

In the past few days, the fragile scaffolding of US-India strategic cooperation has shown signs of stress—if not outright fracture. President Donald Trump’s announcement of sweeping tariff hikes on Indian exports, twice, in retaliation for New Delhi’s continued oil imports from Russia, has rekindled simmering tensions between the world’s largest democracies.

In an unusually sharp critique, former UN Ambassador and Republican stalwart Nikki Haley rebuked the administration for “giving China a pass” while jeopardizing a critical relationship with India. Her statement encapsulates the core contradiction at the heart of Washington’s Asia policy: the simultaneous appeasement of China and coercion of India.

This contradiction, if left unchecked, may not only derail our Indo-Pacific strategy but also undermine long-term global interests, both economically and geopolitically. For two decades, the US has invested in the idea of India as a natural counterweight to China. But through a pattern of strategic missteps—marked by economic nationalism, diplomatic coercion, and inconsistent standards—Washington risks alienating a partner it can ill afford to lose.

## The Grand Design: India as the Indo-Pacific Linchpin

The US-India relationship, as envisioned by American policymakers, was meant to serve a vital strategic goal: containing China’s rise in Asia. From George W. Bush to Barack Obama, from Trump to Biden, there has been rare bipartisan consensus in Washington around India’s centrality to a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” This has manifested in various ways—defense cooperation, technology partnerships, joint naval exercises, and frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) and the recently introduced TRUST and COMPACT initiatives.

In 2024 alone, Washington and New Delhi inked a ten-year defense roadmap and launched expansive plans for joint innovation and supply-chain integration. Trade targets were ambitiously set at \$500 billion by 2030. India’s enormous market, growing tech sector, and

military modernization were seen not just as opportunities but as necessities to blunt China's regional dominance.

On paper, the partnership seemed robust. In practice, however, it has repeatedly stumbled against three core barriers: India's strategic autonomy, America's double standards, and a mutual embrace of economic nationalism. The current standoff over Russian oil imports is not just a policy disagreement—it is a symptom of a deeper malaise.

## Strategic Autonomy: The Non-Negotiable Principle

Any serious analysis of India's foreign policy must begin with its guiding doctrine: strategic autonomy. Since its independence, India has fiercely resisted alignment with global powers, opting instead for multipolar engagement—partnering with various actors without being beholden to any.

This ethos persists in New Delhi's current balancing act: it maintains defense ties with Russia, economic ties with China, and strategic cooperation with the US—all while refusing to subordinate its decisions to any singular power bloc. Thus, when Washington seeks to pressure India into aligning with its sanctions on Russia, it misjudges India's willingness to compromise its principles for partnership.

Rather than drawing India closer, US coercion fuels distrust. New Delhi reads such moves as infringements on sovereignty—echoes of a colonial past repackaged in the language of liberal internationalism. The outcome is predictable: hedging, not alignment.

## Hypocrisy as Policy: The China Exception

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of the current US approach is its perceived hypocrisy.

While the Trump administration has chosen to “pause” tariffs on Chinese goods—even as Beijing continues importing Russian and Iranian oil—it has simultaneously chosen to punish India for doing the same. To observers in New Delhi and beyond, this is a glaring double standard.

The message it sends is that the US is willing to compromise with adversaries when expedient, while lecturing allies when convenient. Nikki Haley’s criticism captures a growing anxiety within Washington’s foreign policy establishment—that short-term trade tactics are sabotaging long-term strategic architecture.

Credibility, in diplomacy, is currency. And credibility suffers when allies are treated worse than rivals. For India, such inconsistencies reaffirm doubts about America’s reliability. If Washington shifts its approach based on transient domestic politics, how stable can its promises really be?

## Economic Nationalism: A Shared Weakness

If strategic autonomy is India’s enduring trait, economic nationalism is its current mood—and the US shares this instinct. Over the past decade, both countries have embraced inward-looking economic policies, raising tariffs, tightening market access, and pushing for domestic self-reliance. For India, this is embodied in Prime Minister Modi’s “Atmanirbhar Bharat” (self-reliant India) campaign. For the US, it’s MAGA (Make America Great Again), the Trump-era protectionism that continues to echo even under his second term.

