

Changing Contours of India's Indo-Pacific Strategic Posture and Priorities Amid the U.S. Tariff Trap

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the most strategic and significant arenas of India's foreign policy posture and priorities in recent years. The region represents a massive economic potential, encompassing major trade routes, resources, and growing markets. The region is also marred with various non-traditional security challenges, along with China's expansionism and the great power rivalry between the United States (U.S.) and China. The recent imposition of steep and targeted tariffs by the U.S. on Indian goods in 2025 as a part of punitive measures against India's Russian oil imports has induced a profound shift in India's strategic posture. Being a major stakeholder and a potential leading power in the region, India is supposed to expedite its commitment to strategic autonomy, ensure regional balance, and promote a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific vision while ensuring a rule-based order in the region. Therefore, the paper aims at analysing the new contours of India's foreign policy position amidst the growing turbulent India-U.S. relations. It further examines how India balances its regional ambitions by strengthening the India-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and diversifying its partnership with the European Union (EU), the strategic pragmatism displayed at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit 2025, and the reinforcement of India-Japan's partnership as a crucial technology and investment hedge in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, this paper indeed provides a strategic view of India's shifted policy priorities in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, India, United States, China, EAEU, SCO, Japan.

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific is an arena encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and the realisation that both these oceans should be seen together rather than as separate entities led to their amalgamation, leading to the conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific. The region is an economic hotbed, and with the presence of major sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) and maritime chokepoints, it witnesses 50 percent of the global trade and 40 percent of oil passing through it (Vice President's Secretariat, 2023). In the words of former Indian Prime Minister (PM) Jawaharlal Nehru's statement in 1946, "the Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic in the future as a nerve centre of the world." His words proved to be relevant in today's time, as the Indo-Pacific is one of the most rapidly evolving regions in the world (Teekah, 2025).

India, lying at the trijunction of the Indian Ocean to the south, the Arabian Sea to the southwest and the Bay of Bengal to the southeast, is a major stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific. India's proximity to the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab-el-Mandab, along with its dominant position in the Indian Ocean, places it at an important juncture. India's economy has continued to rise exponentially, with economic growth of 6.5 percent in the financial year 2024-25 and the real gross domestic production (GDP) expanding by 7.8 percent in the first quarter of FY2025/26 (International Monetary Fund, 2025). The world sees India as an emerging power, especially the U.S., which views India as a state with the potential to counterbalance China amid great power competition and China's expansionist policies, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

However, India's Indo-Pacific vision fosters inclusivity, as highlighted in its official documents, as opposed to the U.S., which is exclusionary and aimed at containing China. Thus, India envisions China as a catalyst in the Indo-Pacific vision, particularly in areas like trade, commerce, technology, people-to-people exchange, connectivity, disaster management, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, and maritime security. India's Indo-Pacific vision is also based on the conviction that perpetual peace and order in the region can only be founded on the convergence of divergent mutual interests and common goods of nations. Hence, India promotes "Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific" (FOIIP), which can accommodate and safeguard the legitimate interests of all stakeholders through various bilateral and multilateral groupings and dialogues in the region.

Therefore, the paper analyses India's strategic autonomy amidst great power competition in the Indo-Pacific and its stance on the unreasonable tariffs imposed by the U.S. for purchasing oil from Russia. The paper evaluates the 2025 U.S. tariff imposition on India not merely as an episodic trade dispute but as a "tariff trap" scenario, where a nation uses tariffs, trade restrictions, or market access controls as leverage to constrain another country's strategic choices. Following the tariffs, the paper assesses how India responds when economic coercion is deployed by a strategic partner. It examines India's shifting strategic posture and priorities in the region through the lens of its strengthening relationship with the countries of Asia and Europe in different bilateral, minilateral and multilateral frameworks like the India-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the India-Japan Partnership, in addition to the long-standing Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). It explores how India is maintaining a delicate balance between the east and the west while protecting its legitimate interests in the region and promoting convergence in areas of mutual interest. It also investigates India's strategic endeavours to combat shared challenges and build a rule-based order in the complex and contested area of the Indo-Pacific.

