

# India-US Relations in Modi-Trump Era

Rishabh Raj

The Indo-US relations that we see today, based upon shared democratic values and increasing convergence of bilateral, regional and global issues has not always been a smooth ride. It had its ups and downs since the beginning on different issues like Kashmir, atomic energy, non-alignment movement etc. After the end of the cold war and with India's adoption of the policy of liberalization in 1991 the relationship between these two countries started moving forward in a positive direction. With the collapse of the USSR, India was forced to find a new strategic and diplomatic partner and in this new unipolar world the United States was a safe bet with which India shared democratic values and pluralistic culture. After decades of mistrust, the United States also realized that India could be a valuable and faithful partner in Asia when Pakistan started losing its democratic values due to a series of internal crisis like Islamic fundamentalism in its government and support to terrorism. India-US trade relations have also improved since the opening of the India market to the world in 1991. The US has emerged as the top trade partner of India in recent years. The ever-shifting geopolitics in the 21st century has made it more important for India to form stronger ties with its allies and this culminated in the form of stronger Indo-US relations since then end of Cold war in 1991

## **Introduction**

India strengthened its ties with the United States, upgrading the relationship to comprehensive global strategic partnership during President Donald Trump's first state visit to India in February 2020. This visit was long overdue and it happened in the backdrop of major domestic policy changes in India like abrogation of article 370 from the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a place which has been a reason of continuous contention between India and Pakistan. President Trump and Prime Minister Modi focused on different issues in their joint statement from fighting terrorism, defence ties, supporting each other for a peaceful and rule-based order in Indo-Pacific to hinting on India-US trade deal in near future.

The Indo-US relations that we see today, based upon shared democratic values and increasing convergence of bilateral, regional and global issues has not always been a smooth ride. It had its ups and downs since the beginning on different issues like Kashmir, atomic energy, non-alignment movement and more. With India's stand not to sign the America-Japan peace treaty in 1951 to Pakistan's membership to both South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CEATO), India-US relations hit a rough patch since the beginning. And with Nehru's policy of non-alignment that was having friendly relations to both blocs, USA and USSR, the US-India relationship took a bitter turn with John Foster Dallas, the secretary of state of the United States criticizing India's neutralism as an impartial and shortsighted policy. This move of India drove the United States further into the lap of Pakistan. However, the India-China conflict showed some promise and brought upon a new chapter in the India-US relations with the United States deciding to assist India in countering the Chinese communist threat. So, during that conflict India got a moderate amount of military assistance from the United States. It was generally believed that this Chinese aggression and America's assistance during that time would further deepen India-US relations but it didn't happen for some reasons. The India-Pakistan war of 1965 further strained the relationship between India and the United States, with Pakistan using the military equipment provided by the United States against India, despite the assurances given by the United States that it will never happen. And in the coming years this relationship between India and the US became more and more strained because of the United States' continuous support to Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir. The decade of 1970s with crucial events like Bangladesh crisis of 1971, Indo-Soviet Friendship and cooperation Treaty of 1971 and India's nuclear explosion of 1974 created more and more divide between the two countries.

### **New Politics, New Equations**

With the beginning of the 1980s the gap started closing down between these two largest democracies of the world with Mrs Indira Gandhi's visit to Washington in July of 1982, which the United States' president Ronald Reagan called a "Dialogue of discovery". Here India made it crystal clear that India doesn't tilt to any side but "stands upright". After Indira Gandhi's assassination Rajiv Gandhi rose to power and during his regime the India-US relationship kept moving forward, touching all the major aspects like political, commercial, cultural and most importantly technological aspect. This relationship materialized with the agreement on the sale of IBM-3090 computer system with

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software to design light combat aircraft in India and CRAZYXMP-14 supercomputers for weather forecasting.

