


Multilevel Analysis of US–India Strategic Alignment and Contestation: Implications for Nepal

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Abstract

The relations between the United States and India, which is characterized by both convergence and divergence across multiple sectors, has grown in significance amid a developing global power transfer. With a focus on the strategic ramifications for Nepal, this study explores the evolving dynamics of US-India relations within the broader framework of regional and global geopolitical changes. It highlights important points of agreement, like democratic ideals, counterbalancing China, and Indo-Pacific cooperation, as well as divisions based on strategic autonomy, multilateralism, and regional objectives. The study looks at how Nepal's geopolitical environment is impacted by structural and regional trends, which force it to confront challenging strategic demands. The study uses Role Theory to analyze Nepal's self-perceptions and the expectations that the US and India have of it, revealing perceptual gaps and conflicting role conceptions in this triangle interaction. Three levels of theme analysis descriptive, comparative, and contextual as well as Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) are part of the article's qualitative,

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interpretive research methodology. The results highlight Nepal's difficult balancing act between cooperating with both powers and preserving strategic autonomy, and they shed light on the wider ramifications of great power competition for small South Asian states in a multipolar global system.

Introduction

The relationship between the United States and India is at a turning point due to complicated South Asian geopolitics and a quickly shifting global order. Due mostly to common democratic values and worries over China's growing regional influence, bilateral cooperation has changed over the past few decades from cautious engagement to complete strategic partnership (Verma, 2025). But India's initiatives for hedging and strategic autonomy show how the next reality will change. The nature, extent, and operationalization of these convergences and divergences are largely dependent on India's resolute pursuit of strategic autonomy and sophisticated hedging in a multipolar environment, even though both nations have broad strategic interests, particularly in opposing China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. India carefully balances its relationship with the United States without becoming a formal ally or subordinate partner, as implied by its commitment to strategic autonomy. India prefers a "restricted alignment" or collaboration that guarantees its flexibility in foreign policy and security decisions, as contrast to the conventional alliance paradigm (Lalwani, 2025).

India's selective support of US-led initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), in which it participates in certain pillars while remaining an observer in others, demonstrates this strategy. India wants to avoid getting involved in great-power conflicts that could restrict its strategic options, which is why it is reluctant to fully support US-led security architectures like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or larger Indo-Pacific military coalitions (Limaye & Nishiuwatoko, 2024). Geographically, India and the US have different strategic maps of the Indo-Pacific region, which reflects their different threat assessments and priorities both practically and symbolically (ORF, 2024). India's balanced approach to maintaining close bilateral ties with the United States while keeping lines of communication open with Russia and, to a lesser extent, China, is another example of its hedging strategy. India continues to buy large quantities of defense equipment from Russia despite US concerns about sanctions and geopolitical alignments. This limited involvement shows convergence and principled difference, as well as India's objective of utilizing economic cooperation while maintaining national policy space. This contrast highlights how important it is to comprehend that US-India strategic cooperation

is a complicated relationship that strikes a balance between convergence and divergence. This dynamic illustrates how India maximizes autonomy and influence by managing its interactions with great powers.

As they negotiate the shifting geostrategic landscape, regional actors like Nepal and others in South Asia face both opportunities and challenges from this complex US-India dynamic, which is based on India's strategic autonomy. There is a dearth of systematic scholarly work that looks at the similarities and differences between the United States and India as well as the implications for Nepal in the context of the global power shift, despite the fact that current literature discusses U.S.-India strategic ties and Nepal's foreign policy separately. In-depth studies of Nepal's management of these changing dynamics are rare, especially when viewed through the prism of role theory. Additionally, there is a knowledge gap regarding how small countries like Nepal maintain strategic autonomy in the face of great power competition in a multipolar world because few studies have critically examined the triangle interplay of perceptions and expectations between the United States, India, and Nepal. This study firstly examines the key areas of convergence and divergence in U.S.–India relations within the broader context of global and regional geopolitical transformations in the evolving world order. Second, it measures the structural and regional dimensions that underpin U.S.–India strategic alignments and tensions, and analyzes how these dynamics are reflected in the Nepalese context. Finally, it analyzes Nepal's self-perceptions vis-à-vis the expectations of the United States and India, and maps the triangular dynamics of perception and expectation through the lens of Role Theory.

Review of Literature

The expanding strategic relationship between the United States and India has sparked significant scholarly interest, particularly in light of the altering global order typified by China's relative ascent and the move to multipolarity. Existing research highlights the developing strategic convergence between Washington and New Delhi, particularly since the early 2000s, while also recognizing continuing areas of divergence rooted in India's strategic autonomy. According to Tellis (2005), US-India ties have evolved into a "natural partnership" based on shared democratic values and aligned geopolitical objectives, particularly in balancing China's growth.

Similarly, Mohan (2012) discusses India's steady transition from non-alignment to multi-alignment, implying that its relationship with the US indicates pragmatic adaptation rather than alliance dependency. However, despite increasing convergence, researchers detect long-standing tensions. According to Cohen (2001) and Madan (2020), India's

unwillingness to embrace formal alliances, combined with its historical commitment to strategic autonomy, typically limits the depth of alignment.

Divergences persist in areas like as economic policy, relations with Russia, and varying threat perceptions. For example, while the US focuses global strategic competition with China, India takes a more nuanced approach that includes competition with selective collaboration (Madan, 2020). At the systemic level, theoretical methods such as neorealism and strategic rivalry frameworks have been widely employed to analyze US-India relations. Kenneth Waltz (1979) proposes that states align to balance power in an anarchic international system, which helps explain the strategic convergence of the United States and India in response to China's development. Meanwhile, recent research on "competitive engagement" implies that major powers collaborate while still competing, resulting in complex patterns of alignment and contestation (Tellis & Tanner, 2012). These frameworks offer a solid foundation for examining the structural and geographical features of US-India relations.

Despite this extensive corpus of literature, research on smaller states, particularly Nepal, remains relatively neglected. Existing research on Nepal's foreign policy is mostly concerned with its balancing strategy with India and China (Baral, 2012; Muni, 2016). According to Muni (2016), Nepal has traditionally adopted a "equidistance" or "diversification" policy to protect sovereignty in the face of asymmetric power relations. Similarly, Baral and Pyakurel (2015) highlight Nepal's efforts to navigate geopolitical challenges through nonalignment and diplomatic flexibility. More recent research examines the United States' growing participation in Nepal, particularly through initiatives such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), SPP, Tibetan refugee issues, and high-level visits.

US intervention brings new dimensions to Nepal's classic India-China balancing act (Chand, 2021). However, these studies tend to examine US policy toward Nepal in isolation, failing to effectively connect it to broader US-India strategic relationships. A key gap in the literature is the lack of comprehensive, multilevel assessments that consider the global, regional, and domestic dimensions of US-India relations and their implications for Nepal. While existing research focuses on bilateral interactions between the United States and India, India and Nepal, or the United States and Nepal, it rarely examines the triangular interplay among these actors in depth.

This fragmentation hampers our knowledge of how systemic convergences and divergences influence regional results for smaller states. Holsti (1970) established role theory, which highlights the importance of national role ideas and external expectations

in driving foreign policy behavior. Later academics, such as Stephen G. Walker and Cameron G. Thies extended this approach to examine how nations handle role conflicts and expectations in complex international situations. Despite its importance, role theory has been underutilized in studying Nepal's foreign policy actions, particularly in light of great power competition.

The few studies that use a perception-based method emphasize the contradictions between Nepal's self-perception as a sovereign, non-aligned state and external expectations from India and the United States. For example, India frequently views Nepal as part of its strategic sphere of influence, whereas the United States sees Nepal as a partner in supporting democratic governance and regional stability. These divergent expectations cause role conflicts in Nepal, hampering its efforts to sustain strategic autonomy (Gupta, 2023). Another notable gap is the dearth of empirical research into how small states manage strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. Existing theories of small state behavior, such as bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging, provide useful insights but do not fully account for the action of nations like Nepal in changing their external environment.