U.S. Tariffs And The Contradictions of Indo-Pacific Vision

The India-U.S. relations, often regarded as a 'natural partnership' in the Indo-Pacific region against the backdrop of U.S.-China competition, have recently been destabilised by a decisive episode of economic standoff. The U.S., under the Trump administration, imposed 50 percent tariffs and penalties on India in August 2025 for buying Russian oil, leading to the relationship coming to a standstill. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), in its official statement, reiterated that India's purchase of Russian oil is based on market forces so that the energy security of the nation is secured. India started buying Russian oil post the Ukraine war when the traditional supplies of India, i.e., Africa and the Middle East, were diverted to Europe after it refused to do transactions with Russia. The statement further pointed towards the contradictions in the behaviour of the U.S., as it continues to import uranium hexafluoride for its nuclear industry, palladium for its EV industry, and fertilisers and chemicals from Russia, while calling out India for maintaining relations (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). This episode reveals stark contradictions in the U.S. Indo-Pacific vision and its treatment of strategic partners like India.

The relations also took a toll when the Trump administration repeatedly claimed to have brought an end to Operation Sindo in May 2025 and prevented the world from witnessing nuclear-armed warfare (Deccan Herald, 2025). This was not appreciated by India, a country that has always advocated for strategic autonomy and national sovereignty in its foreign policy vision. The repeated claims of Trump undermined India's sovereignty, which strictly prohibits any other nation from interfering in its internal matters. The stance of India was made clear in the official documents of the MEA, which reiterated that there was no discussion at any level between India and the U.S. or any proposal of mediation by the U.S. between India and Pakistan during Operation Sindo. The mediation took place bilaterally between the armed forces at the request of Pakistan. PM Modi also firmly reiterated that India will not and has never allowed any other nation to interfere in its national matters (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

Trump's executive orders contradict the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision (FOIP), which was articulated by then-U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in 2017. It aims at building a regional order based on economic prosperity, collective security, and good governance. With the reinvigoration of the MAGA (Make America Great Again) vision by the Trump administration, American foreign policy is moving towards protectionism,

restricting trade practices perceived as unfair, and favouring America First rhetoric. In September 2025, the Trump administration signed an executive order which hiked the H1B visa fee to USD 100,000, leading to growing anxieties among the new Indian graduates from American universities and the people already working in the U.S. (The Times of India, 2025).

The 25 percent tariffs, coupled with the additional penalty of 25 percent, brought the total duty to 50 percent, which was a huge setback to India and Indian industries. Post U.S. moves, PM Modi urged the citizens of India to promote Atmanirbhar Bharat (Make in India) to become a self-sufficient economy, having less dependency on nations for goods and services along with a reduced trade deficit of India with the rest of the world. He fostered export-led growth, and during the Independence Day celebration in August 2025, he stated

We should become self-reliant – not out of desperation, but out of pride. Economic selfishness is on the rise globally, and we mustn't sit and cry about our difficulties; we must rise above and not allow others to hold us in their clutches (Inamdar, 2025).

The unreasonable tariffs imposed on India pose a direct challenge to the Indo-Pacific regional order, where India and the U.S. are two of the most important stakeholders. They are also a part of many security and economic frameworks like the QUAD, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), among others. The fluctuating relationship may delay the functionality of these frameworks as well as prove the narrative of China correctly that the U.S. uses its partners as tools of manipulation rather than promoting genuine growth and development in the region.

Trump's hardline tariff stance on India poses a direct challenge to the QUAD, as evidenced by the delay in the QUAD 2025 Leaders' Summit, which was expected to be held in November in India (The Raisina Hills, 2025). Both India and the U.S. are two very important pillars of the grouping, with the former being the world's largest democracy and the latter being the world's oldest democracy. The brewing tensions between the two nations put a question mark on the future of QUAD, which is operationalised through various working groups on critical and emerging technologies, cyber, health, infrastructure and space, climate and security partnership.

Following the tense India-U.S. relationship, PM Modi cancelled his address at the 80th annual high-level session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2025. Instead, India was represented by the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, indicating India's displeasure towards Trump's unreasonable tariffs (The Economic Times, 2025). The 47th ASEAN Summit and the 22nd ASEAN-India Summit were attended by PM Modi virtually, showcasing India's displeasure towards America's economic coercion while also maintaining engagement with a forum that it considers the most important pillar in the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, the U.S. must make a clear distinction between cooperation and coercion and realise that India is not a junior partner in the Indo-Pacific but an emerging power with growing aspirations and global responsibilities, with the aim to establish a free, fair and inclusive regional order (Gaurav and Rathore, 2025). The tariffs imposed on India are economic as well as strategic in nature. India, being a very important pillar of the Indo-Pacific vision, should not be treated in a manner where its strategic autonomy and independent foreign policy choices are questioned. The recent strategic shifts in India's Indo-Pacific posture and priorities can be seen as the consequences of the U.S. imposition of tariffs, which has created a "tariff trap" for India.

