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India and Trump's US

New Security Calculus

One does not need to be a strategic studies expert to understand that India's relationship with the US has undergone major changes during the second Presidential term of Donald Trump. Recent developments, dominated by the unilateral imposition of massive US tariffs on Indian exports, higher than on any other country, and frequent rants against India by President Trump and leading US Administration figures, have shaken strategic and foreign policy experts, the media commentariat and public opinion in general. There are few if any angry responses from government sources, clearly lest a mercurial Trump gets further annoyed by perceived slights or whatever may have provoked the singling out of India on tariffs in the first place. Trade talks are ambling on without a conclusion in sight, themselves possibly yet another way of holding India's feet to the fire. President Trump's tirades against the H1B visa system, mostly enabling lakhs of Indian IT and other professionals to work in the US and repatriate significant amounts of money back to India, has been yet another salvo fired at India, encouraging growing and loud hate-filled rhetoric against Indians from Trump's MAGA base and other right-wing, anti-immigrant and racist sections. And of course there is the continuing he-said-she-said between Donald Trump and official spokespersons in India about the former's claim that he had intervened in, and brought about the quick end of the India-Pakistan skirmish during India's Operation Sindoor undertaken in retaliation for the terrorist attack in Pahalgam. Much has been made about this. The US President saw this as the unkindest cut of all, provoking him to lash out against India, whereas other countries played to Trump's conceit and self-proclaimed abilities to obtain the best deal, by announcing concessions, US investments and other measures designed to tickle his ego.[1]

On its part, India has clearly been blind-sided by the vituperative US positions and rhetoric, which appear to ignore or even go against several decades of a post-Cold War US perception of India as a strategic partner which India has worked hard to cultivate. Both the US and India have invested considerably in this relationship in the foreign policy and especially in the strategic or defence domains, first under the NDA government led by A.B.Vajpayee and subsequently under the UPA government led by Manmohan Singh. Currently this relationship appears to be in tatters. Yet India has responded to the new challenge like a deer in the headlights, mostly to contradict President Trump's rhetoric about bringing about an India-Pak cease-fire but otherwise with stunned silence, as if

1 "PM Modi is to blame for provoking President Trump": Karan Thapar interview with Sanjay Baru, The Wire, https://m.thewire.in/article/diplomacy/full-text-pm-modi-is-to-blame-for-provoking-tariffs-sanjaya-baru/amp?utm=relatedarticles

waiting for the storm to blow away. But it is not likely to, given Trump's elephant-like memory for nursing grievances and seeking retribution one way or another.

Whatever the motivations or reasoning of President Trump, notorious for his personalized, threats-based conduct of US foreign policy, for the current US stance towards India, this article argues that besides his personal foibles, the present downturn in US-India relations is reflective of deeper foreign policy and security trends going back several years. US security perceptions of its interests globally, and in the Asia-Pacific region in particular, as well as about India's place in this broader scenario, have been shifting significantly if gradually for some time. India's own security situation and external relations, as well as its defence capabilities, have also undergone major changes over the past decade or so. All these have added to a quiet reappraisal by both India and the US of their strategic ties.

The earlier anticipated financial bonanza expected by the US from an opening up of the Indian market with its much touted large middle-class, as well as large-scale US defence equipment acquisitions by India, have not transpired, again contributing to a lessening of India's strategic heft. On its part, India too is finding itself in a difficult position, however much it may covet a US security embrace. For one, India's acquisition of US military hardware has slowed to a trickle for a variety of reasons, such as a mismatch between what the Indian defence forces want and what is available from the US, problematic US export controls and regulations, and an increase in weightage being given by the armed forces to domestically designed and manufactured defence hardware. There are also rising concerns in India about costs versus benefits of a strategic embrace with the US, especially in the evolving security scenario around India.

EARLY POST-COLD WAR PHASE

Before diving into the current state of play, it would be useful to briefly recount the evolution of US-India security relations especially since the end of the Cold War which marked a period of significant transformation in global geo-politics and in how the US and India viewed each other.

Bush and Manmohan Singh: neo-con meets neo-lib

The collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated a major recalibration of security relationships in the world and in South Asia and its neighbourhood. For India, the disintegration of the USSR was of course traumatic and called for massive shifts in its foreign policy and security perspective.

Whereas India continued to rely heavily on the USSR's successor state Russia for strategic support and much of its defence equipment, a change in its security architecture and foreign policy was called for given Russia's weakened geo-political position. In what was rapidly becoming a unipolar world with the US as the predominant power, it was natural for India to seek better relations with the US.

