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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India and the US Today: Interests Not Easily Aligned — Let's Confront This

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**23 May 2026 · **IR** · **GS2**

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 The Indian Express

23 May 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Where exactly do Indian and American strategic interests diverge today, and how should Delhi calibrate its Washington policy without surrendering strategic autonomy?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

Indian Express argues that India-US strategic convergence has been overstated and that the relationship's optimism-driven trajectory of the past two decades cannot conceal widening divergences on trade tariffs, Russia ties (energy and defence), Iran connectivity, technology transfer and immigration. The editorial contends that Delhi should engage Washington with realism — frankly acknowledging policy differences rather than performing alignment — and build a more durable, interest-based partnership anchored in India's strategic autonomy.

THE ARCHITECTURE AND THE REALITY

The visible architecture of the India-US relationship is dense and impressive. The 2005 Strategic Partnership and the Civil Nuclear Initiative reopened high-technology cooperation that had been frozen since 1974. Major Defence Partner status (December 8, 2016) and Strategic Trade Authorisation Tier-1 (STA-1, July 30, 2018) placed India among the United States' closest defence and technology partners. The 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, launched on September 6, 2018, brought foreign and defence ministers together annually. The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), announced in May 2022 and operationalised in January 2023, expanded the scope to semiconductors, quantum, AI and space. The TRUST initiative — Transforming Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology — was unveiled at the Modi-Trump summit on February 13, 2025. Bilateral defence trade has crossed around \$25 billion since 2008.

The reality below this scaffolding is more uneven. Each pillar of the relationship contains a divergence that the public narrative downplays.

WHERE THE INTERESTS DIVERGE

The list of unresolved frictions is no longer marginal.

AREA	DIVERGENCE
Trade	Section 232 tariffs of 25% on steel and aluminium reinstated; threats on Indian pharma and IT services
Russia	S-400 procurement continues; around 35.8% of FY25 crude from Russia; CAATSA waiver politically contested
Iran	Chabahar Port long-term lease (IPGL, May 13, 2024); INSTC engagement; US sanctions pressure
Technology Transfer	F-414 engine ToT for Tejas Mk-2 at around 80%, not full; strategic trade authorisation case-by-case
Immigration	H-1B restrictions; OPT/STEM extension uncertainty; visa backlog for Indian-origin workers
Climate	India's CBDR-RC posture vs proposed US carbon-border measures

These are not episodic irritants. They reflect different national interests, different domestic political constraints and, increasingly, different worldviews on the [multilateral](#) order.

INDIA-RUSSIA: WHY DELHI WILL NOT WALK AWAY

India's continued engagement with Russia is not sentimental — it is structural. An estimated 60-70% of legacy Indian military equipment is of Russian origin; the S-400 Triumf, despite Ukraine-war-related delivery delays, remains central to India's integrated air defence; around 35.8% of crude imports in FY25 were from Russia. The BrahMos joint venture continues to produce missiles for the Indian armed forces and now for export — Vietnam being the most prominent recipient. The 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit (Putin's visit to India, December 2025) signalled that this relationship is not negotiable on Washington's terms.

For Delhi, the Russia link is also a hedge against a possible long-term Russia-China condominium. Walking away from Moscow at Washington's behest would not only damage Indian capabilities; it would push Russia further toward Beijing, an outcome that serves no Indian interest.

INDIA-IRAN: CONNECTIVITY BEYOND SANCTIONS

The Chabahar Port long-term lease, signed by India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) on May 13, 2024, formalises a ten-year operational commitment that began in 2018. Chabahar gives India a non-Pakistan route to Afghanistan and onward to Central Asia. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) — running through Iran to Russia — is the alternative to Hormuz-dependent maritime trade.

India's crude imports from Iran have been curtailed since the 2018 reimposition of US sanctions, but diplomatic engagement, port operations and connectivity investment continue. This is not defiance — it is a clear assertion that India's Eurasian connectivity strategy cannot be subcontracted to US sanctions architecture.

