



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

India-US Relations at Inflection Point

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Cover Images:

US President Donald Trump hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for an Official Working Visit in Washington, D.C., on February 13, 2025. Source: [Prime Minister of India](#)

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the gathering at a public function on the sidelines of the foundation stone laying, inauguration and dedication of multiple development projects to the nation at Khodaldham ground, in Gujarat, on August 25, 2025. Source: [Prime Minister of India](#)

India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar addressing the Economic Times (ET) World Leaders Forum-2025, in New Delhi, on August 23, 2025. Source: [X/@DrSJaishankar](#)

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India-US Relations at Inflection Point

by

Hemant Krishan Singh

India-US ties are yet again at an inflection point, a development that was not anticipated following the positive and forward looking outcomes of the Modi-Trump summit on February 13, 2025. There has been a setback to mutual trust, confidence has been shaken, uncertainty has crept in, public support in India has dissipated, and there is manifestly considerable risk of backsliding.

India has thus far handled the situation with strategic restraint, leaving the door open for a return to the prior trajectory of ties. But it has also not hesitated to, politely but firmly, set the record straight on certain misleading assertions made by President Donald Trump, and his administration's resort to "aggressive economic leverage" against India.

It is only to be hoped that a strategic partnership built over a generation, and across several administrations and leadership transitions in both the US and India, is not headed for a breakdown. The two governments remain engaged in search of solutions to the current dissonance over trade and multiple strategic issues which are clouding the outlook.

High level engagement is also desirable and possible in coming months, but will require even greater diplomatic effort and more careful preparation. This is particularly so following the Trump administration's extraordinary and unprecedented imposition of an additional 25% tariff on India as part of measures in response to "threats to the United States by the government of the Russian Federation". Singling out India for purchases of Russian oil while giving other (and larger) buyers a free pass can hardly be deemed as anything but a hostile act.

Furthermore, the nomination of Sergio Gor - a personal aide with no diplomatic background, expertise on India, or familiarity with the complexities of its neighbourhood - as Ambassador to India, can only cast doubt regarding President Trump's intentions, as will Gor's additional designation as Special Envoy for South and Central Asia. Grandstanding and pressures to impose the MAGA agenda of one-sided deal making can only erode what is left of strategic convergences. Quite clearly, challenges are mounting, with already fraught relations seemingly in a downward spiral.

India and the US, once described as “estranged democracies”, have had their ample share of difficult moments and periodic tensions. It has never been smooth sailing. Trust and mutual understanding have been painstakingly built. Even the best of relationships need to be nurtured; ties between the world’s most powerful and largest democracies are no exception.

It has been evident for some time now that uncertainties and headwinds may lie ahead for India-US relations. Adverse narratives about India, many of them misplaced or divorced from ground realities in India’s vibrant democracy, have become more prominent. It would almost appear that the US establishment has not quite decided what kind of partnership it really wants with India.

These narratives have persisted, with even more pointed attacks on India’s strategic independence and sovereign decision making, while also disparaging its aspirations for a more democratic and multipolar world order. In strategic terms, these amount to demands that India must limit its own strategic space and align with US interests, with highly uncertain or virtually no returns. That is hardly a plausible direction for India’s statecraft.

The latest episode over tariffs is no longer about fair, balanced and reciprocal trade. It is more about the geopolitics of coercive leverage and the unilateral reshaping of world order. Trade and non-trade issues are being bundled together in arguments of convenience, ostensibly to pressurise third countries. There also appears to be a demand for India to deliver an acceptable package of undertakings and commitments, commensurate with ever changing expectations, regarding which there is little predictability.

This is unrealistic. Viable solutions cannot be one-sided. As a developing democracy, India will have its own red lines to protect the most vulnerable segments of its economy. Calls on India to simply fall in line overlook this reality.

India is not a “dead economy”, far from it. It is the world’s fastest growing major economy and a large, attractive, unsaturated market offering opportunities to partners across the globe. That is particularly so for US technology and services driven companies. Nor is India, which like the US runs a massive trade deficit, a mercantilist nation engaged in profiteering at the expense of others. There are perhaps some others who specialise in this area. Targeting India is objectively uncalled for and strategically short sighted.

The continuing rise of India is a significant geopolitical milestone in the global arena, and one that can only bring benefits to the US and the West. Underplaying the strategic relevance of India will not yield dividends. Nor will attempts to undermine India's economic prospects.

Over the last decade, there has been an enormous effort on the part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to prioritise the development of a strategic partnership with the US across the board, based on shared values and converging interests in regional and global stability and prosperity. India recognises just how important the US is as the world's pre-eminent power, as a critical partner for India's economic and technological progress, and as a defence and security partner in the Indo-Pacific. As things move forward in the coming months, which they hopefully will, there is every indication that India will remain steadfast in its commitment to building further on its comprehensive strategic partnership with the US.

But this will require true reciprocity and mutual respect, which at present do not seem to be forthcoming.

US strategic outreach towards India has been described by some American observers as "strategic altruism", without the expectation of returns. This is questionable, as gains have been mutually reinforcing. Strategic benefits for India have in fact been rather modest, while demands on India have multiplied. Ironically, the greatest beneficiary of purported US "altruism" is Communist China, not democratic India. China's rise to great power has been enabled and accommodated by the US over 50 years, while India has emerged from the shadow of US sanctions only in this century, an interlude that may well end up being short lived.

There is no question that India is rising under highly adverse global conditions, with rampant geopolitical rivalry, disruptions to the rules-based international order, growing protectionism, and flagging globalisation. There are, furthermore, emerging US overtures to both Russia and China, with the respective underlying intentions remaining unclear. These may also have implications for India's concerns and interests.

None of this is lost on India's policymakers. Adverse conditions will only strengthen India's commitment to strategic autonomy, accelerate its pursuit of comprehensive power, and add momentum to self-reliance in the areas of economic development, high technology and defence capability. India's trade is

already well diversified with a range of partners, and will naturally find new avenues of growth. The importance of India's relations with Eurasian and European powers, the emerging and advanced economies of Asia, the BRICS countries, and the nations of the Global South, is already at the forefront of India's diplomacy. Relations with the US have thus far been at the top of this multi-alignment.

Trust, stability and reliability are essential elements for any relationship to prosper. India can wait for the US to make up its mind on what kind of relations it wishes to pursue, while continuing to believe in the promise of this broad-based partnership. However, walking back from trenchant signals of overt US hostility and opportunistic geopolitical manipulation of India will not be easy.

It is not in the interest of the US to prolong the current impasse in relations, and the onus now rests with the Trump administration.



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