For the US too, the new geopolitical scenario presented an opportunity to recalibrate its relationship with India, for long coloured by US misconceptions regarding India's policy of non-alignment which it viewed as an affront and a tacit alignment with the Soviet Union and hence against the US. The US under President Nixon and his all-powerful Foreign Secretary Henry Kissinger had opened up a relationship with China, at

that time irreconcilably opposed to the USSR, using Pakistan as a broker. US antipathy towards India had reached its peak during the India-Pakistan war in 1971 and what was to become Bangladesh, when the US notoriously even sent its Seventh Fleet towards the Bay of Bengal, prompting the Soviets to send a counter naval mission to the region as part of the Indo-Soviet Friendship that India under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had recently signed, the closest that India had come to a formal strategic tie-up.

India's first nuclear test in Pokhran in 1974, which took US intelligence and foreign policy establishments totally by surprise, brought yet another downturn in the US relationship with India. The US imposed a freeze on nuclear energy cooperation and a tacit denial of advanced technologies including in space, missiles and defence, and triggered major international non-proliferation efforts under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and later the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to freeze the status quo on nuclear weapons states, which India strongly opposed as discriminatory, and set the stage, along with several other geo-political factors, for a contentious relationship for many years to come. Meanwhile, efforts were on from both sides to improve relations, and these took on momentum in the post Cold War era.

India's openly declared Pokhran-II nuclear weapons test in 1998 set the cat among the pigeons and triggered massive sanctions by the US and some of its allies, specifically including advanced and "dual-use" technologies impacting India's space, missile and defence industries and many scientific and research institutions. The US responded particularly sharply given what it felt was the considerable investment it had made in improving US-India relations, now made easier without the shadow of the Soviet Union, and enabling the US to better befriend a large democracy likely to be a major power some day. In turn India's ruling elites were keen to repair relations with the US which they had long desired, while at the same time wanting to claim what they perceived as India's rightful place in world affairs, including in the strategic sphere.

Even during this period of turbulent US-India relations, indeed even a few days or weeks after Pokhran-II and US sanctions, moves were already underway by both India and the US to somehow bridge the divide and realize what the ruling establishments on both sides desired, namely a breakthrough towards what could be a transformational relationship between the US and India.[2] It is noteworthy that such thinking had broad bipartisan support in both the US among Democrats and Republicans and in India between the BJP and the Congress and the respective governments they respectively led.

These moves culminated in the rapid signing of several landmark agreements between the US and India such as the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership in January 2004, the US-India Defence Framework in June 2005, and the US-India Joint Statement by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and US President George W. Bush in July 2005,[3] recognizing India's de facto status as a responsible nuclear weapons state while India agreed to IAEA safeguards against nuclear proliferation. This was followed by several important bilateral agreements including especially the famous Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement or 123 Agreement on nuclear energy, supply of nuclear materials for civilian

2 US-India strategic Partnership, Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, 5 August, 2005, https://apjjf.org/lora-saalman/1968/article

3 See text at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6772/Joint_Statement_IndiaUS

purposes and major US legislation making all this possible, overcoming earlier sanctions and prohibitions.

These Agreements not only broke the ice between the US and India, notably by bringing India in from the Cold War technology denial and global strategic "outcast" from the non-proliferation regime, and opening the doors for India to obtain defence, space and other advanced technologies from the US. For the US, it opened up the possibility of a strategic, defence and foreign policy partnership with India, a major South Asian and potential regional power long outside the US fold, in what was seen as a big win-win for both.

The newly liberalized Indian economy was booming, sending out positive messages of a new engine for global economic growth, and providing a seemingly gleaming democratic model to the world. Over the next decade or so, India leveraged the new US-India relationship for a seat at the international high table, with the US bringing India into a new G8+5, then a Major Economies Forum, then a G20 of developed and leading developing countries. For the US, these steps minted a brand new strategic ally and, importantly, opened up a new, potentially huge market for defence equipment, from which it had till now been shut out during the cold war decades. Those were heady years for ruling establishments and elites in both countries.

TRUMP 2 AND INDIA

There can be no disagreement that the second term of US President Donald Trump has disrupted international relations, or as some would say turned it upside down.

President Trump's second term has been characterized by heightened aggressive rhetoric, behavior and demands from other countries including even the closest US close allies.[4]

Despite campaign-trail diatribes against previous Democratic and Republican administrations for their interventionist policies in different parts of the world, Trump in his second term also took military action against Iran's nuclear facilities, as well as against Houthi forces in Yemen and supposed Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria. The US also took supposedly counter-terrorism military actions on targets in Nigeria, Iraq and Somalia. The most brazen of these was against Venezuela, which began with the attacks on supposed drug-smuggling boats near that country's coast and culminated in the audacious kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife.The strategy of foreign policy by threat was seen in Trump's social media declaration soon after his inauguration that the US would forcibly take over the Panama Canal and relented after Panama quietly made a deal to pay the US higher fees and other costs. Trump also threatened military action against Colombia, Cuba and Mexico.[5] He made repeated demands that Canada become the USA's 51st state to avoid steep tariff that the US would impose, especially on steel, aluminium and lumber, to redress a huge trade deficit with its northern neighbor, and taunted then Canadian PM Justin Trudeau by calling him

