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INDIA-US RELATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD: DIPLOMACY, TRADE, AND STRATEGIC SHIFTS

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ABSTRACT

India–United States relations have undergone a remarkable transformation over the past two decades, moving from hesitant engagement to a multidimensional partnership shaped by global power shifts. This paper examines the evolving trajectory of India–US relations with a particular focus on diplomacy, trade, and strategic realignments in the contemporary international order. It explores how shared democratic values, economic complementarities, and security imperatives have deepened bilateral cooperation, while divergences on issues such as trade imbalances, technology transfer, and foreign policy autonomy continue to pose challenges. Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative analytical approach, drawing from primary treaties, policy documents, and secondary literature to assess trends and implications. The analysis highlights India’s strategic significance in the Indo-Pacific, the recalibration of US policies amid rising Chinese assertiveness, and the emergence of new economic and technological domains as central to bilateral ties. The discussion underscores that while India–US relations are neither free of friction nor fully institutionalized, they represent one of the most consequential partnerships shaping the 21st century world order. The conclusion suggests that sustained dialogue, pragmatic compromise, and alignment of

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long-term strategic goals are essential for advancing a durable and mutually beneficial partnership.

KEYWORDS: India-US relations, diplomacy, strategic partnerships, trade relations, Indo-Pacific, foreign policy, economic cooperation, security, technology, global order

INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of relations between the Republic of India and the United States of America reflects the evolving character of international law, diplomacy, and strategic realignments in a multipolar world order. Historically, the bilateral engagement between New Delhi and Washington was characterized by caution, limited convergence, and recurring estrangement. During the Cold War period, India's adherence to the principles of non-alignment and strategic autonomy placed it outside the formal alliance structures envisaged by the United States. American foreign policy of that era, premised on a rigid bipolar understanding of world politics, often regarded India with suspicion, particularly due to its reliance on the Soviet Union for defence acquisitions and its advocacy for economic self-reliance. Although there were episodic instances of cooperation such as United States assistance during India's food security crises in the 1960s the relationship remained structurally constrained.

A substantial transformation occurred in the aftermath of the Cold War. India's liberalization of its economy in 1991 created conditions conducive to trade and investment, altering the lens through which Washington perceived New Delhi. The late 1990s presented renewed difficulties following India's nuclear tests in 1998, which invited United States sanctions pursuant to its domestic non-proliferation statutes. Yet paradoxically, nuclear engagement became the fulcrum of rapprochement in the following decade. The India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2008 was a watershed, granting India a unique status in the global non-proliferation regime and signalling recognition of its growing role as a responsible nuclear power. That accord, finalized

despite considerable international scepticism, underscored a recalibration of United States foreign policy towards India as a strategic partner rather than a peripheral actor.

In the contemporary period, India-US relations have evolved into a multidimensional partnership encompassing diplomacy, trade, defence, technology, energy, climate cooperation, and people-to-people linkages. Both States, as constitutional democracies and market economies, recognize their shared interest in preserving stability in the global order. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic theatre, coupled with the rise of the People's Republic of China, has further catalysed convergence. India's geographic location, demographic profile, and growing economic weight render it indispensable to United States strategic calculations, while Washington's capital, technological prowess, and defence cooperation provide New Delhi with opportunities to advance its developmental and security imperatives.

Nevertheless, this partnership is not devoid of frictions. Trade disputes relating to tariffs, intellectual property, data localization, and market access remain recurring irritants. Divergences are also visible in approaches towards climate change obligations, multilateral trade negotiations, and human rights discourses. Furthermore, India's continued defence dependence on the Russian Federation, and its balancing posture vis-à-vis Iran and China, occasionally complicate alignment with United States expectations. New Delhi's doctrine of strategic autonomy, deeply rooted in its foreign policy tradition, ensures that while India engages deeply with Washington, it simultaneously safeguards its prerogative to pursue independent relations with other powers.

SIGNIFICANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD ORDER

The salience of India-US relations has increased significantly in the twenty-first century. The contemporary international system is characterized by multipolarity, fluid alignments, and the re-emergence of great power competition. Within this context, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal arena of geopolitical

contestation. Both India and the United States have articulated a common vision for a “free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific,” a vision operationalized through initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and newer plurilateral groupings like the I2U2.

Economically, the United States is among India’s largest trading partners, while India represents one of the fastest growing markets for American enterprises. The digital economy, renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, defence manufacturing, and emerging technologies constitute dynamic domains of bilateral cooperation. The Indian diaspora in the United States, now exceeding four million, exerts considerable influence, serving as a soft power bridge and as an advocacy base for sustained bilateral engagement. The global challenges of the present era climate change, pandemics, terrorism, cybersecurity threats, and supply-chain vulnerabilities further underscore the necessity of cooperation between the two States. Neither possesses the capacity to unilaterally address these transnational challenges. India’s enhanced voice in multilateral institutions such as the G20 and its increasing participation in global governance forums, combined with Washington’s strategy of alliance-building and partnership-deepening, highlights a convergence of interests. It is evident that the bilateral relationship is not merely transactional but structural, with implications that extend far beyond the regional context.

