

“India–United States Relations in the Contemporary Era: Strategic Convergence, Tensions, and the Road Ahead”

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between India and the United States has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past two decades, evolving from the strategic estrangement of the Cold War era into one of the most consequential bilateral partnerships of the twenty-first century. This paper examines the structural drivers, key milestones, and persistent fault lines of the India–US relationship from approximately 2005 to the mid-2020s. It argues that strategic convergence on counterterrorism, Indo-Pacific stability, technology cooperation, and democratic governance has deepened institutional ties, even as meaningful divergences persist on Russia policy, bilateral trade, and multilateral diplomacy. Drawing on official agreements, diplomatic records, and secondary scholarship, the paper situates the relationship within the broader contest for influence in the Indo-Pacific and assesses its prospects under evolving domestic political conditions in both countries.

Keywords: India–US relations; Indo-Pacific; Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; strategic partnership; DTTI; IPEF; bilateral diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Few bilateral relationships have attracted as sustained a level of scholarly and policy attention in recent years as the one between the Republic of India and the United States of America. Once described by Ambassador Strobe Talbott as an 'estranged democracy,' the partnership has deepened progressively across successive administrations in both New Delhi and Washington, acquiring a density of institutional frameworks, defense agreements, and people-to-people linkages that would have seemed improbable even at the close of the twentieth century.

The catalytic moment arrived in 2005, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush announced a framework for civilian nuclear cooperation that eventually culminated in the historic 123 Agreement of 2008. That arrangement effectively ended India's nuclear-related isolation and signaled Washington's willingness to treat New Delhi as a de facto nuclear-capable state deserving of engagement rather than sanction. It set in motion an escalating pattern of bilateral engagement that later administrations have only deepened.

The scholarly literature on India–US relations falls broadly into three camps: those who view the partnership as a natural alignment of democracies with overlapping strategic interests (Mohan, 2006; Tellis, 2016); those who caution that structural divergences particularly India's strategic autonomy doctrine will permanently constrain the depth of the relationship (Ganguly, 2010; Miller, 2021); and a third school that foregrounds the domestic political economy of both countries as the primary variable shaping bilateral outcomes (Madan, 2020). The present analysis draws on all three traditions while according particular weight to the rapidly evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific as a structural force reshaping the relationship.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the relationship in its historical context. Section 3 examines the principal pillars of contemporary cooperation: defense, technology, trade, and diplomacy. Section 4 addresses the principal areas of friction. Section 5 places the bilateral relationship within the wider Indo-Pacific framework, with particular attention to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Section 6 offers a forward-looking assessment, and Section 7 concludes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM ESTRANGEMENT TO PARTNERSHIP

The Cold War cast a long shadow over India–US relations. India's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, its 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, and Washington's successive security alignments with Pakistan created structural tensions that persisted well beyond the Soviet collapse. The 1974 Pokhran nuclear test and, more significantly, the 1998 tests conducted under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee triggered American sanctions under the Glenn and Symington amendments, reinforcing a mutual perception of strategic incompatibility.

The first genuine diplomatic thaw began during the Clinton administration's second term, accelerated by the 1999 Kargil crisis in which Washington tilted unmistakably toward India and gathered decisive momentum in the early Bush years. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's December 2001 warning to Pakistan, issued in the wake of the attack on the Indian Parliament, was widely read in New Delhi as evidence that Washington's South Asian calculus was shifting. The Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP), announced in January 2004, formalized this reorientation and laid the groundwork for the nuclear deal.

The Obama years added new institutional layers. The 2010 state visit produced the US–India Strategic Partnership Framework, and the President's 2011 address to the Indian Parliament endorsing India's permanent membership of the UN Security Council represented an unprecedented public gesture of strategic confidence. Defense cooperation agreements multiplied, and bilateral trade volumes crossed USD 100 billion annually. Yet the Obama years also surfaced chronic tensions, most visibly India's reluctance to participate in the US-led coalition against the Islamic State and its continued dependence on Russian defense procurement.

The Trump administration (2017–2021) brought characteristic ambivalence. The 2+2 ministerial dialogue was inaugurated, the COMCASA and BECA foundational defense agreements were finalized, India was elevated to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status, and the Quad was revived after a decade of dormancy. Simultaneously, trade friction intensified: the revocation of India's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits, reciprocal tariffs, and sustained disputes over market access introduced a transactional quality that periodically overshadowed security cooperation.

