

India-US Defense Relations: Convergences and Divergences

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Abstract

The United States has long described its partnership with India as a “defining partnership for the twenty-first century,” investing since 2005 in India’s defense capabilities, technology base, and military interoperability. This relationship reached a formal milestone with India’s designation as a “Major Defense Partner” in 2016. At the end of October 2025, both countries signed the next defense framework despite current turmoil in relations. This paper assesses why both countries were able to sign the agreement by theoretically highlighting the convergences and divergences in their relationship. It examines whether Washington and New Delhi possess the political will, mutual trust, common values, and institutional capacity to conclude and implement a new defense framework. Using a qualitative methodology and a neoclassical realist approach, the paper combines analysis of official policy documents, joint statements, speeches, and defense agreements with secondary sources such as think-tank reports and defense trade data. The findings suggest that while shared interests in balancing China sustain strategic convergence, persistent gaps in interoperability, India’s self-serving strategic autonomy doctrine, mistrust, and a lack of common values complicate Washington’s vision of India as a credible defense partner.

Key Words: India-US, Defense Relations, Framework, Strategic Autonomy, Interoperability, Defense Partnership

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Introduction

The US-India relationship was described as “defining partnership for the twenty first century”.¹ US perceived India as a “natural ally” with “shared values”. The US took great efforts beginning in 2005 to “help India to become a major regional power.”² For this purpose, the US worked to improve India’s arms capabilities, technology base and enable interoperability for military operations. India was also designated as a “Major Defense Partner” in 2016.³

In July 2025, high-level diplomatic engagement between the US and India occurred; these interactions focused on finalizing the “10-Year US-India Defense Framework”⁴ for deepening the major defense partnership. However, this momentum was soon overshadowed by tariff related tensions, when President Trump imposed 25% tariffs on Indian exports and hinted at “unspecified penalties” over India’s continued purchases of Russian oil.⁵ The underlying economic imbalance remains a sticking point because the US is India’s largest export market, receiving goods worth \$87 billion in 2024, while India imported only \$41 billion from the US, resulting in approximate \$46 billion trade deficit.⁶

Trump’s announcement of even higher tariffs would damage India’s export revenue further. In July 2025, the EU also imposed sanctions on Nayara, one of India’s two largest private oil refiners, which is majority-owned by Russian interests.⁷ As a result, the Modi government issued statement calling the targeting of India “unjustified and unreasonable” and vowed to take all

¹ “Statements by President Obama and Prime Minister Modi of the Republic of India,” *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*, January 25, 2015, archived, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/statements-president-obama-and-prime-minister-modi-republic-india>.

² US Department of State, “Background Briefing by Administration Officials on U.S.–South Asia Relations,” press briefing, March 25, 2005, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm>.

³ US Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with India,” Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 20, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india>.

⁴ US Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership (2025–2035)*, October 31, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Nov/13/2003820236/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-FRAMEWORK-FOR-THE-US-INDIA-MAJOR-DEFENSE-PARTNERSHIP.PDF>

⁵ Megha Bahree, “US–India Relations at Their ‘Worst’ as Trump Slaps 50 Percent Tariff,” *Al Jazeera*, August 7, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/7/us-india-relations-at-their-worst-as-trump-slaps-50-percent-tariff>.

⁶ David Lawder and Manoj Kumar, “Trump’s Doubling of Tariffs Hits India, Damaging Ties,” *Reuters*, August 27, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/trumps-doubling-tariffs-hits-india-damaging-ties-2025-08-27/>.

⁷ Yashraj Sharma and Charu Sudan Kasturi, “India Accuses US, EU of Russia Trade Double Standards: Who Is Right?,” *Al Jazeera*, August 5, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/5/india-accuses-us-eu-of-russia-trade-double-standards-who-is-right>.

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necessary measures to safeguard its national interests and economic security.⁸ These actions cast a shadow over the strategic dialogue. However, at the end of October 2025, both countries signed the next defense agreement, which reflects that despite some apparent differences, the existence of systemic procedures is enabling defense cooperation. However, this calls for a pragmatic assessment of relations between both countries under Trump 2.0, especially as Washington's tariff regime is indiscriminate, working even against allies. Beyond tariffs, deeper challenges persist in the US-India relationship which include diverging values, persistent interoperability gaps, and India's rigid insistence on self-serving strategic autonomy. All of these issues undermine Washington's vision of India as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and India as a balancer against China.⁹

There is a wide academic literature that exists on the subject of India-US defence and strategic relations. Some scholars have written on convergences and divergences of defense relations of both countries.¹⁰ Others have analyzed the subject critically that how both countries have divergent interests, goals and values.¹¹ Key areas of friction between the two nations include a significant trust deficit, diverging expectations regarding India's role in containing China, and conflicting perspectives on the emerging multipolar order.¹²

The relationship is explored through the lens of theory of Neoclassical Realism. While hedging is frequently employed to explain the US-India defense and strategic partnership,¹³

⁸ "'Extremely Unfortunate': India Reacts Strongly to Donald Trump's 25% Additional Tariff for Buying Russian Oil; 'Will Take All Actions Necessary...'," *The Times of India*, August 6, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/extremely-unfortunate-india-reacts-strongly-to-donald-trumps-25-additional-tariff-for-russia-oil-buys-will-take-all-actions-necessary/articleshow/123145429.cms>.

⁹ "'Extremely Unfortunate': India Reacts Strongly to Donald Trump's 25% Additional Tariff for Buying Russian Oil; 'Will Take All Actions Necessary...'," *The Times of India*, August 6, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/extremely-unfortunate-india-reacts-strongly-to-donald-trumps-25-additional-tariff-for-russia-oil-buys-will-take-all-actions-necessary/articleshow/123145429.cms>.