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THIS PAPER

This research is undertaken with the objective of providing a critical legal and policy analysis of India-US relations in the contemporary period, with particular emphasis on three dimensions: diplomacy, trade, and strategic shifts. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1. What are the historical and legal factors that have shaped the evolution of diplomatic relations between India and the United States?

2. In what ways have trade and economic interactions contributed to both cooperation and contention in the bilateral framework?
3. How do shifting strategic imperatives particularly within the Indo-Pacific inform the alignment of security policies and international legal obligations of the two States?

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and analytical framework, drawing upon primary sources such as treaties, official statements, and multilateral instruments, as well as secondary literature, including scholarly works, think-tank reports, and statistical data from recognized institutions. The analysis is designed to be comprehensive, addressing both convergences and divergences, with the aim of presenting a balanced assessment of the trajectory of India-US relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly and policy literature on India-United States relations is vast and has evolved considerably over the last seven decades. From the early years of estrangement during the Cold War to the present characterization of the partnership as “indispensable” for global order, commentators have employed diverse analytical frameworks. Legal scholars, international relations theorists, and economists alike have contributed to an interdisciplinary discourse. This review synthesizes existing literature under four thematic strands diplomacy, nuclear engagement, economic relations, and strategic realignments while also identifying existing gaps.

Early Perspectives: Estrangement and Limited Engagement

Cold War literature on India-US relations largely emphasize divergence. K.P. Misra described the relationship as “an uneasy equation marked by occasional warmth but structural mistrust,” rooted in India’s doctrine of non-alignment and Washington’s

expectation of bloc loyalty.³ Scholars note that India's reliance on the Soviet Union for defence, coupled with its advocacy for the New International Economic Order (NIEO), created additional tensions with the United States.⁴ Legal commentary from the 1960s and 1970s focused on India's resistance to Western-led economic regimes. B.S. Chimni argued that India's support for the NIEO, particularly within the United Nations General Assembly, was a direct critique of the legal architecture of the Bretton Woods system.⁵ These works illustrate how India's approach to sovereignty and self-reliance stood in sharp contrast to U.S. promotion of liberal internationalism.

POST-COLD WAR REAPPRAISE

The collapse of the Soviet Union and India's 1991 economic reforms prompted a renewed scholarly interest. Sumit Ganguly's influential works trace how India's foreign policy pragmatism created an environment conducive to rapprochement.⁶ G. John Ikenberry similarly viewed India's liberalization as aligning more closely with U.S. visions of an open international order.⁷ In legal literature, analysts emphasized how India's participation in World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations signalled its gradual integration into a rules-based global economy. Raj Bhala observed that India's engagement in the Uruguay Round "demonstrated a newfound willingness to embrace multilateral disciplines," even while continuing to advocate for special and differential treatment.⁸

NUCLEAR ENGAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC REALIGNMENT

³ K.P. Misra, *Studies in Indian Foreign Policy* (1977).

⁴ Surjit Mansingh, *India's Search for Power: Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy, 1966–1982* (1984).

⁵ B.S. Chimni, *International Law and World Order: A Critique of Contemporary Approaches* (1993).

⁶ Sumit Ganguly, *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect* (2010).

⁷ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (2011).

⁸ Raj Bhala, *International Trade Law: An Interdisciplinary, Non-Western Textbook* (3d ed. 2008).

The nuclear question represents the single most discussed issue in bilateral scholarship. India's 1998 nuclear tests initially triggered U.S. sanctions under the Glenn Amendment,⁹ but paradoxically laid the groundwork for dialogue. The most notable development was the India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement (2008). Ashley J. Tellis, a central figure in the discourse, characterized the deal as a recognition of India's de facto nuclear status and a strategic bet by Washington to integrate India into the global order.¹⁰ Legal scholars debated the implications for international law: Daniel H. Joyner questioned whether the agreement undermined the integrity of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) by creating an exception for India.¹¹ Others, however, argued that it reflected a pragmatic evolution of non-proliferation norms, acknowledging geopolitical realities.¹² The nuclear literature demonstrates how the United States shifted from a non-proliferation-centric approach to one of selective accommodation. It also illustrates India's success in negotiating recognition without formally entering the NPT framework.

