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## Indo-U.S. Political and Diplomatic Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Strategic Convergence, Indo-Pacific Cooperation, and the Modi-Biden Era

*Sultan Singh Yadav<sup>1</sup> and Naval Pande<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government Degree College, Tanakpur, Uttarakhand-262309 (India)  
E-mail:<drssyadav20@gmail.com>

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Government Degree College, Tanakpur, Uttarakhand-262309 (India)  
E-mail:<rajatkapoorrr@gmail.com>

### Abstract

*The twenty-first century marks a profound transformation in India-United States relations, shifting from episodic engagement to a sustained, multifaceted partnership rooted in shared strategic and democratic values. The post-Cold War period witnessed a gradual dismantling of ideological barriers, culminating in the emergence of a rules-based partnership encompassing diplomacy, defence, trade, and technology. This paper examines the evolution of Indo-U.S. political and diplomatic relations in the contemporary era, with a particular focus on the Modi-Biden phase of engagement and the broader Indo-Pacific strategy. It explores how changing geopolitical dynamics, China's assertiveness, and a renewed emphasis on democratic resilience have redefined the nature of cooperation between the two nations. The study also highlights the institutionalization of mechanisms such as the QUAD, the 2+2 Dialogue, and I2U2, underscoring their impact on regional stability and multilateral governance. Finally, it argues that Indo-U.S. relations have evolved beyond transactional diplomacy to reflect a strategic convergence anchored in the pursuit of a stable, multipolar, and democratic world order.*

### Keywords

Indo-U.S. relations, Diplomacy, Strategic convergence, Indo-Pacific, QUAD, Modi-Biden, Global governance, Multilateralism, Foreign policy, International relations.

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Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)  
Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

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## **Indo-U.S. Political and Diplomatic Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Strategic Convergence, Indo-Pacific Cooperation, and the Modi-Biden Era**

### **1. Introduction: Changing Dynamics of Indo-U.S. Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The evolution of India-United States relations in the twenty-first century represents one of the most compelling diplomatic transformations in the post-Cold War order. Historically characterized by ambivalence and ideological distance, the relationship has undergone a structural shift defined by strategic alignment and mutual trust. The end of bipolarity in the 1990s created the geopolitical conditions for India and the United States to re-evaluate their foreign policy frameworks (Tellis, 2019). As global power balances shifted, both nations discovered a convergence of interests in areas such as counter-terrorism, technology, trade, defence, and maritime security.

By the early 2000s, Indo-U.S. relations had begun to transcend traditional transactional diplomacy, evolving into what analysts termed a “defining partnership of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Jaishankar, 2020). The relationship’s durability rests on a combination of pragmatic statecraft, shared democratic ethos, and complementary strategic goals. For the United States, India’s rise represents a vital counterweight to authoritarian expansionism and an anchor of stability in the Indo-Pacific. For India, closer ties with Washington provide access to advanced technology, capital, and diplomatic leverage within an evolving multipolar order.

#### **1.1 A New Diplomatic Language**

Unlike the Cold War era - when ideological constraints shaped engagement - contemporary diplomacy between India and the United States is guided by issue-based cooperation and policy complementarity. Initiatives such as the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) (2004), the Civil Nuclear Agreement (2008), and later institutional frameworks like the 2+2 Dialogue have cemented a

durable infrastructure for political dialogue (Pant, 2021). Equally significant is the personal diplomacy that leaders have employed to shape bilateral engagement. From George W. Bush's outreach to Manmohan Singh to the high-visibility diplomacy of Narendra Modi and Donald Trump, personal rapport has often influenced policy momentum. In recent years, Prime Minister Modi's dynamic approach to foreign policy—characterized by the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world as one family) and India's assertive multilateral engagement—has aligned well with Washington's re-calibrated Indo-Pacific vision (Mohan, 2021).

