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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# The Fault Line in India-US Ties: America Doesn't Understand 'Equal'

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Is 'strategic autonomy' still a viable doctrine for India in an era of intensifying US-China rivalry, or does it risk leaving India without dependable partners?"*

The architecture of India-US partnership has expanded faster than the political imagination of equality on which it rests. From Section 232 tariffs to pressure on Russia and Iran ties, Washington continues to treat strategic autonomy as a problem to be managed rather than a doctrine to be respected. A durable relationship will be built on mutual interest, codified non-negotiables, and parallel partnerships — not on hub-and-spoke alignment.

## A PARTNERSHIP WITH EXPENSIVE FURNITURE

By any quantitative measure, the India-United States relationship has matured. Since the 2005 Strategic Partnership, the architecture has thickened: Major Defence Partner status (2016), Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 — STA-1 — in 2018, the Quad's revival into a working format, the 2+2 ministerial dialogue since 2018, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) launched in May 2022, and the TRUST initiative unveiled in 2025 to push the technology agenda further into AI, biotechnology and clean energy.

Defence cooperation has crossed roughly \$25 billion in cumulative sales since 2008. Apaches, P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, MH-60R helicopters, M777 howitzers and the recent Stryker armoured-vehicle conversation have changed the Indian inventory. The GE-414 engine technology transfer for the Tejas Mk-2 programme is, on paper, the most ambitious co-production framework in India-US defence history.

So why the recurring friction? Why do tariff announcements, visa restrictions and Russia-sanctions discussions return to the agenda almost on cue?

## THE FAULT LINE IS THE WORD "EQUAL"

The proposition this editorial advances is that the architecture has outrun the imagination. American strategic culture has historically organised partnerships in concentric circles around itself — formal allies (NATO, Japan, South Korea, Australia), partners-with-conditions, and the rest. India does not fit this map. It is not a treaty ally, it does not seek to be, and it refuses to forfeit Russia ties or Iran connectivity to qualify for the inner circle. Washington reads this as ambivalence; New Delhi understands it as **sovereignty**.

### Where the Strain Shows

FRICITION POINT	INDIAN POSITION	US POSITION
Section 232 tariffs (steel, aluminium)	Discriminatory; WTO-incompatible	National security exception
H-1B and STEM-OPT pathways	Disruption of services trade and people-to-people ties	Domestic labour-market politics
S-400 procurement	Sovereign defence choice	CAATSA risk; interoperability concerns
Russian crude imports	Energy security; price-cap compliance	Pressure to taper
Chabahar port and Iran	Connectivity to Afghanistan, Central Asia	Sanctions architecture
GE-414 ToT	Seek closer to 100 per cent transfer	Around 80 per cent reportedly offered
Technology denials in iCET	Push for closer-to-NATO-ally treatment	Case-by-case approvals

Each line is, in isolation, manageable. The pattern is the problem: a relationship in which India is told, repeatedly and politely, that its sovereign choices on Russia, Iran or defence sourcing are tolerated rather than respected.

## THE RUSSIA QUESTION

A large share of India's legacy military inventory — by widely cited estimates, well over half — is of Russian origin: T-90 tanks, MiG-29s, Sukhoi Su-30 MKIs, IL-76 transport aircraft, **BrahMos missile** co-development, and a deep supply chain of spares. S-400 procurement was a strategic call taken before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the relationship survived both Cold War alignments and the post-1991 turbulence.

The Russia-China axis has hardened since 2022, and Indian strategic planners are alert to that risk. But the response cannot be a forced rupture with Moscow that leaves Indian platforms unsupported and strategic intelligence channels diminished. A calibrated diversification — through France, Israel, the US itself, and

indigenous production under the Aatmanirbhar Bharat framework — is the realistic path.

## THE CHINA QUESTION — AND WHY INDIA CANNOT CHOOSE

Galwan in June 2020, the Pangong Tso standoff, and the partial disengagement of 2023-24 have left India with a hardened LAC posture and a sober understanding of the People’s Republic. At the same time, Indian manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and electronics supply chains continue to depend significantly on Chinese inputs. The US is bifurcating its technology relationship with Beijing across semiconductors, AI, EVs and biotech. India needs both — access to American advanced technology *and* a managed economic relationship with China. That dual track is not a contradiction; it is the strategic terrain India actually occupies.

## WHAT TREATY ALIGNMENT HAS COST OTHERS

PARTNER	ALIGNMENT	COST IN AUTONOMY
Japan	Mutual Security Treaty (1960); host to US bases	China-policy alignment; constrained nuclear options
Australia	AUKUS (2021)	Submarine future bound to US/UK; Pacific posture aligned
South Korea	Mutual Defense Treaty (1953); US troops	CHIPS Act pressure on chip exports to China

India is the only major US partner *without* a formal treaty alliance. That position has often been read in Washington as the “next step yet to be taken”. The argument of this editorial is the opposite: the absence of a treaty is the *defining feature* of the partnership, not a transitional stage to be overcome. It is what makes the Quad strategically useful without making it a NATO.

## CODIFYING THE NON-NEGOTIABLES

A serious reset begins with India naming its non-negotiables, calmly and clearly:

- **Russia legacy ties** — defence platforms, energy where compliant with the price cap, intelligence channels.
- **Iran connectivity** — Chabahar port, INSTC route, ties with Central Asia.
- **Multi-alignment** — Quad *and* SCO, BRICS, IBSA, G20, the Voice of Global South.
- **Strategic autonomy on UN votes** — case-by-case, interest-driven.
- **Indian manufacturing protections** — calibrated tariffs and PLI schemes that fit Indian, not external, timelines.