4 Time, https://time.com/collections/davos-2026/7345543/trump-foreign-policy-second-term/ Jan 16, 2026

5 "What would Trump's threats against Colombia, Cuba and Mexico achieve?," Chatham House, 13 Jan 2026, in https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/01/what-would-trumps-threatened-strikes-colombia-mexico-or-cuba-achieve

“Governor Trudeau!” He stridently demanded, and obtained, an increase in defence spending to 5% of GDP by European NATO countries. President Trump has demanded that Greenland be handed over or sold to the US, and even threatened to take it by force if necessary, because the US needed it for “national security” and lest China or Russia take it over first! In latest developments, Trump imposed a 10% additional tariff on 8 major European NATO allies including the UK for opposing a US take-over of Greenland, which could rise to 25% till that goal is achieved!

Trump imposed “reciprocal” tariffs on almost all countries, including close allies UK and the EU, who he accused of taking advantage of a friendly US by maintaining large trade surpluses, and punitive tariffs on a select few such as China, Brazil and India. In the typical style the world is now familiar with, Trump started with high tariffs, forced other countries to come to the negotiation table pleading for relief and offering all manner of concessions on trade and offers to buy more US products as European countries did, or commitments to make investments in the US especially in the manufacturing sector so as to create US jobs as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan did, and so on.

China was the one country that faced Trump down. Trump had threatened to block sale to China of advanced NVidia chips used for creating and training AI models, but China countered with a block on sale to the US of strategic materials and magnets, in which China controls over 80 percent of global supply, and which are used in a wide range of electric vehicles, wind turbines, automobiles, electrical and electronic goods and so on. Trump was forced to back down, exposing both USA’s vulnerability and highlighting China’s techno-economic clout.

US-India ties: beyond whimsical

Unfortunately, India had no such leverage and made no similar offer that might please or mollify Trump, nor did it retaliate or protest against Trump’s arbitrary actions. PM Modi was among the first few world leaders to visit the White House after President Trump’s inauguration, but could not build on this beginning. Trade talks between the US and India have also proceeded at snail’s pace. India’s outright rejection of Trump’s repeated claim that he secured an end to the armed clashes between India and Pakistan during India’s Operation Sindoor would not have helped either. Meanwhile, Trump hit India where it hurts by imposing restrictions on H1B and student visas. The US has also been witnessing a rising tide of anti-India rhetoric and hate speech from MAGA supporters and other right-wing forces. India has been compelled to simply swallow these bitter pills and wait out the storm. The question is, why was India singled out, and what does that say about India’s place in US foreign policy and strategic domains?

The principal reason cited by Trump himself and his aides was that the tariffs were meant to dissuade India from buying oil from Russia and thus aiding Russia’s war machine deployed against Ukraine. The government of India protested that other countries too, notably China, were also buying Russian oil and that the US itself and its European allies were buying other Russian products, but to no avail. Trump had also been raving for long about India’s trade surplus with the US, and India’s high tariff barriers, characterizing India as a “tariff king.”

Many commentators have pointed to the personalized conduct of foreign policy by President Trump, and how many world leaders had recognized this early and had approached Trump with flattery, expensive gifts, praise for his leadership, and even

"nominations" for the Nobel Peace Prize (as done by Israel's Netanyahu, Pakistan's Field Marshal Asim Munir and others, even though the Nobel Committee does not have a nomination process) that Trump coveted so much. Commentators even questioned Prime Minister Modi's rejection of Trump's repeated claim on the India-Pak ceasefire, and opined that PM Modi could well have found a way to thank President Trump for his role.[6]

However, it would be a mistake to ascribe all this exclusively to personal foibles and idiosyncrasies of President Trump. The plain fact is that, in Trump's language, India has no cards and the US does not really perceive any great gains from a strategic partnership with India, cruelly exposing where India stands in US geo-political thinking. A brief examination of the broader US strategic view under Trump-2 would throw better light on this.

US SECURITY STRATEGY UNDER TRUMP 2

In the midst of this tailspin in US-India relations, three developments on the strategic front deserve a close look.

On 31 October 2025, on the sidelines of the 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus in Kuala Lumpur, US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh signed a 10-year extension of the Framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership, earlier for two periods from 2005 to 2025, now to cover 2025-35. For reasons unknown, no text seems to have been released by either side till date, even though it is described by the US as the "most ambitious and wide-ranging document yet… [reflecting] the two countries' strategic convergence."[7]

On 18 December 2025, the US Congress also passed its annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), a crucial legislative provision that sets spending under the US Department of Defense (now Department of War), US nuclear programmes and other defence programmes, and also sets defence priorities and strategy.