¹⁰ Sameer Lalwani, "US-India Divergence and Convergence on Defense Operationalization Concepts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-india-divergence-and-convergence-defense-operationalization-concepts>.

¹¹ Kamran Bokhari and Daniel Markey, "Re-envisioning U.S.-India Relations," *New Lines Institute*, September 7, 2023, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/india/re-envisioning-u-s-india-relations/>.

¹² Ashley J. Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025), accessed August 13, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions>.

¹³ Muhammad Adnan Khan, "Strategic Hedging or Strategic Confusion? India's Rise as a Global Player," *The GSI Insight*, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://thegsinsight.com/strategic-hedging-or-strategic-confusion-indias-rise-as-a-global-player/>; Txell Reguant, "Can India's Strategic Autonomy Be Considered Hedging?," *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*, Universidad de Navarra, February 21, 2025, accessed August 15, 2025,

however, its core assumption is that political entities unable to effectively ensure their security vis-à-vis major powers will choose to rely on patronage from great powers,¹⁴ does not have validity in case of India. In this logic, hedging acts as an insurance policy against strategic uncertainty, allowing states to balance relations among competing powers to mitigate vulnerabilities. However, India's nuclear capabilities, conventional power, and independent strategic culture enable it to provide for its own security in a manner not typical of hedging states. New Delhi's engagement with Washington is not driven by existential dependence but by the desire to extract strategic, economic, and technological benefits, as well as to influence the regional balance, without diluting its strategic autonomy.

Contrastingly, Alliance Security Dilemma Theory by Glenn H Snyder¹⁵ is also insufficient in capturing this dynamic because both states are not allies yet as India has consistently rejected treaty-based defense commitments, as Jaishankar categorically denied being part of any military commitment because it is not suitable for India.¹⁶ To further substantiate the argument one also has to consider that both countries have 'Non-Aligned Movement' (NAM)¹⁷ because India has always considered itself to be part of the NAM now known as 'strategic autonomy'. The US also recognized India as a 'defense partner' not an ally. Thus, Neoclassical Realism offers a more nuanced and accurate explanation of India's strategic cooperation with the US by integrating the interplay between systemic pressures and domestic decision-making variables.

The Neoclassical Realist framework provides a more comprehensive lens for studying India's partnership with the US. It enables an exploration of systemic opportunities arising from

<https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/can-india-s-strategic-autonomy-be-considered-hedging->; M. Kara, "India's Hedging Strategy in Great Power Competition," *Politics & Foresight* (2025), accessed August 15, 2025, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pafo.12271>; Mark Leonard, James Crabtree, and Suhasini Haidar, "Hedging Diplomacy: New Delhi's Foreign Policy in Trump's World," European Council on Foreign Relations (podcast, September 26, 2025), accessed August 15, 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/podcasts/episode/hedging-diplomacy-new-delhis-foreign-policy-in-trumps-world/>.

¹⁴ F. Figiaconi, "Choosing Not to Choose: Hedging as a Category of Neutrality," *European Journal of International Security*, published online 2025, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10009>.

¹⁵ Glenn H. Snyder, *The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics*, *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461–495.

¹⁶ Ulupi Borah, "India's Strategic Considerations on NATO's Deepening Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS)*, September 10, 2024, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://cenjows.in/indias-strategic-considerations-on-natos-deepening-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

¹⁷ Shashi Tharoor, "The US and India's Non-Aligned Alliance," *Project Syndicate*, July 5, 2023, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/us-india-relations-remarkable-transformation-by-shashi-tharoor-2023-07/>.

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the US-China rivalry, as filtered through domestic perceptions, leadership priorities, and institutional capacities.

The objective of this research is a critical analysis of India-US defense relations systematically, especially in the light of the recent Next 10 Years Defense Framework both countries have signed while going through a tense political and economic rift. This paradoxical rift leads to the research question, which is ‘How the US and India were able to sign and sustain defense agreements despite the evident political strain in their bilateral relationship? This paper finds out that both countries have been able to sustain the relationship because in relationship, there are certain divergences at systematic and bureaucratic levels but there also exist certain commonalities.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and secondary data gathering approaches. It relies on official policy documents, joint statements, speeches, and defense agreements to examine evolving strategic dynamics, along with already published research.

Following this, the paper presents the theoretical framework, highlights current challenges in the relationship, and then examines areas of convergence and divergence. Finally, it provides the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism

To analyze US-India defense and strategic relations, the study applies Neoclassical Realism which argues that the internal political structures, elite perceptions, and strategic cultures shape the relationship, while states interact within the international system shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity. Neoclassical Realism is employed in International Relations (IR) not merely for its ability to explain diverse phenomena, but for its strength in integrating multiple levels of analysis and avoiding the reductionist dogmatism that constrains other realist theories.¹⁸ However, Neoclassical Realism works by analyzing foreign policy through integrating both the structure of international system and domestic factors and their complex interactions with each other.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi and Mojtaba Zare Ashkezari, “Neo-classical Realism in International Relations” (Asian Social Science 12, no. 6 [2016], accessed August 13, 2025), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303412155_Neoclassical_Realism_in_International_Relations.

¹⁹ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited*, *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2001): 128–161, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560543>.

