Can India maintain strategic autonomy in the Trump 2.0 era?

Voiceover:

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Sami Shah:

Hello, I'm Sami Shah.
This is Ear to Asia.

Pradeep Taneja:

India's foreign policy is one of multi alignment. So strategic autonomy and strategic resilience are key principles of Indian foreign policy. I know it is not easy for India to walk that tightrope, but so far India has been successful in maintaining ties with its traditional strategic partner Russia and its new strategic partner, the United States. In fact, many other countries, including Indonesia, are looking at India as an example.

Sami Shah:

In this episode, can India maintain strategic autonomy in the Trump 2.0 era?

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

When India gained independence in 1947, the United States was amongst the first to establish diplomatic ties, but true partnership was slow to follow. Through the Cold War, US backing of Pakistan and India's closeness with Moscow kept the two democracies at arm's length. More recently, shared concerns over China have drawn them together, but their cooperation is once again under strain. In his second term, President Donald Trump has

imposed sweeping tariffs, including a 50% duty on Indian goods, a move aimed at pressuring New Delhi to curb imports of Russian crude oil. The measure has hit Indian exporters hard, placing the country in a difficult bind as it seeks to safeguard its economic interests while preserving long standing energy and defence ties with Moscow. Tougher US immigration rules affecting Indian professionals further complicate the relationship. At the same time, Moscow's closer alignment with Beijing has altered the framework that has underpinned India's defence and economic partnership with Russia for decades. So, can India maintain its balancing act, partnering with the US in the quad, relying on Russia for energy and arms and cautiously improving ties with Beijing?
Are Trump's tariff tactics pushing India closer to its Eurasian partners? And as global rivalries deepen, can New Delhi still chart an independent course between these competing powers?

Dr Pradeep Taneja, an Asia political scientist from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, joins me to peel back the layers of the relationship between India and the United States.

Dr Taneja is also a regular guest on Air to Asia. Welcome back. Pradeep.

Pradeep Taneja:

Hello, Sammy.

Sami Shah:

India and the US began diplomatic relations in 1947. But how did that relationship go from distant to now outright hostile sometimes.

Pradeep Taneja:

Well, it's a long time since independence and the relationship has been transformed. I mean, you rightly said that there was a period, particularly during the Cold War, where India and the United States, in a way, had significant differences, particularly beginning with the 1971 India-Pakistan war, where the US sent in its seventh fleet in the Bay of Bengal and then India, had the backing of the Soviet Union. Earlier that year, Indira Gandhi had signed a

peace and friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, and that became the cornerstone of India's relationship with the Soviet Union.

So, to put it briefly, India was much closer to the Soviet Union, despite being a non-aligned state, despite being one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement and United States, on the other hand, had developed a close strategic relationship with Pakistan.

Pakistan was a treaty ally. Pakistan was a member of both SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation, and CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation). Both of these treaty alliance systems in the region were under the US leadership. India, on the other hand, was much closer to the Soviet Union.

But over the last 30 years, really, relationship between the US and India has been transformed. India signed its first defence decadal agreement since 1995.
India and the US have been signing a defence framework agreement, which goes for about ten years. So, we've seen the first 1 in 1995, another one in 2005, then 2015, and the latest one was signed on the 31st of October this year in Malaysia between the Indian defence minister and the US secretary of defence.

I think these agreements have been growing in ambition. These defence framework agreements between the US and India have been growing in ambition and cooperation between India and the United States, particularly in the defence sector, has been increasing. So much so that in 2016 the US created another classification, a new a unique classification where it classified India as a Major Defence Partner. Now, a Major Defence Partner is a classification which is unique to India because United States obviously has major defence relationships with its NATO allies, but it also has about 20 countries with which the US has a relationship called the non-NATO partners, and that includes Australia, but for India because India is not a treaty ally of the United States, the US has created a new classification called the Major Defence Partner.

So, India is a Major Defence Partner and I would argue that the defence pillar of the Indo-US relationship is probably the strongest of all the other pillars.

Sami Shah:

Were there any contributing factors that were particular in terms of creating those pillars.

Was China the main reason?

