



# ASIA MAIOR

Special Issue 3 / 2025

---

## **Modi's India: Hegemonic Narrative and the Reality of an Authoritarian Regime (2014–2025)**

Edited by  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Marzia Casolari**

---

CESPI - CENTRO STUDI DI POLITICA INTERNAZIONALE ETS

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

Special issue No. 3 / 2025

## Modi's India: Hegemonic Narrative and the Reality of an Authoritarian Regime (2014-2025)

Edited by  
Michelguglielmo Torri  
Marzia Casolari

viella

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989.

Copyright © 2026 - Viella s.r.l. & Associazione Asia Maior

ISBN 979-12-5701-038-6 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5701-219-9 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Special issue, No. 3, 2025

The annual issues of this journal are published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia. The special issues are published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & by a guest scholarly institution. This issue is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & CeSPI - Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale ETS.

*Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989* is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: [www.asiamaior.org](http://www.asiamaior.org).

## **EDITORIAL BOARD**

**Editor-in-chief** (direttore responsabile):

Michelguglielmo Torri, University of Turin.

### **Co-editors:**

Filippo Boni, The Open University

Diego Maiorano, University of Naples «L'Orientale»

Elena Valdameri, ETH Zürich

### **Co-editor of this special issue:**

Marzia Casolari, University of Turin.

### **Associate editors:**

Axel Berkofsky, University of Pavia;

Giulio Pugliese, King's College London;

Emanuela Mangiarotti, University of Pavia;

Pierluigi Valsecchi, University of Pavia.

### **Consulting editors:**

Elisabetta Basile, University of Rome «Sapienza»;

Kerry Brown, King's College London;

Peter Brian Ramsay Carey, Oxford University;

Rosa Caroli, University of Venice;

Jaewoo Choo, Kyung Hee University (Seoul, South Korea);

Jamie Seth Davidson, National University of Singapore;

Ritu Dewan, Indian Association for Women Studies;  
Laura De Giorgi, University of Venice;  
Kevin Hewison, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill;  
Lucia Husenicova, University Matej Bel (Banská Bystrica, Slovakia);  
David C. Kang, Maria Crutcher Professor of International Relations,  
University of Southern California;  
Rohit Karki, Kathmandu School of Law;  
Jeff Kingston, Temple University – Japan Campus;  
Mirjam Künkler, Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study – Uppsala;  
Noemi Lanna, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;  
James Manor, School of Advanced Studies – University of London;  
Aditya Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;  
Mridula Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University;  
Parimala Rao, University of Delhi;  
Guido Samarani, University of Venice;  
Marisa Siddivò, University of Naples «L'Orientale»;  
Eswaran Sridharan, Institute for the Advanced Study of India, University of  
Pennsylvania;  
Arun Swamy, University of Guam;  
Akio Takahara, University of Tokyo;  
Edsel Tupaz, Harvard University alumnus, Ateneo de Manila University and  
Far Eastern University;  
Sten Widmalm, Uppsala University;  
Ather Zia, University of Northern Colorado.

**Graphic project:**

Nicola Mocchi, University of Florence.

Before being published in *Asia Maior* – both the annual and the special issues – all articles, whether commissioned or unsolicited, after being first evaluated by the Journal's editors, are then submitted to a double-blind peer review involving up to three anonymous referees. Coherently with the spirit of the double-blind peer review process, *Asia Maior* does not make public the name of the reviewers. However, the reviewers' names – and, if need be, the whole correspondence between the journal's editors and the reviewer/s – can be disclosed to interested institutions, upon a formal request made directly to the Editor in Chief of the journal.

Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com).



ASSOCIAZIONE ASIA MAIOR

Steering Committee: Filippo Boni, Marzia Casolari, Matteo Fumagalli, Michelguglielmo Torri (President).



Centro Studi  
di Politica  
Internazionale

CeSPI<sup>ETS</sup>

CeSPI

Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale ETS

This volume forms part of a project carried out with the support of the Unit for Analysis, Planning and Historical Documentation – Directorate-General for Political Affairs and International Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Government of Italy, pursuant to Article 23-bis of Presidential Decree No. 18 of 1967.

**The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.**



**viella**

*libreria editrice*

via delle Alpi, 32

I-00198 ROMA

tel. 06 84 17 758

fax 06 85 35 39 60

[www.viella.it](http://www.viella.it)

## CONTENTS

### FOREWORD

- 9 MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, *Going beyond the looking glass: a five-pronged enquiry into the reality of Modi's India*

### ARTICLES

- 15 JAMES MANOR, *Narendra Modi's India ten years on: A second Indian Republic or a second Emergency?*
- 39 ELISABETTA BASILE AND CLAUDIO CECCHI, *Modi's India as a Variety of Authoritarian-Hegemonic Capitalism*
- 89 PILAR M. GUERRIERI, *Architecture and Urban Planning as Pivotal Tools in Narendra Modi's Political Agenda*
- 107 FILIPPO BONI, *From «Neighbourhood first» to «Neighbourhood lost»? India's foreign policy towards South Asia under Modi*
- 129 MICHELUGUGLIELMO TORRI, *Indian Foreign Policy toward the US, China, and Russia under Modi: Rhetoric and Reality (2014-2025)*
- 173 *Appendix*

# INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE US, CHINA, AND RUSSIA UNDER MODI: RHETORIC AND REALITY (2014-2025)

*Michelguglielmo Torri*

Asia Maior – An Italian think tank on Asia  
mg.torri@gmail.com

*The election of Narendra Modi in 2014 is widely portrayed as a watershed moment for Indian foreign policy. This article challenges that narrative, arguing that the core parameters guiding India's relations with the US, China, and Russia under Modi – namely its structural imperatives, constraints, and strategic calculations – exhibit a substantial continuity with the framework established well before his ascent. Indeed, the article locates the true watershed for India's international alignments and strategic outlook in the 2005-2008 period. It demonstrates that Modi's most significant innovation, a more confrontational approach to China, proved both limited in scope and ultimately subject to the same constraints that shaped the policies of his predecessors. In its relations with Russia and the US, continuity remained the leitmotif, even as new tensions and opportunities emerged.*

*Furthermore, the article contends that this underlying continuity and the limited results of Modi's policies have been effectively obscured by a powerful narrative presenting his leadership as revolutionary and his foreign policy as finally establishing India as a major world power. This narrative was forcefully reinforced by India's position of benign neutrality toward Russia during the war in Ukraine, a stance that elicited no concrete adverse reaction from the United States and its key allies. This was depicted as proof of India's ability to forge its own position on major international issues, free from subordination to any great power. This article posits, however, that counter-intuitively, much of India's apparent strength is rooted in its structural weakness. Accordingly, Washington's unexpected tolerance during the Ukraine crisis is better explained by recognizing that India's supposedly independent stance was exercised within a geopolitical space defined by overriding US interests.*

**KEYWORDS** – India's foreign policy; India-China relations; India-US relations; India-Russia relations; Narendra Modi; India's strategic autonomy.

## *1. Introduction*

The rise of Narendra Modi to the office of Prime Minister in 2014 was heralded by his supporters, much of the Indian media, and a significant segment of the international commentariat as a decisive break with the foreign policy traditions of his predecessors. Modi was depicted as a transformative leader, an all-powerful demiurge who reimagined India's place in the world, recalibrated its great power alignments, and restored a sense of

national purpose to its diplomacy. This narrative found fertile ground in a decade marked by China's rise, Russia's resurgence and confrontation with the West, and the United States' geopolitical pivot to Asia.

Yet, as this article will demonstrate, the reality of Indian foreign policy under Modi is different. The strategic architecture within which it evolved was not a product of his vision but rather the outcome of a deepening US-India relationship initiated by Washington in the mid-2000s. The period between 2005 and 2008 – marked by the strengthening of India-US military cooperation and, more importantly, the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement – constituted the real watershed. This agreement represented a Copernican overturning of Washington's approach to New Delhi's nuclear ambitions and set parameters that have continued to shape policy choices not only during the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government but under Modi as well. These parameters included an increasing military and, to a lesser extent, economic closeness between New Delhi and Washington; a corresponding rise in tensions with Beijing, which Indian policymakers managed to keep under control until Modi's premiership; and a declining, yet still crucial, military connection with Moscow. Despite a massive increase in sophisticated arms imports from the US after 2005, the bulk of the weapons and systems used by the Indian armed forces remained of Soviet or Russian origin.

This article is divided into two major parts. The first analyzes the evolution of India's relations with the US, China, and Russia prior to Modi's assumption of office in 2014, focusing on the reconfiguration that occurred between 2005 and 2008. The second, and longer part, assesses the continuities and changes in these relationships under Modi. The article argues that the caesura widely attributed to Modi exists largely at the rhetorical level. It further asserts that the successes which a quasi-hegemonic narrative has ascribed to India's foreign policy under Modi are limited or non-existent. By mid-2025, any claim that India's international position has strengthened compared to what it was on the eve of Modi's rise to power (26 May 2014) can only be met with the utmost scepticism.

### *2.1. Indian foreign policy up to 2005*

Following the substantial failure of its foreign policy based on attempted leadership of the so-called Third World – a failure sanctioned by the 1962 war with China – and after a period of isolation, India's foreign policy between 1971 and 1991 was squarely based on the 20-year Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1971 [Government of India 1971]. This pact anchored New Delhi in a privileged relationship with Moscow, providing diplomatic cover, economic partnership, and an enduring arms supply. The treaty was renewed for a further 20 years in the summer of 1991. However, a few weeks later, the anti-Gorbachev coup d'état precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union and the radical decline of Russian power

under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999). Although the Indo-Russian relationship did not cease, it became largely irrelevant as a strategic buttress for India's international position. As a consequence, New Delhi, faced with the disappearance of its principal patron, recalibrated toward the United States, seeking political protection, economic integration, and recognition as a rising power [Torri 2023b, pp. 149-150; 152-153].

This reorientation, initiated by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (in power 1991-1996), was on the whole successful, although it was complicated by a major obstacle, the nuclear question. India, which had demonstrated its capability to build atomic weapons by carrying out the so-called Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) of 18 May 1974 – also known as Pokhran-I, from the site of the nuclear explosion – had consistently refused to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In New Delhi's view, the NPT institutionalized a fundamentally unequal order, recognizing only those countries that had tested nuclear weapons before 1967 as legitimate nuclear powers, while requiring all others to forgo such capability in perpetuity. Accepting the NPT would have meant consigning India to a permanent status of inferiority vis-à-vis the major Western powers and, perhaps more importantly, its regional rival China, which had been an NPT-designated nuclear weapon state since 1964 [Torri 2023b, pp. 152-154; CRS 2022].

India's refusal to adhere to the NPT and other arms control agreements – in particular the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) – directly clashed with the US position, which aimed to force India to abandon its ambition to be acknowledged as a legitimate nuclear power. In this situation, the Rao government pursued a policy of negotiation with the US, officially aimed at finding a mutually satisfactory solution to the nuclear impasse. In fact, Rao's strategy was to buy time by conveying the impression that New Delhi was amenable to a solution acceptable to Washington. His real objective, however, was to foster increasingly close and relevant economic ties with the US. The strategy was predicated on the belief that as the bilateral economic relationship grew in importance – powerfully promoted by the neoliberal reforms Rao himself had initiated in the summer of 1991 – Washington would find it increasingly costly to sever ties over the nuclear issue, eventually leading to a de facto acceptance of New Delhi's unbending stand [Torri 2023b, p. 154].

India's steadfast position on the nuclear question was justified by both symbolic and practical reasons. Symbolically, the freedom to possess nuclear weapons was regarded as an essential demonstration of India's ability to implement its own independent policies [Torri 2023b, p. 159]. Practically, Indian policymakers saw nuclear capability as essential for national security, providing a deterrent against both China and Pakistan, especially after China's nuclear assistance to Pakistan in the 1980s [Warren and Ganguly 2022].

Narasimha Rao's balancing act, which was continued by the United Front governments (1996-1998), was dramatically altered in May 1998 when

the Atal Behari Vajpayee-led government conducted a series of nuclear tests (Pokhran-II), ending decades of ambiguity about India's status as a nuclear weapons state. Like the first nuclear test of 1974, the 1998 tests were driven primarily by domestic political considerations [Torri 2022, p. 121, fn. 5]. They were, however, justified at the international level as necessary to establish a credible deterrent posture vis-à-vis China. While the tests enjoyed near-unanimous domestic support, they carried a heavy international cost, as the United States and its allies imposed sanctions, cut off technology transfers, and sought to isolate India diplomatically. Relations with China, which had been on a positive trend since 1988, also worsened [Torri 2023b, p. 155].

Over time, however, US sanctions on India were gradually lifted, mainly because of India's growing economic relevance. Furthermore, India's decision to immediately align with the George W. Bush-promoted «war on terror» after the 2001 terrorist attacks finally convinced Washington to remove the remaining sanctions [Torri 2023b, pp. 155-156].

As for the relationship with China, New Delhi had immediately started a mending process, which culminated in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Beijing in 2003. The economic agreements signed during the visit, together with the mutual decision to de-emphasize the border problem in favour of economic cooperation, restarted a period of positive relations between the two Asian giants [Torri 2022, pp. 121-122; Torri 2023b, pp. 156]. Finally, it must be stressed that Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 marked Russia's emergence from the state of weakness into which the Yeltsin government had plunged it. The Indo-Russian relationship, which had never stopped but had become hardly relevant, regained importance in parallel with the new growth of Russian power under Putin's leadership. In particular, Russia resumed its key role as a supplier of weapons and weapon systems to India and as a partner in defence co-production [Dolbaia *et al.* 2025, pp. 2-4].

