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India–USA Strategic Relations: Expanding Horizons of a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

India–USA strategic relations have evolved into a comprehensive global strategic partnership marked by expanding cooperation across political, security, economic, technological, and multilateral domains. This partnership reflects the growing convergence of interests between India and the United States in an increasingly complex and multipolar international system. Anchored in shared democratic values, respect for the rule of law, and commitment to a rules-based international order, bilateral ties have deepened significantly since the early twenty-first century. Defense and security cooperation constitute a central pillar of the relationship, reinforced through strategic dialogues, joint military exercises, and enhanced interoperability. Simultaneously, economic engagement has broadened to include critical and emerging technologies, digital governance, supply chain resilience, clean energy, and innovation-driven growth. Despite persistent differences on trade policies, climate responsibilities, and strategic autonomy, both countries have demonstrated an ability to manage disagreements through institutionalized mechanisms and sustained diplomatic engagement. At the regional and global levels, collaboration in the Indo-Pacific and multilateral forums underscores the partnership's wider strategic significance. India–USA strategic relations represent a pragmatic and forward-looking partnership with the potential to shape global governance, promote stability, and address transnational challenges, making it a defining relationship of contemporary international politics.

Keywords: India–USA relations; strategic partnership; Indo-Pacific; defense cooperation; global governance

Introduction

India–USA strategic relations have evolved into one of the most significant bilateral partnerships of the 21st century, shaped by converging national interests, shared democratic values, and changing global power dynamics. Once marked by ideological divergence during the Cold War—when India pursued non-alignment and the United States aligned closely with Pakistan—the relationship has undergone a profound transformation since the end of the Cold War, particularly after India's economic liberalization in the early 1990s. The post–Cold War international order, the rise of China as a strategic challenger, and the growing importance of the



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Indo-Pacific region have brought New Delhi and Washington closer in strategic outlook. At the core of India–USA relations lies a multifaceted partnership encompassing defense and security cooperation, economic and trade engagement, technological collaboration, and people-to-people ties. Defense cooperation has expanded significantly through landmark agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), COMCASA, and BECA, enabling greater military interoperability and intelligence sharing. Regular joint military exercises like Malabar further reflect deepening trust and operational synergy. Economically, the United States is one of India’s largest trading partners and investors, with cooperation extending into critical sectors such as digital technologies, clean energy, pharmaceuticals, and innovation ecosystems.

Historical Evolution of India–USA Relations

The historical evolution of India–USA relations reflects a complex journey from early goodwill and ideological divergence to strategic convergence and partnership. In the immediate post-independence period, India and the United States shared common democratic values, and the US extended economic assistance and developmental support to India under initiatives such as the Community Development Programme and food aid through PL-480. However, divergent strategic choices during the Cold War soon strained bilateral ties. India’s adoption of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its emphasis on strategic autonomy contrasted with the US policy of military alliances, particularly Washington’s close strategic and military relationship with Pakistan. Key events such as the 1962 Sino-Indian War briefly brought the two countries closer, with the US providing military assistance to India, but this convergence proved short-lived. Relations deteriorated again during the 1971 India–Pakistan War and the Bangladesh Liberation War, when US diplomatic and military support tilted toward Pakistan, generating long-lasting mistrust in New Delhi. The Cold War decades were further marked by differences over India’s nuclear policy, culminating in US opposition to India’s 1974 “peaceful nuclear explosion” and the subsequent imposition of technology denial regimes and sanctions. A major turning point emerged with the end of the Cold War and India’s economic liberalization in 1991, which opened new avenues for economic engagement and reduced ideological barriers. Although India’s 1998 nuclear tests initially led to US sanctions, sustained diplomatic engagement resulted in a gradual normalization of ties and recognition of India as a responsible nuclear power.

