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An Overview of Indo-US Strategic Relations in Modi Era

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Abstract: Today, nobody can deny the fact that the US–India relationship encompasses the most intense bilateral engagement that New Delhi enjoys with any nation. In 2014, when Narendra Modi was elected the prime minister of India, few anticipated that he would turn out to be such an ardent champion of stronger Indo-US ties. Particularly, in strategic cooperation, the Indian nuclear liability law, the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, which was enacted in the year 2010, had cast an enormous pall over the optimistic atmosphere that followed the historic nuclear deal. On the contrary, when Washington finally reached out to Modi through a congratulatory phone call from President Barack Obama, Modi displayed a graciousness that not only belied the anxieties of the past but effectively reset US–India relations for a new era going forward. Moreover, the density of these different ties and interactions between the two makes clear is that the US seeks the closest possible relationship with India, while remaining respectful of India’s constraints, even as New Delhi seeks a deeper affiliation with Washington that bolsters its national power. However, some of the political analysts point out that all the breadth of its successes, however, the partnership still lacks the requisite depth; mitigating this deficit remains the key task for both countries in the years ahead but the US-India strategic partnership has strengthened significantly during the past two decades, based on a convergence of strategic interests. The present research paper highlights Indo-US strategic cooperation including some other ties in Modi era.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Nuclear Deal, Modi-Era, Cooperation.

Introduction: Most of the scholars agree with the fact that India and the United States are ten thousand miles apart. Moreover, the two countries have different geographical settings, races, cultures and habits. Their social structures, political systems and economic organizations are vastly different. The United States is a superpower – economically and militarily – and heads one of the blocs of a still largely bipolarized community

of nations. India is one of the developing countries of the world, but because of other factors is leading middle-power and a non-aligned state. Nevertheless, we can't ignore the facts that despite these differences, the two countries have much in common. Moreover, they cherish common ideas of democracy, liberty and social equality. Both have faith in the United Nations as an instrument to bring world peace and international harmony. Here it is to say that each of them exerts its influence on international affairs in their own ways – the US very much more than India. However, their foreign policies often clash with each other largely on global – not so much on bilateral – issues. But in the Modi era bilateral ties between India and US have become more cordial. Some of the scholars agree that Indo-US relations have undergone a chequered development in Modi era and while they reflected the cooperative pattern at times, the oppositional pattern has always existed with respect of certain issues. Consequently, two countries continuously cooperated due to certain shared objectives and historical experience. These shared ideals would have resulted in cordial relations between the US and India if they had been insulated from the influence of the international set up in the recent years.

However, during the Trump years ties between the two have presented bumps in the road for India, but largely, New Delhi has escaped many of the greatest pitfalls of a transactionally minded and capricious U.S. leadership. India's trade deficit with the United States has brought it under the administration's scrutinizing gaze — with real costs, like the suspension of GSP developing nation status for New Delhi — but the relationship has survived. Meanwhile, the previously mentioned controversies concern India's relationship to its only Muslim-majority region, Kashmir, and, more broadly, its 200-million-strong Muslim minority. But a drastic change in Indo-US relations and cooperation came when Modi took over as India's prime minister in 2014. Meanwhile, Barack Obama had been the president of the United States for almost six years. His perception of India was shaped largely by his judgment that India, unlike Pakistan next door, was thankfully not a problem. India instead represented a great opportunity for the US and—in large measure due to his interactions with Modi's courtly predecessor, Manmohan Singh, at the height of the global financial crisis—could be a potential asset for Washington as Obama restructured the character of US global engagement in the aftermath of the excesses of the Bush era. Unfortunately for Obama and the US, the second UPA regime in India, the hope of a deepened bilateral partnership quickly ran dry—to the President's consternation— at exactly the time when most of the US policymakers were expecting a blossoming strategic partnership with the India.

Most of the scholars and foreign policy analysts point out that many changes in Modi's approach to foreign policy may appear to be successful. The first and most important is in the area of climate change. Therefore, Modi's willingness to accept India's global responsibilities in mitigating climate change was equally vital to success in the lead-up to Paris: a concession unimaginable under India's tradition of 'Third World'

posturing, which would have prevented it from accepting the obligations that finally made an international accord possible. The fact that this climate accord is now endangered as a result of President Trump's policies does not in any way undermine the conclusion that Modi's approach to US–India relations yielded important gains for India at a time when New Delhi could have all too easily become the object of unremitting international pressure.