Pradeep Taneja:

First of all, let me just briefly, go through the key pillars of the US-India relationship. Economic relationship is obviously very important. So that's one pillar and that pillar at the moment is under a lot of pressure. As you pointed out Trump has imposed very high tariff, 50% tariffs on imports from India and that has really affected the trade and economic relationship. But the economic relationship is still an important pillar of the bilateral relationship.

The second pillar is the technological relationship, technology transfer. Indian companies have close relationships with their US counterparts. In fact, many of the US tech companies are run by Indians, people who emigrated from India to the United States. Google. Microsoft. All of these big companies are run by people who originally hailed from India.

The third pillar is the people-to-people relationship. There are about five million people of Indian origin in the United States. The Indian diaspora plays a very important part in that bilateral relationship. The fact that even in the Trump administration, many of the key positions are held by people of Indian origin is itself indicative of that third pillar of the relationship.

The fourth, and I think the most important pillar is the defence relationship. And this is where I think, despite recent turbulence on the trade front, the defence relationship continues to grow. We've seen, for example, as I mentioned, India and US signed their 2025 Defence Framework Agreement, which is a decadal agreement signed every ten years since 1995. But also when it comes to the military-to-military relationship, India and US have a pretty strong relationship. India conducts more military exercises with the United States than it does with any other country. So the defence pillar of that bilateral relationship is probably the strongest.

Sami Shah:

And then let's talk about the China aspect there. How profoundly does the challenge posed by China from border conflicts, regional ambitions, influence India's alignment choices?

Pradeep Taneja:

Well, I think there are differences between the logic of the US-India partnership and the rhetoric. When it comes to rhetoric, when it comes to public statements the two sides don't mention China as the reason for their growing closeness. The Indian government particularly is very careful, not to mention China. So one of the offshoots of the US-India defence relationship, of course, is the Quad. It used to be called the Quadrilateral Security Initiative, but it is now really just referred to as the Quad. And in the Quad, if you look at it, the four countries that are part of the Quad, United States, Australia, Japan and India,
India is the only country which is not a treaty ally of the United States, because Australia and Japan are treaty allies of the United States. So it's nothing unusual to have defence collaboration amongst the treaty allies. The Quad is significant largely because of India's membership of this grouping.

If you look at statements issued by the Quad every time there's a meeting of Quad leaders or quad foreign ministers, the joint statement that is issued at the end of the meeting often doesn't refer to China at all. And the Indian government is also very careful, not to mention China when making statements on US-India relationship. So, in terms of public statements, China obviously is not a factor. Often the relationship is emphasised as one between, you know, two democracies. We share many common values and the relationship between the US and India is a relationship based on our common values. But if you look at the strategic logic of the relationship, clearly, China and particularly the rise of China as a significant military power is important, I think, to that relationship.

Sami Shah:

We haven't yet spoken about Russia, which is often called an anchor - India's relationship to Russia. What historical factors forged this special and privileged strategic partnership?

Pradeep Taneja:

Well, Russia is a close partner of India and has been for a long time, as we discussed at the beginning of this conversation. And India historically has had, earlier the Soviet Union and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia, as India's major defence supplier.
So when it comes to defence equipment, India has relied heavily on defence purchases.

And also I think there is a perception in India that Russia has been a very reliable and trustworthy defence partner and therefore the Indian government while it's been diversifying its defence procurement, its defence acquisitions, to the United States, France, Israel and a number of other countries. But Russia remains a critical defence supplier to India and many of the legacy equipment of the Indian Army, the Indian Air Force, they need spare parts, which can only come from Russia. So, Russia is important and India has made it very clear that the relationship with Russia has its own logic, its own importance and improvements in its relationship with the United States are not at the cost of relationship with Russia.

Sami Shah:

The China-Russia relationship seems to have entered a renaissance itself. How has that affected Moscow-Delhi ties.

Pradeep Taneja:

This triangle is very important - the India, Russia and China Triangle - because clearly there is very little trust between India and China. We've seen, particularly after the events of 2020, on the border in eastern Ladakh, where 20 Indian soldiers were killed for the first time in 45 years that we saw fatalities on the border between China and India in 2020. And that really was a low point in the India-China relationship. Since then, relations have improved. Modi and Xi Jinping have met twice at least. But still, I would argue that the lack of trust between China and India is a major problem. India and Russia, on the other hand, of course, have a very close relationship, as we just discussed.

