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# **From Delhi to D.C.: Indo-American Foreign Policy Shift Post-2000**



## **Analysis**

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28 January 2024

<https://nileandkaplan.au>  
**NK0072344-24**



## Abstract

This paper provides an analytical overview on the evolution of Indo-American foreign policy from 2000. New Delhi's foreign policy shift towards Washington DC has been an advantageous strategy. Driven by a desire for economic growth, securing nuclearisation and fortifying militarisation, and counterterrorism cooperation, in order to counter the imbalance of power presented by other powers' increasing military and political presence, this alignment has deepened bilateral ties and positioned India as a key emerging power in the evolving global order.

### Acknowledgements:

This paper **pays tribute** to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands on which this paper was developed, researched and finalised.

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Nile and Kaplan 2024

### Submission ID:

NK0072344-24 (online)

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## ***'From Delhi to DC:' Indo-American Foreign Policy Shift Post-2000***

Post-2000, policy-makers from the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, under Prime Minister Modi, sought to establish India as an emerging power, defined by the changing geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War. Despite Cold-War-soured Indo-American ties from India's non-aligned geopolitical and disparate nuclear-proliferation stances,<sup>1</sup> China's rise as an expansive economic and military power and its territorial overreaches in the South-China Sea was a mutual concern to foreign policy-makers.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while the US perceived India as a potential ally in their milieu goals of moderating China's threatening balance of power in South-Asia, India viewed the US as strategic and less-so collapsing than the Soviet Union.

Indian policy-makers believed a newly defined Indo-US rapprochement<sup>3</sup> would advance Indian national interests, with these broadly categorised as:

- I. neoliberalising foreign trade and expanding Indian politico-economic agreements;<sup>4</sup>**
- II. bolstering Indian nuclear arsenal and fortifying defence systems;<sup>5</sup> and,**
- III. strengthening counter-terrorism efforts against Pakistani, ISIL and ISIS extremist groups.<sup>6</sup>**

Policy-makers described these foreign policy goals as necessary for "[generating] greater prosperity [for] security"<sup>7</sup> in stabilising hegemonic power tensions with China, Pakistan,

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<sup>1</sup> Vijayalakshmi, K.P. 2015. "India and USA: A New Moment in Strategic Partnership." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 133.

<sup>2</sup> Joshi, Yogesh. 2015. "Between 'Concern' and 'Opportunity': US Pivot to Asia and Foreign Policy Debate in India." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 315.

<sup>3</sup> A newly defined Indo-US rapprochement based in relation on 'strategic autonomy:' "aiming to balance independence in both foreign policy and security decision-making processes with the imperative to forge close strategic ties with the US." See Monsonis, Guillem. 2010. "Strategic Analysis India's Strategic Autonomy and Rapprochement with the US." *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 611.

<sup>4</sup> The White House. 2014. *U.S.-India Joint Statement*. Joint Statement, Washington DC: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary.

<sup>5</sup> The White House. 2016. *JOINT STATEMENT: The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century*. Joint Statement, Washington DC: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary.

<sup>6</sup> The White House. JOINT STATEMENT.

<sup>7</sup> The White House. *U.S.-India Joint Statement*.

and other threats to the balance of power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Foreign policy leaders like Prime Minister Modi, and Presidents McCain, Obama, and Biden, consistently agree on “the priority India accords to its partnership with the United States,” with the US as “a principal partner in the realization of India’s rise as a responsible, influential” power in the region.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, policy-makers were hesitant in US-bilateralism, due to differing foreign policy ideologies and nuclear-proliferation stances.

### **Foreign Policy Ideologies**

The polarising divergence in India’s defensive realism and the US’ offensive realism misaligned the probability of converging their geopolitical interests.<sup>9</sup> Since the signing of the Panchsheel Agreement in April of 1954 by Indian policy leader, Ambassador N. Raghavan, and its latter recommendation by Premier Enlai and Prime Minister Nehru in a Joint Statement in June of 1954, India’s non-alignment status took a defensive, realist position. Meaning, India’s foreign policy considerations were in “pursuit of security [...] not to facilitate expansionism,”<sup>10</sup> instead favouring “territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference [...] and] peaceful coexistence.”<sup>11</sup> This conflicted with the US, who sought offensive realism during the ‘Wars on Terror,’ exercised through their defence expansionism and military interventionism across Afghanistan, Iraq and the South China Sea.

