

From Tensions to Triumph: India and United States Overcome Challenges, Solidify Future Cooperation

On 6 Jan 2025, the-then United States (US)' National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, and Ajit Doval, the NSA to PM Modi, leading a delegation of senior US officials.¹ During the visit, the two sides reviewed in broad strokes the progress made in key sectors, including the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET).²

The trip, Sullivan's last before the Biden administration gives way to Trump 2.0, concluded with an announcement of key US policy changes that will further bilateral ties.³ Washington's planned 'Updates' to the US missile export control policies under the Missile Technology Control Regime will enhance with the US' commercial space cooperation with India. More importantly, Sullivan announced the US' efforts to finalise necessary steps to delist Indian nuclear entities from the restricted lists, which will promote civil nuclear cooperation and clean energy supply chains.

Jaishankar complimented Sullivan for his 'Personal Contribution' to forging a stronger India-US partnership.⁴ Sullivan's visit arrived a week after Jaishankar's six-day visit to the US. Jaishankar met senior officials, including his counterpart Antony Blinken and Sullivan, reviewing the progress of bilateral partnership over the last four years, while he remained optimistic about ties going ahead. He also met Michael Waltz, NSA for current President Donald Trump.⁵ This marked the first high-level meeting by Jaishankar with the Trump 2.0 administration before the swearing-in ceremony.

Even as Sullivan billed the next decade as propelling the India-US partnership toward an 'Endless Frontier', both visits were integral to ongoing efforts to facilitate a smooth transition under Trump 2.0, while signifying the structural, deep, and ever-expanding nature of ties.⁶

Multipronged Significance of the Visits

The high-level visits proved to be significant vis-a-vis India's civil nuclear program (potentially), the future of the bilateral relationship, and the backdrop of recent tensions.

At present, the major impediment to bilateral civil nuclear cooperation is the Code of Federal Regulations (Part 810) of the US, Atomic Energy Act, which allows US nuclear vendors to export equipment under strict safeguards, but bars them from any kind of joint manufacturing of nuclear equipment or performing nuclear design work in countries such as India.⁷ The planned delisting of Indian nuclear entities is especially noteworthy, given that the India-US civil nuclear agreement has not been operationalised in more than a decade and a half.⁸ Moreover, owing to stringent liability provisions in Delhi's Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act 2010, the last two decades have seen no nation other than Russia willing to partner with India to establish nuclear

power plants. It may open the doors for joint production of nuclear components for atomic power projects planned in India by deploying US atomic reactors.

India wants to become a trusted and affordable place for making nuclear reactors, especially Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) with capacities between 30MWe and 300MWe. While India is skilled at building SMRs, its technology, which uses heavy water and natural uranium, is not in line with the more common Light Water Reactors (LWRs) used worldwide. Since the US is a leader in LWR technology, working with American companies and experts could help India improve and bridge this gap.

Such a visit on the part of Sullivan reflected efforts on the part of Washington to strengthen and hasten bilateral cooperation in other key sectors as well, such as advanced technologies, especially since the beginning of iCET.⁹ The high-level visit concluded with announced cooperation on co-production of the US sonobuoys for the Indian Navy, which marked the first defence-industrial collaboration under iCET on niche undersea technology.¹⁰

The production of sonobuoys will be divided equally between the US and India on the basis of US Navy standards, jointly with Bharat Dynamics Limited and American Ultra Maritime, on the principle of Make in India. Besides enhancing subsea indigenisation, the joint venture will enhance military interoperability between the two navies, since sonobuoys are interchangeable and interoperable between US Navy, Indian Navy, and allied P-8, MH-60R, and the MQ-9B Sea Guardian aircraft.¹¹

The visits of Sullivan and Jaishankar only reinforced the mutual intention of not allowing surprise crises to mar the relations. Visits were opportune and perhaps appeared necessary in view of multiple incidents of friction during the last three months. The first was by the US Department of Justice (DOJ)-indicted Vikash Yadav, former officer of the Research and Analysis Wing, for an attempted assassination plot against Sikh separatist leader and US national Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. Indian officials informed the US State Department about concerns regarding certain elements attempting to destabilise the country, describing them as a disruptive force.¹²

Thereafter, another DOJ indictment on Gautam Adani and the subsequent withdrawal of Adani Group's financing request from the US International Development Finance Corporation aggravated the escalatory dynamic.¹³ Both visits symbolised the matured and structural nature of the relationship, which has survived numerous headwinds in hindsight.

Way Ahead

Every US administration brings its own set of challenges to India-US relations. However, some scholars believe that trade disagreements under Trump 2.0 could have a bigger impact on India. Trump, who previously called India the 'Tariff King' because of its high taxes on imports, is likely to take a tougher stance on India's trade policies.¹⁴ However, strong strategic alignment between the two partners might temper

Trump's inclinations for imposing tariffs, although threats to impose duties and dialogue on trade issues might continue.

While Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy may have some pluses for India, such as the latter's relations with Russia, it can also be manifested in different approaches to cooperation in defense sectors.

The potential demands that Washington may place on India for increased defense imports rather than India's preferred projects involving technology transfer may affect the benefits India wants from its ties with the US.

Meanwhile, New Delhi, which is currently in the middle of rapprochement with Beijing, would naturally be circumspect before jumping on a Trump-led anti-China bandwagon. Thus, India is likely to rely on prevalent institutional enablers and bureaucracy for bolstering defense and technology partnership, as it did during Trump's first term. While shared concerns about overreliance on imports from China might further private sector investment from both sides in sunrise sectors, sustained multistakeholder efforts, through iCET and the India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem, will help to ensure continued cooperation in key sectors like high-technologies.

It will also be subject to adjustment of regulations on both sides, especially in defence, manufacturing, and nuclear. It is in this respect that cooperation between the two will be inevitable toward building more resilient supply chains. However, regional security cooperation would gain prominence as well with both working toward an international framework for governance over issues such as artificial intelligence and global commons.

Endnotes

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