Neoclassical Realism is an approach to foreign policy analysis that seeks to understand international politics by taking into account the nature of the international system, which includes the political environment within which states interact. Furthermore, Neoclassical Realists argue that states respond in large part to the constraints and opportunities of the international system when they conduct their foreign and security policies, but their responses are shaped by unit-level factors such as state-society relations, the nature of their domestic political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions.²⁰

Convergences and Divergences in US-India Defense Relations according to implementation of Neoclassical Realism in tabular form.

| Drivers | Convergence | Divergence |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Systemic / International | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shared concerns over China's rise.</i> • <i>Defense industrial</i> interests in advanced tech (AI, space, cyber, maritime domain awareness). • <i>Desire to shape global norms</i> for critical technologies and supply chains. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Different threat geographies.</i> US is Western-Pacific focused, India prioritizes continental borders with China/Pakistan and IOR • <i>Multipolar worldview:</i> India embraces multi-alignment and BRICS/SCO, while the US prefers compliance. • <i>Trade and sanctions friction:</i> US tariffs, CAATSA sanctions risk over Russian arms deals. • <i>Alliance expectations:</i> US seeks NATO-like interoperability; India resists formal alliances. |

²⁰ Norrin M. Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, December 22, 2017, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-36>.

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| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Internal / Bureaucratic & Domestic | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Defense market incentives:</i> India needs high-end tech; US firms seek access to India's \$70B defense market.• <i>Political signaling:</i> Modi and successive US administrations use defense cooperation to showcase global leadership and domestic strength.• <i>Regular 2+2 Dialogue</i> and defense agreements (COMCASA, BECA, SOSA) institutionalize interaction. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Strategic Autonomy doctrine:</i> deeply rooted in India's foreign-policy culture.• <i>Procurement philosophy mismatch:</i> India's lowest-cost bids vs. US cost-plus and ITAR restrictions.• <i>Russian legacy systems:</i> complicate interoperability and trigger US sanctions concerns.• <i>Bureaucratic inertia:</i> Slow Indian defense acquisition, delays in offsets, and US export-control hurdles. |
|--|---|---|

Current Negotiations and Emerging Tensions

In July 2025, high-level diplomatic engagement between the US and India took place; focusing on finalizing the upcoming “10-Year US-India Framework” for deepening the major defense partnership. However, this momentum was soon overshadowed by tariff-related tensions, when President Trump imposed tariffs on Indian exports.²¹

In February 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met President Donald Trump, who framed defense cooperation with India in commercial terms, proposed major arms sales, including F-35 fighter jets, and pushed for increased US oil and gas exports to reduce the bilateral trade deficit. Both sides agreed to negotiate New Defense Framework, with military ties positioned less as strategic alignment and more as mutually beneficial economic and industrial partnerships.

²¹ Megha Bahree, “US–India Relations at Their ‘Worst’ as Trump Slaps 50 Percent Tariff,” *Al Jazeera*, August 7, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/7/us-india-relations-at-their-worst-as-trump-slaps-50-percent-tariff>.

As a result, engagements at the ministerial level on the issue of New Defense Framework took place in July.²² According to a communiqué issued by US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth following his meeting with Indian officials, the US expressed satisfaction with the successful integration of US defense systems into India's military inventory. These developments reflect a two-pronged US strategy; enhancing interoperability and positioning India as a key defense market.²³

Point of Convergence in Relations

A. Convergences at the Systemic Level

The strongest incentives for India-US defense cooperation arise from shared systemic pressures in the changing international order.

▪ *Rise of China and Situation in Asia-Pacific*

Both Washington and New Delhi view China's growing military and economic power as the central structural challenge in Asia.²⁴ The US "Indo-Pacific strategy," launched under the previous two administrations, is explicitly designed to counter rising Chinese influence through partnerships with like-minded states.²⁵ The term "*Indo-Pacific*", a relatively recent addition to strategic discourse, illustrates how Washington perceives the region: it draws an artificial boundary from the US West Coast to India's western shores, reflecting an American threat perception.²⁶ This shift from *Asia-Pacific* to *Indo-Pacific* underscores US-China competition and Washington's determination to reinforce its position by engaging India as a key partner.

Over the past decade, Beijing's naval presence in the South China Sea, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the Maritime Silk Road, have significantly increased China's

²² US Department of War, "Readout of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's Call with India's Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh," *War.gov*, July 2, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Tag/45781/india/>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Khadija Younus, "Strategic Convergence and Competition in the Indo-Pacific Region: Policy Options for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 24, no. 1 (2020): 81–96, <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.24.1.39>.

²⁵ Khadija Younus, "Strategic Convergence and Competition in the Indo-Pacific Region: Policy Options for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 24, no. 1 (2020): 81–96, <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.24.1.39>.

²⁶ Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, "US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pakistan's Foreign Policy: The Hedging Option," *Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2022): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.042.01.00153>.

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presence in the Indo-Pacific region,²⁷ which the US perceives as a threat to the regional balance of power. To maintain its traditional influence, Washington and its allies have pursued a range of countermeasures, including the *Indo-Pacific* strategy (though many Indian and Pacific Ocean littoral states reject this term), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS). Given that China's regional influence is primarily economic, the United States has also advanced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Beyond hard-core realist calculations, the contest also carries a normative dimension. The US and its allies frame their economic and strategic initiatives as rooted in democratic values, claiming superiority over China's governance model. India's status as the "world's largest democracy" was meant to provide credibility to this narrative and provides legitimacy for its participation in US-led initiatives. However, the Modi government's record on civil liberties complicates this claim. Democratic administrations in the US often highlighted the partnership as one between "the oldest democracy and the largest democracy," but New Delhi's hardline actions toward political opponents, religious minorities, social activists, Western media outlets such as the BBC, and even alleged overseas assassination plots have raised concerns.²⁸