However, this concerned quickly mended with India’s revision as an emerging nation in the Global South. India’s foreign policy strategy evolved` from its “traditional non-aligned policy, with its idealist and moralistic overtones, to an eclectic mix of realist, defensive and reactive tactics,” in order to combat China’s increasing military and political presence in the region and “increase India’s ‘bargaining power’ vis-à-vis the international system in general

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<sup>8</sup> The White House. *U.S.-India Joint Statement*.

<sup>9</sup> Joshi. "Between ‘Concern’ and ‘Opportunity,’ 320.

<sup>10</sup> James, Patrick. 2022. "15. Defensive Realism." In *Realism and International Relations: A Graphic Turn Toward Scientific Progress*, by Patrick James, 448-478. New York: Oxford Academic.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of External Affairs. 2004. *Panchsheel*. Policy Report, New Delhi: External Publicity Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1-2.

and the US in particular.”<sup>12</sup> US bilateralism was perceived as, instead, beneficial, as it presented a ‘strategic autonomy’ relationship. As policy analyst Chellaney describes, a relationship with which provides India with “self-sufficiency/self-reliance,”<sup>13</sup> and “sufficient strategic space in order to achieve autonomous great power status” away from its idealist stance.<sup>14</sup>

### **Nuclear-Proliferation**

India’s nuclear arms race against Pakistan through and following the 1998 Nuclear Tests, and the consequent, (US-supported) economic sanctions on international nuclear-proliferation agreements, also presented an initial major threat to India’s policy goals. Specifically, for nuclear security in the region.<sup>15</sup> New Delhi was, and remains, a non-signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Ban Test Treaty (CTBT), with policy-makers under Prime Minister Modi bypassing any obligations to disarmament and non-proliferation efforts in the international community. As a result, other NPT-signatories including the US, coalesced their “[grave] concern at the risk of a nuclear arms race in South Asia,”<sup>16</sup> adopting UNSC Resolution 1172, condemning India’s deterrence and non-compliance by restricting nuclear tests in South Asia and prohibiting Indian nuclear exports through trade sanctions.<sup>17</sup>

However, the Indo-American foreign policy shift was mostly perceived beneficial in advancing their strategic interests. Under Modi, Indian policy-makers prioritised a long-term alliance in reforming nuclear and defensive military co-operative advances (i.e. fighter jets and

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<sup>12</sup> Monsonis, Guillem. 2010. "Strategic Analysis India’s Strategic Autonomy and Rapprochement with the US." *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 614.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 612.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 614.

<sup>15</sup> Cherian, John. 2008. "India's Foreign Policy Shift: From NAM to "Strategic Partnership" with the US." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 59.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Security Council. 1998. *Resolution 1172*. Resolution Paper, Geneva: United Nations Security Council, 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Sullivan, Kate. 2012. *India’s Nuclear Doctrine and the Debate of No First Use Policy*. Policy Report, Uttar Pradesh: M. J. P. Rohilkhand University, 6.

missile defence systems<sup>18</sup>) and foreign trade agreements (i.e. through post-1991-US-influenced neoliberal market investment<sup>19</sup>)<sup>20</sup>, to ensure a simmering of hegemonic nuclear and power tensions with China and Pakistan in the region, and fortifying security against an increasing extremist and terrorist presence in India. Indian policy-makers' decision in their declaration as a nuclear power state in 1998, was a strategic move to balance regional hegemony with long-standing political rivals, Pakistan and China, and former US President Obama affirmed its "convergence in the [US'] strategic perspectives [...] emphasising the need to remain closely invested in [India's] security and prosperity."<sup>21</sup> Hence, the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the beginning of a civil Indo-American nuclear deal, with a mutualising alliance through the signed 2005 Defence Agreement, 2005 Next Steps in Strategic Partnership Statement, and culminating in the 2008 Civil Nuclear Cooperation.<sup>22, 23, 24</sup> Moreover, with fears of greater Pakistan-and-Taliban-based terrorist groups attacks in India and more nuclear-(testing)-arms-race-complications post-1998, US counter-terrorism and nuclear-security efforts were sought to enhance regional stability and a balance of power in South-Asia.

