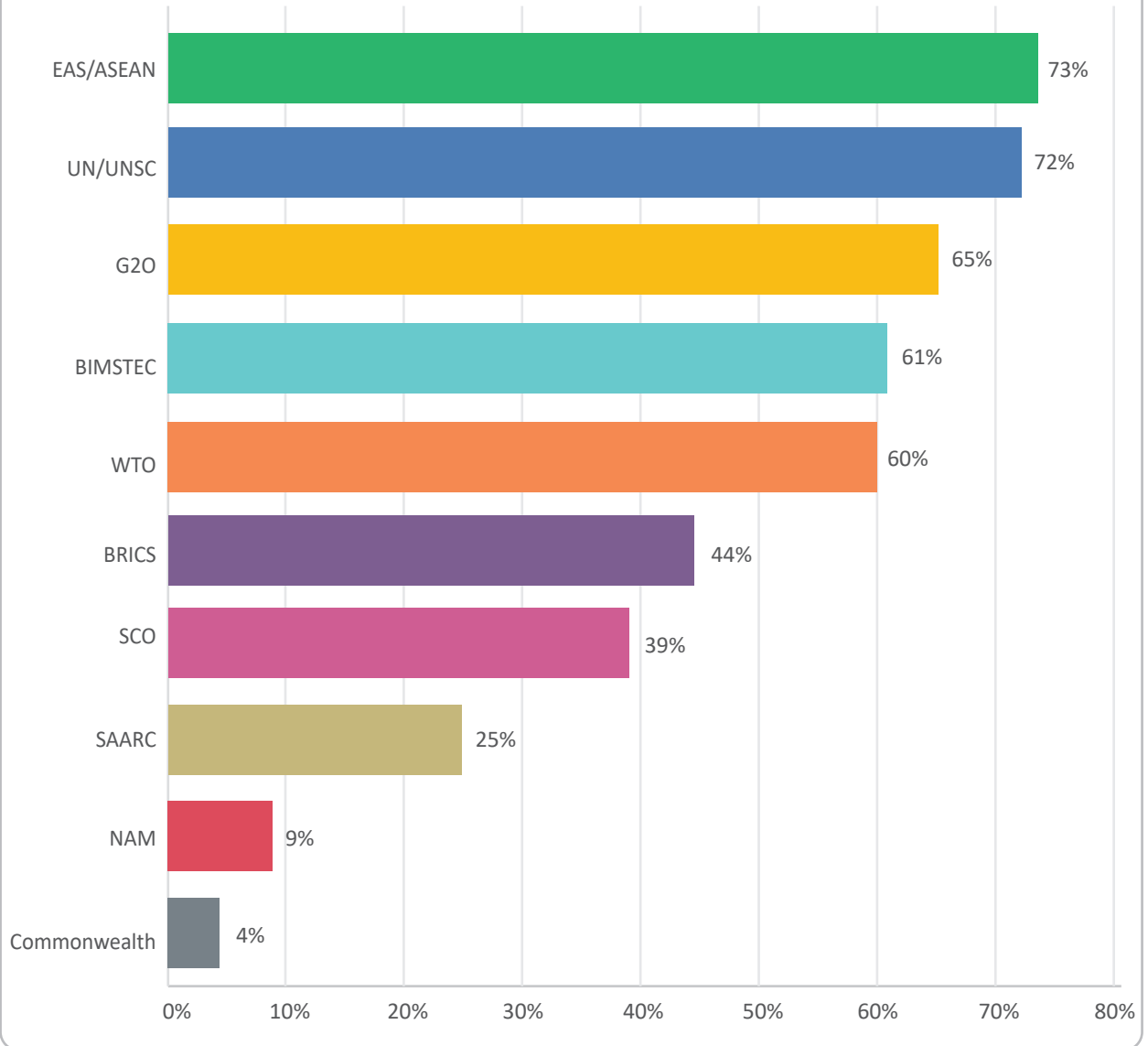
Which of the following regions are very important for Indian interests?

