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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Changing Logic of the India-U.S. Partnership: From Convergence to Flexible Realism

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The Changing Logic of the India-U.S. Partnership: From Convergence to Flexible Realism

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a country's strategic value to a partner rests entirely on that partner's threat perception of a third country, and that perception can shift with an election or a rapprochement neither side controls, what should the smaller partner build instead: more convergence, or more capability?"

Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Washington did not stop needing India. It stopped needing India for the same reason.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Most India-U.S. answers still default to listing convergence-era milestones, the Civil Nuclear Deal, the Quad, defence deals, as though naming them proves the partnership is stable. This editorial supplies the harder point: convergence was always contingent on Washington's own threat perception of China, and a contingent asset is not a strategic asset. A strong answer distinguishes what India built with America from what America happened to need at the time.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood relations; bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests; effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Flexible realism	The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy's doctrine of judging partners by national interest, capability and reciprocal benefit rather than shared values or a fixed rivalry	Named term, directly examinable as the current U.S. strategic posture
Convergence logic	The pre-2025 assumption that China's rise automatically raised India's strategic value to the U.S.	The baseline the editorial argues has ended
Multi-alignment	India's doctrine of pursuing "equal closeness" with multiple major powers issue by issue, distinct from Cold War non-alignment	India's stated policy response, associated with EAM S. Jaishankar
Tolerable stability	The 2025 NSS's preference for pragmatic partnerships over democracy-promotion as an organising principle	Explains why India's democratic character no longer carries automatic strategic weight
Strategic autonomy	India's long-standing preference for freedom of action over binding alliance commitments	The underlying value multi-alignment is designed to preserve

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The convergence era ran roughly from the **2008 India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement** through the **post-2017 revival of the Quad**, a period in which successive U.S. administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, treated a democratic, capable India as a natural counterweight to a rising China in the Indo-Pacific. This logic did not require India to reciprocate with anything beyond its own growth and its own wariness of Beijing; India's value to Washington rose largely on its own.

The Trump administration's **2025 National Security Strategy** breaks from this pattern. It sets out a doctrine its own text calls **"flexible realism"**, prioritising pragmatic, transactional partnerships and "tolerable stability" over values-based alignment, and states there is nothing inconsistent in partnering closely with governments whose political systems differ from America's own. The companion **2026 National Defense Strategy** reinforces this with language stressing sovereignty, national interest and burden-sharing among partners.

The India-specific evidence is the tariff sequence of the past year: a **25% tariff in August 2025**, an **additional 25% penalty tied to India's continued Russian oil purchases** taking the total to **50%**, a cut to **18% in February 2026** after India signalled reduced Russian purchases, a **U.S. Supreme Court ruling later in February 2026** constraining the administration's tariff authority under IEEPA, and a further move to a **flat 10% under Section 301 authority by late July 2026**, the rate in effect as of this edition.

THE ANALYSIS

1. Convergence was always a borrowed asset, not an earned one. India's rising value to Washington through the 2010s reflected America's reading of China, not anything India specifically did to earn that value beyond remaining large, democratic and geographically positioned where it is. A borrowed asset can be withdrawn by the lender without the borrower doing anything wrong.

2. The tariff sequence is the clearest evidence flexible realism is not rhetorical. A 50% tariff, a cut to 18% tied explicitly to Russian oil behaviour, a Supreme Court ruling that then changed the leverage calculus again, and a further settling to a flat 10% under a different statutory authority by mid-2026, all within under a year, is the behaviour of two governments negotiating specific, reversible terms, not the behaviour of a partnership resting on assumed strategic alignment.

3. Technology and export-control posture is the second front to watch. Where convergence-era administrations generally eased technology transfer to India as part of building up a counterweight to China, a flexible-realist posture evaluates technology sharing on the same reciprocal, capability-based terms as tariffs, meaning India cannot assume defence and high-technology cooperation will keep expanding on the old trajectory without India demonstrating equivalent reciprocal value.

4. Multi-alignment is a real doctrine, not an improvisation, but it has to do more work now. Jaishankar's formulation of "equal closeness" with multiple powers was designed for a world where India could extract value from more than one relationship simultaneously without being forced to choose. Flexible realism raises the cost of that strategy by making at least one of those relationships, with Washington, more explicitly conditional.