After the end of the cold war and with India's adoption of the policy of liberalization in 1991 the relationship between these two countries started moving forward in a positive direction. With the collapse of the USSR, India was forced to find a new strategic and diplomatic partner and in this new unipolar world the United States was a safe bet with which India shared democratic values and pluralistic culture. After decades of mistrust, the United States also realized that India could be a valuable and faithful partner in Asia when Pakistan started losing its democratic values due to a series of internal crisis like Islamic fundamentalism in its government and support to terrorism. India's new open market was also a pull factor for the United States to improve its diplomatic ties with India. India's testing of its nuclear weapons in 1998 led to a major tension between the two countries which resulted in the United States imposing sanctions on the exports to India and it also opposed loans and guarantees from international financial institutions. But in August of 1999 India came up with its first draft of nuclear doctrine which clearly stated that India's nuclear weapons are for deterrence only and it also maintained India's No First Use policy. It convinced the world of India's deep rooted conviction to democratic values, justice based international order and peaceful world. During the Kargil war of 1999 the United States stood by India and asked Pakistan to maintain the Line Of Control, thereby reinforcing the India-US ties. After this India-US relations have significantly moved forward with both the Bush and Obama administration, without any major setback. India signed a major path breaking civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the Bush administration in 2005. The United States elevated India's status as major defence partner, a status no other country holds, during President Obama's last meeting with Prime Minister Modi. And in the Trump and Modi era the relationship between these countries have further strengthened with India being entrusted with being a major Asian power to counter China and maintain peace in Asia-Pacific region.

### **India-US Strategic Partnership with Free and Open Indo-Pacific**

India and the United States strategic partnership has been growing steadily over the years with the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2002 to the signing of the U.S.-India Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)

in 2016 to the next step of having an agreement on Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) which was signed in 2018. The major two strategic agreements LEMOA and COMCASA signed during the Modi era paves way to a better and mutual strategic partnership. GSOMIA allows India and United States's militaries to share the intelligence gathered by them, while LEMOA allows both of the countries to have access to each other's designated military facilities for refueling and replenishment. COMCASA which is an Indian specific version of CISMOA (Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement) takes the military and strategic relationship to a new level allowing the transfer of highly sensitive communication equipment from the United States to India. Currently India and the United States are reviewing the process of BECA (Basic exchange and cooperation agreement for geospatial cooperation), which will allow both of the countries to share geospatial and satellite data with each other. With the signing of LEMOA and COMCASA, India and the United States also began a 2+2 ministerial dialogue in 2018 which is part of an effort to put the bilateral defense partnership "on par with that of United States closest allies and partners".

With Narendra Modi arrival into power in 2014 and again with greater majority in 2019 India-US strategic relations enhanced to a greater degree. With India being named United States major partner in Indo-pacific region in the United States department of defence's Indo Pacific Strategy Report 2019. This report underlines the United States commitment to maintain the region's long term peace and prosperity. The bedrock of that strategy is to deepen and strengthen the US's partnerships with friends and allies across the nation. This report states that "the United States and India share a common outlook on the Indo-Pacific," so it leaves one optimistic about the bilateral partnership between these countries while dealing with the issues of Indo-Pacific.

Indian partnership in the Indo-pacific region can be classified into three groups; the QUAD, ASEAN and Western Indian Ocean. The Quad refers to an informal grouping of four countries namely, India, US, Japan and Australia. China perceives Quad group to be anti-China so India has been historically little hesitant to be a part of this quad to counter Chinese fears. Therefore, it was a very significant step when Quad countries met for the first time at a ministerial level in September 2019. India has been doing Malabar naval exercises with the United States since 1992 as a bilateral exercise which became a trilateral exercise in 2015 when Japan became a permanent member. There is this talk that India might invite Australia to be a part of this exercise in

2020. Along with the Quad, India has fostered a greater relationship with the ASEAN countries with its Act East Policy which makes India central to the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States. India has upgraded its bilateral relationship to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership with Vietnam in 2016 and with Indonesia in 2018. India has conducted joint military exercises with ASEAN plus countries in 2018 in the field of humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. India has sold its first ever submarine to Myanmar and is in active negotiation to sell Brahmos cruise missile to Philippines. Few other ASEAN countries have also shown interest in acquiring the Brahmos cruise missile, Aakash surface to air missile and Tejas, a light combat aircraft from India. India has also been expanding its strategic reach to Western Indian Ocean by deciding to conduct joint patrols in the area with France. India has also operationalized a mutual support logistics agreement with France that would allow India access to French military bases in Djibouti, UAE and French Reunion. Furthermore, India has also got into a bilateral agreement with Seychelles to build a naval facility in its Assumption Island, which has faced some local resistance due to the fear of militarization. India has also upgraded its relationship with the United Arab Emirates to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and both these countries held their first ever joint naval exercise in 2018. In addition to building bilateral relationships, India has also been boosting up its own capabilities to better survey the region, which will help in creating a free and open Indo-Pacific. India has set up a series of radars as a part of its coastal surveillance network that provide a comprehensive live monitoring of movements of ships in the Indian Ocean Region and connect Indian radars to similar systems in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. India is also gearing up for the biggest multilateral naval exercise “Milan”, which is a week long multilateral naval exercise aimed at enhancing professional interaction between friendly foreign navies and learn from each other’s strengths and best practices. A total of 41 nations were invited except China. So, India making its headway in the ASEAN and extending its influence over the western Indian Ocean would help the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy to maintain justice-based order and portray India as a leader of Asian subcontinent.