What about China and Russia? China and Russia in the 1950s, they were brothers.
They were very close allies. Then we saw a rupture between China and Russia in 1960 and throughout the 1970s and 80s relationship between China and the former Soviet Union was pretty bad. We've seen over the last decade and a half, in particular, China and Russia have edged closer, particularly as President Putin has become much more authoritarian. Xi and President Putin seem to find a lot of things to work in common. They also have a common agenda in terms of the global influence, the global power, of the United States. They're both resentful of the United States and their power and influence around the region. Also, China and Russia dynamics has changed completely because in the 1950s, when China became the recipient of large-scale Russian, or Soviet, aid China was the younger brother. The Soviet Union was the big brother. And now the relationship is completely transformed

because China's economy today is ten times the size of Russia's economy. And therefore China really is the big brother now. Russia is a junior partner. So apart from the number of nuclear warheads in which Russia leads and some areas of defence technology, for example, making aircraft engines, etc., Russia still has an advantage over China. But in many other areas of technology and economy, China is now clearly the bigger brother. And that relationship has been transformed.

From India's point of view, in this triangular relationship, it's not in India's interest for China and Russia to become close allies, and particularly for Russia to become too dependent on China. And I think the Russian leadership is aware. The Russian leadership also doesn't want to become too dependent on China. That's why they want the relationship with India to be as strong as it has always been, because they want to send a signal to China that while we value our partnership with China, we also have alternatives that India is a country which has a similar size in terms of population and domestic market and a faster growing economy than China's economy at the moment. And therefore, Russia wants to send a signal to China that while we value our partnership, but we have alternatives. So Russia also doesn't want to become overly dependent on China, and that serves India's interest.

Sami Shah:

We're talking a little bit about the economic benefits between China and Russia and with India in that triad you talked about. Let's shift now to the US and India and their relationship and what economic benefits have been accruing for each nation over the decades.

Pradeep Taneja:

The India-US economic relationship is an important pillar, as I mentioned earlier, of the bilateral relationship between the US and India. But China is the country that India has a much bigger trade relationship in terms of trade in goods. The US market is very important for India, particularly for services, because for Indian IT companies, United States is the biggest market for Indian software companies. But when it comes to trade in goods, China is the biggest trading partner. In fact, India imports much more from China than it exports. The trade deficit between China and India is now about 100 billion USD. So 100 billion US dollar trade deficit against India. And that has been an issue of concern for the Indian government. The Indian government has been trying to boost exports to China. But China also has a very protectionist trade policy, and Indian companies have found it very difficult to export their

products in the Chinese market. So that's one problem between China and India. But when it comes to US and India, the kind of exports that India has, the kind of commodities that India exports, China, in fact, is a bigger exporter of those commodities to the US than India. So India-US economic relationship, while being very important, is also underdeveloped. There's still, I think, a lot of potential for India, particularly as Indian companies move up the technological value chain. I think the potential for Indian exports to the US will grow. But a major part of the US exports to India, in fact, are defence equipment. So the trade and defence relationship is really joined at the hip.

Sami Shah:

Let's fast forward then to 2025 and to Donald Trump's second term as president of the United States. One of the hallmarks of this term is his application of tariffs on practically every nation on Earth. The US imposed a 25% tariff on many Indian goods on 1st August 2025 and raised that to 50% on August 29th. What was the reason behind the successive tariff hikes?

Pradeep Taneja:

The first 25% was the so-called reciprocal tariff. US concluded using its own ridiculous formula, that India was imposing 25% tariff on US products, and that was not based on actual tariff, that was based on perceptions about how protectionist the Indian market was. India could live with that. Although India was going to negotiate with the US to bring that down, but India thought that we could live with it. And then the Trump administration imposed another 25% tariff on India. Which were in an attempt to penalise India for importing Russian crude oil. Now, historically, Russia was never a big supplier of crude oil to India. Much of India's crude oil came from the Middle East. But since the Ukraine war, Russian suppliers have been discounting crude oil prices in the Indian market. They have been selling crude oil to Indian companies at a much more reduced price. And as a result, Russia has become an important supplier of crude to India. And US leadership has made repeated statements saying that India was fuelling Russia's Ukraine war. Peter Navarro, the trade advisor to President Trump, and even his treasury secretary, have made statements about India's role in supporting the Russian war against Ukraine. The Indian government has said of course this is a ridiculous claim that India is only interested in sourcing energy at affordable prices because India is one of the most energy dependent countries amongst all major economies. And therefore, India's argent is that we would buy oil from anyone who

