

The Pilot #52 – The recalcitrant ally: What India thinks about America after the war in Iran

Written By



Hindol Sengupta Professor of international relations, O. P. Jindal Global University in India

August 13, 2026

On Raisina Hill, one question about America echoes these days: Forget what other people think America wants; does America still know what it wants?

It used to be said, for at least two decades, that the India-America relationship is “inevitable.” An entire generation of policymakers, analysts, and scholars in both countries grew up surrounded by assertions of this certainty. But it is now widely acknowledged that things have not been the same since war began between Russia and Ukraine, and hit some unprecedented low points with the war in Iran.

There were always, especially in the sinews of the state, older voices in Delhi who were hardened with Cold War wisdom and more skeptical, and these days it seems their voices are stronger than they have been for years.

At the heart of the trepidation lies a critical question—whose interests does the US today consider before it lurches into conflict? From India’s vantage point, just when it was recovering after months of extreme pressure on the purchase of Russian oil and gas, including tariff attacks from the Trump administration, the war with Iran plunged the world’s sixth-largest economy into crisis due to the repeated shutting down of the Strait of Hormuz.

When the United States and Israel attacked Iran in February 2026, India was not a belligerent. It had been steadily building up its relationship with Iran, a country with whom it has old civilizational ties, and which was strategically important for Delhi, including as a fuel source.

India was investing in the key [Chabahar Port](#) in Iran, a counter to Gwadar in Pakistan—the end point of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, only 125 miles away.

All of this, of course, went for a toss, as they say, when the war immediately made a deeply unwilling India a stakeholder. The Strait of Hormuz—the chokepoint through which about half of India's crude oil and 90% of LPG (liquified petroleum gas) imports pass—was shut as Iran fought back using its stranglehold on the vital waterway, only 60 miles wide at its widest point, shooting oil prices [above \\$100](#) a barrel and threatening the kind of imported inflation that has historically been the most politically dangerous vulnerability of any Indian government.

For a country working to boost its economy consistently to rise to [middle-income status](#) and [double its per capita income](#), aimed at pulling millions of people out of poverty, this is not merely an economic crisis, it is an existential one. India knows only too well what kind of turmoil economic inflation could cause. In neighboring Bangladesh, destabilized by energy prices following the Russia-Ukraine war, the longstanding government of Sheikh Hasina collapsed following massive street riots. Hasina is still [in exile](#) in India.

Therefore, New Delhi does not take economic shocks due to global conflict lightly. Especially where even its citizens are [being killed](#), like some were during the Iran war—with not a word of regret from the US.

Through it all, New Delhi has not really protested. There is a simple geopolitical reason: In the moving chessboard of geopolitics, it is still closer today to the United States (India's biggest bilateral trade partner) and Israel (with which the Narendra Modi government has an ever-strengthening friendship and deepening security and business ties). And this—still—provides something of a balance against China, which is vital for India.

Like many around the world, India is waiting, with as much restraint as it can muster, to see how the remaining term of President Donald Trump will pan out. Many in India also wait to see the fate of the Republican Party in the American midterm general elections later this year. India sees no virtue in aggravating any tussle with Trump, whose approval rating is steadily declining—but considering Trump's history, it is also clear that nothing can be taken for granted at this moment in American politics.

But there are lessons from this whole saga that will not disappear easily within the Indian system. Key among these is that leaning toward Washington did not spare India the costs of the relationship's underlying asymmetry, and in this the post-war period has been genuinely instructive for how Indian strategic thinking now regards the United States. Even as India absorbed the economic shock of the Hormuz disruption and positioned itself rhetorically alongside the US and Israel, the Trump administration continued to treat India as, primarily, a trade adversary to be pressured rather than a security partner to be cultivated. The additional tariffs imposed on India over its continued purchases of Russian oil—even as Washington itself issued sanctions waivers permitting Indian refiners to buy Iranian and Russian crude “already on the water” to stabilize global markets—exposed the incoherence, from an Indian point of view, of an American approach that demanded loyalty while offering little accommodation in return.

