

India–United States Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: A Study of Strategic, Economic, and Diplomatic Dimensions

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War marked a significant shift in global political alignments, paving the way for a new phase in India–United States relations. From a period of mutual suspicion and strategic divergence, the bilateral relationship has transformed into a multidimensional partnership grounded in shared democratic values, converging economic interests, and common strategic concerns. This research paper critically examines the evolution of India–US relations in the post-Cold War era through three core dimensions: strategic, economic, and diplomatic. The study traces the growing strategic synergy between the two nations, particularly in the context of defence cooperation, counter-terrorism, and the Indo-Pacific framework. It also analyses the economic trajectory marked by trade liberalization, investment flows, and technological collaboration, while identifying areas of friction such as tariffs and intellectual property rights. Diplomatically, the paper explores the role of high-level engagements, diaspora diplomacy, and multilateral coordination in shaping mutual perceptions and policy decisions.

Keywords:- India–United States Relations, Strategic Partnership, Economic Cooperation, Diplomatic Engagement, Post-Cold War Era, Foreign Policy, Bilateral Trade, Indo–US Nuclear Deal, Geopolitics, Global Governance

Introduction

The end of the Cold War marked a pivotal moment in global geopolitics, reshaping the foundations of international relations and prompting nations to reconsider their strategic alignments. In this new context, India and the United States—two of the world’s largest democracies—began to re-evaluate their previously distant and often strained relationship. During the Cold War, India’s policy of non-alignment and its strategic proximity to the Soviet Union created mutual suspicion with the United States. On the other hand, America’s alliance with Pakistan, especially during the 1971 India–Pakistan War, and its Cold War containment strategy contributed to a deep diplomatic disconnect between New Delhi and Washington. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, coupled with India’s shift toward economic liberalization, created new possibilities for bilateral engagement. India’s gradual movement from a state-controlled economy to one more open to global markets coincided with the United States’ search for new strategic partners in the emerging world order. This marked the beginning of a pragmatic phase in India–US relations, where mutual interests began to outweigh historical grievances.

The 1990s laid the groundwork for this shift, particularly under the leadership of Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and U.S. President Bill Clinton. Although initial progress was slow due to disagreements over nuclear policy, especially after India’s 1998 nuclear tests, both countries managed to navigate these tensions. The turning point came with the landmark India–US Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2005, which not only symbolized trust but also marked the U.S.’s acknowledgment of India as a responsible nuclear power outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (Pant, 2016,).

Strategically, both nations began to see convergence on key global issues, including the rise of China, the threat of terrorism, and the importance of maritime security. The United States recognized India as a critical player in maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific region, while India acknowledged the value of deeper defence cooperation with the world's most advanced military power. The signing of multiple defence agreements, along with joint military exercises like Malabar, further institutionalized this cooperation.

Economically, the two countries also began to engage more closely, with trade volumes expanding rapidly and American investments pouring into India's technology and service sectors. India's growing middle class and expanding consumer market made it a natural partner for the U.S., while India benefited from access to American technology, capital, and education. Though trade disputes and issues like visa policies have periodically strained the relationship, the economic engagement has largely remained on an upward trajectory.

Diplomatically, India and the United States began to cooperate in multilateral forums and global governance institutions. The U.S. has consistently supported India's aspiration for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and collaborated with India on key global issues such as climate change, counter-terrorism, and regional security. The role of the Indian-American diaspora—numbering over four million—has also played a significant role in bridging cultural and political gaps, creating a robust transnational network of influence (Lal, 2008,).

The phrase “natural allies,” often used to describe India–US relations, reflects not just shared democratic values but also the evolving recognition of mutual interests and complementary strengths (Mohan, 2006,). Nevertheless, the relationship has not been without its complexities, particularly given India's insistence on strategic autonomy and America's expectations of alignment in a rapidly shifting global order.