CONTEMPORARY ANALYSES: INDO-PACIFIC AND STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

In the twenty-first century, the Indo-Pacific has become a central theme. C. Raja Mohan argues that India's strategic partnership with the United States is embedded in the logic of balancing China's assertiveness in maritime Asia.¹³ American scholars such as Robert D. Kaplan emphasize India's role as a "linchpin" in sustaining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁴ From a legal perspective, analysts discuss these

⁹ Arms Export Control Act, 22 U.S.C. § 2799aa-1 (Glenn Amendment).

¹⁰ Ashley J. Tellis, *India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the United States* (2005).

¹¹ Daniel H. Joyner, *International Law and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2009).

¹² David Malone & Rohan Mukherjee, "India and the World: From the 1940s to the 2020s," 95 *Int'l Aff.* 757 (2019).

¹³ C. Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (2015).

¹⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (2010).

developments through the lens of international maritime law. James Kraska highlights how both India and the United States have increasingly invoked the principle of freedom of navigation under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), particularly in response to expansive maritime claims by China.¹⁵ The signing of foundational defence agreements LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020) has generated a new body of literature. Scholars suggest these agreements have institutionalized defence cooperation and facilitated intelligence and technological sharing.¹⁶ Legal discussions also highlight how these accords operate within the framework of bilateral executive agreements rather than treaties requiring full legislative ratification, reflecting flexibility in U.S. treaty practice.¹⁷

ECONOMIC AND TRADE RELATIONS IN SCHOLARSHIP

On the economic front, scholarship underscores both cooperation and contention. According to Arvind Panagariya, bilateral trade has grown exponentially, transforming the United States into one of India's largest trading partners.¹⁸ At the same time, disputes over agricultural subsidies, intellectual property, and digital trade norms have attracted sustained attention. Legal scholars note recurring disputes at the WTO. For instance, the India Solar Cells case, brought by the United States, exemplifies the clash between India's developmental policies and U.S. advocacy of free trade norms.¹⁹ Conversely, U.S. tariffs on Indian steel and aluminium have been

¹⁵ James Kraska, "Maritime Power and the Law of the Sea," 43 J. Mar. L. & Com. 389 (2012).

¹⁶ Tanvi Madan, *Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations During the Cold War* (2020).

¹⁷ Curtis A. Bradley, *International Law in the U.S. Legal System* (2d ed. 2015).

¹⁸ Arvind Panagariya, *India Unlimited: Reforms and Growth for the Next Decade* (2018).

¹⁹ Appellate Body Report, *India Certain Measures Relating to Solar Cells and Solar Modules*, WTO Doc. WT/DS456/AB/R (Sept. 16, 2016).

criticized as inconsistent with WTO obligations.²⁰ These disputes demonstrate how international economic law both facilitates and constrains the partnership.

Recent literature has also turned towards digital trade. Anupam Chander highlights tensions between India's data localization requirements and U.S. corporate interests, raising questions about compatibility with global e-commerce rules.²¹

GAPS IN EXISTING LITERATURE

Despite the richness of scholarship, gaps persist. Much of the literature examines India-US relations either through a strategic or economic lens, rarely offering an integrated analysis. There is also limited legal scholarship that systematically evaluates how bilateral cooperation interacts with obligations under international law, particularly in areas such as climate governance, cyber security, and multilateral trade. This paper contributes by addressing these gaps through a holistic framework that integrates diplomacy, trade, and strategic shifts, while grounding the discussion in legal as well as policy analysis.

EVOLUTION OF INDIA-US DIPLOMACY

The diplomatic relationship between India and the United States has not followed a linear trajectory but has instead oscillated between distance and closeness as global and regional conditions have changed. From the early post-colonial era through the Cold War, India prioritized strategic autonomy and cultivated an international posture that resisted formal alignment. Washington, for its part, operated within a bipolar strategic mindset that viewed non-alignment with scepticism. These differing orientations produced an extended period during which formal institutional

²⁰ Request for Consultations by India, United States Certain Measures on Steel and Aluminum Products, WTO Doc. WT/DS547/1 (Mar. 23, 2018).

²¹ Anupam Chander, "Data Nationalism," 64 Emory L.J. 677 (2015).

partnership was limited and cooperation largely episodic rather than structural. The legal and policy literature of the period records this as a relationship conditioned more by contingency than by durable convergence of objectives.

