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From Estrangement to Engagement: The Transformation of Indo-US Security Relations under President Bill Clinton

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Abstract: The end of the Cold War opened a new chapter in global politics and set the stage for India and the United States to rethink their relationship. This study traces how, under President Bill Clinton (1993–2001), the two countries moved from mutual suspicion to a more practical and diverse partnership. It focuses on key moments like India's 1998 nuclear tests, the resulting US sanctions, and the diplomatic efforts that followed. The research also highlights growing cooperation in defence, counter-terrorism, and regional security, especially as South Asia's strategic importance grew. The 1999 Kargil conflict stands out as a turning point, with US involvement helping the two countries find more common ground. While tough issues—like nuclear policy, Kashmir, and differences over Pakistan—remained, the Clinton years saw the start of a more open and constructive Indo-US relationship. This period laid the groundwork for the stronger partnership the two nations would build in the years to come.

Keywords: Indo-US Relations, Clinton Presidency, Strategic Partnership, Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Pokhran-II, Talbott–Jaswant Dialogue, Kargil Conflict, Post-Cold War Security Architecture.



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1. Introduction

Security and strategic alliances shape international relations by influencing how countries cooperate and compete. States form these partnerships to address security challenges and advance their national interests. Such alliances must balance cooperation with competing priorities amid shifting power dynamics. For India and the United States, strategic concerns have shaped their relationship more than economic or cultural ties. Issues such as U.S. support for Pakistan and nuclear non-proliferation have made military and security matters central to their partnership.

Research Rationale

This study examines the period from 1993 to 2001, a pivotal time when Indo-US relations shifted from "estranged democracies" to a strong strategic partnership. By exploring this transformative era, the research highlights the key events and decisions that helped foster trust and closer cooperation between the two nations.

2. Materials and Methods

This research employs qualitative archival analysis, drawing from a diverse range of historical documents and firsthand accounts. The study examines declassified US State Department memos and presidential directives to clarify American perspectives, while records from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs offer insight into India's diplomatic strategies and concerns. The analysis also incorporates personal memoirs and reflections from diplomats involved in or witnessing key negotiations. This comprehensive approach seeks to reconstruct both official policy shifts and the nuanced human interactions, motivations, and contextual factors that influenced Indo-US relations during this transformative period.

3. Results and Discussion

Post-Cold War Realignment and Early Friction (1993–1997):

Impact of the Conclusion of the Cold War:

The end of the Cold War transformed global geopolitics, establishing the US as the sole superpower and reshaping Indo-US relations. Freed from Cold War constraints, both countries redefined their partnership, while Pakistan lost its strategic value in US foreign policy. Adapting to the new unipolar world, India had to realign its foreign policy after losing Soviet support. Russia no longer offered favourable arms deals, and India saw closer ties with the US as essential to counterbalance China and fill the strategic gap left by the USSR's collapse.[1] The US, in turn, moved past Cold War perceptions of India, encouraging cooperation and a fresh start in bilateral relations.

Economic Liberalization as a Catalyst:

India's sweeping economic reforms to shift from a quasi-socialist model to a market democracy in 1991 not only transformed its domestic landscape but also signalled a new openness to the world. These changes spurred international interest, with the United States recognizing India's potential as a key economic partner. This was highlighted when US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown designated India a "Big Emerging Market" in 1995, encouraging deeper trade, investment, and collaboration between the two countries. The reforms marked a turning point, laying the groundwork for a dynamic and mutually beneficial Indo-US economic relationship.

Early Diplomatic Friction Points:

Although there was a conducive environment for Indo-US rapprochement, the first term of Bill Clinton's Presidency witnessed Indo-US friction on certain issues, i.e. nuclear non-proliferation, the Kashmir issue and human rights violations in Kashmir and some other Indian states. The US global policy of expansion of market democracy and prevention of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, clashed with India's nuclear ambition. The Clinton administration had three conflicting security policies towards South Asia. It aimed at "keeping the lid on the nuclear non-proliferation and ballistic missile technology, nudging Indo-US relations forward, and maintaining support for Pakistan as a quasi-democratic, relatively pro-Western Islamic State.[2] Pakistan was portrayed as a valuable country. In April 1996, the Clinton administration decided to transfer military equipment to Pakistan, valued at approximately \$368 million, after the US Congress granted a one-time waiver of the Pressler Amendment, enabling the release to Pakistan of \$368 million worth of advanced US military equipment that had been embargoed since October 1990. India has formally conveyed its serious apprehension to the US that it would legitimize Pakistan's covert acquisition of nuclear weapons and missile capabilities and would have serious regional security implications.

