

INDIA-USA RELATIONSHIP SINCE THE NUCLEAR DEAL: FROM STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP TO TRANSACTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The 2008 India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement marked a watershed moment in bilateral relations, transforming decades of strategic estrangement into a proclaimed partnership. This paper examines the trajectory of the relationship from the landmark nuclear deal to the present, arguing that what began as an idealism-inflected strategic convergence has progressively assumed a transactional character shaped by divergent foreign policy postures, competing economic interests, and India's enduring doctrine of strategic autonomy. Drawing on diplomatic history, treaty analysis, and the work of leading scholars from both countries—including Ashley Tellis, C. Raja Mohan, Shivshankar Menon, S. Jaishankar, and Tanvi Madan—the paper traces key milestones including the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), the foundational defence agreements, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and India's position on the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Iran conflicts to demonstrate that the relationship is best characterised not by allied solidarity but by selective, issue-specific cooperation. While a durable cross-party Indian parliamentary consensus has favoured deepening engagement with Washington since the 1991 economic reforms, the paper concludes that recent global crises have reaffirmed the structural wisdom of India's founding strategic autonomy doctrine: partnerships, however valuable, carry a price, and Indian policymakers must remain clear-eyed about the limits beyond which that price outweighs Indian interests, particularly where national strategic chokepoints are concerned.

Keywords: India-USA relations, Nuclear deal, Strategic partnership, Transactional diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Few bilateral relationships in the post-Cold War era have undergone as dramatic a transformation as that between India and the United States. For much of the twentieth century, the two largest democracies maintained a relationship defined more by mutual suspicion than shared purpose. India's Cold War non-alignment, its clandestine nuclear programme, and its close economic ties with the Soviet Union placed New Delhi at persistent odds with Washington's strategic calculus. As Strobe

Talbott—who led American diplomacy toward India in the years immediately after the 1998 nuclear tests—has recorded, even the most well-intentioned interlocutors on both sides spent much of the 1990s “talking past each other across a chasm of mutual incomprehension” (Talbot, 2004). Talbott, who led the US side of the Singh-Talbott dialogue (1998–2000), provides a first-hand account of the tortuous path toward US-India normalisation after the 1998 Pokhran-II tests.

The structural foundations of rapprochement were laid by a convergence of

factors: the end of Cold War bipolarity, India's 1991 economic liberalisation, the shared experience of the September 11 attacks, and—above all—the perceived need to manage the rise of China. C. Raja Mohan, whose analytical writings have shaped a generation of Indian strategic thinking, identified as early as 2003 that India was “crossing the Rubicon” from ideologically driven non-alignment toward a pragmatic engagement with the American-led international order (Mohan, 2003).

That crossing found its institutional expression in the 2008 Civil Nuclear Agreement. The nuclear deal was significant not merely for its technical content but for the political message it transmitted: the United States was willing to subordinate its own non-proliferation norms—the rules it had painstakingly constructed since the 1970s—to accommodate India's rise. For India, it was a declaration of strategic arrival. For Washington, it was a calculated investment in a long-term partnership. Ashley Tellis, the Carnegie Endowment scholar who served as the principal intellectual architect of the Bush administration's India strategy, described the deal as part of a deliberate effort to “help India become a major world power in the 21st century”—an objective explicitly premised on India's role as a counterweight to Chinese hegemony (Tellis, 2005).

The decade and a half since 2008, however, has complicated this narrative. This paper argues that the relationship has progressively transitioned from a strategic partnership anchored in shared values and convergent long-term vision toward a transactional engagement governed by immediate national interests, competing economic imperatives, and India's calculated maintenance of strategic flexibility. To substantiate this argument, the paper proceeds in five parts: historical background, post-deal institutional architecture, areas of cooperation and friction, theoretical interpretation, and conclusions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: ESTRANGEMENT, RAPPROCHEMENT, AND THE NUCLEAR BREAKTHROUGH

Understanding the nuclear deal requires situating it within the long history of US-India estrangement. The Nixon administration's dispatch of the USS Enterprise carrier battle group to the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War—intended as a coercive signal to India during its military intervention in East Pakistan—left what Gary Bass has characterised as an enduring mark on Indian strategic culture, reinforcing a disposition toward self-reliance and suspicion of great-power commitments (Bass, 2013).