Early Post-Independence Phase

In the early post-independence phase, India–USA relations were shaped by mutual goodwill, shared democratic ideals, and development-oriented engagement, yet tempered by differing strategic expectations. After gaining independence in 1947, India emerged as the world’s largest democracy, which generated optimism in Washington about the prospects of a strong democratic partner in Asia. The United States extended considerable economic and technical assistance to India during the 1950s, supporting nation-building efforts through programs in agriculture,



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education, infrastructure, and public health. Initiatives such as food aid under the PL-480 programme and support for community development projects reflected US interest in stabilizing India's economy and preventing the spread of communism in South Asia. Indian leaders, particularly Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, valued engagement with the US but were cautious of formal alliances, emphasizing independent decision-making in foreign policy. India's leadership viewed development, anti-colonialism, and global peace as central priorities, while advocating a moral and principled approach to international relations. Although India refused to align militarily with the US-led bloc, it maintained cordial diplomatic relations and welcomed Western economic assistance. However, early signs of divergence also emerged, particularly over regional security issues such as Kashmir and Washington's growing military ties with Pakistan. The United States increasingly viewed Pakistan as a key strategic ally in its Cold War containment strategy, which caused concern in New Delhi about regional imbalance and security threats. Despite these differences, the early post-independence period was characterized more by cautious cooperation than confrontation.

Cold War Divergences

The Cold War period marked a phase of pronounced divergence and mistrust in India–USA relations, driven largely by conflicting strategic priorities and alliance systems. India's decision to pursue the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was rooted in its desire to preserve strategic autonomy, avoid entanglement in superpower rivalries, and focus on domestic development. In contrast, the United States viewed the international system through the lens of ideological bipolarity and sought to contain the spread of communism by forming military alliances. This fundamental difference in worldviews became a persistent source of tension. US military and economic support to Pakistan, particularly through alliances such as SEATO and CENTO, significantly strained relations with India, which perceived these moves as direct threats to its security. Although the 1962 Sino-Indian War temporarily brought the two countries closer—prompting US military assistance to India—the rapprochement was short-lived. Relations deteriorated again during the 1971 India–Pakistan War and the Bangladesh Liberation War, when US diplomatic support favored Pakistan, reinforcing Indian perceptions of American bias. Divergences were further intensified by disagreements over nuclear policy. India's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which it viewed as discriminatory, and its 1974 nuclear test led to technology denial regimes and sanctions imposed by the US. Ideological differences were compounded by India's close strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, particularly the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. Throughout the Cold War, bilateral engagement remained limited and transactional, marked by mutual suspicion rather than trust. This phase entrenched structural and psychological barriers in India–USA relations, the legacy of which influenced diplomatic perceptions even after the Cold War ended.



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Post-1991 Strategic Realignment

The post-1991 period represents a decisive strategic realignment in India–USA relations, driven by systemic changes in the international order and India’s internal economic transformation. The end of the Cold War removed the ideological constraints that had long shaped bilateral ties, while the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted India to diversify its strategic partnerships. India’s economic liberalization in 1991 opened its markets to foreign investment and trade, creating new opportunities for economic engagement with the United States. This shift transformed the relationship from aid-based interactions to one centered on trade, investment, technology, and innovation. Although India’s 1998 nuclear tests initially resulted in US sanctions, sustained diplomatic dialogue gradually rebuilt trust and led to a reassessment of India’s strategic importance. A major breakthrough came with the India–US Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2005, which recognized India as a responsible nuclear power and symbolized a departure from decades of nuclear estrangement. Strategic convergence deepened further due to shared concerns over terrorism, regional instability, and China’s growing assertiveness, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Defense cooperation expanded through regular joint military exercises, defense technology collaboration, and foundational agreements enhancing interoperability. The relationship also gained strength from robust people-to-people ties, especially the Indian diaspora in the United States, which played a vital role in economic, political, and cultural linkages. Despite occasional disagreements over trade, climate policy, and foreign relations, the post-1991 era marked a clear transition toward a comprehensive strategic partnership, redefining India–USA relations as a key pillar of regional and global stability.

Strategic Convergence in the Post–Cold War Era

The post–Cold War era has witnessed a marked strategic convergence between India and the United States, driven by evolving geopolitical realities, shared security concerns, and complementary national interests. With the collapse of the bipolar international system, ideological barriers that once constrained bilateral engagement diminished significantly, enabling both countries to reassess each other’s strategic value. India’s emergence as a major economic and military power, combined with its commitment to democratic governance and strategic autonomy, aligned well with the United States’ interest in cultivating reliable partners in a multipolar world. A central driver of convergence has been the rise of China and its increasingly assertive behavior in the Indo-Pacific region, which has prompted both New Delhi and Washington to support a balance-of-power framework that upholds regional stability, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based international order. This shared outlook has been institutionalized through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), involving India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, which emphasizes maritime security, resilient supply chains, and regional cooperation. Defense and security cooperation have become key pillars of strategic



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convergence, reflected in expanded joint military exercises, defense technology collaboration, and the signing of foundational agreements that enhance interoperability, intelligence sharing, and logistical support. Counter-terrorism cooperation has also intensified, with both countries recognizing terrorism as a major threat to regional and global security.