5. The counter-argument deserves full weight. Multi-alignment's central vulnerability is that "equal closeness" to rivals can read, from each rival's side, as insufficient commitment, and the Russian-oil-versus-tariff friction of the past year is a live example of exactly this tension. A more skeptical reading holds that multi-alignment is sustainable only until a partner forces a binary choice, and India has not yet been tested by a scenario that forces one.

6. The only durable fix is capability, not diplomacy. If strategic value assigned by another power can be withdrawn by a change in that power's own calculus, an election, a rapprochement, a shift in domestic politics, none of which India controls, then the only asset immune to that risk is capability India builds and controls itself: economic scale, technological depth, defence production, and diplomatic reach wide enough that no single partner's reassessment is decisive.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

2025 U.S. National Security Strategy: sets out the doctrine of "flexible realism"

2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy: companion document, stresses sovereignty, national interest, burden-sharing

India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement: 2008

Quad: revived post-2017 (originally proposed 2007)

Tariff timeline: 25% (Aug 2025) to 50% (with Russian-oil penalty) to 18% (Feb 2026) to U.S. Supreme Court IEEPA tariff-power ruling (late Feb 2026) to a flat 10% under Section 301 authority (by late July 2026)

Multi-alignment: India's doctrine of "equal closeness" with multiple powers, associated with EAM S. Jaishankar, distinct from Cold War non-alignment

Author of the accompanying Hindu opinion piece reported as Prof. G. Venkat Raman, IIM Indore (geopolitics and China studies)

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT THE INDIA-U.S. PARTNERSHIP HAS WEAKENED OR ENDED. THE EDITORIAL'S ARGUMENT IS NARROWER AND HARDER: THE BASIS ON WHICH THE PARTNERSHIP IS VALUED HAS CHANGED, FROM ASSUMED STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE TO NEGOTIATED, RECIPROCAL, REVERSIBLE TERMS.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR reading this as a fundamental shift. The tariff sequence of the past year, a 50% peak tied explicitly to Russian oil purchases followed by a negotiated cut and then a judicial constraint on tariff power, is not consistent with a relationship still organised around assumed convergence against China. The 2025 NSS says as much in its own language, and treating this as noise rather than signal risks India continuing to under-invest in its own capability while assuming America's strategic need for India will do the work instead.

Argument AGAINST overreading a single year of tariff friction. Tariff disputes over energy purchases are a narrower and more transactional category than the broader defence, technology and Indo-Pacific cooperation that has continued to deepen through the same period; reading one contentious trade dispute as proof of a wholesale doctrinal shift in the entire relationship risks overcorrecting away from a partnership that remains, on most other dimensions, on its established trajectory.

Balanced verdict. Both readings can be true at once: the tariff friction is real evidence that flexible realism has changed the terms on which at least part of the relationship is negotiated, without implying the broader defence and technology relationship has reversed. The prudent response is not to treat the partnership as ending, but to stop treating India's value to Washington as assured, and to invest accordingly in the capability that does not depend on any single partner's continued strategic need.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when your strategic value to a partner rests on that partner's perception of a third party, treat that value as contingent, not owned, and build the version of it that you control yourself.**

A state can rise in another power's estimation for reasons that have nothing to do with anything it has done, simply because the other power's threat environment changed. That kind of value can fall just as fast, for reasons equally outside the first state's control, an election, a rapprochement, a change in domestic politics abroad. The only response that survives every version of that risk is building capability, economic, technological, military, diplomatic, that would make the state valuable to multiple partners on its own terms, independent of any one partner's shifting calculus.

This same structure recurs in India's relationship with the Gulf states, where India's value has risen partly on energy dependence that could shift with global energy transition; in India's relationship with ASEAN, where India's value as a counterweight depends partly on how ASEAN states themselves read China; and in domestic federal politics, where a state government's bargaining power with the Centre can rest on coalition arithmetic that changes with a single election result rather than on anything the state itself controls.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

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FROM CONVERGENCE TO FLEXIBLE REALISM

OLD LOGIC (pre 2025)
CHINA rises ──→ US reads India as counterweight ──→ India's value to US RISES
        (value assigned by Washington's threat perception, not earned by India)