The end of the Cold War and India's 1991 program of economic liberalization altered the strategic calculus in both capitals. Economic opening generated new opportunities for commercial engagement and changed perceptions in Washington about India's role in a post-Cold War liberal order. At the same time, the nuclear tests of 1998 and the U.S. response sanction under domestic non-proliferation statutes temporarily reintroduced friction and underscored the limitations of a purely economic explanation for bilateral change. The subsequent decade, however, witnessed a legal-political accommodation that transformed the relationship's architecture: the India-United States civil nuclear cooperation initiative (commonly referred to as the "123 Agreement" and implemented through congressional legislation and IAEA arrangements) marked a formal recognition of India's status as a significant nuclear actor outside the NPT framework while framing cooperation within specific non-proliferation safeguards and institutional processes. The deal was consequential not merely for its technical terms but for the precedent it established in reconciling strategic interests with international legal norms.²²

Concomitant with nuclear rapprochement was an expanding security dialogue that progressively moved beyond ad hoc interaction to more structured engagement. Beginning with a "new framework" for defence cooperation in the mid-2000s and accelerating thereafter, bilateral diplomacy began to incorporate formal defence-technology links and summit-level consultations. The institutionalization of defence cooperation became visible through three foundational agreements that, collectively,

²² U.S. Department of State, U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative

enabled closer operational interoperability: The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). Each accord occupies a distinct legal and functional space LEMOA facilitates reciprocal logistics support; COMCASA enables secure military communications and technical integration with U.S. platforms; BECA governs the exchange of geospatial and precision-guidance data yet together they reflect an intentional deepening of security ties within a legally framed bilateral scaffold rather than via treaty-based alliance obligations.²³

Parallel to security institutionalization has been a steady expansion of diplomatic formats and fora for consultation. The elevation of dialogue mechanisms ministerial “2+2” meetings²⁴, regular strategic and commercial dialogues, and repetitive summit diplomacy has created multiple channels for dispute management and policy coordination. Multilateral initiatives that include both capitals, most notably the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”), have provided an additional mechanism through which shared strategic concerns, particularly with respect to maritime security and supply-chain resilience in the Indo-Pacific, can be pursued in a plurilateral setting. The Quad’s institutional rebirth after 2017 and subsequent augmentation at leader levels has given the India–U.S. relationship a broader regional context that blends bilateral commitments with cooperative action among like-minded states.²⁵

Yet diplomatic convergence has not erased legal or policy tensions. Trade and market access disputes, divergent approaches to certain multilateral regimes, and New

²³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, LEMOA press release (2016)

²⁴ U.S. Dep’t of State, Highlights of 2020 U.S.–India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue (2020)

²⁵ CSIS and other strategic analyses on the Quad and Indo-Pacific cooperation.

Delhi's continuing procurement links with third countries most notably, historically, the Russian Federation have occasioned friction and prompted careful legal and political navigation. India's insistence on preserving the substantive content of its strategic autonomy doctrine has constrained attempts to transform the bilateral relationship into a formal security alliance; instead, the relationship has developed as a flexible, interest-based partnership that relies on executive instruments, interoperable frameworks, and selective legal commitments appropriate to each policy field. This mode of engagement allows New Delhi to deepen cooperation in areas where convergence is strong while reserving policy space where divergence persists.²⁶

From a legal-interpretive perspective, the India-U.S. diplomatic evolution illustrates two important principles. First, international cooperation between major powers can be advanced through targeted, instrument-specific agreements that preserve state sovereignty while producing operational interoperability a model particularly salient when full treaty commitments are politically or constitutionally difficult. Second, strategic recognition and accommodation exemplified by nuclear cooperation and subsequent defence arrangements²⁷ may create legal exceptions or special regimes that recalibrate norms without extinguishing the underlying multilateral architecture. The bilateral trajectory consequently highlights how law and diplomacy can be mutually constitutive: legal instruments provide the framework for predictable cooperation, and diplomatic imperatives generate the political will necessary to craft and implement those instruments.

In sum, the evolution of India-US diplomacy is best understood as a process of incremental institutionalization driven by converging strategic interests and

²⁶ CNA Corp., *The U.S.–India Defense Relationship: Putting the Foundational Agreements in Context* (2017)

²⁷ Defense and security reporting on BECA (2020) and related Pentagon releases.

underpinned by a selective legal architecture. The relationship today rests upon a dense web of executive agreements, consultative forums, and multilateral linkages that together enable sustained cooperation while allowing both parties to retain policy independence. This calibrated approach has proved resilient through episodic tensions and will likely continue to shape bilateral engagement as both States confront new regional and global challenges.²⁸

TRADE AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The commercial relationship between India and the United States has evolved from modest engagement to one of high economic significance for both parties. Trade and investment underpin much of the contemporary bilateral agenda: they provide economic ballast to political ties, serve as conduits for technology and knowledge transfer, and also function as recurrent sites of contestation. This section examines (i) the contours and drivers of bilateral trade and investment; (ii) principal areas of cooperation and emerging complementarities; (iii) recurrent disputes and legal friction points under international economic law; and (iv) prospects for a more structured trade architecture.