India-US trade relations have also improved since the opening of the India market to the world in 1991. The US has emerged as the top trade partner of India in recent years. In 2017-18 India-US trade was \$126 billion, which rose to \$142 billion in 2018-19. The trade surplus was tilted towards India of the volume of \$18 billion in 2018. In 2018,

India became the first south Asian country and third Asian country to get Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA-1) from the United States. It will pave the way for high technology product sales to India, particularly in the civil space and defence sectors. Traditionally this status is given to only those countries who are members of all four export control regimes; Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), Wassenaar Arrangement(WA), Australia Group and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). India is a member of the three of the four groups except NSG. India's membership to NSG has been pending because of the political opposition from China. And this status is intended to send a strong political message to China.

But there are still some challenges lying ahead between the United States and India that need to be addressed. From the issues of defining the Indo-Pacific in itself to Iran-US conflict and how it would affect India. The United States defines Indo-Pacific spanning from the west coast of India in the Indian Ocean to the west coast of the United States in the Pacific Ocean whereas India considers "Indo" to denote the whole of Indian Ocean stretching from South Africa to Australia. The western Indian Ocean including the Persian Gulf is arguably the most strategic part of India's Indo-pacific which does not feature in US conception of the same. So, here India and the US would need to come on the same page and move parallel with their strategies to maintain justice-based order in the Indo-Pacific area. Second major challenge arises for India due to the Iran-US conflict. In January of 2020 the United States in an air-strike killed Qassem Soleimani, who was an Iranian major general in the Islamic Guard Corps, which escalated the Iran-US conflict to an extreme level. This poses a challenge for India since India shares a good relationship with Iran. India had been developing Chabahar Port with its aim to create a passage into the middle east circumventing Pakistan. So, here India would need to find a fine balance between these two bilateral relationships. Also, in February of 2020 the United States signed a peace deal in Afghanistan with the Taliban group, and has agreed to withdraw all its troops in fourteen months. India has welcomed this step by saying that India supports all opportunities that can bring peace, security and stability in Afghanistan. But whether this move will bring peace or stability in Afghanistan or will bring more instability in Afghanistan without the presence of the United States, India would need to be cautious of that.

## **Conclusion**

Right now the world is facing a major crisis of the Twenty-First century,

a corona-virus pandemic which has infected around fifty million people and have claimed more than one million lives till now. President Trump has called corona virus a chinese virus on many occasions since it has its origin from the Wuhan region of china. It has increased the existing trust deficit between the US and China. China's slow response to contain this Virus to its origin and not informing the world of the severity of this epidemic has been called into the question by many world leaders. There is this saying that there is an opportunity in every crisis and the deeper the crisis, the better the opportunity can be. India should take advantage of this opportunity to show the world its deep rooted commitment to a peaceful, justice based and safer world. Indian Pharmaceutical companies are one of the largest producers of hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug which has been found useful in treating corona virus patients. India has started supplying this essential drug that has been advocated by President Trump as a strong medicine against corona virus to many nations including the United States. India's resilience to this pandemic and Modi's proactive policies have been appreciated by WHO and several world leaders.

The ever-shifting geopolitics in the 21st century has made it more important for India to form stronger ties with its allies and this culminated in the form of stronger Indo-US relations since the end of Coldwar in 1991. India has come a long way from a back seater in the world to leading the way forward towards a more India centric world equation. India has pushed for climate change reforms, being the front runner in forming the International Solar Alliance and promising ambitious NDCs' in the Paris Agreement of 2016. India has been continuously pushing for UNSC reforms and a comprehensive convention on international terrorism, which has found vast support across the world, with a few exceptions like China. India's strong socio-economic fundamentals paves the way for a long-lasting India-US relationship, providing for a balanced justice-based Indo-Pacific region, minimizing China's assertions.

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