### **1.2 From Strategic Partnership to Strategic Convergence**

The transformation of Indo-U.S. ties in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be understood solely as a sequence of agreements but rather as a progressive convergence of world-views. The early 2000s established the foundational pillars of trust, while the later decades deepened collaboration in domains once considered sensitive - including defence logistics, cyber governance, critical technologies, and intelligence sharing. The United States' recognition of India as a "Major Defence Partner" in 2016 institutionalized this shift, marking India's entry into the elite circle of U.S. security partners (Singh, 2017). At the same time, India's global identity underwent a transformation. From being perceived as a regional player, India emerged as a strategic actor with ambitions to shape international discourse on trade, technology, and global governance. The United States, recognizing this transition, adapted its diplomatic outreach to position India as a pivotal partner in maintaining regional balance in Asia.

### **1.3 A Context of Global Realignment**

The current phase of Indo-U.S. relations unfolds within a broader context of systemic change. The rise of China, the decline of uni-polarity, and the re-calibration of alliances have forced both nations to reassess their diplomatic postures. Washington's strategic pivot to Asia, later redefined as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, explicitly identified India as a cornerstone of its regional vision. Concurrently, New Delhi's Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First initiative demonstrated a similar strategic outlook, aiming to project India's influence across the Indo-Pacific littoral. This mutual recognition of convergent interests has produced what analysts describe as "converging democracies in a contested order" (Rajagopalan, 2022).

It has redefined the bilateral agenda from traditional development cooperation to one focused on global governance, supply-chain resilience, and technological sovereignty.

## **2. Methodology and Scope**

This paper employs a qualitative, analytical approach, drawing from official documents, think-tank reports (Brookings, ORF, Carnegie), and scholarly works to trace the evolution of Indo-U.S. political and diplomatic relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While historical reference is made for context, the focus remains primarily on the post-2014 period—especially under the Modi-Trump and Modi-Biden administrations—to illustrate the interplay of leadership, ideology, and strategic imperatives. The following section examines the transformation of diplomatic engagement between 2000 and 2014, laying the groundwork for the contemporary phase of Indo-U.S. diplomacy.

## **3. Literature Review: Theoretical and Analytical Perspectives on Indo-U.S. Diplomacy**

The academic and policy literature on Indo-U.S. relations has undergone significant evolution over the past two decades. Scholars have moved from viewing the relationship through the prism of Cold War divergence to analyzing it as a dynamic, pragmatic partnership shaped by mutual interests and systemic change. Broadly, the literature may be classified into three interrelated perspectives - realist-strategic, liberal-institutionalist, and constructivist-normative approaches.

### **3.1 Realist-Strategic Interpretations**

A dominant strand of scholarship frames the Indo-U.S. partnership as a strategic alignment driven by balance-of-power considerations. Writers such as Ashley Tellis (2019) and Harsh Pant (2021) argue that the convergence between New Delhi and Washington is rooted in shared apprehensions about China's rise and the broader instability of the Indo-Pacific.

Tellis (2019) emphasizes that strategic cooperation reflects a "balance-of-interests" arrangement rather than a formal alliance, allowing India to preserve autonomy while advancing collective deterrence. Similarly, Raja Mohan (2018) situates Indo-U.S. engagement within a pragmatic geopolitical context, viewing it as a

“coalition of convenience” that bridges the gap between India’s civilizational diplomacy and the U.S.’s security-oriented approach. This perspective underscores that strategic interdependence, rather than ideological alignment, has become the glue binding both nations in an era of multipolar competition.

### **3.2 Liberal-Institutionalist Perspectives**

A parallel stream of analysis views the Indo-U.S. relationship through the lens of institutional cooperation, economic interdependence, and rule-based order. Scholars such as Deepa Ollapally (2020) and Tanvi Madan (2021) note that the two democracies have progressively embedded their diplomacy within shared institutional frameworks such as the QUAD, I2U2, and the G20. These arrangements reinforce not only their strategic alignment but also their commitment to multilateralism. Institutional analyses highlight the importance of policy networks—including the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, the U.S.-India Strategic Energy Partnership, and the Technology and Trade Council—in formalizing cooperation. Ollapally (2020) argues that these mechanisms demonstrate the maturation of Indo-U.S. diplomacy, which now rests on predictable, institutionalized exchanges rather than ad hoc political goodwill.