## 2.2. *India-US relations: the sea-change of 2005-2008*

According to one line of analysis, the 1998 nuclear tests, despite the adverse international reaction, ultimately forced a reassessment in Washington and other capitals regarding the feasibility of containing India's nuclear ambitions. From this perspective, rather than resulting in lasting isolation, the Pokhran-II tests initiated a process of gradual normalization of India's status as a legitimate nuclear power. This interpretation holds that high-level dialogues between Indian and US officials, notably the Talbott-Singh talks [Talbott 2024], eventually led to a recognition – tacit at first, and later formalized – that India was an established nuclear weapons state outside the NPT system. This process supposedly culminated in the landmark 2005-2008 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement.

In reality, while it is undeniable that high-level US-India dialogues continued after Pokhran-II, the factor that induced Washington to accept

New Delhi as a legitimate nuclear power, notwithstanding the latter's refusal to join the NPT, was, rather counterintuitively, India's refusal to agree to Washington's request to send an expeditionary force to Iraq in 2004.

This refusal led to an enhanced awareness within Washington of the crucial importance India had come to enjoy at the global level [e.g. Tellis, 2005] and initiated an internal debate among senior US policymakers on how to engage with India. This debate eventually resulted in Washington's decision to bring New Delhi within the sphere of US strategic influence, inserting it into the web of treaty and non-treaty alliances that Washington was constructing around its main Asian adversaries, particularly Iran and China.

The primary obstacle to achieving this objective was, once again, the nuclear issue and India's refusal to sign the NPT or any other international treaty intended to prevent nuclear proliferation. The Bush administration, however, having finally realized that no Indian government would abandon the nuclear policy pursued up to that point, decided to change its own. Whereas US policy had previously been geared towards thwarting India's nuclear ambitions, from 2005 onwards, it began to encourage them [Torri 2023b, pp. 157-158].

To justify such a radical political shift, the US administration needed a rationale for its acceptance of India as a legitimate nuclear power despite New Delhi's steadfast refusal to alter its nuclear policy. In an inventive move, conceived principally by Ashley J. Tellis, an American citizen of Goan origin, US policymakers achieved this by asking India to «disentangle» its civilian nuclear sector from its military one. This allowed Washington to claim that its new nuclear policy toward India would benefit only the civilian sector of India's nuclear industry. This change in US nuclear policy was coupled with the offer of a highly advantageous military pact.

The new US policy was unveiled in March 2005 by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her official visit to New Delhi and was formally launched a few months later, on 18 July, with agreement signed in Washington by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and US President George W. Bush. Under the terms of the 18 July 2005 agreement, India undertook to «disentangle» the civilian sector of its nuclear industry from the military sector [Government of India 2005b]. The civilian sector, representing approximately two-thirds of the industry, would become entitled to the same benefits afforded to the nuclear industries of countries that were party to the NPT.

The negotiation process, which officially began with the joint declaration of 18 July 2005, was definitively concluded more than three years later with the signing of a bilateral agreement in Washington on 10 October 2008 [U.S. Department of State 2008].

The premise and a complementary part of this policy of «nuclear enticing» pursued by the George W. Bush administration was the signing in June 2005 – well before the technical details of the nuclear agreement were

finalized – of a 10-year military cooperation agreement, the *New Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship*. This pact had three main objectives: first, to encourage India to purchase American weapons and weapon systems, particularly the most sophisticated and expensive ones; second, to promote the growing integration of the armed forces of the two countries; and third, to encourage India to cooperate with the US in peacekeeping operations around the world, most particularly in the Indo-Pacific, by participating in joint sea patrols [New Framework 2005; Vanaik 2005].

The June 2005 military pact, which predated the nuclear accord and served as its strategic backbone, signalled to both regional partners and rivals that India was being positioned as a strategic counterpart to China, with the United States providing the technological and security incentives to facilitate this role. For the US, however, the 10-year military pact was seen as merely the first step toward an increasingly close bilateral military cooperation, which would involve a tighter integration between the militaries of the two countries. This integration was to be made possible by India's signing of a series of «foundational agreements» designed to enable secure communications, logistical support, and geospatial data sharing between the two militaries.

This dual-track nuclear and military rapprochement explicitly aimed to integrate India as a key element in the US-led power system in Asia, without requiring India to formally abandon its doctrine of strategic autonomy. For the United States, leveraging India's size, resources, and location was seen as essential for counterbalancing China and constraining Iran.

For India, the prospect of nuclear legitimacy, access to advanced technology, and expanded defence cooperation with the US were enormously attractive. Nevertheless, doubts about the wisdom of this tightening of military and nuclear relations existed in both countries. In India, large sections of the politicized public and policymakers worried about the danger that the nuclear agreement and the foundational pacts could substantially reduce India's autonomy in both the nuclear and military fields. The risks that this new closeness with the US could adversely impact relations with both China and Russia were also clearly perceived and greatly feared.

In fact, up to 2014, the year the Modi government came to power, only some of the goals sought by the US through the 2005 military pact had been reached. The objective of convincing India to actively uphold the US order in Asia by taking part in joint US-India sea patrols had failed to materialize. The results concerning the integration of the armed forces were more nuanced. While joint US-India military exercises had grown spectacularly, the «foundational pacts» were steadfastly opposed by India's Defence Minister, A. K. Antony. He forcefully argued that the US-sponsored pacts would limit India's full control of its own military and give the US unfettered access to India's military installations and sensitive data, including its encrypted systems [Torri 2023b, p. 160]. Astutely, rather than openly reject-

ing the foundational pacts, Antony pretended that the difficulty in signing them was the result of the intractable complications of India's bureaucracy.

### 2.3. *The adverse international effects of the sea-change of 2005-2008 and how India managed them up to 2014*

As explained, the reversal of the US approach to India that took shape between 2005 and 2008 had as one of its main objectives the unravelling of the positive bilateral relations India enjoyed with Iran, China, and Russia. While the anti-Iran objective was unambiguously articulated by Condoleezza Rice during her 2005 official visit to India, the other two objectives were never openly proclaimed. They were, however, clear for all to see, including the countries concerned.

#### 2.3.1. *The relations with China*

Not surprisingly – and as Washington expected – China reacted to the present and future challenges represented by the tightening of US-India military and nuclear relations. Since the 1990s and up to 2005, China had prioritized stable border management and economic cooperation with India. The two sides had signed a series of confidence-building agreements between 1993 and 2005, aimed at defusing tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and promoting dialogue [Torri 2022, pp. 120-121; Cecchi 2025, pp. 430-435]. However, as the US-India military pact was concluded and the civilian nuclear agreement was being finalized, Beijing began to react by changing its approach to India.

This change was first signalled in 2006, when the Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi, asserted China's sovereign rights over the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. This represented a dramatic shift in China's position regarding the *vexata quaestio* of the undefined Himalayan border. Up to that point, China had de facto accepted the higher crest of the Himalayan range as the border in the eastern sector; Arunachal Pradesh, however, lay to the south of these crests. Ambassador Sun's claim, made during an interview with a private Indian television channel, was clearly an unofficial warning, intended to alert India's policymakers that increasing closeness with the US would not be without adverse consequences. As this first warning appeared to go ignored, Beijing reiterated its position the following year in a stronger and more official manner. On 6 June 2007, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, during a meeting in Hamburg with his Indian counterpart, Pranab Mukherjee, officially claimed the whole of Arunachal Pradesh as part of China. In doing so, Yang breached the guidelines contained in a recent bilateral agreement signed in April 2005. Article VII of that agreement explicitly stated that: «In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas» [Government of India 2005a, Art. VII]. Yang,

however, declared that the mere presence of populated areas (inhabited by non-Chinese populations) in Arunachal Pradesh in no way invalidated the rights over this region that China had inherited from Tibet [Torri 2022, pp. 128-130].

Beijing's hardening position on the border issue could not go undetected in New Delhi. As a result, Indian policymakers soon entered a sustained damage-control mode, implementing a complex set of strategies. These included keeping communication channels with Beijing open through high-level contacts; upholding and expanding the India-China economic connection; attempting to find a solution to the unresolved border differences; and managing the border incidents that were bound to happen through diplomatic means. The Indian government also implemented a decision, taken in 2006 – clearly in conjunction with China's raising of the Arunachal Pradesh question – to judiciously strengthen India's defensive apparatus south of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the un-demarcated Sino-Indian provisional border.

Despite India's damage-control efforts and the continuation of intense diplomatic contacts, India-China relations worsened in the post-2008 period. This deterioration became visible through China's opposition to India's global ambitions, particularly New Delhi's quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Nonetheless, this worsening was qualified by the efforts of both New Delhi and Beijing to prevent it from spiralling out of control. Frequent high-level meetings and the signing of several agreements played a role in this. In fact, between the beginning of 2008 and early 2014 (when India's general election brought a change in government), there were no fewer than seven bilateral high-level meetings. During the same period, the confidence-building agreements of 1993, 1996, and 2005, aimed at preventing or managing border crises, were followed by further agreements along the same lines on 17 January 2012 and 23 October 2013 [Torri 2022, pp. 134-135].

While the results of the high-level meetings did not amount to much, this continuing diplomatic interaction at least conveyed the impression that the differences between the two countries were not insuperable. The confidence-building measures – both those signed before and after 2008 – resulted in speedy and bloodless solutions to frequent border incidents, most of which were due to the undefined and un-demarcated nature of the LAC. Finally, economic interchange between the two nations improved spectacularly in the period under review, and in 2009, India-China trade overtook India-US trade in value, making China India's top trading partner [Malone & Mukherjee 2010]. Concurrently, between 2008 and 2013, Indian policymakers, adhering to the Machiavellian principle that diplomacy must be backed by strength, reinforced India's defensive apparatus south of the Himalayas, aiming to remedy a situation of military weakness that could have obstructed New Delhi's pursuit of a satisfactory diplomatic solution to the border dispute.

### 2.3.2. *The relations with Russia*

During the same period, the India-Russia relationship also deteriorated, although without experiencing the dramatic twists of India-China relations, and only up to a point. The diversification of India's defence purchases and its opening toward the US and its allies, resulting from the new closeness between New Delhi and Washington, began to adversely impact Russia's position as the main supplier of weapons and weapon systems to India. Nevertheless, Russia continued to be considered by India as its historically most reliable strategic partner. Russia and India continued to sign treaties that institutionalized the «special and privileged strategic partnership» between the two countries, while regular summits and joint defence ventures continued.

Furthermore, despite the rise in military imports from the US, Israel, and France – particularly in the field of the most technologically advanced and high-value weapons – the quantitative majority of imported weapons continued to come from Russia. Price, reliability, and Moscow's willingness to transfer technology and co-produce advanced systems powerfully contributed to the continuation of the military connection between India and Russia. Moreover, the fact that weapons and weapon systems of Soviet or Russian origin continued to dominate India's arsenal had created a bond of dependency, as Moscow played an indispensable role as a reliable source of spares and training. This dependency could not be broken by the increase in imports from the US, Israel, and France. Finally, Russia and India remained involved in the joint production of weapons, most notably the BrahMos long-range supersonic missiles. The India-Russia relationship was further underpinned by cooperation in the nuclear and space sectors, as well as a shared preference for multipolarity in global governance institutions. Accordingly, in the final analysis, although following a declining trend, the Russia-India connection remained extraordinarily strong [CRS 2022; Warren and Ganguly, 2022; Lopez, 2024; Dolbaia *et al.* 2025].

### 3. *Indian foreign policy under Modi*

Indian foreign policy under Narendra Modi was driven by two primary goals: securing India's acceptance as a major world power and acquiring the direct investment, technological know-how, and other economic resources necessary to accelerate the nation's economic growth. The relationship with the United States was central to the pursuit of both objectives. Accordingly, much like the preceding Manmohan Singh-led government, Modi pursued an increasingly close connection with Washington as his main foreign policy objective.

Initially, Modi moved along the same path as the Manmohan Singh government, attempting to gain as much as possible from the US without

endangering India's strategic autonomy. While this policy yielded some economic results, they were far more limited than anticipated by either Modi or, in the initial phase, by American CEOs. As will be shown, two factors greatly constrained the growth of the economic India-US connection. The first was that, despite his bold rhetoric and promises, Modi was unable to open the Indian market to the extent desired by US entrepreneurs. The second was the first presidency of Donald Trump and the imposition of his signature neo-protectionist «America First» policy. Although these factors did not cause the bilateral economic connection to wither – it in fact continued to grow – they nevertheless greatly hampered its expansion, keeping it well below the initial expectations of the parties involved and its actual potential.

On the whole, however, the modest results of the economic relationship appeared to be compensated by the strengthening of the bilateral military connection. Indeed, the military ties, although somewhat constrained by India's persistent fears that an overly tight connection with the US would limit its strategic autonomy, continued to grow, becoming the mainstay of India-US relations by the end of the Obama presidency (20 January 2017). Modi, like Manmohan Singh and his government, tried to maximize the benefits from Washington's willingness to allow an uninterrupted and growing flow of high-tech weaponry to India without sacrificing strategic autonomy. Over time, however, Modi gradually yielded to American pressure, silently and incrementally accepting what amounted to a *de facto* limitation of India's strategic autonomy.