During Prime Minister Modi's June 2023 visit, more than seventy US members of Congress wrote to President Biden urging him to press Modi on protecting human rights and democratic values.²⁹ Thus, democracy has functioned more as a rhetorical selling point than the true driver of bilateral ties; the relationship rests on apparent shared strategic interests rather than shared political or moral ideals. China's growing stakes in the IOR have caused deep concern in India, leading many to believe that Chinese presence in the IOR has shrunk New Delhi's traditional

²⁷ Khalid Manzoor Butt and Sadaf Jan Siddiqui, "Pakistan's Strategic Calculus: Nexus Between Security and Development," Issue Brief no. 2–2021, *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, August 2021, accessed August 19, 2025, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/5_SS_Khalid_Manzoor_Butt_and_Sadaf_Jan_Siddiqui_No-2_2021.pdf.

²⁸ K. Alan Kronstadt, *India: Religious Freedom Issues*, Congressional Research Service Report R45303, updated November 13, 2024, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45303>.

²⁹ Office of Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, "Jayapal, Van Hollen Lead Bicameral Letter with Over 70 Members Urging President Biden to Discuss Upholding Human Rights and Democratic Values During Upcoming Meeting with Indian PM Modi," press release, June 20, 2023, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://jayapal.house.gov/2023/06/20/jayapal-van-hollen-lead-bicameral-letter-with-over-70-members-urging-president-biden-to-discuss-upholding-human-rights-and-democratic-values-during-upcoming-meeting-with-indian-pm-modi/>.

sphere of influence and necessitating a counter-China strategy.³⁰ This common concern underpins cooperation on maritime domain awareness, joint naval exercises such as Malabar, and the US support for India's blue-water capabilities.³¹

▪ *US need for capable Regional Partners*

From Washington's perspective, the transition from unipolarity to a more contested global order demands greater burden-sharing. Due to its size, strategic location, and expanding economy, India is viewed as a pivotal regional actor capable of helping balance against China.³² This calculation has driven US efforts to deepen defense cooperation and accelerate India's military modernization through transfers of emerging technologies.³³ Foundational defense agreements, such as COMCASA and BECA, are central to this strategy, as they enable secure information-sharing and enhance interoperability. Since the early 2000s, the partnership has broadened beyond arms sales to encompass intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and the New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship.³⁴ Washington hoped that Beijing's growing presence along the Himalayan border or across the wider Indo-Pacific, would draw India firmly into the US strategic orbit. Yet New Delhi's behavior has been more cautious. Despite periodic clashes with China, India avoids overt alignment and has resisted participation in US-led coalition operations such as Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea.³⁵ Even the 2020 border crisis and ongoing naval build-up have not altered India's long-standing commitment to "strategic autonomy," underscoring the limits of US expectations".³⁶

³⁰ Abhijit Singh, "Sino-Indian Dynamics in Littoral Asia – The View from New Delhi," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 3 (2019): 199–213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1598083>.

³¹ Aman Thakker, "U.S.-India Maritime Security Cooperation," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-india-maritime-security-cooperation>.

³² S. Kumar, S. S. Verma, and S. H. Shah, "Indo-US Convergence of Agenda in the New Indo-Pacific Regional Security Architecture," *South Asia Research* 40, no. 2 (2020): 215–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728020915564>.

³³ Zafar Khan, "The Effects of US-China Competing Strategies in Asia-Pacific on India and Pakistan Rivalry in the South Asian Region," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (2021): 888–906, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211021155>.

³⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership*, October 31, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Nov/13/2003820236/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-FRAMEWORK-FOR-THE-US-INDIA-MAJOR-DEFENSE-PARTNERSHIP.PDF>.

³⁵ "India Not Joining Operation Prosperity Guardian in Red Sea as of Now," *The Week (India)*, December 26, 2023, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2023/12/26/india-not-joining-operation-prosperity-guardian-in-red-sea-as-of-now.htm>.

³⁶ Rushali Saha, "Making Sense of India's Muted Response to the Red Sea Crisis," *South Asian Voices*, January 29, 2024, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-in-r-indias-response-red-sea-crisis-01-29-2024/>.

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To improve regional cooperation and influence, the US and India are also investing in mini-lateral groupings. The QUAD is one such example that provided a platform for coordinating security, technology, and infrastructure initiatives without binding alliance commitments. The QUAD (the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia) has become a primary vehicle for coordinating strategic approaches and security perspectives in direct response to Chinese assertiveness.³⁷ Since 2017, the Quad has expanded into a leader-level summit. Its diverse focus on areas like cyber security, infrastructure, and climate change positions the group as a cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific regional architecture.³⁸

Although India has always rejected being part of any military alliance, to avail the benefits of US security threats vis-à-vis China, it has been involved in activities like “Malabar Exercises”, which is conducted by QUAD members to contain China in Asia-Pacific.³⁹ While the US anchors its Pacific strategy in formal alliances with Japan and South Korea, its approach in the IOR reflects a partnership centered on India to counter China’s growing maritime footprint. India’s perception of China as a strategic challenger, coupled with its self-ascribed role as the primary security provider in the IOR, has made it an attractive—yet inherently limited—partner for US regional objectives.

▪ *India’s Aspiration for Great-Power Status*

India seeks to position itself as an equal player between China and the United States, a goal that transcends the Modi government and reflects a long-standing national ambition.⁴⁰ This aspiration to become a global power is grounded in India’s consistent advocacy of a “multipolar world,” a vision sharply different from Washington’s preference for preserving US primacy.⁴¹ Whereas US

³⁷ Frederick Kliem, “Why Quasi-Alliances Will Persist in the Indo-Pacific? The Fall and Rise of the Quad,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2020): 271–304, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797020962620>.