### **3.3 Constructivist-Normative Perspectives**

A growing body of literature adopts a constructivist lens, emphasizing shared democratic values and identity-based diplomacy as central to Indo-U.S. engagement. Madan (2020) and Malone (2022) highlight that the partnership transcends material interests; it symbolizes the solidarity of the world’s two largest democracies amid rising authoritarianism. From this viewpoint, the partnership embodies a normative project - advancing a rules-based Indo-Pacific, ensuring freedom of navigation, and promoting democratic digital governance. Scholars such as Malone (2022) and Chaudhuri (2021) also underline the importance of diaspora diplomacy and cultural inter-linkages, which humanize the relationship and create bottom-up legitimacy for bilateral cooperation.

### **3.4 Synthesis of Scholarly Trends**

Taken together, the literature underscores three consistent themes. *First*, India and the United States have transitioned from estrangement to strategic alignment through an adaptive mix of

realpolitik and value-based diplomacy. *Second*, their cooperation has institutionalized across diverse domains, from energy and technology to climate and maritime security. *Third*, leadership diplomacy – particularly during the Modi and Biden administrations – has personalized and accelerated this transformation. Thus, the Indo-U.S. relationship, as reflected in contemporary scholarship, represents both a structural and ideational convergence: a partnership forged by necessity, sustained by mutual benefit, and legitimized by shared democratic ideals.

## **4. The Transformation of Diplomatic Engagement (2000-2014)**

### **4.1 From Estrangement to Engagement**

In the early 2000s, both nations recognized the futility of earlier ideological rigidity. The administration of U.S. President George W. Bush redefined Washington's South Asia strategy, identifying India as a "natural partner" (Tellis, 2006). The Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP), launched in 2004, initiated cooperation in three sensitive domains – civilian nuclear technology, space exploration, and high-technology trade. On the Indian side, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's vision of India and the United States as "natural allies" marked a decisive diplomatic departure. Vajpayee's outreach established a precedent for issue-based engagement that subsequent governments would expand (Mohan, 2018).

### **4.2 The Civil Nuclear Agreement and Strategic Recognition**

The 2005 U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush remains a landmark in Indo-U.S. diplomacy. It symbolized Washington's recognition of India as a responsible nuclear power outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework and opened the door to advanced technology and energy cooperation. This period also saw India's gradual inclusion in major dialogues such as the U.S.-India Energy Dialogue (2005) and the Defence Framework Agreement (2005). By 2008, following the NSG waiver, India had re-entered the global nuclear marketplace – a turning point that elevated bilateral trust and institutionalized political engagement (Pant, 2016).

### **4.3 The Obama-Manmohan Singh Phase (2009-2014)**

Under the Obama administration, bilateral ties were consolidated through a focus on multilateralism, climate change, and democratic

values. President Obama's visit to India in 2010 and his address to the Indian Parliament marked a symbolic high point, describing the partnership as one that would "define the 21<sup>st</sup> century". Diplomatically, the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue (2010) institutionalized foreign policy coordination, while new initiatives in counter-terrorism and homeland security expanded the ambit of cooperation (Ollapally, 2020). Despite periodic disagreements— notably over trade barriers and intellectual property—the relationship matured into a stable, multi-domain engagement.

#### **4.4 Institutionalization and Trust-Building**

Between 2009 and 2014, the United States emerged as one of India's top trading partners and a crucial defence collaborator. The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) discussions began during this period, setting the stage for later operational cooperation. Equally important was the deepening of people-to-people engagement through education and innovation partnerships, such as the U.S.-India Higher Education Dialogue (2011). By the time Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014, the foundations for a "comprehensive global strategic partnership" had already been laid. The following decade would witness its transformation into a mature, issue-driven, and globally significant diplomatic relationship.