India's Shifting Indo-Pacific Posture & Priorities

The imposition of unpredictable tariffs on India has generated complexity in India-U.S. relations, impacting major exports like gems, textiles, and auto parts. This episode reinforced New Delhi's long-standing recognition that reliance on any single partner (especially with the change in political leadership and policy shifts) will hurt its national interests. Thus, diversification of partnerships in terms of trade and investment serves as the right step to reduce strategic dependence and cushion against external economic shocks. Regions and frameworks such as Eurasia, the EU, the SCO, and Japan, among others, offer alternate markets and investment avenues that can help India balance against the unilateral tariff pressures and strengthen its economic resilience.

India-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Convergence

Strong trade ties between India and Eurasia are considered an important pillar to analyse their bilateral relations, as they strengthen economic growth and overall prosperity. In order to boost trade, a free trade agreement serves as a platform to foster greater market access as a result of reduced tariff and non-tariff barriers, leading to enhanced cooperation in the areas of mutual interest. It is undeniable that the U.S. has been a strategic partner of India with an annual trade of USD 131.84 billion (FY 2024-25); the recent presidency of the Trump administration has injected unpredictability into the traditional ties (The Hindu, 2025). This necessitates India to diversify its strategic partnerships, including its engagement with Eurasia, which is a combination of two normative and continental spaces, i.e., Europe and Asia.

In a recent development, India and the EAEU, comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, signed the Terms of Reference (ToR) to commence negotiations on an FTA in August 2025 in Moscow, Russia. As of 2024, India-EAEU bilateral trade stood at USD 69 billion, showcasing a 7 percent increase from 2023 (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2025). The progress of the FTA was reviewed in a series of meetings in Moscow in November 2025. Plans were devised to enhance trade diversification, cooperation in critical minerals, and supply chain resilience. Key sectors, such as telecom equipment, machinery, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and automobiles, were identified to drive the next phase of economic cooperation (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2025). The FTA between India and Eurasia will prove beneficial for both parties as it will expand the market, thereby giving access to exporters and enhancing trade diversification with new geographies and sectors.

India's parallel outreach toward Europe reinforces this westward economic and strategic orientation, evident in the 11th India-EU Foreign Policy and Security Consultations and the 6th Strategic Partnership Review Meeting held in Brussels on 18 and 19 November, respectively, which assessed the implementation of 'India-EU Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025'. It discussed a wide range of topics, like resilient supply chains, economic security, and the IMEC, as well as areas of cooperation in the field of science and technology, people-to-people contacts, and innovation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). A Free Trade Agreement between India and the EU is long overdue, and a team from the EU is likely to come to India in December 2025 to finalise the FTA and bring it into effect. The FTA will be transformative for both India and the EU, particularly in the domains of economic growth, innovation ecosystems, and global influence. The agreement can emerge as a model of 21st-century economic diplomacy rooted in the principles of environmental standards, economic fairness and contemporary realities (Wadhwa, 2025). The invitation to the EU leaders to be the chief guests at the Republic Day parade in 2026 has a symbolic value amidst the unpredictability in the Trump administration. In these uncertainties, the EU is emerging as a reliable and predictable partner for India and also signalling towards the diversification of India's strategic partnerships (Ritesh, 2025).

India's engagement with the EAEU and the EU represents a strategic diversification effort consistent with its broader pursuit of economic resilience and strategic autonomy, rather than a reactive response to the U.S. episode. By diversifying trade partners, supply chains, and regulatory alignments, India seeks to reduce over-dependence on any single economic pole while reinforcing its strategic autonomy within the Indo-Pacific framework.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit 2025

India has always fostered an independent foreign policy since its independence and does not allow any other nation to intervene in its internal matters. Strategic autonomy has been a cornerstone of India's diplomatic imperative, and with the rising tensions with the U.S. ongoing during the Trump presidency, PM Modi's visit to China after a gap of seven years in the SCO Summit from 31 August to 1 September 2025 was closely observed. With the deteriorating relationship with the U.S., India is also vying for alternatives to enhance its position in the Indo-Pacific. But at the same time, it endorses independence in decision-making, as evidenced by its distancing from China's ambitious BRI, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as it passes through the Gilgit-Baltistan area of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK). In the areas of maritime security also, India stands with a rules-based order and the doctrines enshrined in the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as seen during the 2016 Philippine v. China case, where it stood with the judgement of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in favour of the Philippines, which negated the claims of China concerning the nine-dash line and certain assertions over the South China Sea. During the Galwan crisis in 2020, Indian soldiers fought back with Chinese troops when they attempted to change the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) along the India-China border in the Galwan valley of eastern Ladakh.