Answered: 127



Which international organisation are very important for Indian Interests?

Answered: 127



7. Views On Russian Partnership Are Determinative.

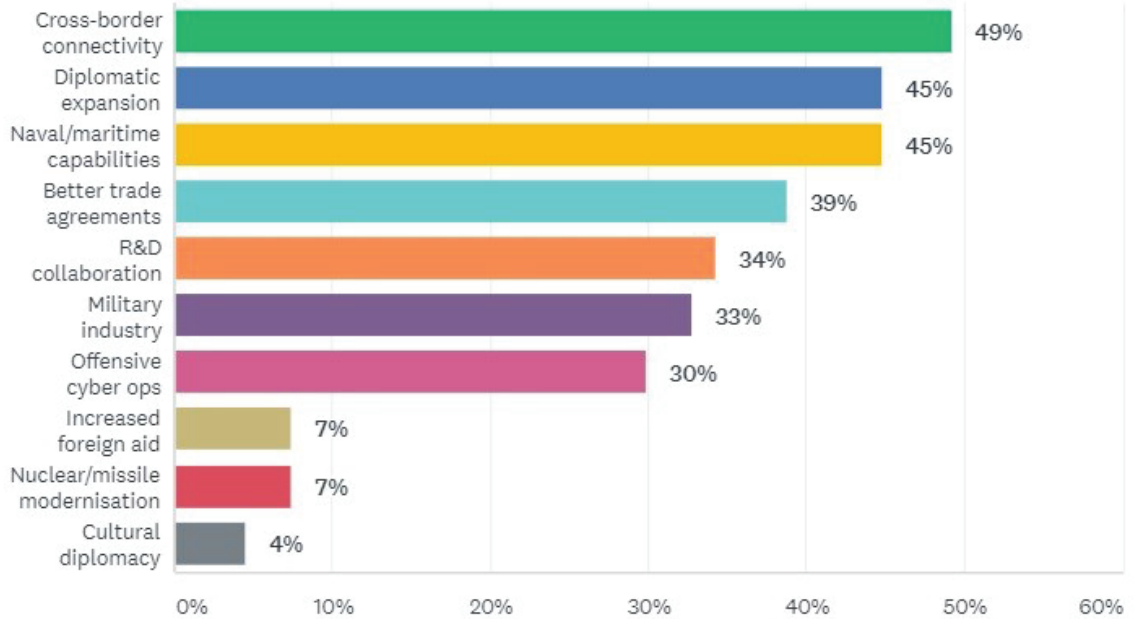
Perhaps the sharpest difference in responses involve those who identified Russia as India's most important partner on global issues. While in the minority (12%), these respondents also exhibit significant variance from other respondents on certain other questions. For example, a much higher proportion of these respondents (80%) believe in remaining equidistant between the U.S. and China in the event of greater competition between the two. All of these respondents (100%) also believe the world would be multipolar by 2035, and a plurality (40%) believe Iran is India's most important partner in West Asia. Only 53% of these respondents think the Indo-Pacific is the best way to define India's extended neighbourhood. A higher proportion of these respondents believe that BRICS (73%) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (53%) are very important to Indian interests. Of note, 73% of those who select Russia as India's most important partner on global issues are born before 1960.

8. Decision-Makers Reflect Different Attitudes From Influencers.

The strategic community can crudely be divided between *decision-makers* – those who have spent most of their careers in the civil services, military, or party politics – and *influencers*, who might include academic scholars, media commentators, journalists, think tank experts, and business executives. The sample of decision-makers surveyed is, on balance, older and more male-dominated, with 77% born before 1970 and only 8% female. They are more likely to see strategic issues (U.S.-Pakistan ties, India-Russia relations) as impediments to better India-U.S. relations, rather than economic issues such as trade. They are also marginally more sceptical of Indian engagement with Pakistan, although a higher proportion (48%) think an intervention in the neighbourhood or Indian Ocean is the most likely use of force overseas. They are more likely to prioritise sourcing technology over investment from abroad, and place an emphasis on defence industrialisation and research and development collaboration. By contrast, influencers tend to be younger (69% were born after 1970) and women are better represented at 27%. They are more prone to desire engagement with all sections of Pakistan's polity (49%), but also believe a limited conflict with Pakistan the most likely scenario for India's use of force overseas (49%). Additionally, they are far more likely (45%) to believe that expanding India's diplomatic corps is a major policy priority.

