



The Centrality of the U.S.-India Partnership to Maintaining Peace and Security in the Indo-Pacific Region



Figure 1: U.S. President Biden and India's PM Modi, Pic Courtesy Reuters

“The United States and India relations is very important and underscored the centrality of U.S.-India partnership to maintaining peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.” Lloyd J. Austin

Over the past two decades, the relationship between the United States and India has grown stronger, entering a new era of “global strategic partnership”.¹ This convergence is significant given the changes in regional and global power dynamics. The two countries have collaborated in numerous areas, including trade and investment, defense and security, climate and clean energy, health, education, cyber, space, and technology. Bilateral trade, defense, security, and technology cooperation have

been the most critical factors in advancing the relationship.² Recent visits by top officials, including Defense Secretary Austin's visit to India in early June and Modi's upcoming official state visit to the U.S. on June 22, will further strengthen the bilateral relationship and will reaffirm the shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, Despite the increasingly positive and collaborative trend in the relations between the two countries, managing China in the Indo-Pacific and India's alignment with Russia are the prominent factors that make some analysts emphasize on India is 'bad bet' and or 'India's last best chance.'

In the list, senior expert Ashley J. Tellis has viewed India as a 'bad bet' for the U.S., based on the fact that India will not be part of any U.S. confrontation with China, unless it threatens India's own security. Another analyst has suggested that; India choosing the West over Russia could make it a great power while also cautioning that this is 'India's last best chance' before the U.S. starts viewing it as a reliable partner. The alternative perspective is that it is important to note that the U.S. is not reliant on India for immediate support in a conflict with China. Additionally, the U.S. tends to seek ways to reduce risk (de-risking) rather than completely sever ties (de-coupling)³ with China; as Biden stated earlier, "need not be a new Cold War."⁴ Additionally, Secretary Austin said recently in Shangri -la-dialogue, "Conflict is neither imminent nor inevitable."⁵ Also, the U.S. Secretary of State, Blinken's proposed plan to travel China on June 18, aims to bring thaw in strained relations of both countries.

Notably, Secretary Austin unequivocally lauded India's 'tremendous capacity' during his recent trip to the country. He emphasized that the United States and India, like-minded countries working on a common vision and shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, can have a "lasting effect."

Of course, it's true that from Taiwan to Tawang (A town in India's Eastern state Arunachal Pradesh), India's own security concerns come first and matter the most. India may not step up with the US if China invades Taiwan or the South China Sea; however, India is committed to upholding international norms and the UN Charter, which protects the sovereignty and integrity of all countries. Furthermore, India's relation with China is at its lowest level after the Galwan clash in 2020, when India sacrificed its 40 soldiers in a non-combatant ambush with China.⁶ In addition, India has another adversary Pakistan, its neighbor, which is in everyday strife through Kashmir⁷ and is also a good friend of China. Given these critical factors and the longstanding policy of non-alignment, the partnership between the US and India is moving forward in a way conducive to both countries.

A Leap in Defense, Security and Technology cooperation



Figure 2: Austin's visit to India, Pic Courtesy Reuters

The U.S.-India defense and security partnership has grown tremendously and now India is US's Major Defense Partner.⁸ The two countries are hugely engaged in defense trade and joint exercises with various levels of bi-lateral dialogues and working groups. During the U.S. Defense Secretary Austin's visit to India on June 4-5, a new roadmap⁹ has been introduced for U.S.-India Defense Industrial Cooperation. The aim is to expedite technology cooperation and co-production in various areas, including air combat and land mobility systems, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, munitions, and the undersea domain. A new initiative of India-U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) is to advance cutting-edge technology cooperation that will promote innovative partnerships between U.S. and Indian companies,

investors, start-up accelerators, and academic research institutions. The Secretary Austin underscored “the centrality of the U.S.-India partnership to maintaining peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region”.¹⁰ The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET)¹¹ represents a joint and unwavering commitment between the United States and India to accelerate collaboration in the areas of artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and the semiconductor supply chain within the technology realm.

