

India-US Relations in the Era of “Flexible Realism”

Mains: *GS II – International Relations*

Why in News?

The recent tariffs imposed by the US administration, including those targeting India, indicate not only ongoing trade disputes but also a broader transformation in US statecraft.

What is Flexible Realism?

- **"Flexible realism"** - It is a foreign policy approach that places a nation's immediate economic and security interests above shared values or traditional alliances.
- It combines trade, technology, and military power as tools of statecraft, judging partnerships by their tangible benefits rather than ideological alignment.
- **Fundamental Principles**
 - **Primacy of National Interest** - International actions are guided by the requirements of domestic economic strength and national security.
 - **Transactional Partnerships** - Alliances are established and sustained according to measurable strategic or economic advantages, rather than shared values or goodwill.
 - **Integrated Statecraft** - Trade policy, tariff frameworks, industrial objectives, and defense strategies are coordinated to advance unified national objectives.
 - **Burden Sharing** - Major powers expect regional partners to take greater responsibility for their own conventional defense capabilities.

What are the characteristics of Flexible realism?

- **Rejection of Ideological Missionaries** - Intentionally abandons previous efforts to promote universal democracy, human rights frameworks, or regime change as perceived moral obligations.
- **Pragmatic Engagement** - Emphasizes the maintenance of productive commercial and diplomatic relations with other nations, irrespective of their internal governance systems or domestic political structures.
- **Non-Imposition of Values** - Avoids pressuring foreign partners or adversaries to adopt social or political changes that conflict with their local histories and traditions.
- **Prudent Prioritization** - Rigorously evaluates what is both achievable and desirable, rather than overextending state resources on idealistic global or humanitarian initiatives.
- **Interest-Centric Focus** - Prioritizes national security, economic prosperity, and regional influence over adherence to abstract rules-based international orders.

What are the historical evolution of US-India relationship?

- **Initial Phase** - The post-Cold War period was characterized by convergence based on shared democratic values and increased economic engagement.
- **China-driven Phase** - The rise of China prompted the development of Quad initiatives, enhanced defence cooperation, and a strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region.
- **Emerging Phase** - This phase is defined by flexible realism, with an emphasis on reciprocity, capability development, and the pursuit of strategic value.
- **Future Phase** - Mutual complementarity is expected to be achieved through co-production, technological collaboration, supply chain resilience, and integrated defence efforts.

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 EVOLUTION OF INDIA-US PARTNERSHIP 		
PHASE	DRIVING FORCE	NATURE OF PARTNERSHIP
1 EARLIER PHASE 	 Post-Cold War convergence	 Democratic values + economic engagement
2 CHINA-DRIVEN PHASE 	 Rise of China	 Quad, defence cooperation, Indo-Pacific
3 EMERGING PHASE 	 Flexible realism	 Reciprocity + capability + strategic value
4 FUTURE PHASE 	 Mutual strategic complementarity	 Co-production, technology, supply chains, defence

What is the changing trend of US-India relationship?

- **Shift from Strategic Convergence to Strategic Complementarity**
 - **Strategic convergence** - It denotes cooperation between India and the United States that is motivated by a common strategic challenge, particularly the rise of China.
 - **Strategic complementarity** - It characterizes a dynamic in which both countries deepen cooperation based on complementary capabilities that strengthen their respective strategic positions.



Why does China remain central to India's security and economic calculus?

- **Border tensions** - Persistent disputes ensure that China remains a central consideration in India's security strategy.
- **Indo-Pacific competition** - China's assertive actions significantly influence the strategic dynamics of the region.
- **Supply-chain dependence** - India continues to rely on Chinese production networks for critical components and goods.
- **Maritime security** - The expansion of China's naval presence affects the stability of the Indian Ocean region.
- **Technology competition** - Strategic rivalry in advanced technology sectors between India and China is increasingly inevitable.
- **Regional balance** - The growth of China's power continues to shape the strategic equilibrium across Asia.

Why does this new strategy matter for India?

- **Economic** - US tariffs place pressure on India's exports and restrict market access. However, they also encourage diversification and promote stronger domestic manufacturing to enhance competitiveness.
- **Strategic** - India-US relations may become more transactional, as strategic alignment does not ensure economic security.
- India's contributions to Indo-Pacific security and supply chain diversification are increasingly important.
- **Technological** - Restrictions imposed by the United States on technology exports may limit India's access to essential technologies.
- Concurrently, India's strategic significance as a partner in the fields of semiconductors, artificial intelligence, defence technology, and critical minerals is likely to grow.
- **Geopolitical** - India should pursue cooperation with the United States while preserving its strategic autonomy.
- Enhancing relations with the European Union, Japan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Global South may mitigate excessive reliance on a

single partner.

What are the challenges before India?

- **China-centric risk** - Reduce dependence on the dynamics of the US-China rivalry during the formulation of foreign policy.
- **Trade tension** - A primarily transactional approach by the United States could negatively impact India's exports and market access.
- **Reliance on technology** - Implement measures to prevent cooperation from leading to excessive dependence on foreign technology.
- **Capability gap** - Prioritize the rapid advancement of defence manufacturing, research and development, and advanced technology initiatives.
- **Strategic autonomy** - Deepen engagement with the United States while preserving independence from exclusive international alliances.

What lies ahead?

- India's long-term strategic relevance should not be contingent upon its utility in countering another power.
- Instead, it should be grounded in India's economic strength, technological capabilities, military preparedness, and diplomatic influence.

Reference

[The Hindu | The changing logic of the India-U.S. partnership](#)