

# THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA–U.S. STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: BALANCING CHINA WITHOUT FORMAL ALLIANCES

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## ABSTRACT

*This research paper examines the evolution, drivers, and future trajectory of India–U.S. strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific. The study traces the historical foundations of the partnership, analyses the diplomatic and strategic recalibrations that produced the Indo-Pacific framework, and evaluates China’s assertiveness as the central structural driver of convergence. It also explores the depth of defence cooperation, the significance of the Quad as a model for non-alliance collaboration, and the growing economic and technological partnerships that increasingly shape the global balance of power. Importantly, the research analyses how India balances its strategic autonomy with deeper engagement with the United States, identifying areas of convergence and divergence that will influence future cooperation. The paper concludes by mapping the likely trajectories of the bilateral partnership, arguing that India and the United States are positioned to shape the Indo-Pacific order through flexible, high-trust, non-treaty strategic coordination.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-Pacific, India–U.S. Relations, Strategic Alignment, Quad, Defence Cooperation, Strategic Autonomy, China, Maritime Security, Emerging Technologies*

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, using a combination of historical analysis, strategic studies frameworks, policy document review, and comparative geopolitical assessment.

Primary sources include official government statements, speeches, agreements, policy releases, and data from ministries of external affairs and defence. Secondary sources include journal articles, academic books, think-tank analyses, and contemporary geopolitical commentaries.

The methodology emphasises interpretive analysis, evaluating patterns, motivations, and

strategic behaviours rather than quantitative metrics. The paper synthesises evidence from multiple domains—defence, diplomacy, economics, and technology—to provide a holistic understanding of India–U.S. alignment in the Indo-Pacific.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on India–U.S. relations highlights several key themes. Early scholarship describes the Cold War period as one of mistrust driven by conflicting worldviews—India’s non-alignment vs. America’s alliance-centric strategy. Post–Cold War literature identifies liberalisation, geopolitical reorientation, and shared regional concerns—

especially China's rise—as factors that facilitated strategic convergence.

Studies on the Indo-Pacific framework (Abe, Medcalf, and Pant) emphasise the importance of a unified maritime strategic space linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Analysts also highlight the Quad as an innovative and flexible geopolitical instrument. Literature on defence cooperation focuses on foundational agreements (LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA) and increasing interoperability.

Recent work stresses the technological dimension of U.S.–India relations (iCET, semiconductor cooperation), the domestic drivers of India's strategic autonomy, and evolving middle-power coalitions in Asia. This paper builds on this scholarship and integrates these strands into a comprehensive analysis of Indo-Pacific alignment.

## THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

The contemporary India–U.S. strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific is the result of a long, uneven, and often contradictory historical trajectory. What appears today as a natural convergence was, for decades, obstructed by clashing worldviews, incompatible security priorities, and mutual strategic suspicion. India's insistence on strategic autonomy after independence and the United States' alliance-centric Cold War posture created a political distance that took nearly fifty years to overcome. However, as global political dynamics shifted—with the Cold War ending, economic globalisation accelerating, and China rising as a revisionist power—the structural foundations of India–U.S. cooperation gradually strengthened. The bilateral relationship, once characterised by diplomatic hesitancy, began transforming into a multilayered strategic partnership that today anchors the Indo-Pacific balance of power.

### **Early Cold War Disconnect and Strategic Divergence**

At independence, India adopted a policy of non-alignment—a deliberate choice shaped by colonial experience and a desire to avoid entanglement in superpower rivalry. The United States, however, approached Asia through the logic of containment, expecting countries to align against the Soviet Union. India's refusal to join U.S.-led alliances was interpreted in Washington as indecisiveness or moral idealism. Meanwhile, U.S. military support to Pakistan—India's main adversary—deepened distrust and shaped Indian perceptions of American intentions for decades.

