

Indo-US Partnership under Modi Administration

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Under Prime Minister Modi, India opted for a 'multi-alignment' policy and the United States seems to be its closest working partner. These two largest democracies are cooperating in different fields and their relations are expected to further strengthen in future. Soon after the transition from the non-alignment movement as a cold war strategy, India opted for a more realistic 'strategic autonomy'. It has always maintained an independent foreign policy and autonomy by not taking dictation from another external power.

Modi after becoming the Prime Minister of India in 2014 revealed his goal of sticking to the strategy of shaping foreign policy and securing the state's national interest without any influence or pressure by an external power. The departure from Nehru's policy towards a multi-aligned foreign policy on grounds of pointed alignment has led India to maintain good relations with smaller, middle, and especially superpowers. Similarly, Modi has reaffirmed that Indian strategic autonomy remains strong despite having strong strategic and economic relationships with its years-old partner US or any other power with which it has diplomatic relations.¹

India has always maintained good ties with global players like Russia while being a working partner of the United States simultaneously. It is clear from the Indian strategy of not condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and publicly refusing to blame Moscow for the crisis despite the US leadership doing so that no external power could exert influence on the Indian decision-making process.² The supporters of the non-

alignment strategy criticize the Indo-US partnership for constraining Indian strategic autonomy. However, the political leadership always emphasizes that India's strategic autonomy is enhanced rather than being constrained by this partnership. Both states collaborate to strengthen one another in different ways, without essentially dictating either state's internal matters or impacting their foreign policies toward other states.

India's ambition to attain the status of the 'South Asian Giant' is becoming a reality under Narendra Modi. Washington has shown eagerness in assisting New Delhi's aforementioned quest as part of a broader strategy. To elaborate on the underlying aspects of Indo-US relations, it is important to look into their partnership along with the areas of cooperation between India and the US.

Interests of Both Partners

India is a part of the US plans to counter China while securing its national interest in the long run. Both allies are part of a broader strategy as the US is aiding India to strengthen it economically, strategically, and politically. India aims at becoming a thriving economy and a strong global actor, along with becoming a dominant democracy in the region giving the critics the ground to highlight the authoritarian Chinese regime. It is evident that the US hegemonic status is declining and the power is shifting toward the Asian region, US would never want to lose India as New Delhi is a viable option for countering China's influence in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions. Thus, the US has empowered it for using it to cope

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with China in the region. While India-China rivalry remains evident in the Indian Ocean, the persisting presence of the US along with its containment of China policy is at play in the background.³ The strengthening alliance of the US and India in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad⁴ in short) and I2U2⁵ alliance ensures the mutual goals that the US is assisting India in attaining the modern nuclear weapons.⁶ India being a nuclear power is becoming a prominent influencer in the region economically and strategically along with becoming a maritime power.

Economic Cooperation

India is one of the fastest-growing and the fifth-largest economy in the world.⁷ The United States is India's largest trading partner and a significant export market. Bilateral trade between India and the US was approximately \$157 billion last year and leather items were prominent among Indian exports to the US. Narendra Modi stated last month while laying the foundation of the International Financial Services Centre Authority (IFSCA),⁸ "India is now entering the league of nations like the US, UK, and Singapore."⁹ He wants India to be seen as a trendsetter, shaping the world's financial sector. Moreover, in 2018, the US announced \$113 million for technological development, energy initiatives, and infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰

Security Cooperation

India and the US are not just trade partners but also very strong strategic partners. A few days after the US strategy of announcing funds for Indo-Pacific economic development, it provided \$300 million for the region's security funding. This initiative further proved the US to be a trustworthy ally of India and revealed the nascent American motive of forming a strategy to cope with the rising influence of China in the

region. Furthermore, the 2+2 dialogues¹¹ between the US and India also reflect the American objectives of shaping the contours of Indo-Pacific policy and strategy of countering the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹²

Several defence initiatives involving arms deals and military exercises took place between both countries over the past decade. Starting in 2014, India participated in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) military exercise. In 2015, Modi and Trump renewed a security deal signed earlier in 2005. During the same year, India started to pursue its interest of shifting power towards South Asia by increasing its import of heavy military equipment due to which it became the largest arms importer by 2021.