This paper aims to explore the trajectory of India–United States relations in the post-Cold War era by focusing on three core dimensions—strategic, economic, and diplomatic. Each of these areas reflects both cooperation and friction, shaped by changing domestic priorities, global power shifts, and the pressures of a multipolar world. Through a descriptive and analytical approach, the study seeks to evaluate the evolving nature of this bilateral partnership and assess its implications for the 21st century international order.

Strategic Dimension of India–US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

The strategic dimension of India–United States relations has undergone a fundamental transformation since the end of the Cold War. From a relationship characterized by mutual distrust and divergence of interests, India and the United States have moved towards a closer, multifaceted strategic partnership. This shift has been driven by changes in the global power structure, shared concerns over regional and global security challenges, and converging interests in areas such as defence cooperation, counter-terrorism, maritime security, and regional stability—particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

During the Cold War, the strategic orientation of India and the United States was largely shaped by their respective global positions. India, pursuing a policy of non-alignment, leaned heavily towards the Soviet Union in matters of defence and strategic support, while the United States prioritized its alliance with Pakistan and its broader containment strategy against communism. The result was a persistent undercurrent of suspicion and misalignment that prevented meaningful strategic cooperation.

The end of the Cold War created new opportunities for a redefined partnership. The global unipolar moment of American dominance and India's growing desire for international recognition prompted both sides to engage strategically. While India's 1998 nuclear tests initially triggered U.S. sanctions and condemnation, they also forced a reassessment of India's role as a responsible regional power. A crucial turning point came

with the Jaswant Singh–Strobe Talbott talks, which paved the way for strategic dialogue and helped both nations move beyond Cold War legacies.

The real breakthrough in strategic ties, however, came in the early 2000s. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States expanded its global counter-terrorism campaign, while India, long a victim of cross-border terrorism, found common ground with Washington. Both nations recognized terrorism as a shared threat that required joint efforts and intelligence cooperation. This marked the beginning of a closer strategic engagement.

The defining milestone in strategic relations was the 2005 India–US Civil Nuclear Agreement, which signalled a major shift in U.S. policy by recognizing India as a legitimate nuclear power outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This agreement not only enhanced mutual trust but also opened the door for broader defence and strategic cooperation. The United States began to see India as a long-term strategic partner in Asia, capable of balancing China's growing influence and contributing to regional stability. As C. Raja Mohan aptly observed, this agreement marked the beginning of India's transition “from a balancer to a partner” in global strategic affairs (Mohan, 2006.).

Defence cooperation has since become a central pillar of the India–US strategic partnership. Several foundational agreements have been signed to facilitate military collaboration, logistics, and intelligence sharing. The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2002 established a framework for the secure exchange of classified information. This was followed by the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, which allows reciprocal use of military bases for refuelling and repair, and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, enabling interoperability and real-time data sharing between the two militaries. The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), signed in 2020, further deepened geospatial intelligence cooperation.

These agreements have led to greater operational synergy between the Indian and American armed forces. Joint military exercises such as Yudh Abhyas, Tiger Triumph, and especially Malabar—a trilateral naval exercise involving India, the U.S., and Japan (and recently Australia)—have enhanced trust and interoperability. Such engagements demonstrate the deepening maritime cooperation between both nations, especially in safeguarding sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific.

Another critical dimension of strategic convergence is the Indo-Pacific strategy. The emergence of China as a revisionist power, with assertive claims in the South China Sea and increasing influence across Asia and Africa, has drawn both India and the United States into a strategic alignment. The revival and institutionalization of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—comprising India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia—reflects this shared vision of a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. Although India continues to emphasize strategic autonomy, its participation in QUAD and other regional forums reflects a pragmatic approach to balancing China's regional ambitions.

Space and cyber cooperation have also emerged as important areas within the strategic partnership. India and the U.S. have agreed on frameworks for collaboration in space exploration, satellite technology, and cyber defence, recognizing the strategic implications of new and emerging technologies. Additionally, the India–US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, involving defence and foreign ministers, has institutionalized high-level strategic communication, ensuring continuity and coherence in bilateral defence policy.

