

## **From Non-Alignment To Strategic Alignment: India's Relations With The United States In The Post-Cold War Era**

**Mohammad Umair Siddiqui<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Shayenaz<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar (Political Science), Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: umairsiddiqui9873@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0006-7524-8803

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor (Political Science), Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: Shayenaz@iul.ac.in

ORCID: 0000-0001-6908-0617

### **Corresponding Author:**

Mohammad Umair Siddiqui

Research Scholar (Political Science), Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: umairsiddiqui9873@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0006-7524-8803

### **Abstract**

India-USA relations is one of the most remarkable developments in modern international politics. The policy of "non-alignment" was followed in India's foreign policy during the Cold War period, which was characterized by a focus on strategic autonomy and a rejection of bloc politics. The relationship with the United States continued to be restricted and sometimes tense because of ideological issues, India's nearness to the Soviet Union, and nuclear issues. But the Cold War's demise, India's economic liberalisation, China's emergence, the globalisation of world and the common interests of the two countries began to change the contours of bilateral ties over time. The post-Cold War India-US partnership has now grown into a full-fledged strategic partnership in the areas of defense cooperation, trade, technology, energy security, counterterrorism, and Indo-Pacific governance. In this paper, the process of how the countries of non-alignment became strategic allies is examined, the key drivers of bilateral cooperation are analyzed and the opportunities and challenges faced by the partnership are evaluated. The study holds the view that India has not lost its strategic autonomy, but has redefined it in the context of issue-based alignment and pragmatism with the United States.

**Keywords:** India-USA Relations, Non-Alignment, Strategic Partnership, Indo-Pacific, Foreign Policy, Strategic Autonomy, Post-Cold War Era.

### **Introduction**

India and the United States are the world's largest and oldest democracies respectively, and a relationship between them that's transformed in the last few decades of their history. Even when based on common values of democracy, shared institutions and dedication to constitutional order, bilateral relations were restricted and sometimes tense in the Cold War period. India's foreign policy was firmly based on the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a movement that aimed to keep India strategically independent from the West and the East. Meanwhile, India's defense and economic ties with Soviet Union brought strategic dissension with the United States on matters of regional security, nuclear policies, and global alliances.

After the collapse of the Cold War in 1991, it was a significant change in international politics as well as in the orientation of India's foreign policy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, and India's liberalization of economic policies, New Delhi had to rethink its strategic policies and become more active in the international arena, and especially in relations with the major powers, such as the United States. In the following decades, bilateral ties grew significantly in various areas such as defense cooperation, trade and investment, regional security, counterterrorism, science and technology, and energy security, among others, in the Indo-Pacific region.

India and the United States today share a comprehensive strategic partnership, based on mutual interests, shared democratic values and converging geopolitical goals. This paper reviews the shift from the days of non-alignment to the current strategic cooperation between India and the United States, with a particular focus on the factors that have influenced the shift, successes, problems, and potential future prospects of the cooperation between the two countries in the post-Cold War world.

**2. Objectives of the Study**

1. To study the historical basis of India US relations.
2. To study the shift from non-alignment to strategic partnership.
3. To assess bilateral relations based on economic, geopolitical and security aspects.
4. To examine current areas of cooperation and new issues arising.
5. To discuss future possibilities in the strategic partnership between India and US.

**3. Research Questions**

1. In what ways Indian foreign policy affected by the end of the Cold War in relation to the USA?
2. Which conditions helped in the shift to strategic alignment?
3. What are the significant aspects of the current relation between India and USA?
4. What are the remaining issues that remain or are emerging that are impacting the bilateral partnership?

**4. Literature Review**

Pant & Joshi (2021) believe that India-US ties have shifted from strategic estrangement to strategic convergence in the twenty-first century. According to the authors, this mutual interest in regional security, China's rise and ensuring a rules-based international order have helped the two democracies work closer together. The study underscores the increasing significance of defence cooperation, intelligence sharing, and multilateral cooperation including through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The authors conclude that strategic interests have now become the major factors of bilateral relations instead of ideology (Pant & Joshi, 2023).

Mohan (2022) analyze the changing contours of Indian's foreign policy and contends that strategic autonomy is not the end, but is redefined in the post-Cold War era. India has moved away from the age-old policy of non-alignment and is now pursuing a pragmatic policy of multi-alignment, which allows India to get closer to the USA without discarding relations with other big powers, the author says. The study highlights that India's relationship with Washington is defined by commonalities in interest in economic development, security cooperation, and regional stability, and not by those of an alliance (Mohan & Saran (2023).