On the eve of the Ukrainian crisis (22 February 2022), Modi had effectively manoeuvred Indian foreign policy into a position constrained by US geopolitical interests. This was a situation from which, as this article will argue, he was rescued by the strategic upheaval caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Washington-led reaction to it. The unexpected freedom of action granted to New Delhi by the crisis allowed Modi and his government's narrative-shapers to claim that India was a great power, able to follow its own independent path without any compulsion to side with one or another of the great powers pitted against each other on the international stage.

This proved to be a very successful narrative, generally accepted by both Indian public opinion and most international analysts as an accurate rendering of reality. The contention of this article, however, is that India's vaunted strategic autonomy, as demonstrated by its behaviour after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, was exercised within a political space that continued to be delimited by US interests. Accordingly, a different definition of those interests by Washington would necessarily affect India's ability to exercise its strategic autonomy. This redefinition of US geopolitical interests did in fact occur with Donald Trump's second ascent to the US presidency, a redefinition that questioned India's supposed role as a great power capable of pursuing a strategic path of its own choosing, free from external influences.

In implementing his US policy, Modi, like the preceding Indian governments, was well aware that increasing closeness with the US, particularly the tightening of the bilateral military partnership, would inevitably have negative repercussions on India's other two main international relationships: those with Moscow and Beijing. The relationship with Moscow was prudently managed, following the same path as previous Indian governments. In the case of China, however, there was a change of style. Initially, Modi's China policy was characterized not only by the continuation of the diplomatic engagement pursued by his predecessor but also by the implementation of a dual strategy based on economic engagement and political containment.

Regarding the containment aspect of Modi's China policy, two elements must be stressed. The first is that it was a product of Modi's own initiative, visible from the beginning of his premiership and in no way imposed or suggested by Washington – which, nonetheless, could not but be satisfied by it. It is also necessary to highlight that, starting in 2016, India's dual engagement-containment policy toward China morphed into one where containment became prevalent. In 2017, this resulted in a serious confrontation along the Himalayan border at Doklam. After Doklam, the situation along the border, despite some partial easing, became increasingly tense, leading in 2020 to the most serious crisis since the late 1980s. The military risks to which the Galwan crisis exposed India, and the failed attempt to decouple the Indian economy from the Chinese one – briefly pursued as a reprisal against China – eventually induced Modi to silently return to the policy of prudent tension management followed by his predecessor.

### 3.1. *The India-US connection under Modi*

#### 3.1.1. *The economic dimension (2014-2016)*

Modi's first visit to the US as prime minister took place only a few months after his election (26-30 September 2014). For a politician who, just one year prior, had been unable to obtain a visa to enter the US, the trip marked a dramatic reversal. Modi received red-carpet treatment from American authorities and rousing receptions from the influential, 2.8 million-strong Indian-American community [Torri & Maiorano 2015, p. 313]. Modi's objectives were twofold: attracting US private investment to India and renewing and expanding defence cooperation. The Indian premier pursued the former by meeting with the CEOs of several leading US corporations, striving to convince them that times had changed in India and that «archaic» labour laws and bureaucratic impediments to international capital were on their way out [Torri & Maiorano 2015, pp. 312-313].

This visit was followed by US President Barack Obama's invitation to be the «Chief Guest» at India's Republic Day parade on 26 January 2015, the first time a foreign head of state had been so honoured. These exchange-

es, coupled with other high-level visits, were «extraordinarily rich in political symbolism» but proved much shorter in «substantive outcome» [Bhadra-kumar 2015, 30 June]. No substantial steps forward were made in opening the Indian internal market to US capital, and the bilateral investment treaty eagerly sought by the US was not finalized.

This lack of substantive progress soon brought about a change in the attitude of both the American administration and US entrepreneurs. Significantly, Modi's second visit to the US (26-30 September 2015) went almost unnoticed in the American press [Jain 2015]. He met with 47 of the US's top CEOs – some of whom, as in the cases of Google, Microsoft, and Adobe, were of Indian origin – and tried once again to convince them that «India was open for business». By this point, however, US CEOs, while still convinced of Modi's good faith, had concluded that he was unable to deliver on his promises [Sirohi 2015]. This conviction was shared by the US administration. On the eve of Modi's second arrival, US Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker, speaking at the US-India CEO Forum in Washington (21 September 2015), pointedly remarked that the World Bank ranked India 186 out of 189 countries on the ease of enforcing contracts. Pritzker also noted that it could take years to resolve a contractual dispute in India, as terms were too frequently reinterpreted after a deal had closed [Penny Pritzker 2015].

In a way, Modi's first two visits to the US set the parameters for the bilateral economic connection up to the end of the Obama presidency (20 January 2017). Modi continued his efforts to induce US entrepreneurs to invest, assuring them of his support in easing their operations but realizing very little of what he promised. Nevertheless, despite the persistent obstacles, the Indian market remained big and promising enough to induce US entrepreneurs to enter it and try to make the most of the opportunity. Accordingly, in spite of the disappointment of the US administration and entrepreneurs, US direct investment in India continued to grow – a positive trend that continued in the following years [Government of India 2025]. It is a fact, however, that this growth remained well below India's expectations and the US business community's potential [Kantha 2025].

### 3.1.2. *The military dimension: the cautious beginning (2014-2015)*

Initially, the tightening of the bilateral military connection was as slow and halting as that of the economic relationship. As previously noted, Washington aimed to closely integrate the military forces of the two countries in the Asia-Pacific through the finalization of contentious pacts, particularly the Logistic Support Agreement (LSA), the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA). The LSA envisaged reciprocal logistical support, to be provided by each party by opening its bases and furnishing fuel and other kinds of logistics

backing to the other's fighter jets and naval warships, on barter or an equal value exchange basis; the CISMOA was aimed at enabling greater communications interoperability between the militaries of India and the US, by allowing India to procure transfer-specialised equipment for encrypted communications for US-origin military platforms; the BECA would allow the sharing of geospatial intelligence, relevant for accurately hitting long distance targets [e.g., Philip 2020; Roy 2020]. As above noted, before Modi's rise to power these pacts had been steadfastly opposed by then Defence Minister A. K. Antony, who was convinced they would limit India's full control of its own military and give the US unfettered access to India's military installations and sensitive data, including its encrypted systems.

With the coming to power of the Modi-headed BJP government, negotiations for closer bilateral military cooperation were restarted. A common India-US position on the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region was reached during Modi's September 2014 visit to the US. It reasserted Washington's anti-Chinese position on «safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the [Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean] region, especially in the South China Sea». It also stated that the US and India would «treat each other at the same level as their closer partners» on matters such as «defense technology, trade, research, co-production and co-development» [Joint Strategic Vision 2015]. These positions were formalized in a bilateral document signed during Obama's January 2015 visit to India. This was followed by the signing in New Delhi, at the beginning of June 2015, of a new 10-year US-India defence framework, renewing the one signed in 2005.

The January 2015 joint document was seen by some commentators as establishing a closer integration of India's foreign policy within the US's anti-China arc of containment. Although this thesis was denied by the Indian government, it appeared to be confirmed by a development concerning «Exercise Malabar». This naval drill, first held in 1992 as a bilateral India-US exercise, had progressed from a modest beginning «to become a high point of Indo-US defence cooperation at the operational level [...] with high strategic significance» [Bangara 2015]. In 2007, the exercise was expanded to a multilateral format, with Japan, Australia, and Singapore joining. This was perceived by China as a direct threat, and its formal diplomatic protests resulted in the exercise being scaled down to its original bilateral format in 2008. Now, in 2015, US pressure induced India to accept the re-inclusion of Japan [Torri & Maiorano 2016, pp.392-393]. Not surprisingly, this decision was seen by many chancelleries and analysts as indicative of New Delhi's growing integration into the anti-China arc of containment that Washington was building [e.g., Singh 2015].

For the time being, however, while India had caved to US pressure regarding Japan's inclusion in Malabar, it continued to appear hesitant to accept the «foundational pacts». Both the Modi government and most Indi-

an commentators, while not averse to an increasingly close embrace with the US, were reluctant to openly take an anti-China stand, which the signing of formal military agreements and participation in joint patrols in the South China Sea would be seen as. As a result, while negotiations for the LSA went on, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar denied that the government was entertaining any project of jointly patrolling the South China Sea with the US Navy (March 2016). He was also sent to Beijing (April 2016) to convince the Chinese that the pact itself was not aimed against them [Torri & Maiorano 2017, p. 341].

### 3.1.3. *The military dimension: India caving in under US pressure (2016)*

During 2016, however, New Delhi appeared to further cave in under Washington's pressure. On 12 April, the news became public that India and the US had agreed «in principle» to a somewhat modified version of the LSA, which now took the name of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). Later, on 18 May 2016, a flotilla of four of the Indian Navy's most powerful and modern ships left for the South China Sea and North West Pacific, in what a commentator described as a mission whose only goal was «annoying Beijing» [Bhadrakumar 2016, 21 June]. Finally, in June, units of the Indian, US, and Japanese navies commenced the 20<sup>th</sup> session of «Exercise Malabar», confirming both the increasing military closeness between the US and India and the permanent insertion of Japan into the exercise [Torri & Maiorano 2017, pp. 341-342].

This gradual reorientation of New Delhi's foreign policy was encouraged by Washington through two concomitant strategies. The first was to favour India at the military level. The American administration expressed its support for India's plans to expand its navy to 166 warships, including a third aircraft carrier, and promised to sell and produce in India two state-of-the-art US military aircraft: Lockheed Martin's F-16 and Boeing's F/A-18 Hornet [Ratnayake 2016].

At the same time, however, India was put under pressure, finding itself in the crosshairs of criticism from influential American politicians and lobbies. On 24 May 2016, a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) on US-India relations saw several senators harshly criticizing India for its dismal civil rights record and its alleged lack of concrete economic reforms. SFRC Chairman Bob Corker was particularly hard-hitting, accusing India of having «12 to 14 million slaves» [Sirohi 2016]. Furthermore, on 7 June 2016, the US Congress's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a special hearing that examined the current state of human rights in India, stressing the existing «challenges to fundamental freedoms» [Bhadrakumar 2016, 2 June].

All of this occurred while Modi was undertaking another of his visits to the US. This criticism undoubtedly played a role in shaping the joint US-India communiqué of 7 June 2016, which closed the visit. Among its

most important points were the announcement of the finalization of the LEMOA text and the declaration that the US recognized India as «a Major Defense Partner». This designation implied that the US was ready to facilitate the flow of military technology to India «to a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners» [Joint Statement 2016, 7 June]. Significantly, in the aftermath of the joint communiqué, the US legislators' preoccupations with India's civil rights record and the presence of millions of slaves appeared to vanish into thin air.

On 29 August 2016, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced the signing of the LEMOA [Joint Statement 2016, 29 August]. This was seen by most analysts as «a major and decisive step in the direction of making India a 'linchpin' of the US rebalance to the Indo-Pacific» [Paul 2016]. By then, the military connection had become so close that the number of US-India joint military exercises exceeded those held by the US with any other friendly nation [Jayasekera 2016].

By 2016, the US had become India's main supplier of weapons value-wise, as, according to Modi himself, related imports had moved «from almost zero to ten billion dollars in less than a decade» [Narendra Modi's speech 2016]. The enactment of an «India Amendment» in the US National Defense Authorization Act for 2017 on 8 December 2016 mandated the Secretaries of Defense and State to jointly act to «recognize India's status as a major defense partner» and to «facilitate the transfer [to India] of advanced technology» to «advance United States interests in the South Asia and greater Indo-Asia-Pacific regions» [National Defense Authorization Act 2016]. Although short on specifics, the amendment highlighted the bipartisan consensus that India was a precious instrument for propping up US military hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

During his last official visit to India (8 December 2016), US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter rightly noted that «defense relations» had become a «major driver» in Indo-US bilateral relations [Jones 2016]. Although unstated, it was clear that the tightening and expansion of these military relations had as their main objective and only rationale the containment of China.

### 3.2.1. *The economic difficulties under Donald Trump (2017-2020)*

This was the situation when Donald Trump took over as president of the US on 20 January 2017. During the electoral campaign, Trump had made clear his intention to launch his neo-protectionist «America First» policy, the implementation of which could not but damage India. Modi attempted to escape this impending danger by establishing a close personal relationship with the new President and by increasingly aligning India's foreign policy with American priorities.

At first, Modi's strategy appeared to work. During his first official visit to the United States under Trump's first presidency (25-26 June 2017),

the Indian premier received «red carpet» treatment. Contentious issues that could have made the interaction between Trump and Modi difficult were conveniently sidelined, while both sides stressed the «strategic convergence» between the two countries. India espoused Donald Trump's stand on North Korea and agreed to work with the US in both Afghanistan and the Indo-Pacific; in return, the US espoused India's position on Pakistan, criticizing it for allegedly giving cover to anti-India terrorist groups [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 284].

