

# The Paradox of Strategic Autonomy: India-US Relations under "Trump 2.0"

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## **Abstract**

*The Indian foreign policy framework has used strategic autonomy as its foundational principle which prohibits the country from making binding alliances while it pursues its independent national objectives throughout the various global power centers. The Nehruvian non-alignment doctrine which established this framework has remained intact through multiple geopolitical crises until present-day which requires its most difficult test to maintain US relations during Donald Trumps second presidential term. The second term of Trump which analysts refer to as "Trump 2.0" introduces both economic nationalism and transactional behavior with unpredictable outcomes through its strengthened institutional structure which lacks internal limitations existing during his first term. The situation creates an actual paradox for India. The United States partnership has reached its highest strategic importance because both countries need to address the growing threat from China. The Trump administration requires India to accept specific terms which challenge India's ability to create independent foreign policies through his demands on trade and technology access and defence procurement and immigration policies. The article analyzes the structural tensions and developing agreements that shape this relationship because it demonstrates how India's strategic autonomy begins to transition into a system that implements more restricted and less reliable operational methods.*

**Keywords:** *India-US relations, Indo-Pacific, non-alignment, strategic autonomy, Trump 2.0, transactionalism*

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## **I. Introduction**

There is a particular irony in the fact that two countries which share democratic values, a growing defence partnership, and a common strategic anxiety about China keep finding reasons to frustrate each other. India and the United States have been in an extended diplomatic dance for decades — drawing closer, then pulling back, then cautiously approaching again. The relationship has matured enormously since the dark days of the Cold War, when Washington tilted toward Pakistan and New Delhi leaned into Soviet arms. But "matured" doesn't mean "simple."

Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 reintroduced a brand of leadership that treats alliances like business deals and views trade deficits as moral failures. For most US allies, this was jarring. For India, it was complicated in a different way — because India has never really been a traditional US ally to begin with. New Delhi has always insisted on the right to buy Russian weapons, maintain ties with Iran, abstain on UN votes that embarrass Washington, and set its own tariff schedules. That posture has a name: strategic autonomy.

The question at the heart of this article is whether that posture can survive — or at least remain coherent — when the United States under Trump is demanding concessions in exchange for the very partnership India needs most. This is the paradox. And it is worth unpacking carefully.

## **II. Strategic Autonomy: More Than a Slogan**

### **2.1 The Doctrine and Its Roots**

Strategic autonomy isn't just a buzzword that Indian diplomats use at press conferences. It reflects a genuine, deeply held belief in the Indian foreign policy establishment that binding alliances compromise sovereignty and limit a country's ability to respond flexibly to a changing world. Jawaharlal Nehru articulated this most forcefully in the 1950s, when he helped found the Non-Aligned Movement as a way to keep newly independent nations out of the superpower rivalry between Washington and Moscow.

The Cold War is long over, but the instinct has endured. India under Narendra Modi has rebranded the concept — talking less about non-alignment and more about "multi-alignment" — but the underlying logic is the same. India wants to be a friend of Washington, Moscow, Tehran, and Riyadh simultaneously, without being hostage to any of them. It wants to join the Quad (the security grouping with the US, Japan, and Australia) without formally committing to collective defence obligations. It wants American technology and investment without opening its markets unconditionally.

That is a difficult needle to thread at the best of times. Under Trump 2.0, the thread has become considerably thinner.

## 2.2 Why It Still Makes Sense — and Where It Strains

There is a defensible logic to strategic autonomy. India is a continent-sized country with a complex neighbourhood, centuries of colonial memory, and a domestic political culture that is deeply suspicious of foreign entanglement. No Indian prime minister can afford to be seen as a vassal of Washington. The political costs would be enormous.

But the doctrine strains under two related pressures. First, the world of 2025 is far more polarised than the world of 1955 or even 2005. The US-China rivalry is structural and deepening, and sitting comfortably between two hostile superpowers is harder when they are both demanding to know whose side you're on. Second, India's own strategic interests have shifted. China's aggression on the Himalayan border — most dramatically in the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 — has made the US relationship feel less optional and more necessary. The warmth between Modi and Trump, both personally and structurally, reflects a real convergence of threat perception.