Recent research on hedging methods indicates that tiny nations might adopt flexible and multidirectional policies to maximize advantages while limiting risks (Kuik, 2016). However, these frameworks have yet to be consistently applied to Nepal's interactions with the United States and India. Furthermore, the triangle dynamics between the United States, India, and Nepal have received little scholarly attention. While some research recognize the growing relevance of trilateral interactions, they frequently lack a theoretical framework for investigating the interplay of perceptions and expectations among these actors. This difference is especially noticeable in the context of growing geopolitical initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Strategy, where US-India convergence may create both opportunities and restrictions for Nepal.

Despite these limitations, this study fills three significant gaps in the literature. First, it conducts a multilevel analysis of US-India strategic alignment and contestation, looking at both structural (global) and regional elements. Second, it examines how these dynamics play out in the Nepalese context, concentrating on the potential and challenges they present for Nepal's foreign policy. Third, it uses role theory to examine Nepal's self-perceptions in relation to external expectations, providing a new framework for understanding the triangle dynamics of US-India-Nepal interactions. By incorporating ideas from a thorough grasp of how global power shifts affect regional geopolitics and small-state agency. In doing so, it addresses the growing demand for nuanced analysis of South Asia's changing strategic terrain and the role of countries such as Nepal within it.

Research Methodology

This study examines the growing patterns of convergence and divergence in US-India relations in the context of changing regional and global geopolitical pressures using a qualitative, interpretive research design and a thematic analytical approach. The study examines Nepal's self-perceptions, the expectations of the US and India, and the perceptual conflicts that arise within this strategic triangle using Role Theory as a theoretical framework based on Foreign Policy Analysis. Examining how states see their roles and how these perceptions coincide or diverge with other actors' expectations is made easier with the help of role theory. Most of the information is gathered from secondary sources. These include scholarly books, policy documents, peer-reviewed academic journals, and official government publications including Indo-Pacific strategic frameworks, India's foreign policy statements, and the United States National Security Strategy. Further information is gathered from reputable international and regional media outlets that help contextualize current events and policy changes, as well as publications and policy briefs from well-known think tanks like CSIS, Carnegie India, ORF, Brookings, and Nepal's Institute of Foreign Affairs.

The selected texts are methodically coded and comprehended using a Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA). Three steps are included in thematic analysis: By using descriptive analysis, consistent themes and patterns about US-India relations and Nepal's strategic position can be found in official discourses, academic discussions, and policy narratives. Comparative analysis reveals both similarities and differences between US and Indian strategies and actions in areas such as regional diplomacy, economic engagement, and security cooperation. The US-China strategic rivalry, South Asian regional politics, and the expanding multipolar global order are some of the larger geopolitical frameworks that contextualize interactions between the US, India, and Nepal. This methodological approach offers policy-relevant insights on Nepal's strategic space and options as global power shifts take place, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the triangle interaction between the United States, India, and Nepal.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion explores the US-India strategic convergence and divergence at the global, regional and national levels with its impact on geopolitical conflicts influencing Nepal's foreign policy, security and strategic balancing.

Global Power Transitions: Evolving Nature of US-India Relations

From Nehru to Modi, US-Indian relations have changed from cautious engagement to strategic cooperation. In the midst of Cold War tensions, India adopted a non-alignment strategy and avoided contact with the US during Nehru's presidency, concentrating instead on its leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement (CFR, 2023). Due to India's close ties to the Soviet Union and the United States' backing of Pakistan, especially during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, relations were often tense. After the end of the Cold War, the relationship greatly strengthened, especially after the Manmohan Singh administration signed a historic nuclear cooperation agreement. However, under Narendra Modi's premiership, which started in 2014, relations greatly improved. Modi established robust cooperation in the fields of technology, defense, and counterterrorism by leveraging India's expanding economic power and geopolitical goals. The "defining partnership" status of US-India relations was highlighted by his numerous encounters with US presidents, including historic tours and speeches to Congress (Pant and Joshi, 2017).

In recent decades, the international system has undergone significant changes, shifting from a unipolar world ruled by a single superpower to a multipolar global order characterized by several major countries. With its unparalleled economic, military, and cultural might on a global scale, the United States became the only hegemon after the end of the Cold War. According to Friedman (2010), as stated in IDEA Publishers Group (2021), the United States played a special role throughout this period in developing international conventions, maintaining global order, and directing the global agenda based on its own interests. However, the balance of power has gradually shifted away from unipolarity because to the rise of regional powers, especially China, Russia, and India (Studocu, 2024). The present shift from unipolarity to multipolarity is being driven by a number of factors, including increased economic and technological interdependence among states, the declining relative power of the United States, and the economic rise of China and other regional countries. New alliances are creating a more pluralistic global order, as seen by the establishment of institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and economic blocs like BRICS (Spinetimes, 2024). As a greater range of ideas and views emerges inside the global system, power is being redistributed both conceptually and tangibly (Global Times, 2025).

The struggle between the United States' desire to maintain a unipolar world under its leadership and India's desire to create a multipolar world order in which it leads the Global South is what sets apart the evolving global order. In frameworks like the Indo-Pacific

Strategy and the Quad, the long-standing hegemon, the United States, wants India to be aligned as a significant strategic partner to oppose China's expansion. In order to increase military interoperability and alignment against potential adversaries, Washington views India as a crucial ally in upholding a rules-based system centered by US strength (GIS Reports, 2025; Chatham House, 2025).

India, on the other hand, actively avoids legally binding alliances in order to preserve flexibility in a shifting multipolar world and instead pursues a nuanced foreign policy based on strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. India positions itself as a champion of Global South unity and an advocate for a more equitable international governance system by striking a balance between cooperation with the United States and ongoing ties with Russia, China, and regional organizations like BRICS (GIS Reports, 2025; BRICS Rewired, 2025). US-Indian relations become a complicated blend of strategic convergence and underlying antagonism as a result of this basic divide. Washington must take into account Indian interests within its broader Indo-Pacific framework since India's claim to leadership in the Global South offers distinct policy priorities that occasionally diverge from US global agendas (The Diplomat, 2025; ORF, 2024).

Because of this, the current US-India relationship is more of a balanced partnership that strikes a balance between autonomy and cooperation. India leverages this relationship to bolster its status as a legitimate global power that supports multipolarity, while the United States exploits India's global influence to maintain the unipolar aspects of the current order.

US-India Convergences and Divergences on Global Level

On a global scale, US-India relations show congruence in sustaining a rules-based international order, balancing China's ascent, boosting maritime security, and developing economic and technical collaboration. However, disagreements exist on matters such as Russia policy, trade disputes, climate obligations, and approaches to global governance, which reflect disparities in strategic autonomy and national interests.

Convergences on India–US Relations

Convergences in India-US relations are motivated by shared strategic goals in preserving a stable Indo-Pacific order, countering China's growing influence, enhancing defense and security cooperation, extending commercial and technical partnerships, and supporting democratic ideals. Both countries are increasingly collaborating at the bilateral, regional, and global levels to achieve common geopolitical, economic, and security goals.

Shared Interests in the Indo-Pacific (QUAD, Maritime Security, Connectivity)

The US-India strategic cooperation is shaped in large part by the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), which emphasizes India's importance in the Indo-Pacific area. By identifying India as a Major Defense Partner and highlighting its function as a regional provider of net security, the IPS hopes to improve defense relations with that country. Increased bilateral cooperation in cutting-edge technology, sales of weapons like armed drones, and agreements to jointly manufacture combat aircraft engines are all significant accomplishments that reflect the IPS's goal of integrated defense industrial bases (Freeman et al., 2024). The cooperative security approach is mainly meant to offset China's growing military and nuclear capabilities given the region's complex geopolitical dynamics (Pant & Mishra, 2023).