sells it to us at a discounted price, at an affordable price. And the same offer is available to the US if the US wants to discount oil exports to India, India would buy them from the US. So Indian government says that this is a purely commercial relationship. Russia is supplying oil to India at a discounted price and therefore Indian companies have been buying it from Russia. But US says that this is, in a way, an extension of India's historical ties with Russia. And therefore it would like to see the imports of Russian crude oil by India to stop.
And President Trump actually has recently claimed that India has stopped buying Russian crude. I think India has reduced imports of crude oil from Russia, but I don't think India has stopped. And the US government imposed that 25% extra tariff to essentially change India's trade policy so that India buys less oil or doesn't buy any oil from Russia.

I mean, if you look at the United States inconsistency in US policy from India's point of view, for example, President Trump recently said that Hungary is a landlocked country and therefore Hungary could import Russian oil. But India should not be buying Russian oil.
So clearly in India it is seen as a hypocritical attitude by the US government. And Indian government has said that India's oil import policy is largely a commercial decision by Indian oil companies (some of them, of course, are government owned) that it is not a political or diplomatic government policy.

Sami Shah:

Can we talk a little bit about what sectors have suffered the most in India because of the tariffs and are jobs at risk, and how much are they still dependent on the US market?

Pradeep Taneja:

First of all, Sami, India's exports to the US were largely labour-intensive products, the same kind of goods that other countries also export to the United States. So for example, one of the industries which has been affected where there have been job losses is leather goods. India is a major exporter of leather goods and Indian leather goods exports handbags, suitcases, wallets and other leather products. Those industries are concentrated in some parts of India, and since those tariffs have meant that the cost of imports from India of leather goods have gone up and therefore the US buyers are resorting to buying them from other countries, Pakistan, for example, which has much lower tariffs.
Some industries, labour intensive industries from India, have been adversely affected and we've seen job losses such as leather industry. But there are other industries where tariffs

are not biting as much, where tariffs actually are low. We have seen, for example, US has recently reduced tariffs on food products from a number of countries, including beef, bananas and many other types of food products, largely because US is facing high inflation. One of the problems that the Trump administration faces is that the US public is saying that President Trump keeps telling the country that the US economy is doing very well, but US consumers are feeling the pinch. They're feeling the effect of these high tariffs on basic goods including food products. So recently we have seen US administration reduce tariffs on some of the food products. But clearly India and US are engaged in trade negotiations. They are trying to reach a trade agreement. Both sides have said that they are close. India's commerce minister was in the US not too long ago and his team and the team of the US president have been working on trying to reach a trade agreement. So it's quite possible that we will soon, in fact, within a matter of weeks, we could see a trade agreement between the United States and India. And that could bring the tariff rates back to, in fact, quite possibly below 25%.

Sami Shah:

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I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by Asia political scientist Dr Pradeep Taneja from the University of Melbourne. We're talking about how Trump 2.0 affects India, US relations.

Sami Shah:

How has Trump's punitive tariffs on both India and China affected their bilateral relationship? Has there been some unity formed by being the targets of Trump's ire?

Pradeep Taneja:

Not really. I mean, there was some speculation that India and China, because they're both under pressure from President Trump, that they would work together as two of the largest populations, two of the largest markets, and significant Asian powers that they would find common ground and work together. That really hasn't happened. We've seen relations between China and India have improved. But I don't think that that has much to do with President Trump or the United States pressure on these two countries. I think India and China have reasons to work together. As I said earlier, India and China have a very significant trade relationship. Many of India's manufactured goods, in fact, have components which are imported from China. So for India's own manufacturing industry and Prime Minister Modi has this ‘Make in India’ program and the ‘Make in India’ program focuses, of course, on India based manufacturing. But many of these products have components which are imported from China. So the India-China economic relationship has its own logic. Similarly, India-China strategic tension have their own logic and India doesn't want to see China as the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region. And that's why India would work closely with the United States, with Japan, with Australia and many other countries to make sure that China doesn't become the dominant military power in the Indo-Pacific region. That United States and other US allies remain engaged in the Indo-Pacific region. So there is a strategic, you know, logic. So while the economic logic of the US-China relationship dictates that India and China find a way to work together, but the strategic logic of India-China relationship shows that India would still continue to have close defence ties, close strategic ties with the United States to make sure that the United States stays engaged in the region.