NEW LOGIC (2025 NSS onward, "flexible realism")
US evaluates EACH partner on:
   reciprocal economic benefit + technological capability + demonstrated national interest
        │
        ├── TARIFFS as leverage: 25% (Aug 2025) then 50% (Russian oil penalty)
        │        then cut to 18% (Feb 2026, reduced Russian purchases), then to a flat 10% under
        │        then US Supreme Court constrains tariff power (late Feb 2026)
        │
        └── technology and defence cooperation increasingly reciprocity tested

INDIA'S RESPONSE: multi-alignment
   equal closeness with US, Russia, Europe, Japan, Global South, managed China ties
        │
        ├── benefit: no single partner's reassessment leaves India without options
        └── cost: contradictory commitments, risk of being read as convenient, not reliable
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THE ONLY ASSET IMMUNE TO ANOTHER POWER'S CHANGE OF CALCULUS
   = India's own economic, technological, defence and diplomatic capability
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TAKEAWAY BOX

A partner valued for opposing someone else is never valued for very long. Capability is the only value a country can guarantee itself.

2025 U.S. **National Security Strategy** *and its doctrine of* **"flexible realism"***; 2026* **National Defense Strategy***; India-U.S.* **Civil Nuclear Agreement, 2008***;* **Quad** *revived post-2017; tariff sequence* **25% to 50% to 18% to a flat 10%** *(Aug 2025 to July 2026) tied first to Russian oil purchases and then to a shift in statutory authority;* **multi-alignment** *and EAM* **S. Jaishankar's** *"equal closeness" formulation.*

is it good-faith diplomacy or opportunism for a state to pursue "equal closeness" with rival powers simultaneously, and does the answer depend on whether the state is transparent with each partner about what it is doing with the others?

UPSC has repeatedly examined India's bilateral relations with major powers and the effect of developed-country policies on India's interests; this editorial updates that theme with the specific mechanism, a named U.S. strategy doctrine, by which the India-U.S. calculus is changing in real time.

"India's strategic value to the United States has historically depended on Washington's perception of China, not on anything India controls." Critically examine this claim with reference to the doctrine of flexible realism and India's policy of multi-alignment.

Sources: The Hindu, The Tribune, PIB

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The Hindu's editorial (reported to draw on an accompanying opinion piece by Prof. G. Venkat Raman of IIM Indore) argues that the India-U.S. partnership, built for nearly two decades on the assumption that China's rise would keep raising India's strategic value to Washington, is being reshaped by the Trump administration's "flexible realism," a doctrine set out in the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy that judges partners by reciprocal economic benefit, technological capability and demonstrated national interest rather than shared opposition to any one power, and that India cannot treat its usefulness to America's China strategy as a durable foreign-policy asset.

✓ SUPPORTING

- The convergence-era architecture is real and substantial: the 2008 India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement, the post-2017 revival of the Quad, and a decade of expanding defence and technology cooperation under the Indo-Pacific framework were all built, explicitly or implicitly, on Washington's reading of India as a counterweight to a rising China, a logic that gave India steadily rising strategic value simply by remaining large, democratic and wary of Beijing.
- The tariff record of the past year is the clearest evidence that this logic has changed: Washington imposed a 25% tariff on Indian goods in August 2025 and then an additional 25% penalty explicitly tied to India's continued purchase of Russian oil, taking the total to 50%, before cutting it back to 18% in February 2026 after India signalled it would reduce Russian oil purchases, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling later that same month constraining the administration's tariff powers under IEEPA, and a further move to a flat 10% base under Section 301 authority by late July 2026, the rate in effect at the time of this piece's publication. A partnership governed by shared threat perception does not normally produce this kind of transactional, reversible, leverage-driven sequence over energy purchases.
- The 2025 National Security Strategy's own language supports the "flexible realism" reading: it explicitly frames good relations with governments whose systems differ from America's as unproblematic, prioritises "tolerable stability" over democracy-promotion, and states plainly that Washington sees nothing inconsistent in partnering with autocracies while continuing to describe its own values as universal, a framing under which India's democratic character stops being a source of automatic strategic credit and becomes simply one input among several, alongside economic reciprocity and technological capability.
- India's declared response, multi-alignment, is a real and pre-existing doctrine, not an improvised reaction: External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has described it as pursuing "equal closeness" with multiple major powers on an issue-by-issue basis rather than the Cold War-era equidistance of non-alignment, which is why India has simultaneously deepened technology

and security cooperation with the U.S., Japan, Australia and Europe while preserving energy and defence ties with Russia and managing an increasingly difficult relationship with China, all without formally aligning with any single bloc.