## III. Trump 2.0: Familiar Face, Sharper Edges

### 3.1 What Changed from the First Term

Trump's first presidency (2017–2021) featured a lot of bilateral goodwill between Modi and Trump personally, cemented by events like the "Howdy Modi" rally in Houston and the "Namaste Trump" event in Ahmedabad. But it also featured real friction: Trump repeatedly complained about India's tariffs, revoked India's preferential trade status under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) in 2019, and pressured New Delhi on its purchase of Russian S-400 missile defence systems.

The second term has picked up where the first left off, but with a more systematic approach. Trump 2.0 entered office with a clearer economic nationalist agenda, a more unified cabinet aligned with his worldview, and less institutional resistance from career officials and diplomats. The chaos of the first term — the revolving door of advisers, the improvised decisions — has been replaced by something more deliberate. That makes it both more effective and, from India's perspective, harder to manage.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the trajectory of US-India trade relations between 2016 and 2025 shows a pattern of growing economic interdependence alongside recurring tariff disputes — a dynamic that captures the paradox of a relationship that is simultaneously deepening and contentious.

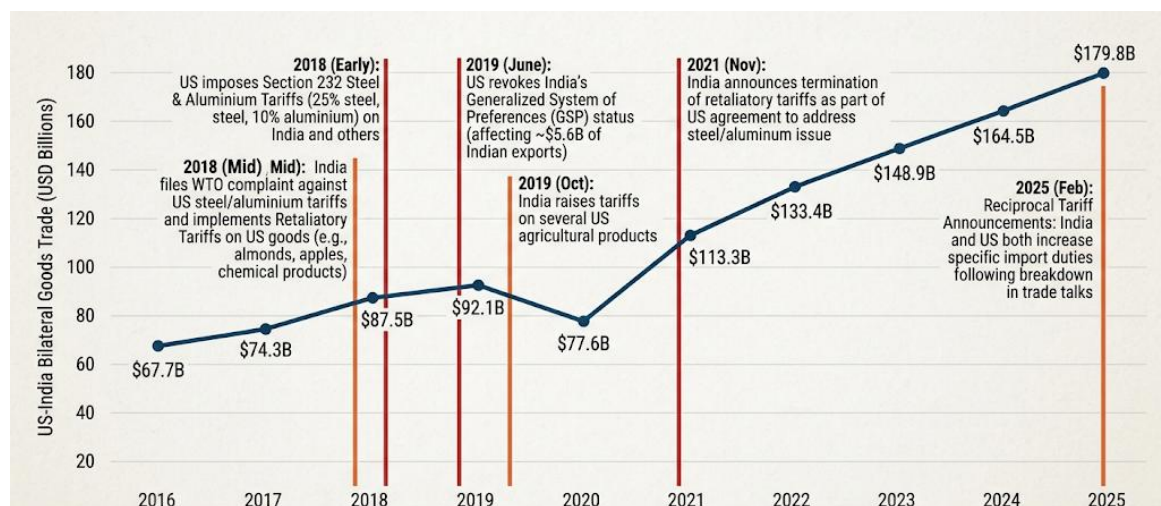


Fig. 1: US-India Bilateral Trade and Tariff Dispute Timeline, 2016–2025

### 3.2 The Tariff War and Its Bilateral Fallout

The Trump administration established extensive reciprocal tariffs which affected all countries that the US maintained major trade deficits with in April 2025. The United States imposed a 26 percent tariff on India which maintained a goods trade surplus of about 45 billion dollars with the United States. The announcement created major disruptions to Indian exporting industries especially in pharmaceuticals textiles and engineering products.