### **5. Modi Era Diplomacy and U.S. Engagement (2014-2020)**

The election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 marked the beginning of a new phase in Indo-U.S. diplomacy, characterized by visible dynamism, strategic clarity, and assertive foreign policy articulation. Modi's emphasis on "multi-alignment" rather than non-alignment signalled a departure from India's traditional cautious diplomacy. Under his leadership, India adopted a proactive approach to foreign engagement, aligning its interests more closely with global democratic powers, including the United States (Jaishankar, 2020).

#### **5.1 Leadership Diplomacy and Strategic Symbolism**

The Modi government's early outreach to Washington was marked by a series of high-profile summits that underscored India's strategic importance in U.S. foreign policy. Modi's first visit to the United States in 2014, following his decade-long visa ban, was both

symbolic and substantive. His address at Madison Square Garden to the Indian diaspora projected India's global confidence and soft power. Subsequent meetings with President Barack Obama in 2015 and 2016 further consolidated political trust. Obama's participation as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2015 symbolized mutual respect between the world's two largest democracies. During this visit, both leaders unveiled the "U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region", a policy document that laid the foundation for Indo-Pacific cooperation (Madan, 2021).

## **5.2 Economic and Technological Cooperation**

Economic diplomacy flourished during the Modi-Obama and Modi-Trump periods. Bilateral trade crossed USD 140 billion by 2018, making the United States one of India's largest trading partners. Simultaneously, U.S. investment in India's technology, energy, and defence sectors expanded substantially (Brookings Institution, 2022). The U.S.-India Energy Dialogue was upgraded to a Strategic Energy Partnership (SEP) in 2018, broadening cooperation in clean energy, oil, and gas infrastructure. The launch of the U.S.-India Trade Policy Forum revived dialogue on intellectual property rights, market access, and investment norms, although friction persisted over tariff disputes and data localisation policies (Carnegie Endowment, 2021). Technological cooperation deepened through the U.S.-India Cyber Dialogue and joint initiatives on critical and emerging technologies, including 5G, artificial intelligence, and space research. These developments reflected a mutual recognition that technological sovereignty was becoming an essential component of strategic autonomy in the digital age.

## **5.3 Defence Partnership and Security Architecture**

Under Modi, defence ties with the United States witnessed unprecedented growth. The designation of India as a Major Defence Partner in 2016 formalized its elevated status within the U.S. strategic ecosystem. The subsequent signing of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018 and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in 2020 enhanced interoperability between the armed forces of both countries (ORF, 2022). These foundational agreements collectively symbolized a shift from transactional cooperation to integrated security engagement. They also reflected India's central role in the

U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, aimed at counterbalancing China's regional assertiveness. The QUAD revival in 2017, involving India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, further exemplified India's diplomatic re-calibration.

#### **5.4 Modi-Trump Diplomacy: A Pragmatic Partnership**

The Donald Trump administration (2017-2021) adopted a transactional and personality-driven approach to diplomacy. Despite initial uncertainties, Modi adeptly navigated Trump's "America First" agenda through visible public diplomacy, such as the "Howdy Modi" event in Houston (2019) and the "Namaste Trump" rally in Ahmedabad (2020).

These high-visibility events showcased the growing importance of people-to-people ties and reflected the political chemistry between the two leaders. While trade disputes and differences over immigration persisted, defence and strategic cooperation continued to thrive, particularly in the Indo-Pacific domain. The Trump era, despite its unpredictability, solidified the notion that Indo-U.S. diplomacy had become "institution-proof" - resilient to leadership changes and anchored in shared strategic imperatives (Pant, 2021).

### **6. The Biden Administration and India's Global Role (2021-Present)**

The election of President Joe Biden in 2021 marked another milestone in Indo-U.S. diplomatic evolution. Biden's approach, grounded in multilateralism, alliance restoration, and value-based diplomacy, offered continuity with transformation. The partnership has since deepened across climate policy, defence cooperation, and global governance, underscoring India's growing significance in U.S. foreign policy.