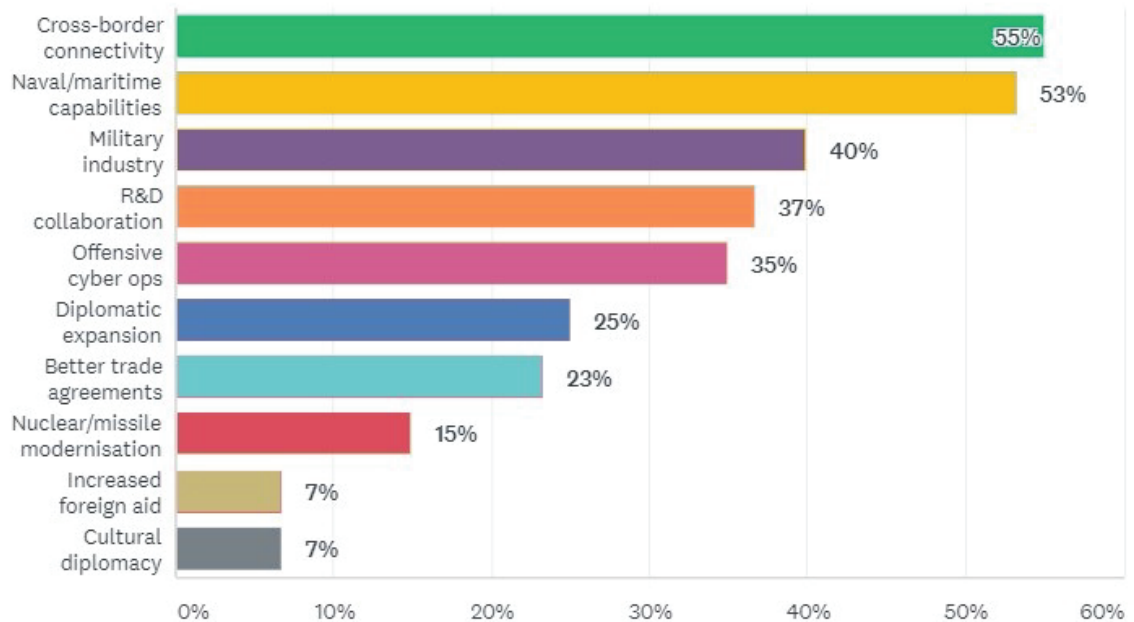
Which should be among India's top 3 priorities? (Influencers only)

Answered: 67



Which should be among India's top 3 priorities? (Decision-makers only)

Answered: 60



9. Differences Exist Across Age Profiles.

Certain differences also appear across various age profiles. Those born before 1960 believe Indian intervention in its neighbourhood or Indian Ocean region is more likely, do not consider an expanded diplomatic corps a high priority, and place greater importance on the United Nations and UN Security Council. Those born in and after 1980 are more comfortable with the terminology of the Indo-Pacific, believe Europe is slightly more important for Indian interests, and are less likely to identify sectarianism and identity politics as India’s biggest domestic challenge. By contrast, those born between 1960 and 1979 are more likely to identify the United States as India’s most important partner and are more likely to believe that India should collaborate with the United States in the event of greater U.S.-China competition. This cohort is also the most enthusiastic about trade, and are more likely to believe that the World Trade Organization is very important for Indian interests, that India has been a beneficiary of preferential trade agreements, and that trade is the primary obstacle to better India-U.S. relations.

