



**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# POLICY BRIEF

## Letter from America: a US-India Awakening

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**Delhi Policy Group**

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[www.delhipolicygroup.org](http://www.delhipolicygroup.org)



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### ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### Cover Photographs:

US President Joe Biden meets Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, during his first official state visit, in the White House on June 23, 2023. (Source: [The White House/Official Twitter](#))

US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India addressing their joint press conference at the White House on June 23, 2023. (Source: [The White House/Official Twitter](#))

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India addresses the US Congress in Washington on June 23, 2023. (Source: [PM Modi/Official Twitter](#))

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## Letter from America: a US-India Awakening

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### Foreword

*The DPG Senior Faculty held dialogues and interactions with US officials and think tanks in Washington D.C. from June 26-30, 2023. Coming immediately after the state visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United States, these meetings provided a timely opportunity to exchange in-depth perspectives with US counterparts on the India-US comprehensive, global and strategic partnership. What follows is a brief overview of the US policy scene, the prevailing perceptions, and future prospects for bilateral relations.*

### I. The State Visit

There is perhaps no better time to visit the centres of American power and influence than in the aftermath of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's potentially transformational, and decidedly path-breaking, state visit to Washington D.C. from June 22-24, 2023.

The trajectory of India-US relations appears to have scaled new heights and reached a significantly higher level. The nature of the Biden Administration's unprecedented welcome, the uplifting message of PM Modi's address to the US Congress, and the far reaching array of landmark decisions announced in the Joint Statement, together present what has rightly been termed the most expansive and comprehensive vision for progress in the history of our bilateral relationship.

PM Modi himself described the India-US partnership for a better world as "our calling for the century", and termed this undertaking as a matter of conviction, not convenience. He projected the image of a stronger, self confident, people centric and democratic India, committed to building a long term special relationship of mutual understanding and benefit with the US. He underlined that India will be a close and reliable partner for the US in maintaining a world order based on international law, that "close defence cooperation between India and America symbolises mutual trust and shared priorities", and that the stability of the Indo-Pacific is the central concern of this strategic partnership.



## II. The Perceptions and Challenges

In our dialogues with a cross-section of US think tanks and exchanges with US officials, we were able to sound out their perspectives on the strategic significance of PM Modi's visit, the resilience of this emerging India-US partnership, and the major challenges of implementation in various areas which still lie ahead. What we found was, for the most part, positive and reassuring.

The general mood in Washington D.C., as far as India is concerned, has changed for the better. This now goes well beyond the branches of the US government and includes the US business and corporate sector.

However, a vocal segment of opinion here continues to have reservations, the principal among them being India's perceived "democratic backsliding", which is seen as an obstacle for broader, bipartisan support for ties with India. Some see India-US relations as being based on interests alone, not on both values and interests. Preceding PM Modi's visit, there was an orchestrated campaign of criticism of India's record on democracy and human rights, emanating from the media and think tanks alike, mostly citing State Department reports. Howsoever misplaced, these judgemental views linger, including in important bastions of US officialdom.

Indirectly, these concerns also get reflected in relation to India not aligning itself with Western democracies against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even though the sharper tone of the previous year has somewhat abated. The nature of India's critical geo-strategic interests in Eurasia is still marginally acknowledged, and its major challenge of countering China's adversarial posture is only partially understood.

As we would expect from think-tanks of a great power, interest in relations with India is not uniform. Even after PM Modi's landmark visit, some are still wondering what the buzz on India is all about, and why the two governments are marching ahead without building greater shared understandings, in which they presumably wish to play a role. These views are marginal, and simply out of date and time.

The mood on Russia remains uniformly harsh, even though there are assertions that the US is not looking to dismantle that country. The expectation is that the attrition of war will eventually force Russia to change its attitude towards the West, without the need to accommodate Moscow in European security and stability. Given this objective, there is no talk of an off-ramp to end the conflict in Ukraine.