However, the US is still worried about India's enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPR) despite significant strategic collaboration. Due to persistent issues with intellectual property protection and enforcement, such as problems with patentability standards under Indian law, long delays in patent issuance, and inconsistent enforcement tactics, India was placed back on the US Trade Representative's "Priority Watch List" in 2025. Despite increased engagement and efforts to adhere to international intellectual property standards, the United States has acknowledged India's uneven progress in these areas. The general US-India trade and technological relationship is still significantly hampered by these intellectual property issues (Business Standard, 2025). Although IP policy is still a major problem that calls for greater convergence and cooperation for stronger bilateral ties, the US IPS highlights India as a vital partner, particularly for security cooperation and regional influence in the Indo-Pacific.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific agenda depends on a solid collaboration between the United States and India. Our security and commercial relations were greatly improved by the first 2+2 Dialogue in 2018. India has spent over \$16 billion on American defense systems as a Major Defense Partner, and billions more are in the works. In order to promote defense cooperation, we signed a bilateral Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement in 2018. In November 2019, we intend to conduct Tiger Triumph, the first tri-service bilateral exercise (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Promoting India's ongoing development and leadership in the region. We will continue to develop a strategic alliance between the United States and India, working together and through regional organizations to advance stability in South Asia, cooperate in new areas like health, space, and cyberspace, strengthen our economic and technological ties, and support an open and free Indo-Pacific. We acknowledge that India is a leader

and like-minded partner in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, active in and connected to Southeast Asia, a catalyst for regional growth and development, and a driving force behind the Quad and other regional fora (IPS, 2022).

The United States, India, Japan, and Australia make up the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which has developed into a vital forum for accomplishing shared Indo-Pacific goals, especially in the areas of maritime security, connectivity, and economic resilience. The four democracies reaffirmed their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific at the 2025 Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Washington, focusing on collaboration in the fight against illegal maritime activities like drug trafficking, piracy, and illegal fishing through increased maritime law enforcement and cooperative training initiatives. Notably, their commitment to maintaining a rules-based maritime order and enhancing interoperability among their coast guards and navies is demonstrated by the launch of the first-ever Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission and the upcoming marine law negotiations (US Department of State, 2025).

As demonstrated by the introduction of the Quad Critical Minerals Initiative, which seeks to secure and diversify supply chains for essential minerals needed for emerging technologies and renewable energy, connectivity and economic security continue to be key components of the Quad's agenda. By reducing regional reliance and bolstering group resilience, this project aims to advance economic growth across the Indo-Pacific area. Additionally, the Quad's role in forming the Indo-Pacific economic architecture will be strengthened by the proposed Quad Ports of the Future Partnership, which will be inaugurated in Mumbai and show a dedication to building high-quality infrastructure that supports long-term growth and regional integration (ASEAN U.S. Mission, 2025).

The Quad nations have expanded their involvement in humanitarian relief and disaster response in addition to economic and security cooperation, utilizing their combined logistical capabilities to provide prompt and efficient aid during regional emergencies. In order to increase overall readiness, the next Marine Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI) workshop will assess and enhance marine capabilities in cooperation with regional partners. The Quad's growing significance as a comprehensive framework that not only opposes coercive behavior but also advances Indo-Pacific security, connectivity, and prosperity is demonstrated by these diverse projects (Tribune India, 2025).

Defense Cooperation: Foundational Agreements, Military Exercises, and Arms Trade

As evidenced by significant agreements, military drills, and growing arms trade, India and the US have significantly expanded their defense cooperation in recent years, especially since

the historic civil nuclear treaty. The defense alliance has developed into a "Major Defense Partnership," emphasizing Indo-Pacific strategic alignment, technology cooperation, and interoperability. Notable defense agreements include the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), the Industrial Security Annex (ISA), and, more recently, the proposed Reciprocal Defense Procurement (RDP) agreement and the non-binding Security of Supplies Arrangement (SOSA). These agreements boost mutual trust and operational synergy by encouraging information sharing, faster defense sales, and co-production activities (MEA, 2025).

The number and complexity of military drills like Yudh Abhyas (army), Vajra Prahar (Special Forces), and Malabar (naval) have increased, strengthening tactical cooperation and interoperability between the two armed forces. Increased arms trade has also improved India's Indo-Pacific defense capabilities by giving it access to a wide range of US-origin equipment, including the C-130J, C-17, Apache helicopters, P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, and MQ-9B Reapers (White House, 2025). This strong defense alliance integrates cutting-edge fields like space and artificial intelligence into defense cooperation while bolstering security in a free, open, and rules-based system, which is in line with both nations' Indo-Pacific goals (Quach Thi et al., 2024). All things considered, defense relations between the US and India have become a crucial basis for both technological cooperation and regional stability.

A collection of fundamental agreements that support interoperability, logistics, and intelligence sharing serve as the cornerstone for defense cooperation among Quad members Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, ultimately enhancing Indo-Pacific collective security. These agreements, which include reciprocal access agreements and logistics support arrangements, lay the legal and practical groundwork for cooperative military operations and the efficient deployment of forces among member states. To enhance joint airlift capability and prompt disaster response, for instance, the Quad nations want to conduct the first Indo-Pacific Logistics Network field training exercise, demonstrating a deepening of practical military cooperation (The Diplomat, 2024). Exercise Malabar is the most well-known and enduring example of the joint military drills that are an essential part of Quad defense cooperation.

Originally a trilateral naval exercise between the US, Japan, and India, it now commonly involves Australia and serves as a platform for improving crisis response skills, operational interoperability, and marine domain awareness. These exercises strengthen the Quad's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific by simulating difficult scenarios

including as maritime interdiction, anti-submarine warfare, and humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission, founded in 2025, focuses on steps to increase maritime law enforcement collaboration and information sharing across the region in order to combat illicit activities such as illegal fishing and piracy.

By facilitating knowledge exchange, cooperative development, and supply chain diversification, arms trade and military sector cooperation enhance the Quad's strategic alliance. For instance, agreements that permit co-production and trade in vital defense technologies have recently strengthened defense industry ties between Australia and India. This is indicative of a broader trend among Quad members looking to lessen dependency on outside suppliers, especially in light of escalating regional tensions. Additionally, the Quad's diverse approach to defense cooperation that extends beyond conventional military domains is shown by U.S. legislation initiatives like the Quad Space Act of 2025, which aim to institutionalize collaboration in new sectors including space security (The Diplomat, 2023).

Counterterrorism Collaboration and Cyber Security Cooperation

As an essential part of their strategic alliance, India and the US have developed a solid partnership in cyber security and counterterrorism. In order to disrupt terrorist networks and stop attacks, this teamwork consists of cooperative working groups, frequent discussions, and information-sharing platforms. Both nations have placed a strong emphasis on enhanced cooperation in intelligence sharing, terrorist group designations, fighting terrorist financing, and combating violent extremism since the US-India Counterterrorism Designations Dialogue was established and the India-US Working Group on Counterterrorism met. In response to shared concerns about the threats posed by cross-border extremist groups, these efforts have been intensified through cooperative training programs and coordinated initiatives at the regional and international levels (US Embassy & Consulates in India, 2018).

At the same time, cyber security collaboration has grown in importance, with initiatives to safeguard critical infrastructure, boost resistance to cyber-attacks, and promote the development of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI). Research alliances and collaborative frameworks like the US-India TRUST initiative have improved cyber security capabilities and accelerated strategic technology development (Indian Embassy USA, 2025). By improving regional security and stability through multilateral engagement and technology-driven collaboration, this integrated approach to cyber security and counterterrorism supports their overarching Indo-Pacific policy (ORF America, 2025).

The G7 has placed a high priority on improving border security cooperation and expediting the exchange of electronic evidence in order to boost operational capabilities against terrorism while safeguarding human rights and the rule of law. Furthermore, international organizations such as the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) support frameworks for South-South and triangular cooperation, which strengthen traditional North-South cooperation while also fostering solidarity and mutual benefits by facilitating expertise exchange and joint initiatives among nations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America (UNOCT, 2022). To counteract the expanding dangers posed by cyber terrorism and terrorist groups' use of digital platforms, cyber security cooperation is an essential component of modern counterterrorism measures. To improve information sharing and operational coordination in cybercrime and terrorism, Interpol maintains a global network of member nations and collaborates with other international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Europol. In an increasingly interconnected digital environment, such global measures are critical for combating terrorist financing, preventing attacks, and safeguarding critical infrastructure (Interpol, 2023).