India's wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 further entrenched this divide. The U.S. openly supported Pakistan in 1971, reinforcing India's alignment with the Soviet Union and culminating in the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship. Nuclear issues introduced another layer of tension. After India's 1974 “peaceful nuclear explosion,” Washington imposed export controls and led global efforts to restrict India's technological access.

The Cold War era therefore saw structural divergence:

- India prioritised autonomy and regional stability.
- The U.S. prioritised alliances and global ideological competition.

The result was decades of mistrust, limited trade, minimal defence engagement, and an absence of strategic coordination.

### **Post–Cold War Liberalisation and Rethinking of Strategic Postures**

The end of the Cold War opened the door to a reimagined relationship. India's economic liberalisation in 1991 brought Western capital, markets, and technology into the Indian economy. For the first time, economic interests aligned meaningfully with geopolitical possibilities. Meanwhile, Washington began recognising India as a rising power capable of balancing China's growing influence.

The 1998 nuclear tests initially triggered sanctions, but they unexpectedly led to sustained dialogue between the two countries (the Jaswant Singh–Strobe Talbott talks). These exchanges laid the foundation for long-term understanding.

The landmark moment came with the 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement, which effectively normalised India's nuclear status and demonstrated unprecedented U.S. willingness to privilege strategic considerations over non-proliferation rigidity.

Simultaneously, India developed its Look East → Act East policies, expanding engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. The United States' "Pivot to Asia" complemented this shift, and both countries increasingly recognised the China challenge through similar lenses.

By the early 2010s, the structural foundations for a durable strategic partnership were firmly in place.

## THE DIPLOMATIC RECALIBRATION AND EMERGENCE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific is not just a geographic expression; it is a diplomatic and strategic framework that redefines how India and the United States perceive and engage with the broader Asian region. Its emergence reflects the realisation that Asia's security cannot be compartmentalised into separate Indian and Pacific spheres. China's economic and military reach, India's expanding maritime presence, and growing interdependence between trade routes, technology networks, and regional institutions have created an integrated strategic system.

This recalibration required both nations to rethink old assumptions and adopt a framework that matched contemporary geopolitical realities. The Indo-Pacific concept provided the intellectual and diplomatic foundation for India–U.S. alignment while accommodating India's autonomy and America's regional leadership.

### ***Evolution of the Indo-Pacific Concept***

Until the early 2000s, the "Asia-Pacific" centred on East Asia, sidelining India from regional security discussions. But major developments—China's naval expansion, India's Act East policy, and Japan's "confluence of two seas" vision—highlighted that the Indian and Pacific Oceans formed a single strategic continuum.

Japan, Australia, ASEAN states, and eventually the United States adopted the Indo-Pacific framework, culminating in the renaming of U.S. Pacific Command to INDOPACOM in 2018. This signalled a structural shift: India was now viewed as indispensable to regional stability.

For India, the Indo-Pacific concept aligned with its civilisational history and strategic ambition. It integrated India's immediate neighbourhood, Southeast Asia, and the broader maritime region into one coherent strategic space. Importantly, it gave India equal footing with major powers in shaping regional rules and norms.

### ***India's Shifting Strategic Identity: From Continental to Maritime Power***

Historically preoccupied with continental threats—Pakistan and China—India's identity as a maritime power evolved gradually. Economic globalisation, energy imports, and the Indian Ocean's centrality to trade forced India to reorient its defence posture. China's growing naval footprint and port acquisitions intensified this shift.

India's naval modernisation, expanded maritime exercises, and the Act East policy positioned it as a key player in Indo-Pacific security. The Indo-Pacific framework validated India's maritime aspirations and created opportunities for deeper strategic coordination with the U.S., Japan, Australia, and ASEAN.

By repositioning itself as both a continental and maritime power, India became a central pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

## CHINA AS THE STRUCTURAL DRIVER OF STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

While India and the U.S. share many areas of cooperation, no factor has accelerated alignment more than China's rise. China's assertiveness across military, economic, and geopolitical domains has functioned as a structural driver—not a temporary issue—compelling both countries to coordinate their policies and strengthen their partnership.