⚠ **COUNTER**

Multi-alignment is not a free good. Simultaneously deepening ties with Washington, keeping Moscow close, courting Europe and Japan, and managing Beijing creates commitments that can pull in different directions at the same moment, buying Russian oil while seeking U.S. technology access is precisely the friction the past year's tariff sequence exposed, and a partner pursuing "equal closeness" with everyone risks being read by each individual power as a partner of convenience rather than a reliable one, which is a real cost when a crisis eventually forces a choice that multi-alignment cannot indefinitely defer.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

Treat multi-alignment as a holding strategy, not a destination: use the diplomatic space it provides to build the underlying capability that the editorial identifies as the only durable asset, which means sustained investment in domestic manufacturing and semiconductor capacity, defence-production self-reliance under Atmanirbhar Bharat, technology partnerships that transfer capability rather than only equipment, and an economic growth rate that keeps India valuable to multiple partners on its own economic weight rather than on its usefulness against any third country; and use forums where India already has standing, the Quad, the G20 legacy, IBSA and BRICS, I2U2, to keep multiple channels open so that no single partner's change of strategic calculus can leave India suddenly without options.

MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

The India-U.S. partnership was long anchored in a shared strategic convergence against a rising China. Examine how the Trump administration's "flexible realism" is changing this logic, and discuss whether India's policy of multi-alignment is an adequate response. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

For nearly two decades, the India-U.S. partnership rested on a simple and largely unstated logic: a rising China made India steadily more valuable to Washington as a democratic counterweight in the Indo-Pacific, a logic visible in the 2008 Civil Nuclear Agreement, the post-2017 revival of the Quad, and a decade of expanding defence and technology cooperation. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy, built around what it explicitly calls "flexible realism," is changing that logic, and The Hindu's editorial on 8 August 2026 argues India must respond by treating this shift as structural rather than temporary.

BODY

"Flexible realism" replaces convergence-against-China with a transactional calculus: partners are evaluated on reciprocal economic benefit, technological capability and demonstrated national interest, and the strategy's own language states there is nothing inconsistent in Washington partnering with governments whose systems differ from its own, a framing under which shared democratic values stop functioning as automatic strategic credit. The clearest evidence of this shift in the India-specific record is the tariff sequence of the past year: a 25% tariff in August 2025, an additional 25% penalty explicitly tied to India's continued purchase of Russian oil taking the total to 50%, a cut back to 18% in February 2026 after India signalled it would reduce those purchases, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling later that month constraining the administration's tariff powers under IEEPA, and a further shift to a flat 10% tariff under Section 301 authority by late July 2026, the rate applicable as this piece went to print.

This is not the behaviour of a partnership anchored in shared threat perception; it is the behaviour of two governments negotiating reciprocal, reversible, interest-specific terms. The implication for India is that its relevance to Washington was never a fixed asset, it was contingent on America's own reading of the China threat, a reading that can shift with a change of administration, a change in U.S. domestic politics, or even a future U.S.-China rapprochement, none of which India controls.

India's declared response is multi-alignment, which External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has described as pursuing "equal closeness" with multiple major powers issue by issue, rather than the equidistance of Cold War-era non-alignment, allowing India to deepen technology and security ties with the U.S., Japan, Australia and Europe while preserving energy and defence relationships with Russia and managing a difficult but functional relationship with China.

CONCLUSION

Multi-alignment is a sound response to a genuine structural problem, but it is not costless: pursuing simultaneous closeness with powers that are themselves rivals creates contradictory pressures, visible in the friction between Russian oil purchases and U.S. tariff leverage over the past year, and it risks each partner reading India as useful rather than reliable. The sounder long-term answer, which the editorial's logic points toward even if multi-alignment buys the time to build it, is that India's own economic dynamism, technological capability, defence preparedness and diplomatic reach must become the actual source of its strategic value, so that no single partner's change of calculus can determine India's relevance.

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