

A study of Continuities and Shift in India and USA Strategic Engagement, 1993-2024

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Abstract

This study looks at the strategic relationships between India and the US from 1993 to 2024, looking at how they have stayed the same and changed over three time periods. In these steps, there is healing after the Cold War, institutional strengthening, and a strategy shift as the world's politics change. The article examines how early diplomatic efforts turned into a strategic relationship, starting with India's economic change and a drop in Cold War distrust. The 1998 Singh-Talbott meeting, the 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement, and the improvement of the military and technology relationship under different administrations are all looked at. After 2017, there will be the Indo-Pacific alliance, the Quad renewal, and new technology cooperation led by (iCET). The text talks about shared values and common interests, like managing China's power in the area, but it also looks at disagreements over trade, human rights, and global disasters. The main idea of this piece is that the friendship between the US and India is practical and strong. This partnership is based on a need for strategy alignment and a shared understanding of our regional and global duties. The study comes to this opinion by looking at scholarly books, government documents, and international events.

Keywords: India–US strategic partnership, bilateral relations, Indo-Pacific strategy, QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), defense cooperation, civil nuclear agreement, geopolitical shifts, emerging technologies (iCET), realism and foreign policy, institutionalization of diplomacy, strategic autonomy, trade and economic diplomacy, counterterrorism cooperation, US Pivot to Asia, China containment strategy, Major Defense Partner status, 2+2 dialogue format, multilateral engagement, technology diplomacy, non-alignment and post-Cold War realignment.

Citation: Riya Sanoria, Dr. Amit Kumar. 2025. A study of Continuities and Shift in India and USA Strategic Engagement, 1993-2024. FishTaxa 37: 150-156.

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, India and the US have discussed strategy differently. This transformation is triggered by world politics and both countries' governments. India and the US have transformed their Cold War distrust into a global bilateral strategic alliance in the 21st century. People today consider this a key global political relationship. A major shift occurred in the early 1990s. This was mainly because India's long-time friend, the Soviet Union, collapsed after the Cold War. It was also because Narasimha Rao opened India's economy (Akhila and John, 2024). Due to these events, New Delhi was compelled to reconnect with the West, notably Washington, on different terms, which helped establish a new foreign policy. Developmental regional powers like India were strategically important because the US had to adjust its ties to deal with a world with one power. Trust, similar interests, and sometimes uncomfortable situations have grown since 1993. India's 1998 nuclear tests were temporarily halted by US sanctions (Al-Marashi and Goldschmidt Jr., 2024). Afterwards, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh held extensive diplomatic talks. These chats normalised interactions and made them more practical. The 2005 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement followed a major development in the early 2000s.

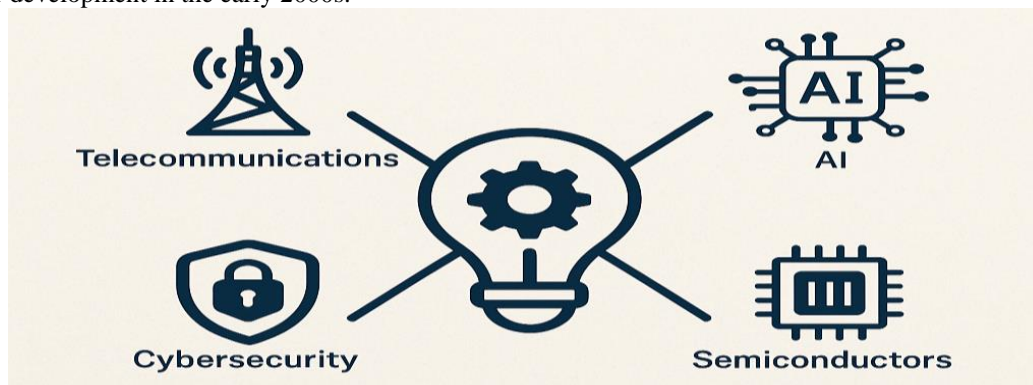


Figure: Technology and Innovation Collaboration (iCET)
(Source: Self-created)

In this step, the US government made it clear that it wanted India to have its nuclear control outside the NPT. This indicated the US government's commitment. Strategic collaboration has expanded to cover military, counterterrorism, energy, space, cybersecurity, and the Indo-Pacific maritime security architecture. China's development as a revolutionary force in Asia has shaped these interactions (Antoniadis et al., 2024). India is a key partner in maintaining regional balance thanks to the US's "Pivot to Asia" strategy, which President Obama implemented and President Trump and Vice President Biden transformed into the Indo-Pacific strategy. However, India has shifted its approach to "Act East" and aims to participate more in global value chains and strategic groups like the Quad (US, Japan, and Australia). But the partnership isn't perfect, and some things can't happen. Human rights, unfair commerce, visa constraints, and India's strategic independence remain contentious, notably with Russia. People disagree about the US leaving Afghanistan and the Ukraine crisis (Bachhawat et al., n.d.). The two countries' relationship is strong and flexible, typically carrying forward despite government changes in both capitals. This paper examines India-US strategic relations from 1993 until 2024. Many studies have examined turning moments, the causes of cooperation and tension, and how domestic, regional, and international variables have affected bilateral relations. This study examines both the practical and theoretical aspects of the alliance to better understand how two democracies with complex internal requirements handle strategic convergence in a rapidly changing environment (Biron et al., 2024). This involves examining the partnership's structure and concept.