India's threat from China is immediate and territorial. The U.S. threat from China is global and systemic. These perspectives differ but complement each other, creating powerful incentives for collaboration.

### **China's Rise and the Altered Regional Security Landscape**

China's rapid military modernisation, naval expansion, and coercive behaviour in the South China Sea have reshaped Asian security. Beijing has militarised artificial islands, rejected international rulings, and deployed A2/AD systems that threaten freedom of navigation.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has acquired strategic footholds across the Indian Ocean—Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti—creating potential dual-use facilities. These developments directly challenge India's maritime security and U.S. naval dominance.

China's influence on ASEAN states, economic coercion against Australia, and aggressive actions toward Taiwan have reinforced the perception that Beijing aims to reshape regional order in its favour.

For both India and the U.S., China's assertiveness is not episodic but structural—requiring long-term strategic counterbalancing.

### **Sino-Indian Border Tensions as a Catalyst**

China's challenge to India is direct and territorial, most visibly along the Line of Actual Control. The 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan clash marked decisive ruptures. The Galwan incident, in particular, eliminated India's remaining optimism about managing China through diplomacy alone.

China's militarisation of the border and enduring standoffs created conditions where India could no longer maintain hedging strategies. Post-Galwan, India accelerated defence cooperation with the U.S., including operational intelligence-sharing, enhanced military exercises, and fast-tracked technology partnerships.

For Washington, China's aggression toward India validated its Indo-Pacific strategy and strengthened the rationale for supporting India militarily.

Thus, border tensions functioned as a catalyst for unprecedented strategic convergence.

## **DEFENCE COOPERATION: MECHANISMS AND DEPTH**

Defence cooperation has become the strongest pillar of the India–U.S. strategic relationship. What makes it unique is that it functions without a formal alliance. Instead, it is built on practical operational mechanisms, foundational agreements, shared exercises, joint technology development, and intelligence-sharing.

### **Foundational Military Agreements and Operational Synergy**

The signing of LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA fundamentally transformed military cooperation:

- LEMOA enables logistics support and access to each other's bases.
- COMCASA allows secure, encrypted communication between Indian and U.S. platforms.
- BECA provides geospatial intelligence that enhances precision targeting and situational awareness.

These agreements improved interoperability dramatically, especially in maritime and air domains. They also signalled a major shift in political trust from both sides. Combined with 2+2 dialogues and working groups on cyber, space, and defence

technology, the two militaries now operate with unprecedented transparency and coordination.

### **Technology Transfers, Co-Development, and Joint Military Exercises**

India and the U.S. have moved from arms sales to co-development and co-production of advanced systems. Key initiatives include:

- DTTI and iCET
- GE–HAL jet engine co-production
- Maritime surveillance networks
- Collaboration in AI, quantum technologies, space, and cyber

India's acquisition of advanced U.S. platforms—P-8I, Apaches, Chinooks, C-17s, C-130Js—has improved operational capabilities significantly.

Joint exercises such as Malabar, Yudh Abhyas, Cope India, and Tiger Triumph deepen interoperability, doctrinal familiarity, and crisis readiness.

Maritime domain awareness cooperation, especially through IFC-IOR, strengthens the ability to track Chinese naval activity.

In sum, defence cooperation is structural, comprehensive, and forward-looking.

## **THE QUAD AS A PROTOTYPE FOR NON-ALLIANCE STRATEGIC COOPERATION**

The Quad has become a central element of the Indo-Pacific architecture, demonstrating how major democracies can coordinate strategically without forming a military alliance. It is flexible, issue-based, and designed to address a wide range of challenges—from maritime security to technology governance.

