

Explaining Continuity and Change in U.S.–India Relations: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of the Trump and Biden Administrations

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ABSTRACT

The U.S.–India strategic partnership has emerged as one of the most significant bilateral relationships in the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture. Despite the transition from the Trump administration’s “America First” foreign policy to the Biden administration’s emphasis on alliances, multilateralism, and democratic values, the trajectory of U.S.–India relations has exhibited substantial continuity alongside important policy adjustments. This article employs the theoretical framework of Neoclassical Realism to explain how systemic pressures and domestic-level variables collectively shaped the evolution of bilateral relations across the two administrations. It argues that the intensifying strategic competition with China, the growing geopolitical significance of the Indo-Pacific, and shared concerns over regional security created enduring structural incentives for sustaining and deepening U.S.–India cooperation. At the same time, leadership perceptions, domestic political priorities, institutional preferences, and diplomatic styles influenced the nature and scope of engagement in areas such as defence cooperation, critical and emerging technologies, economic security, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), climate cooperation, and global governance. Through a comparative qualitative analysis of official policy documents, strategic initiatives, bilateral agreements, speeches, and secondary literature, the study demonstrates that while tactical approaches differed under Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the strategic foundations of the partnership remained remarkably resilient. The article contends that continuity has outweighed change because the bilateral relationship is increasingly driven by long-term structural imperatives rather than short-term political leadership. By integrating systemic and domestic variables within a Neoclassical Realist framework, the study contributes to the literature on alliance politics, strategic partnerships, and Indo-Pacific geopolitics, offering a comprehensive explanation of the resilience and future trajectory of U.S.–India relations amid an increasingly competitive international order.

Keywords: U.S.–India relations, Neoclassical Realism, Trump administration, Biden administration, Indo-Pacific strategy, great power competition, strategic partnership, China, Quad, defence cooperation, strategic autonomy, and foreign policy analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The United States–India relationship has emerged as one of the most significant strategic partnerships in contemporary international politics. Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly following the 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement, bilateral relations have expanded across defense, trade, technology, maritime security, and regional governance. This transformation has been driven largely by shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, especially the rise of China, which has encouraged greater strategic convergence between Washington and New Delhi. Today, India occupies a central position in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, while the United States has become one of India’s most important strategic partners.

The transition from the Trump administration (2017–2021) to the Biden administration (2021–present) presents an interesting case for examining continuity and change in U.S. foreign policy toward India. President Donald

Trump adopted an "America First" approach characterized by transactional diplomacy, strategic competition with China, and increased defense cooperation with India. His administration strengthened military ties, revitalized the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and signed key defense agreements, despite disagreements over trade and immigration.

President Joe Biden introduced a different diplomatic style by emphasizing multilateralism, democratic partnerships, climate cooperation, and technological collaboration. Nevertheless, his administration has largely maintained the strategic orientation established under Trump, expanding cooperation through initiatives such as the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) and strengthening coordination within the Indo-Pacific framework. At the same time, differences over India's strategic autonomy, its relations with Russia, and democratic governance have highlighted areas of policy divergence.

The persistence of strategic cooperation despite changes in presidential leadership raises an important analytical question: Why has U.S.–India strategic cooperation remained largely consistent across the Trump and Biden administrations despite differences in foreign policy priorities and leadership styles? Existing explanations provide only partial answers. Structural realist approaches emphasize the role of China's rise in driving strategic alignment, while liberal and constructivist perspectives highlight democratic values, institutions, and economic interdependence. Although these approaches explain important aspects of the partnership, they do not adequately account for both the continuity in strategic objectives and the variation in policy implementation across administrations.

This article argues that Neoclassical Realism (NCR) offers a more comprehensive explanation. Neoclassical Realism contends that systemic pressures influence foreign policy through domestic intervening variables such as leaders' perceptions, bureaucratic institutions, and domestic political considerations. From this perspective, the rise of China created a common structural incentive for both administrations to strengthen relations with India. However, differences in leadership preferences, governing styles, and domestic political contexts shaped how these strategic objectives were pursued. Consequently, while the overall direction of U.S.–India relations remained stable, policy instruments, diplomatic rhetoric, and issue priorities differed between the Trump and Biden administrations.