On the contrary, PM Shri Narendra Modi's political instincts allowed him to quickly appreciate the extent to which US–India relations had fallen around the time he took office. Despite his limited experience with Washington up to that point, he understood that the pervasive frustration in both capitals did not bode well for his larger project of revitalising India, balancing the threats posed by growing Chinese power, and expanding New Delhi's influence on the international stage. Now, Indo-US relations were based entirely on his conviction that he must do whatever is necessary to advance India's interests, Modi, brushing away any wounded amour propre, set out to repair the US–India relationship with alacrity in three ways that would affect both the style and the substance of Indian foreign policy.

1. Now, unlike his recent predecessors, Modi invested heavily in building up personal relationships with his peers abroad. Whether through his dramatic hugs, his invitations to Presidents Obama and Trump to visit India as honoured guests on major national events, or his repeated breaches of protocol by personally receiving visiting dignitaries at Indian airports, Modi sought to cement personal friendships with national leaders who were politically important to India. Beyond leaders within South Asia itself, or those of Japan, Israel and a handful of European states, no one was more important to Modi than the US president. Consequently, he invested heavily in developing strong friendships with his American counterparts, first Obama and now Trump, guided by the logic that, even if US and Indian national interests did not always cohere, the latter would always come out ahead if the individual steering policy in Washington were favourably disposed towards India. When strategic convergence between the two countries existed, warm personal ties could push the envelope to produce even better policy outcomes for India. Thus, by so focusing on developing a personal rapport with his US counterparts, Modi personalised the conduct of India's international relations in ways not seen in decades to the advantage of India's interests as a whole.
2. It represents Modi's considered effort to augment Indian security by developing a network of key partnerships that include Japan and especially the US—countries that not only represent sterling antipodes to authoritarian China but also happen to be favoured partners due to a confluence of common interests and common values. Modi's private remarks to his international counterparts, including to political figures in the US, suggest that he genuinely views democratic regimes as a source of stability in international politics. Hence, he has more openly allied India with other

democratic partners and, in a remarkable evolution from times past, has encouraged his counterparts to consider not merely increased bilateral economic cooperation, but, rather, initiatives aimed at bringing security and prosperity to other parts of the globe.

3. In the wake of new relationship between India and the US, Modi has quietly but resolutely moved India away from the rhetoric of non-alignment to the practice of strategic partnership. This does not imply that India is content to be a camp follower of the US or, for that matter, any other great power. To the contrary, India has ploughed its own course in foreign policy, dictated by a sense of its own interests. As it has moved forward in its quest to become a 'leading power', however, Modi has not shied away from developing and nurturing partnerships with other nations, most importantly, the US. Unlike those votaries of non-alignment who argue that India should be cautious about developing special affiliations with great powers—because that might possibly constrain India's freedom of action in the future—Modi has freely reached out to the US in the hope of building a robust strategic partnership that could enhance India's power and standing. In many ways, this represents a continuation of India's traditional grand strategy—but with one important difference. Now, New Delhi has moved resolutely to cement specific foreign ties that are of supernormal value to India.

The most remarkable success of Modi's foreign policy has been India's cooperation with the US in shaping the security environment in the Indo-Pacific. While this term has taken on new life under President Trump, the defining agreement between the US and India occurred under President Obama. Prime Minister Modi's active involvement in shaping the 'US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region' was couched in innocuous language, but its import was momentous. India did not simply reaffirm its commitment to the freedom of navigation and overflight—especially in the South China Sea where the threats from China are particularly acute—but it declared its willingness to contribute towards larger diplomatic and regional integration in order to bolster long-term peace and prosperity for all. On the contrary Modi's strategic partnership with the global powers has been very successful. That is why; regional security environment in South Asia has a vision and cooperation based on security ties.

The main objective of strategic ties along with articulating the larger objective in this way was also remarkable for many reasons. First, India did not seek the cover of traditional multilateral fora such as the United Nations, India's traditional 'go to' mechanism, in order to legitimise its security contributions, but felt comfortable enough to signal its role through a bilateral announcement with the reigning superpower. Second, India utilised the process of developing the joint strategic vision to convey to the US and to others how it intended to contribute towards the common goal of ensuring maritime security in its traditional and new operating spaces in the Indo-Pacific. Third, and finally, the US—in active collaboration with India—began

to treat the joint vision statement as a road map for developing the bureaucratic justifications necessary to authorise the sale of advanced military technologies that would enable India to execute the relevant operational missions in the wider Indian Ocean Region. Moreover, Modi's regional ties equally and importantly opened the door to increasing India's access to control the US technologies, supporting India's membership in the organs of global governance as well as regional governance.

