

2024 IN REVIEW: INDIA'S TIES WITH MAJOR POWERS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The year 2024 started under the shadow of U.S. allegations regarding involvement of Indian government agents in the attempted killing of Sikh activists on its soil.¹ Preceding the release of this information, President Joe Biden declined the invitation to attend India's Republic Day celebrations as chief guest, setting the tone for Indo-U.S. relations for the year.² As Mr. Narendra Modi was elected prime minister for the third consecutive term, India persisted with its key foreign policy approaches towards China, Russia and the U.S. – betraying further exposure of its true intentions and objectives.

Sino-India Border 'Breakthrough' Amid Mistrust

This year marked a purported 'breakthrough' in Sino-India relations as both countries continued negotiations on the border dispute. After four years of stand-off, in October 2024, India and China had announced reaching a patrolling agreement along the disputed border in the Himalayas.³ Most recently, on 18 December 2024, the Indian and Chinese representatives reportedly reached a

1 Maheen Shafeeq, "2023 In-Review: Dents in Indo-U.S. Relations," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, December 22, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-2023-in-review-dents-in-indo-u-s-relations/>

2 Maheen Shafeeq, "India's Republic Day: Indo-French Partnership and Implications for Pakistan," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, February 15, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-indias-republic-day-indo-french-partnership-and-implications-for-pakistan/>

3 Maheen Shafeeq, "A Thaw in India-China Relations Amidst Geopolitical Complexities and Implications for Pakistan," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, November 6, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-a-thaw-in-india-china-relations-amidst-geopolitical-complexities-and-implications-for-pakistan/>

'consensus' on six points for border management, including seeking a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework for settlement of the boundary question; maintaining peace and tranquility in the border areas; ensuring peaceful conditions on the ground; advancing effective border management; coordinating and guiding the relevant diplomatic and military mechanisms; and exchanging cross-border data on trade and rivers.⁴ These six points are being projected as significant for the reestablishment of working relations between the two sides, post-Galwan valley skirmishes. Although this development does not fully alleviate the border tensions, it does bring India and China a bit closer to managing the tense relations as strenuous efforts would still be required to restore mutual trust and resolve the main bone of contention – i.e., demarcation of the disputed border.

Since the May 2020 Galwan valley skirmishes, India and China have held over 20 rounds of high-level military talks to lower the tension. As such, the two countries have been able to maintain communication dictated by their respective interests. For China, it could be an attempt to keep India from fully falling into the U.S. orbit in the context of 'Indo Pacific' strategy and in the wake of uncertainties surrounding the actions of the incoming Trump Administration. For India, it could be a recognition of a losing grip on South Asia combined with the lack of will and the capacity to counter China in the border region or in the Indian Ocean Region. Notwithstanding its political posture of "countering" China, India remains in search of alternative diplomatic options as compared to military recourse to resolve the dispute. This runs contrary to its assigned role of a 'net security provider' within the U.S. 'Indo-Pacific' construct. Moving forward, India would continue seeking to defuse the border tensions with China, while securing defence deals and advanced technology from the U.S. and the West on the pretext of "countering" China, evidently in sharply contrasting strategies.

India-Russia Special and Privileged Partnership Endures

During 2024, India appeared closer to Russia. Although India defended Russia diplomatically in its conflict against Ukraine since it started in February 2022, the year was significant in that Prime Minister Modi visited Russia twice and met Russian President Vladimir Putin: First, in July, for the 22nd India-Russia Annual Dialogue, where Russia's highest award was conferred on him; and second, in October, to attend the BRICS summit, a part of the drive for alternative options as well as efforts to blunt any perception of 'alignment' with the West.⁵ These were the first leadership level meetings

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs India, "23rd Meeting of the Special Representatives of India and China" press release, December 18, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38805/23rd_Meeting_of_the_Special_Representatives_of_India_and_China

⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Transcript of Special Briefing by Foreign Secretary on Prime Minister's Visit to Russia, July 09, 2024," Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit->

since the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out. During these meetings, the two countries agreed to take tangible steps to further strengthen the India-Russia 'Special and Privileged' strategic partnership. However, any defence deals resulting from these meetings were not disclosed; rather the focus ostensibly remained on strengthening economic connectivity through the Chennai-Vladivostok (Eastern Maritime) Corridor and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). This could be designed to reinvigorate the supply chains in order to support the impacted Russian economy due to the on-going conflict.

The year also showed that India was playing on both sides of the conflicting parties in Eastern Europe, as it provided defence equipment both to Ukraine and Russia. This illustrates that India has continued to capitalize on the profit-making opportunities in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, while conveniently glossing over its obligations to international law and human rights. To be sure, India would continue to accrue as well as extend benefits in the diplomatic, economic and defence domains, within the backdrop of its strategic partnership with Russia. As the conflict becomes protracted, Russia would need all the available partners, and in this context the special relationship with India is likely to grow as claimed by Russia's Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.⁶

Indo-U.S. Ties Driven by Conflicting Agendas

The Indo-U.S. strategic partnership is driven by the projected 'China threat,' constrained by Moscow's concerns, and overshadowed by New Delhi's thwarted murder plot on U.S. soil.⁷ In context of 'countering' China in the 'Indo-Pacific' region, India remained a priority in Washington's strategic calculus in 2024. The primary focus of their strategic partnership was on enhancing maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region. Within this framework, in October 2024, the U.S. agreed to sell 30 advanced radio systems and other support equipment for India's Seahawk naval helicopters worth \$1.17 billion with the aim of upgrading India's anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.⁸

detail.htm?37945/Transcript+of+Special+Briefing+by+Foreign+Secretary+on+Prime+Ministers+visit+to+Russia+July+09+2024