However, despite significant progress, certain limitations persist. India's historical commitment to non-alignment continues to shape its cautious engagement with the U.S.-led security architecture. For instance,

India's decision to not join military alliances and its close ties with countries like Russia present occasional friction points in the strategic dialogue. The United States, on its part, has at times expressed concerns over India's defence purchases from Russia, particularly the S-400 missile system, which triggered debates over the applicability of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

Nevertheless, the strategic partnership remains resilient, adapting to challenges while capitalizing on shared interests. The rise of China, the threat of terrorism, technological disruptions, and the reshaping of global institutions have only increased the urgency of cooperation between India and the United States. As Harsh V. Pant notes, the strategic embrace is not merely transactional but a reflection of long-term structural alignment in global politics (Pant, 2016.).

Economic Dimension of India–US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

The economic relationship between India and the United States in the post-Cold War era has emerged as a cornerstone of their bilateral engagement. Over the last three decades, both countries have witnessed a marked expansion in trade, investment, services, technology, and knowledge-based partnerships. This transformation, rooted in structural changes in the global economy and India's liberalization policies, has enabled the two largest democracies to build a robust and diversified economic partnership.

The economic dimension of India–US relations began to take shape in the early 1990s, following India's adoption of economic liberalization measures in 1991. Faced with a balance-of-payments crisis, India initiated significant reforms that reduced trade barriers, encouraged foreign investment, and opened up previously restricted sectors to private participation. These changes not only altered India's domestic economic structure but also created avenues for deeper economic engagement with the United States, which had previously viewed India's economy as overly protectionist and state-driven.

In the initial years of reform, the United States became one of the first countries to respond positively to India's liberalization. American businesses and investors, drawn by India's vast consumer market, English-speaking workforce, and potential for high returns, began to view India as an important emerging market. By the end of the 1990s, bilateral trade in goods and services had already begun to gain momentum, marking the beginning of a long-term economic partnership.

The early 2000s witnessed a qualitative shift in bilateral economic ties. The Information Technology (IT) revolution in India played a pivotal role in reshaping economic relations. American firms, especially in Silicon Valley, established strong partnerships with Indian IT companies. Outsourcing and offshoring became defining features of India–US economic engagement, with companies like Infosys, Wipro, and TCS playing major roles in servicing American clients. The exchange of skilled professionals, particularly in the STEM fields, contributed to a growing interdependence between the knowledge economies of the two nations.

The United States soon became India's largest trading partner in goods and services. According to data from the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR), bilateral trade in goods and services exceeded \$160 billion by 2023, making the United States India's top trading partner. This includes key sectors such as pharmaceuticals, machinery, agriculture, textiles, energy, and defence-related components. Indian exports to the U.S. include refined petroleum products, gems and jewelry, pharmaceuticals, and software services, while U.S. exports to India are dominated by aircraft, machinery, medical instruments, and natural gas.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) forms another important pillar of the economic relationship. The United States is among the top five sources of FDI into India, with American companies investing heavily in manufacturing, services, technology, and retail. Major U.S. corporations such as Amazon, Google, Walmart, and Microsoft

have expanded their operations in India, not just as a cost-effective production base but also to access its growing consumer class. Similarly, Indian companies like Tata, Mahindra, and Infosys have expanded their presence in the U.S., contributing to employment and technology development. As C. Fred Bergsten notes, "the U.S.–India economic relationship, once considered marginal, has today become indispensable to the strategic calculus of both nations" (Bergsten, 2010.).

One of the most significant developments in recent years has been cooperation in the energy sector. The United States has emerged as a key supplier of crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) to India, diversifying India's energy sources and reducing dependence on Middle Eastern oil. The U.S.–India Strategic Energy Partnership, launched in 2018, focuses on energy security, energy efficiency, renewable energy, and technology transfer. This collaboration has assumed greater importance in the context of climate change and the global transition to cleaner sources of energy.