The NDAA is a highly detailed document running into thousands of pages on various approved defence expenditures and budgets. This writer was unable to study this document line by line but, going by various sources, it is believed to contain broad enabling provisions for budgetary allocations for expenses related to military activities in the Indo-Pacific region, defined as important for US strategic interests, for activities including military exercises of the Quadrilateral coalition of the US, Japan, Australia and India as a "partner nation," and for integrating the defence-industrial bases of the Quad member countries.[8,9] However, the NDAA is mainly an enabling document to smoothen and provide advance justification for subsequent departmental financial allocations,

6 "PM Modi is to blame for provoking President Trump:" Karan Thapar interview with Sanjay Baru, The Wire.

7 Factsheet: https://media.defense.gov/2025/Nov/13/2003820236/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-FRAMEWORK-FOR-THE-US-INDIA-MAJOR-DEFENSE-PARTNERSHIP.PDF

8 "US President signs NDAA 2026, stresses deeper US engagement with India and Quad,"at https://www.newsonair.gov.in/us-president-signs-ndaa-2026-stresses-deeper-us-engagement-with-india-and-quad/

9 Gemini AI Summary

rather than providing specific amounts of money, so further detailed examination is neither possible here nor would serve much purpose.

In November 2025, the US released its National Security Strategy (NSS) Document,[10] formally laying out the strategic policy of the second Trump administration. This very revealing document is definitely germane to discussions here and calls for close examination.

The NSS is noteworthy for its almost personalized Trumpian view of the world, sprinkled with mentions of Trump by name. It is remarkably devoid of idealistic statements about spreading democratic values, or defending human rights — these words and phrases are completely missing from the NSS — which used to be the underpinnings of the worldview enunciated by previous administrations, Democrat or Republican, over several decades. Indeed, it also departs from the strategic perspective enunciated and practiced in the first Trump administration. Instead, it sees the world and US strategic interests through the "America First" prism, with economic interests centred on domestic industry and jobs, termed as re-industrialization or on-shoring, in prime place in tandem with military power to protect and expand the former. It describes its basic principles not as grounded in traditional political ideology but in pragmatism and "flexible realism," and puts forward President Trump's "unconventional diplomacy, America's military might, and economic leverage" as a model.

The NSS sees allies as those whose economic interests are linked those of the US and for whom, therefore, greater investment in their own defence, enabled by ties to the US, advances the allies' own self-interest. The NSS is sharply critical of European allies, and calls for "restoring Europe's civilizational self-confidence and Western identity" for "preserving the freedom and security of Europe." "Core rights [and] liberties" are viewed very differently compared to previous US administrations, as is clear from the assertion that the US "will oppose elite-driven anti-democratic restrictions on core liberties in Europe, the Anglosphere and other democracies especially among our allies."

It may come as a surprise that the US Security Strategy under Trump-2 is sharply critical of earlier perspectives of "permanent global domination" which it decries as unrealistic and responsible for over-extension of US military and diplomatic efforts, especially into regions and conflicts far removed from US "core interests." At the same time, it does not advocate isolationism, but muscular intervention to defend and extend "core interests" in priority geographies but with what the NSS terms as "pre-disposition to non-interventionism," a view which it ascribes to the US founding fathers. Similarly, it pours scorn on decades of US championing of "free-trade" and globalism which it faults for the loss of US industries and jobs through off-shoring and outsourcing, loss of US sovereignty to multi-lateral and international entities, and for the rise of China to a "near-peer." Instead it advocates bilateral partnerships leveraging US economic, industrial and military strengths, focusing on building and leading a "burden-sharing network with financial incentives enabling allies to take greater responsibility for their own defence."

It would be a mistake to believe that the US is diluting its imperialist hegemony. The Trumpian vision continues to be imperialist, but emphasizes US exceptionalism with a unique place in the world, isolationalism not in the sense of cutting itself off from the rest

10 "National Security Strategy 2026," at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf

of the world but viewing itself as a lone great power ready to go solo and take on even its allies, with a pragmatic stance towards its big-power rivals whereby confrontation is avoided for now to the extent possible until overwhelming supremacy is established down the road.

US Pivot to the Western Hemisphere

In this view of the world, the new strategy document puts forward the thesis that the core interests of the US lie in its backyard, namely the Western Hemisphere, and calls for "readjust[ing] strategic/military forces away from less important theatres," with emphasis on allies and partners in Europe and Asia strengthening their own capabilities and taking greater responsibility for their own and the region's defence. The NSS specifically harks back to the Monroe Doctrine enunciated by US President James Monroe in 1823 by which the US asserted its exclusive sphere of influence in the Americas, telling European colonial powers to cease any colonizing activities in the region while the US would, in turn, not interfere in Europe.