The problem arises when nationalism collides with partnership. Trump’s recent tariff hikes on Indian exports—targeted at items like pharmaceuticals, textiles, and auto parts—hurt not just Indian producers but also American consumers and companies who rely on affordable imports. In retaliation, India may restrict US firms’ access to its growing tech sector, delay defense procurements, or pursue alternate partners.

Rather than fostering economic integration, both sides are drifting into defensive postures. And this is precisely the environment in which China thrives: when two of its key rivals are undermining each other rather than cooperating.

## Regional Ramifications: China Gains Where the US Falters

The broader danger of Washington's missteps with India lies in their regional fallout. As China deepens its economic and military footprint through the Belt and Road Initiative, fortified island bases, and digital infrastructure diplomacy, any weakening of the US-India bond opens the door to Beijing's strategic opportunism.

Already, China is building influence in South Asia via debt diplomacy in Sri Lanka, infrastructure partnerships in Bangladesh, and maritime expansion in the Indian Ocean. If India feels squeezed by Washington, it may respond not by confronting China—but by softening its stance or simply standing aside. For Beijing, this equidistance is a strategic victory.

The United States, meanwhile, loses a critical partner capable of offsetting Chinese naval power, influencing regional states, and promoting democratic norms. And this loss comes not through Indian betrayal, but through American miscalculation.

## Global Consequences: From the Indo-Pacific to the Global South

India is not merely a regional power—it increasingly acts as a voice for the Global South. From climate negotiations to WTO reform, India positions itself as a bridge between developed and developing nations. Its leadership in forums like BRICS, the G20, and the International Solar Alliance gives it leverage well beyond Asia.

The US, by undermining ties with India, diminishes its own capacity to engage meaningfully with the Global South. Washington's credibility in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia—already fragile—further erodes when its flagship democratic partner feels compelled to distance itself.

Moreover, in critical technology areas—semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity—the US has much to gain from Indian talent, market access, and regulatory collaboration. Severing or stalling this tech convergence pushes India toward Chinese, Russian, or indigenous alternatives. This balkanization of the global tech ecosystem weakens the US-led innovation bloc.

## A Growing Credibility Gap

Perhaps the most enduring cost of the current US strategy is reputational. Allies in Europe and Asia are watching closely. If the US penalizes India—its supposed “natural partner”—while placating China, what does that say about its alliance priorities? Can Taiwan, South Korea, or Japan feel secure in US commitments when those are so easily undercut by electoral cycles or trade politics?

Even American domestic stakeholders—defense contractors, tech firms, diaspora organizations—are increasingly alarmed. Haley's rebuke, while politically calculated, signals that internal dissent about the White House's India policy is growing.

Without course correction, the US risks not only alienating India but also diminishing its appeal as a partner of choice for the 21st century.

## The Way Forward: Respect, Not Coercion

The path to salvaging the US-India relationship does not lie in stronger ultimatums or louder condemnations. It lies in a genuine appreciation of India's strategic worldview. New Delhi will never be an obedient junior partner in a US-led bloc. But it can be a powerful, autonomous collaborator in a shared vision for regional stability and global prosperity.

To that end, Washington must do the following:

1. Respect India's Autonomy: Stop framing strategic alignment as a zero-sum demand. Allow India space to navigate its own relationships, even if they include Russia or China.
2. Ensure Consistency: Apply strategic logic equally. If China can receive a reprieve despite its authoritarianism and aggression, India deserves better treatment for its democratic credentials and cooperation.
3. Recalibrate Economic Pressure: Avoid tariff escalations that hurt both economies and stall integration. Focus instead on harmonizing standards, easing market access, and incentivizing co-production.
4. Double Down on Shared Goals: Whether in maritime security, clean energy, or emerging technologies, invest in platforms that build trust, deliver results, and outlast political administrations.

## America's Choice

The US-India relationship is not merely transactional; it is transformational—if managed wisely. But today, Washington stands at a crossroads. It can treat India as a genuine partner, one whose strategic autonomy enriches rather than threatens shared goals. Or it can continue down a path of coercion, hypocrisy, and shortsightedness—burning the very bridge it needs to cross in its contest with China.

In a century that will be shaped by the balance of power in Asia, the United States cannot afford to lose India. But to keep India close, it must first learn to let it stand tall.