There is a striking difference in current US policy towards Europe and Asia. In Europe, there is a push for maximalist outcomes from the ongoing conflict. In Asia, there is diplomatic outreach towards China to reduce escalating tensions, mainly over Taiwan and technology dominance. The talk is of de-risking not decoupling, of slowing China's progress in advanced technologies while scaling up the US's own technological and military strengths. There is thus considerable nuance and a perceptible softening in the US policy on China, bringing it closer to the comfort level of European and Asian allies alike. On Taiwan, the effort is to leave China in no doubt that a unilateral change to the status quo will be unacceptable to the US. Overall, the US is dealing with China from strength, and recognises that long term competition lies ahead.

Meanwhile, there is limited understanding that an underlying tension is emerging in the stake-holding for global order. When nations at large look at the US, they see a pre-eminent power with enormous capacity to bring about a brighter future for all. Among the strategic community here, considerations of world order revolve around the centrality of US/Western civilisation, its institutions (G7 and NATO), and its power and influence. There needs to be much greater reckoning for changing power equations, growing multipolarity, aspirations of emerging powers, and the predicament of the Global South which stands marginalised, even as it bears the consequences of economic disruption and stalled multilateral cooperation. It is precisely this need for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced stake-holding in the rules based world order that India can help address.

### III. The Promise Ahead

That said, there is also a growing constituency here that perceives a palpable change in the India-US relationship, and an unprecedented opportunity to enable commercial, technological and economic dimensions to grow the relationship further. India figures prominently in the move to invest in trusted geographies, particularly in the advanced manufacturing and technology spaces. Even on the trade side, which has traditionally been highly contentious, things appear to be looking up, bringing an FTA to push the potential of merchandise and services trade into the realm of possibility. Entirely new horizons are opening up in the defence technology and defence capability arenas, with serious consideration of meaningful ways to further strengthen India's deterrent power, terrestrial and maritime. Space cooperation has been given an exponential boost.

A longstanding issue in bilateral relations has been the US difficulty in coming to terms with India as a partner, not an ally. This area of hesitancy is receding,



accompanied by the realisation that the US cannot tackle all global challenges on its own. New approaches towards allies and partners that are relevant and fit for purpose to meet the demands of the day are being seen as the way forward. India occupies a central space among US partners, with a key role in the Quad; in South East Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean; and across the Global South. That said, there is still a gap in coordinating positions on our respective regional concerns, which the decision to expand Indo-Pacific wide diplomatic consultations will hopefully help to narrow.

There is some expectation that India is well positioned to provide balancing alternatives to China, from Central Asia to West Asia and Africa, to America's advantage. That India will mainly pursue its own interests in its contiguous periphery and the Global South needs to be better understood.

The strategic relevance of the Indian Ocean is gaining traction. China is seen to have a big game plan for the Indian Ocean, where it has been making patient and methodical inroads. After a Covid-19 induced slowdown, the PLA Navy is expected to re-engage in the Indian Ocean within the next couple of years. In this context, the newly announced, jointly led, India-US dialogue on the Indian Ocean region marks a significant advance. The problem still remains with the Indian Navy having to deal with three US combatant commands in the IOR. The US side is working to configure more cohesive ways to engage India in the Indian Ocean maritime, and there is ongoing consideration of standing up a coordinating mechanism at the Pentagon to look at the IOR holistically.

The remarkable progress achieved within this year in advancing the India-US bilateral partnership across the critical domains of high technology and defence, and in multiple other areas, has been leadership led, at the highest level, with the respective NSAs overseeing the process. This has ensured that all parts of the government are now more deeply engaged in delivering results that enhance India-US ties. Energising bureaucracies, decision makers, business leaders, and public opinion must remain a key priority on both sides to ensure effective implementation of the far reaching decisions taken at the Modi-Biden summit.

It is heartening to note that work has already commenced on delivering further concrete outcomes at the next bilateral summit, which is likely to be held in September 2023, coinciding with the G20 summit. There is much promise and opportunity ahead to realise the full potential of India-US relations.

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