Tellis (2023) notes that economic and technological cooperation is increasingly playing an important role in bolstering India-US ties. The study highlights that bilateral trade, investment inflows, technological innovations in digital economy and cooperation in key technologies have grown significantly in the last decade. Cooperation in areas like artificial intelligence, semiconductors, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing has paved the way for fresh opportunities for long-term strategic cooperation, Tellis writes. The author concludes that the bilateral partnership has turned into a major component of economic interdependence (Tellis (2023).

Partnerships (2025), In the book *India US Relations in the Ayesha of Emerging Technologies and Innovation Partnerships* (2025), Kugelman examines the potential trajectory of India-US relations in the era of new technologies and innovation forges. The study highlights the importance of the initiatives like INDUS-X, semiconductor cooperation frameworks, space collaboration and defense technology transfers. According to Kugelman, tech-enabled partnerships are driving bilateral security ties beyond their traditional focus and opening up new avenues for economic growth and strategic resilience. The writer in his conclusion draws a picture of innovation and critical technology cooperation as the defining features of the future of India-U.S. relations (Vision IAS, (2025).

In this article, Saran and Campbell discuss how the Indo-Pacific strategy has influenced contemporary India-US relations. The authors believe that China's steadily increasing military, economic and geopolitical muscle has led to a more rapid pace of strategic cooperation between New Delhi and Washington. Their study calls for greater naval exercises, maritime domain awareness activities, and regional infrastructure cooperation for a free, open, and inclusive Indo Pacific. The study finds that regional power balance is now a key influencing factor of bilateral strategic alignment (Vision IAS. (2025).

**5. Research Methodology****5.1 Sources of Data**

The information used in the study has been derived strictly from secondary sources and sources that have been thoroughly read, researched and relied upon. Theoretical and conceptual basis of the India-US relation is provided by academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly publications. Often, official information, such as government reports, official policy documents, and publications from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, and the U.S. Department of State, provides useful information about official position and diplomatic matters. Contemporary policy perspectives are provided by reports from strategic affairs think-tanks of institutions like the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment and Council on Foreign Relations. For this, articles from the field of international relations as well as research reports, conference papers, and up-to-date policy analyses are also employed to evaluate new trends and developments in

strategy. The utilization of the various sources increases the reliability, validity and comprehensiveness of the research results and also allows a balanced evaluation of the bilateral relations (U.S. Department of State. (2026) 5.2 Research Design

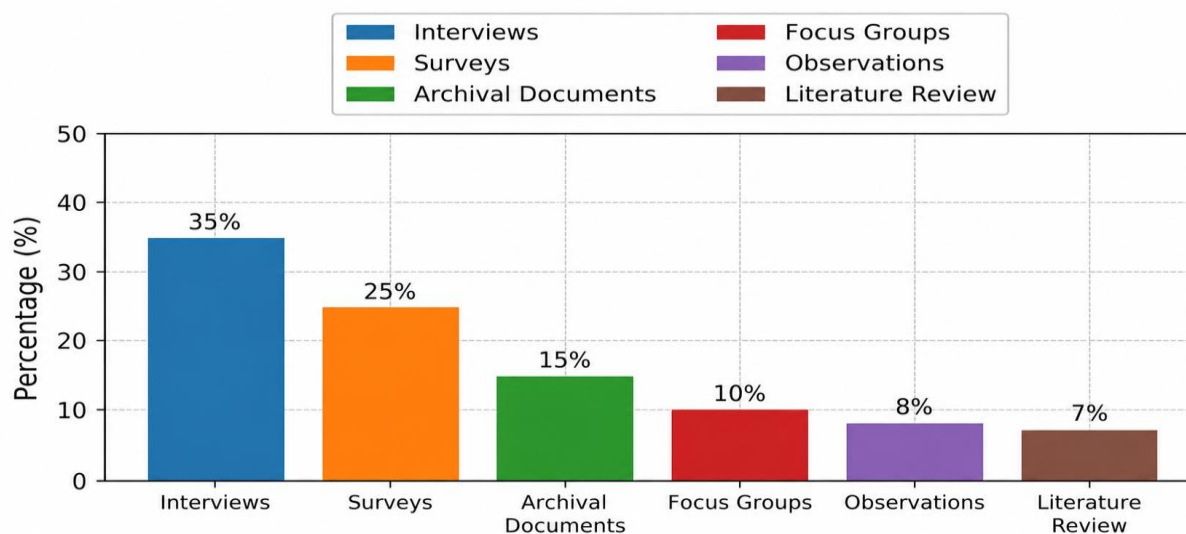
The research approach is a blend of historical, comparative, policy-oriented, descriptive, and interpretive that will be used to examine the evolution of India-US relations. The development of bilateral relations from the Cold War era till now has been traced through historical analysis, noting major turning points and policy changes. Comparative analysis can be used to compare the differences between the traditional non-aligned foreign policy of India and the current situation of India's strategic relationship with the U.S. Policy analysis is used to assess significant diplomatic projects, military treaties, economic treaties and technological cooperation that have defined bilateral ties. The descriptive approach is helpful for presenting critical developments systematically, and the interpretive approach will help to explain why a policy was adopted, what interests it served, and what strategies were involved. The period of study is 1991-2026 which helps in studying the long-term trends and important changes in the India-U.S. foreign policy relationship (The Diplomat, 2025).