The early 2000s saw Indian policy-makers, unsuccessfully, misrecognise the US' volatile relationship to Afghanistan and Pakistan, amid the Wars on Terror. Although, India's defensive realist foreign policy collided with the US' offensive realist interventionism post-Cold-War, the clandestine militarisation of Pakistan through \$1 billion in military aid<sup>25</sup> consisting of "air-to-air missiles, and naval armaments"<sup>26</sup> under the Obama administration 'AfPak'-isation policy, posed initial threats to the stability of South Asia. The US-arms-sales efforts did, in fact, operationalise the military hostility in Pakistan, breeding an environment fit for extremism and insurgency against its expanding defence systems. The AfPak policy saw the

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<sup>18</sup> Vijayalakshmi. "India and USA: A New Moment in Strategic Partnership," 133.

<sup>19</sup> Bhardwaj, Naina. 2022. *US Emerges as India's Largest Trade Partner in FY 2022, Surpasses China*. Delhi: India Briefing, Dean Shire & Associates.

<sup>20</sup> Karl, David J. 2012. "U.S.-India Relations: The Way Forward." *Orbis*, Volume 56, Issue 2, 321.

<sup>21</sup> The White House. JOINT STATEMENT.

<sup>22</sup> Sibal, Kanwal. 2015. "India-US Strategic Partnership: Transformation is Real." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 106.

<sup>23</sup> Cherian. "India's Foreign Policy Shift: From NAM to "Strategic Partnership" with the US," 59.

<sup>24</sup> Vijayalakshmi. "India and USA: A New Moment in Strategic Partnership," 134.

<sup>25</sup> Sibal. "India-US Strategic Partnership: Transformation is Real," 110.

<sup>26</sup> Vijayalakshmi. "India and USA: A New Moment in Strategic Partnership," 139.

mobilisation of anti-India jihadi tirades raising complications for propulsive terrorist extremism in India; made evident by the releasing of Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist leader, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, and the Lashkare-Taiba-led Terrorist attack in Mumbai in 2008.<sup>27</sup> Moreso, talks of the US' 're-hyphenating' of relations between India and Pakistan<sup>28</sup> particularly by intervening in the nuclear and defence arms races heightened the possibility for further insecurity to India's territorial integrity and state sovereignty.

However, from 2011, policy-makers under the Obama administration reformed their foreign policy vision, turning their eyes from AfPak, more solidly to India. This Obamaian policy of "rebalancing" to Asia, and Prime Minister Modi's election in 2014, only further mobilised the US-bilateralist policy. Indeed, the successes of the Indo tilt to America did outweigh the failures.

## **I. Economic Growth and 'Emerging Power' Status**

Despite India's neoliberalising of foreign trade and its role in the international political economy in 1991, US-bilateralism has leveraged India's economic growth. Notably, "two-way trade has increased fivefold since 2001 to nearly \$100 billion" and policy leaders since Modi and Obama have been insistent on continuing to prioritise trade increase by another fivefold in future years.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, India's emerging power revision has been made evident in its P5+1-plight, long-since the Obama administration siding in support of a reformed UNSC with India's permanence,<sup>30</sup> and remains a continued foreign policy ambition, especially given the active endorsement of India's positioning in high table discussions through the US-backed admittance to numerous defence alliances (i.e. Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sibal. "India-US Strategic Partnership: Transformation is Real," 110.

<sup>28</sup> Inclusive of erstwhile states of Kashmir and Jammu, a fiery and long-contested debate of disputed nation vs. state borders and their relation to each respective state's sovereignty and territorial boundaries, circa Partition 1947. See Joshi. "Between 'Concern' and 'Opportunity,'" 324-325.

<sup>29</sup> The White House. *U.S.-India Joint Statement*.

<sup>30</sup> Sibal. "India-US Strategic Partnership: Transformation is Real," 109.

<sup>31</sup> Sibal. "India-US Strategic Partnership: Transformation is Real," 107.



