

India-U.S. Relations

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India-U.S. Relations: Navigating Strategic Drift

Context

The **India-U.S. relationship** is widely regarded as one of the most **significant strategic partnerships** of the 21st century. Anchored in **shared democratic values** and driven by **mutual geopolitical interests**, the two countries have made notable strides over the past two decades. However, recent developments suggest a **gradual but visible drift** in the partnership. Understanding the causes, manifestations, and corrective steps is essential for restoring **strategic trust and long-term alignment**.

Trajectory of India-U.S. Ties: From Optimism to Unease

- The relationship peaked with **Prime Minister Modi's early outreach** to President Trump and bipartisan goodwill in Washington.
 - There was a strong emphasis on **building a democratic, rules-based global order**.
 - However, signs of **policy inconsistency** and **symbolic missteps** have led to strategic unease:
 - Trump's **hyphenation of India and Pakistan** post-Operation Sindoor blurred strategic distinctions.
 - Hosting of **Pakistan's military chief** by the U.S. also upset India's diplomatic establishment.
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Points of Friction

- **Economic Issues:**

- Despite U.S. trade deals with China, **India's manufacturing sector** was indirectly discouraged (e.g., Apple investment concerns).
- This affects India's **China-plus-one strategy**.

- **Immigration Policies:**

- Uncertainty around the **H-1B visa regime**, a key pillar of India-U.S. tech cooperation, threatens Indian professionals in the U.S.

- **Security Concerns:**

- The Pentagon describing **Pakistan as a "phenomenal partner" in counterterrorism** contradicts India's position on Pakistan's involvement in cross-border militancy.
- Such narratives reflect a **Cold War-era mindset** in some sections of the U.S. establishment.

Causes Behind Strategic Drift

- **Transactional Diplomacy:**

- The **Trump administration's focus on short-term benefits** conflicts with India's preference for **gradual, long-term strategic alignment**.

- **Overestimation of Pakistan's Role:**

- Despite Pakistan's **ambiguous role in terrorism**, some U.S. institutions continue to view it as strategically important, especially in relation to Afghanistan.

- **India's Strategic Autonomy Misinterpreted:**

- India's **civilisational approach and autonomy in foreign policy** is sometimes mistaken by U.S. analysts as indecisiveness.
- Critics like **Ashley Tellis** argue that India suffers from "great-power delusions," overlooking its **calculated diplomacy**.

Steps Toward Renewal

- **Avoid Reactive Diplomacy:**

- India must maintain **strategic consistency**, enhance its influence in Washington through **Congress, think tanks, and diaspora** networks.

- **Accelerate Economic Reforms:**

- Domestic reforms are crucial not for appeasement but to **boost investor confidence and competitiveness**.
- Focus areas: **regulatory clarity, infrastructure upgrade, and high-value manufacturing**.

- **Reframe Immigration Dialogue:**

- The **H-1B issue** should be positioned as a **mutual driver of innovation**, not as a one-sided concession.

- **U.S. Support in Capacity Building:**

- The U.S. must abandon outdated frameworks and **recognize India's value** in shaping **democratic supply chains** and **Indo-Pacific security**.

Rediscovering Strategic Purpose

- The relationship must move beyond **anti-China alignment** or **market access goals**.
- It should aim to **co-create a pluralistic and democratic world order**.
- The **2005 Civil Nuclear Deal** is an example of bold, trust-based diplomacy that defied convention.
- Current tensions offer a chance for **course correction**, not a sign of failure.

Conclusion

The India-U.S. partnership has previously endured **sanctions, climate disagreements, and regional security differences**, only to emerge stronger.

Today, it stands at a **critical juncture**, where both nations must resist losing a **generational opportunity**.

If both sides recommit to **clarity, candour, and strategic purpose**, the relationship can weather present challenges and contribute meaningfully to a **stable, democratic, multipolar world order**.



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