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Indian Aviation Safety, Its Dangerous Credibility Deficit

Context

- **Aviation safety** is founded on the principle that even a single loss of life is unacceptable.
- This conviction underpins the global framework established by the **International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)**, which stresses collective responsibility and openness.
- The crash of **Air India Flight 171** in June 2025 highlights a disturbing gap between these principles and their implementation in India, raising serious concerns about transparency, regulatory independence, and international credibility.

ICAO Principles and the Centrality of Transparency

- ICAO recognises aviation as an **interconnected global system** in which a failure in one state affects all others.
- Transparency and the free exchange of safety information are essential to collective action, effective regulation, and public confidence.
- Annex 13 mandates independent, non-punitive accident investigations focused solely on preventing future occurrences.
- India, as an ICAO signatory, is obligated to uphold these standards. However, the handling of the AI 171 investigation reflects a retreat from openness, replacing clarity with delay and ambiguity, thereby weakening trust in the investigative process.

The AI 171 Crash and Troubling Indicators

- AI 171 crashed within a minute of take-off from Ahmedabad, killing 241 passengers and 19 people on the ground.
- The rapid recovery of the Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) and Digital Flight Data Recorder (DFDR), with assistance from the U.S.
- **National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)**, underscored the gravity of the event.
- The need for commando protection for the chief investigator further suggested the sensitivity of the findings.
- The preliminary report, released a month later, raised more questions than it answered.
- It confirmed that both engine fuel control switches moved to cut-off seconds after lift-off and recorded a brief cockpit exchange denying intentional action.

- Since these switches require deliberate mechanical movement, the absence of detailed analysis is deeply concerning.
- The CVR and DFDR should conclusively reveal cockpit actions, crew roles, and ambient cues during the critical seconds, particularly with NTSB expertise available.
- The lack of clarity points to reluctance in addressing uncomfortable conclusions.

International Friction and Political Interference

- Serious differences reportedly emerged between Indian authorities and international investigators.
- The NTSB's strictly technical mandate leaves **no room for political influence**, and resistance to altering findings appears to have strained cooperation.
- This breakdown has been described by experienced safety officials as unprecedented.
- Such discord undermines assurances of a truthful and transparent investigation.
- In aviation safety, credibility is earned through **impartiality and openness**, not national defensiveness.
- Political interference compromises both the integrity of the investigation and India's standing within the global aviation community.

A Pattern of Regulatory Weakness

- The AI 171 case reflects long-standing systemic issues. After the **2010 Mangalore crash**, official claims of ICAO compliance were contradicted by later findings of concealed safety violations.
- Following the 2020 Kozhikode crash, promised corrective actions remain largely unimplemented years later.
- The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has repeatedly yielded to political and commercial pressure, **delaying enforcement** of safety requirements and granting repeated extensions.
- The mishandling of the AI 171 crash site, where evidence was compromised and **flights resumed without adequate rescue and fire-fighting services**, further illustrates institutional failure and disregard for established safety protocols.

Information Vacuum and Misinformation

- Delayed and ambiguous communication has created fertile ground for misinformation.
- Speculative narratives, particularly on social media, have misrepresented technical systems such as ACARS and Inmarsat, which operate within encrypted and restricted frameworks.
- In the absence of authoritative clarity, such claims gain traction despite lacking factual basis.
- In contrast, Air India's restraint in avoiding speculative commentary reflects responsible conduct, highlighting the obligation of investigative authorities to provide timely, accurate information.

Lessons from International Best Practices

- International practice demonstrates a stark contrast. Following a **UPS MD-11 cargo crash** in November 2025, the NTSB conducted daily briefings, rapidly analysed recorder data, and coordinated with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).
- Within days, the FAA issued an Emergency Airworthiness Directive grounding the aircraft type.

- The absence of similar action after AI 171 strongly indicates that international regulators do not believe a systemic defect exists in the Boeing 787.
- This suggests that the probable cause lies elsewhere, knowledge that, if withheld, only deepens suspicion about **the investigation's integrity**.