Although recent scholarship has examined U.S.–India relations in the context of Indo-Pacific strategy and U.S.–China competition, relatively few studies have systematically compared the Trump and Biden administrations through the lens of Neoclassical Realism. Most existing research either focuses on structural geopolitical factors or analyzes individual policy areas such as defense cooperation, trade, or the Quad. This study addresses that gap by integrating systemic and domestic-level explanations to account for both continuity and change in bilateral relations.

Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, the article examines U.S. policy toward India during the Trump and Biden administrations through the analysis of official policy documents, strategic reports, speeches, and secondary literature. It argues that the continuity of the U.S.–India strategic partnership is primarily driven by the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, while differences in policy implementation reflect domestic political and leadership variables emphasized by Neoclassical Realism.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on U.S.–India relations and Neoclassical Realism. It is followed by the theoretical framework, an analysis of the Trump and Biden administrations, a comparative discussion of continuity and change, and concluding observations on the implications of the findings for the study of U.S. foreign policy and Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical Realism (NCR) emerged during the 1990s as an extension of structural realism, seeking to explain why states often respond differently to similar systemic pressures. While structural realism, particularly Kenneth Waltz's theory, argues that the international distribution of power largely determines state behaviour, it provides

limited explanation for variations in foreign policy among states operating within the same international environment. Neoclassical Realism addresses this limitation by incorporating domestic political variables into realist analysis.

According to Gideon Rose (1998), foreign policy outcomes are shaped by the interaction between independent variables at the systemic level and intervening variables at the domestic level. Systemic pressures create incentives and constraints, but policymakers interpret and implement these pressures through domestic political institutions, leadership perceptions, bureaucratic politics, and state capacity. Consequently, foreign policy is neither determined solely by international structure nor exclusively by domestic politics; rather, it is the product of their interaction.

In the context of U.S.–India relations, the principal independent variable is the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific resulting from China's rapid economic, military, and technological rise. This structural transformation has encouraged the United States to strengthen strategic partnerships capable of maintaining a favourable regional balance. India, because of its geographic location, military capabilities, economic potential, and strategic autonomy, has emerged as a critical partner within this broader strategy.

However, the policies adopted by the Trump and Biden administrations differed because systemic incentives were filtered through different domestic variables. During the Trump administration, leadership perceptions emphasising bilateral bargaining, economic nationalism, and transactional diplomacy influenced policy implementation. While strategic cooperation with India expanded considerably, trade disputes and immigration restrictions reflected Trump's domestic political priorities.

By contrast, the Biden administration interpreted the same structural environment through a multilateral and alliance-oriented foreign policy framework. Democratic partnerships, technological cooperation, climate governance, and institutional coordination became central components of bilateral engagement. Nevertheless, the fundamental strategic objective of strengthening India as a counterbalance to China remained unchanged.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the continuity and change in U.S.–India relations under the Trump (2017–2021) and Biden (2021–present) administrations. The comparative approach is appropriate because both administrations operated within a broadly similar international environment characterised by intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition, yet pursued different foreign policy styles and domestic priorities. Comparing these two cases enables an assessment of how structural pressures and domestic intervening variables interacted to shape U.S. policy toward India.

The analysis is guided by Neoclassical Realism (NCR), which posits that foreign policy outcomes result from the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic-level factors. In this study, the independent variable is the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific driven by China's growing military, economic, and technological capabilities. The dependent variable is U.S. policy toward India, while the principal intervening variables include presidential leadership, foreign policy ideology, bureaucratic preferences, and domestic political considerations.

The study employs process tracing to identify the causal mechanisms linking structural incentives with policy outcomes. Rather than merely describing policy developments, process tracing examines how external geopolitical pressures were interpreted by policymakers and translated into specific foreign policy decisions under each administration. This approach helps explain why similar strategic objectives produced different policy instruments and diplomatic approaches.

The empirical analysis relies on qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include U.S. National Security Strategy documents (2017 and 2022), the Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022), official White House statements, speeches by Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden, U.S. Department of State

publications, Department of Defense reports, congressional hearings, and joint U.S.–India statements. Indian government documents, including statements issued by the Ministry of External Affairs and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official engagements, are also examined to provide the bilateral perspective.

Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports published by leading think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), and the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA). These sources provide both theoretical insights and empirical evidence regarding the evolution of U.S.–India strategic relations.

U.S.–India Relations under the Trump Administration (2017–2021)

Strategic Context

When Donald Trump assumed office in January 2017, the United States faced an increasingly competitive international environment marked by China's growing economic and military influence. The Trump administration identified China as a "revisionist power" seeking to challenge the existing international order. This assessment was formally articulated in the 2017 National Security Strategy, which shifted U.S. foreign policy from counterterrorism to great-power competition. Within this strategic context, India was viewed as an indispensable regional partner capable of contributing to a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

Although Trump's foreign policy emphasized "America First" and often questioned traditional alliances, India occupied a distinctive position in U.S. strategy. Successive high-level meetings between President Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi—including the "Howdy Modi" event in Houston (2019) and the "Namaste Trump" visit to Ahmedabad (2020)—demonstrated the growing political importance of the bilateral relationship. Personal diplomacy between the two leaders complemented broader strategic objectives and reinforced mutual commitments to strengthening defense and security cooperation.

Defense and Security Cooperation

Defense cooperation represented the cornerstone of U.S.–India relations during the Trump administration. Building on the progress achieved under previous administrations, both countries deepened military interoperability through expanded joint exercises, increased defense trade, and the conclusion of foundational agreements. The signing of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018 and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in 2020 significantly enhanced intelligence sharing, secure communications, and geospatial cooperation.

The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) further reflected the growing convergence of strategic interests among the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. Although the Quad had been revived in 2017, it gained greater strategic momentum during Trump's presidency as concerns over China's assertiveness intensified. Regular ministerial meetings and the inclusion of Australia in the Malabar naval exercises underscored the increasing institutionalization of Indo-Pacific security cooperation.

Economic Relations and Trade Disputes

Despite significant advances in strategic cooperation, economic relations remained a source of tension. Consistent with the administration's emphasis on reducing trade deficits, Trump criticized India's tariff policies and sought greater market access for American goods. In 2019, the United States withdrew India's preferential trade status under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), arguing that India had failed to provide equitable market access for U.S. exporters.

Trade disagreements extended to digital taxation, agricultural products, and medical devices. In addition, tighter restrictions on H-1B visas created uncertainty for Indian information technology professionals and generated

criticism from New Delhi. These disputes illustrated the transactional character of Trump's foreign economic policy, where strategic cooperation did not necessarily translate into economic concessions.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, the Trump administration demonstrated how systemic pressures generated strategic continuity while domestic political priorities shaped policy implementation. The rise of China encouraged closer security cooperation with India, but Trump's economic nationalism and preference for bilateral bargaining produced friction in trade and immigration. Consequently, strategic cooperation expanded significantly even as economic disputes periodically strained the broader relationship.

U.S.–India Relations under the Biden Administration (2021–Present)

Strategic Context

When President Joe Biden assumed office in January 2021, he inherited a U.S.–India relationship that had reached an unprecedented level of strategic cooperation. Although Biden departed from his predecessor's unilateral and transactional foreign policy by emphasizing alliances, multilateralism, and democratic values, his administration retained the Indo-Pacific as the principal theater of U.S. grand strategy. The 2022 National Security Strategy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy identified the People's Republic of China as the most significant long-term strategic competitor to the United States. Consequently, India remained central to Washington's efforts to promote a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

Unlike the Trump administration, however, Biden sought to embed U.S.–India cooperation within broader institutional and multilateral frameworks. The administration strengthened coordination through the Quad, expanded engagement with regional partners, and prioritized cooperation in emerging technologies, clean energy, resilient supply chains, and global health. Thus, while the strategic objective of strengthening India remained unchanged, the methods and policy instruments reflected a more institutionalized and partnership-oriented approach.

Expanding Strategic and Defence Cooperation

Strategic and defence cooperation continued to deepen under the Biden administration. High-level political engagement intensified, culminating in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Washington in June 2023, which produced a series of landmark agreements in defence production, semiconductors, space cooperation, and critical technologies. These initiatives reflected a broadening of the bilateral relationship beyond traditional military cooperation.