Modi's demarche, however, did not save India from Trump's neo-protectionist «America First» policy. In June 2018, Trump quoted India as one of the countries guilty of dishonest trade practices, accusing it of imposing 100% tariffs on certain US goods [Torri 2019, p. 302]. This was followed by the new President's decision in March 2018 to impose heavy import tariffs on steel (25%) and aluminium (10%). While the measure was not specifically aimed at India, affecting a series of other countries such as China, the EU, Mexico, Russia, and Canada, New Delhi was rightly worried that these new tariffs could be the opening move of a protectionist policy aimed at more lucrative Indian exports to the US, particularly pharmaceutical items. India requested to be exempted from the tariffs and tried to leverage its «strategic partnership» with the US, but Washington turned down the request [Torri 2019, pp. 302-303].

India reacted by denouncing the US tariffs as protectionist before the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and threatening to hike its own tariffs on a series of US products. This, however, was a threat that New Delhi initially kept on hold, hesitating to challenge the US, particularly because of Donald Trump's unpredictability. Accordingly, New Delhi fell back on renewed negotiations, which, however, while not bringing about any concrete result, took place against a backdrop of increasing economic pressure.

Another problem was the question of the H-1B visa. In autumn 2018, news emerged that the Trump administration intended to limit the concession of H-1B visas and cancel work permissions for H-4 visa users, namely the spouses and children of H-1B visa holders. The H-1B visa – a non-immigrant visa allowing US companies to employ foreign workers in highly skilled occupations – was the most sought-after among Indian IT professionals. As of 5 October 2018, Indians held 93% of this visa category. Any restriction of the existing rules could not but adversely affect the more than 300,000 Indian citizens holding H-1B visas and their families [Torri 2019, p. 303]. Finally, on 29 May 2019, President Trump announced the imminent termination of the preferential tariff treatment allowed to India under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). The decision, which became effective on 5 June 2019, terminated preferential tariffs for Indian exports worth almost US\$ 6 billion [Torri 2021, p. 390].

These measures were eventually damaging enough to force India to react by imposing tariff duties on 28 US products, primarily in the agricul-

ture sector. A «mini trade war» ensued between India and the US. A solution was sought in a comprehensive trade deal, which Trump announced on the eve of his 2020 visit to India, but the deal never materialized [Torri 2021, pp. 390-91]. In 2020, the Trump administration continued to turn a deaf ear to India's economic requests. In March, it closed the door on reinstating India's GSP benefits; in June came the announcement that H1-B visas would remain suspended until the end of the year [Torri 2021, p. 393].

### 3.2.2. *The limitation of India's «strategic autonomy» (2017-2020)*

Washington's economic pressure was also accompanied by a strategy explicitly aimed at limiting New Delhi's strategic autonomy. The objective was not to condition the India-China relationship – which, as will be seen, was already worsening without major pressure from the American administration – but to constrain and possibly destroy the India-Iran and India-Russia connections.

Hitting the India-Iran connection was an objective openly pursued by Washington since 2005. As a result, India's imports of Iranian oil had declined over the years, although they briefly picked up again following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. In December 2017, Iran remained the third-largest oil supplier to India, and in 2018, India was still the second-biggest buyer of Iranian oil after China [Torri 2019, pp. 305-306]. Iran was also relevant as the location for the Chabahar port, the strategic hub of a corridor bypassing Pakistan to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Washington had maintained a tolerant attitude toward the project, as it served US interests in Afghanistan and competed with China's nearby Gwadar port. However, on 8 May 2018, Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA brought the threat of US sanctions against countries trading with Iran. After attempting to find a way out, India substantially decreased its volume of imported Iranian oil, and in May 2019, New Delhi officially declared it had stopped importing Iranian oil altogether. On its part, the future of the Chabahar project remained shrouded in uncertainty [Torri 2021, pp. 399-400].

Simultaneously, the US Congress put in the crosshairs the India-Russia connection. In summer 2017, it passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which mandated secondary sanctions on countries engaging in significant transactions with Russia's defence sector. This directly affected India, which still bought most of its weapons from Russia. Although Russia's share of India's arms imports had declined from 79% in 2008-12 to 62% in 2012-17, Moscow remained the main supplier quantity-wise and offered weapons with fewer political strings attached [Torri 2019, p. 304]. This was capped by New Delhi's negotiation to purchase five Russia-made S-400 Triumf air defence missile systems, a system generally considered superior to its US equivalents. Despite US entreaties,

New Delhi decided to proceed, running the gauntlet of possible CAATSA sanctions.

Against this backdrop, Washington's pressure on New Delhi to sign the remaining foundational agreements continued. This pressure was strong enough to induce New Delhi to sign the second pact, COMCASA, on 6 September 2018 [2+2 Ministerial Dialogue 2018]. The signing took place notwithstanding fears among many Indian analysts that COMCASA could allow the US to illegitimately acquire highly confidential data on India's defence and intelligence apparatuses [Torri 2019, p. 307]. The cementing of the strategic relationship continued unabated. The December 2019 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue resulted in expanded naval cooperation, the formalization of the annual «Tiger Triumph» tri-service exercise, and an industrial exchange annexe for joint defence manufacturing [2+2 Ministerial Dialogue 2019]. Modi also used India's expanding military imports to satisfy Trump's desire to help the US economy grow [Joshi 2020, p. 417]. In 2019 alone, India agreed to buy or negotiated the purchase of over US\$ 7 billion worth of military equipment from the US, including combat drones, maritime surveillance aircraft, transport and combat helicopters, and short-range missile defence systems [Torri 2021, p. 391]. In the following year, US arm sales to India continued to surge, and, according to a US Department of State's spokesperson, speaking at the end of October, as of 2020 the United States had authorized more than US\$ 20 billion in defence sales to India [Defence News 2020; U.S. Security Cooperation With India 2025]. Against a backdrop of trade disputes, defence partnership had therefore become the engine driving Indo-US relationship [Joshi 2020, p. 417; Defence News 2020].

Interestingly, the tightening of the bilateral military connection and India's concessions to Washington's strategic desiderata saw no reciprocation on the main issues causing tension. This became clear during US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's remarks to the press in New Delhi on 6 September 2018. Regarding Iranian oil, Pompeo stated: «We have told the Indians consistently... that on November 4th the sanctions with respect to Iranian crude oil will be enforced... it is our expectation that the purchases of Iranian crude oil will go to zero from every country, or sanctions will be imposed». In relation to the S-400 purchase and a possible CAATSA waiver, he declared: «no decision has been made... We are working to... exercise that waiver authority only where it makes sense» [Remarks to the Press, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo 2018].

### 3.2.3. *Resisting US pressure: the Quad question*

India did, however, resist the pressure of the Trump administration with some success in one notable case: the transformation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – an entente including Australia, India, Japan, and the US – into an Asian NATO. The Quad had originally taken shape

from the joint humanitarian relief efforts of these four nations following the 2004 Tsunami. After a few years of promising growth, it was abruptly disbanded in 2008 [Rudd 2019]. On 11 November 2017, however, the quadrilateral entente was resuscitated in a meeting of senior officials on the side-lines of the ASEAN summit in Manila [Madan 2017; Roy-Chaudhury & Sullivan de Estrada 2018; Buchan & Rimland 2020].

In both its first and second phases, the Quad's institutional framework was limited to periodical meetings, and its objectives remained indefinite until the beginning of its second phase. Nevertheless, few doubted that the Quad was an alliance in progress whose main, albeit undeclared, objective was the containment of China. Adhering to a well-defined anti-China strategy was complicated by the member states' different economic and military structures and, more importantly, their different geographical locations. Significantly, during the Quad's first phase, member states were consistently unable to conclude their meetings with a joint statement, instead issuing separate ones that, despite common elements, featured important differences. As some analysts noted, anti-China positions were spelled out with a clarity directly proportional to the geographical distance of the authoring state from China [Torri 2018, pp. 19-20].

The relaunching of the Quad in November 2017 was mainly the work of the Trump administration, which aimed not only to strengthen the US-sponsored anti-China arc of containment but also to transform the Quad into the nucleus of a NATO-like military organization. This was made explicit on 31 August 2020 by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, who argued that the Indo-Pacific region lacked «strong multilateral structures», making it necessary «at some point» to formalize a structure like NATO. According to Biegun, the Quad was the nucleus for this structure, which would hopefully expand to include Vietnam, South Korea, and New Zealand [Torri 2021, p. 394; Torri 2023a, pp. 350-351].

A NATO-like anti-China alliance, though apparently tempting, was a dangerous proposition for India – the only Quad member with a long and unsettled land border with China. The Quad's de facto military arm was the naval Exercise Malabar, but the entente lacked a corresponding land-based military organization. This left India by far the most exposed to potential retaliation from China. While some Indian analysts argued that opening a second front in the South China Sea could counter China's push on the Himalayas [e.g., Pai 2020], a NATO-like Quad, however redoubtable at sea, lacked a comparable land force to deploy along its only land border with China.

Consequently, New Delhi, while a willing partner, remained reluctant to let the Quad assume the character of an open anti-China military alliance [Pugliese & Maslow 2019, pp. 123-124; Torri 2019, pp. 297-313]. Not surprisingly, Biegun's suggestion left New Delhi cold [Torri 2021, p. 395]. When the 2020 Quad security meeting was held in Tokyo on 6 October, lit-

tle of tangible substance emerged. The difference in approach between the virulent anti-China speech of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the much more cautious tone of the other foreign ministers was evident [Torri 2021, p. 395].

Delhi's reluctance put a spanner in the project, as implicitly acknowledged by Pompeo, who was later to define India as the «wild card» in the entente [NDTV 2023]. However, even here, New Delhi's resistance was not unambiguous. During the Tokyo meeting, the Americans successfully convinced India to expand Exercise Malabar by including Australia, a move New Delhi had previously resisted. On 19 October 2020, Australia was invited, and Exercise Malabar 2020 was again upgraded to a quadrilateral drill. It took place in two phases in November, off the coast of Visakhapatnam and in the Arabian Sea, highlighted by the participation of two aircraft carrier battle groups: the US Navy's Nimitz and the Indian Navy's Vikramaditya [Torri 2021, p. 395].

#### 3.2.4. *India's strategic autonomy at the end of Trump's first presidency*

Despite India's soft-peddalling on the Quad, by the end of Trump's presidency, it was difficult to distinguish the US-India strategic connection from a formal military alliance. Nevertheless, most Indian analysts and the public at large appeared convinced that India's strategic vicinity to the US did not amount to an alliance and that its strategic autonomy remained intact. This opinion dovetailed with criticism from the well-known US foreign relations expert Ashley Tellis, who argued from a different standpoint that the alliance existed but was weak due to a lack of systematic follow-up work on the foundational agreements. In Tellis's view, this left the two sides needing «to know much more about each other's forces, where they are located, what their doctrines are and how they operate» [Sirohi 2020]. Along the same lines, former Ambassador M.K. Bhadrakumar noted: «The Indians at large harbour a notion that their country is cherrypicking out of the American basket of goods». This, in Bhadrakumar's opinion, was a delusion coupled with the conviction that this could be done without paying any political price [Bhadrakumar 2020, 24 October].

In short, the prevailing view was that the tightening of the India-US connection existed less in reality than as a potentiality that New Delhi believed it could exploit at will. This article contends, however, that reality was different, as the foundational agreements created both potential and actual limitations on India's strategic autonomy.

##### 3.2.4.1. *The potential limitations*

The data and high-technology security equipment India received from the US through COMCASA and BECA were indeed «force multipliers». The problem, as pointed out by Indian military expert Pravin Sawhney, was that

this equipment was vulnerable to US pre-implanted «nano malware (malicious software) codes that start functioning when certain conditions are met, or outside instructions are given after months or even years». Sawhney also noted that since US experts would be authorized COMCASA users, they «could corrupt datasets on command for as long as they want» and «could even overwrite Indian short-range, point to point radio frequency connections by long-range high-powered signals from beyond physical parameters». In Sawhney's opinion: «The reality is India has cut off its nose to spite the Chinese by flaunting untested strategic ties with the US» [Sawhney 2020].

A second problem, noted by M.K. Bhadrakumar, was that «the coordinates or inputs that BECA provides may not be useful beyond a point in their application, since something like seventy percent of Indian weapons are of Russian origin, which may be incompatible with the US services». The more widespread the use of BECA-supplied data became, the greater the incentive for India to progressively whittle down its dependence on Russian weaponry. This process was bound to be strengthened by the fact that «Russia would have misgivings while transferring cutting-edge military technology in future» due to the US capability to penetrate India-owned weaponry, made possible by increased interoperability. This was a success for US diplomacy, but much less so for India's ability to maintain its strategic autonomy [Bhadrakumar 2020, 28 October].

#### 3.2.4.2. *The actual limitations*

Quite apart from potential limitations, New Delhi's inability to cope with Washington's pressure was already visible in the unravelling of the India-Iran connection. The steady diminution up to the de facto cessation in India's oil imports from Iran, forced by US pressure, has already been highlighted. Washington had, however, left New Delhi a free hand regarding its involvement in upgrading the Iranian port of Chabahar and building a railway to Zahedan, as the project served US interests in Afghanistan and competed with China's BRI. However, following Trump's anti-Iranian sanctions, the Modi government began to stall on the project's implementation. It is possible that, as argued by analyst Francesca Salvatore, the Indian government itself had second thoughts, prioritizing a good relationship with Trump over the grand plan of opening a privileged trade path to Europe [Salvatore 2020].

