



By: Brahma Chellaney

India and America between strategic partnership and regional rivalry



On his recent visit to India, US Secretary of State **Marco Rubio** predictably touted India as one of America's "most important strategic partners," citing the two countries' shared values, "people-to-people ties," and strategic alignment on "all of the key issues that will define the new century." But this familiar language of **partnership** rings increasingly hollow.

Much has been said about the impact US President **Donald Trump's** public insults and weaponization of tariffs have had on America's relations with India.

But the bilateral relationship was under pressure well before Trump's return to the White House in 2025.

In recent years, as India's regional standing has been steadily eroded by China's expanding strategic footprint, the United States has pursued policies in **India's strategic backyard** that have disregarded Indian interests—and sometimes run directly counter to them.

Bangladesh is a case in point. After the military-backed ouster of Prime Minister **Sheikh Hasina's government** in 2024, the US endorsed regime change.

But India knew this posed serious risks, which have since materialized: Bangladesh is now gripped by **Islamist violence**, jeopardizing stability on India's eastern flank.

Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan

Then there is Myanmar. Since the military's 2021 overthrow of a civilian government, the US has maintained a punitive approach toward the junta, including tough sanctions and "non-lethal" military aid for rebel groups, despite the security risks this has created along India's sensitive northeastern frontier.

In March, a US citizen, along with six Ukrainian nationals, was **arrested in India** for allegedly entering the country's northeast without permits and crossing into Myanmar to train and arm anti-junta fighters for drone

warfare.

The US has begun treating Nepal as a strategic priority in its own right, rather than as part of its India policy

The US has also begun treating **Nepal**—a country bound to India through geography, culture, and economics—as a strategic priority in its own right, rather than as part of its India policy.

In recent years, high-level US officials have **visited Kathmandu** more frequently, often without making the once-customary stop in New Delhi.

Trump has made matters much worse, not least by pursuing closer ties with Pakistan.

Never mind that Pakistan continues to provide safe haven, as well as military and intelligence aid, to terrorist groups, or that Pakistani army chief Asim Munir staged a **constitutional coup** last November.

Trump's family members and business associates have struck lucrative deals in the country, and that is apparently good enough reason for the Trump administration to revive dangerous strategic dynamics on the subcontinent.

A more conciliatory approach toward China

The US has even begun taking a more **conciliatory approach** toward China.

Though the strategic competition between the two superpowers remains intense, Trump's recent shift toward accommodation in some areas has created considerable uncertainty—not least for India, whose value to the US has long been rooted in its ability to act as a **regional counterweight** to China.

But while the US has long viewed India as a

critical democratic bulwark against Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific, it also balks at the idea of Indian regional dominance.

The National Security Strategy barely mentions India

As US Assistant Secretary of State **Samir Paul Kapur** explained in February, the US is seeking to prevent any single power from gaining too much influence in South Asia.

Kapur's remarks echoed the Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS), according to which the US "cannot allow any nation to become so dominant" that it could "threaten [US] interests" and must maintain "global and regional balances of power."

In America's view, a more pluralistic regional order is inherently more stable and favorable to US interests than one dominated by any country—even a close "strategic partner."

Unlike its 2017 predecessor, the NSS barely mentions India, noting only that the US wants to "improve commercial (and other) relations" with the country, in order to encourage it to "contribute to Indo-Pacific security."

Global partners or regional rivals

America's reservations are not just geopolitical. "We are not going to make the same mistakes with India that we made with China 20 years ago," US Deputy Secretary of State **Christopher Landau** said on a recent visit to New Delhi, letting it "develop all these markets" and then start "beating" the US in "a lot of commercial things."

The message is clear: the US now views India less as a strategic partner to be nurtured than as a regional and economic rival to be contained.



We are not going to make the same mistakes with India that we made with China 20 years ago - Christopher Landau

India must adapt to this new reality, which demands a fundamental shift in its strategic thinking.

India can no longer count on its close relationship with the US to sustain its influence across South Asia and beyond.

Instead, it must cultivate regional influence through economic engagement, political sensitivity toward neighboring states, and the delivery of tangible public goods that appeal to smaller countries.

The US should rethink its approach as well. It might want a more diversified regional order, but this cannot come at the expense of its partnership with India, with which it continues to share important interests, from managing China's rise to preserving stability across the Indo-Pacific.

Policies that systematically weaken India's position in its own neighborhood risk undermining these shared objectives.

The Trump administration seems to hope that the US and India can remain global partners, even as they become regional rivals.

But this will be no easy feat, and the outcome will shape not only the future of the bilateral relationship, but also the strategic landscape in South Asia and beyond.

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