³⁸ Garima Mohan and Kristi Govella, *The Future of the Quad and the Emerging Architecture in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 21, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4311301>.

³⁹ Dost Muhammad, “Growing Indian Interest in Malabar Naval Exercise,” *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, December 18, 2020, accessed August 19, 2025, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/IB_Dost_Muhammad_Dec_18_2020.pdf.

⁴⁰ Kamran Bokhari and Daniel Markey, “Re-envisioning U.S.-India Relations,” *New Lines Institute*, September 7, 2023, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/india/re-envisioning-u-s-india-relations/>.

⁴¹ Ashley J. Tellis, “India’s Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi’s Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions,” *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025), accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions>.

strategists often view multipolarity as a challenge to unipolar stability and a driver of great-power competition, New Delhi sees it as essential to preventing any single state from imposing its will on the international system. For New Delhi, closer defense ties with the United States reinforce its claim to major-power status. India perceives itself as a burgeoning great power, backed by significant economic and military capabilities. Its involvement in high-level strategic dialogues and its designation as a 'Major Defense Partner' further demonstrate that its influence now extends well beyond the region.

However, while India anticipates becoming a great power in terms of relative Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by midcentury, it does not expect to be a superpower.⁴² New Delhi aims to restrain not only China but also any other country that might aspire to become a global power, including the United States, thereby safeguarding its strategic autonomy and avoiding formal alliances. This approach is based on India's belief that a rising power should guard its freedom of action and avoid compromises that could lead to subordination within coalitions. However, this pursuit of multipolarity and strategic autonomy, coupled with its economic growth predominantly tied to domestic market expansion rather than international integration, may lead to less global influence than desired, even as it becomes a great power.⁴³

Ultimately, India's pursuit of great-power status is both ambitious and cautious; it seeks recognition and influence without the encumbrances of alliance politics. This dual posture, leveraging US partnership while resisting dependence, highlights the central tension in India's rise. Whether New Delhi can translate its economic and demographic strengths into sustained global clout will depend not only on continued growth and institutional reform at home, but also on its ability to navigate a competitive, multipolar order without sacrificing the strategic autonomy it prizes.

Together, these factors create a structural environment where strategic convergence is not optional but mutually advantageous, even though both sides guard their autonomy.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

B. Convergences at the Bureaucratic / Domestic Level

Beyond the international system, internal political and bureaucratic incentives sustain India-US defense cooperation.

▪ *Defense-market Incentives*

India is the world's largest arms importer and seeks high-end technologies to modernize its forces. India has undertaken a series of reforms and initiatives to promote defense production, exports, and collaboration with US companies. The Defense Production and Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020 sets a target of roughly USD 5 billion in annual defense exports by 2025 and encourages joint ventures with foreign firms, including US majors such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin.⁴⁴ Under the Strategic Partnership (SP) Model, selected Indian private companies collaborate with foreign Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) to produce multiple military platforms, serving as key partners in national defense. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) liberalization in 2020 raised the automatic route cap for FDI in defense from 49% to 74%, allowing deeper US participation in co-production and export projects.⁴⁵ Initiatives like Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat⁴⁶ promote indigenous manufacturing and joint production, supporting projects such as the co-production of GE F414 jet engines and the assembly of MH-60R helicopters for export.⁴⁷ Additionally, export approvals and fast-track procedures, including the creation of a Defence Export Promotion Cell, have streamlined licensing and clearances for jointly developed systems involving US technology transfers.⁴⁸ These measures demonstrate how India is simultaneously courting US technology and investment while positioning itself as a defense exporter. This transformation has enabled India to carve out a niche in the international arms

⁴⁴Asia Pacific Security Magazine, "MOD Releases Draft Defence Production and Export Promotion Policy 2020," *Asia Pacific Security Magazine*, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://www.asiapacificsecuritymagazine.com/mod-releases-draft-defence-production-and-export-promotion-policy-2020>.

⁴⁵ Ministry of Defence, "FDI in Defence Sector," *Press Information Bureau*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2004475>.

⁴⁶ Abhay Yadav, "India's Defence Industry: The Rise and the Transformation," March 24, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4771042>.

⁴⁷ YP Rajesh, "Why GE Plan to Make Fighter Jet Engines in India Is a Big Deal," *Reuters*, June 23, 2023, accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/why-ge-plan-make-fighter-jet-engines-india-is-big-deal-2023-06-22/>.

⁴⁸ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Marketing of Indigenously Developed Defence Equipment," press release, December 16, 2022, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1884096®=3&lang=2>.

market, with bilateral trade with the US growing significantly over the past two decades. Co-production projects like the GE F414 jet-engine agreement exemplify how commercial incentives on both sides reinforce the broader strategic partnership, aligning with India's goal of achieving substantial defense exports by 2025. Moreover, India has also recently eased its nuclear liability laws to cap accident-related penalties on equipment suppliers, three government sources said, in a move mainly to attract US firms that have been holding back due to the risk of unlimited exposure.⁴⁹

▪ *Political Signaling and Institutionalized Dialogue Mechanisms*

For successive US administrations, deepening ties with India demonstrates a commitment to the Indo-Pacific. For Prime Minister Modi, visible US engagement supports his domestic narrative of India as a rising global power. The strengthened Indo-US proximity has become a notable factor in the regional security architectures, highlighting a growing multidimensional convergence of interests. The US-India bilateral relationship has notably strengthened in areas of defense, counter-terrorism, cyber, and homeland security, especially after 2016. Regular forums such as the 2+2 Dialogue, the DTTI, and the Security of Supply Agreement provide predictable channels for policy coordination.⁵⁰ The US-India strategic partnership has seen dramatic development through strategic dialogues and reciprocal visits, reflecting deepening ties in both security and economic fields.⁵¹ These mechanisms reduce bureaucratic friction, enable long-term planning, and normalize cooperation across multiple agencies and services.