Conclusion

- The tragedy of AI 171 extends beyond the crash itself to its aftermath. **Lack of transparency**, investigative delays, and the marginalisation of foreign expertise risk isolating India from the global aviation safety community.
- Such isolation undermines diplomatic standing, regulatory credibility, and passenger confidence.
- Aviation safety cannot coexist with secrecy or political interference.
- To honour its responsibilities and restore trust, India must recommit to **independent investigation**, transparency, and meaningful regulatory reform. Failure to do so risks repeating history at an unacceptable human cost.

Indian Aviation Safety, Its Dangerous Credibility Deficit FAQs

Q1. What core principle does ICAO emphasise for global aviation safety?

Ans. ICAO emphasises transparency and collective responsibility as the foundation of aviation safety.

Q2. What key issue did the AI 171 preliminary report fail to clarify?

Ans. The report failed to clearly explain the mechanical movement of both engine fuel control switches.

Q3. Why was international cooperation strained during the AI 171 investigation?

Ans. Cooperation was strained due to political interference and disagreements over technical findings.

Q4. What recurring weakness is highlighted in India's aviation safety system?

Ans. The analysis highlights regulatory weakness and susceptibility to political pressure.

Q5. What lesson does international best practice offer after aviation accidents?

Ans. International best practice shows that rapid transparency and decisive regulatory action improve safety.

Source: **The Hindu**

The Parallel Track That Keeps U.S.-India Ties Going

Context

- India–United States relations in 2025 reflect a complex and paradoxical phase.
- While political engagement has been strained by economic disputes, shifting strategic priorities, and the postponement of the Quad Leaders' Summit scheduled to be hosted by India, the underlying architecture of cooperation remains strong.

- This contrast highlights a **dual-track dynamic** in bilateral relations, where political uncertainty coexists with expanding institutional collaboration.
- Defence, technology, and multilateral mechanisms continue to anchor the partnership, demonstrating that strategic depth extends beyond summit diplomacy.

Political and Economic Frictions

- Bilateral tensions have been driven largely by **trade and tariff disputes**, particularly U.S. sanctions related to India's purchase of Russian crude oil.
- These measures have coincided with a sharp decline in Indian exports to the U.S. in 2025, underscoring the economic cost of political friction.
- The delayed Quad Leaders' Summit and limited official communication further reflect this uneasy phase.
- India's concerns are compounded by **Washington's growing engagement with Pakistan** and comparatively lower tariff barriers for both Pakistan and China.
- U.S. cooperation with Islamabad, centred on port access and critical mineral supply chains, signals a pragmatic approach rooted in immediate geopolitical and economic interests.
- From New Delhi's perspective, this reinforces apprehensions about shifting U.S. priorities and the possibility of a U.S.-China accommodation.
- Nevertheless, American officials continue to emphasise **India's strategic importance**, indicating recalibration rather than disengagement.

Sustained Institutional and Multilateral Engagement

- Despite strained political signals, institutional cooperation has continued to expand.
- The July 2025 Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Washington launched initiatives covering maritime security, counterterrorism, economic cooperation, critical technologies, and humanitarian assistance.
- The Quad Counterterrorism Working Group's third meeting in December 2025 further reinforced the grouping's functionality and **Quad's operational relevance** beyond leadership-level summits.
- High-level visits by India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and the Indian Navy Chief to the United States fit within this broader pattern of sustained engagement.
- These interactions signal continuity and reaffirm commitment to long-term collaboration, even amid diplomatic caution.

Defence Cooperation as the Cornerstone

- Defence cooperation remains the most stable pillar of the relationship and the **defence cooperation cornerstone** of bilateral ties.
- Since the 2008 civil nuclear agreement, defence and security frameworks have steadily deepened.
- Foundational agreements such as LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA have enabled logistical support, secure communications, and intelligence sharing, significantly enhancing military interoperability.
- This momentum continued with the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies and the **India-U.S. Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X)**.

- A major milestone was the signing of a 10-year Defence Framework Agreement in October 2025, institutionalising long-term coordination, information sharing, and technological collaboration aimed at strengthening **Indo-Pacific stability**.
- Regular military exercises, including Yudh Abhyas, Tiger Claw, and Malabar, continue to deepen trust and operational synergy between the armed forces.