India's 1974 Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) at Pokhran, which George Perkovich has described as a decision driven by a complex amalgam of security imperatives, technological nationalism, and domestic political pressures, prompted the United States to construct the Nuclear Suppliers Group specifically to deny India access to civilian nuclear technology (Perkovich, 1999). The resulting decades of sanctions created a self-reinforcing cycle of alienation that persisted well into the 1990s.

India's May 1998 tests—conducted under the BJP government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee—initially appeared to deepen the estrangement. The Clinton administration imposed sanctions under the Glenn Amendment, and bilateral relations reached a formal nadir. Yet, paradoxically, the tests also forced a more serious American engagement with Indian strategic realities. The Jaswant Singh-Strobe Talbott dialogue (1998–2000) was the crucible in which the intellectual framework for a transformed relationship was forged. As Jaswant Singh himself has recorded, the talks convinced key figures on both sides that a sustained partnership required abandoning the fiction that India could be pressured into NPT accession (J. Singh, 2006).

The George W. Bush administration translated this intellectual shift into policy.

Motivated by a quartet of strategic imperatives—balancing China, integrating India into the global order on US-friendly terms, expanding the American arms market, and reinforcing democratic solidarity—Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced the framework of the civil nuclear deal in July 2005 (Tellis, 2006). After three years of intricate multilateral diplomacy involving an IAEA safeguards agreement, a US-India 123 Agreement, and an NSG waiver, the deal entered into force in October 2008. Shivshankar Menon, who served as India's foreign secretary through the critical negotiating phase, has provided the authoritative Indian account of the strategic calculations—and the political risks—involved in securing the NSG consensus (S. Menon, 2016).

POST-DEAL INSTITUTIONAL DEEPENING

The decade following the nuclear agreement witnessed substantial institutional development across defence, security, and technology domains. Successive administrations on both sides worked to translate the political breakthrough of 2008 into durable structural frameworks. The defence relationship has been the most tangible expression of post-deal partnership. Stephen Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, writing in their landmark 2010 study of Indian military modernisation, identified the buyer-seller dynamic as the central weakness of early defence ties—a dynamic in which India purchased American platforms without acquiring the technological and doctrinal integration that characterises genuine security partnerships (Cohen & Dasgupta, 2010). The Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), launched in 2012 and revitalised in 2015, represented a deliberate effort to transcend this limitation by promoting co-development and co-production arrangements.

The completion of the four foundational defence agreements—LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), BECA (2020), and ISA (2021)—marked the most significant structural deepening of the security relationship since the nuclear deal itself. Rajesh

Rajagopalan of Jawaharlal Nehru University has offered the most systematic scholarly assessment of these agreements, concluding that while they do not formally bind India into alliance structures, they create “ratchet effects” that incrementally constrain India's strategic options (Rajagopalan, 2020). Brahma Chellaney, a more sceptical voice from the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, has raised concerns that the cumulative logic of the foundational agreements points toward a “quasi-alliance” that sits uneasily with India's non-alignment heritage (Chellaney, 2018).

The designation of India as a Major Defence Partner (2016) and its elevation to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 (STA-1) status (2018) further institutionalised the relationship. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data show that US arms transfers to India grew from near-zero in 2007 to cumulative deliveries exceeding USD 21 billion by 2021, making India the single largest non-NATO recipient of American defence equipment (SIPRI, 2021).

The revival of the Quad in 2017—originally floated in 2007 by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe—and its elevation to leader-level summitry in 2021 represented a qualitative shift in the multilateral dimension of the India-USA relationship. Alyssa Ayres, a former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, has argued that the Quad's revival reflected Washington's recognition that managing China's rise required engaging India as an active participant in regional security architecture rather than a passive beneficiary of US deterrence (Ayres, 2018).

India's participation in the Quad, however, has been governed by a principle of deliberate ambiguity. S. Jaishankar, whose 2020 book has become the closest thing to an official articulation of contemporary Indian foreign policy philosophy, frames the Quad as an expression of multi-alignment—a framework that enhances India's strategic options without subordinating it to any single power's agenda (S. Jaishankar, 2020). New Delhi has consistently resisted characterising the Quad as a security alliance, insisting that its agenda

encompasses vaccine diplomacy, clean energy, and supply chain resilience alongside maritime security.

The inauguration of the India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in September 2018—bringing together the foreign and defence ministers of both countries—placed India in a format previously reserved for Washington's treaty allies. Aparna Pande of the Hudson Institute has situated this development within a longer arc of Indian foreign policy evolution, arguing that the BJP government's embrace of institutionalised security dialogues with the United States represented a departure from the Nehruvian suspicion of alignment while remaining carefully calibrated to avoid the formal commitments of treaty alliance (Pande, 2017).