Eventually, Tehran, tired of New Delhi's delays, decided to complete the project on its own. In July 2020, Iran inaugurated the track-laying process for the 628 km Chabahar-Zahedan line, to be completed without India's assistance [Torri 2021, p. 401]. How Iran found the resources was explained by subsequent news: Iran and China had «quietly drafted a sweeping economic and security partnership that would clear the way for billions of dollars of Chinese investments in energy and other sectors» [Fassihi & Myers 2020]. According to a leaked version of the agreement, it «would vastly ex-

pand Chinese presence in banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of other projects. In exchange, China would receive a regular – and, according to an Iranian official and an oil trader, heavily discounted – supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years» [Haidar 2020].

The prospect of substantial Chinese funding had enabled Iran to start the project. The agreement also reportedly provided for the lease of the Chabahar port to China and for China to develop Bandar-e-Jask, a port west of Chabahar, with a potential tie-up to the Chinese-run Pakistani port at Gwadar [Torri 2021, p. 401]. By July 2020, the Modi government's caving to US pressure had damaged the India-Iran connection, apparently beyond repair, and contributed to pushing Iran into the arms of China. This made impossible the realization of the ambitious project to open a sea-land highway connecting India to Europe, circumventing the land barriers that made India a virtual island.

### 3.3. *Breaking out from the box: the (apparent) reassertion of India's strategic autonomy (2022-2024)*

#### 3.3.1. *The Ukraine crisis and its fallout on the India-US connection*

The start of Joe Biden's presidency (20 January 2021) was followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (22 February 2022), an event that deeply impacted the geopolitical configuration not only in Europe but across the world, including Asia. For India, the Ukraine crisis offered unforeseen opportunities and advantages.

As has been argued, the India-US military connection had by this point become so close as to constitute a *de facto* alliance, even if Indian policymakers and analysts denied it. Whether or not this was a formal alliance, the relationship was such that Washington and its allies expected India to side with them against Russia. This expectation was reinforced by the Western tendency, led by Washington, to frame the conflict as a clash between global democracies and Russian autocracy. As the self-proclaimed «world's largest democracy» – a title widely accepted in the West – India was expected to align dutifully with this democratic bloc. This, however, did not happen. From the outset, India adopted an ambiguous neutrality, refusing to publicly condemn the Russian invasion and not hesitating to profit from discounted Russian oil and other goods. Over time, a considerable share of these oil imports was refined and found its way to Western markets, effectively bypassing the sanctions regime against Russia.

Counterintuitively, India's ambiguous neutrality – which thinly veiled a *de facto* pro-Russia stance – and its triangulation of Russian oil to Western markets elicited no concrete adverse reaction from Washington or its allies. This outcome appears to squarely contradict the preceding argument that India's tightening military connection with the US had come at the cost of its strategic autonomy. Indeed, Indian Foreign Minister Subrah-

manyam Jaishankar and a host of analysts presented India's policy and the West's non-reaction as undeniable proof of India's strength and ability to follow an independent path dictated solely by its national interest.

This narrative proved to be very enticing for the Indian public and successful in the world at large. It did, however, obscure a key factor: India's freedom of action was exercised within a political space delimited by overriding US interests. As we will see, the potential for this space to change, and thus reveal the true limits of India's supposed autonomy and major power role, would become apparent once Donald Trump returned to power.

### 3.3.2. *India's ambiguous neutrality*

On 26 February 2022, just two days after the invasion began, India was one of three countries to abstain on a UN Security Council resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops. It subsequently abstained on a procedural resolution calling for an emergency session of the UN General Assembly [Torri 2023a, p. 358].

At a special Quad meeting on 3 March 2022, convened by President Biden to discuss the war, India was the only member not to condemn Russia. Yet, no public denunciation followed; instead, there were only «gentle efforts» behind the scenes to persuade New Delhi to change its position [Prakash 2022]. The period from March to May 2022 witnessed a «flurry of diplomatic activities», with an exceptional number of high-level Western officials visiting New Delhi, alongside virtual meetings between Modi and leaders from the US and Australia [Torri 2023a, p. 358].

A fortnight after the Quad meeting, on 18 March 2022, an Indian official revealed that India would increase its imports of Russian oil, offered at a 20% discount [Al Jazeera 2022, 18 March]. In the months that followed, India's imports of Russian oil boomed, increasing tenfold by September 2022 compared to the previous year. This transformed Russia from a marginal supplier into India's third-largest. By October, Russia had become India's top oil supplier, accounting for 22% of its total crude imports and surpassing Iraq and Saudi Arabia, which had become key providers after the virtual elimination of Iranian oil. Concurrently, the value of India's coal imports from Russia rose four-fold by September 2022 compared to the previous year [Torri 2023a, p. 358].

Despite these developments, there was no concrete adverse reaction from the US or its main allies. On 31 March 2022, both the United States and Great Britain signalled their acceptance of India's decision to purchase discounted Russian oil [Torri 2023a, p. 359]. In the following months, high-level India-US meetings and a public statement by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (11 April 2022) made clear that India's strategy had been green-lighted by the US and that bilateral relations remained close and cordial [Torri 2023a, p. 359].

Further proof of the excellent state of US-India relations was offered by another twist in the ongoing S-400 Triumph saga. As noted, India had signed a US\$ 5 billion deal in October 2018 to buy five of these sophisticated Russian air defence systems, and began to induct them in December 2021. Since the signing, the threat of sanctions under the US Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) had hung over India. On 14 July 2022, however, the House of Representatives passed a legislative amendment, authored by Indian-American Congressman Ro Khanna, urging the Biden administration to waive any possible CAATSA sanctions on India. As Khanna explicitly stated, the waiver was intended to help India deter aggressors like China [Torri 2023a, p. 362]. Although the amendment was not confirmed by the Senate or signed by President Biden, CAATSA sanctions were not applied to India.

The cordiality of India-US relations was again visible during a meeting between Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and Secretary of State Antony Blinken in New York on 27 September 2022. At a joint press conference, Jaishankar described the India-US alliance as «a very positive experience [...] with a lot of promise», offering the potential for the two countries to jointly «shape the direction of the world» [De Silva and Jones 2022].

### 3.3.3. *The reasons behind India's de facto pro-Russia standing*

The reasons for India's de facto pro-Russia stance on the Ukraine crisis are not mysterious; they were immediately identified and widely discussed by analysts and media worldwide. The primary driver was the Indian armed forces' heavy and ongoing dependence on Russian military hardware. As explained, despite a massive inflow of high-tech weapons from the US, Israel, and France since 2005, Indian armed forces remained predominantly equipped with Russian weapons [Jaffrelot and Sud 2022; Dolbaia *et al.* 2025]. A sudden and drastic reduction not just in new arms supplies, but more critically in the spare parts needed to maintain existing Russian-origin hardware, would dramatically diminish the operational capabilities of the Indian armed forces. In turn, any such reduction would negatively affect India's ability to militarily counter China. Another constraint was India's (possibly unrealistic) objective of preventing Moscow from being isolated and pushed into a dangerous embrace with China. Finally, a role was also played by the fact that Russia, both during and after the Soviet period, had consistently supported India at the diplomatic level and never clashed with it.

Why India's pro-Russia policy was readily understood, Western analysts appeared to have some difficulty explaining why the US and its allies did not pressure India to align with their anti-Russian position. In a way, India's ability to distance itself from the US and its allies was not a proof of strength, as claimed by Jaishankar and Modi's apologists, but was paradoxically made possible by its weakness. Had New Delhi cut its relationship with

Moscow, the entire Indian military apparatus would have been drastically weakened, possibly to the brink of collapse. This would have squarely contradicted Washington's interests, as the US had assiduously strengthened the Indian armed forces to serve as a counterpoise to its main global competitor, China. An Indian anti-Russia alignment would have been of limited, mainly rhetorical, value, but it would have risked dramatically weakening the US-sponsored anti-China arc of containment in the Indo-Pacific.

Analogously, the seemingly baffling acceptance of India's decision to buy Russian oil and triangulate a sizeable share of it to Western markets has a clear explanation in American interests. The exclusion of Russian oil from Western markets through sanctions was a double-edged sword that harmed the West as well as Russia. With India's help, Russian oil continued to flow to Western markets, preventing hydrocarbon prices from skyrocketing and potentially causing a major economic crisis. Finally, maintaining a geopolitical space that allowed Russia some freedom of manoeuvre, thereby preventing its complete subordination to China, was a goal that, while perhaps unrealistic, did not in itself go against Washington's interests.

#### 3.3.4. *The Quad question*

While the Biden administration's attention was overwhelmingly focused on the war in Ukraine – and, from late 2023, on the Gaza crisis – US interest in Asia remained a key concern. Even before the Russian invasion, the new administration had made clear that, like its predecessor, it viewed the Quad as a primary instrument for wielding US influence over the oceans surrounding Asia and, by extension, projecting that influence onto the continent itself. The administration also appeared aware that a Quad in which India was a «wild card», to use former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's term, would have little vitality. Without India's contribution, controlling the Indian Ocean – from the east coast of Africa to the strategically decisive Malacca Straits – would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

As above noted, given India's exposed strategic position as the only Quad country with a long and unsettled border with China, New Delhi had distanced itself from the Trump-era strategy of transforming the Quad into an Asian NATO. Accordingly, to keep India as a willing member, the Biden administration implemented a radical change of emphasis in the Quad's objectives.

This change became visible during the first Quad leaders' summit of the Biden era, held virtually on 12 March 2021. The meeting concluded with a joint statement, *The Spirit of the Quad*, which, after the customary rhetoric about «promoting a free, open, rules-based order», clearly defined the entente's objectives. These included managing the economic and health crises caused by COVID-19, addressing climate change, controlling cyberspace and critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure investment, and humanitarian and disaster relief [The White House 2021].

This program, reiterated in the joint statement of 24 May 2022 [The White House, 2022], was characterized by two elements. First was the absence of any explicit reference to a present or future military dimension. Second, most of the objectives outlined had an unmistakable anti-China subtext. The control of cyberspace and critical technologies aimed to compete with Chinese firms like Huawei; quality infrastructure investment was a direct competitor to China's BRI; and even the response to the COVID-19 crisis was in competition with China's «vaccine diplomacy».

Indian analysts and political figures have often claimed – as a rule implicitly – that this metamorphosis of the Quad from a potential Asian NATO into an organization focused on non-military containment of China was the result of India's influence. While available documentation does not allow for a definitive conclusion on this claim, there is no doubt that the Biden administration's revised Quad policy satisfied India's sensitivities and served its interests.

#### 3.4. *Testing the limits of the strategic autonomy: the crisis of 2023*

There is reason to believe that the work of Indian narrative-shapers, portraying India as a major world power able to follow its own course without being conditioned by external pressures, had become so successful as to induce the Indian government itself to believe its own propaganda. Accordingly, taking a leaf from a state that Modi-ruled India greatly admired – one indeed able to deploy its chosen politics, however murderous, without being conditioned by external pressures – New Delhi began a policy of assassinating its enemies abroad [Hall 2024, pp. 301-2; 310-312].

In 2022 and 2023, a series of killings of persons allegedly involved in anti-Indian violent activities were carried out in Pakistan. By 2023, this policy of targeted assassinations was extended to the UK and Canada. In the case of Canada, the assassination of Sikh pro-Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar outside a temple in Surrey, British Columbia, attracted wide attention worldwide. While political assassinations in non-Western countries usually pass with little notice in the West, an assassination openly carried out in a Western country, targeting one of its own citizens, was something entirely different. Hence the relevance acquired by the killing of a Canadian citizen, albeit of Indian extraction.

From the beginning, Canadian police suspected Indian involvement, a suspicion strengthened by intelligence supplied by another country. The Canadian government initiated a series of diplomatic *démarches* to obtain explanations from India, but without success. Eventually, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went public with his government's suspicions before parliament (18 September 2023). At the same time, Pavan Kumar Rai, purportedly the Ottawa station chief of India's main intelligence service, RAW, was expelled [Hall 2024, pp. 310-312].

As befitting a country that by then considered itself a major world power challenged by a middle power like Canada, India reacted «with fury», starting a diplomatic confrontation that resulted in a «deep freeze» of the bilateral relationship, «with neither side willing to break the ice» [Hall 2024, p. 311]. India could, of course, overlook Canada's sensibilities, but there is reason to believe its activities on North American soil were not limited to Canada. On 22 November 2023, news became public that US authorities had foiled an alleged plot to murder the prominent Khalistani activist and joint US-Canadian citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. A week later, the US Department of Justice made public its findings against an Indian citizen, Nikhil Gupta, as the supposed hitman, and an unnamed Indian official in New Delhi who had allegedly masterminded the attempt.

If New Delhi could dismiss Ottawa's reaction and engage in a diplomatic war with Canada, Washington's indictment could not be dismissed in the same cavalier way. Consequently, India's reaction «was markedly different to its visceral response to the earlier Canadian allegations». While no official admission of involvement was made, «no angry statements were issued, no diplomats were expelled, and no visa processes suspended» [Hall 2024, p. 312].

The targeted killings affair festered during 2024, exacerbated by new revelations from Canada. In October 2024, Trudeau went public with his government's conviction that Indian diplomats had been involved in both the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar and in intimidating other Sikh separatists. Even more relevant was the news that Canadian authorities suspected India's Home Minister, Amit Shah, of directing the operation in North America. This brought about a new round of mutual expulsions of diplomats [Hall 2024, p. 311].