⁴⁹ Sarita Chaganti Singh, "India Plans to Ease Nuclear Liability Laws to Attract Foreign Firms, Sources Say," *Reuters*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-plans-ease-nuclear-liability-laws-attract-foreign-firms-sources-say-2025-04-18/>.

⁵⁰ Government of India, "Joint Statement on the Second India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32227/Joint+Statement+on+the+Second+IndiaUS+2432+Ministerial+Dialogue>.

⁵¹ Dinshaw Mistry, *Aligning Unevenly: India and the United States*, Policy Studies No. 74 (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2016), accessed August 20, 2025, <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/321f9572-1a40-4a92-bec6-6316eae56c1/content>.

Point of Divergence in Relations

▪ *Systemic Pressures: Divergent Strategic Priorities and Enduring Trust Deficit*

US and India remain divided in their geographical priorities and strategic outlooks. India's focus remains largely on its immediate subcontinental borders and the Western IOR, while the US strategic posture focuses broader Eurasian landmass and Asia-Pacific. These divergent threat perceptions have fueled mutual skepticism in both partners, Washington often perceives New Delhi's persistent strategic autonomy and selective cooperation as non-committal,⁵² whereas India views persistent US pressure as a form of strategic entrapment.⁵³ Tensions became evident in May 2023 when the US House Select Committee on Strategic Competition with China proposed including India in a NATO Plus arrangement to bolster Taiwan's deterrence.⁵⁴ Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar publicly dismissed the idea, stating that a military alliance is "not possible for India."⁵⁵

Adding to the complexity, Jaishankar's recent visit to China, first in five years, underscored India's intention to maintain stable bilateral ties with Beijing.⁵⁶ This approach directly contrasts with US expectations for India to play a more assertive role against China. The Biden administration, in particular, has questioned the political will of its partner to deter Chinese assertiveness in the Western Pacific.⁵⁷ While Washington looks to New Delhi as a key player in its "Indo-Pacific strategy", India remains hesitant to escalate tensions with China. These strategic

⁵² Daniel S. Markey, "India as It Is: Washington and New Delhi Share Interests, Not Values," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023), accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/markey-modi-biden-united-states>.

⁵³ Sameer Lalwani, "U.S.-India Divergence and Convergence on Defense Operationalization Concepts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-india-divergence-and-convergence-defense-operationalization-concepts>.

⁵⁴ "US Congressional Committee Recommends Strengthening NATO-Plus with India to Counter Chinese Communist Party's Strategic Competition," *Hindustan Times*, May 28, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/us-congressional-committee-recommends-strengthening-nato-plus-with-india-to-counter-chinese-communist-party-s-strategic-competition-101685210608532.html>.

⁵⁵ Fareha Naaz, "'India Capable of Countering Chinese Aggression', Refuses to Join NATO, Says S. Jaishankar," *LiveMint*, June 9, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india-capable-of-countering-chinese-aggression-refuses-to-join-nato-says-s-jaishankar-11686288765836.html>.

⁵⁶ Anadolu Agency, "Indian Foreign Minister Makes First Trip to China in 5 Years," *AA.com.tr*, July 14, 2025, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/indian-foreign-minister-makes-1st-trip-to-china-in-5-years/3630380>.

⁵⁷ Araudra Singh, "Hurdles and Opportunities for the India-U.S. Defense Partnership," *Stimson Center*, February 22, 2024, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/hurdles-and-opportunities-for-the-india-u-s-defense-partnership/>.

misalignments and unresolved trust issues could hinder the trajectory of US-India defense cooperation.

▪ ***Ties with Russia, China and Multipolar Worldview***

Despite its involvement in the Quad, India's commitment to a multipolar world is occasionally viewed with skepticism in the West. By actively participating in groups like BRICS and the SCO, New Delhi continues to engage with platforms explicitly designed to challenge Western hegemony. India is a strong supporter of multipolarity and sees it as a framework for opportunities and growth where not one state has ultimate power, this basic notion is against the US dominance and challenges unipolarity.

Moreover, whenever, it comes to Russia, India has not fulfilled the desires of US, such as when Russia invaded Ukraine, Washington hoped that India would distance itself from the Kremlin, and condemn Russian aggression.⁵⁸ But, India continued to maintain its strategic partnership with Russia, a geostrategic adversary of the US. On the economic side, India has benefited from Russian oil sales, which helped India meet its fast-growing energy needs. Since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, New Delhi has increasingly purchased discounted Russian oil in contravention of US-led sanctions; it is now Russia's number one export destination.⁵⁹ For such friendship Russian President Vladimir Putin has thanked India by calling India a "true friend."⁶⁰

Furthermore, India has also purchased Russian arms for decades, meaning that the majority of India's military hardware is of Soviet or Russian build.⁶¹ Thus far, Washington has looked the other way on enforcing the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which penalizes countries that purchase weapons from sanctioned Russian defense suppliers, with respect to New Delhi's purchase of Moscow's S-400 surface-to-air missile

⁵⁸ Krishna N. Das, "U.S. Hopes India Will Distance Itself from Russia After Ukraine Invasion," *Reuters*, March 3, 2022, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-hopes-india-will-distance-itself-russia-after-ukraine-invasion-2022-03-03/>.