#### **6.1 Reinvigorating Multilateralism and Climate Diplomacy**

Under the Biden-Modi framework, climate and sustainable development have emerged as key pillars of engagement. The launch of the U.S.-India Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership in 2021 aligned both nations' goals for carbon neutrality and clean technology innovation (White House, 2023). The collaboration on Green Hydrogen, renewable energy financing, and the Global Biofuels Alliance - launched under India's G20 presidency in 2023 - exemplifies this alignment. The partnership reinforces India's identity as a responsible global stakeholder and the U.S.'s role as a

technological catalyst for sustainable development (NITI Aayog, 2023).

### **6.2 The QUAD's Strategic Maturity**

The Biden administration elevated the QUAD from a consultative mechanism to a strategic policy platform. The first-ever Leaders' Summit in 2021 institutionalized regular engagements, followed by meetings in Tokyo (2022) and Sydney (2023). The QUAD's focus expanded from maritime security to critical technologies, vaccine diplomacy, cyber resilience, and infrastructure financing (Carnegie Endowment, 2023). India's participation in QUAD reflects its nuanced strategic posture - cooperating closely with the United States and its allies while preserving its independent voice in global affairs.

### **6.3 I2U2 and New Minilateralism**

In 2022, the launch of I2U2 - comprising India, Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates - marked a new phase of issue-based multilateralism. Focused on food security, clean energy, and technological innovation, I2U2 demonstrates India's growing diplomatic versatility (Brookings Institution, 2023). The initiative reflects the evolution of Indian foreign policy from reactive balancing to proactive global shaping, where partnerships are structured around practical cooperation rather than ideological blocs.

### **6.4 Technology and Defence Synergies**

Recent years have witnessed a rapid expansion in defence-industrial and technological cooperation. The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), announced in 2023, focuses on joint development of semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and space technologies. These initiatives complement India's "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) vision while advancing U.S. supply chain diversification (White House, 2023). The defence dimension continues to grow through increased joint exercises, co-production agreements, and maritime domain awareness initiatives under the Indo-Pacific Maritime Cooperation Framework (2023).

### **6.5 The Modi-Biden Equation and Global Governance**

The diplomatic synergy between Modi and Biden is anchored in pragmatic trust and global responsibility. Biden's endorsement of India's G20 Presidency (2023) and support for its permanent

membership in the UN Security Council reflect Washington's recognition of India's leadership in multilateral diplomacy. During the G20 Summit in New Delhi, both leaders reaffirmed commitments to democratic values, supply chain security, and equitable global development. These developments have elevated Indo-U.S. diplomacy from bilateral coordination to global co-leadership—positioning India as a central pillar in America's Indo-Pacific strategy and a pivotal voice in global governance.

## **7. Indo-U.S. Strategic Convergence in the Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific region has become the central theatre of Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The redefinition of the Asia-Pacific into the "Indo-Pacific" marks a conceptual and diplomatic convergence between New Delhi and Washington - both seeking a free, open, and inclusive regional order.

### **7.1 The Indo-Pacific Vision: From Concept to Strategy**

For India, the Indo-Pacific is a geographic and civilizational continuum extending from the eastern coast of Africa to the western Pacific. For the United States, it represents a strategic framework to ensure maritime freedom, supply chain resilience, and security architecture that prevents coercive domination by any single power (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in 2019, complements the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. Both share a commitment to the rule of law, regional connectivity, and sustainable development.

### **7.2 Maritime and Security Cooperation**

Defence and maritime collaboration form the backbone of Indo-U.S. strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Regular joint exercises such as MALABAR, involving India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia, have strengthened operational interoperability. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) have further institutionalized security cooperation, allowing real-time data sharing and mutual logistical access (Pant, 2021).