For the contemporary period in the 21st century, the strategy document adds a "Trump corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, which Trump himself has dubbed the "Donroe Doctrine," with special features, namely "to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, and to protect our homeland and our access to key geographies throughout the region… [and] deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere."

The NSS expounds that it had been a bad strategic mistake to have allowed external powers, meaning China, to gain access to the region, develop infrastructure and cement linkages with different countries so as to develop roots, set up supply chains for critical materials and access strategic locations, all of which will henceforth be denied and reversed. It further elaborates that these inroads may not signify ideological affinities, but could possibly have arisen from investments at good terms, price and other incentives which can be replaced. The NSS thus provides a contemporary neo-colonial framework of denial of access to rival powers (read China), establishment of US supply chains, control over strategic locations and deepening linkages of US companies with the aim of securing "sole source contracts." Local economic growth in the region would be promoted, enabling bigger markets for US goods, all this being guaranteed by the predominant US military might.

This perspective on China, and the predominantly economic view of geo-politics backed by military muscle, has salience with respect to Asia and India in particular.

India & the Indo-Pacific

The US view of Asia and India as enunciated in the NSS document follow the thinking discussed above.

China is viewed predominantly as an economic, including technological, rival and threat, rather than as an ideological foe[11] as was the case in earlier Democratic or Republican strategic doctrines, including in Trump's first term, when China's role in Asia was viewed in strategic terms albeit manifested in economic activities. The Obama

11 See Time, op.cit.

administration had initiated a “pivot to Asia” in recognition of the growing economic and trade importance of the Asian region, the need to counter efforts by China to assert itself economically as well as militarily and shift the region away from the US towards Chinese interests. The pivot sought to take advantage of what was then perceived as the dwindling threats in Afghanistan and West Asia, facilitating a transfer of financial and military resources from those theatres to Asia. This soon led to a greater strategic focus on Asia and the Pacific, as encapsulated in the renaming of the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command, bringing with it a new emphasis on India. This period saw active US military engagement off Taiwan and Japan, in the South China Sea, and in South East Asia, as well as increased economic involvement with ASEAN and other regional actors, for example in the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership.

This vision seems to have receded in the second Trump administration’s security strategy, which makes a trenchant critique of four decades of US foreign and strategic policies in the region.

The term Indo-Pacific itself does not occur often in the NSS, with “Asia” being often preferred instead. Military aspects are considerably muted, with an emphasis on a goal to “win the economic future, avoid military confrontation.” In the long term, the NSS argues, “maintaining American economic and technological preeminence is the surest way to deter and prevent a large-scale military conflict. A favorable conventional military balance remains an essential component of strategic competition.”

In strategic terms, the NSS views the region as comprising the “first” and “second island chains,” the former being Japan, the Koreas, the Philippines etc while the latter embraces Guam, Indonesia, Micronesia and the Pacific islands further east, while Taiwan, besides being a dominant player in semi-conductors, “provides direct access to the Second Island Chain and splits Northeast and Southeast Asia into two distinct theaters.” Taiwan is thus viewed as geographically and economically crucial for US interests since “one third of global shipping passes annually through the South China Sea — [so] deterring a conflict over Taiwan, ideally by preserving military overmatch.” Yet, the NSS appears to not be as assertive as earlier to defend Taiwan from military attack by China, instead advancing a milder posture that the “United States *does not support* any unilateral change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait (emphasis added),” which is actually quite different from what the NSS says is the “long-term declaratory policy on Taiwan.”

The strategy document reiterates Trump’s familiar burden-sharing approach as regards any military threats in the region from China, similar to the position adopted by the US in Europe where, under the Trump Presidency, NATO Article 5 commitments to defend any NATO country from attacks have been underplayed amidst strident US calls to European allies to raise their defence expenditure and take greater responsibility for their own defence. In Asia, the US says it “will build a military capable of denying aggression anywhere in the First Island Chain… but allies must invest in capabilities aimed at deterring aggression… while reinforcing U.S. and allies’ capacity to deny any attempt to seize Taiwan or achieve a balance of forces so unfavorable… as to make defending that island impossible.”

It is interesting that, whereas Trump’s domestic policies closely follow the perspective and policy prescriptions advocated in the infamous “Project 25” prepared

under the aegis of the right-wing Heritage Foundation,[12] there is divergence with respect to China. Project 25 has a short, pithy position in which China is the clear and main enemy that must be defeated, drawing a parallel to then US President Ronald Reagan's attitude and actions with respect to the Soviet Union. In contrast, the NSS and Trump take a more realist stance of containment rather than confrontation, although this may not always hold.