End of Bipolarity and New Opportunities

The end of bipolarity with the collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the international system and created new strategic opportunities for closer India–USA relations. During the Cold War, the rigid division of the world into opposing ideological blocs constrained bilateral engagement, as India’s policy of non-alignment and close ties with the Soviet Union conflicted with the United States’ alliance-based security framework. The dissolution of this bipolar order removed many of these structural and ideological barriers, allowing both countries to reassess their foreign policy priorities in a more fluid and multipolar global environment. For India, the end of the Cold War coincided with a period of profound domestic transformation marked by economic liberalization in 1991, which reduced state control, encouraged foreign investment, and integrated India more closely into the global economy. This shift opened significant avenues for economic and technological cooperation with the United States, moving the relationship beyond aid and political caution toward trade, investment, and innovation-led engagement. For the United States, the post-bipolar world required the identification of new strategic partners capable of contributing to regional stability and global governance. India’s growing economic potential, strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region, and expanding military capabilities made it an increasingly attractive partner. The absence of ideological confrontation enabled pragmatic cooperation in areas such as defense, counter-terrorism, science and technology, space research, and education. Bilateral institutional mechanisms, including strategic dialogues and sector-specific working groups, emerged to sustain long-term engagement. The new international environment also allowed both countries to collaborate in multilateral forums and regional initiatives, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where shared concerns about security, connectivity, and freedom of navigation gained prominence. Overall, the end of bipolarity transformed India–USA relations by replacing historical suspicion with opportunity-driven engagement, laying the structural foundation for strategic convergence in the post–Cold War era.

Shared Democratic Values and Interests

Shared democratic values and converging national interests have played a crucial role in strengthening strategic convergence between India and the United States in the post–Cold War era. As the world’s two largest democracies, both countries are rooted in constitutional governance, rule of law, political pluralism, and protection of civil liberties, providing a normative foundation for deeper cooperation. These shared values have fostered mutual trust and



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facilitated sustained engagement across political administrations, insulating the relationship from abrupt policy reversals. Beyond normative alignment, India and the United States increasingly recognize that their democratic systems and open societies face common challenges, including terrorism, cyber threats, disinformation, and the need to safeguard democratic institutions in an era of geopolitical competition. Strategically, both countries share an interest in maintaining a stable balance of power in Asia, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, where concerns over unilateralism, coercive diplomacy, and threats to freedom of navigation have intensified. This convergence has translated into coordinated efforts to support a rules-based international order, respect for international law, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Economic interests further reinforce democratic convergence, as both countries emphasize market-oriented growth, innovation, and private-sector-led development.

Defence Agreements and Military Exercises

Defence agreements and joint military exercises form the backbone of India–USA defence and security cooperation, reflecting growing strategic trust and institutionalized military engagement. Over the past two decades, both countries have signed a series of foundational defence agreements that enable deeper operational coordination and information sharing between their armed forces. These include the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which allows reciprocal access to military facilities for logistics support; the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), facilitating secure communications and interoperability; and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), enabling the sharing of geospatial and satellite data for enhanced situational awareness. Collectively, these agreements have transformed bilateral defence relations from limited interaction to sustained strategic cooperation. Joint military exercises further reinforce this partnership by enhancing interoperability, mutual understanding, and operational readiness. Exercises such as Malabar, Yudh Abhyas, Cope India, and Vajra Prahar cover naval, army, air force, and special forces cooperation, respectively. The Malabar naval exercise, in particular, has evolved into a high-profile multilateral drill involving key Indo-Pacific partners, underscoring India–USA alignment in maritime security. These exercises allow both militaries to share best practices, improve coordination in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, and high-end combat scenarios, while also building trust at multiple levels of command. Defence dialogues and institutional mechanisms, such as the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, provide strategic direction and policy coherence to military cooperation. While India continues to uphold strategic autonomy and avoids formal alliances, defence agreements and exercises with the United States signal a pragmatic and interest-based partnership. This growing defence engagement enhances India’s military preparedness, strengthens deterrence capabilities, and contributes to regional