## II. US-fortified Nuclearisation, Nuclear Security and Militarisation

Indian policy-makers have affirmed “that a strong and capable Indian military supports peace, stability, [...and] order in the Indo-Pacific,” with Prime Minister Modi, too, “reaffirming his pledge to support the transfer [...] of advanced U.S. military technology” to India.<sup>32</sup> Since the 2008 Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement, India has been steadfast in modernising its nuclear arsenal and operationalising its nuclearisation of South Asia and the Indian Ocean. US policy-makers withheld India from any efforts to join the NPT, instead, allowing all 45 members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), that once condemned India’s non-proliferation stance, to sign civil Indo-nuclear trading agreements. Now, India solidifies itself as a nuclear power state, as the only nuclear possessor state and non-NPT signatory permitted to engage in foreign trade.<sup>33</sup> The liberalising of trade agreements places India as the second-largest arms importer, globally.<sup>34</sup>

With the US having spent \$US250 billion on nuclear assets to India from 2008-2023 alone, and predicted to invest an additional \$US40 billion in future, India stands as the third largest buyer of U.S. nuclear weapons.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, the US is helping construct 10 more nuclear reactors, one of which is a fast-breeder reactor.<sup>36</sup> As of 2023, India has 22 nuclear power reactors in operation, 8 nuclear power plants in active use,<sup>37</sup> and a total of 160 nuclear warheads.<sup>38</sup> In its military, India boasts eight nuclear systems consisting of two aircrafts, four land-based ballistic missiles, two sea-based ballistic missiles, and at least four more systems are currently in development.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The White House. *U.S.-India Joint Statement*.

<sup>33</sup> Sullivan. *India’s Nuclear Doctrine and the Debate of No First Use Policy*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Peedikayil, Aneetta Thomas, Aswathy Koonampilly, and Medha Bhagwat. 2020. "India’s Realist Foreign Policy: Present-Day Relevance." *The Diplomatist*, October 20.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, Karl. 2012. "U.S.-India Relations: The Way Forward." *Orbis* 56 (2): 321.

<sup>36</sup> World Nuclear Association. 2016. *India, China & NPT*. London: World Nuclear Association.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kristensen, Hans. M., and Matt Korda. 2022. "Indian Nuclear Weapons, 2022." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 78 (4): 224-236.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



Militarily, India has experienced an “ambitious military build-up, ”<sup>40</sup> and the US is the largest arms exporter globally, surpassing Russia.<sup>41</sup> For India, the US was a strategic distributor of artillery aircraft and maritime patrol aircraft.<sup>42</sup> With a *de facto* economic goal of \$30 billion in defence deals from 2004,<sup>43</sup> and an *ipso facto* success of “purchases amounting to \$4.5 billion” from 2012, India solidifies itself as the “third largest buyer of U.S. weapons.”<sup>44</sup>

### III. Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Exigencies of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts were a shared foreign policy goal and have, indeed, been executed in success. Still shaken by the tremor of the 9/11 New York and 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Indian and American policy-makers signed the 2015 U.S.-India Joint Statement and U.S.-India-Joint Declaration on Combatting Terrorism. Detailing their foreign policy frameworks to combat groups including “Al-Qa’ida, Da’esh/ISIL, Jaish-e Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, D Company and their affiliates,” India and the US call for Pakistan “to bring the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai and 2016 Pathankot terrorist attacks to justice,” and restore peace in South Asia.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, with the US leveraging affirmed support from the UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism to defeat further Pakistani-based attacks in the region, India’s tilt to the US underlines the necessity for aggrandised multilateral efforts to combat rising extremism and its threat to regional peace and security in future.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

New Delhi’s foreign policy shift towards Washington DC has been an advantageous strategy. Driven by a desire for economic growth, securing nuclearisation and fortifying militarisation, and counterterrorism cooperation, in order to counter the threatening imbalance of power by China’s increasing military and political presence, this alignment has deepened bilateral ties and positioned India as a key emerging power in the evolving global order.

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<sup>40</sup> Karl. "U.S.-India Relations: The Way Forward," 321.

<sup>41</sup> Joshi. "Between 'Concern' and 'Opportunity,'" 323.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>43</sup> Cherian. "India's Foreign Policy Shift: From NAM to "Strategic Partnership" with the US," 59.

<sup>44</sup> Karl. "U.S.-India Relations: The Way Forward," 321.

<sup>45</sup> The White House. *U.S.-India Joint Statement*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.