The Biden administration (2021–2025) inherited this ambivalent legacy and sought, with mixed results, to rebalance it. The elevation of the Quad to head-of-government level in March 2021, the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in May 2022, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET) in January 2023, and the state visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington in June 2023 represented genuine qualitative advances. At the same time, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and India's public refusal to condemn it exposed the limits of the partnership in ways that generated sustained if diplomatically contained tension.

THE PILLARS OF CONTEMPORARY COOPERATION

Defense and Security

Defense cooperation has become the most rapidly institutionalized dimension of the India–US partnership. The foundational agreements GSOMIA (2002), LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020) have progressively integrated Indian and American military logistics, communications, and geospatial intelligence systems in ways that would have been politically inconceivable a generation ago. The Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), launched in 2012 and periodically reconstituted, created formal pathways for joint development and co-production of defense equipment, culminating in landmark arrangements on GE F414 jet engines and the MQ-9B SeaGuardian drone platform agreed during the 2023 Modi state visit.

Military exercise frequency and complexity have both increased markedly. The Malabar naval exercise, a bilateral format launched in 1992, became effectively quadrilateral when Japan was permanently included from 2020 and Australia subsequently participated. The Yudh Abhyas (army), Cope India and Talon Saber (air force), and Tiger Triumph (tri-service) exercises have grown in scope, duration, and operational complexity. Intelligence sharing, formally constrained by India's reluctance to join Five Eyes-adjacent architectures, has nevertheless expanded through bilateral channels particularly on counterterrorism and Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean Region.

The most powerful structural driver of defense cooperation has been a converging threat perception toward China. The June 2020 Galwan Valley clash between Indian and Chinese forces produced

an immediate increase in Indian demand for American defense materiel; emergency procurements of M777 howitzers, C-130J transport aircraft spares, and Apache helicopter components illustrated the practical value of the partnership during a period of acute border tension.

Technology Cooperation

The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET), elaborated during the June 2023 state visit, marked a qualitative shift in the technology dimension of the relationship. Under ICET, cooperation has been formalized across semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, advanced telecommunications, and space exploration. GE Aerospace's agreement to co-produce the F414 engine with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited represented a notable departure from Washington's traditional reluctance to transfer sensitive military propulsion technology to non-treaty partners.

In the civilian technology domain, the relationship is sustained in part by the scale of Indian-American participation in the American innovation economy. The Indian diaspora accounts for a disproportionate share of Fortune 500 chief executives, Silicon Valley founders, and senior technology executives—creating an informal but consequential channel of influence. The US-India Business Council (USIBC) and the US-India Strategic and Partnership Forum (USISPF) provide formal institutional expression of this interface. The Semiconductor Supply Chain and Innovation Partnership concluded in 2023, together with India's growing role as a site for semiconductor assembly and testing, reflects a shared effort to build supply-chain resilience against concentrated production dependencies.

Economic and Trade Relations

Bilateral trade in goods and services reached approximately USD 190 billion in 2023, making the United States India's largest trading partner and India one of the fastest-growing markets for American exports. Technology services led by Infosys, TCS, Wipro, and HCL remain the most visible component of the commercial relationship, but manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, energy, and financial services are of growing importance.

The trade relationship has nonetheless been marked by persistent friction that sits uneasily alongside summit-level warmth. India's tariff and non-tariff barriers on agricultural commodities, dairy, medical devices, and certain manufactured goods remain among the highest maintained by any major economy. American concerns regarding data localization requirements, intellectual property enforcement, and digital services market access have been recurring themes in both World Trade Organisation proceedings and bilateral consultations. India's removal from the Generalized System of Preferences program in 2019 has not been reversed, leaving exporters in textiles and chemicals sectors in a state of continuing uncertainty.

Diplomatic and Multilateral Cooperation

In multilateral forums, India–US convergence has grown considerably but remains selective. The two countries cooperated effectively during India's G20 presidency, with the 2023 New Delhi Summit producing a consensus Leaders' Declaration on several contested issues, facilitated in part by American diplomatic support. Both governments have worked toward the reform of multilateral development banks to expand concessional development finance capacity for the Global South.