India's first reaction to the situation showed both concern and restraint because it needed to protect its interests. Indian officials showed they wanted to negotiate by proposing agricultural import limits and energy purchasing limits that would help India meet US requirements. The broader situation created discomfort because

India needed to show its main security partner that Germany used its economic power to get advantages without showing any common defense interests.

Strategic autonomy exists to prevent exactly this type of situation from happening. The strategic autonomy tools which enable countries to build multiple partnerships while reducing their reliance on one power face difficulties when dealing with tariff systems. You can choose multiple military suppliers but your US market which purchases your IT services and generics and software engineers creates difficulties for you to find alternatives.

### **3.3 Immigration, H-1B Visas, and the Indian Diaspora Factor**

Trade is not the only pressure point. The Trump administration's aggressive posture on immigration — including stricter enforcement, deportations of undocumented Indian nationals, and proposed changes to H-1B visa pathways — has created a politically sensitive situation for Modi's government.

The Indian diaspora in the United States is enormous and influential. Roughly four million Indian-Americans contribute disproportionately to the US economy in high-skill sectors. Many of them, or their parents, came through the very visa pathways that Trump's policies complicate. The optics of Indian nationals being deported in handcuffs on military aircraft — a scene that actually occurred in early 2025 — caused genuine outrage in India, forcing the government into an awkward position of quiet diplomatic protest without public escalation.

Modi's political coalition includes a significant component of diaspora pride and global Indian identity. Attacks on that community's standing in the US are not easily absorbed or ignored.

## **IV. The China Variable: Where Everything Converges**

### **4.1 Shared Threat, Different Strategies**

If there is one thing that reliably pulls India and the United States together, it is China. Beijing's behaviour over the last decade — the border incursions with India, the militarisation of the South China Sea, the economic coercion of smaller neighbours, the technological competition with the US — has given both countries strong reasons to build the relationship despite the friction.

The Quad has been the institutional expression of this shared concern. Under both Biden and Trump's second term, the grouping has continued to hold summits, conduct joint naval exercises, and develop frameworks for technology supply-chain resilience. India's participation in the Quad is not grudging; New Delhi genuinely sees value in it as a hedge against Chinese power. But India has also been careful to ensure that Quad membership does not become a de facto military alliance — that there are no mutual defence clauses, no formal commitments to come to each other's aid in a conflict.

Trump's approach to the China rivalry adds a complicating layer. His administration has been aggressive on trade with China, pursuing further decoupling in semiconductors, AI hardware, and critical minerals. For India, this creates real opportunity — companies reshoring from China look at India as a natural alternative, and the "China Plus One" strategy has driven significant foreign investment into Indian manufacturing. But it also creates risk. If the US-China rivalry escalates sharply — economically or, in a worst case, militarily — India will face immense pressure to formally choose sides in ways that its strategic autonomy doctrine is designed to avoid.

### **4.2 The Russia Complication**

Then there is Russia. India's relationship with Moscow is old, deep, and strategically significant — and it is a constant irritant in the India-US relationship. India continues to buy Russian oil at discounted prices (a practice that accelerated after Western sanctions following the Ukraine invasion), operates large inventories of Russian military equipment, and has resisted Western pressure to condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine at the UN.

Trump's own relationship with Russia is, of course, complicated and has been the subject of intense domestic scrutiny in the US. In his second term, Trump has pursued a negotiated settlement to the Ukraine war, which has put him partially at odds with NATO allies. This actually creates a small window of reduced pressure on India over Russia — if Washington itself is seeking to rehabilitate relations with Moscow, it is harder to demand that New Delhi sever ties with it.

But this is a temporary and fragile reprieve. The structural pressure from the US defence establishment and Congress to sanction India over its S-400 purchase (under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA) has not disappeared. It is in abeyance, not resolved.