One of the most significant developments was the launch of the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) in 2023. The initiative created a comprehensive framework for collaboration in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, telecommunications, biotechnology, and advanced defence innovation. By focusing on technological resilience and innovation, the Biden administration sought to strengthen the long-term strategic foundations of the partnership while reducing dependence on Chinese technology and supply chains.

Defence cooperation also expanded through increased military exercises, intelligence sharing, and defence industrial collaboration. The agreement to facilitate the co-production of GE F414 jet engines in India represented a significant step toward strengthening India's domestic defence manufacturing capabilities and reflected growing confidence in bilateral defence relations.

The Quad and the Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Biden administration elevated the Quad from a primarily security-focused dialogue to a broader platform for regional governance. Annual leaders' summits institutionalized cooperation in areas such as vaccine

distribution, maritime domain awareness, cybersecurity, climate change, critical infrastructure, and emerging technologies.

Rather than presenting the Quad as a formal military alliance, the administration framed it as a flexible partnership designed to promote regional stability and uphold international law. This broader agenda enhanced India's comfort with the grouping by allowing cooperation without compromising its longstanding commitment to strategic autonomy.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy further reinforced India's role as a leading regional power and an essential partner in maintaining a favourable balance of power. Washington increasingly viewed India's economic growth, technological capabilities, and maritime position as critical components of regional stability.

Areas of Policy Divergence

Despite growing strategic convergence, several issues continued to generate differences between Washington and New Delhi. The most significant challenge emerged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While the United States led international efforts to isolate Russia through sanctions and diplomatic pressure, India maintained its policy of strategic autonomy by expanding purchases of discounted Russian energy and avoiding direct condemnation of Moscow.

The Biden administration also expressed concerns regarding democratic governance, religious freedom, and human rights in India. Although these issues occasionally appeared in official statements and congressional discussions, they did not fundamentally alter the trajectory of strategic cooperation. Instead, both governments adopted a pragmatic approach that prioritized shared geopolitical interests while managing political disagreements through diplomatic engagement.

Trade disputes likewise persisted, although they were handled with greater flexibility than during the Trump administration. Progress was made in resolving several outstanding trade disagreements, and both governments increasingly emphasized cooperation in technology, investment, and supply-chain resilience rather than tariff-based negotiations.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, the Biden administration illustrates how identical systemic pressures can produce different policy outcomes when filtered through distinct domestic political preferences and leadership styles. Like its predecessor, the administration viewed China's rise as the principal strategic challenge and regarded India as an indispensable partner in the Indo-Pacific. However, Biden's emphasis on multilateralism, technological cooperation, democratic partnerships, and institutional engagement shaped a more comprehensive and less transactional approach to bilateral relations.

Consequently, the Biden administration demonstrated substantial continuity in strategic objectives while introducing important changes in diplomatic style, issue prioritization, and mechanisms of cooperation. This combination of continuity and adaptation supports the central proposition of neoclassical realism that international structural pressures are mediated by domestic intervening variables.

Comparative Analysis: Continuity and Change in U.S.–India Relations

The comparison of the Trump and Biden administrations reveals a pattern of strategic continuity alongside policy adaptation. Both administrations recognized India as a pivotal partner in advancing U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific and balancing China's growing influence. Defence cooperation, support for the Quad, and efforts to enhance India's strategic capabilities remained consistent despite changes in political leadership. This continuity indicates that systemic factors—particularly the changing balance of power in Asia—constituted the primary drivers of U.S. policy toward India.

At the same time, important differences emerged in the conduct of bilateral relations. The Trump administration pursued a largely transactional foreign policy characterized by bilateral bargaining, economic nationalism, and personalized diplomacy. Strategic cooperation advanced significantly, yet economic issues such as tariffs, market access, and immigration frequently generated friction. In contrast, the Biden administration emphasized multilateral institutions, technological cooperation, and values-based diplomacy while embedding India within broader regional initiatives.

These differences illustrate the role of domestic intervening variables emphasized by Neoclassical Realism. Leadership perceptions, ideological preferences, and bureaucratic priorities influenced the methods through which shared strategic objectives were pursued. Whereas Trump prioritized burden-sharing and bilateral negotiations, Biden sought to institutionalize cooperation through multilateral frameworks and long-term technological partnerships.

