



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## POLICY BRIEF

### Letter from America

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Volume IX, Issue 16

July 15, 2024



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 authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### Cover Photographs:

President of the United States, Joe Biden, and his predecessor, former President Donald Trump during the first debate of the 2024 Presidential elections in Georgia, United States on June 27, 2024. (Source: [CNN/ Official Website](#))

US National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, calls on Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, India on June 17, 2024. (Source: [PM Modi/Official X Account](#))

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## **I. Preface\***

As changes in global power equations - between regions and among nations - gather momentum, the US remains the world's preeminent power. However, it also finds itself at a juncture where its capacity to exercise unilateral power and influence is under severe challenge in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Unprecedented turmoil in US domestic politics, including the threat of violence, has only added to this sense of vulnerability.

For a rising and aspirational India, relations with the US remain vital and of great consequence. The hesitations of history have not entirely receded, but trust and confidence in the US-India comprehensive strategic partnership continues to grow.

While we can expect some levels of high-level engagement - such as the 2+2 Ministerial - to continue in the coming months, any major decisions or advances in bilateral relations will have to await the outcome of the US presidential election.

As the world's largest democracy, India must hope that the electoral process in the world's most powerful democracy will be unifying for the American people.

## **II. The Prevailing Mood**

Visits by the DPG senior faculty to Washington D.C. in the languid summer season have been useful barometers of mainstream thinking within the Beltway establishment, from the uncertain disposition of US domestic politics to the faltering exercise of its global power and influence.

Our visit a year ago (June 2023) had appeared to mark the high point of the Biden administration, and of the pursuit of liberal agendas by the Democratic Party. President Joe Biden was strong at home, left-liberal elites were

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\*This survey of the world scene and India-US relations is based on interactions of the DPG Senior Faculty with US Government agencies and Think Tanks in Washington D.C. from June 24-28, 2024.

mainstreaming their climate, social and cultural fixations, American allies in the Euro-Atlantic (and Asia) had been lined up for global leverage, Ukraine had been primed to defeat Russia on the battlefield, and reaffirmation of the global dominance of the US-led West was once again, seemingly, within reach.

For India as well, PM Narendra Modi's state visit in June 2023 had significantly raised the level of US-India relations.

The mood this year has been palpably different. The triumphant tone has somewhat receded, the unrelenting media and think tank narrative building has become more nuanced, liberal elites are on the defensive, external crises have multiplied, Ukraine is staring at possible defeat (the NATO alliance's unwavering support notwithstanding), and US adversaries have come together to pose even more formidable challenges to the West's domination.

There is continued focus on the imperative of US leadership, which involves the building of enabling alliances, placing tough demands on allies, and prevailing over adversaries. Partners are boxed in a new category that is not quite understood, particularly as they can often tend to prioritise their own interests over those of the US.

The mood on Russia is harsh and unforgiving, complicating ties with India. Sentiment against China continues to harden, as the PRC is seen as the only country with the capability and intent to pose a serious long term threat to US power. However, when it comes to crafting pathways to divide the Russia-China axis, this invariably leads only to accommodative signalling towards China. Engaging Russia is simply not on the cards, at least not on equal terms.

Beyond the US preoccupation with great power equations, there continues to be marginal realisation that the vast majority of the international community, which comprises the diverse and geopolitically inchoate Global South, lies outside the US-led alliance system and remains open to pursuing close relations with nations pushing back against the West.

Accommodating emerging powers as important pillars of the UN Charter-based world order remains beyond the horizon in the midst of unilateralist assertions of Western interests, including through the G7 and the NATO military alliance, which is looking to spread its potentially destabilising tentacles towards Asia. Meanwhile, the multilateral system, constructed and long sustained by the US, stands sidelined, un-reformed and mostly ineffective.

The Indo-Pacific is recognised as the world's economic and geopolitical centre of gravity, but is glaringly under-represented in key institutions of global decision making which are heavily tilted towards the Euro-Atlantic. This imbalance prioritises receding Europe over emerging Asia.

The US is pursuing a robust security architecture in East Asia, but broader Indo-Pacific balancing is falling behind. In the absence of countervailing architecture in both East Asia and the Indian Ocean Region, the US and India will be unable to play a mutually reinforcing security role. The much hyped US Indo-Pacific strategy continues to be under-resourced as crises multiply elsewhere. The Quad remains more promise than substance.