## **V. Defence and Technology: The Deeper Integration Question**

### **5.1 iCET and the Technology Pathway**

The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), which started in 2023, represents one of the most promising developments that has occurred between India and the United States in their relationship. The initiative covers semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, advanced telecommunications, and defence technology. The project establishes a framework that enables India to receive advanced American technology in return for its commitment to United States supply chain security and export control measures.

iCET offers India an appealing option because the program provides access to advanced technology without requiring India to become a full military partner. You receive the technology advantages of a partnership without needing to establish a mutual defence agreement. Security partnerships will deliver developmental benefits according to this operational model which represents contemporary strategic independence.

The Trump administration has been broadly supportive of iCET, partly because it fits the transactional logic: India gets technology, the US gets a manufacturing and supply-chain partner that reduces dependence on China. India and the United States maintain existing conflicts because their technology export control systems and their defence co-production agreements require India to share sensitive information with the United States.

### **5.2 The Limits of Co-Production**

Despite the momentum on technology cooperation, there are real limits to how far India will go. Washington wants India to adopt US-standard interoperability protocols, share intelligence under frameworks like COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement), and limit technology transfers to third countries. Each of these asks edges toward the kind of binding arrangement that Indian strategists resist.

Co-production arrangements — like the proposed joint production of GE-414 jet engines for India's Light Combat Aircraft — are genuinely transformative when they work. They build domestic industrial capacity, reduce import dependence, and create institutional links between the two countries' defence establishments. But they also require India to align its procurement timelines, regulatory frameworks, and technology control regimes with American standards. That is a form of dependence, even if it's called partnership.

## **VI. Is Strategic Autonomy Sustainable?**

The pattern that emerges from this analysis is not one of India's strategic autonomy collapsing, but of it being quietly renegotiated. India is not abandoning its preference for independence — it is recalibrating what that independence means in a world where the costs of staying equidistant from Washington and Beijing have risen sharply.

There are three possible trajectories from here. In the first, India gradually deepens its integration with the US — on trade, technology, and defence — while maintaining the rhetorical commitment to autonomy as a domestic political narrative. The substance shifts; the language doesn't. This is the most likely near-term path, and there are real benefits to it. India gets access to capital, technology, and security guarantees it couldn't easily get elsewhere.

In the second trajectory, the friction accumulates to a point where India actively diversifies away from the US — deepening economic ties with Europe, the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and even China in bilateral commercial terms, while keeping the Quad relationship alive but shallow. This would represent a genuine reversion to multi-alignment and would frustrate Washington considerably.

The third trajectory is the most destabilising: a sharp deterioration triggered by an external shock — a serious India-China military confrontation, a US-China trade war that forces economic decoupling, or a domestic political crisis in either country that interrupts diplomatic continuity. Under Trump 2.0, institutional continuity in US foreign policy is not guaranteed.

What makes the current moment genuinely paradoxical is that India needs the US relationship more than ever (because of China), while the US relationship has become more demanding and less predictable than ever (because of Trump). Strategic autonomy was designed for a world where you had more options and more time. India is discovering that both are running shorter.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The relationship between India and the United States under Trump's second presidency is not broken — but it is under significant and growing strain. India's doctrine of strategic autonomy, which has served as the organising principle of its foreign policy for seven decades, is being tested by a partner who respects leverage more than loyalty, and who sees every bilateral issue through the lens of what America gets out of it.

There is no clean resolution to this paradox. India cannot simply abandon strategic autonomy — the domestic political constraints are real, and the strategic logic of avoiding total dependence on any single power

remains sound. But it also cannot pretend that the world of 2025 offers the same room for manoeuvre that the world of 1995 or even 2010 did. China is too threatening, technology too central, and American engagement too consequential to manage at arm's length.

What India is likely to do — what it is already doing — is pursue a pragmatic, issue-by-issue adaptation. Give ground on trade when the political cost is manageable. Deepen defence and technology cooperation where the gains are clear. Maintain the Russia relationship carefully and quietly. Participate fully in the Quad while resisting its evolution into a formal alliance. Buy American aircraft engines while continuing to operate Russian ones.

It is not elegant. But it might just be smart enough to work — at least until the next shock arrives.

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