Sami Shah:

Do you think, then, that the punitive tariffs were a miscalculation by Trump? Or is India's dependence on the US so great that Trump, as he believes, does hold all the cards?

Pradeep Taneja:

Personally, my opinion is that President Trump's trade policy has very little strategic logic because, generally speaking, a power such as the United States will have some coordination between its foreign policy and its trade policy. President Trump seems to think that trade policy is completely independent of foreign policy or strategic policy. And that's why in making those decisions, for example, punitive tariffs on India, as you pointed out earlier,

India faces 50% tariffs on exports to the US. Now, it doesn't make any sense when you look at the strategic direction of the US-India relationship over the last 30 years. Over the last 30 years, India has emerged as a very important strategic and defence partner of the United States. We've seen India and the United States sign a number of foundational agreements. These are agreements that the United States only signs with its treaty allies. And India and the US have reached very significant agreements on defence cooperation. So punitive tariffs, which have really created a very negative perception of the United States in India - in India, there's always been a section of the Indian elite and the Indian public at large which believes that the United States is not a reliable partner, as against Russia because Russia is seen as a very trustworthy partner. But there is a perception, a widespread perception in India that United States is not a reliable partner, not a trustworthy partner. And now those people are saying, ‘I told you so, right’. That these tariffs are indicative of lack of trust, lack of, you know, trust in the United States. So I think this decision by President Trump, even though in economic terms, I don't think it is going to give the United States any significant advantage, but in terms of public perception in India, it makes the job of the Indian government that much harder when it tries to improve relations with the US. So I think it's a self-goal on the part of the United States.

Sami Shah:

The US has imposed sanctions on certain firms like Rosneft and Lukoil. Can you tell us a little bit about why that's happened, what the connection is to the US and why the sanctions were imposed? And then how has India responded? What's India's relationship there?

Pradeep Taneja:

I mean, from India's point of view, some of the Russian companies, Rosneft, for example, these are Russian energy companies which play a very important part in Russia's exports of energy to the rest of the world. And although historically India's imports of Russian oil were insignificant, but the exports of crude oil, particularly to India from Russia, come through these companies. And some of these companies also have investments. For example, there is an oil refinery in India which has Russian investments. In fact, Russia is the biggest investor in that oil refining company. It used to be owned by an Indian company. But once that Indian company sold the business to Russian companies, now Russian companies are a significant players in oil refining, at least in one company. So, by imposing sanctions, I think President Trump is trying to penalise both India and China, because China and India

are the two of the biggest importers of Russian oil. And by targeting these companies, by imposing sanctions on these companies, President Trump is trying to say that, ‘look, we want you to stop buying oil from these companies. But it's interesting that he is not banned Russian oil. He's only imposed sanctions on Russian companies. So there are many indirect ways for Indian and Chinese companies to buy Russian oil, because Russian companies have been doing it for a long time to skirt these sanctions. And they can export oil through companies based in Dubai, for example. So when people want to buy Russian oil, they can find a way around these sanctions.

Sami Shah:

So while not specifically directed at India, the recent tightening of immigration rules by the US appears to make the importation of talent more difficult. Please can you give us a potted account of the changes that affect the recruitment of foreign talent in the US now, and how has that affected India?