India's independent stance is also visible vis-à-vis the U.S. when it describes the QUAD as a security framework and not a military alliance, much to the U.S. dismay. India's Indo-Pacific vision is inclusionary in nature, and attributing the QUAD as a military alliance will prove China's claim of 'Asian NATO' to be correct. India views the QUAD as a framework to combat non-traditional maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, along with enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). India also did not join the first pillar (trade) of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), an economic initiative started by the U.S. in 2022. Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal stated that the strict environment and labour laws linked to trade could force India to follow strict standards that may hurt Indian industries, especially small businesses. Also, India is creating its own data protection and digital laws, so it did not want to accept international rules before finishing its domestic laws (Sinha, 2022).

Thus, against the backdrop, India's presence and strengthening relations with the SCO display the acceptance of India's capability and credibility to promote a multipolar and rule-based order. Although India's participation in the SCO does little to advance its Indo-Pacific vision, it may serve as a framework that helps India to avoid relying only on Western partners in promoting security and stability in the Indo-Pacific as well as keep it connected to Eurasia (Gaurav & Rathore, 2025). India resorting to political-security diversification illustrates its preference for multi-vector diplomacy as a safeguard against geopolitical and economic coercion. The challenge that lies ahead of India is how it balances between the east and the west to bring the best outcomes, build a rules-based order and further its own aspirations to become a leading power in the Indo-Pacific.

India-Japan Steady and Stable Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

Amidst the unstable relationships and differing national priorities, Japan emerges as India's most stable partner in the Indo-Pacific. The India-Japan relationship dates back to the 6th century when Buddhism was introduced in Japan. Post-World War II, Indian PM Jawaharlal Nehru donated an Indian elephant to the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, which was seen as a ray of hope to Japanese people who had just emerged from the devastation of the war. In 1952, Japan and India signed a peace treaty, establishing diplomatic relations between the two nations. In recent times, relations have been stable, with the Japan-India Vision Statement being issued during PM Modi's visit to Japan in October 2018, which reiterated their mutual interest and support for the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025).

At the 15th India-Japan Annual Summit in August 2025, a joint statement titled 'Partnership for Security and Prosperity of Our Next Generation' was issued, wherein leaders of both nations expressed commitment to a 'Joint Vision for the Next Decade'. The partnership laid emphasis on eight pillars, i.e., economy, economic security, mobility, environment, technology and innovation, health, people-to-people ties and state-prefecture engagement. A Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation was also adopted, which elevated the security and defence ties of India and Japan to the next level, as the changing geopolitical realities and emerging security challenges demanded amendments. The summit also witnessed the adoption of an Action Plan for India-Japan Human Resource Exchange and Cooperation, with the aim of laying out a roadmap of talent mobility and the exchange of more than 500,000 personnel in five years, including 50,000 skilled personnel and potential talents from India to Japan (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

India and Japan share good defence, strategic and economic relations, with the two nations part of various joint exercises to enhance interoperability and share best practices with each other. They include the Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX), Exercise Malabar and JAIMEX (anti-submarine warfare and other maritime drills), among others. The 15th India-Japan Summit saw the welcoming of Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force's (JMSDF) participation in MILAN (naval exercise) and Tarang Shakti (air exercise). India and Japan's

longstanding friendship is rooted in civilisational ties and spiritual affinity, having shared values and a strategic outlook for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. The Annual Summit 2025 reaffirmed this intention of sharing greater responsibility to anchor peace and stability in the region (Rathore & Gaurav, 2025).

Japan is also playing a big role in the development and infrastructure projects in India's Northeast Region (NER). The Advantage Assam 2.0 - Investment and Infrastructure Summit was held in February 2025 in Guwahati, which saw the reaffirmation on the part of Japan for its continued commitment towards the NER's development. The infrastructure projects are instrumentalised through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which provides financing to these projects. To date, JICA has supported the construction of over 750 kilometres of new roads, which are very important for the overall development of any region, as good roads lead to good connectivity, ultimately leading to a better supply of goods and services and overall development (Basu, 2025). As of 2024, Japan committed the Official Development Assistance (ODA) loan of approximately USD 1.50 billion for nine projects in various sectors (Table 1).