India is viewed in this rather limited Asia-Pacific context and, as such, figures only marginally in the NSS strategy document compared to earlier US administrations when considerable attention was paid to roping India into a more extensive and assertive alliance. The focus now is on the "security challenge [of] the potential for any competitor to control the South China Sea… [and allow] a potentially hostile power to impose a toll system over one of the world's most vital lanes of commerce or—worse—to close and reopen it at will." This would call for "strong cooperation with every nation that stands to suffer, from India to Japan and beyond." Besides this, India is mentioned just three other times, sometimes only parenthetically, in a much broader context of assisting the US advance its interests.

US-India Defence Partnership

When the US-India Defence Framework Agreement was launched in the mid-2000s, it was projected as a transformational effort by the US to boost India's defence and advanced technology capabilities and its role as a major power. However, as critics in India especially on the Left pointed out, the defence partnership also ensnared India into a strategic embrace with US imperialism with attendant dangers. No military ally of the US had managed to retain substantial strategic autonomy, with NATO member France being a possible if tenuous exception. Every step India took in deepening defence ties, or buying military hardware, required India to accept some or other US condition.

The more sophisticated the hardware and technology involved, the more strict the conditions became. All major military equipment sales, especially those falling under government-to-government sales, have to be approved by the US Congress, most often with various conditions built-in. Where high-tech equipment are sold, involving sophisticated technology, communications etc, these are usually supplied only to formal US allies, since promotion of inter-operability is one of the goals, as mandated under the Defence Framework Agreement. US Sales of such equipment to India required designation of India as a "major defence partner" in 2016. The Defence Framework also involves collaboration in sophisticated defence technologies, technology transfer, co-development and co-production, all of which involve sensitive and protected know-how.

Therefore India was required to sign on to 4 major so-called Foundational Agreements namely General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2002, laying the groundwork for protecting shared sensitive military information; Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, allowing reciprocal access to military facilities for refueling, repairs, and supplies, improving joint operations; Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, facilitating secure communications and access to advanced US communication systems for defense platforms, and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in 2020, enabling

12 See https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf

exchange of geospatial intelligence, crucial for accurate targeting and navigation. Each of these is mandatory for India to acquire increasingly sophisticated military equipment, and also makes India dependent on US communications, encrypted signals, proprietary avionics, electronics and controls. India struggled hard to make each of these Agreements India-specific so as to make it clear that India was not just another ally signing on the dotted line, but an autonomous entity trying to reduce dependence and reporting requirements. All this have made each succeeding equipment acquisition increasingly time-consuming, and calling for detailed and arduous negotiations.

Indian Defence Acquisitions from the US

Nevertheless, this phase saw India acquire many types of US military hardware which the Indian armed forces said they required and felt were the best in their class globally. In under two decades or so, the US went from zero defence sales to India to over $40 billion in sales by 2024. This is way far behind Russia, Israel and France, but considerably more than earlier, with potential for far higher sales.

The equipment India acquired from the US were not the bulk, bread-and-butter hardware used by a military in large numbers, but rather were niche equipment performing specialized functions. Initial acquisitions included the highly rated Lockheed Martin Hercules C-130J medium transport aircraft with capability to operate from relatively short and rough airfields as often found in forward bases in India. This aircraft type is the most widely used and longest-serving military transport aircraft used since the mid-1950s in various roles, more than 2,700 of which are in operation in around 70 countries. Recent reports suggest India may be acquiring 80 more Super Hercules with substantial domestic sub-assembly production in collaboration with Tata Advanced Systems. Other acquisitions included 12 Boeing P8I maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft. Additional purchases by India are currently stalled due to high prices quoted and on-going trade disputes with the US. Two relatively large-volume acquisition was that of BAe Systems' 145 M-777 howitzer light-weight artillery systems for use in cold mountain regions, a much awaited artillery modernization by India, 120 of which were assembled in India by Mahindra Defence, and 145,000 Sig Sauer automatic rifles. India also acquired several military helicopters to replace ageing Russian systems and modernize the Air Force and Army's rotary wing fleets, such as 28 Apache attack helicopters and 15 heavy-lift Chinooks, both from Boeing. India's purchase of US advanced helicopters continued with 24 MH-60R 'Romeo' multi-role anti-submarine helicopters for the Indian Navy, deliveries of which have almost been completed at the time of writing.[13]

Some acquisitions showed India how difficult the US could be as a defence supplier, imposing several conditions or having complex rules that specified which kinds of equipment could be sold to what category of allies or partners! India's decision to acquire 31 *armed* Sea Guardian/Predator medium-altitude drones, after prolonged negotiations with the US, was bogged down in back-and-forth discussions , due to the system falling under the US Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) which mandates

13 For detailed list of US equipment sold to India see https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12438#:~:text=*%2028%20AH%2D64%20Apache%20combat%20helicopters%20(25,radars.%20*%2015%20CH%2D47%20Chinook%20transport%20helicopters

that such systems be sold only to treaty partners, which India is not. The delay in delivery has given India an opportunity to currently do some re-thinking on the acquisition in light of the vulnerability of such large and relatively slow drones in contested airspace and theatres as seen from Yemen to Ukraine.