Cooperation at the United Nations is more complex. American support for India's permanent membership of the Security Council has been rhetorically consistent since 2011 but has not been translated into a formal legislative or procedural proposal, in part because of the intrinsic difficulty of Security Council reform more broadly. On human rights, the relationship has been periodically strained by American governmental and civil society criticism of conditions affecting religious minorities in India criticism that New Delhi invariably characterizes as interference in domestic affairs.

PERSISTENT FAULT LINES***The Russia Factor***

India's relationship with Russia historically rooted in Soviet-era defense procurement, which still accounts for a substantial portion of India's operational weapons inventory has been the most diplomatically visible point of friction in the India–US partnership since February 2022. India's abstentions in United Nations General Assembly votes condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its continuation of Russian oil imports at discounted prices, and Prime Minister Modi's meetings with President Putin in 2023 and 2024 were received with barely concealed frustration in Washington.

Indian officials and analysts offer a consistent and, to many observers, not entirely unpersuasive justification for this stance. India's dependence on Russian spare parts for Soviet-era weapons platforms cannot be resolved over a short timeframe; the strategic autonomy doctrine has never entailed commitment to American foreign policy positions as a matter of principle; and India's energy import requirements are considerable. As India accelerates defense indigenisation and procurement diversification, the structural foundation of the Russia relationship is gradually narrowing but American tolerance for Indian hedging, though not unlimited, has proved more durable than many anticipated.

Trade Disputes

As noted above, bilateral trade is substantial and expanding, but the relationship is encumbered by recurrent market access disputes. India's elevated tariff structure on agricultural products, data localization mandates under the Personal Data Protection framework, and perceived preferential treatment for state-owned enterprises in public procurement have been consistent American concerns. India, in turn, objects to restrictions on H-1B visa issuance which bear directly on the Indian technology services industry and has pressed without success for a Bilateral Investment Treaty that has been in negotiation for more than a decade.

Democratic Governance Concerns

A range of American civil society organisations, editorial institutions, and a portion of the legislative branch have raised concerns regarding press freedom, minority rights protections, and judicial independence in India. These concerns have been amplified by the downgrading of India's democratic status in Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) assessments, creating periodic bilateral discomfort. The Modi government's consistent characterisation of such criticism as interference in Indian internal affairs reinforced by the broader nationalist sensibility of its political support base means that even diplomatically measured American expressions of concern generate more friction than resolution.

It is nevertheless the case that successive American administrations have largely subordinated democratic governance concerns to the imperatives of the strategic partnership. The State Department's annual human rights reports on India are detailed and substantive; the diplomatic follow-through is modest. This asymmetry is noted by Indian officials with some equanimity and by American critics of the relationship with some concern, but it reflects a consistent pattern in American foreign policy during periods of intensified great-power competition: the management of governance concerns in relationships with strategically important partners, rather than their prioritisation.

THE INDO-PACIFIC DIMENSION: QUAD, IPEF, AND BEYOND

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

The Quad comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States has been the most emblematic multilateral expression of the India–US partnership's Indo-Pacific ambitions. Originally convened at the official level in 2007, it was suspended following the Rudd government's Australian withdrawal before being revived in 2017 and elevated to foreign minister level in 2019 and head-of-government level in March 2021. The Quad's working groups on vaccine distribution, climate resilience, critical technologies, and infrastructure finance have given the grouping a development-

oriented dimension designed to appeal to Indo-Pacific partners who might resist a purely security-focused format.

India's engagement with the Quad has been characterised by a sustained effort to limit any explicitly anti-China framing. Indian officials have consistently described the Quad as a 'positive agenda' grouping rather than a coalition directed against a specific state. This reflects both India's doctrinal preference for strategic ambiguity and the practical reality that India's economic relationship with China bilateral merchandise trade exceeded USD 130 billion in 2023, making China India's largest goods trading partner despite acute political tensions gives New Delhi reasons to avoid the adversarial posturing that Australia, Japan, and the United States have sometimes adopted more openly.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), launched in May 2022, brought together fourteen Indo-Pacific economies including India around four pillars: trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy. India joined three of the four pillars, declining to participate in Pillar I on trade, which it considered insufficiently responsive to its development imperatives and domestic political constraints. The supply chain agreement concluded under IPEF Pillar II in 2023, the first binding trade outcome of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific economic strategy, included Indian participation and formalized India's role in diversified supply chains for critical minerals and manufactured goods.