Expanding Technological and Industrial Collaboration

- Beyond defence operations, bilateral cooperation has expanded into industrial and technological domains.
- Hindustan Aeronautics Limited's billion-dollar agreement with General Electric for fighter jet engines highlights growing defence-industrial integration.
- The **joint NASA-ISRO NISAR satellite launch** in July 2025 further reflects advanced technological cooperation, supporting disaster management, agricultural planning, and infrastructure resilience.
- At the regional level, the Quad Ports of the Future Conference held in Mumbai in November 2025 underscored the importance of **technology and infrastructure cooperation**.
- With participation from 24 Indo-Pacific partners, the initiative highlighted quality, secure, and resilient port infrastructure as a strategic priority, linking connectivity with economic security and regional development.

Conclusion

- India-U.S. relations in 2025 demonstrate significant **institutional resilience** despite political headwinds.
- While leadership-level engagement faces constraints from economic disputes and geopolitical recalibrations, cooperation continues through strong bureaucratic frameworks, reflecting **bureaucratic continuity** and shared strategic interests.
- Looking ahead, sustaining this momentum will require deeper institutional understanding beyond defence, including regulatory alignment, technological integration, and expanded sectoral cooperation.
- Ultimately, the durability of the partnership will rest on its capacity to preserve a **long-term strategic partnership** that can withstand short-term political volatility while remaining responsive to an evolving global order.

The Parallel Track That Keeps U.S.-India Ties Going FAQs

Q1. Why do India-U.S. relations appear strained in 2025?

Ans. India-U.S. relations appear strained due to trade disputes, tariffs, and shifting U.S. geopolitical priorities.

Q2. What explains the delay of the Quad Leaders' Summit?

Ans. The Quad Leaders' Summit was delayed due to political and economic tensions affecting bilateral relations.

Q3. Which area remains the strongest pillar of India-U.S. cooperation?

Ans. Defence cooperation remains the strongest pillar of India-U.S. bilateral relations.

Q4. How has institutional cooperation continued despite political strains?

Ans. Institutional cooperation has continued through defence agreements, multilateral mechanisms, and regular high-level engagements.

Q5. What will determine the future resilience of India-U.S. relations?

Ans. The future resilience of India-U.S. relations will depend on deeper institutional understanding and expanded cooperation beyond defence.

Source: **The Hindu**

Venezuela, US Power Play and India's Latin America Opportunities

Context

- The dramatic US intervention involving the seizure of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro marks a significant shift in Washington's **Latin America policy**.
- Unlike earlier efforts aimed at outright regime change, the current US strategy appears focused on "**regime seduction**"—co-opting the existing power structure to realign Venezuela geopolitically.
- This development has wider implications for great power rivalry, regional politics in Latin America, and India's foreign policy priorities.

Key Developments

- **Nature of the US intervention**

- Trump's move is among the most audacious US actions in Latin America in recent decades.
- Strategy focuses on **co-opting** the Maduro establishment, not dismantling it.
- Interim President Delcy Rodríguez's tentative outreach to Washington may signal a reset in US-Venezuela relations.

- **Background of US-Venezuela engagement**

- Engagement attempts predate Trump; the Biden administration explored rapprochement post-2022 Ukraine war to access Venezuelan oil amid sanctions on Russia.
- Recent negotiations failed, but the current crisis may reopen diplomatic channels.

Geopolitical Implications

- **Regional power dynamics:** A post-Maduro realignment could lead to –

- Reassertion of US dominance in Latin America.
- Acceleration of rightward political drift, reversing decades of left-wing populism.
- Direct challenge to Cuban, Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence in the Western Hemisphere.

- **Impact on Great Power competition:**

- Venezuela has been a hub of **anti-American geopolitics**, supported by Russia and China.
- Trump's revival of a muscular **Monroe Doctrine**, reinforced by the "Trump Corollary", targets China's expanding economic footprint.