Apart from sales of military equipment, the US and India have also engaged in several joint exercises, both bilateral and multi-lateral. Arrangements in the Quad partnership involving the US, Australia, Japan and India also include periodic drills, especially by naval forces, underlining the primarily oceanic Indo-Pacific focus of the Quad. These exercises and capabilities also relate to disaster rescue and relief operations, and other humanitarian assistance in the region.

One of the largest and very important defence deals between the US and India involves supply by the US of GE F-404 aircraft engines for India's indigenous multi-role Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) 'Tejas.' Significance of the deal lies in the historical US denial of this engine to India when the US did not permit Sweden to sell its Viggen fighter jets powered by the same F-404 engines to India! So it was with considerable trepidation and after much deliberation that India decided to install this particular engine in the Tejas fighter Mk1 and Mk1A versions. Following the successful integration of this engine with the current versions, the aircraft designer DRDO is now developing the next upgraded version named Tejas Mk2 with the advanced and more powerful GE-414 engines also from General Electric Aerospace of the USA. Together, 212 GE-404 engines are being ordered for the LCA Mk1 and Mk1A, while roughly 200 GE-414 engines are envisaged for the LCA Mk2 and a few for the initial prototypes of the next generation, more powerful Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA).

The on-going delays in US/Boeing deliveries of even the initial lot of F-404 engines, in turn causing further delay completing deliveries of LCA Tejas fighters in a dangerously depleted IAF fleet strength, is being viewed in Indian military and defence bureaucracy with some anxiety. This and other problems in sealing defence acquisition deals with the US, as well as the history of US refusal in 1978 to permit sale to India of Sweden's Saab Viggen fighter powered by the US Pratt & Whitney JT8D engine, have revived memories in India of past unreliability of the US as a defence partner, including with other countries, such as when the US refused to deliver F-16s to Pakistan on grounds of nuclear proliferation concerns and insufficient action against terrorism, but retained the money paid for them!

Growing Limitations of US-India Defence Partnership

Notwithstanding all the above deals, the ship of the US-India defence partnership has run aground on several rocks which are not incidental nor can be fixed by managerial correctives, but are intrinsic to the relationship between the US and India, and their respective interests, and relative power status, with the US as the global imperialist superpower and India as a rising power with its own regional and global aspirations requiring strategic autonomy.

Prolonged negotiations have been required for the US and GE to agree that the GE-414 deal, in keeping with the current Indian emphasis on domestic manufacturing at least in the defence industry, would involve technology transfer of up to 80% of value, something that the US and its defence majors have historically not favoured. This was desired by India, which wanted to acquire advanced know-how in materials and

advanced manufacturing, control systems and other technologies in defence. However, when it came to selecting an engine for the indigenous 5th generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) the US and GE, and appears set to strike a deal with Safran of France for co-development of a more powerful, advanced engine most probably with full or substantial ownership of intellectual property, an unfamiliar arrangement for US manufacturers such as GE with which, therefore, such a deal was not possible.

As may be seen above, recent purchases by India have also included provisions for substantial production and/or assembly in India, sometimes along with integration into the global manufacturer's supply chain. After a long time, and after much persuasion by several actors in the geo-political and strategic sectors, it appears that the Indian armed forces have finally become convinced that the military should be largely equipped primarily or largely with indigenously designed and manufactured hardware so as to insure against dependence on other governments and external entities. So nowadays there is a marked preference for indigenous defence hardware, which has started to be reflected in declining share of imports in defence acquisitions in general, not just from the US, except for specific niche items.

Limitations to acquisitions of US military hardware by India, a very attractive part of the US-India defence partnership, have started becoming apparent.

On the US side, there was huge disappointment in the 2010s on India not prioritizing US hardware in big-ticket deals such as in India's 2007 tender for 126 Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA), termed the 'mother of all defence deals' in international arms circles, which was eventually won by French defence major Dassault's Rafale for 36 fighters. The US had put forward two candidates, namely the venerable and hugely popular Lockheed Martin F-16 fighter and the Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet. Despite some heavy lobbying efforts including at government-to-government levels, neither made it past the initial round of evaluation, largely perhaps on grounds of being 3-4 decades old platforms, albeit now updated, and doubts about domestic manufacture which was a condition in the tender. When a revised multi-role fighter aircraft (MRFA) tender was floated in 2018-19, US companies tried again, this time for the F21 (upgraded version of F16), F15 Eagle E/X and the F/A18 and, as expected, lost out again to the Rafale despite offering substantial domestic manufacture. The Rafale-M (for marine) also won the tender for a carrier-based fighter against the F/A-18.