Pradeep Taneja:

Sami, I think the main issue here is one category of visa - the H-1b visa. The H-1b visa, the United States has used to bring in foreign talent to work in America. And the biggest users of H-1b visas have been Indian companies, particularly Indian IT companies, information technology companies. And according to one estimate, I saw about 70% of these visas are issued to Indian citizens to work in the United States. So when the Trump administration sort of targeted the H-1b visa, Clearly Indian engineers Indian talent were directly affected by that policy. But we've seen recently President Trump himself say that. Look, we need we need foreign talent in some areas. He's actually pushed back against some of the some of the MAGA people by arguing that, ‘no, we don't have enough talent in some industries, so we do need to import foreign talent’. So I think we are we're seeing a realisation that this policy was a flawed policy, particularly when it comes to the competitiveness of American companies. International talent, including Indian talent, is important to the success of American companies. And we've seen that President Trump making that statement is indicative of a relaxation, I think, in the H-1b visa policy.

Sami Shah:

It's not just the companies that benefit in America. It's also remittances that are a big part of the Indian diaspora experience. How has that impacted? Has it had an impact on the Indian economy?

Pradeep Taneja:

The United States is a very high-cost country for Indian engineers, Indian technology talent to go to the US. For the companies, Indian companies, US is a very important market. But most of the Indians who go to the US to work, in fact, they don't save a lot of money because the cost of living in the US is quite high. But when it comes to remittances, the remittances from the Gulf countries from the Middle East are the most important source of remittances to India - 70 billion USD goes from the Middle East to India. But remittances from these technology workers aren't really a significant component of remittances to India overall.

Sami Shah:

Let's turn our attention now to India's defence and security considerations. What are the key drivers of India's defence security policy?

Pradeep Taneja:

One of the challenges that India faces, particularly vis-a-vis the United States, is China has been very successful in modernisation of its defence forces. You know, ever since China began its program of four modernisations, defence was very much one of the one of the key components of its modernisation program. And China has made great strides in defence technology, particularly the close collaboration between Chinese industry and the Chinese military, the People's Liberation Army. We have seen China has demonstrated tremendous capacity to produce its defence equipment domestically, whether it is being done through innovation or stealing technology or reverse engineering technology, that's a different issue. But the fact is that China has been quite successful in defence modernisation.

India has also made significant strides in defence technology, but India still needs collaboration with particularly Western technology partners. And United States, of course, is

the most important technology partner for India. US and India have something called Defence, Technology and Trade Initiative. The Defence Technology and Trade Initiative is about joint development and joint production of defence equipment between American and Indian companies. And so far, if you look at the performance, the actual net effect of this initiative, there has not been as much transfer of technology to India as India would like. India has this ‘Make in India’ program where Indian government wants defence manufacturers in India to work with their American counterparts to produce modern defence equipment in India. For example aircraft engines: India has a domestically made fighter aircraft called Tejas and for Tejas the engines have to be imported. India has signed an agreement with the French company, with an American company and so far, we haven't seen significant progress when it comes to joint production of this equipment. And given the Trump administration's focus on buy and sell, in other words, you know, the buyer seller relationship Trump administration seems more interested in India buying American made defence equipment rather than American companies jointly producing defence equipment in India, which is India's preferred option. And given the size of India, given how much India imports in terms of defence equipment, India is a significant partner for US companies and significant market for US companies. So Indian government is a bit annoyed that the Trump administration is focusing on buyer seller relationship rather than joint production as the joint defence and trade and technology initiative calls for.

Sami Shah:

Can you tell us a little bit about how India became part of the Quad or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue? What is the purpose of the group and what benefits has India got from its membership there?

Pradeep Taneja:

The Quad is an initiative that goes back to 2006 2007. The former Japanese prime minister the late Shinzo Abe provided the conceptual framework for this when he addressed the Indian Parliament when he was first in office in 2007, where he talked about the confluence of Pacific and Indian Oceans. That we need to work on increasing cooperation between countries like India, a major power in the Indian Ocean and countries in the Pacific Ocean, particularly Japan's allies. That led to a meeting between relatively mid-level officials from these four countries Japan, United States, Australia and India in 2007. And then we saw a change of government in Australia. We saw India also not demonstrating as much appetite

for this kind of defence collaboration. We saw China reacting to Quad, particularly when it was first mooted, China reacting very aggressively to this. So we've seen a combination of factors.