The trouble, from New Delhi's perspective, is not any punitive action from Trump—though that is obviously damaging. The bigger problem is how frequently America's demands and actions change these days. As one diplomat said to me, "Policy between states cannot change at the frequency of social media posts."

India believes that it has consistently tried to provide America evidence of its intentions—while keeping its own core interests intact (like not damaging ties with Russia, a key energy supplier it has had to turn to again with the Hormuz closures despite tremendous prior pressure from the US to abandon Moscow). India has attempted to convey that it naturally leans towards America and Israel because Israel and the Gulf Arab states are now more consequential to Indian security and economic interests than an Iran that has been, for India, more a source of energy and transit ambition (the Chabahar port project) than a genuine strategic partner. New Delhi has since scaled back its Chabahar commitments after Washington declined to extend sanctions waivers—a decision that tells its own story about where India believes its future interests lie. And yet, it has been caught in Trump's crossfire again and again.

This complicates any simple story of Indian "non-alignment" or "strategic autonomy" and introduces a clear element of geopolitical hedging.

The [February 2026 framework](#) that brought reciprocal tariffs down from 25 to 18%, and the interim trade agreement that followed, were sold in Washington as evidence of a relationship being repaired. But from New Delhi's side, the reading has been more clinical: India absorbed a demand to end Russian oil purchases, committed to a staggering \$500 billion in American purchases over five years, and received in exchange a tariff rate still higher than what several of its competitor economies enjoy. When Secretary of State Marco Rubio [visited India](#) in May and, later, floated an [invitation](#) for Modi to visit the White House, Indian officials responded with "defensive diplomacy"—polite, correct, and conspicuously silent on the invitation itself. This is not the behavior of a government that considers the relationship settled or the trust rebuilt. It is the behavior of a government managing an indispensable but, at the present moment, unreliable partner.

The deeper lesson of the Iran war, for Indian foreign policy, is a reaffirmation of something India's strategic community has long understood—India's relationship with the United States has never been an alliance in the treaty sense, and Indian elites do not want it to become one. What India wants is access—to technology, to markets, to defense platforms, to a favorable balance of power vis-à-vis China—without the obligations of formal alignment that would compromise India's freedom to manage its own neighborhood, its own energy security, and its own relationships with Russia, Iran, and the Gulf simultaneously. For a time it seemed, with the US proclaiming under Trump that it did not want dependents, that India's position had finally been properly understood, but now the feeling is unsure.

The Iran war tested this model under real pressure, and it largely held. India tilted toward Washington's coalition without joining it, absorbed economic costs without abandoning its options, and endured tariff coercion without capitulating on every point of American demand. What has changed is the mood in New Delhi's foreign policy establishment—a hardening sense that the United States under the current administration treats partnership as a series of extractions rather than a reciprocal project, and that Indian goodwill, demonstrated through

actions as costly as staying silent over the deaths of its own citizens, buys less accommodation in Washington than India may have imagined.

None of this suggests rupture. The structural logic that binds India and the United States—a shared, if asymmetric, cautiousness of Chinese power, deepening technology and defense cooperation, an Indian diaspora and economy still oriented significantly toward the American market—remains intact and will likely deepen further as the final bilateral trade agreement concludes. But it must be remembered that even on the diaspora front, the Trump position on visas and the Indian community in America has—for the first time in decades—made even the Indian diaspora **very worried** about their future in the US. So, the aftermath of the Iran war has stripped away the sentimental gloss that characterized much India-US commentary of the past decade. What remains is a more accurate and, in some ways, healthier picture—two powers whose interests overlap substantially but not completely, who need each other more than either likes to admit, and who will keep negotiating the terms of a partnership that neither is prepared to abandon, and neither is quite prepared to fully trust.

Hindol Sengupta (*hindol.sengupta@gmail.com*) is professor of international relations at O. P. Jindal Global University in India.

Media: Reuters