



By: *Brahma Chellaney*

# Is the US losing India as a pillar of its Indo-Pacific strategy?



At a time when US policy toward India has become distinctly **punitive**, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's **warm reception** of Russian President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi last week could not have been more pointed.

Modi's message was clear: India is a sovereign power that will not be dragooned into choosing sides in a widening rift between "the West and the rest." Instead, it will continue to chart its own course in international affairs.

No major power is more vital to America's long-term strategic interests than India.

It is, after all, the only country with the population size, geographical position, and military might (including nuclear weapons) necessary to challenge China's efforts to dominate Asia and ultimately supplant the United States as a global hegemon.

Ever since George W. Bush's presidency, senior US officials have recognized the **partnership with India** as crucial to maintaining a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

This has never been mere rhetoric: over the last decade, US-India security ties have deepened rapidly, particularly in terms of military interoperability, intelligence cooperation, and technology exchanges.

Part of this progress occurred during US President Donald Trump's first administration.

As he ramped up pressure on China and cut **security aid to Pakistan**, Trump expanded cooperation with India, which stood at the center of his administration's **Indo-Pacific strategy**.

The result is evident today: India now conducts more **military exercises** with the US than with any other country, and the US has emerged as India's **largest trading partner**.

## The US often disregarded India's own interests

But even as this process unfolded, the US gave India plenty of reason to be wary. Its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan – which took place under President Joe Biden, but resulted from a deal cut earlier by Trump – raised serious doubts about the judgment and reliability of America's leaders, as it effectively handed that country back to Taliban terrorists.

Concerns heightened in 2022, when the Biden administration helped Pakistan secure an International Monetary Fund bailout and then approved a **\$450 million deal** to modernize the country's US-supplied F-16 fleet, reviving in India bitter memories of America's arming of Pakistan during the Cold War.

### India saw no reason to sacrifice its national interests for a distant conflict

Trump has intensified this embrace of Pakistan, not least in the interest of personal enrichment – highlighted by a lucrative cryptocurrency deal signed in April.

Although the US often disregarded India's own interests, it nonetheless expected total loyalty when it came to enforcing sanctions on Russia over its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

But India – like other US allies such as Israel and Turkey – refused to comply, instead increasing purchases of discounted Russian oil. India saw no reason to sacrifice its national interests for a distant conflict, especially when the chief beneficiary of Western pressure on Russia was China.

## US tariffs on Indian goods exceed those applied to Chinese exports

India has seen this dynamic unfold before. When Trump reimposed harsh sanctions on Iran in 2019, India was deprived of one of its cheapest and most reliable **energy sources**, while China seized the opportunity to import

Iranian crude at steep discounts and expand its **security footprint** there.

A similar pattern emerged after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By isolating Russia from Western markets, sanctions effectively turned China into Russia's economic lifeline, giving it leverage to strengthen its overland energy-supply routes from Russia.

China now knows that, even if it moves against Taiwan, it will not lose access to Russian energy.

**US tariffs on Indian goods now exceed those applied to Chinese exports. This is nothing short of a US economic war on India**

While this trend undoubtedly undermines India's strategic interests, at least this time India also took advantage of discounts on Russian oil.

The Trump administration, however, was not having it. It imposed an extra 25% tariff on US imports from India – raising total duties to 50% – and threatened secondary sanctions, claiming that India was undermining US efforts to counter “Russia's harmful activities.”

Yet Trump spared other major importers of **Russian energy** and even granted a sanctions exemption to Hungary, whose autocratic prime minister, Viktor Orbán, is a close Trump ally.

US tariffs on Indian goods now exceed those applied to Chinese exports. This is nothing short of a US economic war on India.

## A wake-up call for the US

The US calls India **indispensable**, but treats its interests as peripheral.

It wants India to serve as a pillar of America's **Indo-Pacific strategy**, but adopts policies that directly undercut India's economic strength,

regional security, and strategic autonomy.



*Instead of trying to force India to “fall in line,” the US must rebuild the relationship by treating India as an equal partner*

Trump's foreign policy may be particularly erratic but the underlying pattern has spanned multiple administrations.

The result is an increasingly embittered and mistrustful India that sees no choice but to hedge its bets by accelerating self-reliance and strengthening ties with alternative partners, beginning with Russia.

Putin's visit to New Delhi should serve as a wake-up call for the US: coercion and inconsistency are a sure path to estrangement.

A flexible, interest-driven “soft alliance” with India remains one of America's few credible means of balancing China's aggressive rise.

In this sense, the US needs India more than India needs the US. Instead of trying to force India to “fall in line,” the US must rebuild the relationship by treating India as an equal partner.

This means engaging with India as it is, not as American policymakers want it to be.

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