Bilateral trade in goods and services has expanded substantially in the past two decades. Accounting methods vary slightly across agencies and years, but official U.S. government figures indicate that total U.S.-India trade in goods and services exceeded \$200 billion in recent reporting (2023–2024 datasets), with both merchandise and services contributing materially to the figure. U.S. exports to India include aircraft, machinery, medical devices, and high-value services (notably IT and business services), while U.S. imports from India feature pharmaceuticals, gems and jewellery,

²⁸ Council on Foreign Relations

textiles, and an expanding portfolio of high-value electronics produced in India.²⁹ Two structural drivers explain the change. First, India's post-1991 economic opening and subsequent policy reforms significantly increased the country's absorptive capacity for capital goods and services, thus attracting U.S. firms. Second, the rise of India as a hub for information technology, pharmaceuticals, and increasingly electronics manufacturing has expanded the realm of commercial complementarities between the two economies. The expanding Indian middle class and India's long-run demographic advantage also render the market a strategic destination for U.S. exporters and investors alike.³⁰

Several sectors epitomize convergent interests. The information-technology and business-process services sector serve as both an export engine for India and a critical enabler of U.S. companies' global operations. Pharmaceuticals and generic drug manufacturing in India have been central to global health supply chains, as illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic where India played a pivotal role in vaccine and active pharmaceutical ingredient production. Renewable energy and climate-related investment, digital services and cloud infrastructure, and defence and aerospace manufacturing represent additional growth corridors where joint commercial ventures, co-production, and technology transfer can generate mutual gains.³¹ Moreover, the Indian diaspora in the United States plays an outsized role: it not only stimulates bilateral trade but also facilitates investment and entrepreneurship, acting as an informal bridge that reduces transaction costs and supports cross-border collaboration.³²

²⁹ U.S. and India Trade Representation Agreement

³⁰ Cong. Research Serv., U.S.–India Trade Relations, R46977 (2025)

³¹ U.S. Dep't of Commerce, Exporting to India: Market Overview (2024)

³² India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), India–US Trade (data and overview)

Notwithstanding broad complementarities, trade relations have been punctuated by legal disputes and policy disagreements. Two representative categories illustrate the legal framing of tensions: (a) WTO disputes (b) unilateral trade measures.

- (a) WTO disputes: A salient example is the dispute concerning India's domestic measures on solar cells and modules (WTO DS456). In that case, the WTO Appellate Body evaluated whether certain domestic support measures and procurement practices were consistent with India's WTO obligations; the dispute underscored the tension between development-oriented industrial policy and disciplines embedded in the multilateral trading system.³³ The larger lesson is institutional: multilateral dispute settlement remains the principal legal forum for adjudicating such tensions even as domestic industrial policy imperatives collide with trade commitments.
- (b) Unilateral measures and trade remedies: Freezes on market access, imposition of tariffs, and invocation of national security exceptions have periodically produced friction. For instance, disputes concerning U.S. steel and aluminium measures under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act prompted consultations and litigation at the WTO level, and raised questions about the permissible scope of unilateral trade measures when framed as concerns of national security or critical industry protection.³⁴

Intellectual property protections and digital trade norms are another recurring battleground. The United States has persistently pushed for stronger IP standards and predictable enforcement, while India has emphasized access to medicines, public health prerogatives, and regulatory autonomy. Similarly, India's evolving approach

³³ WTO, India Certain Measures Relating to Solar Cells and Solar Modules, Appellate Body Report, WT/DS456/AB/R (2016)

³⁴ WTO, Certain Measures on Steel and Aluminum Products (Section 232) Dispute DS547/DS544

to data governance including localization and privacy-protective measures has generated regulatory tensions with U.S. technology firms and has prompted debates about compatibility with cross-border data flow norms.³⁵

Given the depth of bilateral commercial ties and the strategic value attached to supply-chain resilience, the possibility of a structured trade agreement merits serious consideration. Several initiatives and dialogues have sought to map a roadmap for expanded cooperation, addressing areas such as tariffs, standards, digital trade, investment facilitation, and regulatory cooperation. A comprehensive India-U.S. trade pact would need to reconcile India's development imperatives with U.S. priorities on market access, intellectual property, and labour and environmental standards. This balance between policy space for developmental measures and obligations that ensure reciprocal market access remains the central legal and political challenge. Any future agreement is also likely to be selective and modular rather than an all-encompassing free trade agreement. Given political economy constraints in both capitals, negotiators may prioritize sectoral arrangements (for example, in digital trade, pharmaceuticals, and clean energy) that yield quick wins while deferring more contentious areas to subsequent rounds. The legal design of such accords could emphasize binding dispute-settlement mechanisms at the sectoral level, mutual recognition of standards, and cooperation on regulatory capacity building measures that would strengthen predictability without unduly constraining domestic policy space.³⁶ Trade and economic relations between India and the United States are characterized by significant mutual interest and substantial legal complexity. Complementarities have enabled rapid expansion, yet legal disputes and differing

³⁵ Anupam Chander, "Data Nationalism," 64 Emory L.J. 677 (2015).