⁵⁹ Clyde Russell, "Asia Crude Imports Surge as China, India Snap up Russian Oil," *Reuters*, March 28, 2024, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/asia-crude-imports-surge-china-india-snap-up-russian-oil-russell-2024-03-28/>.

⁶⁰ Mausam Jha, "'PM Modi Willing to Do His Utmost to Resolve Russia-Ukraine Issue by Peaceful Means,' Says Putin," *LiveMint*, December 28, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/eam-s-jaishankar-meeting-russian-president-vladimir-putin-pm-modi-ukraine-bilateral-india-russia-world-sergey-lavrov-11703726317637.html>.

⁶¹ Sushant Singh, "86 Per Cent of Indian Military Equipment of Russian Origin: Stimson Center Paper," *Indian Express*, July 22, 2020, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/86-per-cent-of-indian-military-equipment-of-russian-origin-stimson-center-paper-6517136/>.

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system.⁶² Heightening these issues are India's continued purchases of Russian-origin equipment, especially the S-400 air defense system.⁶³ But the issue is that not only are such platforms incompatible with US systems, but they also raise security concerns, particularly regarding potential data leaks that could compromise advanced US technologies. While there has been steady progress in training and command-level integration, India's equipment base remains largely Russian, where India has currently purchased 60 billion of Russian arms, which is 65 % of its total arms import.⁶⁴ President Trump hinted at a potential sale of the F-35 to India; however, the proposal failed to gain traction due to complex regulatory hurdles and strategic misalignments.

As highlighted by recent operational shortcomings during the India-Pakistan air battle, India's own systems lack cohesion, raising serious doubts about joint operational readiness in real-time crises.⁶⁵ The absence of a shared purpose or agreed-upon mission for interoperability further undermines its development. India's reluctance to participate in coalition operations such as the US-led Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea, reveals the enduring constraints to be engulfed in "US-Led Security Ecosystem" away from its position of autonomy.⁶⁶

▪ *Domestic Drivers: Divergent Bharat First, Hindu Nationalism, and Strategic Autonomy*

Under the Modi regime, India's foreign policy has evolved according to global power shifts, US-China rivalry, and the rise of nationalism, by retorting to Hindu nationalism and the "Bharat First" doctrine increasingly shaping its foreign and domestic policies. While India maintains its

⁶² Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, "S-400 CAATSA Sanctions Ball in US Court," *Observer Research Foundation*, November 18, 2021, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/s-400-caatsa-sanctions-ball-in-us-court/>.

⁶³ Erin Mello, "The Enduring Russian Impediment to U.S.-Indian Relations," *War on the Rocks*, February 13, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/02/the-enduring-russian-impediment-to-u-s-indian-relations/>.

⁶⁴ Daniel S. Markey and David Brostoff, "Friends with Limits: The Future of Russo-Indian Defense Ties," *War on the Rocks*, April 25, 2025, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/04/friends-with-limits-the-future-of-russo-indian-defense-ties/>.

⁶⁵ John A. Tirpak, "The Biggest News from India-Pakistan Air Battle: the Kill Chain," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/india-pakistan-air-battle-kill-chain/>.

⁶⁶ Rushali Saha, "Making Sense of India's Muted Response to the Red Sea Crisis," *South Asian Voices*, January 29, 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-in-r-indias-response-red-sea-crisis-01-29-2024>.

longstanding principle of strategic autonomy, it now follows a more pragmatic model of “issue-based engagement” and is prioritizing national interest over ideological alignment.⁶⁷

Since its independence in 1947, India has maintained a policy of nonalignment, eschewing formal alliances and resisting the pull of competing blocs. This posture of strategic autonomy fundamentally defined its diplomacy throughout the Cold War. Now, its foreign policy community stresses a commitment to multi-alignment, which consists of the diversification of partnerships, the refusal to join military alliances, the promotion of a multipolar world order in which no single superpower or pair of great powers is predominant, and a willingness to engage in issue-based cooperation with a wide variety of actors across geopolitical fault lines.⁶⁸

Despite being a major arms importer, India promotes defense indigenization, though progress is hampered by limited research and development, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and slow technological adaptation.⁶⁹ Its openness to foreign defense collaboration, particularly with the US, are based on techno-nationalistic sentiments and aimed at strengthening domestic capabilities rather than forging deep security partnerships. India’s techno-nationalistic policy on utilizing foreign tech to boost its own technical base has many downsides, such as, the public sector dominance has slowed down India’s technological progress and weakened its ability to benefit from foreign partnerships. Since the early 2010s, Western expectations of India as a liberal democratic and economic counterweight to China have largely gone unfulfilled, hampered by inconsistent economic progress, perceived democratic backsliding, and a persistent reluctance toward formal alliances.⁷⁰

In the past, even minor moves toward the US were seen in India as threats to sovereignty, while defense deals with countries like Russia or France were not questioned.⁷¹ After the Cold War, strategic autonomy expanded from a nuclear-focused idea to a broader foreign policy principle.

⁶⁷ Mehtap Kara, “India’s Hedging Strategy in Great Power Competition,” *Political Science Quarterly* 140, no. 1 (2025): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12271>.

⁶⁸ Happymon Jacob, “The Shocking Rift Between India and the United States,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 14, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/shocking-rift-between-india-and-united-states>.

⁶⁹ Mukesh Kumar, “India’s Defense Indigenization: An Emerging Arms Exporter?,” *Stimson Center*, June 26, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/indias-defense-indigenization-an-emerging-arms-exporter/>.