The affair had another relevant result, this time internal to India but with potential foreign policy implications. While the official government position had been restrained, that of many Indian commentators and, more relevantly, politicians from the Hindu right – the core of Modi's political base – had not. An aggressive campaign was launched in traditional and new media against the US. The Biden administration was accused of being «disrespectful» towards India, and the US State Department of promoting a campaign against the BJP. As proof, critics cited the Pannun case, Biden's inability to travel to New Delhi for Republic Day or a Quad summit, dismal reports on democracy and human rights in India, alleged US involvement in the change of government in Bangladesh, and the US indictment for fraud of Gujarati billionaire Gautam Adani, a personal friend of Modi [Hall 2025, p. 324].

By mid-2024, it had become clear that the Hindu right was spoiling for Donald Trump's victory in the upcoming US presidential election. This unabashed pro-Trump position was based on both concrete and delusional reasons. The concrete reasons included ideological affinity, the belief that

Trump would be tough on China and «Islamic terrorism», the certainty that he would overlook democratic backsliding in India, and the hope he would bring Putin «back from the cold» and make the targeted killings affair go away. The delusional reasons included the conviction – which went squarely against what had actually happened during Trump’s first term in power – that he would create new economic opportunities for India. While the India-US connection remained strong at the official level, India’s policymakers were marking time, hoping for Trump’s return. But as the old proverb says: «Be careful what you wish for, lest it comes true».

INDIA-US BILATERAL TRADE (MILLIONS OF US\$)						
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
INDIA’S EXPORTS TO US						
Merchandise	54,282	57,694	51,190	73,260	85,671	83,768
Services	28,874	29,738	25,841	28,989	32,862	36,329
Total	83,156	87,432	77,031	102,249	118,533	120,097
Change	8.3%	5.1%	-11.9%	32.74%	15.93%	1.31%
US EXPORTS TO INDIA						
Merchandise	33,191	34,288	27,395	40,130	47,332	40,117
Services	25,200	24,333	17,420	16,720	25,571	29,863
Total	58,391	58,621	44,815	56,850	72,903	69,980
Change	18.5%	0.4%	-23.6%	26.85%	28.24%	-4.00%
TOTAL BILATERAL TRADE BETWEEN INDIA AND THE US						
Merchandise & Services	141,547	146,053	121,846	159,099	191,436	190,077
Change	12.3%	3.2%	-16.6%	30.57%	20.33%	-0.71%
Source: India-US bilateral relations 2025						

### 3.5. *The growth of the economic India-US connection at the end of the Biden presidency*

Although the military connection came to supersede the economic one in strategic importance, and despite the fact that its growth remained below the initial hopes of both Narendra Modi and American CEOs, the India-US economic relationship was by no means insignificant. In fact, notwithstanding the bureaucratic barriers that continued to hamper foreign entrepreneurs in India and the difficulties created by Donald Trump’s first presidency, the bilateral economic connection continued to grow.

This growth was not primarily the result of any fundamental change in India’s domestic economic policy, but rather of a series of international factors

that induced US manufacturers to shift their operations away from China. A confluence of factors – including rising labour costs in China, the US-China trade war and its associated tariff hikes, and the vulnerabilities in centralized supply chains exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic – all played a role in this shift. India, alongside Vietnam, emerged as its principal beneficiary.

As a result, by 2023, the US had become India's largest trading partner, with overall bilateral trade in goods and services reaching US\$ 190.1 billion for the calendar year.

Also, during FY 2023-24, the US had become the third largest source of FDI into India with inflows of US\$ 4.99 billion accounting for almost 9% of total FDI equity inflows. Many Indian companies were investing in the US and adding value [India-US bilateral relations 2025]. According to a CII study released in April 2023, 163 Indian companies invested over US\$ 40 billion in the US and created over 425,000 direct jobs [CII Report 2023].

#### 4. *The India-China relationship under Modi*

##### 4.1. *Engaging China, containing China*

In the early years of his premiership, Modi pursued his goal of engaging China through high-profile diplomatic events, such as receiving President Xi Jinping in Gujarat in 2014 amidst much fanfare, holding a series of bilateral summits, and seeking to expand economic cooperation. Modi particularly tried, without much success, to convince China to invest in Indian infrastructure and contribute to his «Make in India» project. At the same time, however, Modi launched a proactive policy in the Indian Ocean, East and Central Asia, and the Pacific, whose main aim appeared to be the building of an Indian arc of containment around China. This strategy was pursued through official visits by the Indian Prime Minister to states in the area, the signing of bilateral agreements, and a series of bilateral naval exercises. The attempt to position India as a rival to China also found expression in the launch of a «Cotton Route» policy, in clear competition with China's «Silk Road» policy [Torri & Maiorano 2015].

While Modi had initially sought to increase Chinese investment, in 2017 he took a different position by refusing China's invitation to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Not only was India one of the very few countries to boycott the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing (14-15 May 2017), but just a few days later, at the 52<sup>nd</sup> annual meeting of the African Development Bank in Gandhinagar (22-26 May 2017), India and Japan announced the launch of an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 285].

This initiative, in the making since 2015, was technically similar to the BRI and focused on a geographical area overlapping with the BRI's intended sphere of influence, placing it in direct competition with it. Although

the India-Japan initiative soon appeared to lack substance, its anti-China dimension could not go unnoticed. India also proactively competed with China within the SCO and BRICS [Cecchi 2025, pp. 425-426, 432]. But it was along the undefined Himalayan border that India's challenge to China became most strident and dangerous.

#### 4.2. *The peculiarities of the India-China border*

Before dealing with the India-China border confrontation, some preliminary information is in order. The dominant narrative in India and the West on the border tensions is as follows: after the 1962 war, the militaries of both countries took positions along a provisional border, the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, with increasing frequency, the Chinese have pushed beyond the LAC, occupying slices of Indian territory in a «salami slicing» strategy that has steadily extended China's control. This view, crafted by an Indian analyst [Chellaney 2013], has been accepted by most Western experts, particularly as China has come to be seen as a threat to the US-dominated world order. This vision, nonetheless, is based on two logical fallacies.

The first concerns the nature of the LAC. The LAC is often viewed as a continuous line controlled on opposite sides by the two militaries, similar to the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir. In reality, the situation is completely different. A continuous LAC exists only on maps. Along the Himalayas, China and India occupy a number of permanent and seasonal bases separated by huge stretches of territory. Some of these are patrolled by one or both countries at different times of the year, while other areas have been abandoned by both. Additional territories have never been patrolled by either party [Torri 2021, pp. 384-386].

Once this is understood, a second, counterintuitive but exceedingly important problem must be highlighted. There is not just one LAC; there are two: the one on Chinese military maps and the one on Indian maps. These two LACs are widely divergent, as shown by the fact that the Indian LAC is 3,488 kilometres long, whereas the Chinese LAC is only around 2,000 kilometres long [Torri 2021, p. 385]. It is important to emphasize that, according to international law, there is no reason to evaluate one LAC as more legitimate than the other. They are equally legitimate (or illegitimate) and simply represent the claims of New Delhi and Beijing on territories they control only partially.

All this means that the brilliantly argued and generally accepted theory of «salami slicing», while widely accepted, has no connection with the situation on the ground and only obscures it. In reality, any move by either side to extend control over deserted territory or reclaim vacated bases is usually seen by the other as a threat. It is no surprise that incidents are bound to happen and have continued to happen [Saint-Mézard 2013; Bhonsale 2018]. The policymakers of both nations are aware of these dangers and have discussed solutions since at least 2003. However, these discussions have yielded limited

results. Maps showing the LAC have been exchanged only for the central sector, leaving the western and eastern sectors unresolved. Behavioural protocols have been finalized to prevent escalation, and as a result, incidents have generally been resolved quickly and without loss of life. While many incidents may be due to local initiatives, the political leadership of either nation can easily trigger a major incident whenever it is deemed convenient.

#### 4.3. *From Doklam to the Galwan Valley*

The Doklam plateau is at the tri-junction of India, China, and Bhutan, on land long under China's de facto control but claimed by Bhutan. On 16 June 2017, a People's Liberation Army (PLA) construction party entered the area to build a road. Allegedly in consultation with Bhutan, Indian troops crossed the border on 18 June and prevented the PLA from continuing its work. This triggered a standoff that caused a storm of jingoist threats in both Indian and Chinese media. However, confidential diplomatic contacts continued, and after more than two months, the confrontation ended on 28 August 2017, with both sides vacating the plateau. The road was left unfinished, but the Chinese reiterated their right to patrol the area and restart work in the future [Torri & Maiorano 2018, pp. 285-288].

What made the Doklam incident unique was that it occurred in the central sector, the only part of the border where the LAC is mutually accepted and demarcated. Indian troops had crossed what their own government recognized as the provisional international border into a territory not even claimed by India. India asserted to be acting on behalf of Bhutan, following a request by Thimphu, but Bhutan appeared unenthusiastic and never confirmed that it had ever made any request of intervention from India. New Delhi also claimed the road posed a danger to the strategically crucial Siliguri corridor (the «Chicken's Neck»). However, to access Doklam, the PLA would have to cross the Chumbi Valley, which is closed by mountain ridges controlled by the Indian army even along the Bhutanese side. This means the sector is more of an ideal place for India to ambush an advancing Chinese army than a dagger aimed at the «Chicken Neck» [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 287].

What, then, were the real reasons for the intervention? The standoff occurred just before the BRICS summit in Xiamen and the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. China had an overriding interest in the success of the BRICS summit, and President Xi Jinping could ill afford a military confrontation that could escalate. It is legitimate to suspect that India's action was intended to embarrass the Chinese leadership, counting on the fact that the Sikkim sector was one of the few places along the Himalaya where the Indian armed forces enjoyed superiority. The goal, then, was less about blocking a road than projecting India and its prime minister as capable of successfully facing down China [Torri & Maiorano 2018, p. 288].

Encouraged by the Doklam success, India continued its China containment strategy, strengthening its relationship with Japan and taking an active part in the resurrection of the Quad in November 2017. China reacted by attempting to defuse tensions through diplomatic contacts, leading to a series of high-level meetings in 2018, including the informal Modi-Xi summit in Wuhan. These meetings were facilitated by the uncertainty caused by the Trump presidency and his «America First» policy.

Nevertheless, India never completely abandoned its anti-China strategy. This became apparent again in 2019 when Modi dismantled the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a move seen by Beijing as aimed at tightening New Delhi's control over the western sector of the border. This preoccupation was strengthened by two declarations made in the Indian Parliament by Home Minister Amit Shah – namely the number two in the Modi government. Shah stated (on 19 November and 3 December 2019) that the whole of previous princely state of Kashmir was «an inseparable part of India». Accordingly, both the Pakistani part of Kashmir and Aksai Chin, the latter the Himalayan territory under Chinese control at least from the early 1960s, were Indian and, in Shah's words, worth dying for [Amit Shah 2019, 22 November; Amit Shah 2019, 5 December].

The Doklam incident, the dismantling of Jammu & Kashmir, and Amit Shah's bluster might explain the major incident that took place in Ladakh in 2020. A series of coordinated Chinese troop movements sparked tense face-offs, culminating in a deadly clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020, involving the first loss of life on the border in 45 years, although no firearms were employed.<sup>1</sup> The incident was followed by a prolonged military buildup, repeated skirmishes, and economic retaliations by India, bringing the two nations closer to open conflict than at any time since 1987 [Torri 2021, pp. 379-384; Hall 2025; CRS 2022].

#### *4.4. India's post-Galwan Valley de-escalation and the return to engagement with China*

Modi's initial response to the Galwan crisis was characterized by hardline rhetoric, including visits to forward military areas, public statements emphasizing India's determination, the banning of Chinese apps, and restrictions on Chinese investment. However, as in the Doklam crisis, Indian and Chinese officials silently resumed military and diplomatic talks. Both sides were aware of the risks of uncontrolled escalation, but a full-scale war represented an existential danger for India, given the massive disparity in economic and military capabilities. Potential military support from India's de facto allies, particularly the Quad, would have been of limited import.

1. The brutal hand-to-hand fighting resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese casualties.

Not surprisingly, the Modi government quietly returned to a more cautious, crisis-management posture. This de-escalation had two main aspects: the silent negotiation of limited disengagements at friction points and the continuous growth in bilateral trade, despite high-profile Indian restrictions. As for the border, there was progress in easing tensions, notably the October 2024 agreement to restore patrolling rights in some sectors. Both sides, however, left large forces massed in the rear. Mutual trust remained basically absent, and as repeatedly noted by Foreign Minister Jaishankar, the situation continued to be «abnormal» [Hall 2024, p. 303; Hall 2025, pp. 317-319].

## 5. *Trump redux*

### 5.1. *The crisis of the India-US relationship*

Donald Trump won for the second time the US presidential election on 5 November 2024. The following day, Narendra Modi phoned the US President elect and had a «warm conversation» with him [Gupta 2024]. In the following days, Indian media explained to their readers how Trump's election would strengthen American-Indian relations, given the strong personal bond between the newly elected US president and the Indian premier, based on the fact that both were «strongman leaders with shared perceptions of China and radical Islam as existential threats, a mutual animosity of the liberal media and civil society, well-entrenched economic nationalism and a value-neutral foreign policy dictated by self-interest» [Bajpae 2025]. The same media noted how Indians were among those most positive about a second Trump term.