Technology and Economic Partnerships: Semiconductors, Digital Economy, Clean Energy

India and the United States have greatly enhanced economic and technological collaboration, particularly in the clean energy, digital economy, and semiconductor industries. This demonstrates strategic alignment to improve supply chains and innovation. The U.S.-India TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology) initiative was launched in February 2025 to build reliable and robust supply chains for semiconductors and critical minerals, ushering in a new era of semiconductor supply chain cooperation (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). In order to evaluate and improve India's semiconductor ecosystem, including its workforce, infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks, the US Department of State collaborates with India's Semiconductor Mission under the CHIPS Act of 2022 (US State Department, 2024). Notably, investments like Tata Electronics' \$10.44 billion fab in Gujarat and Micron Technology's \$2.75 billion chip assembly plant show how India is becoming a global center for semiconductor manufacturing, which is anticipated to generate a large number of jobs and lessen dependency on imports (Orbit Skyline, 2025).

Driven by shared goals in innovation, sustainability, and economic growth, the India-US connection has grown beyond semiconductors to include the digital economy and renewable energy sectors. In order to address global concerns like the scarcity of semiconductors and the transition to sustainable technologies, the alliance fosters

cooperative research, investment promotion, and supply chain resilience. Additionally, the alliance aligns with larger international frameworks like the Quad, which focuses on developing critical and emerging technologies and safeguarding semiconductor supply chains (The Tribune, 2024). This all-encompassing partnership not only strengthens bilateral relations but also contributes to the development of a more secure, sustainable, and competitive global technology landscape, positioning the US and India as key participants in the development of future technical and economic paradigms.

Through strategic technical and economic partnerships focused on semiconductors, the digital economy, and clean energy, the United States is aggressively bolstering India to counterbalance China. The Indo-US partnership to create a robust and varied semiconductor supply chain is a prime example. Both nations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to encourage private sector cooperation, research and development, talent cultivation, and infrastructure enhancement with the aim of reducing reliance on China and Taiwan in this crucial industry. This agreement is supported by US initiatives like the CHIPS and Science Act and India's Semiconductor Mission (The Print, 2023). The International Technology Security and Innovation Fund supports this partnership, which also tackles supply chain logistics and regulatory frameworks to create a safe global environment (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

In addition to semiconductors, the US-India collaboration encompasses cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence, supercomputing, and 5G telecommunications that are expressly designed to rival China's technological aspirations (New York Times, 2023). With combined efforts to accelerate innovation and deployment of sustainable energy technology, India is a preferred partner for the United States in creating a more diverse digital economy and enhancing clean energy projects due to its growing industrial base and tech skill pool (Circuit Digest, 2023). When taken as a whole, these actions not only strengthen India's economic and scientific capabilities but also support a common goal of an Indo-Pacific region that is technologically advanced, free, and able to resist Chinese hegemony (Foreign Policy, 2024).

Divergences on India–US Relations

Divergences between India and the US continue on issues of strategic autonomy, relations with Russia, trade divergences, regional security priorities and positions on China, providing grounds for both cooperation as well as friction at the global and South Asian regional levels.

India's Strategic Autonomy vs. US Alliance-Centric Approach

India's strategic autonomy demonstrates its long-standing commitment to making independent judgments in military, economic growth, and foreign policy, enabling it to safeguard national interests without unduly depending on a single global power. In order to lessen reliance and bolster domestic military and technological capabilities, such as advancements in fighter planes, ballistic missiles, and space technology, India seeks economic diversification through programs like "Make in India" and free trade agreements (Valdai Club, 2025). This strategy balances India's ties to major powers like the US, Russia, and China while preserving its adaptability in a multipolar world by enabling it to engage pragmatically with a number of international organizations, including the QUAD, BRICS, and SCO (Rajeev, 2025).

The US alliance-centric approach, on the other hand, emphasizes solid bilateral and multilateral ties based on shared strategic interests, often pushing partner nations to closely align with US geopolitical objectives. India's strategic autonomy causes it to steer clear of exclusive alliances in favor of a multi-alignment strategy that enables it to interact with various powers independently, while the US uses frameworks like the QUAD and bilateral defense agreements to strengthen ties, especially in the Indo-Pacific region (RSIS, 2025). India's ability to maintain a balanced foreign policy that maximizes strategic space without being overly dependent on any one bloc is demonstrated by its continued engagement with Russia in spite of criticism from the West (Rajeev, 2025).

This discrepancy highlights India's growing importance as a crucial actor managing great power rivalry in the twenty-first century and highlights the challenge of balancing India's independent posture with the US preference for alliance-based security architectures (Insights on India, 2025). Due to their respective historical contexts and geopolitical objectives, India and the US have seen both convergence and divergence in their ties; India's pursuit of strategic autonomy contrasts with the US's emphasis on alliances. During the Cold War, when India adopted a non-alignment strategy and the United States collaborated with Pakistan and other regional nations, the partnership which was formally founded in 1947 began with mutual suspicion.

However, a thaw was made possible by India's economic liberalization in the 1990s and changing geopolitical conditions, leading to innovations like the 2008 Civil Nuclear Agreement, which showed a deepening strategic alliance beyond economic relations (Drishti IAS, 2024). Similar worries about terrorism, China's rise, and international security are examples of convergences that have brought India and the US closer together through

defense agreements like BECA, joint military drills, intelligence sharing, and greater trade in high-tech and renewable energy industries. The United States' objective to create an Indo-Pacific alliance architecture that leverages India's strategic location and growing capabilities as a balancing regional force is reflected in these initiatives (CFR, 2023). This convergence is demonstrated by recent defense cooperation, such as joint production of fighter jet engines and drone purchases.

India is nonetheless wary about maintaining its strategic independence, though, and steers clear of official military alliances that would trap it in conflicts between superpowers or restrict its diplomatic options. In contrast to the US's preference for more alliance-centric commitments, India's foreign policy nevertheless places a strong emphasis on independent decision-making, multi-alignment, and engagement with all major powers, including Russia. As India balances its security aims without fully absorbing US strategic objectives, this disparity may lead to conflict or restrict the depth of defense integration (Brookings, 2017). The relationship between the US and India is essentially a combination of calibrated divergence based on India's quest for strategic autonomy and growing convergence based on shared interests. This balance has an impact on regional geopolitics by establishing India as a key, but non-aligned, partner in a larger US-led endeavor to construct a free, open Indo-Pacific order.

Contrary Perspectives on Russia, Amidst the Ukraine War

India and the United States have markedly divergent attitudes on Russia, particularly in light of the continuing Ukraine war. India has a strategic cooperation with both the United States and Russia, but has refrained from overtly denouncing Russia despite Western pressure. Instead, India promotes a balanced diplomatic approach focused on resolving conflict via conversation and negotiation, reflecting its goal to maintain strategic autonomy while benefiting from its connections with both nations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly advocated for peace and vowed to assist diplomatic efforts, relying on India's standing as a big buyer of Russian armaments and energy to support a resolution (ERI, 2025).

In contrast, the United States has adopted a robust posture in support of Ukraine, offering significant military and financial aid to help Ukraine fight Russian aggression until a positive deal can be reached. The US policy includes direct support for Ukraine's defense capabilities as well as diplomatic pressure on Russia, including as concerted sanctions and international attempts to isolate Moscow (State Department, 2025). This gap is further demonstrated by India's withdrawal from important United Nations votes denouncing

Russia, which contrasts with the United States' outspoken opposition to Russian actions. India's position is guided by the notion of strategic autonomy and a desire for multilateral engagement, whereas the United States stresses alliance-centric measures to resist Russia's military advancements (India Today, 2025). These differing stances underscore the complexity of India-U.S. relations amid the Ukraine crisis, balancing geopolitical interests with divergent diplomatic philosophies.

While the United States emphasizes a closer, more operational partnership, as evidenced by initiatives such as the US-India COMPACT and defense frameworks that propose significant technology sharing and interoperability, India carefully calibrates its cooperation to maintain autonomy, avoiding commitments that could limit its independent diplomatic posture (White House, 2025). The US administration, particularly under President Trump's sovereigntist attitude, prefers transactional and flexible alliances that correspond with India's pragmatic diplomacy, but due to these differences, it does not give India a formal treaty alliance (The 19FortyFive, 2025). India's attitude restricts the extent to which the US can compel it to choose definitively between Washington and its traditional allies, Russia and China. Instead, India remains a critical but non-aligned state, strengthening bilateral connections with the United States to meet similar concerns while maintaining strategic autonomy through diplomatic hedging and diverse partnerships (Drishti IAS, 2025). This dynamic results in a nuanced US-India partnership that is similar in shared interests but dissimilar in alliance aspirations.

