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India's Strategic Partnership with the United States

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ABSTRACT

Foreign policy of India is a perfect amalgamation of idealism and pragmatism. While founding its policy of peace, non-violence it balanced it with the need to have an independent stand at global level. India not only opted for non-alignment to remain independent from global power blocs and military alliances but also stood for territorial sovereignty and peaceful co-existence. These foundational principles remained as the harbinger of path of India in its journey as a nation state in the international politics. It sustained with its foreign policy throughout the Cold War amidst contentions in its neighbourhood and the challenges of economic development at domestic level as well as unfavourable balance of payments crisis. However, as the global world order evolved after the Cold War as the Bi-polarity gave way to Uni-polarity. India also started to integrate its enduring diplomatic ideals with practical objectives like economic growth, technological advancement and security modernization as a result of necessity and compulsions of times. The liberalization of India's economy in 1991 due to the New Economic Policies /LPG and its growing role in global trade prompted a shift from non-alignment to "multi-alignment." Among the most significant outcomes of this evolution is India's deepening partnership with the United States due to their shared democratic values and convergent strategic goals, the India-U.S. relationship extends upto economic goals. The partnership is important to strike a balance in the Indo-Pacific and international world order. While India continues to uphold its independence in global decision-making, its collaboration with the United States enhances its global influence and modernization capabilities. This paper seeks to trace the continuities and discontinuities of Indian foreign policy. Further, it is also a humble attempt of analysing the rationale and implications of India's strategic tilt toward the U.S.A. specifically in the post- cold war period.

Keywords: *India-U.S. Bilateral relations, foreign policy of India, Non-alignment, autonomy, multipolar world, democratic partnership, China factor*

I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is the way of a nation states to express its goals and ideals in the course of international politics. Like every other Country India as well, always tried to balance moral

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principles like peace, sovereignty and equality with the practical realities of security, power and development. Since independence Indian foreign policy has constantly evolved to meet changing global needs and requirements while keeping in pace with the continuation of the of autonomy and dignity in international politics.

In the beginning the foreign policy was shaped by the experience of colonial past and the desire to build an independent path distinct from Cold War blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union. Our policy of *non-alignment* aimed to keep India free from external domination while promoting peace, cooperation and development with the help of both the superpowers without joining one of the blocs and retaining the right to self-determination. Non-alignment did not mean isolation, non-activeness or neutrality. Instead, it reflected India's belief that moral leadership and solidarity among newly independent nations could promote a more equitable world order suitable for the third world countries as well.

Through the Non-Aligned Movement, India became a voice for decolonization, anti-racism and economic justice with a demand of New International Economic Order at global level. The emphasis on sovereignty and moral universalism gave India significant diplomatic edge and importance in the 1950s and 1960s especially among the newly independent third world nation states.

However, idealism alone could not have protected India from regional and global pressures. The 1962 war with China exposed the limits of idealist approach of our leadership. However, the decisive intervention in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, demonstrated our willingness to use power and strategic alliances when its core interests are at stake. Further, the Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 signalled a shift toward realism recognizing that moral principles must sometimes yield to strategic needs. Though, this invited lot of criticism for India as it was seen as an alignment towards USSR

II. FOUNDATIONS OF INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY

India's foreign policy was shaped by the experience of colonialism and imperialism along with its yearning for independence. The doctrine of Panchsheel and non-alignment was conceived not as isolationism but strategic alignment and policy of action in the bipolar Cold War order (Pant, 2016).² The Panchsheel Agreement based on mutual respect, non-interference and peaceful coexistence and maintenance of territorial sovereignty set the ideal tone for India's

² Nayar, B. R., & Paul, T. V. (2017). *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status*. Cambridge University Press.

diplomatic relations (Malone & Mohan, 2014).³ Besides, India projected herself as a leader of the Global South and tried to project anti-colonialism and colonialism economic reforms in international institutions (Nayar & Paul, 2017).⁴ Non-alignment allowed India to maintain its independent stand in its external matters while taking care of domestic priorities. However, it was facing pressure in terms of security due to its neighbouring countries such as China and Pakistan. India always maintained a pragmatic and realistic trend signified in its participation in UN peacekeeping operations, peaceful conflict resolution of border disputes along with managing relations with both the super powers blocks namely USSR and USA.

In the 1990s, the world underwent dramatic changes due to the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and India's own economic crisis in 1991 forced a major reassessment in terms of its opting for LPG and opening its economy to the Global competition. Indian Government introduced economic liberalization and India began integrating more deeply with global markets. This economic shift also transformed foreign policy thinking and diplomacy became linked with economy. For enlarging its reach India opted for measures such as the *Look East Policy* and Act East policy. At present our policy and diplomacy has become more assertive, visible and pragmatic.