However, the economic relationship has also faced several challenges. Trade imbalances, tariff disputes, and differing regulatory approaches have at times created friction. For instance, India's high tariffs on certain American products, such as motorcycles and dairy, and the U.S.'s imposition of tariffs on Indian steel and aluminium have led to periodic tensions. In 2019, the U.S. removed India from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program, which had provided duty-free access to Indian exports worth billions of dollars. India, in response, imposed retaliatory tariffs on select American goods.

Despite these differences, both countries have shown a willingness to resolve disputes through dialogue and institutional mechanisms. Platforms like the U.S.–India Trade Policy Forum and the U.S.–India CEO Forum have facilitated regular interactions between policymakers and business leaders. These forums have enabled the identification of new areas of cooperation, including digital trade, intellectual property rights, and supply chain resilience.

The digital economy is emerging as a promising frontier in bilateral economic engagement. With India's rapid digitalization, initiatives such as the India Stack, Aadhaar-based financial inclusion, and the expansion of e-commerce have caught the attention of U.S. tech giants. Data localization norms, taxation of digital services, and regulation of digital platforms are, however, areas where policy differences persist. Nonetheless, the economic logic of partnership continues to prevail, driven by mutual benefits and the rising centrality of technology in global commerce.

Another important factor in the India–US economic relationship is the contribution of the Indian diaspora in the United States. With a population of over 4 million, Indian Americans have played a key role in strengthening economic and people-to-people ties. They have contributed significantly to sectors such as healthcare, technology, education, and entrepreneurship. The diaspora acts as a bridge between the two economies, fostering business links, cultural exchange, and political goodwill.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of global supply chains, India and the United States have also started collaborating on building resilient and diversified supply chains. The U.S. initiative to reduce overdependence on China aligns with India's "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) campaigns. Joint efforts in critical sectors such as semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and rare earth minerals underscore the strategic depth of their economic cooperation.

Diplomatic Dimension of India–US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

The diplomatic relationship between India and the United States has undergone a significant transformation since the end of the Cold War. From being estranged democracies with divergent worldviews during much of

the 20th century, the two nations have gradually developed a multi-faceted partnership grounded in shared democratic values, mutual strategic interests, and increasing economic interdependence. This evolution in diplomacy reflects not only changing global realities but also the maturing of both countries as major actors in international politics.

During the Cold War period, the India–US relationship was marked by mistrust and strategic divergence. India’s policy of non-alignment and close ties with the Soviet Union were viewed with scepticism in Washington. On the other hand, U.S. support to Pakistan, especially in military terms, was seen in New Delhi as an affront to regional balance. The post-Cold War geopolitical scenario, however, allowed both nations to reimagine their diplomatic priorities. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of a unipolar world order prompted India to adjust its external relations, while the United States began to recognize India’s potential as a rising power in Asia.

The landmark moment in modern India–US diplomacy came in the early 2000s, with the signing of the U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2005. This agreement symbolized a major shift in American non-proliferation policy, as it recognized India as a responsible nuclear power outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The deal not only facilitated India’s access to civilian nuclear technology but also indicated a broader strategic embrace between the two countries. It marked a diplomatic breakthrough and became a symbol of the trust and willingness of both sides to engage constructively, despite historical differences.

Diplomatic engagement also intensified through a series of high-level visits and institutional dialogues. Successive U.S. presidents—from Bill Clinton to Joe Biden—have considered India as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region. On the Indian side, Prime Ministers from Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Narendra Modi have prioritized the U.S. in foreign policy calculus. Prime Minister Vajpayee’s famous remark that India and the United States are “natural allies” laid the foundation for a new diplomatic discourse, which has since evolved into strategic convergence on several fronts (Tellis, 2006,).