Trade Frictions, Protectionist Tendencies, and Market Access Disputes

India and the United States have had substantial trade frictions, typified by protectionist inclinations and conflicts over market access, particularly in industries such as autos, steel, and agriculture. The United States slapped a 25% safeguard duty on Indian passenger vehicles, light trucks, and some automobile parts beginning in May 2025, which India has challenged as a violation of WTO norms. In response, India filed retaliatory duties on specific US imports at the World Trade Organization, heightening tensions amid ongoing trade talks (Times of India, 2025). These tariffs damage billions of dollars in bilateral trade and hamper efforts to negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement before the US administration's July 9, 2025 deadline (Reuters, 2025).

The main concerns are India's reluctance to considerably decrease tariffs on U.S. agricultural products such as corn, soybeans, wheat, and ethanol, owing to the sector's importance in rural employment and political sensitivities. Meanwhile, the United States seeks increased market access for agriculture goods, dairy, automobiles, medicines, and

alcoholic beverages, as well as reductions in non-tariff barriers (Reuters, 2025). Indian business players also advocate for the gradual liberalization of protected sectors in order to protect domestic producers from abrupt competition. Despite its willingness to engage, India stresses that any trade pact prioritize national interests over forced timelines, emphasizing a balanced, win-win strategy (Al Jazeera, 2025). The ongoing stalemate reflects broader challenges in reconciling India's protectionist policies with the U.S.'s alliance-driven trade agenda, underscoring the complexity of this critical bilateral economic relationship.

Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and Occasional Normative Disagreements

While India and the United States are both democracies, their ideas on human rights and democracy development differ, and there are occasional difficulties. India strongly emphasizes its strategic autonomy, rejecting what it sees as external judgment on its domestic human rights issues. Indian officials have emphasized that discussions on human rights with the United States should be conducted on the basis of equality and partnership, rejecting "judgmental pronouncements" and emphasizing that, like all societies, India faces challenges but also has a vibrant civil society that addresses these issues (Business Standard, 2016). Despite India's constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights, Human Rights Watch and other organizations have documented concerns about discrimination against minorities, politically motivated prosecutions, and dissent restrictions, which contrast with India's historical role as a global human rights advocate and its current alignment with authoritarian states in some multilateral forums to stymie certain human rights initiatives (The Diplomat, 2025).

The United States, on the other hand, actively promotes human rights and democratic standards as essential pillars of its foreign policy, frequently raising concerns about India's human rights record at bilateral and multilateral levels. While the United States recognizes India's democratic vibrancy and strategic relevance, it also emphasizes minority rights violations, limits on free expression, and the treatment of refugees and marginalized people (Freedom House, 2025). This normative emphasis occasionally causes conflict, as India regards such criticisms as politically motivated or prejudiced, particularly when they emanate from US government reports or international agencies viewed as Western-centric (Reuters, 2024). Nonetheless, both countries continue to engage in high-level conversations highlighting shared democratic ideals and people-to-people collaboration, while dealing with normative issues pragmatically and prioritizing their broader strategic alliance (MEA, 2025). This dynamic reflects a complex balancing act where India defends its sovereignty and development model, and the U.S. advocates for universal human rights standards within the framework of their evolving bilateral relationship.

The problem of human rights, democracy promotion, and normative disputes has been a constant but carefully handled part of the US-India bilateral relationship. U.S. legislators and ambassadors frequently express concern about human rights issues in India, particularly the treatment of minorities, freedom of expression, and the employment of legislation believed to restrict civil society and opposition. For example, recent US State Department reports and Congressional summaries have highlighted persistent issues like as discrimination against Muslims and Dalits, internet shutdowns, and claims of excessive force by security officers (HRW, 2025). Similarly, US officials have condemned India's use of strict rules and visa denials for critics as eroding democratic liberties (State Department, 2025).

In response, India has routinely criticized these studies as "deeply biased" and internal concerns including misunderstanding or selective criticism of India's complex social and security challenges (Reuters, 2024). Indian officials emphasize strong constitutional safeguards of fundamental rights and claim that law enforcement activities are required to ensure domestic security and prevent terrorism (Drishti IAS, 2025). During high-level dialogues, including Modi's travels to Washington, India emphasizes mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference, encouraging the US not to politicize human rights problems at the price of broader strategic partnership (MEA Joint Statement, 2025). Despite periodic normative disagreements, both countries maintain a pragmatic alliance that recognizes shared democratic values while resolving issues through diplomatic engagement. The United States, for its part, strikes a balance between human rights promotion and geopolitical interests in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing cooperation in counterterrorism, trade and technology. Meanwhile, India continues to promote democratic government while emphasizing the importance of contextual and sovereign approaches to human rights (Drishti IAS, 2025). Thus, while there are occasional disagreements about human rights and democracy development, they do not substantially undermine the growing India-US relationship.

Convergences and Divergences in Regional Level

Similar to the global level, the United States and India share numerous significant areas of convergence in South Asia, which are motivated by similar strategic goals, economic engagement, and regional security concerns. One key point of agreement is their joint strategic and security cooperation, which is primarily intended to offset China's growing influence in South Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific area. The US regards India as a major defense partner in South Asia, emphasizing capacity building, defense industry partnership,

and coordinated military exercises in all domains (land, sea, air, space, and cyber). Both countries have agreed to strengthen information sharing, logistics assistance, and coordinated operations, such as the "Tiger Triumph" tri-service exercise, which increases interoperability and regional security cooperation (United States-India Joint Leaders' Statement, 2025).

Economically, the United States and India are actively strengthening trade and investment ties, with the declared objective of more than tripling bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030 under the "Mission 500" initiative. Both countries also collaborate to secure supply chains, particularly in fields where reliance on China is a national security risk, such as critical minerals, pharmaceuticals, and advanced technologies (The Diplomat, 2025). On the regional governance and multilateral front, the United States and India agree to pursue rules-based regional connectivity and cooperation frameworks. Both support for long-term regional infrastructure development, cross-border energy trade, and digital economy frameworks that promote South Asian connectivity and economic progress.

Initiatives supported by BIMSTEC and other regional platforms promote inclusive and transparent regional economic integration (South Asia Snapshot, 2025). In the realm of technology and innovation, US-India collaboration promotes cooperation in space technologies, artificial intelligence, and autonomous system development. NASA-ISRO collaborative initiatives and industry partnerships, such as those between Anduril Industries and the Mahindra Group, demonstrate their commitment to advancing cutting-edge scientific research and defense-related technology transfer in order to consolidate regional technological leadership (United States-India Joint Leaders' Statement, 2025). Both countries also support the advancement of democratic ideals, good governance, and counterterrorism activities in South Asia. The US-India dialogue focuses on improving democratic institutions, combating corruption, and protecting human rights, all of which contribute indirectly to South Asian political stability. Their mutual denunciation of terrorism and commitment to bringing offenders to justice highlights a common agenda that promotes regional security and development (South Asia Snapshot, 2025).

Despite their developing strategic alliance, their approaches to South Asia differ significantly on a regional level. These disparities have an impact on their policies toward China, Pakistan, and smaller South Asian countries, as well as their trade strategy and frameworks for security cooperation. India has a strategic hedging stance toward China that balances cautious engagement with robust defense preparedness, especially given their ongoing border disputes and regional competition. New Delhi avoids outright containment

methods and maintains several channels of engagement, including economic relations and diplomatic dialogue. In contrast, the United States has adopted a containment strategy aimed at limiting China's growing influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole. This fundamental disparity puts India's calibrated autonomy at variance with US ambitions for a more confrontational approach (ORF, 2024).

Another noteworthy difference between India and the United States is their stance toward Pakistan. The United States employs a tactical engagement policy, balancing security concerns with pragmatic counterterrorism collaboration, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 and in Afghanistan. America maintains a working relationship with Pakistan to promote peace in Afghanistan and restrict terrorist networks. India, on the other hand, takes a strong containment approach toward Pakistan, typified by tight diplomatic disengagement and international pressure to isolate Islamabad as a result of cross-border terrorism and the Kashmir conflict. This disparity implies that the US attempts to balance relations between the two nations, frequently disappointing India's expectations for a more uncompromising US posture on Pakistan (The Atlantic Council, 2025).