This optimistic mood persisted during Modi's trip to Washington on 12-15 February 2025 (his first during Trump's second term). While the danger of higher tariffs rate for India's exports to the US was present on the background, bilateral relations appeared to be moving along an increasingly positive path, destined to lead to an expansion of the military and economic connections. A new US\$ 500bn trade goal was set for bilateral trade, which aimed to more than double the dimension which it had reached in 2023 (US\$ 190bn). This was an objective that would be made possible by the conclusion of a bilateral trade agreement – as noted, a goal search by the US in the previous 20 years without any success. Now Modi and Trump committed to negotiating the first phase of the trade agreement by autumn 2025; it was aimed to deal with market access, tariff reductions and supply chain integration across goods and services. Also, Trump announced that the US would increase military equipment sales to India already in 2025 «by many billions of dollars» and adumbrated that the US would ultimately provide the top-notch F-35 stealth warplanes to India [Biswas and Inamdar 2025].

While it was clear that much hard work was necessary to give concrete substance to the stated goals, the general atmosphere was a quite positive one [Travelli 2025]. Unfortunately, this mutual warmth turned to frost rather suddenly in May. Following a serious terrorist attack in the Kashmir Valley, India accused Pakistan of being complicit, launching a series of air strikes against alleged terrorist hideouts in Pakistan in retaliation. Pakistan's response resulted in a major air battle, raising the possibility that this was only the prelude to open warfare between two nations equipped with nuclear weapons. The confrontation, which started on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, arrived at an abrupt end on the 10<sup>th</sup>. Soon after the cessation of hostilities, Trump claimed «at least 30 times» that he had mediated the ceasefire between India and Pakistan using trade as leverage [The Wire Staff 2025].

It was a claim that Islamabad immediately acknowledged, while New Delhi denied, insisting that the ceasefire had been arrived through bilateral negotiations, not including any third party. Of course, New Delhi policy as far as the Kashmiri question and the conflict with Pakistan are concerned is traditionally aimed at preventing the involvement of any third party or international organization in order to keep the matter strictly bilateral. Anyway, completely apart from the truthfulness or otherwise of Trump's claim, denying it was an extremely unwise move on the part of the Indian government from the viewpoint of international relations, even if an almost compulsory one, from the viewpoint of internal politics.<sup>2</sup>

The resentment on the part of a US President who, out of personal vanity, was relentlessly seeking successes that could earn him the Nobel Peace Prize [Mashal *et al.* 2025] was compounded by another possibly more relevant political question. The negotiation which was supposed to conclude with the signing of the first phase of the eagerly sought (on the part of Washington) trade agreement by autumn 2025, once again was going nowhere. Washington's requests to open the Indian market to US agricultural and dairy products frontally clashed with the interests of the Indian farmers. Here the problem was less that farmers still accounted for some 45% of the Indian labour force than their proven capacity, particularly in Northern India, to self-organize and act in order to defend their interests. In 2020, soon after Modi had successfully crashed the extensive pro-democracy movement, he had failed to do the same with the farmer movement against a legislation that would potentially reduce farmers' earnings. In the end the legislation had had to be repealed. On the top of that, farmers' discontent had played a role in the general election, determining a conspicuous diminution of the popular vote going to the BJP,

2. To accept Trump's claim would have exposed the Modi government to the accusation that, under US pressure, it had given up one foreign policy objective shared by all Indian political forces.

Modi's party. As correctly noted by Joshua Yang of 'The Washington Post', India's country's agriculture and dairy industries are «the third rail of Indian politics» and, as such, a politically very dangerous subject to touch [Yang 2025].

Trump's hurt vanity and the difficulty to break open the Indian agricultural and dairy market to the penetration of the US capital explain Trump's decision to launch a veritable economic war against India. On 30 July, Trump announced a 25% tariff, plus a penalty, to be imposed on India starting on 1 August. The US President justified his decision both on the ground that India was a «friend» whose tariffs were «far too high, among the highest in the world» and a country which was purchasing Russian military equipment and energy «when everyone wants Russia to STOP THE KILLING IN UKRAINE». [Yađav 2025; The Wire Staff 2025, 30 July]. What made Trump's decision additionally offensive for New Delhi was that, a few hours after hitting India the US President announced a 19% tariff rate for Pakistan [Yang 2025]. But that was not the end of it; on 6 August Trump threatened to add a 25% punitive tariff, motivated by India's purchases on Russian oil, on top of the 25% tariff he had announced the previous week [Travelli 2025]. A threat that became effective on 27 August, when «just after midnight» the 50% tariff rate on most Indian imports became effective [Jones and MacRae 2025].

Trump's decision, if maintained, was bound to be catastrophic for India, even if some 30% of India's exports to the US «including pharmaceuticals, electronics, raw drug materials and refined fuels – worth \$27.6bn» remained duty-free, at least for the time being. In fact, India, had become one of the countries facing the highest US duties, together with left-leaning Brazil. This damaged India both directly and indirectly, as rival exporters from other countries – such as Turkey, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines and other south and south-east countries – which faced lower US tariffs were now advantaged. According to Indian economist Santanu Sengupta of Goldman Sachs, «sustained 50% levies could push gross domestic product (GDP) growth below 6%, from a forecast level of around 6.5%» [Jones and MacRae 2025].

### 5.2. *The renewal of the India-China relationship*

At the beginning of 2025, in an apparently sudden development, India-China relations took a visible turn for the better, as a series of negotiations which had taken place the previous year, without reaching any agreed result, concluded successfully, following a meeting between India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and China's Vice Foreign Minister of China Sun Weidong on 27 January 2025. Among the results reached at the meeting there were the resumption of both direct air services between the two countries,

starting immediately, and the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra<sup>3</sup> in the summer of 2025 [People's Republic of China 2025; *QUESTION NO- 1041*; Lau 2025]. Both direct flights and the Yatra had been suspended because of the COVID and hitherto not resumed because of the border clashes of 2020.

This positive evolution in the India-China relationship took place before the crisis of India-US connection brought about by Donald Trump's imposition of devastating customs duties on most Indian goods. As convincingly argued by Christophe Jaffrelot, a possible key explanation of the improvement in the bilateral India-China relations was the increasing economic dependency of India on China, which New Delhi's failed attempt to sanction China economically after the 2020 Himalayan border clashes had only made more evident. In fact, as noted by Jaffrelot:

In 2024, with \$118 billion in trade in goods, China regained its position as India's largest trading partner, supplanting the United States, which had overtaken it shortly before, for two fiscal years. At the same time, India's trade deficit with China has widened steadily, jumping from \$46 billion in 2019-20 to \$85 billion in 2023-24 and \$99.2 billion in 2024-25. Indian exports – worth just \$15 billion in 2024-25, less than in 2018-19 – consist mainly of raw materials (including iron ore) and refined oil, while Chinese exports to India, worth more than \$124 billion (compared to \$70.3 billion in 2019), consist mainly of manufactured goods, including machine tools, computers, organic chemicals, integrated circuits and plastics [Jaffrelot 2025].

But, of course, it is also possible – and the two explanations are not mutually exclusive – that Modi, in spite of the enthusiasm of the Indian media for the bright future of India-US relations under Trump's dispensation, was hedging his bets, knowing the unpredictably and whimsical behaviour of his supposed friend in the White House. Certainly, after the sudden worsening of the US-India relation, following New Delhi's refusal to acknowledge Trump's supposed mediation role in putting an end to the May confrontation with Pakistan, India's demarche towards China accelerated. In June, on the sidelines of the SCO (Qingdao, China) and just two days after India and China had firmed up a disengagement pact for Depsang and Demchok, along the Himalayan undefined border, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath

3. Kailash Mansarovar Yatra is a sacred pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar, which are located in the Tibet Autonomous Region and, therefore, are an integral part of China. The Yatra is a highly significant spiritual journey for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Bonpos (namely the followers of Bon, a Tibetan variant of Buddhism). The Yatra, which attracts thousands of devotees despite the difficult journey, is organized annually by the Ministry of External Affairs of India in collaboration with the Government of China. Tensions between the two countries have sometimes resulted in the suspension of the Yatra.

Singh, interacting with his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun, called for a permanent solution to the border dispute with China by going beyond the enacting of Confidence Building Measures along the LAC to the demarcation of a mutually acknowledged border [Upadhyaya and Dutta 2025; Reuters 2025]. In July, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar went to Beijing, and, addressing China's Vice President Han Zheng, pointed to the opportunity of an open exchange of views and perspectives between India and China, made necessary by an international situation that was becoming increasingly complex. He also conveyed India's support for China's SCO leadership and noted improvements in bilateral relations [Sobhan 2025].

At the time when this article is closed (beginning of September 2025) India's rapprochement with China reached its peak at the annual SCO summit, which took place from 31 August to 1 September in Tianjin, a northern Chinese city on the Bohai Sea. Modi, who, only the year before, had not even attended the previous SCO meeting in Astana (Kazakhstan), now, for the first time after seven years, went to China. In the pithy report of a well-known Indian journalist, the Indian Premier «guffawed for the cameras with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, remained cosseted with the Russian President in the latter's limousine for nearly an hour», and, in his bilateral with Xi, «Modi described India and China as 'partners, not rivals' and 'underlined' that both countries 'pursue strategic autonomy, and their relations should not be seen through a third country lens'» [Varadarajan 2025]. Photos taken at the event, and widely circulated on the traditional and social media, showed Modi in apparently very cordial conversation with either Xi or Putin or with both, and the Indian Premier and the Russian President walking together hand in hand. As noted, by Devirupa Mitri, «The images were aimed at more than one audience: the White House and television channels back home» [Mitra 2025].

## 6. Conclusion: where Narendra Modi's foreign policy has led India

Most international analysts and commentators have seen Trump's India policy as the catastrophic ending of a strategy, started in 2005, aimed at including India in the US-sponsored network of treaty and non-treaty allies, intended to surround and constrain Washington's main world competitor, namely China. But, while analyses on this side of the problem abound, the same is not true as far as its other side is concerned: what Modi's trip to Tianjin demonstrates?

The first conclusion prompted by Modi's journey to Tianjin is that Modi's policy aimed at challenging China had been shelved, at least for the time being. Modi has abandoned his signature policy of challenge to China and reverted to the more prudent strategy followed by his predecessors. Namely, he has reverted to a policy of patient diplomatic engagement with

a major power from which India is divided by conflicting interests, particularly as far as the border problem is concerned, but united by many others [Cecchi 2025].

This reassessment of India's China policy has been conceived and implemented before the catastrophic overturn of the India-US relations, determined by the vagaries of a US President whose foreign policy has an uncanny resemblance with Macbeth's definition of life (Act 5, Scene 5).<sup>4</sup> However – and this is the second conclusion prompted by Modi's journey to Tianjin, Trump's vagaries have made the readjustment of India's China policy a necessity. This, in turn, is the demonstration, as clear as any, that India's famed «strategic autonomy», which, according to Jaishankar and the many admirers of Modi, has characterised India's foreign policy under the latter's dispensation, has deployed itself inside the limits imposed by Washington's interests. The radical redefinition and contraction of these limits – decided by Donald Trump, possibly because of a less than rational decision – has trapped India in a very uncertain position. New Delhi's claim to be able to act without any constraint on the part of any of the major world powers has been exposed. Quite simply, it has become apparent – once again, as in the pre-Modi past – that New Delhi cannot guarantee its security and the pursuit of its national interests without the support of a major world power and preferably, the non-hostility of other world powers. This is a state of affairs which had been clearly understood and acted upon by all Indian leaders since the time when Indira Gandhi had signed the twenty-year mutual protection pact with the Soviet Union in 1971. It is also a state of affairs that Modi seemed to have either forgotten or overlooked, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine appeared to have created unforeseen possibilities and opportunities for India. Modi, while prompt and skilful in seizing these possibilities and opportunities, seems to have ended up believing the propaganda crafted by his own Foreign Minister, namely that India could follow a certain path because she was capable to do it, not because it was allowed to do it by her hugely more powerful key ally.

Trump's decision, radically redefining Washington foreign policy and, as a consequence, radically contracting the political space allowed to India's «strategic autonomy», has left India in a very exposed position, as she cannot count on Washington's support anymore. This makes imperative for her either to hope in a change of heart on the part of Trump – which, given the way of functioning of the man, is always possible – or a rapid solution of the many problems which still divide India from China. Accordingly, in this moment the only important ally on which India can count remains Russia. Nonetheless, the relationship with Russia is not as strong as in the past and, much more important, Russia is not a major world power anymore, by any stretch of imagination. In the final analysis, then, the

4. «Life [...] is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing».

supposedly all-powerful demiurge who, supposedly, has radically modified Indian foreign policy and, supposedly, has made an acknowledged major world power of his country, able to choose its independent path without any foreign constriction, has led India to its more exposed and weakest international position since the period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rapprochement to the US in the early 1990s.