AREAS OF COOPERATION AND FRICTION

Despite significant institutional deepening, the relationship has exhibited a recurring pattern in which strategic enthusiasm gives way to transactional bargaining. Three domains illustrate this dynamic with particular clarity. Bilateral merchandise and services trade reached approximately USD 191 billion in 2022, a substantial increase from the USD 60 billion recorded at the time of the nuclear deal. Yet the economic relationship has simultaneously been a persistent source of friction. Nitya Nanda and Sachin Chaturvedi, in their systematic analysis of Indo-American economic engagement, identify structural asymmetries—India's protectionist agricultural policy, its data localisation mandates, its price controls on medical devices, and its intellectual property framework—as the principal obstacles to a comprehensive free trade agreement (Nanda & Chaturvedi, 2019). The US Trade Representative's annual Foreign Trade Barriers report has consistently designated India as one of the most challenging trade partners for American exporters (Office of the United States Trade Representative [USTR], 2023).

The Trump administration's 2019 termination of India's preferential access under the

Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), covering approximately USD 5.6 billion in annual imports, provoked retaliatory Indian tariffs and brought bilateral economic relations to their lowest point since the nuclear deal. The H-1B visa restrictions imposed across successive administrations have compounded the friction, striking at a sector in which Indian nationals constitute the largest single national-origin group of visa recipients. These economic irritants underscore a fundamental feature of the transactional turn: even in a relationship rhetorically elevated to “defining partnership of the 21st century,” national economic interests consistently override partnership solidarity.

No issue has tested the strategic partnership narrative more severely than India's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. India abstained on multiple UN General Assembly and Security Council resolutions condemning the invasion, declined to join Western sanctions, and significantly increased purchases of discounted Russian crude oil. Vijay Gokhale, a former Indian foreign secretary, has offered a sophisticated defence of this position, arguing that India's abstentions reflected a calculated strategy of “strategic equidistance” designed to preserve New Delhi's room for manoeuvre between Washington and Moscow (Gokhale, 2021).

Sushant Singh, writing in *‘Foreign Affairs’*, provides a more structurally grounded explanation: India's continued dependence on Russian-origin defence platforms—estimated at 60–70% of its military inventory—creates a material constraint on the extent to which New Delhi can openly align with the Western position on Eastern Europe (S. Singh, 2022). This structural dependence is a direct legacy of Cold War-era procurement decisions and has not been overcome by the post-2008 diversification toward American and Israeli platforms.

India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's June 2022 remark at the GLOBSEC Forum in Bratislava—that Europe must “grow out of the mind-set that Europe's problems are the world's problems”—was widely read as a blunt assertion of India's refusal to accept a Western framing of the

conflict as a universal moral cause (S. Jaishankar, 2022). American officials, conscious of India's indispensability to the Quad and unwilling to drive New Delhi toward greater alignment with Beijing, responded with notable public restraint—itsself a revealing indication of the transactional calculus governing the relationship.

The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), launched at the Biden-Modi summit of January 2023, represents the most promising avenue for durable convergence in the contemporary relationship. The initiative, which spans semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, advanced telecommunications, and space, reflects a genuine structural alignment of interests: both countries seek to reduce their dependence on Chinese supply chains and build resilient technological alternatives (White House, 2023). The announcement of a USD 825 million Micron semiconductor investment in Gujarat during Prime Minister Modi's June 2023 state visit to Washington exemplified the commercial potential of this agenda.

THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION: BETWEEN LIBERALISM, REALISM, AND TRANSACTIONALISM

The trajectory of the India-USA relationship since 2008 can be illuminated by drawing on three theoretical traditions in International Relations, each of which captures a different dimension of the bilateral dynamic. Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory, which posits that states align against perceived threats rather than abstract power concentrations, provides the most parsimonious structural explanation for the relationship's origins and persistence (Walt, 1987). Both India and the United States perceive China as their principal long-term strategic challenge; the India-USA partnership is, at its structural core, a hedging arrangement against Chinese hegemony in Asia. This logic explains both the depth of defence cooperation—concentrated precisely in domains relevant to China

contingencies—and the limits of that cooperation on issues unrelated to China, such as Ukraine or trade.