The IPEF's significance for India–US relations lies less in its immediate trade effects which remain modest than in its signalling function. India's selective participation reflects a broader pattern: substantive engagement with the institutional architecture of American Indo-Pacific strategy that stops short of the full commitments that treaty allies routinely accept. This pattern generates periodic American frustration while simultaneously constituting a precondition of India's ability to sustain domestic political support for the partnership.

THE ROAD AHEAD: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

The trajectory of India–US relations over the coming decade will be shaped by several interlocking variables: the evolution of Chinese strategic behaviour in the Indo-Pacific and along India's borders; domestic political developments in both countries; the pace of Indian economic growth and defense modernisation; and the degree to which both governments can manage their bilateral differences while cooperating on shared priorities.

China's continued assertion across the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Line of Actual Control is likely to remain the dominant structural driver of the relationship. Each escalation of

Chinese pressure on Indian territory has historically produced an acceleration of India–US defense cooperation. The 2020 Galwan Valley confrontation generated emergency arms transfers expedited foundational agreement negotiations, and a visible deepening of intelligence cooperation. Future crises, should they occur, are likely to produce similar effects—though at a higher baseline of institutional integration.

Indian domestic politics present a more ambiguous picture. The BJP government has proved a willing partner on much of the security agenda while generating the governance concerns that complicate the relationship with American civil society and parts of the American legislature. A future Indian government of a different political character might be more accommodating on democratic governance issues but potentially less willing to move at pace on defense integration. The relationship's institutional depth standing dialogue mechanisms, parliamentary exchanges, business council links provides insulation from any single political transition, but sustained strategic ambition has historically depended on leadership-level political will.

On the American side, the bipartisan consensus on Indo-Pacific engagement that has sustained the India partnership across administrations remains broadly durable but is not guaranteed. Protectionist impulses that cut across party lines, combined with periodic legislative interest in conditioning security cooperation on human rights grounds, represent manageable but real complications.

The technology dimension is likely to be increasingly determinative. As both countries invest substantially in semiconductor manufacturing, AI capability, and quantum computing, questions of supply-chain integration versus industrial competition will sharpen. The iCET framework provides a useful channel, but its ambitions exceed its current implementation capacity. Navigating the tension between American export control architecture designed for formal treaty allies and India's status as a strategic partner rather than an ally will require sustained diplomatic creativity on both sides.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the partnership's long-term domestic sustainability in both democracies depends on whether it generates tangible, broadly distributed economic benefits: jobs, technology transfers, investment flows. The elite foreign policy consensus for strategic partnership is real but cannot sustain itself indefinitely absent a broader constituency of material interest, and that constituency remains a work in progress.

CONCLUSION

The India–United States partnership has travelled a considerable distance from the estranged democratic relationship of the Cold War era. It rests today on a substantial foundation of overlapping interests in an open and stable Indo-Pacific; in counterterrorism cooperation; in

technology leadership; and in the shared proposition that the rise of an authoritarian China at the expense of the rules-based international order is contrary to the long-term interests of both countries. The relationship's institutional architecture through 2+2 dialogues, foundational defense agreements, the Quad, iCET, and a dense web of commercial and people-to-people ties—provides meaningful resilience against political turbulence.

Yet the relationship is not an alliance in any traditional sense, and the persistent Indian emphasis on strategic autonomy is not purely rhetorical. India will continue to manage its relationships with Russia and other partners in ways that complicate American foreign policy preferences; it will continue to exercise independent judgement about when to align with American positions in multilateral forums and when to abstain; it will continue to protect domestic economic interests in ways that frustrate American exporters and investors.

None of this is fatal to the partnership. The accumulated diplomatic experience of the last two decades demonstrates that both governments have developed a considerable capacity to manage their differences while cooperating on shared priorities. The relationship is most accurately understood not as an alliance in the making, but as a mature strategic partnership between two large, sovereign, and genuinely democratic states whose interests overlap substantially without coinciding perfectly. In the contest-laden landscape of twenty-first century international politics, that represents a meaningful and durable achievement.

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