One of the most striking features of India–US diplomatic relations in the 21st century has been the creation of multiple institutional mechanisms to sustain continuous dialogue and policy coordination. These include the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue (between foreign and defence ministers), the Strategic Energy Partnership, the U.S.–India CEO Forum, and cooperation under platforms like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) involving Japan and Australia. Such mechanisms have provided structure and continuity to the bilateral relationship, allowing both sides to navigate challenges while enhancing cooperation in emerging domains such as cyber security, climate change, health, and critical technologies.

India–US diplomacy has also been characterized by close coordination in multilateral forums. India’s bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council has received consistent support from the United States. Similarly, India’s inclusion in export control regimes like the Wassenaar Arrangement, the Australia Group, and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR)—with strong backing from Washington—has facilitated India’s integration into the global non-proliferation architecture. This support underscores the U.S. acknowledgment of India’s responsible global behaviour and its willingness to shape global norms in partnership with New Delhi.

Furthermore, the diplomatic relationship has deepened around shared values and global issues. Both India and the U.S. are committed to democratic governance, rule of law, freedom of navigation, and counterterrorism. These shared values often translate into coordinated positions on global challenges such as climate change, pandemic response, and maritime security. The signing of the Paris Agreement on climate change and India’s

active role in the International Solar Alliance (ISA) have opened new areas for green diplomacy between the two countries.

Yet, diplomacy is not devoid of challenges. Issues like visa policies, trade disputes, human rights, and differing positions on global conflicts occasionally create friction. For instance, India's cautious stance on the Russia–Ukraine conflict has not fully aligned with U.S. expectations. At the same time, American criticisms on issues related to religious freedom and civil liberties in India have sometimes strained the tone of diplomatic exchanges. However, these differences are generally managed with maturity, reflecting the strategic depth of the relationship and the ability to compartmentalize disagreements.

The Indian diaspora in the United States also plays an important role in strengthening diplomatic ties. With over four million people of Indian origin residing in the U.S., the diaspora contributes not only to economic and technological exchange but also to the political discourse. Indian Americans have increasingly held positions of influence in U.S. politics, diplomacy, and academia, serving as informal ambassadors of goodwill and cultural diplomacy.

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific strategy has emerged as a key pillar of India–US diplomatic engagement. Both countries have emphasized the importance of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, countering China's assertiveness in the region. Through diplomatic coordination under the Quad and bilateral naval cooperation, India and the U.S. have signaled their shared vision for regional stability. The Indo-Pacific construct now serves as a central axis of diplomatic and strategic alignment, reinforcing the growing convergence of interests between New Delhi and Washington.

Challenges in the Bilateral Relationship

Despite the expanding scope of India–United States relations in the post-Cold War era, the partnership has not been free from challenges. The bilateral relationship, though marked by strategic convergence and mutual aspirations, also experiences periodic strains due to differing national interests, domestic political compulsions, and global geopolitical dynamics. These challenges test the resilience of the partnership and require sustained diplomatic efforts to manage differences while advancing shared goals.

One of the most persistent challenges arises from **divergent strategic alignments**. While India seeks to maintain its strategic autonomy in global affairs, the United States continues to operate within a framework of alliances and blocs. This difference becomes evident when India maintains balanced ties with nations such as Iran or Russia, which are often at odds with U.S. foreign policy. For instance, India's continued defence and energy cooperation with Russia, including the acquisition of the S-400 missile defence system, has raised concerns in Washington and exposed the limitations of strategic coordination.

Similarly, India's **non-aligned foreign policy tradition** often leads to cautious diplomacy, especially in conflicts like the Russia–Ukraine war, where New Delhi refrained from directly condemning Moscow, opting instead for a neutral position advocating dialogue. Such stances have created discomfort in U.S. diplomatic circles, which expect stronger alignment from India as a strategic partner. However, India's foreign policy is grounded in national interest rather than alignment with any single bloc, a position that sometimes results in differing global outlooks.