John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which emphasises states' incentive to maximise relative power and resist entrapment in alliance commitments, offers a complementary explanation for India's resistance to formal alliance structures (Mearsheimer, 2014). As an emerging great power with genuine aspirations to strategic autonomy, India has strong structural incentives to avoid the binding commitments that would make it a subordinate partner rather than an independent pole in a multipolar order.

G. John Ikenberry's liberal internationalism, which holds that open, rule-based institutions generate compliance through institutional embeddedness rather than coercion, provides the normative framework that has animated the partnership rhetoric of successive American administrations (Ikenberry, 2011). Yet the India case reveals the limits of this framework: institutional deepening has not produced the normative alignment that liberal theory would predict. India engages US-led institutions selectively, as a consumer of the security goods they provide, while resisting the identity commitments—democratic solidarity, rules-based order—that the United States seeks to embed in those institutions.

The scholarly literature from both countries has grappled with this gap between rhetoric and reality. Kanti Bajpai and his co-editors, in their authoritative volume on Indian grand strategy, situate India's behaviour within a tradition of strategic restraint and multi-alignment that has deeper roots than any particular government's foreign policy preference (Bajpai et al., 2014). Tanvi Madan's historical analysis of the China variable in US-India relations demonstrates that the partnership has always been more opportunistic than principled—a finding that contextualises the transactional turn of recent years as the reassertion of an underlying logic rather than a departure from a prior norm (Madan, 2020).

DISCUSSION: IS TRANSACTIONALISM A FAILURE OR A MATURATION?

The foregoing analysis raises a normative question: should the transition from strategic partnership to transactional engagement be understood as a failure of the relationship's founding vision, or as its maturation into a more realistic and sustainable form? The pessimistic reading holds that the absence of a bilateral trade agreement, the persistent visa irritants, India's non-compliance on Russia, and the limits of Quad institutionalisation all indicate that the partnership has failed to transcend the logic of self-interest. On this view, the nuclear deal's promise of a "defining partnership" was always more aspiration than analysis—a rhetorical investment that obscured the structural divergences between a status quo power seeking to lock in its international order and a revisionist rising power seeking to maximise its strategic flexibility.

The optimistic reading, which this paper finds more persuasive, holds that transactionalism is an appropriate mode for a partnership between states with genuinely different strategic cultures, geopolitical positions, and domestic political constraints. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, one of India's most incisive political philosophers, has raised the further question—underexamined in the strategic literature—of whether India's domestic democratic trajectory poses an emerging challenge to the values-based dimension of the partnership (Mehta, 2021). If US Congressional and civil society concerns about democratic backsliding in India continue to grow, the normative foundations of the relationship may erode even further, leaving a purely transactional residue.

Against this backdrop, the iCET framework offers a model for managing the transactional relationship constructively: identifying domains of genuine structural convergence, building concrete deliverables around those domains, and resisting the temptation to over-invest the relationship with values-laden rhetoric that neither party can consistently sustain. A relationship that delivers

cooperation on defence technology, semiconductor supply chains, and Indo-Pacific security—while tolerating divergence on Russia, trade, and international institutional norms—may prove more durable than one premised on a deeper solidarity that structural realities do not support.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY RECONSIDERED: THE PRICE OF PARTNERSHIP IN A FRACTURING WORLD

The preceding analysis warrants a more pointed concluding argument regarding the strategic posture India ought to adopt going forward. Since the 1991 Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG) reforms, the trajectory of India's engagement with the United States has been one of near-continuous deepening. C. Raja Mohan's early account of this shift demonstrates that economic liberalisation did not merely open Indian markets; it fundamentally altered the assumptions underlying Indian foreign policy, replacing Nehruvian non-alignment with a pragmatic calculus in which closer ties with the world's largest economy became an organising priority of the Indian state (Mohan, 1998). This deepening has enjoyed a notable feature rare in Indian politics: durable cross-party consensus. Harsh V. Pant's research demonstrates that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, which concluded the nuclear deal, and the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance, which has presided over the foundational defence agreements and the Quad's revival, have sustained continuity on the broad architecture of the American relationship despite sharp domestic political polarisation on almost every other matter of governance (Pant, 2009). Parliamentary debates on defence agreements, the nuclear deal ratification process, and the Quad have consistently shown that support for deepening US engagement crosses India's principal party divide, reflecting an unusual degree of elite consensus on the strategic logic of the relationship.