⁶ Sanstuti Nath, "Russia To Pursue Stronger Ties With India Amid Lack Of Trust With West," NDTV, December 19, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/russia-putin-aide-says-moscow-to-pursue-stronger-ties-with-india-amid-lack-of-trust-with-west-7282431>

⁷ Maheen Shafeeq, "Canada and U.S. Expose Indian Government's Transnational Terrorism," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, November 15, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-canada-and-u-s-expose-indian-governments-transnational-terrorism/>

⁸ "India-U.S.: Major Arms Transfers and Military Exercises," Congressional Research Service, December 5, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12438>

As Major Defence Partners, India and the U.S. inked the Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA) during Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to the U.S. in August 2024.⁹ SOSA is a non-binding agreement that primarily permits to request priority delivery of certain defence items. It remains to be seen how impactful this would be in expediting the pending deals, especially the 114 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA).¹⁰ Frustrated with the delays in foreign jet procurement and setbacks in its own indigenous production of Tejas coupled with the urgent need to update the aging fleet, India appears to be turning to Su-30 MKI as an alternative option, highlighting reliance on Russia over the Western options for aircraft.¹¹

India's significant defence collaboration with Russia has been an irritant in the Indo-U.S. partnership, especially ever since the Russia-Ukraine conflict began. While the U.S. has pressed India diplomatically to distance itself from Russia, the U.S. took certain measures in 2024 imposing sanctions on Indian defence firms and persons for providing U.S.-sourced critical and dual-use technology to Russia. This shows that Indo-Russia ties are at least being scrutinized in Washington, if not impacting Indo-U.S. ties as yet.¹²

Despite defence deals and the premium on building India as a 'bulwark' against China, India-U.S. political and diplomatic relations appear overshadowed by the U.S. and Canadian allegations for murder campaigns against Sikh activists orchestrated by Indian government agents on their soil. The Canadian government alleged that India's home affairs minister, Amit Shah, PM Modi's closest confidant, was behind a recent series of plots to murder and intimidate Sikh activists.¹³ The U.S. Department of Justice issued a second indictment of charges against another Indian government official. In yet another case, an indictment accused the Adani group of bribing Indian government

⁹ Joseph Clark, "Austin Lauds U.S.-India Ties in Meeting With Counterpart," US Department of Defence, August 23, 2024

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3883273/austin-lauds-us-india-ties-in-meeting-with-counterpart/>

¹⁰ Dinakar Peri, "Govt. looking for a transparent, efficient procurement model for 114 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft tender", *The Hindu*, October 31, 2024,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/govt-looking-for-a-transparent-efficient-procurement-model-for-114-multi-role-fighter-aircraft-tender/article68815639.ece>

¹¹ Shivani Sharma, "India signs Rs 13,500 crore deal for advanced indigenous Su-30MKI jets," *India Today*, December 13, 2024,

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-signs-rs-13500-crore-deal-for-advanced-indigenous-su-30mki-jets-2649248-2024-12-13>

¹² Maheen Shafeeq, "India-Russia Strategic Partnership Under U.S. Scrutiny: Analyzing U.S. Sanctions and Export Controls," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, November 27, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-india-russia-strategic-partnership-under-u-s-scrutiny-analyzing-u-s-sanctions-and-export-controls/>

¹³ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Canada alleges Indian minister behind plot to target Sikh separatists," *The Guardian*, 30 Oct 2024,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/30/canada-alleges-indian-minister-amit-shah-plot-to-target-sikh-separatists>

officials to obtain contracts for solar power plant project from the U.S. This highlights that two of Modi's closest confidants are under scrutiny in the U.S.

Conclusion

In the year 2024, India and China inched towards agreeing to manage the border dispute. However, persistent mistrust and the core issue of demarcation of the disputed border would likely linger on. With this step, India aims to calm its opponent, if not befriend it. This appears in contrast with India's assigned role as 'net security provider' in the U.S. 'Indo-Pacific' construct. During 2024, India also appeared closer to Russia as Modi and Putin met in person for the first time since the on-set of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022. On the other hand, Indian artillery landed in Ukraine, a subject of obvious ire in Indo-Russia relations.

While India has extended vast diplomatic support to Russia, it has also provided military equipment to Russia, some of it even sourced from the U.S. for which the U.S. imposed sanctions on Indian firms and individuals. Since the start of the conflict, India has secured lucrative deals, especially in the purchase of discounted Russian crude oil and exporting it to diverse markets, benefitting from the war. Although the U.S. and India concluded an agreement to expedite the pending defence orders, neither Russia nor the U.S. concluded any significant defence deal with India during 2024 -- unlike previous year when India secured the deal to co-produce jet engines. In conclusion, while the U.S. works on making India a 'counter-weight' to China, India seeks to resolve tensions with China, and build an even closer relationship with Russia – all in the name of 'strategic autonomy.' Would these contradictory strands in Indian policies and actions be reconciled in 2025, or would this clever posture finally get caught in the quagmire of zero-sum mindsets and equations of contemporary geo-politics, only time will tell.