³⁶ Arvind Panagariya, *India Unlimited: Reforms and Growth for the Next Decade* (2018); PHDCCI report on trade prospects (2023–24 projections).

policy objectives have repeatedly surfaced. The future of the economic partnership will depend on negotiating a pragmatic balancing of developmental policy space and reciprocal market commitments, anchored in durable institutional mechanisms that can adjudicate and manage disputes without destabilizing the broader strategic relationship.

STRATEGIC AND SECURITY SHIFTS

This section analyses the strategic and security dimensions of India-United States interaction, focusing on (a) the institutionalization of defence cooperation; (b) the strategic context of the Indo-Pacific and multilateral architectures; (c) the constraints imposed by India's external relationships (notably with the Russian Federation); and (d) emergent domains of security cooperation such as space, cyber, and supply-chain resilience. The treatment foregrounds legal instruments, executive practice, and the interplay between strategic interests and international legal norms.

A. Institutionalization of Defence Cooperation

Since the mid-2000s bilateral defence engagement has moved from episodic cooperation to a structured, instrument-based partnership. Three foundational executive instruments the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) constitute the legal scaffolding for operational interoperability, technical cooperation, and secure information sharing. LEMOA permits reciprocal access to logistics facilities and supplies, facilitating India-U.S. force projection and replenishment in peacetime and contingencies; COMCASA enables the transfer and use of secure communications equipment; BECA governs the exchange of geospatial and targeting data that materially enhances the precision of conventional forces. Together, these agreements are carefully calibrated to produce functional interoperability while avoiding the

constitutional and political complications that a formal treaty or alliance would entail.

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Legally, the executive-agreement model that both Governments have preferred reflects a conscious trade-off: it delivers operational benefits without triggering the domestic ratification requirements or alliance commitments associated with full treaty status. This design preserves New Delhi's doctrine of strategic autonomy while permitting incremental legal commitments that are narrow in scope and specific in purpose. Operational practice joint exercises, logistics exchanges, and defence industry co-production has reinforced the effect of these instruments, converting legal architecture into routine interoperability.

B. Indo-Pacific: Strategic Context and Multilateral Linkages

The Indo-Pacific strategic environment provides the primary rationale for deepened India-U.S. security cooperation. Both capitals publicly articulate a commitment to a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific, a formulation that has animated bilateral and plurilateral initiatives. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and newer economic-security formats such as I2U2 reflect an effort to institutionalize a like-minded approach to maritime security, infrastructure resilience, and critical-technology cooperation. These plurilateral mechanisms serve dual legal and political functions: they provide platforms for policy coordination among partners and create collective responses to challenges maritime claims, coercive economic practices, and supply-chain vulnerabilities without converting the partnership into a formal treaty alliance.³⁸ From an international-legal perspective, shared invocations of the law of the sea and freedom of navigation underscore how legal norms are used

³⁷ Press Info. Bureau (India), India and the United States Sign the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) (2016).

³⁸ Quad Leaders' Joint Statement (May 20, 2023).

selectively to sustain strategic objectives. At the same time, the Quad and similar arrangements operate largely outside formal security-alliance law; they are best understood as pragmatic coalitions of like-minded States that rely on a mixture of declaratory law, coordinated practice, and capacity-building rather than on binding collective-defence obligations. This institutional flexibility has allowed India to participate substantively while preserving its policy space.

C. Constraints: Historic Ties with Russia and Policy Trade-Offs

India's long-standing defence and strategic relationship with the Russian Federation remains a salient constraint on India-U.S. strategic alignment. Russia has historically supplied the bulk of India's major conventional platforms and critical components; while the share of Russian supplies has declined in recent years, Moscow continues to be a major source of arms and technology for New Delhi. This dependence imposes legal and policy complications for India, particularly when U.S. secondary sanctions or export controls intersect with Indian procurement priorities. Notably, New Delhi has pursued diversification procuring Western platforms and deepening U.S. cooperation while retaining selective Russian engagements for continuity of force readiness and technology transfer.³⁹ For Washington, this reality produces a pragmatic accommodation: U.S. policy increasingly tolerates a degree of Indian independence on particular procurements so long as India's strategic trajectory converges with U.S. objectives on the broader regional balance. The legal architecture of export control waivers, Strategic Trade Authorization, and case-by-case licensing has been adapted to facilitate transfers while managing proliferation and allied-access concerns. The outcome is a managed asymmetry: India deepens interoperability with

³⁹ SIPRI, Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023 (data on India's arms imports and Russia's role).

the United States while maintaining critical supply-lines and industrial arrangements with other partners.⁴⁰