The Indian arsenal expansion was assisted by the United States as the two countries signed three significant foundational agreements. One of them is the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed in 2016 for trust-building and replenishment of services on bases. LEMOA strengthened the Indian navy in a long run. In 2017, India invested in its Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) equipment from the US worth \$75 million with an additional \$336.3 million in C-17 Transport Aircraft. In 2018, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was signed providing India with access to advanced US technology, during the same year a \$930 million arms trade took place between India and US where six Apache Helicopters were imported by India. The year 2019 is significant as India bought two American Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM), Self-Protection Suites (SPS) worth \$190 million, and 24 MH-60 Multi-Mission Helicopters worth \$2.6 billion from the US. In the same year, the Modi government requested to buy \$1.021 billion in



weaponry including the Naval Gun System MK-45. In 2020, the Integrated Air Defence Weapon System worth \$1.867 billion stole the show along with advanced missile and helicopter imports. By the end of 2020, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) was signed. In 2021, India bought six P-81 Patrol Aircrafts worth \$2.42 billion from the US. Both countries are ready to further strengthen their strategic relations and arms agreements and in 2022 are ready for the fourth 2+2 Indo-US dialogue.¹³

Maritime Affairs

The Indo-US Maritime Security Cooperation is strong. Both countries are active in counterpiracy initiatives within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the US has supported India by all means to pursue its hegemonic ambition in this region. Under the scope of LEMOA, both states already enjoy maritime facilities on both sides to support naval operations, i.e., refuelling and replenishment. However, as a step forward, a US navy ship docked in India in August for repairs.¹⁴ The USNS, Charles Drew, reached the Larsen & Toubro (L&T) Shipyard at Kattupalli in Chennai and such events are more likely to be seen in future as India has showcased its efficient shipbuilding capabilities.

Changing Dynamics of South Asia

As India is progressing in the region, it faces several border issues. Being a close partner of the United States, India has acquired modern arms and nuclear weapons along with a naval build-up which contributes to the regional security dilemma as the bordering states feel threatened by it.¹⁵ The competition also exists as India and Pakistan have failed to

develop good relations and maintain an arms parity with one another. India lays its eyes on the ambition of becoming the regional hegemon under the veil of its Security and Growth of All in the Region (SAGAR) policy and the US is aiding it in the effort. India, being a US partner, is gaining representation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and is working on its 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies.¹⁶ India is also an active member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) along with twenty-two other members. While Pakistan is also trying to become a member of IORA, the Indian ambition of becoming a regional superpower seems to be a reality under the scope of the Indo-US partnership.¹⁷

Conclusion

India and US seem to be more inclined towards strengthening their strategic relations and cooperation in different sectors. US President Joe Biden recently termed India an 'indispensable partner' on the eve of the 75th anniversary of Indian independence.¹⁸ As we witness India trying to dominate the IOR and gain power in the South Asian region, it is becoming eligible to attain the status of a regional hegemon. The activeness of India and the US in alliances like the Quad and the I2U2 alliance depict their ambition of countering the Chinese BRI and the rising influence of China due to it being a global competitor of the US. China also shares a border with India. Therefore, both partners see it as a common threat. India, however, is also contributing to the South Asian security dilemma as its massive arms race and naval build-up pose security implications for Pakistan and are creating an atmosphere of regional uncertainty.¹⁹

Notes and References

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- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ravi Agrawal, "Why India Won't Condemn Russia," *Foreign Policy*, 11 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/11/india-russia-ukraine-war-diplomacy/>.
- ⁴ Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is a strategic security dialogue between India, United States, Japan, and Australia. Its major aim is to safeguard the interests of allies to counter China in the Indo-Pacific.
- ⁵ I2U2 is a grouping of India, Israel, UAE and the US for joint investments and new energy initiatives.
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- ⁸ IFSCA is an Indian authority for the regulation and development of financial products, services and Institution in the International Financial Service Centre (IFSC).
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- ¹¹ The Indo-US 2+2 dialogue is a 'dialogue mechanism' between two appointed ministers from both states, i.e., the Indian Minister of External Affairs and Indian Defense Minister along with the US Secretary of Defense and the US Secretary of State to strengthen their diplomatic ties.
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