Here it is noteworthy that the most important contours of strategic partnership between India and the US are founded on shared democratic political architecture – India being the largest democracy while US the oldest one. The strong institutional affinity, deep-rooted democratic foundations, robust constitutional fabric in polity and decision process, vibrancy in cultural diversity fostering multiculturalism, shared belief in freedom of human rights, strong people-to-people ties, and non-interventional business and economic framework with the spirit of globalization and competition are hallmarks that bring the two countries closer to each other. The convergences of fundamental socio-politico-economic attributes and strategic interests that the two countries share constitute strong underpinnings that make New Delhi and Washington natural allies. This is a very special relationship that stands the test of time and has enormous potential to shape the dynamics of 21st century global geopolitics. It is the need of the hour that the two countries actually should cooperate on the different issues to each other. It would pave a way and the momentum of people-to-people interaction and ushering in a new transformational era of strategic ties in the recent years.

Now it is to say that since 2014, with the Narendra Modi government coming to office in India one can notice that the relationship between New Delhi and Washington has entered an altogether revamped phase of warming up scaling newer heights of mutual commitment and trust. What we see now is that the dimensions of strategic partnership in the last five years with successively Modi-Obama and currently Modi-Trump relations have deepened and reflected in treating each other as symmetrical partners sharing each other's concerns in a more meaningful manner and acting together towards mitigation. Even though the ties between the two countries are multifarious, yet greater engaged cooperation is generally observed both in bilateral framework and in multilateral fora such as UN Security Council, G-20, Quad, JAI (Japan-America-India) alliance, Financial Action Task Force (FATF). On the contrary, the formation of Two-Plus-Two Dialogue by itself exemplifies how much importance the two countries currently provide in acquiring new qualitative edge and purpose towards emboldening shared commitment in dealing with the menace of strategic security issues of mutual interests. It is heartening to see that the expanding and rapidly unfolding dimensions of strategic ties between New Delhi and Washington have now being increasingly very fast in the global scenario of strategic partnership.

Recently, most of the political analysts agree with the fact that today both New Delhi and Washington well recognize convergence of mutual interests and the need for enhanced cooperation in maintaining peace

and stability especially in the Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific. Such understanding becomes all the more critical especially in the context of growing Chinese aspirations for establishing hegemony and altering power balance in this vital area of global maritime trade. The India Ocean region is crucial as nearly half of global commercial sea-vessels and two-thirds global oil trade pass through these sea lines. Both Prime Minister Modi and President Trump are aware of the potential strategic threats arising out of complex geopolitical dimensions in the greater Indian Ocean region, sensitivity of Persian Gulf region included. With the US recently designating India as 'Major Defence Partner', a status unique to India, new vistas have opened for elevated Indo-US cooperation impacting power balance in the region and neutralizing shared security threats. As part of accelerated India-US security partnership joint military exercises between the Indian and US military personnel have been taking place on a sustainable basis and strengthening the security ties in the modern era.

Concluding Remarks: Today, Both Modi and Trump treat and greet each other with great respect and camaraderie. Moreover, they are on the same page in identifying shared threats. Now, they understand that the two countries need each other for fulfilling common cause and concerns. Diplomacy apart, the strong people-to-people connection and high spirit reflected in recently concluded 'Howdy Modi' event, where the two leaders shared stage together, was truly astounding. The optics is profoundly ripe for a big leap forward in elevating Indo-US security ties. Needless to say that since January 2017, the U.S.-India relationship, during its best moments, has mostly glided along the trajectory that had already been running its course through the Obama years, after an initial jolt during the Bush administration. In 2019, India's economic performance and the BJP's expenditure of domestic political capital on longstanding issues on the Party's social agenda have been negatively correlated: gone are the days of India as the world's most promising large emerging economy, giving way to the days of India as the next big story in the global surge of populist illiberalism. In the new decade, the US analysts will need to think hard on a range of questions pertaining to the relationship with India. Likewise, India also needs to write a new chapter of strategic partnership in the coming year. It is thought that in the recent years in future Indo-US strategic ties will be remarkable and based on people-to-people contact.

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