In all these, British and European companies and government were much more amenable to technology transfer agreements and for full or partial domestic manufacture in India. Safran's offer for co-development of advanced fighter jet engines has also been matched by Rolls Royce (UK) for the AMCA platform.

However, this is apparently not the way the US does business, even with its closest allies. Its F-35 programme involves co-development and manufacture or assembly by its NATO partners and other allies, but significant proprietary technologies are still closely guarded by the US.

The Defence Framework Agreement, and several additional programmes under that broad umbrella, speaks impressively of co-development of defence systems and transfer of advanced technologies in many areas or products, acknowledging India's keen interest in moving beyond a buyer-seller relationship to one of genuine partnership.

However, all of many such efforts over almost two decades of attempts have come to nought.[14]

In 2012, the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTII) was launched in 2012, and included 4 technologies or systems which were already at advanced stage of development in the US and could be quickly moved up the development ladder to production through collaborative efforts by the US and India so as to produce results quickly and build confidence on both sides for future, more complex co-development projects. These included, for example, Mobile Electric Hybrid Power Systems (MEHPS) and roll-on/roll-off (RO-RO) intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) modules for India's then newly acquired Hercules C-130 J transporters. Nothing much happened and the projects were dropped by 2020. In 2016, the US proposed joint development of an Advanced Tactical Ground Combat Vehicle (ATGCV) and helicopters under a Future Vertical Lift (FVL) programme: both were later dropped due to slow progress and India deciding to focus on indigenous development of similar systems.

DTTI was expanded to other areas and ambitious programmes such as co-development of a 65,000 tonne aircraft carrier and a fighter jet engine also faded away.

Similarly, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) was launched in 2022 substituting the DTTI, to focus on 6 advanced areas in defence, spaces and telecom such as 6G networks, semi-conductors and AI but made little progress. Even a smaller project to jointly develop a CATOBAR (catapult assisted take-off barrier-arrested recovery) system for take-off and landing of fighter jets from flat-deck aircraft carriers which India badly wanted for its envisaged IAC-2 carrier came to nothing despite several working groups, technical groups and many meetings. It seemed that every meeting between the US and India would end with agreements on joint projects that never got anywhere. It became clear that the US was simply dangling carrots playing to India's ambitions and desires, but never intending to actually deliver, preferring a patron-client or seller-buyer relationship.

Partnership Losing Momentum

It appears that the US-India strategic partnership has run its course and will limp along tamely unless both sides take it upon themselves to recalibrate the relationship. But that seems like an increasingly difficult prospect, since the drift in US-India relations seems to cut across the partisan divide in the US.

The US under Trump-2 recently forged a coalition of countries called Pax Silica to collaborate on semi-conductors, AI and rare-earth minerals from mining to refining and products in an attempt to counter China's dominance on these vital sectors. Eight countries, namely the US, UK, the Netherlands, Israel, UAE, Japan, South Korea and Australia came together in the founding meeting in Washington DC on 12 December 2025. India was left out despite being part of the Quad and surely an important player by way of its technical capabilities, role in computer software and the semi-conductor chain. Belatedly, the new US Ambassador designate to India and President Trump's close friend Sergio Gor announced in Delhi on 12 January 2026 that soon India would be formally invited to join this group. However, this is not the first time this has happened, and it is

14 Rahul Bedi, "Another India-US Defence Agreement, Same Old Obstacles," The Wire, 4 Nov 2025, https://thewire.in/security/another-india-us-defence-agreement-same-old-obstacles

not just down to Trump and his foibles either. The US under President Joe Biden too invited India to join the US-led Minerals Security Partnership only in late 2023, a year after it was launched in June 2022![15]

One does not want to stray too far into the arena of geo-politics, but perhaps, for the US, India is not ally enough. India is a member of the Quad, but reluctant to adopt a confrontational attitude with regard to China, and not as a US military ally. As a power in this part of the world, India has not been able to control or even maintain close relations with its neighbours, with fraught relationships on all sides. The US may wonder if it needs to go out of its way to cultivate India as a major defence and strategic partner. On its part, in pursuit of a bigger place on the world stage, India had virtually put all its strategic eggs into the US basket, but now faces diminishing returns and may wonder if the cost to be paid is worth it, given the US insistence on maintaining an imperial-style leader-led relationship with a seller-buyer relationship in defence technologies. If India truly wants strategic autonomy, it cannot obtain it while holding on to US apron strings, but must carve out its own geo-political and strategic space.

15 https://www.deccanherald.com/india/us-to-invite-india-for-pax-silica-to-counter-chinas-rare-earth-mining-dominance-secure-ai-supply-chain-3859886