### **Quad's Strategic Vision and Functional Framework**

The Quad's vision focuses on a free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific anchored in international law. Its agenda includes:

- Maritime security
- Supply-chain resilience
- Critical and emerging technologies
- Cybersecurity
- Infrastructure partnerships
- Public health and disaster response
- Climate initiatives

The Quad enhances deterrence not through military commitments but through signalling, capacity-building, and normative leadership. Exercises like Malabar reinforce operational alignment.

### **India's Role and the Quad's Limits as a Non-Alliance Model**

India's participation is strategic and deliberate. The Quad strengthens India's maritime presence and geopolitical influence while respecting its autonomy. India supports the Quad's flexible structure because it avoids treaty obligations or collective defence commitments.

The Quad's limits—no alliance commitments, no military command structure, no explicit anti-China treaty—are intentional. They allow cooperation without escalation or loss of sovereignty.

Despite these limits, the Quad has emerged as an innovative model for 21st-century strategic cooperation—adaptable, multi-dimensional, and effective in shaping regional power dynamics.

## **ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT**

Economic and technological cooperation has become one of the strongest and most durable pillars of the India–U.S. strategic partnership. While

defence cooperation enhances India's immediate security posture, it is economic interdependence and technological collaboration that create long-term strategic stability. In an era where power is defined as much by innovation and data as by military capabilities, both nations recognise that the contest with China will be shaped significantly by control over technology ecosystems, supply chains, digital infrastructure, and economic resilience.

The India–U.S. partnership in these areas therefore goes beyond trade; it is a deliberate alignment designed to prevent technological dependency on China, strengthen domestic capabilities, and build a secure, open, and democratic economic architecture across the Indo-Pacific.

### **Strategic Trade and Economic Interdependence**

India and the United States have steadily expanded their economic partnership, with the U.S. becoming India's largest trading partner and a major player in India's technology and services sectors. Bilateral trade now spans IT services, pharmaceuticals, defence equipment, energy, electronics, and agricultural products.

This economic integration is not just commercial—it is strategic.

Both nations share concerns about China's economic coercion, dominance in global manufacturing, and attempts to reshape economic rules in its favour. In response, India and the U.S. have strengthened cooperation in supply-chain resilience, focusing on critical sectors such as:

- semiconductors
- pharmaceuticals
- critical minerals
- medical supplies
- clean energy components

U.S. companies play a central role in India's IT and innovation ecosystems, while Indian talent contributes significantly to the U.S. tech sector. These connections create structural incentives for

long-term cooperation, reinforcing the strategic partnership beyond defence.

### **Critical and Emerging Technologies as the New Battleground**

Technological competition is the defining strategic domain of the 21st century, and India–U.S. convergence is strongest in this area. Through iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies), both nations collaborate on:

- AI and machine learning
- quantum technologies
- aerospace and jet engine co-production
- cyber security
- space situational awareness
- 5G/6G telecom infrastructure
- semiconductor manufacturing

This cooperation reduces reliance on Chinese technology systems and helps India build a self-reliant defence and tech ecosystem.

Additionally, both countries coordinate on digital governance to counter authoritarian digital models. Joint ventures in space, cyber, biotechnology, and green technologies further deepen this partnership, making India and the U.S. key players in shaping global technological norms.

## **INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: LIMITS AND ADAPTATIONS**

India's strategic autonomy has been central to its foreign policy since independence. However, the evolving Indo-Pacific landscape—marked by China's assertiveness, technological dependence, and shifting power dynamics—has pushed India to recalibrate how it practices autonomy. Today, strategic autonomy does not mean distancing from major powers; it means choosing partnerships without being constrained by them.

### **Limits of Strategic Autonomy in a Changing Global Order**



India's traditional version of autonomy faces structural limits today. As China expands its military presence along the LAC, strengthens ties with Pakistan, and deepens influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, India's freedom of manoeuvre has narrowed.

Similarly, India's dependence on global supply chains, its need for foreign investment, and its defence reliance on Russia constrain policy flexibility. The Russia–Ukraine war exposed India's delicate position between its traditional defence partner and growing ties with the U.S.