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stability, while allowing the United States to work closely with a capable partner in maintaining security and balance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Arms Trade and Strategic Interoperability

Arms trade and strategic interoperability have emerged as key dimensions of India–USA defence cooperation, marking a significant departure from the Cold War era when military ties were minimal. Since the early 2000s, the United States has become one of India’s major defence suppliers, providing advanced military platforms and systems that enhance India’s operational capabilities across domains. Major acquisitions include C-17 and C-130J transport aircraft, P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, Apache attack helicopters, and Chinook heavy-lift helicopters. These platforms have significantly strengthened India’s airlift capacity, maritime surveillance, and precision strike capabilities. Beyond procurement, arms trade has facilitated deeper strategic interoperability between the two armed forces. US-origin systems, combined with shared doctrines and training through joint exercises, enable smoother coordination during bilateral and multilateral operations, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and maritime security missions. Defence technology collaboration initiatives and industrial partnerships have also expanded under frameworks such as the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), which seeks to promote co-development and co-production of defence technologies. While progress under DTTI has been gradual, it reflects a long-term shift toward deeper defence industrial cooperation. At the same time, India’s diversified defence procurement strategy and continued reliance on other suppliers, including Russia, highlight its commitment to strategic autonomy. Challenges such as technology transfer restrictions, cost concerns, and regulatory hurdles persist. Nevertheless, arms trade with the United States has enhanced India’s military modernization while aligning its forces more closely with advanced global standards. Strategic interoperability, therefore, is not merely technical but also political, symbolizing growing trust and shared security objectives within the broader India–USA strategic partnership.

Maritime Security and Indo-Pacific Strategy

Maritime security and the Indo-Pacific strategy constitute a central pillar of India–USA defence cooperation, reflecting shared concerns over regional stability, sea lane security, and adherence to international maritime norms. Both countries recognize the Indo-Pacific as a strategically vital region connecting major global trade routes and energy flows, where freedom of navigation and overflight are essential for economic and security interests. India’s geographical location astride key sea lanes in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) complements the United States’ broader Indo-Pacific strategy, creating natural strategic convergence. Cooperation in maritime domain awareness has expanded through information sharing, joint patrols, and the use of advanced surveillance platforms such as the P-8 aircraft. The Malabar naval exercise has become a prominent symbol of this cooperation, enhancing interoperability in anti-submarine warfare,



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carrier operations, and maritime interdiction. India and the United States also collaborate in capacity-building initiatives for smaller littoral states, promoting regional maritime security and resilience. Strategic alignment is further evident in shared support for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, emphasizing respect for sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, and a rules-based order under international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). While India avoids overt military alignment against any single country, its participation in Indo-Pacific frameworks and partnerships reflects concern over growing unilateralism and coercive behavior in the region. The United States views India as a key net security provider in the IOR, capable of contributing to regional balance and stability. Through maritime cooperation and strategic coordination, India–USA relations play a critical role in shaping the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific, reinforcing deterrence, stability, and cooperative security in an increasingly contested maritime domain.

Economic and Technological Engagement

Economic and technological engagement forms a vital pillar of India–USA strategic relations, underpinning the broader partnership with mutual growth, innovation, and long-term strategic interdependence. Since India's economic liberalization in 1991, bilateral economic ties have expanded rapidly, transforming the relationship from one dominated by aid and limited trade into a dynamic partnership based on commerce, investment, and knowledge exchange. The United States is among India's largest trading partners and a major source of foreign direct investment, particularly in sectors such as information technology, telecommunications, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, financial services, and start-ups. At the same time, Indian companies have made significant investments in the US economy, contributing to employment generation and technological advancement, thereby reinforcing economic interlinkages. Technological cooperation has emerged as a strategic priority, reflecting shared interests in innovation-led growth and economic security. Collaboration spans critical and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, cyber security, space, biotechnology, and clean energy. Institutional mechanisms like the Strategic Energy Partnership, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), and various science and technology forums have provided structured platforms for cooperation in research, development, and commercialization. The growing digital partnership between the two countries has been particularly significant, with the US benefiting from India's skilled human capital and software expertise, while India gains access to advanced technologies, capital, and innovation ecosystems.