Naming these out loud does not weaken the partnership; it lets Washington plan around them. Treaty allies enjoy that clarity. India should claim the same dignity.

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF A BALANCED PARTNERSHIP

A “balanced partnership” framework, distinct from hub-and-spoke alignment, would have several features:

- 1 **Peer-to-peer dialogue** institutionalised through 2+2 and a parallel Track 1.5 mechanism, with reciprocal market access and visa pathways negotiated as a package.
- 2 **Closer-to-complete technology transfer** in flagship programmes — including a roadmap towards full GE-414 transfer for the Tejas Mk-2 — as a measurable test.
- 3 **Parallel partnerships** with the European Union (FTA), the United Kingdom (CETA, 2024), Japan (Special Strategic and Global Partnership), and France (strategic partnership and Rafale ecosystem) — so that no single relationship carries disproportionate weight.
- 4 **Sectoral lock-ins** where mutual interest is structural — semiconductors, AI safety, undersea cables, space, clean energy.
- 5 **A managed disagreement protocol** — disputes (tariffs, visas, sanctions) handled through institutionalised channels rather than ministerial surprise.

## UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

**GS Paper 2 — International Relations.** The case offers a textbook study of the limits of strategic partnership in a multipolar world. Conceptual anchors: non-alignment (Bandung 1955, Belgrade 1961), strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, the Quad architecture, CAATSA, and the contemporary US-China bifurcation in technology.

### UPSC RELEVANCE

Washington calls India a partner; New Delhi must insist that “partner” is read in its dictionary sense — an equal, with its own interests, its own history, and its own friends. Until that reading is mutual, every tariff notification and every sanctions warning will continue to remind us how unfinished the architecture really is.

Sources: [Indian Express](#), [MEA](#)

### ● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The structural strain in India-US relations is not a series of episodic disputes over tariffs or visas; it is the consequence of Washington's persistent inability to treat New Delhi as a sovereign equal — one entitled to its own Russia ties, Iran ties, and multi-aligned foreign policy. India should reset the relationship on mutual interest rather than align with a US-defined template of partnership.

✓ **SUPPORTING**

- Despite Strategic Partnership (2005), Major Defence Partner status (2016), STA-1 (2018), iCET (2022) and TRUST (2025), India still encounters case-by-case approvals, incomplete technology transfers, and Section 232 tariffs.
- On Russia (S-400, legacy spares, energy) and Iran (Chabahar connectivity), Washington has repeatedly expected Indian alignment with US sanctions architecture — an expectation incompatible with India's geography and history.
- Comparative cases — Japan and Australia (AUKUS, 2021) — show that closer treaty alignment with the US has come at the cost of independent diplomatic space.
- India is the only major US partner outside a formal treaty alliance; that very status is the asset Washington consistently misreads as a problem.

⚠ **COUNTER**

Proponents of deeper alignment argue that in an era of US-China bifurcation, strategic autonomy risks leaving India without the technology transfers, capital and security guarantees that only the US can credibly provide; equidistance, they say, is a luxury of a calmer world.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

India should codify its non-negotiables (Russia legacy ties, Iran connectivity, strategic autonomy), negotiate from strength on market access and defence offsets, build EU, UK and Japan as parallel partners, and push for a 'balanced partnership' framework that replaces hub-and-spoke alignment with peer-to-peer engagement.

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**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**
**QUESTION**

*'The architecture of India-US partnership has expanded faster than the political imagination of equality on which it rests.' Critically analyse the structural fault lines in the relationship and suggest how India can pursue strategic autonomy without losing the benefits of US engagement. (250 words)*

**INTRODUCTION**

The India-United States relationship has, over two decades, accumulated an impressive architecture: the Strategic Partnership of 2005, Major Defence Partner status in 2016, Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 in 2018, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in May 2022, and the TRUST initiative announced in 2025. Yet, recurrent friction — over tariffs, visas, Russia ties, Iran connectivity, and the very concept of strategic autonomy — suggests a deeper fault line: Washington's difficulty in treating New Delhi as a sovereign equal.

**BODY**

The friction is structural, not transactional. Defence cooperation has grown to roughly \$25 billion in cumulative sales since 2008, spanning Apaches, P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, MH-60R helicopters, M777 howitzers, the GE-414 engine technology transfer for the Tejas Mk-2 programme, and the Stryker contract. iCET and TRUST promise depth in semiconductors, AI, biotech and clean energy.

Yet 'Major Defence Partner' status — sui generis on paper — has been operationally constrained by case-by-case export approvals, by less-than-complete technology transfers (the GE-414 deal, at reportedly around 80 per cent technology transfer, is a notable example), and by the absence of an interoperability framework that India can engage on its own terms. The Russia question — S-400 procurement, MiG and Sukhoi spares, Indian crude imports from Russia after February 2022 — has been repeatedly treated by Washington as a test of alignment, not as a sovereign Indian choice.

The Iran question — Chabahar port, India's connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan — has similarly run into US sanctions architecture. Tariff disputes (Section 232 steel and aluminium reinstated, threats on pharmaceuticals and IT services) and H-1B visa friction add transactional irritants to this structural strain.

The comparative record — Japan's reduced China-policy autonomy, Australia's AUKUS-bound submarine future — suggests that closer treaty alignment with the US has costs India should not casually accept. India remains the only major US partner without a treaty alliance; that status is not a limitation, it is the asset.

**CONCLUSION**

A durable India-US partnership will rest on mutual interest, not hierarchical expectation. India should codify its non-negotiables — Russia legacy ties, Iran connectivity, autonomous foreign policy — negotiate from the strength of its market and demographics, build parallel partnerships with the EU, UK and Japan, and push for an architecture in which 'equal' is more than rhetorical decoration.

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

## Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

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