

# THE GREAT INDIAN STRATEGIC DEBATE - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

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For over two decades, ever since the process of rapprochement began between India and the United States (US) after the 1998 nuclear tests, there have been two clear views within the Indian polity and strategic community. One suggested closer ties between India and the US. Advocates of this view pointed to US power; the advantages that India could extract for its economic development; the convergence in democratic values; and the fact that the US can act as an insurance policy in the face of a rising China. The other school of thought pointed to the US track record of undermining Indian interests and its close ties with the Pakistan military; and argued that proximity will undermine India's "strategic autonomy", and deepen New Delhi's disputes with Beijing.

All governments have chosen a middle way till now, even as they have tilted towards the first view. Recognising the benefits of closer ties with the US, New Delhi has deepened economic and military links with Washington. But it has been careful not to enter any formal alliance; been hesitant to institutionalise structures such as Quad; retained its independent positions on issues such as trade; and deepened its economic ties with China. Each time tensions with China erupted, a familiar question was asked. Is China's behaviour a result of India-US proximity, or is India-US proximity a result of Chinese behaviour?

Chinese aggression at the Line of Actual Control in the last two months, and the brutal clash on June 15 which left 20 Indian soldiers dead, have now answered the question. China will be India's greatest strategic threat in the coming decades. Whether India desires it or not, it will end up as one of the frontline states which will have to step up to contain Chinese power, not because of a third power, but because its own interests are at stake. This will mean India has no choice but to deepen its partnerships with other countries, particularly the US. And it will reduce links with China. But even as there is greater strategic clarity, walking down this path comes with responsibility and costs. It may lead to even greater Chinese aggression, and open up the prospect of an adverse two-front situation. It will mean making difficult trade-offs, since US interests do not always converge with Indian interests. It will also mean building internal economic capabilities, ensuring social peace, and evolving a cross-party consensual position. India's choice has been made; it now has to stay the distance.

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