D. Emerging Domains: Space, Cyber, and Supply-Chain Security

Security cooperation is extending into non-traditional and high-technology domains. Space cooperation ranging from satellite navigation interoperability to potential collaboration on space situational awareness raises issues of dual-use technology transfer, export control, and norms for responsible behaviour in outer space. Cybersecurity cooperation similarly navigates a difficult legal terrain: mutual assistance can buttress national resilience, yet questions of sovereignty, cross-border law enforcement, and normative constraints on offensive cyber operations remain unresolved. The United States and India have initiated dialogues and capacity-building measures in these fields, but durable legal regimes are nascent and likely to evolve through practice and sectoral agreements rather than comprehensive treaties. Supply-chain security particularly for semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and critical minerals has become a central area of cooperation. Both Governments have sought to promote on-shoring and co-production to reduce strategic dependencies exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the face of geopolitical disruptions. Legal tools in this domain include investment facilitation, export control harmonization, and targeted trade incentives. These mechanisms are typically transactional and modular, consistent with the broader pattern of selective legal commitments that characterize the bilateral relationship.⁴¹

E. Legal-Strategic Implications and Trajectory

⁴⁰ U.S. Dep't of State, U.S. Security Cooperation with India (overview of strategic trade and cooperation).

⁴¹ I2U2 – U.S. Department of State.

Taken together, the strategic and security shifts in India-U.S. relations reveal an incremental, interest-driven institutionalization that balances operational benefit with legal restraint. The prevailing model is one of targeted legal instruments, layered institutional engagement, and pragmatic political accommodation. This model has several implications:

1. Norm creation through practice: Where formal treaties are politically infeasible, repeated cooperation and sector-specific agreements can generate normative expectations and operational standards that approximate legal regimes.
2. Preservation of autonomy: India's preference for executive, non-treaty instruments enable engagement without ceding sovereign discretion on core strategic decisions an important legal and political safeguard.⁴²
3. Legal complexity in high-technology domains: Emerging fields (space, cyber, AI) will necessitate novel legal instruments and export-control architectures that reconcile security imperatives with commercial openness.⁴³

The security relationship between India and the United States has matured into a calibrated partnership: legally restrained, operationally effective, and strategically purposeful. It is shaped by convergent interests in regional stability and by enduring constraints rooted in India's historical relationships and domestic policy choices. Future deepening will depend on the capacity of both Governments to translate ad hoc cooperation into predictable, law-anchored practices while preserving the flexibility that has made the partnership resilient to episodic tensions.

Challenges and Divergences in India-US Relations

⁴² Beyond BECA – Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations.

⁴³ U.S. Security Cooperation with India – U.S. Department of State

Despite broad convergence on regional and global issues, India and the United States continue to face political and diplomatic differences. One recurring area of tension is “human rights and democratic governance standards”. Washington often emphasizes civil liberties, freedom of the press, and minority protections as elements of bilateral engagement. New Delhi, while committed to democratic principles, prioritizes sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, sometimes resulting in friction over statements or conditionalities attached to aid, visas, or trade.⁴⁴

Differences also emerge in the context of multilateral diplomacy. India maintains strategic autonomy, often aligning with countries that do not share all U.S. positions on global issues such as Iran, climate negotiations, or Russia. The United States expects coordination on security and economic sanctions, particularly in counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and supply-chain security. Legal frameworks such as sanctions laws and export controls sometimes collide with India’s policy choices, requiring careful negotiation to avoid diplomatic fallout while respecting domestic law.⁴⁵

U.S. exporters have raised concerns over India’s protectionist tariffs on steel, aluminium, and certain agricultural products. Conversely, India resists unilateral trade restrictions imposed by the United States under national security or safeguard provisions.⁴⁶ The U.S. has pressed India for stronger IP protections and enforcement of patent rights, while India defends its policies that ensure affordable access to medicines, particularly in public health contexts. This divergence has led to repeated consultations under WTO dispute mechanisms and bilateral dialogues.⁴⁷ India’s regulatory requirements on data storage and cross-border flows have created friction with U.S. technology companies and necessitate negotiations on privacy,

⁴⁴ U.S. Dep’t of State, 2023 Human Rights Report

⁴⁵ Press Information Bureau (India), Joint Statements on U.S.–India Consultations,

⁴⁶ WTO, United States Certain Measures on Steel and Aluminum Products, WT/DS544/AB/R (2019)

⁴⁷ WTO, India Certain Measures Relating to Solar Cells and Solar Modules, WT/DS456/AB/R (2016).

cybersecurity, and commercial rights. These issues raise questions about the compatibility of domestic law with international trade and investment obligations.⁵