III. CONTINUITIES IN INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The most persistent ideal in Indian foreign policy is its stand for autonomy i.e. the capacity to make independent decisions free from external pressure, the reason why India did not join any power bloc or military alliance. This principal and ideal continued to prevail during cold war and afterwards as well as foreign policy discourse (Pant & Rej, 2018).⁵ With its relation with the U.S.A., the only superpower, India maintains its independent stand and maintained diplomatic relations guided by its national interest. India's aspiration to lead South Asia and contribute to regional stability has been continuous and quite visible via platforms like SAARC, BIMSTEC and the Bay of Bengal Initiative. This regional focus aligns closely with U.S. interests in South Asian security, providing a complementary basis for cooperation (Bajpai, 2022).⁶

India's faith in multilateral institutions such as UNO, UNSC, WTO and principles of equity

³ Malone, D. M., & Mohan, C. R. (2014). *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy*. Oxford University Press.

⁴ Nayar, B. R., & Paul, T. V. (2017). *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Pant, H. V., & Rej, A. (2018). The unending quest for strategic autonomy: India and the U.S. *The Washington Quarterly*, 41(3), 123–138.

⁶ Bajpai, K. (2022). *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases*. Oxford University Press.

and aspiration for an egalitarian economic world order to suit to developing and third world countries continue to guide its foreign policy. (Mohan, 2022).⁷ Further, its participation in BRICS, G20 and now the Quad and SCO reflect consistency in engaging diverse multilateral forums to secure a rules-based order. India tries to exert global clout based cultural diplomacy based on its cultural legacy and indigenous knowledge system. further it also projects its diaspora as a tool of soft power (Thussu, 2018).⁸The same continuity and change is also being reflected in its relationship with America.

India maintains a traditional preference for dialogue over coercion, discussion over force avoiding direct interference in other countries' internal affairs, consistent with its respect for territorial sovereignty in lines with its commitment to panchsheel. This was evident in its restrained stance on Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal crisis in its neighbourhood and cautious engagement with Middle Eastern conflicts, underscoring a principled commitment to diplomacy (Ganguly, 2015).⁹

IV. DISCONTINUITIES AND CHANGE

In the post 1991 period India opted for New Economic policies i.e. economic liberalization, transformation from a protectionist stance and import substitution regime, it embraced globalization, localization and privatization. (Saran, 2017).¹⁰ This change along with changed international environment enabled new alignments, specifically with the U.S.A. India's rigid non-alignment gave way to strategic multi-alignment, reflecting its pragmatic adaptation to a multipolar world. Engagements span the U.S., Russia, Japan, ASEAN states and the EU, with India demonstrating flexibility in pursuing issue-based cooperation without formal alliances (Pant & Bommakanti, 2019).¹¹ The 2008 Indo-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement exemplifies this shift, signalling deeper ties with the U.S. while preserving autonomy.

China's rise and regional assertiveness have reshaped India's threat perceptions and security concerns. India now participates actively in the Quad, the Malabar naval exercises and strategic dialogues with the U.S., Japan, and Australia focused on the Indo-Pacific (Pant & Rej, 2018).¹² India has taken a more proactive stance in its neighbourhood with infrastructure investments and conditioned diplomacy under the "Neighbourhood First" policy and an answer to Chinese encirclement. Its efforts to counter Chinese influence, particularly through initiatives like the

⁷ Mohan, C. R. (2022). India's new strategic choices. *Foreign Affairs*, 101(4), 88–97.

⁸ Thussu, D. K. (2018). *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹ Ganguly, S. (2015). *Indian Foreign Policy: Ambition and Transition*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Saran, S. (2017). *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century*. Juggernaut.

¹¹ Pant & Bommakanti, 2019, op.cit

¹² Pant & Rej, 2018, op.cit

Act East Policy and engagement in the Indian Ocean region, reflect a moral to practical evolution of Diplomacy.

Under current leadership, foreign policy along with diplomacy has become more personalized and nationalist. Initiatives like diasporic diplomacy and image-based projection represent newer ways of public diplomacy that diverge from the elitist, bureaucratic model of the past. This shift is evident from national security measures taken by India in recent times.

V. THE INDIA–U.S. PARTNERSHIP: A DEFINING REALIGNMENT

Among recent global alignments, India's partnership with the United States stands out as historic and strategic. Once marked by mistrust during the Cold War era, ties between the two countries have deepened significantly in the post-cold war period due to shared democratic values and economic interests. The American vision of a "*free and open Indo-Pacific*" goes well with India's goal of maintaining stability and resisting hegemonic dominance in Asia. For India, the Indo-Pacific strategy is not only a military alignment but a tactic of balance of power. *QUAD* with India, the United States, Japan and Australia stand for regional security while preserving the strategic autonomy of member states. Economic ties continue to strengthen, with the U.S. emerging as one of India's top trading partners with trade surplus and a critical source of investment and innovation.

India has carefully avoided becoming dependent on any one super power. This strategy provided India scope to maintain bilateral diplomatic relations with other major powers such as Russia, France and Japan, while simultaneously engaging multilateral diplomacy through the platforms such as BRICS, SCO and G20.

VI. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN INDIA'S GLOBAL ROLE

The evolution of India's foreign policy thus reflects both continuity in purpose and change in methods as per the suitability of time and circumstances. The core aspiration preserving sovereignty and promoting peace while ensuring development and security has endured the test of time. What has changed is the way India pursues its national interest corresponding to its national power. In contemporary times moral principles coexist with calculated pragmatism. Idealism shapes India's global image while realism drives its actions.