⁷⁰ Ashley J. Tellis, “India’s Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi’s Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions,” *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025), accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions>.

⁷¹ Jeff M. Smith, “Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-Indian Relations,” *War on the Rocks*, November 6, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/strategic-autonomy-and-u-s-indian-relations/>.

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First emphasized by leaders like President K.R. Narayanan and PM Manmohan Singh, it became practical way to keep India's global options open.⁷² Former NSA M.K. Narayanan even said the US was “exploiting” the special relationship to pull India into its anti-China strategy.⁷³ This skepticism has made many in the West label India as a “swing state,”⁷⁴ one that will not fully commit to any one camp, hence, its nickname as “the weakest link in the QUAD”⁷⁵.

Thus, this blend of Hindu nationalism, techno-nationalism, and strategic autonomy by Modi regime is likely - allow India to leverage great power competition without giving-up freedom of action, but it limits trust and depth in its partnerships. India will continue to play the role of a calculated “swing state” rather than the dependable strategic partner US wants it to be, thus, no matter how many defense partnerships both sides sign.

▪ *Technical and Structural Barriers at Domestic Levels in both countries*

The two countries operate under vastly different procurement philosophies: India prioritizes the 'lowest-cost, technically acceptable' (L1) approach, whereas the U.S. utilizes a 'best-value' model that justifies higher costs for superior performance and capability. India's lowest-cost and technically responsive bids are motivated by financial limitations, a high acquisition volume, and a wish to evade the political attention that comes with costly contracts.

According to this approach, pricing becomes the deciding factor once a system satisfies the technical requirements, frequently favoring platforms with adequate rather than excellent performance. For instance, even though these systems lagged behind Western alternatives in avionics, survivability, or network-centric capabilities, India's long-term reliance on Russian-origin platforms such as the MiG-21, MiG-29, and T-72 tanks were shaped by both strategic alignment and their relatively lower acquisition and lifecycle costs.⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “22 Is Less Than the Sum of Its Parts,” *The Hindu*, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/22-is-less-than-the-sum-of-its-parts/article24970664.ece>.

⁷⁴ Shayerah I. Akhtar, *India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R47597 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 16, 2023), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47597>.

⁷⁵ Dhruva Jaishankar, interview by Hwang Jae-ho, *The Korea Herald*, August 1, 2022, published by ORF America, <https://orfamerica.org/media/koreaheraldjaishankarinterview>.

⁷⁶ Ashley J. Tellis, *Troubles, They Come in Battalions: The Manifold Travails of the Indian Defense Establishment* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 38–45, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/03/14/troubles-they-come-in-battalions-pub-63001>.

This divergence leads to procedural misalignment and miscommunication, especially in arms trade negotiations. Despite high expectations, initiatives like the iCET and the DTTI have yet to bring transformative results. Moreover, due to strict regulatory frameworks like the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) and International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), critical technologies required for advanced platforms such as nuclear-powered submarines is restricted for India, which is sore a point for India.⁷⁷ On India's side, regulatory and structural inefficiencies persist despite revisions to the Defence Acquisition Procedure; US firms have also raised concerns over India's delays in granting offset credits, which expose them to penalties.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The persistence of US-Indian defense cooperation is neither coincidental nor solely leader-driven, especially in the face of obvious political, economic, and normative conflicts. Instead, a Neoclassical Realist perspective best explains it as the result of a relationship that is both domestically mediated and structurally conditioned. Because deep-seated systemic incentives and institutionalized mechanisms continue to outweigh episodic tensions, both states reached a new ten-year defense framework, despite tariff disputes under Trump 2.0, sanction pressures regarding Russia, and ongoing disagreements over strategic alignment. The growing rivalry between the US and China creates a strong structural drive for cooperation at the systemic level. India's worries about China's expanding maritime and continental influence and Washington's desire for competent regional allies create a convergence that is difficult for either side to ignore. This convergence is selective and constrained, though. India does not share Washington's inclination for alliance-based balancing, nor does it view China in a strictly zero-sum manner. Rather than seeing the growing multipolar system as a challenge needing strong alignment, India sees it as a chance to improve its own status and autonomy. This difference explains why India maintains interaction with China and upholds its long-standing friendship with Russia while simultaneously strengthening defense ties with the US. At the domestic and bureaucratic level, institutionalization has insulated the defense relationship from political shocks. Mechanisms such as the 2+2 Dialogue, foundational agreements (COMCASA, BECA, SOSA), defense-industrial cooperation, and

⁷⁷ Araudra Singh, "Hurdles and Opportunities for the India-U.S. Defense Partnership," *Stimson Center*, February 22, 2024, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/hurdles-and-opportunities-for-the-india-u-s-defense-partnership>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

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expanding military exercises have shifted the partnership away from ad hoc, leader-centric engagement toward routinized interaction.

The prevailing theoretical frameworks such as hedging or alliance security dilemma theory are insufficient. Neoclassical Realism better captures this dynamic by explaining how systemic pressures are filtered through domestic ideas—strategic autonomy, techno-nationalism, procurement preferences, and nationalist politics—to produce a calibrated, non-committal partnership. The US-India defense partnership is durable but inherently constrained. While structural interests and institutionalized cooperation offer resilience against shocks, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy and multipolarity prevents the relationship from evolving into a formal alliance. The paradox of deepening defense ties alongside persistent strategic divergence is a defining feature, not a temporary glitch. Looking ahead, India will likely continue to leverage technological benefits from the US while avoiding the role of a 'decisive balancer' against China to preserve its independence.

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