

To 'de-Americanise', India should not romanticise China's reality

Hindol Sengupta • June 26, 2026,

New Delhi needs to understand why Beijing is more amiable today



National flags of China and India fly next to the Meijiang Convention and Exhibition Center, a venue for 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin, China, on August 30, 2025. Reuters File

There has been considerable commentary on whether India needs to 'move away' from America, strategically, in the wake of Washington's 2025 tariff war, the secondary penalty over Russian crude, the simultaneous courtship of Pakistan. One scholar has described this as a need for de-Americanising Indian statecraft.

At a time when US President Donald Trump's provocations have soured relations, especially in the public square, between Washington and New Delhi, and a thaw, of a kind, is underway between India and China, such a reasoning is potent. But India should be wary of tilting towards an alternative — accommodation with China — far more dangerous than the dependence it claims to cure.

Crucially, was Indian strategy ever so Americanised? This is at the very least debatable. The architecture Jawaharlal Nehru bequeathed was non-alignment, formalised at Belgrade in 1961 alongside Tito, Nasser, Sukarno and Nkrumah — a doctrine whose entire purpose was to refuse enrolment in any superpower's camp. When the Cold War squeezed hardest, India tilted not toward Washington but away

from it: the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of August 1971 was a direct answer to the Nixon-Kissinger opening to Beijing and the American 'tilt' to Pakistan. That December, as the Bangladesh war reached its climax, Washington dispatched Task Force 74, led by the carrier USS Enterprise, into the Bay of Bengal - gunboat coercion aimed squarely at India. This is the foundational memory of independent India's strategic class, and it is not an American one.

The friction was structural, not incidental. India's first nuclear test, Smiling Buddha of May 1974, provoked the creation of the Nuclear Suppliers Group — an entire global regime erected in part to constrain New Delhi. Pokhran II in 1998 brought down American sanctions under the Glenn Amendment and years of the Talbott-Singh dialogue before any reconciliation. Even the supposed high-water mark of convergence — the 2005 civil-nuclear understanding between Manmohan Singh and George W. Bush, sealed by the 2008 NSG waiver — was negotiated by a government dependent on Communist allies who nearly toppled it over precisely this issue. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2016 line about overcoming 'the hesitations of history' was an aspiration, not an epitaph. Convergence was real but always partial, always hedged, always shadowed by India's insistence on what it calls strategic autonomy. The hurdles were never cleared; they were managed.

So, the honest description is not an Americanised India reluctantly to be weaned, but an autonomy-seeking India that has, for two decades, leaned selectively toward Washington — on defence technology, the Quad, and counter-China balancing — while keeping Russian arms, discounted Russian energy, and above all its own voice. How far can one de-Americanise a strategy that was only ever conditionally American.

This matters because the de-Americanisation case rarely ends in pure self-reliance. Its logical terminus, whether stated or not, is a tilt toward Beijing — and here the argument collapses on the evidence. What is China actually offering? On the one issue that defines the relationship, the disputed boundary, almost nothing. The October 2024 understanding restored patrolling at Depsang and Demchok and enabled the Modi-Xi meeting at Kazan, but it was border management, not resolution. The deeper steps India has demanded — de-escalation of the massed forces and de-induction to pre-2020 positions — have not occurred, and Beijing has signalled no intention of taking them. The buffer zones persist; the dual-use infrastructure build-up continues; the boundary remains exactly as unsettled as before. The great dams are being built

in Tibet and their impact on India's water future is still extremely uncertain. The reopening of a few Himalayan trade passes is positive atmospherics. The patrolling agreement and disengagement reduced immediate friction, but they did not amount to a political settlement. The substance is, yet, absent.

Why, then, does Beijing want a thaw at all? Not from goodwill alone but from also from pressure. China's economy is decelerating into a structural slowdown. Official growth held near 5 per cent in 2025, but the IMF projects roughly 4.4 per cent for 2026 and a continued step-down through the decade — and the headline conceals a sicker body: real-estate investment falling around 16 per cent year-on-year, private investment contracting, consumption stubbornly weak despite every visible success in electric vehicles, solar and artificial intelligence. The pessimists who warn of growth sinking toward low single digits are extrapolating a real trajectory; whatever the precise floor, the direction is unmistakable, and it is downward. A confident, ascendant China does not solicit warmth from a rival it humiliated in 2020.

The turbulence is not only economic. Xi Jinping's purge of the People's Liberation Army has reached a scale unseen since the Mao era. In late 2025, there was a new wave of military purges under Xi Jinping, including senior officers, raising questions about readiness and command stability. What does this signal? A leader consolidating control or one who can no longer trust his generals? Either reading describes a regime preoccupied at its apex, and not a serene power dispensing strategic goodwill. India is, in fact, negotiating with a state managing economic fragility and military convulsion at once.

None of this argues for clinging to Washington. Trump's coercion is real, his treatment of India shabby, and the case for diversification — toward Europe, the Gulf, Japan, Southeast Asia, and genuine indigenous capacity — is overwhelming. But that is the recovery of strategic autonomy, the oldest instinct in India's repertoire, not its abandonment for a new and worse patron. One needs to consider carefully if 'de-Americanisation' is that it accepts the patron-client frame and merely proposes a change of patron. India's actual tradition is to refuse the frame entirely.

The lesson of 1971, 1974, 1998 and 2025 is one and the same: great powers serve their interests, and India's task is to serve its own — accommodating where it gains, resisting where it must, beholden nowhere. To exchange a difficult partner who offers

technology and capital for a hostile neighbour who offers nothing significant yet would not be strategic independence. It would be its surrender.

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