Yet this paper's central conclusion is that the very durability of this consensus makes it imperative for Indian policymakers to resist converting a favourable disposition toward Washington into anything resembling a binding strategic commitment. The argument advanced here is not that India should retreat from its engagement with the United States, but that the contemporary international environment has reaffirmed, with unusual clarity, the structural wisdom that animated India's founding generation of strategic thinkers.

Zorawar Daulet Singh's revisionist history of Indian Cold War diplomacy demonstrates that Jawaharlal Nehru's commitment to non-alignment was never primarily an ideological abstraction; it emerged from a hard-headed reading of India's structural vulnerability as a newly independent state navigating a world of contending great powers, each of which sought to instrumentalise Indian alignment for its own purposes (Z. D. Singh, 2019). The Nonalignment 2.0 strategy document—authored by a cross-section of India's leading strategic minds in 2012—explicitly extended this logic into the contemporary era, cautioning against converting India's improving relationship with Washington into a formal alliance and insisting that India's interests are best served by preserving maximum independent room for manoeuvre amid an unsettled distribution of global power (Khilnani et al., 2012). The recurrence of this caution across two generations of Indian strategic thought, separated by more than four decades and entirely different international structures, suggests that it reflects something more durable than a passing policy preference: a structural assessment of India's position in the international system that successive crises have repeatedly vindicated.

The two most consequential international crises of the current decade—Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the Israel-Iran war of 2025–2026—have together supplied an unplanned but unusually clarifying stress test of this assessment. Happyman Jacob has argued that the near-simultaneous eruption of major conflict in Eastern Europe and West Asia exposed the practical costs

that India would have borne had it tied its foreign policy more closely to either the American-led Western bloc or to Russia and its partners; New Delhi's ability to maintain functional relationships with Washington, Moscow, Tehran, and Tel Aviv simultaneously—relationships that a more binary alignment would have placed in direct conflict with one another—proved indispensable to protecting Indian interests during both crises (Jacob, 2024).

The Israel-Iran war carries particular significance for Indian strategic calculus because it directly implicated India's energy security and the safety of a substantial Indian diaspora in the Gulf region. Manoj Joshi's analysis of India's crude oil and natural gas exposure through the Strait of Hormuz demonstrates that Indian strategic chokepoints remain acutely vulnerable to conflicts in which India has no direct stake and over whose escalation it has no control (Joshi, 2024). Dhruva Jaishankar's assessment of the same crisis reaches a complementary conclusion: had India's foreign policy been more tightly bound to any single external power's regional confrontations—whether through formal alliance or through a degree of economic and security dependence that constrained its freedom of action—the costs to Indian energy supply and diaspora safety during the crisis would have been considerably higher (D. Jaishankar, 2024).

The Ukraine war, examined earlier in this paper through the lens of India's abstentions, supplies a parallel lesson when viewed from the perspective of the Western alliance system itself. Rajan Menon's analysis of the conflict's effect on Western solidarity demonstrates that even formal, treaty-bound alliance commitments proved considerably more conditional and self-interested in practice than their public rhetoric suggested, with member states calibrating their material support to Ukraine according to their own threat perceptions, economic exposure, and domestic political constraints rather than according to any uniform alliance obligation (R. Menon, 2023). Walter Russell Mead has captured the broader implication of this pattern in his concept of the “price of friendship”: close partnerships and formal alliances alike extract

continuous costs in the form of policy conformity, supply chain exposure, and entanglement in conflicts not of one's own choosing—costs that do not disappear simply because a relationship is framed in the language of strategic partnership rather than formal alliance (Mead, 2023).

The implication for Indian policy is direct. The United States may indeed be, in the language of the strategic partnership narrative, India's most valuable contemporary external partner—a source of advanced defence technology, investment, market access, and diplomatic support in multilateral forums. But it would be analytically mistaken, and strategically hazardous, to conflate this value with an alignment of interests. Between two states as large, as geographically distant, and as differently positioned in the international system as India and the United States, there are remarkably few issues on which their interests are genuinely identical rather than merely overlapping or temporarily convergent. On China, the two countries share a common concern but differing thresholds of tolerance and differing exposure to escalation. On Russia, their interests diverge sharply. On the Middle East, India's energy dependence and diaspora presence create vulnerabilities that the United States, as a net energy exporter with a far smaller regional diaspora, does not share to the same degree. On trade and technology transfer, the two countries remain, in substantial respects, competitors as much as partners.