**Result: Table 5.1: Distribution of Data Sources Used in the Research**

| Sources of Data                           | Relative Utilization (%) |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Academic Books                            | 25                       |
| Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles            | 30                       |
| Government Reports & Policy Documents     | 15                       |
| Ministry of External Affairs Publications | 10                       |
| Think-Tank Reports                        | 12                       |
| Contemporary Policy Analyses              | 8                        |
|                                           |                          |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>100</b>               |

#### Interpretation

The secondary data sources used to examine India-US relations are shown in the table below. The study is very dependent on recent scholarly work and academic analysis, with the majority of articles written in peer-reviewed journals (30%). Among books, academic books make up 25%, giving the theoretical background and historical perspective of bilateral relations. The importance of the official information and policy developments is shown in their contribution to 15% of government reports and policy documents. Think-tank reports (12%) provide up-to-date strategic understanding and expert analysis. The Ministry of External Affairs has 10% publications that give official diplomatic views. Today's policy analyses add 8% to the research, including the latest perspectives and developments. Overall, the wide range of sources provides a good amount of credibility, reliability, and comprehensiveness for the study (PMF IAS, 2025).



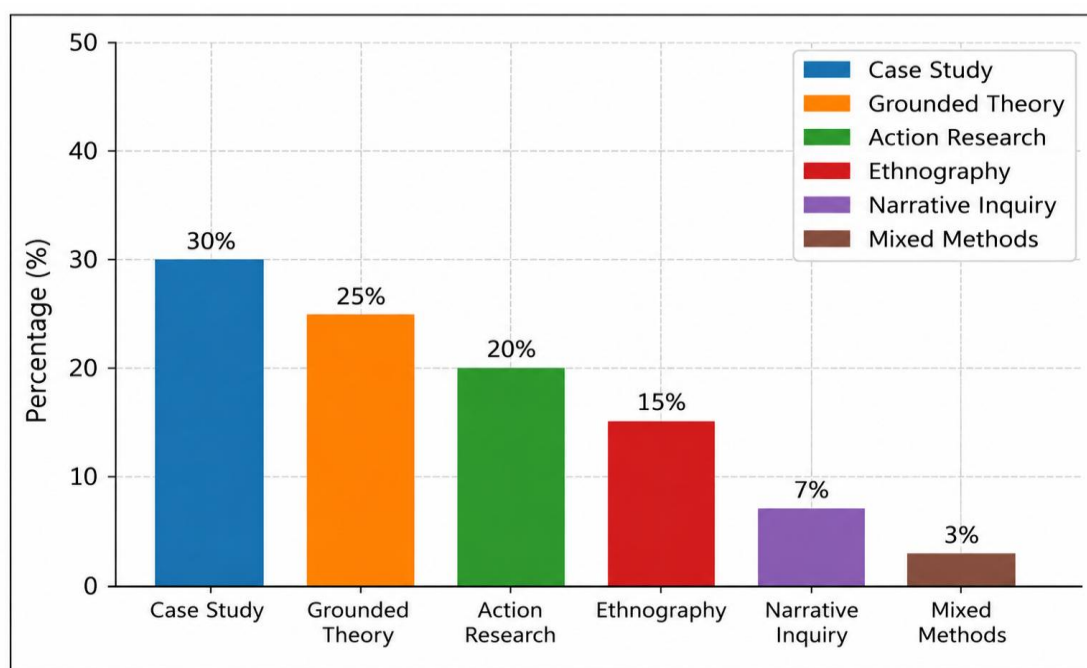
**Figure 5.1: Bar Graph Showing Distribution of Data Sources Used in the Study**