The United States and India have different approaches to their smaller South Asian neighbors. India's neighborhood-first policy prioritizes direct political, economic, and security interaction with neighboring countries, seeing them as critical to its regional influence. In contrast, the United States promotes selective bilateralism, engaging particular countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka while prioritizing governance changes, economic liberalization, and international connectivity. For example, the US-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) investment in Nepal takes a more transactional approach than India's wide strategic relationships. Furthermore, both countries respond to crises differently, with India taking a cautious, interest-based approach and the US emphasizing democratic transitions and human rights (Aspen Institute, 2023; DW, 2025).

While India's neighborhood-first approach asserts leadership and secure influence over neighbors such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, the United States pursues a more bilateral and selective strategy, aiming to expand its footprint through targeted aid, diplomatic presence, and security arrangements. This competitive dynamic creates overlaps and conflicts in influence, with Nepal stuck between strong Indian cultural links and US strategic reach. The United States' expanding engagement in countries such as the Maldives through defense treaties undermines India's historic regional dominance (Aspen Institute, 2023; Kathmandu Post, 2025). India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, hedging, and neighborhood-first strategy contrasts with the United States' containment of China,

balanced engagement with Pakistan, and broader alliance development. These distinctions demand cautious management as the two powers seek to maximize collaboration while moderating competitive tendencies, with regional states such as Nepal and Bangladesh at the heart of their geopolitical interplay.

Understanding the Effects of US-India Convergences and Divergences in Nepalese Context

The convergence between the United States and India has important ramifications for Nepal, potentially undermining its non-alignment stance and strategic autonomy. Nepal may experience greater pressure to identify with the Indo-US bloc or with China. The US-India cooperation, particularly through security frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), limits Nepal's options for a balanced foreign policy (CESIF Nepal, 2025). This convergence reduces Nepal's ability to operate neutrally between big countries, forcing it to traverse an increasingly limited diplomatic space. The US-India alignment diminishes Nepal's bargaining power in bilateral and regional situations. As the United States and India collaborate, Nepal's bargaining position dwindles, particularly in negotiations over funding and infrastructure projects. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a US-backed initiative with strong Indian support, exemplifies this dynamic in which Nepal feels politically and strategically pressured to accept assistance on terms that spark domestic controversies and sovereignty concerns (National Interest, 2024). This convergence could force Nepal into conditions that do not fully accord with its developmental priorities or political consensus.

Furthermore, Nepal risks marginalization in regional multilateral forums due to increasing United States–India convergence in shaping regional architecture. For example, India-led platforms such as BIMSTEC and US-backed Indo-Pacific discussions may marginalize countries like Nepal if their interests do not entirely fit with the US-India strategy. Furthermore, the immobility of SAARC, which is frequently affected by India's strained relations with Pakistan and implicit US backing for that posture, inhibits Nepal's potential to act as a bridge-builder in South Asian regionalism (Kathmandu Post, 2025). This regional marginalization reduces Nepal's diplomatic leverage and alternatives. The strategic cooperation between the United States and India complicates Nepal's security and geopolitical situation. The two countries' military and intelligence collaboration might hasten militarization in South Asia, making Nepal a potential site for strategic competition.

Nepal may become more visible on the US tactical radar (My Republica, 2024). Furthermore, intelligence sharing and surveillance collaboration between the United States and India can strengthen India's influence over US Nepal policy. Controversial programs

backed by major countries, particularly the MCC, create domestic arguments over foreign meddling and national interest, splintering consensus on foreign policy strategy. Including contentious problems allow external actors, including as the United States, India, and China, to increase their influence over Nepal's political parties and institutions, stoking instability and undermining democratic governance (ORF, 2025). Nepal may run the risk of being reliant on strategic narratives propagated by the US-India alliance. This entails using diplomatic jargon like the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" slogan, which may not be consistent with Nepal's own interests or developmental goals. Prioritizing security and strategic cooperation among Nepal, the United States, and India risks overshadowing critical socioeconomic issues such as climate change, employment, infrastructure, and poverty reduction, resulting in a misallocation of Nepal's limited resources and attention (The Annapurna Express, 2024).

Close alignment with the Indo-US alliance in efforts to oppose China may result in diplomatic and economic reprisal from Beijing, which remains Nepal's principal development partner. Nepal is stuck between opposing visions: China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US-India-led Indo-Pacific Strategy (The Annapurna Express, 2024). However, the growing convergence between the United States and India offers Nepal with both challenges and opportunities. The democratic and governance spheres stand to benefit from US and Indian support for building democratic institutions and encouraging good governance practices. Both countries prioritize democracy, transparency, the rule of law, and human rights in their foreign policy agendas, which may translate into aid for Nepal's civil society, media, election processes, and anti-corruption initiatives, hence strengthening Nepal's democratic consolidation (ORF, 2025). Similarly, regional stability is an important asset, since the US-India collaboration focuses counterterrorism cooperation and diplomatic engagement to address volatility in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Afghanistan. This focus indirectly improves Nepal's security situation. Furthermore, their advocacy for a rules-based system promotes Nepal's sovereignty within a more stable and predictable South Asian setting, lowering the likelihood of unchecked regional wars (The Annapurna Express, 2024).

Nonetheless, biopolarity in the global system has always been beneficial to Nepal, even as the United States and India diverge in regional and Nepal issues. These contrasts create a multipolar environment in which Nepal can successfully navigate to maximize its national interests. The strategic divergences between the United States and India give Nepal more strategic autonomy and balancing room. Unlike a united front, which forces smaller countries to choose sides, Nepal's multipolarity allows it to avoid slipping into the orbit

of a single power. Nepal may follow a pragmatic "smart balancing" policy by engaging Washington and New Delhi selectively while protecting its cherished sovereignty and long-standing non-alignment values (Bhattarai, 2020). This flexibility is especially crucial as Nepal deals with complex regional rivalries, allowing the country to retain an independent foreign policy that suits its national interests rather than being tied to a single hegemon.

The continuous diverging interests between the United States and India frequently result in increased aid and infrastructure investment pledges for Nepal, as King Mahendra capitalized on the world system's bipolarity. Similarly, the US-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) award benefits Nepal's infrastructure and electricity transmission sectors, while India continues to provide lines of credit and lead vital connectivity activities (ORF, 2025; National Interest, 2024). This rivalry for influence enables Nepal to choose benefit from both actors while avoiding over-reliance on a single donor, so improving its growth prospects and economic resilience. Third, Nepal enjoys significant policy autonomy in international affairs as a result of disparities in how the United States and India address regional security issues. Disagreements between the two countries over matters like as policy toward Pakistan and China allow Nepal to act freely, devising nuanced diplomatic answers rather than ideologically or militarily joining with one side (Kathmandu Post, 2025). This strengthens Kathmandu's ability to pursue regional diplomacy on its own terms, leveraging strategic ambiguity to protect its interests in the face of conflicting great power agendas.

Furthermore, Nepal might use US-India divergences to strengthen its diplomatic negotiating clout. When the two countries take opposing stances or priorities, Nepal can strategically play its cards to gain better terms in economic, military, or strategic cooperation agreements. The competition itself becomes a weapon for Nepal to negotiate greater assistance packages or security assurances, maximizing the outcomes of each collaboration (Bhattarai, 2020). The divergences also protect Nepal from binary strategic constraints, which generally compel smaller countries into tight alliances, similar to Cold War dynamics. For example, India's reluctance to fully support US-led security blocs such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or broader Indo-Pacific security frameworks means Nepal is under less coercive pressure to choose sides (The Annapurna Express, 2024). This independence promotes Nepal's multisector diplomacy, which involves maintaining productive connections with different nations while avoiding alienation or entanglement in exclusive security agreements. Nepal gains economically and strategically from multipolar integration within multiple regional frameworks. It can participate in Indian-led initiatives such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic

Cooperation) and BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal), as well as US-influenced Indo-Pacific economic and governance discussions. This diverse engagement broadens Nepal's trade, investment, and diplomatic opportunities, reducing reliance on a single regional initiative and fostering a more balanced economic geography (ORF, 2025).