The increasing importance of cyber security, digital infrastructure, and emerging technologies further complicates autonomy—India cannot remain isolated and must cooperate with trusted partners.

### **Adaptations in India's Strategic Autonomy: A New Model of Flexible Alignment**

India has adapted autonomy into a multi-aligned model—deepening ties with the U.S., France, Japan, Australia, and Israel, while retaining ties with Russia and maintaining independent positions on global conflicts.

Through the Quad, India practices security cooperation without alliance obligations.

Through iCET, India partners on cutting-edge technology without compromising sovereignty.

Through diversified defence procurement and co-production, India reduces over-reliance on any single country.

This flexible, adaptive model strengthens India's ability to balance China while safeguarding independent decision-making.

## **AREAS OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE**

India and the United States converge strongly on Indo-Pacific security, maritime stability, technology governance, and countering coercive Chinese behaviour. At the same time, both nations diverge in certain geopolitical areas, especially regarding

Russia, the Middle East, trade policies, and the pace of economic liberalisation. Understanding these convergences and divergences explains why the partnership is deep but non-allied.

### **Areas of Convergence**

Key convergences include:

- shared concerns about China's assertiveness
- commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific
- maritime security coordination
- joint development of critical technologies
- defence interoperability and intelligence-sharing
- collaboration in the Quad
- support for democratic values and transparent infrastructure

These convergences give the partnership structural strength and long-term alignment.

### **Areas of Divergence**

Despite convergence, differences persist:

- India's reliance on Russia for defence vs. U.S. sanctions on Moscow
- differing threat perceptions (India's continental focus vs. U.S.'s global focus)
- India's economic protectionism vs. U.S. market-driven expectations
- divergent positions on Middle East politics
- U.S. domestic criticism of India's internal politics
- India's refusal to join formal alliances

These divergences are manageable and do not undermine strategic cooperation.

## **FUTURE TRAJECTORIES OF INDIA–U.S. INDO-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP**

The Indo-Pacific partnership will continue deepening through flexible cooperation rather than rigid alliances. Both nations will strengthen maritime coordination, technological collaboration, supply-chain integration, and regional diplomacy.

The next decade will be defined by how well India and the U.S. convert shared interests into institutionalised forms of cooperation while respecting India's autonomy and the U.S.'s global commitments.

### **A Long-Term, Non-Treaty Strategic Partnership**

Both nations will maintain a non-treaty, high-trust strategic partnership.

The relationship will deepen through:

- expanded military exercises
- enhanced intelligence-sharing
- coordinated responses to regional crises
- strengthened defence-technology co-development
- more robust 2+2 and ICET frameworks

This model avoids alliance obligations while supporting operational synergy.

### **Post-Quad Multilateral Frameworks and Regional Security Architecture**

Beyond the Quad, India and the U.S. will advance issue-based coalitions, including:

- maritime surveillance networks
- cyber security partnerships
- infrastructure finance alternatives to BRI
- semiconductor and supply-chain alliances
- space situational awareness cooperation

These modular coalitions will distribute power across the Indo-Pacific, preventing dominance by any single state—especially China.

## **CONCLUSION**

The India–U.S. strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific represents one of the most important geopolitical developments of the 21st century. Built on converging security concerns, technological interdependence, shared democratic values, and maritime cooperation, the partnership has matured beyond episodic diplomacy into a structural alignment.

China's assertiveness remains the central driver of cooperation, but both nations also share broader interests in maintaining a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. While divergences persist—especially regarding Russia, trade, and alliance expectations—they do not undermine the strategic logic of partnership.

Looking ahead, the bilateral relationship will deepen through flexible, non-treaty cooperation across defence, technology, supply chains, and regional capacity-building. India's emphasis on autonomy and Washington's preference for burden-sharing ensure that the partnership will remain adaptive, resilient, and strategically significant. Together, India and the U.S. are poised to shape the Indo-Pacific order for decades to come.

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