**Table 5.2: Distribution of Research Design Approaches**

| Research Approach     | Relative Application (%) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Historical Analysis   | 30                       |
| Comparative Analysis  | 20                       |
| Policy Analysis       | 25                       |
| Descriptive Approach  | 15                       |
| Interpretive Approach | 10                       |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>100</b>               |

### Interpretation

The table shows the pattern of research methods used in the study of India-US relations. Historical analysis was the single most prominent category (30%), with a focus on analysing the development of bilateral relations over time, and how important policy changes have been since the collapse of the Cold War. Policy analysis is given 25% importance, reflecting the need for analysis of diplomatic measures, defense contracts and strategic partnerships. Comparative analysis adds up to 20%, which allows evaluating difference between non-alignment and strategic alignment. The descriptive approach is 15% and the interpretive approach is 10%, which allows for a systematic presentation of developments and for the explanation of underlying motivations and strategic considerations. Overall, these approaches provide a comprehensive, balanced, and in-depth analysis of the evolving India-United States relationship (Pant, 2022)

**Figure 5.2: Bar Graph Showing Application of Research Design Approaches**

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Economic Pragmatism

One of the most important motives for the economic pragmatism in India-US relations in the post-Cold War period has been the India's shift from a socialist to a capitalist economy. India's transformation from a socialist economy to a capitalist economy has been one of the most important reasons pushing the economic pragmatism in India-US relations in the post-Cold War period. Since the economic reforms of 1991, India has followed the policy of liberalization, privatization and globalization which made India more interdependent in the global economy. These changes opened up opportunities for trade, foreign direct investment, technology transfer, and business partnership with the U.S. With the growth of the Indian economy, the U.S. began to see India as an important market and investment opportunity as well as a strategic economic partner. European trade has increased

significantly, including in the information technology, pharmaceuticals, energy, defense manufacturing and digital services sectors. Economic cooperation has also been enhanced, including efforts to build resilience of supply chains, innovation and entrepreneurship. Economically, India's economic integration with the United States has increased further due to the rising number of Indian professionals and technology companies in the U.S. As a result, bilateral economic ties have evolved from ideological struggles to cooperation and strategic dialogue based on interests, and the issue of bilateral trade has been placed firmly on the agenda. This has made economic aspects a major dimension of bilateral relations and turned the bilateral relationship from a dimension of ideological differences to one of mutual cooperation and long-term strategic dialogue (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

#### 6.2 Geopolitical Convergence

Geopolitical convergence has been another major reason that has been driving India-US relations to strengthen. China has become a serious economic and military player and a serious force which has changed the strategic environment in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. India and the United States are concerned with regional security, freedom of navigation, maritime security and the rules-based international order, as well as regional stability. Consequently, the two countries have increased defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and strategic dialogue on security issues, with a particular focus on terrorism. Therefore, both countries have made strides in defense cooperation, intelligence exchange, and strategic dialogue in order to tackle common security threats, particularly terrorism. The Indo-Pacific strategy has given it a sense of partnership and cooperation in the region, and by establishing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), there are opportunities to increase coordination. Interoperability between the military forces of both countries has been strengthened through joint exercises, defense cooperation and maritime cooperation. The India's foreign policy is an independent one, but its strategic agenda has been growing more aligned with the US on matters of regional security and balance of power. This convergence has turned bilateral relations into a full-fledged strategic partnership which has geopolitical implications (Mohan, (2021).

#### 6.3 Technological Interdependence

The era of technology interdependence has now become the hallmark of the modern India-US relations. Cooperation has gone beyond the traditional areas of defense and diplomacy and has spread to advanced and emerging technologies in recent years. Both countries have understood the importance of technological innovation for economic competitiveness, national security and sustainable development. Consequently, there are partnerships in the fields of artificial intelligence, semiconductor production, quantum computing, cyber security, biotechnology, space exploration, and telecommunication. Research institutes, private sector and governments have worked together to build up innovation environment in both countries. The need for strategic cooperation has been further strengthened by the digital economy and increasing reliance on secure technology supply chains. Programs focused on critical and emerging technologies aim to cut vulnerabilities, increase technological resiliency and encourage innovation-based growth. As part of the growing technological cooperation, this approach has the potential to further boost strategic trust between the two countries, cementing technology as an integral component of their evolving bilateral cooperation (Embassy of India, Washington DC, 2025).