Upswing in Trade and Economic Sector

Trade and investments are important components of the U.S.-India multi-sectoral relations. Total bilateral trade between the two countries increased tremendously from U.S. \$20 billion in 2000 to US \$175 billion in 2022.¹² Many U.S. companies see India as a stable and growing market and enhance their operations from India. Apple, and other big U.S. companies tend to boost their production from India.¹³ The deal between Boeing and Air India is a recent example of another huge collaboration between American and Indian companies where Air India will buy 200 Boeing and Airbus Aircraft for a total of \$ 45.9 billion.¹⁴ The economic and financial partnership between the U.S. and India are moving ahead at a fast pace along with the flurry of visits of U.S. Commerce Secretary and Treasury Secretary Gina Raimondo to India in Feb-March 2023, collaborating with the sidelines of G-20 Finance Ministers meetings (FMMs).¹⁵ And, India’s Finance Minister, Mrs. Nirmala Sitaraman met with US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, to discuss the shared interest of

deepening economic partnership. While she attended the Spring Annual meeting of IMF and World Bank on her week-long visit to the US in mid-April 2023.¹⁶

Expectations and Reality

The convergence between two countries in bilateral relations is a reality. At the same time both countries committed to support the rule based international order with free, and open Indo-Pacific. However, two factors are still creating turbulence in the U.S.-India partnership. One is the way of managing China. While U.S.-India bilateral convergence doesn't necessarily mean convergence on managing China in the Indo-Pacific, despite the growing tension between India and China. India wants to avoid an escalation of the situation. After the Galwan face-off in 2020, India-China relations are not 'business as usual.' Since then, China's threat has been ghosting India at its Eastern Border, viewing the recent incidents; of China's effort to rename 11 places in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and China's opposition to India's Home Minister's visit to the region.¹⁷ On this, the US supports India and condemns using military force to change the Status Quo by Beijing along the LAC. In February 2023, Senator Merkley introduced a bipartisan resolution reaffirming the US recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of India.¹⁸ At the same time, it is also true that more assertive behavior by China in the Himalayan region will ultimately result in deeper ties between the U.S. and India.

And second; India's approach toward the Russia-Ukraine war and its alignment with Russia. India's dependency on Russian arms and oil has been widely debated and discussed in the post-Russia-Ukraine war discourse. However, India's Prime Minister Modi remarked that it's not the 'era of war' and that the crisis should end with 'diplomacy' and 'dialogue.' Furthermore, India has expanded its military procurement sources to include France, Israel, Germany, and the UK, alongside efforts to enhance its own domestic defense capabilities. As per a 2023 report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russian arms exports to India saw a considerable drop of 37%. This decline may be attributed to the Russia-Ukraine war and the rise in Russian arms exports to China by 37%.¹⁹ Additionally, the collaboration between Russia and China could impede India's future relations with Russia.

Still, the U.S. and India need to work together on critical matters such as tariffs, market access, and India's eligibility for the U.S. Generalized System of Preference (GSP). Addressing these issues is essential for the growth of the trade relationship between the U.S. and India and the ongoing negotiations on the IPEF supply chain agreement. This collaboration has the potential to further strengthen trade relations and establish a robust supply chain, taking advantage of India's rapidly growing economy. With the world's largest population of individuals under 35 years old, which stands at an impressive 66%,²⁰ India is a rising power, and this partnership is sure to yield significant benefits for both nations.

Both countries want to limit China's sphere of influence and oppose any change in status quo using military force in the Indo-Pacific region. Indo-Pacific is the 'priority theater' for the U.S., and India has a geo-strategically advantageous position in the Indo-Pacific. India is a prominent member of the Quad, and India is also a member of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) to make the economies more connected, resilient, clean, and fair. The shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific is the key to broader strategic convergence in U.S.-India relations.

Conclusion

Despite the gap between the U.S. and India's policy towards managing China and Russia, the US and India have worked for more robust economic, defense, and security cooperation. The U.S. is India's largest trading partner in 2022-23, and India is a designated major defense partner of the United States. Both countries have a comprehensive strategic partnership. President Biden said that "relationships with India is the most consequential relationship that the United States has in the world. And that still stands." The United States and India have potential to rewrite the history of their relationship with their foundational values of freedom, liberty, rule of law to establish an equal, inclusive, and free and open Indo-Pacific. Both countries should enhance multi-sectoral cooperation and embrace the rising challenges of global economy and global order. The much-expected visit of President Biden to India in

September and President Modi's forthcoming State visit to Washington in June will boost the relationship.

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