The Kashmir issue, while not overtly categorized as a security concern by the US, became a significant point of disagreement between India and the US. Under the Clinton administration, the United States began to attribute a specific meaning to the Kashmir conflict, highlighting human rights abuses. Clinton administration accorded the Kashmir issue as a potential flashpoint of a nuclear arms race in South Asia. However, India steadfastly maintained that it would not accept any external interference regarding Kashmir, insisting on resolving the matter bilaterally with Pakistan in line with the Shimla Agreement. Moreover, the US Administration has intermittently expressed its concerns

regarding the human rights situation in Kashmir and Punjab.[3] Efforts were also made to reduce US developmental aid to India over allegations of human rights violations in these regions.

The nuclear issue has long hindered closer India-US cooperation since the Cold War era. After India's decision not to sign the NPT in 1968 and its 1974 nuclear test, it adopted a policy of ambiguity—neither confirming nor denying weapons capability—until 1997.[4] After the Cold War, the P-5 extended the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) indefinitely in 1995, which India saw as legitimizing nuclear apartheid. India, having rejected the NPT, criticized its discriminatory nature and concluded that acquiring nuclear weapons was essential for its security.[5] In 1995, Prime Minister Rao decided to prepare for a nuclear test due to Pakistan's nuclear advances, aided by China, and international agreements that favoured established nuclear powers. Security threats from China and Pakistan, plus restrictive global treaties, drove this decision, though US pressure delayed the test. India co-sponsored a 1993 UN resolution for the CTBT but refused to sign the treaty in 1996, citing concerns about its entry-into-force clause and China's continued nuclear testing. India saw the CTBT as discriminatory and inconsistent with international law, and Western criticism followed.[6]

During the Clinton Presidency, US policy in South Asia focused on preventing nuclear and missile proliferation. The US pressured India to join the NPT, restricted technology transfers, and combined diplomatic engagement with strategic pressure to promote non-proliferation. During the Clinton administration, the US linked the Kashmir issue to non-proliferation and arms control, fearing it could trigger nuclear conflict. Clinton urged India and Pakistan to resolve disputes peacefully and eliminate their nuclear arsenals, viewing them as destabilizing. The US tried to prevent India from becoming a declared nuclear power, especially before India's 1998 tests. Despite four rounds of talks in the early 1990s, India resisted US pressure, citing security threats and calling for global, non-discriminatory agreements. India also saw US policy as maintaining its own dominance.

During Clinton's second term, the US tried to strengthen ties with India, but was surprised by India's 1998 nuclear tests, prompted by rising tensions with Pakistan. These tests marked India's emergence as a recognized nuclear weapon state, especially after its successful thermonuclear explosion. India's 1998 nuclear tests severely strained relations with the US, resulting in economic sanctions. Pakistan's subsequent tests led to further global condemnation, with calls for restraint and CTBT accession. On May 11, 1998, India ended nuclear ambiguity with the Pokhran II tests, citing security threats from the China-Pakistan nexus.[7]

After India's nuclear tests, the US sought to engage India in talks on the CTBT and NPT, but negotiations were inconclusive. India and Pakistan blocked CTBT enforcement, and India pledged only to avoid future tests. US Senate rejection of the CTBT later made India's refusal irrelevant.

The Indo-US strategic dialogue marked a shift toward US acceptance of India's nuclear arsenal, influenced by India's concerns about China. India stressed its sovereignty, and Clinton encouraged continued dialogue to improve security for both nations. India and the US have deepened cooperation on nuclear issues, terrorism, and technology. Despite initial tensions over India's nuclear test, it led to a stronger partnership.[8] The US now sees India as a key economic and strategic ally.

