

Indo-US Relations in the Trump 2.0 Era: Navigating between Strategic Drift and Renewal

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Summary

In Donald Trump's second term as the President of the United States (US), Indo-US relations face uncertainty. Once hailed as a model for 21st-century strategic partnership, the bilateral relationship is now under pressure from shifting foreign policy priorities, rising transactionalism, and diverging geopolitical compulsions. This brief examines key stress points in the relationship – including energy sanctions, the weakening of Indo-Pacific frameworks and renewed US engagement with Pakistan – and offers policy recommendations to safeguard long-term cooperation.

Introduction

The relationship between India and the United State (US), once a symbol of deepening democratic alignment and geopolitical synergy, is facing headwinds in Donald Trump's second term in the White House. A confluence of unilateralism in Washington and assertive strategic autonomy in New Delhi has created a fragile equilibrium. The partnership now oscillates between the promise of strategic renewal and the risk of long-term drift.

Energy Sanctions and Strategic Misalignment

A central flashpoint is a proposed US Senate bill – led by Senator Lindsey Graham – threatening secondary sanctions on nations continuing oil imports from Russia. India, which sources [over 30 per cent of its crude from Russia](#), views such imports as a practical response to inflationary pressures and diversification needs. However, US lawmakers increasingly interpret India's choices as a challenge to Western unity on Ukraine. The lack of nuance in Washington's perception risks hardening positions on both sides.

Diplomacy by Impulse: Trump's Foreign Policy Style

Trump's foreign policy remains centred on deal-making, personality-driven outreach and short-term wins. While his first term featured high-visibility events with India – such as 'Howdy Modi' and 'Namaste Trump' – these engagements often lacked substantive policy outcomes. The second term appears even more unpredictable, with a retreat from multilateralism and reduced appetite for institutional investment in Indo-Pacific alliances.

Indo-Pacific Commitments Under Review

Under President Joe Biden, frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), AUKUS (a trilateral partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US) and the

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework received renewed focus. Trump's return has cast doubt on their future. Reports suggest internal scepticism in the Trump administration regarding the strategic value and financial burden of AUKUS. If this scepticism translates into reduced commitment, the message to regional allies may be clear: the US' leadership in the Indo-Pacific is neither stable nor guaranteed.

The China-Pakistan Nexus and Operation Sindoor

India's regional security calculations have also been tested by escalating tensions with Pakistan and China. Operation Sindoor – India's calibrated military response to the Pahalgam terror attacks – demonstrated a new willingness for swift unilateral action. [Beijing's criticism of India's action](#), calling it "regrettable" and expressing its concern for "peace and security", coupled with its diplomatic support for Pakistan in multilateral forums, underscores the growing convergence of Chinese and Pakistani strategic interests.

Re-Hyphenation Risk: The US' Outreach to Pakistan

In a significant reversal of recent bipartisan trends, Trump's second term has seen renewed outreach to Pakistan. Citing counterterrorism cooperation and regional stability, Trump's administration has resumed [high-level engagements with Islamabad](#). Discussions reportedly include military assistance and debt relief. For New Delhi, this revives concerns of a hyphenated South Asia policy, where India and Pakistan are again viewed through a single geopolitical lens.

Strategic Sensitivities and Narrative Gaps

Both India and the US suffer from mutual misperceptions. Washington remains frustrated by New Delhi's refusal to fully align with Western stances on Russia's invasion of Ukraine or curtail defence ties with Moscow. Conversely, India remains highly sensitive to perceived slights, especially around Kashmir, democracy and comparisons with Pakistan. These tensions are magnified by inadequate mechanisms for real-time strategic communication.

India's lobbying capabilities in Washington remain limited in scale and agility. Although diaspora engagement and institutional ties through bodies like the US-India Business Council have built goodwill, India lacks a rapid-response media presence or a strengthened congressional advocacy network. As legislative activism grows in the US, this imbalance could have long-term consequences.

The Quad at Risk

The viability of the Quad depends heavily on India's sustained commitment. If the US' sanctions are imposed or multilateral frameworks like AUKUS are deprioritised, the credibility of American leadership in the Indo-Pacific comes increasingly under question. This, in turn, could provide strategic openings for China to expand its influence across the region.

Policy Recommendations

In order to prevent further drift and ensure a resilient long-term partnership, both India and the US must recalibrate their strategic engagement.

For the US, it is crucial to recognise that India's energy policies are driven by economic pragmatism rather than ideological divergence. Washington should consider legislative provisions that allow for strategic flexibility with key partners – similar to the waivers issued under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act – so as not to penalise alignment that is otherwise beneficial to American interests. Furthermore, the US must reaffirm its commitment to multilateral frameworks like the Quad and AUKUS and insulate them from the fluctuations of domestic political cycles to maintain credibility and consistency.

For India, enhancing its influence in Washington is essential. This includes upgrading its lobbying and media engagement to effectively shape both policymaker and public perceptions. India should also broaden its bipartisan outreach beyond the traditional India caucuses in the Congress, ensuring sustained support across political lines. Finally, India must work to clarify its foreign policy narrative – clearly articulating the principles behind its strategic autonomy and defence diversification – to counter misinterpretations and reinforce trust.

Conclusion

The Indo-US relationship has weathered many phases – from estrangement to embrace. Yet the current juncture may be among its most consequential. The path forward will require strategic maturity, empathy for political constraints and investment in long-term institutions. If both sides can rise to this challenge, the Indo-Pacific will remain free, open and inclusive. If not, the costs of strategic drift will be deeply consequential.

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