AMERICA FIRST AND THE LIMITS OF RECIPROCITY

Trump 2.0 transactionalism is not a policy aberration; it is the operational doctrine of the present administration. The “reciprocal tariffs” framework treats tariff parity as a **unilateral** right. Pressure on NATO allies for a 5% of GDP defence commitment signals that the United States now expects greater financial contribution from partners. The “America First” framing is unsentimental: relationships are valued by what they deliver to the American economy and worker, not by historical narrative.

For India, the implication is that performing alignment will not insulate it from American economic pressure. The IT services sector, pharmaceutical exports and steel and aluminium have all been targets. Future targets — perhaps generic medicine pricing, or data-localisation disputes, or H-1B-equivalent visas — are likely. A relationship built on alignment **rhetoric** absorbs every such episode as a betrayal; a relationship built on candid interest-recognition absorbs them as predictable.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AS OPERATIONAL MULTI-ALIGNMENT

India's strategic autonomy is sometimes misread as a non-aligned hangover. It is in fact an active multi-alignment doctrine.

PLATFORM	INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT
Quad	Founding member; Indo-Pacific architecture
SCO	Full member since 2017; security and Eurasia engagement
BRICS	Founding member; BRICS Plus expansion
IBSA	India-Brazil-South Africa trilateral
G20	Hosted Presidency 2022-23
Voice of the Global South	Hosted summits 2023, 2024
Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)	Engaged on three of four pillars

The intellectual lineage — Bandung 1955, Belgrade 1961 — is now embedded in an operational doctrine of simultaneous engagement with mutually contesting powers. Unlike Japan, South Korea and Australia, India is not in any formal treaty alliance with the United States. This is not a deficiency to be overcome; it is the architecture that lets Delhi engage Moscow on S-400, Tehran on Chabahar, Beijing on LAC disengagement and Washington on iCET — all at once.

A REALISM-BASED FRAMEWORK

The editorial's central argument is that the alternative to overstated convergence is not estrangement — it is realism.

Five operational principles follow:

- 1 **Define core interests in advance.** Russia legacy ties, Iran connectivity, defence diversification, skilled-worker access — these should be communicated to Washington as non-negotiable, not discovered as friction points after each summit.
- 2 **Negotiate from strength.** The Indian market, demographics, the tech workforce and defence offsets are leverage. Delhi should price them accordingly.
- 3 **Diversify parallel partnerships.** The EU FTA (targeted conclusion 2025-26), the UK, Japan, France, Germany, South Korea and ASEAN should be cultivated to reduce US over-reliance.
- 4 **Decouple substance from rhetoric.** A defence deal does not require an alliance speech; a technology partnership does not require a values declaration.
- 5 **Institutionalise early-warning mechanisms.** Track-1.5 channels should surface divergence before it becomes a public crisis.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 – India’s Foreign Policy, Bilateral Relations, International Institutions

- **Strategic Partnership 2005:** Civil Nuclear Initiative; reopening of high-technology cooperation post-1974 freeze.
- **Major Defence Partner status, December 2016:** India placed in a special category for defence trade.
- **STA-1 designation, July 30, 2018:** Strategic Trade Authorisation Tier-1; eased licensing for dual-use exports.
- **2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, since September 6, 2018:** Foreign and defence ministers; institutionalised political-military coordination.
- **iCET, May 2022 (operational January 2023):** Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies; semiconductors, quantum, AI, space.
- **TRUST initiative, February 13, 2025:** Transforming Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology; announced at Modi-Trump summit.
- **Section 232 tariffs:** 25% on steel and aluminium; threat extension to pharma and IT services.
- **Chabahar Port, IPGL long-term lease, May 13, 2024:** Ten-year operational commitment; non-Pakistan route to Central Asia.
- **INSTC:** International North-South Transport Corridor through Iran to Russia.
- **F-414 engine ToT:** Tejas Mk-2 powerplant; negotiated at around 80%, not full transfer.
- **23rd India-Russia Annual Summit, December 2025:** Putin’s visit to India; reaffirmed bilateral special privileged strategic partnership.
- **Strategic autonomy doctrine:** Multi-alignment across Quad, SCO, BRICS, IBSA, G20, Voice of the Global South.
- **Bandung 1955, Belgrade 1961:** Intellectual lineage of non-alignment now operationalised as multi-alignment.