The empirical findings therefore support the article's central argument: the continuity in U.S.–India relations was driven primarily by structural geopolitical imperatives, while policy variation resulted from differences in domestic political leadership and foreign policy orientation. Neoclassical Realism provides a more convincing explanation than structural realism alone because it accounts for both the persistence of strategic objectives and the variation in policy implementation across administrations.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the continuity and change in U.S.–India relations under the Trump and Biden administrations through the analytical lens of Neoclassical Realism (NCR). Despite significant differences in leadership style, diplomatic rhetoric, and foreign policy priorities, the analysis demonstrates that the overall strategic trajectory of U.S.–India relations remained remarkably consistent. Both administrations viewed India as a critical partner in advancing a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific and as an essential actor in responding to the geopolitical challenges posed by China's growing regional and global influence.

The comparative analysis supports the central proposition of Neoclassical Realism that foreign policy is shaped by the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic intervening variables. At the systemic level, the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific created a strong incentive for successive U.S. administrations to deepen strategic engagement with India. This structural imperative explains the continuity observed in defence cooperation, the institutionalisation of the Quad, maritime security cooperation, and collaboration in emerging technologies.

At the domestic level, however, leadership perceptions, ideological preferences, and policy priorities influenced the manner in which these strategic objectives were pursued. The Trump administration adopted a more transactional and bilateral approach, emphasizing defence cooperation while simultaneously pursuing economic nationalism that produced tensions over trade and immigration. By contrast, the Biden administration strengthened multilateral engagement, technological cooperation, and institutional partnerships while integrating democratic values and global governance issues into the bilateral agenda. These differences reflect changes in policy implementation rather than a fundamental shift in strategic objectives.

The findings contribute to the literature in two important ways. First, the study demonstrates that structural realism alone cannot fully explain variations in U.S. foreign policy across different administrations. While the international distribution of power explains the persistence of the strategic partnership, it does not account for differences in diplomatic style, policy priorities, or implementation. By incorporating domestic political variables, Neoclassical Realism provides a more comprehensive explanation of foreign policy continuity and change.

Second, the article contributes to the growing scholarship on U.S.–India relations by offering a systematic comparison of the Trump and Biden administrations within a single theoretical framework. Previous studies have frequently focused on specific policy areas—such as defence cooperation, trade, or the Quad—or have

explained the partnership primarily through geopolitical competition with China. This study integrates these dimensions into a unified analytical framework, demonstrating how systemic and domestic factors jointly shape bilateral relations.

The study also carries important policy implications. As strategic competition between the United States and China continues to intensify, India is likely to remain central to U.S. regional strategy regardless of changes in political leadership in Washington. Future administrations may differ in diplomatic style or policy emphasis, but the structural logic underpinning the partnership is unlikely to disappear. At the same time, policymakers in both countries must continue to manage areas of disagreement—including trade, human rights, and India's strategic autonomy—to prevent them from undermining broader strategic cooperation.

This study has certain limitations. It focuses primarily on U.S. foreign policy and treats India largely as the recipient of American strategic engagement. Consequently, it does not fully examine how India's domestic politics, strategic culture, or bureaucratic decision-making influenced the evolution of the partnership. Furthermore, the analysis is limited to the Trump and Biden administrations and does not include earlier periods that may provide a longer historical perspective on policy continuity.

Future research could extend this analysis in several directions. Comparative studies examining multiple U.S. administrations from George W. Bush through the present would provide a more comprehensive understanding of long-term strategic continuity. Scholars could also incorporate India's domestic political dynamics into a two-level neoclassical realist framework or compare U.S. relations with India and other Indo-Pacific partners, such as Japan or Australia, to assess whether similar patterns of continuity and change emerge under comparable structural conditions.

In conclusion, the evolution of U.S.–India relations during the Trump and Biden administrations demonstrates that continuity and change are not mutually exclusive. While geopolitical competition and the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific have sustained the strategic partnership, domestic political leadership has shaped the form, priorities, and implementation of U.S. policy. By integrating systemic and domestic explanations, Neoclassical Realism offers a robust framework for understanding not only the trajectory of U.S.–India relations but also broader patterns of foreign policy adaptation in an era of intensifying great-power competition.

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