This is not a counsel of estrangement but of calibration. India must continue to maximise the genuine and substantial gains available through cooperation with the United States—in defence technology, semiconductor and critical technology partnerships, investment, and multilateral coordination on the Indo-Pacific—while simultaneously ensuring that its strategic chokepoints, whether in energy supply, critical defence platforms, semiconductor inputs, or financial infrastructure, are not allowed to fall under the effective control or veto of any single external power, American or otherwise. The logic of diversification that has historically governed India's

defence procurement, its energy sourcing, and its diplomatic posture toward competing great powers is not an artefact of Cold War nostalgia; it is, as the events of the current decade have demonstrated with unusual force, a continuing structural necessity for a state of India's size, ambition, and geographic position.

Indian policymakers, in other words, must remain clear-eyed about the limits of what partnership with Washington can and should be permitted to cost. The cross-party parliamentary consensus favouring deepened US engagement is a genuine and valuable political asset, reflecting a broad recognition across India's political spectrum that the relationship serves Indian interests. But that consensus should not be mistaken for, or allowed to drift into, an unconditional commitment. The price of friendship, as the recent experience of formal US allies during the Ukraine war illustrates, is real and is paid disproportionately by the more dependent partner in any relationship. India's task is to identify, with precision, the threshold beyond which the costs of deeper alignment with the United States would begin to outweigh the benefits—and to ensure that its policymaking apparatus retains both the analytical clarity and the practical optionality to recognise that threshold before it is crossed rather than after.

CONCLUSION

The India-USA relationship since the 2008 nuclear deal has travelled a considerable distance—from the historic rapprochement symbolised by the agreement itself, through the institutional deepening of foundational defence accords, the Quad, and the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, to the more cautious, interest-calibrated engagement of the present. This paper has argued that this trajectory represents not a failure of the partnership but a clarification of its underlying character: a relationship of convergent but not identical interests, conducted by two states with distinct strategic cultures and domestic political imperatives.

The nuclear deal remains the foundational act of the modern relationship—a moment at which the United States made a deliberate and costly bet on India's long-term strategic value. That bet has yielded substantial returns in terms of defence cooperation, technology partnership, and India's integration into Indo-Pacific security frameworks. It has not, however, produced the deep normative alignment that characterises America's treaty alliances in Europe and Northeast Asia, and the intellectual honesty to acknowledge this gap is a prerequisite for managing the relationship effectively going forward.

This paper's analysis points to a final and more pointed conclusion regarding the strategic posture India should adopt. The pattern of increasing engagement with Washington since the LPG reforms of 1991, sustained by a rare cross-party parliamentary consensus, is a real and valuable achievement of Indian diplomacy. Yet the contemporary international environment—marked in immediate succession by the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Iran conflict—has demonstrated with unusual clarity why India's founding policymakers were so insistent upon strategic autonomy in the first place. Both crises have shown that partnerships, however valuable, come with a price: a price paid in policy conformity, in exposure to conflicts not of one's own choosing, and in the risk that one's own strategic chokepoints—energy supply, critical defence inputs, technology infrastructure—become hostage to the calculations of an external power pursuing its own interests rather than one's own.

India must therefore continue to pursue maximum cooperation with the United States in the domains where genuine convergence exists, while remaining acutely conscious that, between two states of such scale and such different geographic and historical positioning, true identity of interest is the exception rather than the rule. The task before Indian policymakers is not to choose between partnership and autonomy but to define, with precision and continuous reassessment, the limits beyond which the price of partnership would exceed what Indian interests can sustainably afford to pay.

The China variable—identified by Tellis (2006) as the original strategic rationale for the partnership and confirmed by Madan's (2020) historical analysis as its most consistent structural driver—will remain an important determinant of the relationship's future trajectory. But it should inform, not override, India's broader commitment to a foreign policy that maximises its options rather than narrows them.

The India-USA relationship is neither the transformative strategic alliance envisioned by its most enthusiastic proponents nor the superficial arrangement alleged by its sceptics. It is a mature, institutionally substantial, and strategically significant relationship that has found its appropriate register in transactional cooperation. Properly managed—and bounded by a clear-eyed Indian insistence on strategic autonomy—this transactional maturity may prove more enduring than the grander visions that animated the partnership's founding moment, and considerably more protective of Indian interests than any deeper alignment that recent global crises have shown to carry costs India need not, and should not, agree to bear.

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