Mains Questions:

- 1 “The India-US partnership has been built on a narrative of strategic convergence that increasingly understates the divergence of national interests.” Critically examine and suggest a realism-based framework.
- 2 Trace the institutional evolution of the India-US relationship from the 2005 Strategic Partnership to the 2025 TRUST initiative. What structural divergences coexist with this architecture?

- 3 India’s strategic autonomy doctrine is sometimes characterised as multi-alignment. Evaluate this characterisation with reference to India’s simultaneous engagement with Russia, the United States and Iran.
- 4 Examine the implications of US “reciprocal tariffs” and “America First” framing for India’s trade, technology and immigration interests.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership 2005, Civil Nuclear Initiative, Major Defence Partner 2016, STA-1, 2+2 Dialogue, iCET, TRUST initiative, Section 232 tariffs, S-400 Triumph, CAATSA, Chabahar Port, IPGL, INSTC, F-414 engine, H-1B, OPT/STEM, CBDR-RC, strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, Quad, SCO, BRICS, IBSA, Voice of the Global South, Bandung 1955, Belgrade 1961, India-Russia 23rd Annual Summit, Trump 2.0, reciprocal tariffs, America First

The deeper argument of this Indian Express editorial is that the most durable foreign-policy partnerships are not those built on the rhetoric of shared values but those built on the clear recognition of where interests diverge — and the willingness to negotiate that divergence in good faith. India and the United States have a remarkable amount of common ground on the Indo-Pacific, on critical technologies and on the rules-based order. They also have substantial differences on Russia, Iran, trade and immigration. Pretending the differences do not exist makes the next disappointment harder; naming them honestly makes the next agreement more durable. Realism, in this sense, is not the absence of optimism — it is the only foundation on which sustainable optimism can rest.

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

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Indian Express argues that the optimism-driven India-US trajectory of the past two decades has overstated strategic convergence and understated structural divergence on trade tariffs, Russia ties, Iran connectivity, technology transfer and immigration; a more durable partnership requires Delhi to confront these differences candidly, define non-negotiable core interests in advance, and engage Washington from a position of clear-eyed realism rather than performative alignment.

✓ **SUPPORTING**

- The institutional architecture of the relationship — the 2005 Strategic Partnership and Civil Nuclear Initiative, Major Defence Partner status (December 2016), STA-1 designation (July 2018), the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue (since September 2018), iCET (May 2022, operational January 2023) and the TRUST initiative (Modi-Trump summit, February 13, 2025) — coexists with defence trade of around \$25 billion since 2008; yet the headline architecture conceals widening interest gaps below the surface.
- Divergences are concrete and structural — Section 232 tariffs of 25% on steel and aluminium have been reinstated and threats extend to Indian pharma and IT services; India continues to procure the S-400 system from Russia and around 35.8% of crude in FY25 was from Russian sources; the Chabahar Port long-term lease signed by IPGL on May 13, 2024 keeps Iran connectivity central to India's Eurasia strategy; F-414 engine technology transfer for Tejas Mk-2 has been negotiated at around 80%, not 100%; and H-1B and OPT/STEM uncertainty continues to affect Indian-origin tech workers.
- India's "strategic autonomy" doctrine is not a relic of non-alignment but an active multi-alignment strategy — Quad, SCO, BRICS, IBSA, G20 and the Voice of the Global South are all simultaneous platforms; unlike Japan, South Korea and Australia, India is not in any formal treaty alliance with the United States, and the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit (Putin's visit to India, December 2025) reaffirmed that India will not pick sides on legacy partnerships regardless of Washington's preferences.
- Trump 2.0 transactionalism — the "reciprocal tariffs" doctrine, pressure on NATO partners for a 5% GDP defence target and the "America First" framing — means Washington's own commitment to a single privileged India relationship is conditional; performing alignment in this environment creates expectations that fail, generates disappointment cycles and damages the trust capital that any durable partnership requires.