The Clinton Administration treated India as a "nuclear democracy," distinguishing it from other proliferating states, and maintained warmer relations with India than with Pakistan to limit regional proliferation risks.[9] Recognizing its growing energy needs, India has focused on nuclear cooperation with the US and sought to ease dual-use technology restrictions since 2001 as part of a broader effort to strengthen bilateral ties. Under the Clinton Presidency, the US moved from reducing India's and Pakistan's nuclear programs to urging minimal, non-deployed forces. By recognizing India as a "nuclear democracy," the US built stronger ties with India while managing proliferation concerns.

The Kargil Conflict and the De-Hyphenation of South Asia (1999)

In the latter part of Clinton's second term, the Kargil War (1999) emerged as a serious security concern. The Kargil War took place from 3rd May to 23rd July, 1999, when Pakistan's ISI Directorate sent troops across the LOC into Kashmir near Kargil. President Clinton viewed the situation as dangerous and urged the nation to resolve it quickly without further escalation. The US blamed Pakistan as the aggressor and urged immediate cessation of hostilities. US President Clinton urged Nawaz Sharif to reinstate the LOC as per the Shimla Agreement.[10] President Clinton exerted tremendous pressure on Pakistan to acquiesce, amid concerns that the military was mobilizing its nuclear warheads.[11] The USA publicly supported India for the first time.[12] This signified a shift in US security-policy priorities in South Asia. Washington's approach during the Kargil conflict signalled a strategic shift, ending the traditional US-Pakistan-India hyphenation and recognising India as a principal regional security actor.

The Pivot to Partnership: The 2000 State Visit and Bilateral Architecture

US President Bill Clinton visited India in March 2000. Clinton was the first U.S. President to visit India in 22 years, staying for five days, and spent only five hours in Pakistan. Then, in 2000, President Bill Clinton made a landmark visit to India, becoming the first U.S. President to visit the country in 22 years. Immediately before the visit, the Administration had eased U.S. sanctions on India related to its 1998 nuclear tests. President Clinton described India as a "natural ally" of the US in his address to the Indian Parliament. He underscored the shared values that unite the two nations and outlined various potential avenues for collaboration. The speech reinforced the importance of strengthening bilateral relations and fostering cooperation across multiple domains.[13] That same year, the U.S.-India Joint Counterterrorism Working Group was established, formalizing an area of cooperation that long existed.[14]

Systemic Drivers of Indo-US Security and Strategic Rapprochement:

The Asian Strategic Balance

As China's influence and naval presence in Asia have grown, the United States has increasingly viewed India as a key player in maintaining regional stability. American strategic thinking now often positions India as an essential counterbalance to Beijing's ambitions, highlighting the importance of deeper US-India cooperation amid shifting power dynamics across the Indo-Pacific.[15]

Indian Diaspora

Over time, the Indian-American community grew in size and influence, becoming a powerful voice in American society and politics. Their advocacy, along with the establishment of the Congressional Caucus on India, helped shape U.S. foreign policy toward India.[16] These Coalitions built bridges between the two democracies, demonstrating how personal connections and community ties can transform bilateral relationships at the highest levels.

Security Challenges from non-state actors and transnational networks

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally transformed Eurasia's geopolitical landscape. Former Soviet republics achieved independence, Russia's regional influence diminished, and significant uncertainties emerged in Central and South Asia. Security threats increasingly originated from non-state actors and transnational networks, rather than exclusively from national armies. International terrorism, religious extremism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and transnational crime emerged as significant concerns for both India and the United States.[17] India has experienced persistent cross-border terrorism, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the United States increasingly identified international terrorism as a significant national security threat. This development established a key area of strategic convergence between India and the United States.

4. Conclusion

The US-India relationship has undergone a remarkable transformation since the early 1990s. What began as a partnership marked by ideological differences gradually evolved into one defined by practical cooperation, especially following India's nuclear tests. This pragmatic shift allowed both countries to set aside past disagreements and focus on shared goals, paving the way for a much closer and more productive alliance. The groundwork laid during the Clinton-Vajpayee years set the stage for several landmark developments in US-India relations. Initiatives such as the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP), the historic 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement, and the formation of the Quad all trace their origins to this period of renewed engagement. These milestones reflect a deepening trust and strategic alignment that continued to grow under the Bush and Obama administrations. Thus, the Clinton period may be termed the seeding period of the Indo-US strategic partnership.

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