

# STRATEGIES FOR AUTONOMY

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

*The scope of Open Embrace, writes Varghese K. George, Associate Editor of The Hindu, in the introduction, is to explore how U.S. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, both driven by notions of nationalism, are reshaping the U.S. and India, respectively, and the impact of that process on their external ties. An extract:*

While Indian foreign policy has evolved over the decades, what has not changed is the concept of strategic autonomy, which is that India would not join any military alliance, would always keep its choices open and would choose what is good for it depending on the situation at a particular moment. Some commentators have derided strategic autonomy as a rigid ideological position that has prevented India from achieving more in the international arena. Some have said that India should have become an ally of the U.S. several decades ago, and by not doing so, it had limited its potential.

Strategic autonomy has recently been at the forefront of discussions largely due to India's ever-tightening embrace with the U.S. As the two countries inch closer to one another, will India be able to maintain its autonomy of choice and independence? Will it become a satellite of the U.S., dragged by it into alliances and wars of its choosing?

Define 'strategic partners'

Undoubtedly, the U.S. is crucial to India's progress as a key source of technology and capital and as the foremost destination for its students and jobseekers in various sectors. Many advocates of continuing expansion of India-U.S. ties say that strategic autonomy is useless and counterproductive. Why not join the U.S. wholeheartedly and derive full benefits of being an ally of the most powerful military force and home to the best technology in the world?

The U.S. shares its most advanced technologies and intelligence only with its closest allies. The NATO allies and Israel are topmost in this pecking order. For instance, only they have been given F-35 fighter planes, the most advanced of America's fighter planes yet. The Guardian-series Unmanned Aerial Vehicles have been sold only to NATO allies till date, and now India has been offered them as a special gesture. India's requests for advanced technologies routinely get entangled in the foundational question — has any other country that is not a military ally been given this particular technology? Whenever the answer is 'no', its request could be denied. For instance, a new plane for the travel of India's Prime Minister, being negotiated between India and American manufacturer Boeing, will come without a lot of advanced communication equipment unless both countries manage to conclude a treaty that governs its use. Hence one can argue that there are benefits of signing up as a military ally of the U.S.

The counter to this argument is that given the drastic changes in U.S. position across several crucial issues, India might have done well by never aligning with it as an ally. The U.S. had been pushing India to open its markets more to global trade, but has now suddenly turned against the same, under Mr. Trump. The U.S. under Barack Obama put tremendous pressure on India to ratify the Paris Agreement. But his successor has announced a withdrawal from the pact and ordered an end to all measures for its implementation.

Even before Mr. Trump, if one considers the last two decades of accelerated engagement between the two countries, the U.S. has made abrupt U-turns on many foreign policy issues, much to India's discomfort. It has alternated between trying to befriend and confront China —

something that continues under Mr. Trump; it has sought to ignore Pakistan, punish it and then woo it with money and weapons; it has tried to contain Iran and then open up to it and, now, contain it again; and it has given conflicting signals on Afghanistan. President Obama wanted India to take a tougher stand against the military junta in Myanmar, and then went ahead for a rapprochement with them himself. Strategic autonomy has allowed India to have its own policies towards these countries to a great extent, in the midst of the flux that the U.S. often contributes to.

Mr. Modi and his key adviser in the initial years, S. Jaishankar, did not use the phrase strategic autonomy in the beginning. But in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, Mr. Modi said: "It is a measure of our strategic autonomy that India's Strategic Partnership, with Russia, has matured to be special and privileged." The speech itself was an elucidation of the age-old policy of India's strategic autonomy.

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