India's relation with the America therefore not to be viewed as a break from consistency but amalgamation of moral ideals with pragmatism to make it compatible with new realities. In a realist world defined by economic interdependence, due to dynamic power equations the cooperation between major democracies like India and the U.S. becomes pertinent for

international peace and stability. In contemporary times Indian foreign policy may be aptly described as multi-alignment rather than non-alignment as being a responsible member of international community essential to have an independent voice.

VII. THE STRATEGIC TILT TOWARD THE UNITED STATES

Throughout the Cold War U.S. bloc saw India with suspicion due to its stance for non-alignment, specifically due to its pro alignment /tilt toward the USSR. However, post-1991 economic reforms and shared democratic values created pathways for new beginning and both of them saw each other natural alliance partners. The Indo–U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2008 formalized the transformation into a strategic partnership that recognizes India as a responsible regional power. Both the nation views their relationship as an aid to counter the Chinese dominance in the region as well as at the global level. If we talk about our trade partnership with USA our trade has always been in surplus. For America, India is important to strike a balance in south Asia and to counter China and to promote regional balance.

Both nations emphasize democratic governance, rule of law and human rights. (Thussu, 2018).¹³ India's role in QUAD marks India's readiness to fight systemic challenges jointly with the U.S., Japan and Australia while maintaining independent foreign-policy choices (Pant & Rej, 2018).¹⁴

VIII. MAJOR CHALLENGES IN INDO–U.S. RELATIONS

Bilateral Relations: At present the bilateral relations are being strained due recent development of Trumps second region, specifically tariff and visa related issues. India's insistence on "Make in India" policies occasionally clashes with U.S. export control regimes, complicating technology transfer in sensitive sectors. Further, while both countries cooperate under the QUAD framework to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific, differences persist in dealing with key global players. The U.S. remains uneasy over India's deep ties with Russia, especially due to Ukraine war. Similarly, India has been cautious in aligning too closely with American objectives in East Asia, preferring to preserve its strategic autonomy and avoid appearing as part of an anti-China bloc. Besides, the leadership styles of both governments have introduced friction. The resurgence of nationalism under both Modi and Trump has led to what analysts describe as "mutual suspicion disguised as friendship".

U.S. policymakers have expressed concern over perceived democratic backsliding in India,

¹³ Thussu, D. K. (2018). *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*. Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁴ Pant, H. V., & Rej, A. (2018). The unending quest for strategic autonomy: India and the U.S. *The Washington Quarterly*, 41(3), 123–138.

while Indian officials have criticized U.S. interference in its domestic affairs.

Prospects and Opportunities for the Future: Despite current tensions, both nations remain deeply interdependent.

India's fast-growing market offers vast opportunities for U.S. exporters and investors. Further, the shared interest in maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific remains a strong unifying factor. Both nations are expected to deepen military and intelligence collaboration through QUAD etc. Besides, strong Indian diaspora in America remains a critical link in promoting mutual understanding and trust.¹⁵ Finally, both democracies cooperate in global institutions like the G20 and the UN. Their joint efforts in pandemic preparedness, cybersecurity, and development finance demonstrate their potential to co-lead reforms in global governance.¹⁶

IX. CONCLUSION AND RATIONALE BEHIND THE PARTNERSHIP

The India-U.S. partnership as a strategic necessity to balance against China's regional ambitions to become the regional giant if not the global superpower. Being the lone superpower USA wants to stabilize power distribution in Asia is being viewed as a realist theory stance. To achieve the stable power distribution in south Asia, USA's support enhances India's military capabilities and regional influence which ultimately results in ensuring equilibrium.

Besides, from a liberal perspective, collaboration and dialogue furthers global governance, enhances collective security and supports liberal economic interdependence, creating a convergence of interests aligned with democratic peace theory (Nayar & Paul, 2017). Shared democratic norms and identity provide a foundation deeper than material interests, sustaining long-term cooperation and projecting soft power in global diplomacy (Bajpai, 2022). The India-U.S. relationship, often called one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century, currently stands at a crossroads due to challenges of trade etc. India's foreign policy is a combination of continuity in theory and change discontinuity in practice as per suitability and requirement of time and circumstances. Both nations recognize their shared interest in maintaining a stable, multipolar world order and preventing China's regional dominance. Both of them needs each other. The relationship's durability lies in its ability to evolve from dependence to partnership.

¹⁵ Gaurav Yadav, *India-U.S. Relations - Significance & Challenges - Explained Pointwise*, FREE UPSC IAS PREPARATION SYLLABUS AND MATERIALS FOR ASPIRANTS (Sept. 2, 2025), <https://forumias.com/blog/india-u-s-relations-significance-challenges-explained-pointwise/>.

¹⁶ Prime Minister's Office, *Prime Minister Reaffirms the Strength of India-US Relations*, PIB (Oct. 9, 2025), <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2165135>.