As far as India's foreign policy under Modi is concerned, the gap between story-telling and reality is, indeed, huge.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [2+2 Ministerial Dialogue 2018] U.S. Department of State, Joint Statement on the Inaugural U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, Washington, D.C./New Delhi, 6 September 2018.
- [2+2 Ministerial Dialogue 2019] U.S. Department of State, *Joint Statement on the Second U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue*. Washington, D.C., December 18, 2019.
- Al Jazeera 2022, 18 March, 'Russian oil sale to India complicates Biden's efforts'.
- [Amit Shah 2019, 22 November] 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K, we are ready to die for the region: Amit Shah', *Business Standard*, 22 November 2019.
- [Amit Shah 2019, 5 December] 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K; will give life for it: Amit Shah in Lok Sabha', *Business Standard*, 5 December 2019.
- Bajpae, Chietigj, 2025, 7 March, 'Modi's Washington visit highlights India's importance to the US, but will not resolve long-term challenges', *Chatham House*.
- Bangara, Suresh, 2015, 14 October, 'Why America, India and Japan are Playing War Games at Sea', *The Quint*.
- Bhadrakumar, M.K., 2015, 30 June, 'Obama's India visit a big blank', *Asia Times*.
- Bhadrakumar, M.K., 2016, 2 June, 'No free lunch for Modi at Capitol Hill', *Indian Punchline*.
- Bhadrakumar, M.K., 2016, 21 June, 'Our China Policy stumbles into cul-de-sac', *Indian Punchline*.
- Bhadrakumar, M.K., 2020, 24 October, 'Emerging contours of the US-Indian military alliance', *Indian Punchline*.
- Bhadrakumar, M.K., 2020, 28 October, 'India's remains of the day in Ladakh', *News-click*.
- Bhonsale, Mihir, 2018, *Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media*, in «ORF Occasional Paper», No. 143, February, pp. 24-26.
- Biswas, Soutik, and Nikhil Inamdar, 2025, 'Five key takeaways from Modi-Trump talks', *BBC*, 14 February.
- Buchan, Patrick Gerard, & Benjamin Rimland, 2020, 16 March, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Briefs*.
- Cecchi, Claudio, 2025, 'China and India: Cooperation and rivalry in the global landscape and within the BRICS', *Asia Maior*, XXXV/2024

- Chellaney, Brahma, 2013, 6 March, 'China's salami-slice strategy', *The Japan Times*, July 26.
- Chowdhury, Debasish Roy, 2022, 'Why the U.S. Doesn't Mind India's Notable Silence on Ukraine', *Time*.
- [CII Report 2023] Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), *Indian Roots, American Soil. A Survey of Indian Industry's Business Footprint in the United States* 7th Edition, New Delhi 2023.
- [CRS 2022] K. Alan Kronstadt, India-Russia Relations and Implications for U.S. Interests, Congressional Research Service, 24 August 2022.
- De Silva, Rohantha, and Keith Jones, 2022, 18 October, 'India strengthening anti-China alliance with the US as Washington wages war on Russia', *World Socialist Web Site*.
- [Defence News 2020] 'India Resists U.S. Pressure to Buy Armed Drones as Trump Looks for Foreign Policy «Wins»', *Defense News*, 29 October 2020.
- [Dolbaia *et al.*] Tina Dolbaia, Vasabjit Banerjee, and Amanda Southfield, 2025, 22 August, 'Guns and Oil: Continuity and Change in Russia-India Relations', *CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies)*.
- [Fassihi & Myers 2020] Farnaz Fassihi & Steven Lee Myers, 'Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership', *The New York Times*, 11 July 2020 (updated on 30 November 2020).
- [Government of India 1971] Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between the Government of India and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, 9 August 1971.
- [Government of India 2005a] Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question, 11 April 2005.
- [Government of India 2005b] Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Joint Statement, India-U.S.*, 18 July 2025.
- [India-US bilateral relations 2025] Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs - India-US Bilateral Relations 2025.
- Gupta, Shishir, 2024, 8 November, '«MAGA, India First»: Why Donald Trump's return will solidify India-US trade, security ties', *Hindustan Times*.
- Haidar, Suhasini, 2020, 14 July, 'Iran drops India from Chabahar rail project, cites funding delay', *The Hindu*.
- Hall, Ian, 2024, 'India 2023: Tactical wins and strategic setbacks in foreign policy?', *Asia Maior*, XXXIV/2023.
- Hall, Ian, 2025, 'India 2024: Challenges and contention in foreign policy', *Asia Maior*, XXXV/2024.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe, 2025, , 4 September, 'The Sino-Indian Rapprochement Is More Than Just a Response to Trump', *The Wire*.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe, and Aadil Sud, 2022, 5 July, 'Indian Military Dependence on Russia', *Institut Montaigne*.
- Jain, Mayank, 2015, 25 September, 'Despite excitement at home, Modi's visit fails to make headlines in major US newspapers', *Scroll.in*.
- Jayasekera, Deepal, 2016, 31 August, 'US war planes and battleships to start using Indian bases', *World Socialist Web Site*.
- [Joint Statement 2016, 29 August] U.S. Department of Defense, U.S.-India Joint Statement on the visit of Minister of Defence Manohar Parrikar to the United

- States, 29 August 2016. Paul, Joshy M., 2016, 'Locking in US-India ties', East Asia Forum, 1 October.
- [Joint Statement 2016, 7 June] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Joint Statement: The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century', 7 June 2016.
- [Joint Strategic Vision 2015] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*, 25 January 2015.
- Jones, Callum, and Penelope MacRae, 2025, 27 August, 'Trump imposes 50% tariff on India as punishment for buying Russian oil', *The Guardian*.
- Jones, Keith, 2016, 15 December, 'To target China, US further enhances military-strategic alliance with India', *World Socialist Web Site*.
- Joshi, Yogesh, 2020, 'India 2019: Foreign policy dilemmas and their domestic roots', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019
- Kantha, Sharmila, 2025, 11 August, 'Trajectory of India-US Economic Relations', *NatStrat*.
- Landler, Mark, 2018, 8 May, 'Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned', *The New York Times*.
- Lau, Chris, 2025, , 28 January, 'China and India agree to resume direct commercial flights for first time in five years', *CNN*.
- Lopez, Jackson, 2024, 28 October, 'The Decline of India-Russia Strategic Relations', *ORF*.
- Madan, Tanvi, 2017, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the «Quad»', *War on the Rocks*, 16 November.
- Malone, David M., & Rohan Mukherjee, 2010, 'India and China: Conflict and Cooperation', *Survival*, 52(1), pp. 137-158
- [Mashal *et al.* 2025] Mashal, Mujib, Tyler Pager and Anupreeta Das, 'The Nobel Prize and a Testy Phone Call: How the Trump-Modi Relationship Unraveled', *The New York Times*, 30 August 2025.
- Mitra, Devirupa, 2025, 1 September, 'From SCO Hall to Aurus Limo: Modi and Putin Put Bonhomie on Display in Tianjin', *The Wire*.
- [Narendra Modi's speech 2016] 'PM Narendra Modi's speech in US Congress: Read the full text', *The Indian Express*, 10 June 2016
- [National Defense Authorization Act 2016] House of Representatives, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, 30 November 2016.
- [NDTV 2023] Press 'Trust of India 'India «Wild Card» In Quad: Ex US Secretary Of State Mike Pompeo In Book', *NDTV*, 26 January 2023.
- [New Framework 2005] *New Framework for the India - U.S. Defence Relationship, Signed in Arlington, Virginia, USA, on 28 June 2005*, Rumsfeld.com.
- Pai, Nitin, 2020, 26 May, 'How India can end Chinese transgressions: Take conflict to a place Beijing is worried about', *The Print*.
- [Penny Pritzker 2015] U.S. Department of Commerce, *U.S. Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker Addresses U.S.-India Commercial and Economic Relationship at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 September 2015.
- [People's Republic Of China 2025] PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Meeting of the Foreign Secretary-Vice Minister Mechanism between China and India Held in Beijing*, 28 January 2025.
- Philip, Sneesh Alex, 2020, 27 October, 'The 3 foundational agreements with US and what they mean for India's military growth', *The Print*.

- Prakash, Teesta, 2022, 9 March, 'China is key to understand India's dilemma over Ukraine', *The Interpreter*.
- [Pugliese & Maslow 2019] Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2018: Fleshing out the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» strategic vision', *Asia Maior*, XXIX/2018, [QUESTION NO- 1041] Government of India - Ministry of External Affairs, 2025, QUESTION NO- 1041 KAILASH MANSAROVAR YATRA, 13 February.
- Ratnayake, K., 2016, 14 April, 'India-US military cooperation «robust and deepening»', *World Socialist Web Site*.
- [Remarks to the Press, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo 2018] U.S. Department of State, *Remarks to the Press, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo*, US Embassy, New Delhi, India, 6 September 2018.
- [Reuters, 2025] 'India seeks permanent solution to border dispute with China', *Reuters*, 27 June 2025.
- Roy, Shubhajit, 2020, Explained: BECA, and the importance of 3 foundational pacts of India-US defence cooperation', *The Indian Express*, 3 November.
- Roy-Chaudhury, Rahul, & Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 2018, 'India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad', *Survival*, 60(3), pp. 181-94.
- Rudd, Kevin, 2019, 26 March, 'The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the «Quad»', *Nikkei Asia*.
- Saint-Mézard, Isabelle, 2013, 'The Border Incident of Spring 2013: Interpreting China-India Relations', *Hérodote*, 50(3), pp. 132-149.
- Salvatore, Francesca, 2020, 5 September, 'Il fallimento (voluto) della Via della Seta Indiana', *Insideover*.
- Sawhney, Pravin, 2020, , 27 October, 'Why India's Latest Defence Agreement with the United States May Prove a Costly Bargain', *The Wire*.
- Singh, Abhijit, 2015, 28 October, 'Malabar 2015: Strategic Power Play in the Indian Ocean', *The Diplomat*.
- Sirohi, Seema, 2015, 27 September, 'In corporate America, public enthusiasm but private disappointment about Modi', *Scroll.in*.
- Sirohi, Seema, 2016, 29 May, 'What explains India getting such a public lashing from US lawmakers on the eve of Modi's visit?', *Scroll.in*.
- Sirohi, Seema, 2020, , 5 December, 'China Tensions: Can the US or the Quad Come to India's Help?', *The Wire*.
- Sobhan, Shakeel, 2025, 14 July, 'India's Jaishankar hails 'positive trajectory' in China ties', *Deutsche Welle*.
- Talbot, Strobe, 2004, *Engaging India. Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb*, Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press.
- Tellis, Ashley J., 2005, *India as a New Global Power: An Action Agenda for the United States*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- The White House, 2021, 12 March, 'Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: «The Spirit of the Quad».
- The White House, 2022, 24 May, 'Quad Joint Leaders' Statement'.
- The Wire Staff, 2025, 30 July, '«Will Take Steps to Secure National Interest»: India as Trump Announces 25% Tariff, Plus 'Penalty', From August 1', *The Wire*.
- Topden, Tenzin, 2018, 16 May, 'India's Russia conundrum: a question of balance', *Asia Times*.
- [Torri & Maiorano 2015] Torri, Michelguglielmo, and Diego Maiorano, 2015, 'India 2014: the annihilation of the congress party and the beginning of the Modi era', *Asia Maior*, XXV/2014

- [Torri & Maiorano 2016] Torri, Michelguglielmo, and Diego Maiorano, 2016, 'India 2015: The uncertain record of the Modi government', *Asia Maior*, XXVI/2015
- [Torri & Maiorano 2017] Torri, Michelguglielmo, and Diego Maiorano, 2017, 'India 2016: Reforming the economy and tightening the connection with the US', *Asia Maior*, XXVII/2016
- [Torri & Maiorano 2018] Torri, Michelguglielmo, and Diego Maiorano, 2018, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', *Asia Maior*, XXVIII/2017
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2021, 'India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2022, 'The Road to Galwan Valley: An alternative view of India's relations with China and the US since 2005', *Asia Maior - Special Issue No. 2*.
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2023a, 'India 2021-2022: Playing against China on different chessboards', *Asia Maior XXXIII/2022*
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2023b, *India's US policy 1991-2019: the gradual loss of strategic autonomy*, in Silvio Beretta, Axel Berkofsky, Giuseppe Iannini (eds.), *India's Foreign Policy and Economic Challenges. Friends, Enemies and Controversies*, Cham (Switzerland): Springer, pp. 149-177.
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 2019, 'India 2018: the resetting of New Delhi's foreign policy?', *Asia Maior*, XXIX/2018.
- Travelli, Alex, 2025, 6 August, 'India, Once America's Counterweight to China, Is Now Facing Trump's Wrath', *The New York Times*.
- U.S. Department of State, 2008, *Agreement for Cooperation between the Government of The United States of America and the Government of India Concerning Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy* (signed at Washington, on October 10, 2008).
- [U.S. Security Cooperation With India 2025] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, *U.S. Security Cooperation With India* (Fact Sheet), 20 January 2025.
- Upadhyaya, Pranay, and Sharangee Dutta, 2025, 27 June, 'India suggests 4-pronged plan to China to manage border tensions, better ties', *India Today*.
- Vanaik, Achin, 2005, 6-12 August, 'The Significance of the New India-US Framework Agreement on Defence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(32), pp. 3581-3585.
- Varadarajan, Siddharth, 2025, 1 September, *The India Cable*.
- Warren, Spenser A., and Sumit Ganguly, 2022, 'Russia-India Relations after Ukraine', *Asian Survey* 62 (5-6), pp. 811-837.
- Yadav, Nikita, 2025, 30 July, *BBC*, 'Trump to hit India with 25% tariffs - plus «penalty» for trade with Russia'.
- Yang, Joshua, 2025, 11 August, 'The end of the Trump-Modi bromance', *The Washington Post*.