Furthermore, moments of strategic divergence between the United States and India provide opportunities for Nepal to take on regional leadership duties as a neutral facilitator or bridge builder. With its acknowledged non-aligned past and legacy of peace diplomacy, Nepal may offer itself as a forum for conversation, conflict resolution, and regional stability. This potential raises Nepal's prominence and influence above its size, allowing it to contribute positively to South Asian and Indo-Pacific diplomacy (Kathmandu Post, 2025). Finally, these divergences assist Nepal avoid overdependence on one power, shielding it from the overwhelming geopolitical pressures and conditions that are sometimes associated with single donor or strategic partner relationships. By capitalizing on the competitiveness and policy differences between the United States and India, Nepal can maintain a more independent policymaking process, lowering the possibility of external overreach or political meddling.

Understanding the Narratives United States Nepal via India's Eyes

The United States has always backed Nepal's efforts to maintain its autonomous character, which has persisted throughout its history (Pandey, 2015). The United States strongly supported Nepal's admission to the United Nations on December 14, 1955. Nepal's relationship with the United States and membership in the United Nations were essential in establishing the country's claim to be truly free (Brown, 1971). During the Cold War, the US viewed India as a counterbalance to communist expansion in South Asia. Thus, India's participation in US-Nepal strategy is important. The convergence of philosophies between the United States and India, as well as the Tibetan refugee problem, have influenced US Nepal policy. During the construction of the Kodari Highway connecting Nepal and China, the United States and India expressed concern over the potential spread of communism in South Asia via Nepal. As a result, both countries supported Nepal's autocratic monarchy as a protection against growing communist influence in the country. Despite Nepal's non-aligned stance, the US recognized its neutrality and attempted to engage with the country through diplomatic and economic channels in order to promote Western ideas while opposing Soviet and Chinese pressures (Smith & Khanal, 2019).

A substantial number of Tibetan refugees settled in Nepal and Dharamshala. This factor also influences US-Nepal policy. During Jimmy Carter's presidency, Nepal felt

India's influence on US Nepal policy. Thus, King Birendra argued at the time that America is a superpower that must maintain ties with other nations on its own terms; neighbors are not eyes (Bhandari, 2014). However, when Ronald Reagan became president and King Birendra paid a state visit to America from December 5 to 13, 1983, a new era in Nepal-US relations began. Despite India's concerns, President Reagan understands Nepal's sensitivity and priorities. After seven years, the US supported Nepal's demand for a peace zone. However, the strategy could not be sustained under President Bill Clinton. According to then-ambassador Bhek Bahadur Thapa, the US president was immensely fond of India, and his administration used to prioritize India." He said that India and Nepal had signed a treaty in 1950 (Paudyal and Dhungana, 2022).

Since King Mahendra, Nepal has criticized US-Nepal policies through India's eyes. When the United States reestablished relations with China in order to undercut the Sino-Soviet bloc. During the 1972 Ping Pong diplomacy, the United States did not perceive China as a competitor or a communist danger. Since then, the connection between Nepal and the United States has waned due to India's dominance. Thus, Nepal has demanded that America better comprehend its own lengthy history and autonomous identity (Pandey, 2020). Thus, "Don't look at us from another's point of view, don't condemn us by listening to another's remarks, consider us as a different nation, and have your own viewpoint. And, as a great country, do not subject us to humiliating conditions when providing financial assistance" (Shrestha, 1988).

Nonetheless, Washington maintained direct bilateral relations with Kathmandu, trying to prevent Nepal from becoming unduly reliant on New Delhi. In 2045-046, India imposed an economic blockade on Nepal, depleting the United States' compassion and support. At the time, Stephen Solarz, chairman of the prominent Asia Pacific Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs of the United States Congress, was posted to Nepal to lend political support. Similarly, in 1975, US President Gerald Ford met with Chinese officials to discuss Nepal's security situation and how the United States and China could help Nepal deal with India's purchase of Sikkim (US Department of State, 2008).

Similarly, after seven years of Reagan's presidency, the US supported Nepal's peace zone concept. Following then, several European and Latin American countries showed their support, raising the total to 130 (IFA, 2019). The Maoist insurgency, which began in 1996, was the primary driving force behind the US' post-Cold War policy toward Nepal. The United States linked the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to its War on Terror agenda (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010). During that time, the United States maintained close ties

with Nepal's other allies, most notably India and Britain. Christina Rocca's appointment as Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia in April 2001 signaled the start of the US' active military intervention policy in Nepal. According to this view, the Rocca period (2001-4) would witness tight collaboration between US action in Nepal and the then-BJP Indian government. Though the 1950 agreement prohibited Nepal from seeking military assistance from other countries, expanding US-Indian military cooperation took precedence. Saran claimed at the end of 2003 that India and the United States were "on the same wavelength" (Mage, 2007). Gyanendra formed an armed forces government in February 2005, which included royalist ministers who were personally devoted to the king. Christine Rocca, the Assistant Secretary for South Asia, visited Nepal on May 10, 2005. It was her fourth visit to Nepal, and she made five policy recommendations for the country. Taking power on January 19th without consulting with India is wrong. Maoists also pose a threat to India, hence Nepal should establish good relations with India right away (Pandey, 2015).

Despite the fact that the Nepal-India 1950 Treaty restricts foreign military and defense cooperation, the BJP and Congress regimes supported the United States. After 2004, Congress, the US government, and India signed a defense cooperation and civil nuclear pact, allowing them to collaborate on Nepal issues (Nayak, 2008). In reaction to Gyanendra's 2005 measures, both Delhi and Washington suspended their support for Nepal's army (Norris 2005). Gyanendra then sought arms from China, which had refrained to condemn the February 2005 coup, describing it as a "internal affair." China responded warmly, much to the consternation of Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, who appears to have subsequently appraised the situation differently. In June 2005, five armored personnel carriers arrived in Nepal from China. The US did not want to overtly break ranks with India or the European Union on the issue of military assistance to the increasingly isolated royal regime, so it went to its Israeli alternative.

The rising difference between Indian and US policies came to pass. The US position was clear: democracy should not be destroyed, and Maoist terror should not succeed. However, the label "terrorist" has faded from Indian officials' vocabulary; within a year, it was announced that the Maoists "are not terrorists" (Mage, 2007). By late July 2005, local parliamentary party activists had openly collaborated with Maoists in the countryside. The Indian government cooperated, and successful negotiations between revolutionaries and political parties on a unified insurgency strategy concluded in November 2005 (the "12 Point Agreement").

When Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Sharan called the American ambassador in New Delhi to ask for assistance, he was told that "Washington is not ready to encourage terrorists." The US openly endorsed the Palace's rejection of the pact, stating that the Maoists were "illegitimate" and not appropriate partners in a settlement (Miklian, 2008). The United States was opposed to negotiating an agreement with the terrorists, but the emphasis was on the monarch not delaying growth, which was about to take a difficult turn. During the 12-point agreement, India urged the US to assist with this initiative; however, the US declined because President Bush's position was either with us or with terror.

As a result, the United States opposed the agreement struck by the Maoists and political parties. Despite the people's movement's success and the comprehensive peace agreement, the US changes its attitude toward India. However, it maintained Maoists on the terror list for an extended period (Kreuttner, 2009). The United States and India agree on the Maoist insurgency and King Gyanendra's actions. Both the US and India expressed concern about the Maoist insurgency and the King's actions. The United States launched military operations against the Maoist insurgency with the support of India's BJP government. However, U.S. and Indian policy diverged when the term "terrorist" was removed from Indian officials' lexicon and the Indian government attempted to reach the 12 Point Agreement. The US position was clear: King and democratic forces should collaborate.

During the post-monarchy period, Washington gave indirect support for the peace process without directly threatening India's power. The US saw India as a regional leader capable of managing Nepal's transition to republic (Adhikari, 2024). However, the adoption of the Indo-Pacific policy at this time introduces regional factors into US-Nepal ties. Similarly, rather than viewing Nepal through Indian eyes, the United States stepped up its interaction with the country on its terms. During this time, Nepal's inclusion in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, agreement on the MCC, SPP, increased regular high-level visits, concerns about Tibetan refugee rights, and transparency in Chinese investments have all had a significant impact on US policy toward Nepal. The MCC, SPP, Tibetan refugee issues, religious report and regular trips reflect the US's determination to examine Nepal objectively. However, in the MCC, India became a third party and kept silent throughout the intense dispute between the US and China over the MCC.