Strategic and Security Divergences

India's continuing defence ties with Russia complicate full strategic alignment with the United States. While Washington has granted waivers and technical accommodations, the relationship requires ongoing legal and political negotiation to reconcile U.S. export control rules with India's force readiness requirements. Although both countries support a "free and open Indo-Pacific," India's approach emphasizes multilateralism and non-alignment, occasionally differing from U.S. operational strategies or coalition structures. Legal agreements underpin cooperation, but the operational doctrine remains flexible to preserve India's autonomy.⁴⁸ In areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and space cooperation, India and the United States are still negotiating norms and operational boundaries. Issues include export control compliance, dual-use technology transfers, and protection of sensitive data. These require legal frameworks that balance innovation, security, and sovereignty.⁸

Domestic politics in both countries can amplify divergences. In India, coalition dynamics, bureaucratic processes, and federal-state considerations influence trade, defence, and foreign policy decisions. In the United States, congressional oversight, election cycles, and interest-group lobbying can affect sanctions, export approvals, and engagement priorities. Legal instruments executive agreements, trade acts, and defence cooperation memoranda must be implemented within these domestic constraints, making bilateral coordination complex.⁴⁹ Despite these challenges, several

⁴⁸ . Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (2015).

⁴⁹ Arvind Panagariya, *India Unlimited: Reforms and Growth for the Next Decade* (2018).

mechanisms help manage divergences such as COMCASA and BECA allow functional cooperation without creating rigid treaty obligations' dispute settlement, Quad dialogues, and UN frameworks helps create structured avenues to resolve conflicts. These mechanisms demonstrate that while divergences exist, institutional design and legal frameworks allow the relationship to absorb and manage differences without destabilizing the broader strategic partnership.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

India-U.S. relations have evolved into a complex, multidimensional partnership anchored in diplomacy, trade, and strategic cooperation. Historically, the relationship was shaped by Cold War dynamics, with India pursuing non-alignment and the United States prioritizing its global security agenda. The post-Cold War period, India's economic liberalization, and subsequent nuclear and defence agreements created new avenues for structured engagement, producing a partnership that is both operationally robust and legally nuanced. The analysis demonstrates that incremental, instrument-specific legal arrangements such as LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA have allowed both countries to deepen cooperation without the political and constitutional implications of formal treaty obligations. Similarly, trade relations, while marked by complementarities, continue to be shaped by legal disputes, regulatory divergences, and differing domestic priorities. These patterns reflect a broader theme: the India-U.S. partnership is interest-driven, pragmatically institutionalized, and highly resilient, even in the face of divergences and episodic tension.

Legal instruments in the form of executive agreements, sectoral accords, and multilateral commitments have provided predictable frameworks for cooperation while preserving policy autonomy. This approach illustrates how targeted legal

⁵⁰ CNA Corp., *The U.S.-India defence Relationship: Foundational Agreements Context* (2017)

arrangements can substitute for full-fledged treaties in complex bilateral contexts. Strategic autonomy and selective alignment: India have successfully maintained its strategic autonomy while aligning with the United States in areas of converging interest. This dual approach demonstrates that sovereign discretion and strategic cooperation are not mutually exclusive, but can coexist within a carefully calibrated legal and operational framework. Emerging domains require adaptive legal regimes such as space, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and supply-chain security are increasingly central to bilateral cooperation. Legal frameworks in these sectors must evolve through practice, dialogue, and modular agreements, rather than relying solely on comprehensive treaties. High-level dialogues, multilateral coordination, and sectoral agreements provide durable avenues for dispute resolution, ensuring that differences in trade, procurement, or policy do not destabilize the broader strategic partnership.

India-U.S. relations have strategic ramifications that extend beyond bilateral interests. Supports regional stability in the Indo-Pacific through coordinated security measures, joint exercises, and multilateral coalitions such as the Quad. Enhances global economic resilience by facilitating investment, technological collaboration, and diversified supply chains. Demonstrates a model of legal and institutional innovation where operational objectives and sovereignty considerations are balanced through tailored agreements.

These elements collectively position the India-U.S. partnership as a cornerstone of twenty-first century international relations, capable of adapting to evolving geopolitical, technological, and economic challenges. The study concludes that India-U.S. relations exemplify a modern paradigm of strategic partnership: one that is law-informed, interest-driven, and institutionally layered. While challenges remain including trade disputes, third-party dependencies, and divergences in strategic

outlook the partnership's resilience stems from its capacity to reconcile legal, political, and strategic imperatives through incremental and flexible arrangements.

Looking forward, the trajectory of the bilateral relationship will be shaped by, continued legal innovation in emerging technology and security sectors. Strengthened multilateral and sectoral cooperation to manage disputes and enhance predictability. Sustained commitment to strategic alignment, tempered by India's preservation of autonomy and the United States' tolerance for policy diversity. In conclusion the India-United States partnership is a dynamic and evolving relationship, where law, strategy, and diplomacy interact to produce cooperation that is simultaneously robust, flexible, and legally grounded.