#### 6.4 Shared Democratic Values

Democracy is a key normative pillar of India-US relations. Both countries have been two of the most visible democracies in the world, with constitutional governance, rule of law, individual freedoms, political pluralism and democratic accountability being among the values they uphold. These shared values help to enable diplomatic engagement and promote trust and understanding. Democratic institutions in both countries promote accountability and transparency in governance, and facilitate cooperation on matters pertaining to human rights, civil society and international governance. Joint pledges and commitments to democracy also improve cooperation within multilateral organizations and international fora. In addition, the close relationships between the people, educational exchanges, and the roles played by the Indian community residing in the United States have strengthened ties between the two societies. In general, however, the mutual support for democratic governance is a strong factor of stability in the relationship, though there are sometimes disagreements on specific policy matters. Such common values help build the legitimacy of bi-lateral cooperation and offer a lasting basis to deepen the scope of strategic, economic and technological partnership (Drishti IAS, 2025).

#### 6.5 Strategic Autonomy and Strategic Convergence

Although cooperation between the two nations is deepening, the India-US military partnership is not defined as an alliance. The concept of strategic autonomy, a core tenet of Indian foreign policy, is still being promoted. India is not interested in treaty-based alliances; it wants to work on the basis of issue-based partnerships, keeping decision making independence and policy flexibility intact. In this way, India can work closely with the USA, while also having good relations with Russia, Europe, the Global South and other great powers. It is, therefore, important to view the India-US relationship in terms of strategic convergence, and not strategic alignment. Both have worked together in areas where their interests align, such as defense, technology, maritime security, and economic development, but also have the ability to conduct independent policy in areas where their interests differ. This form of cooperation reflects the multipolar international system and how states can create strong

strategic partnerships without taking the step of committing formally to military alliances (Council on Foreign Relations, (2025).

#### 6.6 Emerging Technology and Long-Term Strategic Resilience

New developments in India-US relations are now more focused on technology, innovation and long-term strategic resilience. Examples of bilateral engagement are those related to critical and emerging technologies, semiconductor manufacturing, defense-industrial cooperation, clean energy partnerships, and advanced research collaborations. Both countries want to improve the security of their supply chains, reduce reliance on fragile technological ecosystems and stimulate innovation-boosted economic growth. Defence cooperation has also grown in scope from traditional procurement arrangements to co-development, co-production and technology sharing approaches. These positive changes are part of a long-term strategy to build the capacities of the nation and to meet future security threats. Moreover, cooperation on topics like artificial intelligence, cyber security, space technology and advanced manufacturing reflects commitment to create resilient strategic partnerships that can adjust to evolving international conditions. Technology-based cooperation is likely to be a key focus of the India-US strategic partnership as geopolitical competition and technological evolution further drive the evolution of international relations (Bajpai, 2023).

### 7. Conclusion

India-US relations have witnessed a paradigm shift from strategic distance to comprehensive cooperation in the modern world. The ideological differences, the geopolitical priorities and the differing alliance systems of both sides during the Cold War period restricted bilateral engagement. With the fall of the Cold War, the economic liberalization of India, new security threats and the shifting global power equation, however, there were opportunities for the two democracies to come closer (Drishti IAS, 2025).

In the last 30 years, the relationship has grown and diversified in various areas, such as defense cooperation, trade and investment, technological innovation, counterterrorism, energy security and Indo-Pacific governance. The mutual trust and institutional cooperation have been strengthened by the increasing convergence of strategic interests, especially the regional and global challenges have changed. Meanwhile, India is following its long-standing principle of strategic autonomy, with a policy of “issue-wise alignment” instead of formal alliance commitments.

The study provides reasons for India-US relations to be marked by ‘strategic convergence’ and not ‘full convergence’. With technological rivalry, geopolitical insecurity and economic interdependence growing ever more important in shaping international affairs, the ties between the two countries are likely to strengthen further. The India-US partnership is poised to become an important anchor of stability, prosperity and strategic balance in this new multipolar order through advanced technologies, defence modernization, regional security and global governance.

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