Table 1: Major Japanese ODA-Funded Infrastructure and Development Projects in India

Project	State/Location	Amount (USD)
The North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (Phase 3) (Tranche II): Dhubri-Phulbari bridge	Assam-Meghalaya	222.70 million
The North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (Phase 7): NH 127B (Phulbari-Goeragre section)	Meghalaya	100.32 million
The Project for Promoting Start-up and Innovation	Telangana	152.80 million
The Project for the Construction of Chennai Peripheral Ring Road (Phase 2)	Tamil Nadu	321.41 million
The Project for Promoting Sustainable Horticulture (Tranche I)	Haryana	104.51 million
The Project for Climate Change Response and ecosystem Services Enhancement	Rajasthan	168.47 million
The Project for the Establishment of the Medical College Hospital at Nagaland Institute of Medical Sciences and Research	Nagaland	64.48 million
The Project for the Improvement of Urban Water Supply System	Uttarakhand	104.51 million
The Dedicated Freight Corridor Project (Phase 1) (Tranche V)	Delhi and Mumbai (Western Corridor) and between Ludhiana and Kolkata via Delhi (Eastern Corridor)	257.93 million

Source: Ministry of Finance, 2025.

Japan's technology is also supporting India in the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail (Bullet Train), Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), and metro rail systems (Delhi, Chennai, Bengaluru, etc.). The 508-kilometre bullet train project is under construction using Japanese Shinkansen technology, which will establish new standards in India's speed, operational reliability and safety (The Times of India, 2025).

In the Indo-Pacific, India and Japan are part of various security frameworks like the QUAD, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), among others. These frameworks and institutions aim at establishing a free, fair, and rules-based Indo-Pacific regional order, founded on shared prosperity and economic growth.

The historical relationship between India and Japan have been consistently strong and cooperative, and unlike transactional partnership, their relationship provides long-term strategic insulation through infrastructure financing, supply-chain resilience, security enhancement, and technology transfer. Japan's role thus underscores how India offsets tariff-induced vulnerabilities not only through market diversification but by anchoring stable, trust-based partnerships central to its Indo-Pacific vision.

CONCLUSION

India's firm stances and strategies in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis U.S. tariffs showcase its independent foreign policy choices. The diplomatic pressure imposed on India by raising tariffs to 50 percent certainly had ramifications on Indian goods, but this made India even stronger and moved it further towards its goal of "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat". Thus, far from being a mere "tariff trap", this situation served as a powerful catalyst for India to accelerate its long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. This response reflects India's prioritisation of autonomy, diversification, and calibrated alignment over dependence on any single strategic partner. Consequently, India's participation in forums like SCO and diversification of partnerships with Eurasia and the EU, and a steady partnership with Japan, made the world realise that India is not a follower but an aspiring leading power. Furthermore, post-tariffs, Trump also stated that India and the U.S. have a special relationship, reiterating the importance of India in America's diplomacy and foreign policy.

Hence, India's changing contours of Indo-Pacific strategy are not a rejection of the U.S. partnership and the QUAD but a "pragmatic recalibration" to secure national interests in an increasingly shifting strategic landscape of the region and the world at large. This recalibration underscores that India's Indo-Pacific engagement is evolving from reliance-based partnerships to resilience-based cooperation, without abandoning existing strategic frameworks. The "tariff trap" has forced India to become more assertive in defining the terms of its strategic posture and priorities in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, India should uphold the principles of multilateralism and enhance its economic leverage and strategic partnerships. In doing so, India positions itself as a stabilising power capable of shaping, rather than merely adapting to, Indo-Pacific regional dynamics. Its commitment to QUAD, IPEF, IORA, and other regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific make it a responsible player, having the will to establish a rules-based order and work towards a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. At the same time, its attempts at diversification of trade and services with other regional players of Asia and Europe give a strong foothold to India, while also sending a clear message to the world that India has the potential to diversify its strategic engagements and reduce overreliance on any single power. Such diversification enhances India's economic resilience and strategic credibility within the Indo-Pacific order. But, in all this, India also needs to foresee its economic and diplomatic interests as well, while maintaining a delicate balance between the differing and conflicting parties in the Indo-Pacific in order to emerge as a leading power in the region and establish peace and order.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

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