Percent of respondents who say...	Born pre-1960 (n=52)	Born 1960-1979 (n=37)	Born post-1979 (n=38)
India is most likely to use military force overseas in an intervention in its neighbourhood or Indian Ocean region.	52%	35%	42%
An expanded diplomatic corps should be among India’s top priorities.	19%	46%	47%
The United Nations/UNSC is very important for Indian interests.	81%	62%	68%
The Indo-Pacific best describes India’s extended region.	69%	68%	87%
Europe is very important for Indian interests.	25%	27%	34%
Sectarianism and identity politics are India’s biggest domestic challenges.	13%	19%	0%
The United States is India’s most important partner on global issues.	73%	81%	71%
India should collaborate more closely with the U.S. in the event of greater U.S.-China competition	40%	51%	39%
The World Trade Organization is very important for Indian interests.	54%	73%	55%
Trade is the biggest obstacle to better relations with the U.S.	21%	41%	34%
Preferential trade agreements have been good for India.	73%	76%	66%

10. Strategic Elites Reflect Public Opinion Except On Pakistan (And Somewhat On China).

While recent public opinion surveys of Indian attitudes to international affairs have employed different methodologies, a direct comparison can be made between the survey of India's strategic community and the 2017, "America's Role in the Indo-Pacific" (ARIP) public survey.⁵ The two surveys used similar questions on a few issues. This comparison indicates that while Indian elites are more likely than the public to prioritise the partnership with the United States over other countries, they are less inclined to work more closely with the United States in the event of greater U.S.-China competition. Both groups express similarly positive views of free trade agreements. By contrast, attitudes to Pakistan appeared harsher among the public, although an exact comparison is not possible due to differences in the questions asked. In the ARIP survey, 76% supported either isolating Pakistan while cooperating with China or working with others against a China-Pakistan axis. Only 13% of strategic elites supported containing or isolating *all* elements of Pakistan's political leadership and civil society. Similarly, while 54% of elites saw China's assertiveness as India's single biggest external challenge, a lower proportion (46%) of the public believed China exerted a negative influence on India. It is worth keeping in mind that the ARIP survey was conducted months before the Doklam stand-off between India and China and the subsequent thaw in relations, which may have influenced Indian public opinion on China.

	Elite	Public
	Survey of India's Strategic Community (Dec 2018)	America's Role in the Indo-Pacific (Mar 2017)
Preferred international partner:		
- United States	75%	53%
- Russia	12%	21%
- Japan	6%	12%
- China	2%	10%
In U.S.-China competition:		
- Work with U.S.	43%	48%
- Work with China	2%	14%
- Remain equidistant	54%	37%
Favourable views of free trade agreements	72%	68%
India should isolate/contain Pakistan	13%*	76%*
Negative views of China	54%*	46%*

*The survey questions asked were significantly different, making comparisons inexact.

⁵ See Jackman, Flake, et al., "America's Role in the Indo-Pacific." This survey was conducted in March 2017 by Ipsos and was commissioned by a consortium of Asian think tanks that included Brookings India. Questions were translated into eight Indian languages, with an Indian sample size of 750 (margin of error less than or equal to 3.6%).

CONCLUSION

The survey presents an initial foray into systematically assessing the Indian strategic community's attitudes concerning important issues in India's foreign and strategic policies. Future editions would benefit from a larger sample size and better representation from future decision-makers, particularly younger members of the military and civil services. Regular surveys of this nature will also enable the identification of trends influenced by current events, and would thereby comprise a valuable addition to the literature on India's foreign and security policy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dhruva Jaishankar is Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings India in New Delhi and the Brookings Institution in Washington DC. He is also a Non-Resident Fellow with the Lowy Institute in Australia. His research examines India's role in the international system and the effects of global developments on India's politics, economics, and society, with a particular focus on India's relations with the United States, the Indo-Pacific, and Europe. Jaishankar was previously a Transatlantic Fellow with the German Marshall Fund (GMF) in Washington DC from 2012 until 2016, where he managed the India Trilateral Forum, a regular policy dialogue involving participants from India, Europe, and the United States.

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