It's very difficult to blame any one member of Quad for Quad actually going into hibernation for ten years between 2007 and 2017. But in 2017, we saw all the four members of Quad actually begin a fresh dialogue based on their partnership, which goes back to the 2004 tsunami. Because these four countries had collaborated after the 2004 tsunami in providing disaster relief and humanitarian assistance to countries which were affected in the Indian Ocean by the 2004 tsunami. And that cooperation between the defence forces of these four countries became the foundation of the Quad. And Quad under President Trump's first administration actually got a shot in the arm because the Trump administration, the first Trump administration, changed the name of the US Pacific Command, which is based in Hawaii, to the Indo-Pacific command. And we saw meetings in terms of the level of government, the increase from government officials to ministers, foreign ministers to even leaders meeting where leaders of the four countries met.

And this is where I believe there's been a setback to the Quad, because since President Trump came to power in the second Trump administration, we haven't seen a meeting of the Quad leaders. India was supposed to host the leaders meeting this year in 2025 and President Trump was supposed to travel to India and that hasn't happened. And Indian government, again, is annoyed by the fact that President Trump, although he came to the Asia Pacific region to attend the ASEAN meeting in Malaysia, and then he went to South Korea, where he met with the Chinese president, Xi Jinping. But he did not travel to India for the Quad Summit. So Indian government, while being still enthusiastic about the Quad is concerned that the Trump administration seems to have lost interest.

Sami Shah:

In the second half of 2025, a mercurial President Trump seems to be on a mission to cripple the Russian economy in a way that sanctions haven't delivered, and India seems to have faced the brunt of Trump's agenda. Can India successfully walk the proverbial tightrope between a seemingly fickle Washington and Moscow? How can it best find the path between these two great military powers?

Pradeep Taneja:

I think Moscow will continue to be a major partner for India. There are many areas of defence technology, for example, one of India's most effective missiles, the BrahMos missile, was developed in partnership with Russia. India's air defence system is also sourced from Russia – the S-400. So there are many areas of defence technology where India and Russia have a very close and very trustworthy partnership. But at the same time, India doesn't want to put all its eggs in one basket. And India is also aware that in many areas of defence technology, Western companies, particularly the US companies, have an advantage. And India therefore wants to work with the US companies and US suppliers when it comes to defence production.

So I don't think India views the growing relationship with the United States as coming at the expense of its relationship with Russia. And if US were to make that a condition, then I think it will adversely affect US-India relationship. US administrations and previous administrations have accepted India's close strategic and diplomatic ties with Russia and they were willing to improve relations with India. They were willing to establish closer strategic and defence relationship with India, despite India's close relations with Russia. So from India's point of view, Russia will remain an important partner for India. But at the same time, India wants close defence and security ties with the United States. And previous US administrations have accepted that logic.

Sami Shah:

So final question then, wouldn't it make sense for India to switch from Russia to the United States as its primary supplier of weapons, or at least advanced weapons systems?
It seems that would please Donald Trump and create a more long-lasting relationship between the US and India.

Pradeep Taneja:

That's a very good question, Sami, and that really goes to the heart of the philosophical foundations of India's foreign and defence policies. India's foreign policy is based on what Indian government calls strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy is an advance in many ways on the previous non-alignment policy. And strategic autonomy says that India would not be a treaty ally of any one power, that India would retain its strategic autonomy and its

strategic resilience, that these are core principles of India's foreign and defence policies. And it's important for India to be able to maintain its relationship with major defence partners, major foreign policy partners, and therefore each relationship is supposed to have its own logic. The relationship with the US has its own logic. The relationship with Russia has its own logic, and relations with China have their own logic.

So India's foreign policy as Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar has repeatedly emphasised, is one of multi alignment rather than alignment with any one power. So strategic autonomy and strategic resilience are key principles of Indian foreign policy. I know it is not easy for India to walk the tightrope. But so far India has been successful in maintaining ties with its traditional strategic partner, Russia, and its new strategic partner, the United States. But I think it's a challenge for the Indian diplomacy. It's a challenge for Indian diplomacy, but so far, India has shown that India is capable of doing it. And in fact, many other countries, including Indonesia, are looking at India as an example. If India can do it, they want to do it too. And India in many ways is setting an example for other non-aligned countries who don't want to become too tied or too dependent on any one partner.

Sami Shah:

Our guest has been Dr Pradeep Taneja from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Thank you, Pradeep.

Pradeep Taneja:

Thank you, Sami.

Sami Shah:

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