

Daily Editorial Analysis 17 December 2025

December 17, 2025 • vajiramandravi.com

India and the U.S.: 2005 versus 2025

Context

- The trajectory of India-United States relations over the past two decades reflects a fundamental shift in American strategic thinking.
- In 2005, the relationship was **anchored in confidence**, optimism, and a belief that the rise of responsible powers strengthened the global order.
- By contrast, the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) reveals a more inward-looking America, focused on minimising burdens and reassuring itself of relevance.
- This transformation carries significant **implications for India's strategic choices** and expectations.

The Spirit of 2005: Confidence and Strategic Generosity

- The strategic moment of 2005 was defined by **American self-assurance and strategic generosity**.
- Washington's declaration that it wished to help India become a major world power reflected a worldview in which **the ascent of others was not seen as a threat but as a stabilising force**.
- This belief underpinned the civil nuclear agreement and a broader partnership that treated India's rise as an end in itself.
- Mutual confidence lay at the core of this engagement. **India's strategic autonomy** was accommodated because it was embedded in a shared sense of possibility.
- Global leadership was viewed as a responsibility to be exercised, not a liability to be avoided. The partnership was expansive, aspirational, and future-oriented.

The 2025 NSS: Retrenchment and National Reassurance

- The 2025 NSS marks a sharp departure from this earlier outlook. **Its tone is assertive yet defensive, saturated with claims of unprecedented achievement**.
- Rather than offering a roadmap for shaping the international system, the strategy functions as an exercise in national reassurance, projecting certainty in a world that increasingly resists American control.
- Where the language of 2005 emphasised partnership, **the language of 2025 emphasises burdens**.
- The declaration that the U.S. will no longer prop up the entire world order like Atlas signals a retreat from confident global leadership.
- **Engagement is framed as a cost to be reduced** rather than an investment to be sustained, and leadership becomes conditional and transactional.

India Reframed: From Strategic End to Tactical Means

- This intellectual shift is most visible in the treatment of India. Cooperation remains important, but it is **explicitly instrumental**.
- India is framed less as a civilisational power with intrinsic value and more as **a component of America's China-balancing strategy**, particularly within the Indo-Pacific and the Quad framework.
- **In 2005, India's rise was a strategic objective; in 2025, it is a strategic function.** This narrowing reflects a broader retreat from internationalist confidence.
- The assertion of unilateral autonomy and hemispheric exclusivity highlights an irony: **strategic autonomy** once questioned when articulated by India is now embraced by the U.S. and labelled realism.

Strategy as Performance and the Limits of Engagement

- The NSS's tone reinforces this inward turn. Its enumeration of diplomatic successes across diverse regions reads less as strategic assessment and more as **performance aimed at domestic audiences**.
- Strategy becomes a narrative of achievement rather than a framework for managing global complexity.
- For India, the implications are stark. The U.S. that once sought to expand India's strategic space is now preoccupied with its own **vulnerabilities and burden management**.
- It demands more from partners while offering fewer assurances in return. **Shared interests persist, but shared responsibilities are receding**, and burden-sharing increasingly resembles burden-shifting.

Recalibrating India's Strategic Outlook

- This shift does not negate the value of India-U.S. cooperation; **it redefines its basis**.
- India can no longer assume that Washington will invest in India's rise as a matter of strategic design.
- **The partnership must rest on converging interests** rather than expansive expectations.
- As the NSS itself underscores, partners are expected to assume primary responsibility for their regions, signalling that U.S. support will be selective and conditional.
- The lesson of 2005 remains instructive. **Transformative partnerships require confidence** on both sides and a belief that another's rise reinforces one's own strength.
- The 2025 strategy lacks this confidence, shaped instead by grievance over past overreach, scepticism of institutions, and a desire to restore an earlier conception of American primacy.

Conclusion

- **The era of widening horizons** that enabled the civil nuclear breakthrough has given way to contracting American ambition and expanding Indian responsibility.
- India's emergence as a major world power will depend not on external sponsorship but on **its own strategic confidence and material capacity** in a fragmented global order.
- Paradoxically, the narrowing of American commitments **creates greater strategic space for others**.
- India's challenge is not to fill a vacuum but **to craft a role aligned with its scale, interests, and civilisational temperament**.

- While the assumptions of 2005 may not return, **the aspiration that animated them remains India's to realise.**

India and the U.S.: 2005 versus 2025 FAQs

Q1. How did the U.S. view India's rise in 2005?

Ans. The United States viewed India's rise as a strategic objective that would strengthen the global order.

Q2. What core shift does the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy reflect?

Ans. It reflects a shift from confident international leadership to burden minimisation and strategic retrenchment.

Q3. How is India positioned in the 2025 NSS?

Ans. India is positioned instrumentally, primarily as a partner within the U.S. strategy to balance China in the Indo-Pacific.

Q4. What does the emphasis on burden-sharing imply for U.S. partners?

Ans. It implies that partners are expected to assume greater regional responsibility with more limited U.S. support.

Q5. What determines India's rise in the current global order?

Ans. India's rise is determined by its own strategic confidence and material capacity rather than external sponsorship

Source: **The Hindu**

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/daily-editorial-analysis-17-december-2025/>

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