Finally, the division and disarray in the US domestic discourse is increasingly being viewed with concern by US allies and adversaries alike, and is becoming a leading factor in considerations of global geopolitical risk. Holding a presidential election that is fair and transparent, and regarded as credible and legitimate by the American people, has become more important than ever.

### III. The US Perspective on India

While the overall sentiment towards India is positive, the US is still getting accustomed to dealing with a strategic partner that aspires to be an independent player in a multipolar order.

There are questions about India's perception of its own power, its strategic interests, its regional and global aspirations, and its posture of maintaining omnidirectional relations based on realist considerations of national interest. This can sometimes convey the impression that the US is still undecided whether India deserves to be a privileged partner, particularly when issues are raised that tend to undermine the hard won trust in the bilateral relationship.

The counter argument, which is becoming central to broad US thinking about India, is that it is a middle power with the greatest comprehensive power potential after China, and thus an indispensable counterweight to a resurgent China, with which close relations are a strategic necessity. This is all the more so as the US sees limitations in the support it can effectively leverage from its allies in East Asia, and the general resistance across the Indo-Pacific region to standing up for US goals in Asia.

The US policy is to keep India firmly in its camp by highlighting the centrality of the China challenge, while also taking steps to wean India away from its close defence and strategic ties with Russia. In terms of its officially stated outlook, the US has a vested interest in India being able to play a larger regional

and global role, and more importantly do so in partnership with the US as far as possible.

On its part, the US is showcasing greater defence collaboration and controlled military technology infusion, cooperation in new and emerging technologies, closer diplomatic and geopolitical coordination, and efforts to expand Quad benefits in the "Indo" part of the Indo-Pacific.

India is expected to play a lead role in the Indian Ocean. Given force level constraints, there is virtually no possibility of a USN presence in the region, even though there is some talk of restructuring US combatant commands to better align with IN operations. Unlike in East Asia, a US-supported security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region is not being contemplated.

The US objective is to contribute to India's military modernisation, and to better integrate Indian and US platforms, as also those of other Quad partners, to bolster deterrence. Given the shortage of critical military supplies owing to ongoing conflicts, there is also talk of putting together an Indo-Pacific industrial base and facilities for repair and overhaul of systems. This prospect holds promise and needs to become an important factor in India-US defence cooperation.

Despite the stated US desire to focus on defence technology transfers and not just on sales of weapons systems, India must remain circumspect about expectations. It remains to be seen if the start of GE 414 engine production will lead to greater levels of technology transfer in other areas, and help develop indigenous supply chains. All technological cooperation will come with caveats, and India is unlikely to be included in the category of AUKUS Pillars I and II in terms of critical technology sharing.

That said, iCET is a pathbreaking G2G initiative which, along with its defence innovation frameworks, must be leveraged to mutual advantage. Making substantive progress in some critical technologies like Quantum, UUV systems and AI, needs to be targeted for implementation through specific programmes, to underscore mutual commitment to the partnership.

India's continuing relationship with Russia in pursuit of its own strategic interests is a major point of friction. This issue is likely to remain centre-stage, in direct linkage to the situation in Ukraine. We can expect that military setbacks for Ukraine, unravelling of NATO capacities, and political turmoil in Europe will only lead to greater India-US dissonance, which will need to be carefully managed.

On relations with India, the trust dilemma still persists in the US establishment, and is amplified by certain segments among think tanks and academia that act as guardians of US interests. There is at best tepid appreciation of the exemplary conduct of India's general elections, the deepening of its democracy, and the manifest observance of constitutional processes. Lingering concerns about freedom of expression, suppression of the media, treatment of minorities and weakening of institutions continue to be cited, as part of a motivated agenda to keep India under pressure. Left unspoken is the reality that democracy is popular and successful in India, not on the ropes as in some parts of the West.

#### IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is considerable recognition across US government agencies of India's prospects over a five to ten year perspective, in terms of political stability, fast growing market economy, and institutional frameworks backed by a democratic polity. India is seen as a nodal US partner with a shared interest in a stable balance and rules based order in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Trust issues will remain - on both sides - and will require attention as India and the US work to build further on the remarkable progress in bilateral relations witnessed over the past two decades.

Over the long term, the interests of India and the US will remain broadly aligned around the need to ensure that the overall balance remains in favour of democracy, freedom and a UN Charter-based order. The bigger challenge will be to also work together to strengthen the trend towards Asian multipolarity and greater equilibrium in international relations. As a post-alliance mechanism for strategic cooperation among its like minded partners, success of the Quad may well hold the key.

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