Another significant area of contention is **trade and economic friction**. While economic relations have expanded significantly, trade-related disagreements persist. The U.S. has repeatedly raised issues regarding market access in India, high tariffs on American goods, and concerns related to intellectual property rights. India, in turn, has expressed dissatisfaction over stringent U.S. visa regulations, particularly affecting its IT

professionals and service exports. In 2019, the Trump administration withdrew India's beneficiary status under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), which affected Indian exports to the U.S. Though diplomatic channels have worked to resolve some of these disputes, economic protectionism and domestic pressures in both countries can trigger occasional setbacks in trade relations.

Human rights and democratic values have also emerged as sensitive points in the relationship. American institutions and lawmakers occasionally raise concerns about the state of civil liberties, religious freedom, and press independence in India. The Indian government, however, has viewed such remarks as interference in internal affairs. This difference in perception regarding domestic policies creates unease in diplomatic engagement, particularly when issues become public or enter the realm of legislative politics in either country. While both nations pride themselves on being vibrant democracies, the interpretation and implementation of democratic principles sometimes differ, leading to ideological discomfort.

The **China factor**, despite being a unifying concern in many respects, also adds complexity to the bilateral relationship. While both India and the U.S. view China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific with concern, their respective engagements with China differ in tone and intensity. India, due to its long and contested land border with China, faces a distinct set of challenges that are not entirely shared by the U.S., which has broader concerns about China's global rise. As a result, their threat perceptions and responses to Chinese actions can sometimes diverge, especially regarding military cooperation and Quad dynamics.

In addition, **technological cooperation**, though growing, has witnessed friction due to issues around data sovereignty, digital trade, and regulatory frameworks. The U.S. encourages greater openness to American tech firms, while India is increasingly advocating for digital self-reliance and data localization policies. This gap in expectations could affect future collaboration in high-tech sectors like artificial intelligence, cyber security, and digital infrastructure.

Finally, **domestic political transitions** in both nations occasionally affect the pace and tone of bilateral engagement. Changes in leadership or shifts in political priorities can alter the momentum of cooperation. For example, while the Obama and Modi administrations enjoyed robust ties, there were initial hesitations during the Trump presidency over trade and immigration issues. However, the long-term trajectory has remained largely positive, despite periodic slowdowns.

Conclusion

The trajectory of India–United States relations in the post-Cold War era reflects a significant transformation from mutual suspicion to strategic convergence. As the global political order evolved, both countries recalibrated their foreign policies to adapt to new challenges and opportunities. From the initial hesitations of the 1990s, shaped by Cold War legacies, to the present era of multifaceted engagement, the bilateral relationship has grown into a comprehensive partnership encompassing strategic, economic, and diplomatic dimensions.

Strategically, the convergence has been driven by shared concerns about terrorism, regional instability, and particularly the rise of China as a revisionist power. Defence cooperation, joint military exercises, foundational agreements, and the Indo-Pacific vision have placed India and the U.S. on a path of deepening security ties. Despite India's emphasis on strategic autonomy, the growing synergy in security interests has brought both nations closer in shaping regional and global security architectures.

Economically, the relationship has seen robust growth in trade, investment, and technology collaboration. Both nations have recognized the mutual benefits of economic interdependence. However, unresolved trade

disputes, protectionist policies, and evolving digital governance issues highlight the need for constant negotiation and policy alignment to sustain this momentum.

Diplomatically, the two countries have established regular high-level dialogues and institutional frameworks that reflect the maturity of their relationship. India's rise as a key global player and the U.S.'s recognition of this role have led to stronger coordination in multilateral forums, development partnerships, and regional diplomacy. Yet, differences over human rights, foreign policy alignments, and domestic political developments remain areas that require careful handling.

While the relationship is not without its challenges, its resilience lies in the shared democratic values, mutual respect for sovereignty, and the recognition of long-term strategic complementarity. As the international order becomes increasingly multipolar and uncertain, the India–U.S. partnership is poised to play a pivotal role in shaping global governance, economic stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Sustained dialogue, institutionalized cooperation, and accommodation of each other's core interests will be essential in realizing the full potential of this dynamic and evolving relationship.

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