Mapping the Nepal's Perception and India-US Expectations through Role Theory

The use of Role Theory to understand Nepal's foreign policy reveals critical insights into Nepal's self-perception as a sovereign, non-aligned, and balancing actor in South Asia, as contrasted with external expectations from India and the United States, as well as frequent misperceptions from India about Nepal's strategic intentions and independence. Role Theory, which investigates how states perceive their identity, expected behaviors, and interactions within a regional and international system, provides a useful framework for understanding the complex dynamics in the US-India-Nepal triangle, as well as the implications for Nepal's diplomatic posture and maneuvering space. Nepal sees itself as a neutral and autonomous state committed to non-alignment and pursuing an independent foreign policy.

This self-definition originates from Nepal's historical emphasis on preserving sovereignty in the face of pressure from its two large neighbors, India and China, while also collaborating with global powers to meet its development needs. Kathmandu sees itself as a bridge and balancing actor in regional power dynamics, attempting to balance conflicting forces rather than becoming an extension or puppet of any larger power bloc. Nepal's strategic autonomy is important to its self-conception, with the goal of leveraging its geographical location for economic connectivity and growth while safeguarding national interests from external influence (Khadka, 2017, Nepal News, 2025).

Contrary to Nepal's self-perception, India's expectations of Nepal are more paternalistic and frequently based on historical and cultural ties. Nepal is largely regarded as part of India's historic area of influence, and the two countries anticipate to work together on regional security, commerce, and political concerns. New Delhi expects Nepal to be a credible partner in addressing India's strategic concerns, particularly China's ascent and cross-border security issues. Since the Neharu era, India has viewed the Himalayas as a security frontier and Nepal as a buffer zone. However, India's expectations frequently ignore Nepal's desire for sovereign decision-making, with China occasionally causing mistrust and frustration when Kathmandu pursues autonomous policies such as the Trade and Transit Agreement, participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, and other connectivity.

India frequently misinterprets Nepal's diversification of foreign contacts as strategic hostility or ingratitude, ignoring Nepal's subtle hedging strategy aimed at protecting its independence un the face of competing powers (ORF, 2024; The National Interest, 2024). According to the US, Nepal is a potential strategic partner and gateway for larger Indo-Pacific engagement based on democratic government, economic development, and counterbalancing

China's influence. Washington expects Nepal to align with US strategic goals in the region, frequently encouraging collaboration on infrastructure projects (such as those funded by the Millennium Challenge Corporation), democratic institution-building, and regional connectivity initiatives that are consistent with a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision.

The US MCC Compact, State Partnership, Tibetan refugee issues, and their regular travels and pronouncements all suggest this. Nepal sees itself primarily as a neutral, autonomous state committed to non-alignment and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors, particularly India and China (based on historical and regional identity) (Holsti, 1970). On the other hand, as a global hegemon, the United States may expect Nepal to more clearly align with US strategic interests in South Asia, such as resisting Chinese or Indian influence, fostering democracy, or engaging in regional security frameworks (Harnisch, 2013). The discrepancy in perceptions and expectations emerges because Nepal's national role conception does not always entail becoming a frontline state in US geopolitical ambitions, and Nepal prefers not to antagonize its powerful neighbors.

The disparity between Nepal's self-defined role and US role expectations might cause diplomatic conflicts or disappointed expectations, hurting aid, military cooperation, and political talks (Thies, 2010).

On the other hand, US involvement with Nepal is frequently regulated with sensitivity to India's regional considerations and a desire to avoid open clashes with New Delhi's objectives. Thus, while the US regards Nepal as a small but strategically significant actor with the potential for multilateral engagement, its expectations frequently collide with India's more controlling stance, posing diplomatic challenges for Nepal's role negotiation (National Interest, 2024; Asia Society, 2025). In contrast, the United States' sympathies and support were drained when India imposed an economic blockade on Nepal in 2045-046. At the time, Stephen Solarz, chairman of the prominent Asia Pacific Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs of the United States Congress, was dispatched to Nepal to lend political support. Similarly, in 1975, US President Gerald Ford met with Chinese officials to discuss Nepal's security situation and how the US and China could help Nepal deal with India's annexation of Sikkim (US Department of State Archive 2008). Similarly, after seven years of Reagan's presidency, the US supported Nepal's peace zone concept. Following then, several European and Latin American countries showed their support, raising the total to 130 (IFA, 2019).

Furthermore, the United States did not agree on India's initiations during the 12-point agreement with Nepal's political parties. Similarly, when Nepal's new constitution was

promulgated in 2015, India conducted an unofficial blockade, although the US stated that it was a milestone for democracy. Misperceptions stem mostly from India's attribution of malevolent external forces and ignorance of Nepal's sovereign foreign policy decisions. India sometimes sees Nepal's increased engagement with the United States and China as an attempt to challenge Indian regional primacy or destabilize previously tight bilateral ties. Such perceptions are fostered by situations such as the 2015 blockade and ongoing border tensions, which have exacerbated distrust narratives.

India's assessment of Nepal diminishes its agency, presenting its diversification as disruptive rather than sensible hedging in a multipolar regional order. Meanwhile, Nepal's leaders prioritize sovereignty and national interest over ideological adherence in their balancing act, which involves managing dangers and opportunities rather than aligning with India (Khadka, 2017, ORF, 2024). In consequence, Nepal is navigating a difficult triadic role negotiation to affirm its autonomous non-aligned identity among India's paternalistic expectations and US strategic overtures. Nepal's role conception urges it to behave as a diplomatic mediator and balanced actor, maximizing developmental gains while maintaining autonomy. However, India's misperceptions and the United States' security-related expectations can limit Nepal's maneuverability, resulting in domestic political instability and diplomatic problems. Finally, Role Theory demonstrates how Nepal is actively establishing and protecting its national role identity in the face of foreign pressures and competing expectations.

Conclusion

The developing global power transfer, principally determined by China's ascent and the recalibration of US global leadership, has had a substantial impact on the United States-India strategic cooperation. Their agreement on democracy promotion, Indo-Pacific security, counterterrorism, and China containment demonstrates a common vision for regional order and global governance. At the same time, their differences such as India's strategic autonomy, opposing views on Russia, and trade protectionism show limits to their alliance. These global and regional convergences and divergences have a significant impact on smaller states such as Nepal, which is situated at the crossroads between India's traditional sphere of influence and expanding American strategic interests. In Nepal, US-India convergences frequently appear as shared demands or expectations for alignment on democratic values, regional connectivity, and combating China's expanding influence, notably in infrastructure and digital space. However, disagreements between the two such as on Nepal's internal political affairs, refugee difficulties (e.g., Tibetans), and India's

unease with direct US intervention in South Asia occasionally give Nepal with strategic breathing room. Nepal uses these fault lines to maintain a hedging strategy, aiming to preserve autonomy while benefiting from both powers.

Nepal's self-perception is founded on its historical narrative of sovereign independence, strategic neutrality, and non-alignment. This impression frequently contrasts with the expectations placed on it by both the United States and India. The United States increasingly views Nepal through the lens of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, expecting it to embrace a liberal international system and support American-led frameworks. Meanwhile, India expects Nepal to share its vision for regional leadership and security, particularly in terms of border security and political stability. This misalignment has resulted in triangle perceptual conflicts. Nepal frequently regards itself as a sovereign player pursuing balanced diplomacy, whereas India sees Nepal's hedging as strategic drift or unreliability. Simultaneously, the United States may see Nepal's cautious approach as unwillingness or vulnerability to Chinese influence. These misaligned perspectives cause friction and misunderstandings, making Nepal's navigation of US-India strategic expectations more complicated.

Finally, the US-India equation during the global power transition poses both opportunities and restrictions for Nepal. While their similarities may jeopardize Nepal's autonomy, their differences may provide diplomatic opportunities. The challenge for Nepal is to manage this triangle dynamic through strategic clarity, agile diplomacy, and recalibrated expectations, all based on a realistic assessment of its capabilities and weaknesses in a more competitive geopolitical context.

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