### **7.3 The Economic Dimension of the Indo-Pacific**

Beyond security, the Indo-Pacific partnership also rests on economic connectivity. India and the U.S. collaborate on the

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), focusing on clean energy, resilient supply chains, and digital trade standards (White House, 2023). Although India has opted out of the trade pillar of the IPEF, its participation in the supply chain and energy components underscores a pragmatic approach to economic multilateralism.

## **8. Diplomatic Cooperation on Global Platforms**

### **8.1 The G20 and Global Economic Governance**

India's presidency of the G20 in 2023 marked a diplomatic milestone in Indo-U.S. relations. The United States strongly supported India's inclusive vision for global development, encapsulated in the theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future". Joint initiatives such as the Global Biofuels Alliance and Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) were designed to provide sustainable alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (NITI Aayog, 2023).

### **8.2 United Nations and Global Governance**

India's long-standing quest for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) continues to receive strong American support. The Biden administration's reiteration of this stance reflects an evolving understanding of India's role as a responsible global power. Both countries have also cooperated closely on counter-terrorism resolutions and humanitarian responses under the UN framework (Brookings Institution, 2023).

### **8.3 Technology, Health, and Climate Diplomacy**

Post-pandemic diplomacy has witnessed enhanced Indo-U.S. collaboration on health security, vaccine distribution, and climate adaptation. Through the QUAD Vaccine Partnership (2021) and Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030, the two nations have positioned themselves as co-leaders in global resilience-building (Carnegie Endowment, 2023).

## **9. Challenges in Contemporary Diplomacy**

### **9.1 Trade and Economic Disputes**

Trade frictions remain a recurring issue. The U.S. withdrawal of India's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits in 2019 and disagreements over digital taxation, e-commerce regulation, and visa restrictions have caused periodic strain (Madan, 2021). However,

these tensions coexist with expanding investment flows and a shared commitment to economic resilience.

### **9-2 Divergent Foreign Policy Priorities**

While both nations converge on the Indo-Pacific, divergences persist on issues such as Russia's war in Ukraine, sanctions policy, and regional alignments in West Asia. India's adherence to strategic autonomy occasionally contrasts with Washington's alliance-based approach (Jaishankar, 2020).

### **9-3 Human Rights and Digital Governance**

The United States occasionally raises concerns regarding human rights, data privacy, and freedom of expression in India. Conversely, New Delhi remains cautious of perceived external interference in domestic affairs. These differences highlight the democratic paradox within the partnership - where shared values do not always translate into identical policy positions.

## **10. Future Prospects of Indo-U.S. Diplomacy**

### **10-1 Towards a Comprehensive Global Partnership**

The institutional architecture of the relationship – encompassing defence, technology, climate, and people-to-people ties – has reached a point of critical consolidation. Strengthening this framework will require aligning domestic reforms with international commitments.

### **10-2 Joint Leadership in Global Governance**

Both nations are likely to play a co-leadership role in shaping 21<sup>st</sup>-century global governance. India's growing presence in multilateral institutions and U.S. support for democratic resilience initiatives offer a strong basis for cooperation on global health, cyber-security, and digital equity (White House, 2023).

### **10-3 The Role of People and Soft Power**

Indian diaspora diplomacy will continue to be a vital bridge in sustaining bilateral goodwill. Educational and cultural exchanges, combined with innovation partnerships, reinforce societal connections that underpin the strategic relationship (Mohan, 2022).

## **11. Conclusion**

Indo-U.S. political and diplomatic relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflect a remarkable evolution from estrangement to strategic

convergence. Anchored in shared democratic values and overlapping strategic interests, the partnership has matured into a comprehensive framework that influences global governance, security, and development. The Modi-Biden era represents the consolidation of this transformation – an era where diplomacy extends beyond statecraft into shared innovation, sustainability, and leadership. While challenges persist, the resilience of the partnership lies in its adaptability and mutual recognition of global responsibilities. As India emerges as a global power and the United States re-calibrates its alliances for a multipolar order, Indo-U.S. relations are likely to remain the cornerstone of democratic collaboration in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

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