India's Response - Strategic Restraint

- **Why India remained cautious**

- India's reaction was criticised as too timid, especially compared to BRICS partners.
- However, restraint mirrors India's stance on –
 - Russia-Ukraine war (2022)
 - US-Israeli strikes on Iran
- India has moved away from moralistic diplomacy, recognising the limits of international law in great power politics.
- India invokes sovereignty norms primarily in cases of Chinese territorial aggression, given its direct security stakes.

- **Limited stakes in Latin America**

- Venezuela lies outside India's core strategic theatre.
- Latin America itself is internally divided. **For example**, Brazil's President Lula da Silva condemned the US action, while conservative forces across the region welcomed Maduro's ouster.

India, BRICS, and Strategic Priorities

- Russia and China have invested heavily in Venezuela to contest US primacy.
- India, despite rhetoric of a multipolar world, does not share their objective of undermining US dominance in the Western Hemisphere.
- India's true strategic focus remains –
 - Limiting Chinese dominance in Asia
 - Building a “**multipolar Asia**”, not a post-American global order.

Economic Dimension - Missed Opportunities

- **Why Latin America matters to India**

- The “Year of Trump's Tariffs” has compelled India to diversify export markets.
- Latin America, with its combined GDP of around \$5.5 trillion and a population exceeding 650 million, remains an **under-explored** commercial terrain.
- India's annual bilateral trade with the region is underwhelming at \$45 billion (China's – \$500 billion). The city-state of Singapore does as much trade with Latin America as India.

- **Emerging opportunity**

- As the US pressures Latin American states to reduce dependence on China, many will seek **diversification** rather than substitution.
- This opens space for Indian trade, investment, and technology partnerships.

Structural Weaknesses in India's Latin America Policy

- Persistent **diplomatic neglect** despite historical connections (e.g., Tagore's 1924 Argentina visit).
- Symbolic gestures (roads named after Simón Bolívar, San Martín) contrast with –
 - Poor political literacy about the region
 - Infrequent high-level visits
 - Thin commercial diplomacy
 - Weak institutional presence
- Past ideological fascination (Fidel Castro, Che Guevara) yielded cultural symbolism, not strategic policy.

Challenges for India and Way Ahead

- **Limited diplomatic bandwidth and expertise on Latin America:** Insufficient understanding of Latin American political economy and society. So,
 - Sustained political engagement with Latin American countries beyond episodic diplomacy.
 - Targeted trade diplomacy focusing on pharmaceuticals, IT services, automobiles, renewable energy, and defence manufacturing.
 - Develop region-specific expertise within MEA and policy think tanks.
- **Over-reliance on BRICS alignment:** Treat Latin America as an independent strategic and economic theatre, not merely through the BRICS or US-China prism.
- **Weak trade infrastructure:** Strengthen institutional presence—embassies, trade offices, academic and cultural exchanges.

Conclusion

- The Venezuela crisis is not just a spectacle of US interventionism; it is a signal of reshaped geopolitics in Latin America amid renewed great power rivalry.
- India's cautious diplomacy may be strategically sound in the short term, but its long-standing neglect of the region is no longer tenable.
- As Latin America enters a new political phase and seeks economic diversification, India must move beyond **symbolic internationalism to purposeful engagement.**

India's Latin America Opportunities FAQs

Q1. How does the recent US intervention in Venezuela reflect a shift in Washington's approach?

Ans. The US strategy has shifted from outright regime change to "regime seduction" by co-opting the existing power elite.

Q2. What are the geopolitical consequences of a potential post-Maduro strategic reorientation of Venezuela?

Ans. It could reassert US dominance in Latin America, accelerate the region's rightward political drift, etc.

Q3. Why has India adopted a restrained diplomatic response to the US action in Venezuela?

Ans. India prioritises strategic realism over moral posturing, reserving sovereignty-based criticism mainly for Chinese violations.

Q4. Why should India reconsider its prolonged neglect of Latin America?

Ans. Latin America's large market offers India underexplored economic and strategic opportunities.

Q5. Why "tailing BRICS partners" is an inadequate strategy for India's engagement with Latin America.

Ans. India's interests in the region differ from Russia and China, necessitating an independent strategy.

Source: IE

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