COUNTER

Critics will argue that explicit acknowledgement of divergence weakens India's bargaining position, signals retreat from the Quad and the Indo-Pacific architecture and could embolden China; some strategic analysts maintain that ambiguity has served India well, preserving optics of convergence while delivering substantive defence and technology gains such as the GE-414 deal, P-8I, MH-60R and Apache acquisitions.

WAY FORWARD

Define India's core non-negotiable interests in advance — continued Russia legacy ties, Iran connectivity through Chabahar and INSTC, defence diversification and immigration access for skilled workers; negotiate from genuine sources of strength (the Indian market, demographics, the tech workforce, defence offsets); accelerate parallel partnerships with

the European Union (target FTA conclusion 2025-26), the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Germany and ASEAN; manage expectations on both sides; decouple the strategic relationship from the rhetoric of alliance; and institutionalise track-1.5 mechanisms for early identification of divergence before it becomes crisis.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

"The India-US partnership has been built on a narrative of strategic convergence that increasingly understates the divergence of national interests." Critically examine the principal areas of divergence and suggest a realism-based framework for engaging Washington without compromising India's strategic autonomy. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Indian Express contends that the optimism-driven India-US trajectory of the past decade has overstated convergence and understated divergence; durable partnership now requires realism — frank acknowledgement of where interests differ — rather than performative alignment.

BODY

The institutional scaffolding is impressive — the 2005 Strategic Partnership and Civil Nuclear Initiative, Major Defence Partner status (December 2016), STA-1 (July 2018), the 2+2 Dialogue (since September 2018), iCET (May 2022, operational January 2023), the TRUST initiative (February 13, 2025) and defence trade of around \$25 billion since 2008. But beneath this architecture, the divergence list lengthens. On trade, Section 232 tariffs of 25% on steel and aluminium have been reinstated and threats extend to Indian pharma and IT services. On Russia, India continues S-400 procurement and around 35.8% of FY25 crude is Russian; the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit (Putin's December 2025 India visit) reaffirmed this relationship. On Iran, the Chabahar Port long-term lease (IPGL, May 13, 2024) and the International North-South Transport Corridor keep Iran central to India's Eurasia outreach. On technology, F-414 engine transfer for Tejas Mk-2 is at around 80% rather than full ToT; strategic trade authorisation remains case-by-case. On immigration, H-1B and OPT/STEM uncertainty constrains Indian-origin workers. India's strategic autonomy doctrine is not a hangover from non-alignment but an active multi-alignment posture across Quad, SCO, BRICS, IBSA, G20 and the Voice of the Global South; India holds no treaty alliance with the

United States unlike Japan, South Korea or Australia.

Trump 2.0 transactionalism — the “reciprocal tariffs” doctrine, NATO 5% GDP pressure and “America First” — means Washington’s own commitment is conditional. Performing alignment in this environment produces disappointment cycles and damages trust.

CONCLUSION

The way forward is realism. Delhi should define non-negotiable core interests in advance — Russia legacy ties, Iran connectivity, defence diversification, skilled-worker access; negotiate from genuine strengths; accelerate parallel partnerships with the EU (target FTA 2025-26), UK, Japan, France, Germany and ASEAN; manage expectations; decouple strategic substance from alliance rhetoric; and institutionalise track-1.5 mechanisms to catch divergence early.

A partnership built on candidly recognised interests will outlast one built on overstated alignment.

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