Trade, Investment, and Supply Chains

Trade, investment, and supply chain cooperation constitute a central dimension of India–USA economic engagement, reflecting growing interdependence and shared concerns over economic resilience. Since the early 1990s, bilateral trade has expanded substantially, encompassing goods,



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services, and digital commerce. The United States is one of India's largest trading partners, with strong complementarities in sectors such as information technology services, pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, energy, and agriculture. Services trade, particularly in IT, business process outsourcing, and professional services, has been a major driver of economic ties, while US companies remain key investors in India's manufacturing, financial services, e-commerce, and start-up ecosystems. Conversely, Indian firms have emerged as significant investors in the US economy, contributing to job creation and industrial growth, especially in technology, healthcare, and manufacturing. Beyond traditional trade and investment, both countries increasingly recognize the strategic importance of resilient and diversified supply chains in an era marked by geopolitical competition, pandemics, and economic disruptions. India–USA cooperation has therefore expanded into areas such as supply chain security, critical minerals, pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, and clean energy technologies. Initiatives aimed at reducing overdependence on single-source suppliers and enhancing transparency and reliability in global supply networks align with broader Indo-Pacific economic strategies. While trade relations have periodically faced challenges related to tariffs, market access, standards, and regulatory issues, both sides have shown a willingness to address disputes through dialogue rather than confrontation. Economic frameworks and high-level trade forums provide platforms to resolve differences and explore new opportunities. Overall, expanding trade, deepening investment ties, and strengthening supply chain cooperation not only enhance bilateral economic growth but also reinforce strategic trust, making economic engagement an essential stabilizing force in India–USA strategic relations.

Cooperation in Technology, Space, and Innovation

Cooperation in technology, space, and innovation represents one of the most forward-looking and strategically significant aspects of India–USA relations. Both countries view technological leadership as critical to economic competitiveness, national security, and global influence, leading to expanded collaboration in cutting-edge and emerging domains. Bilateral cooperation spans areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, semiconductors, cyber security, biotechnology, and advanced manufacturing. Institutional frameworks and dialogue mechanisms facilitate joint research, development, and talent exchange, while partnerships between universities, research institutions, and private enterprises drive innovation ecosystems. Space cooperation has been a particularly prominent area, evolving from limited engagement to deep scientific and operational collaboration. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) cooperate on satellite missions, earth observation, planetary exploration, and space science, enhancing capabilities in climate monitoring, disaster management, and scientific research. The participation of Indian astronauts in US-led missions and collaboration on advanced space technologies underscore growing



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mutual trust. Innovation-driven engagement is further strengthened by strong people-to-people links, including Indian scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs who contribute significantly to the US technology sector while maintaining deep connections with India's innovation landscape. Start-up collaboration, venture capital flows, and joint incubation initiatives promote cross-border entrepreneurship and commercialization of research. Despite challenges such as technology transfer restrictions, intellectual property concerns, and regulatory differences, both countries have emphasized long-term cooperation in shaping global technology standards and ethical frameworks. Thus, technology, space, and innovation cooperation not only advance bilateral interests but also position India and the United States as key partners in addressing global challenges and shaping the future of science and technology.

Conclusion

The conclusion of India–USA Strategic Relations: Expanding Horizons of a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership emphasizes the consolidation of a mature, resilient, and forward-looking relationship between India and the United States in an era of profound geopolitical transformation. What began as cautious engagement has evolved into a multidimensional partnership encompassing defense and security cooperation, economic integration, technological innovation, climate action, and people-to-people ties. Strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific, commitment to democratic values, and support for a rules-based international order have provided a strong normative and geopolitical foundation for cooperation. Defense collaboration, supported by institutionalized dialogues and growing interoperability, has enhanced regional stability and mutual trust, while expanding economic and technological linkages reflect shared interests in innovation-led growth and supply chain resilience. At the same time, differences on trade, data governance, and strategic autonomy persist, highlighting the complex nature of engagement between two large and diverse democracies. Importantly, these challenges are increasingly managed through dialogue and institutional mechanisms rather than confrontation. Multilateral cooperation further amplifies the partnership's global relevance, enabling coordinated responses to transnational challenges such as terrorism, climate change, and emerging technologies. The durability of India–USA strategic relations will depend on sustained political commitment, mutual sensitivity to domestic priorities, and the ability to translate strategic convergence into tangible and inclusive outcomes. In this sense, the India–USA partnership stands as a defining pillar of 21st-century global politics.

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