Literature Review

Since the conclusion of the Cold War, there has been an increase in the number of scholarly works that examine the relationship between the United States and India. This significant growth indicates that the two-way relationship is becoming strategic. Distrust and ideology were studied extensively following the Cold War. Researchers like Stephen P. Cohen (2002) and C. Raja Mohan (2003) claimed the end of bipolarity, and India's economic reforms gave citizens new ways to participate (Braun and Clarke, 2023). These activities provided new avenues to participate, they say. They raised awareness that India's 1991 economic liberalisation weakened its economic independence and allowed it to collaborate more with Western nations, particularly the US.

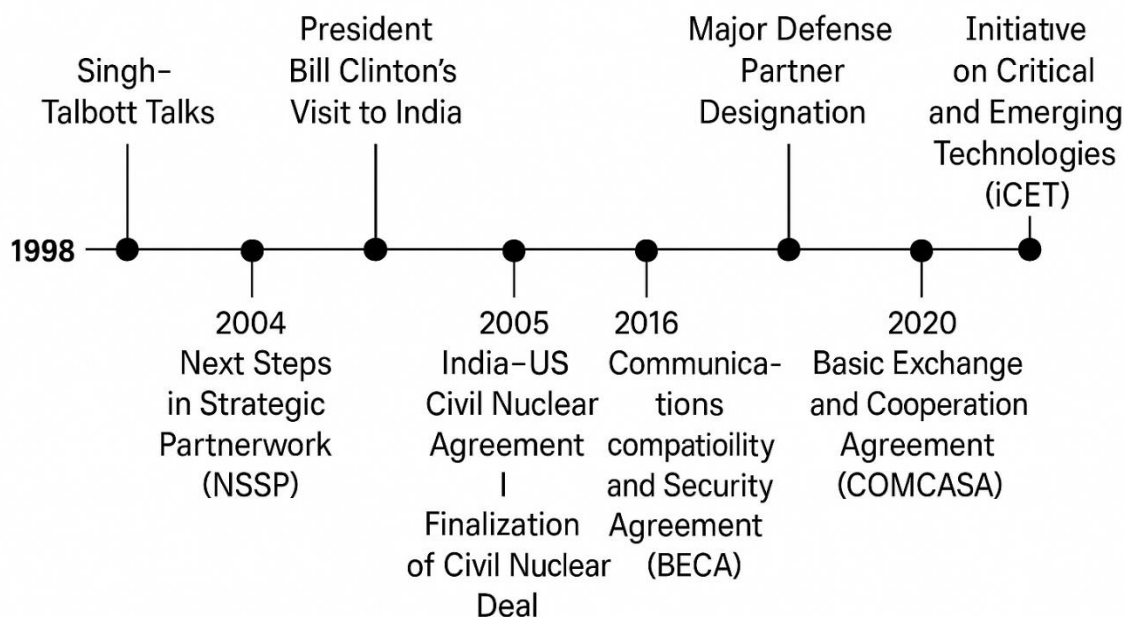


Figure: Timeline of Key Bilateral Agreements (1993–2024)
(Source: Self-created)

The US rethought its global policy and sought methods to engage new regional powers in its unipolar administration. However, early academic works concentrated on how slowly things were returning to normal due to Cold War suspicion. For its 1998 nuclear tests, the US promptly levied sanctions and harsh censure on India. Many believed these tests harmed relations between the countries (Briggs and Hallin, 2024). There was also a unique political procedure between Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott. "Engaging India," Talbott's 2004 memoir, conveys these exchanges' passion and subtlety. It emphasises how discussion changes both sides of an issue. Scholars believe this period was crucial because it allowed both nations to comprehend each other's strategic goals and internal tensions. Tellis sees the accord as a strategic exception to the non-proliferation framework and a recognition of India's nuclear responsibility. Pant says it was a big improvement in the two countries' relationship and demonstrated fresh trust (Cho et al., 2022). Realist professors believe this is part of a US effort to restrict China's rise. However, liberal institutionalists claim the US got involved because of shared democratic values and rising economic interdependence. Researchers also like how India and the US are improving their defences jointly. Tanvi Madan (2020) and Aparna Pande said the

Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), COMCASA, and BECA accords will help the military collaborate and share information. In "Fateful Triangle," Madan argues that India's alliance with the US is influenced by regional issues and historical concerns over strategic autonomy. India must delicately balance its ties with Russia, Iran, and other long-standing allies while welcoming the US (Davis and McMurtry, 2024). Recently, researchers have focused on the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), two pressing topics. According to scholars C. Raja Mohan (2021) and David Brewster, the partnership has strengthened because both countries wish to maintain marine security and stop the Chinese government from acting aggressively. The Quad is not a military collaboration, but it is becoming a popular tool for governments to collaborate on strategic planning. Critics warn that India's history of not being allies and its own political restrictions may prevent it from fully supporting the US's strategic ambitions (Erber and Erber, 2024). Many academics, like Arvind Subramanian, have discussed the economy's pros and cons. Trade between the two countries has risen since the 1990s, but both sides defend their industries, causing complications. Differences over digital taxes, pharmaceutical patents, and market access make collaboration tougher. Subramanian emphasises that India must make deeper structural adjustments to maximise strategic economic cooperation. Finally, the literature examines repeated divergence. According to analysts Alyssa Ayres and Michael Kugelman, India's attitude on the Russia-Ukraine war, its unwillingness to publicly condemn Russia, and its differing views on human rights and climate funding anger many. These researchers propose a more realistic perspective that accounts for transactional link components (Farhat et al., 2024). They advise against overestimating convergence and advocate realism. Academics describe the India-US strategic cooperation as dynamic, diverse, and ever-changing. Changing global power structures, local politics, and leader preferences contribute to this occurrence of long-term strategic alignment and divergence. This literature helps analyse what changed and remained the same in the relationship between 1993 and 2024.

Evolution of India–US Strategic Engagement (1993–2005): From Hesitation to Strategic Partnership

India and the United States experienced a critical period of relationship from 1993 to 2005. The two countries formed a solid strategic relationship after decades of different strategic agendas. Trust between India and the US has never been high. Indians didn't trust each other because they were neutral in the Cold War and near to the USSR. The changing international order following the Cold War, India's economic liberalisation, and both sides' expanding strategic needs allowed for realignment (Fixico, 2024). The 1991 economic crisis forced India to allow more foreign investment. This enabled international business and investment, notably with the US. American corporations and government leaders saw India as an economic growth potential and a possible military partner in Asia as it opened up to globalisation. After the Cold War, the US became the only superpower and sought new methods to collaborate with developing economies to maintain its global dominance, especially in Asia. Even after these improvements, Cold War hostility persisted throughout the early 1990s. However, India's nuclear aspirations and strategic autonomy remained contentious (Ginalski et al., 2023). India conducted nuclear tests at Pokhran in May 1998. These tests were the true test of the two nations' relationship. After the Glenn Amendment, the US imposed sanctions, showing its concern about nuclear proliferation and the arms race in the region. This situation didn't worsen; it unexpectedly allowed diplomats to talk. After that, India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott spoke, which was crucial. The two ambassadors met over a dozen times from 1998 to 2000 for one of the longest and most in-depth bilateral official conversations since the Cold War (Govella, Mohan and Glaser, 2022). These meetings rebuilt trust, clarified each country's strategic position, and provided the framework for long-term collaboration. Even if they disagreed on the NPT, the two parties believed that strategic convergence was possible. Bill Clinton visited India in March 2000. The first living US president to visit India in 22 years changed relations between the two nations. His five-day visit showed that the US cared about India's development to global importance and that both countries were willing to build on their democratic values. Through speeches, contacts with Indian civil society, and negotiations with Indian government officials, Clinton stressed the complexity of US-India relations (Hassan et al., 2024). He said the countries cooperate on trade, technology, energy, and security. Many said the vacation changed their views of each other. The September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes changed global strategy again. This pushed India and the US closer in the war against terrorism. India provided logistical support and information to the US in Afghanistan. Both countries were confronting transnational terrorist threats and valued security in South Asia and the Middle East, thus, the bombings allowed them to discuss strategic problems. Delhi perceived the security benefits of tighter ties with the US, and Washington embraced India's rising concerns about Pakistani terrorism in several ways. Military-to-military cooperation began in the early 2000s. This cooperation includes drills, marketing defence goods, and hosting security discussions (Hines, 2023). It was time for the annual Malabar naval drills. Most marine security and cooperation drills are between India and the US. Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP), agreed in 2004, was a crucial project. The National Security Strategy Document (NSSP) outlined cooperation on civilian nuclear technologies, space research, high-tech trade, and missile defence. People paid heed because it implied India and the US would shift from commerce to long-term strategic cooperation. Even though the NSSP was primarily a process, it was vital. India and the US began 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement talks after the NSSP. The arrangement was facilitated by the NSSP (Keen and Tidwell, 2024). This crucial pact was reached later, but its roots are in the 1993–2005 trust and strategic alignment. At this point, India joined the global nuclear order. It gave India new opportunities in many other sectors. Between 1993 and 2005, India-US relations went from scepticism and distance to strategic involvement. It created the groundwork for a long-term partnership. Economic changes, regional security challenges, and political tenacity accelerated this phase. After wasted opportunities, they formed a friendship based on shared principles, respect, and a willingness to collaborate in a changing world (Manulak, 2024). The relationship tone changed.

Consolidation and Expansion (2005–2016): Institutionalisation and Strategic Depth

India and the United States enhanced their strategic partnership from 2005 to 2016. This became feasible by constructing upon a foundation of ten years. The 2005–2008 India–US Civil Nuclear Agreement was the most significant event of this time. It transformed relations between the two nations. India is not a member of the NPT, but the pact offered them peaceful nuclear technology and proved that the US views India as a responsible world power (Michalos, 2023). The nuclear pact had far-reaching repercussions beyond energy cooperation. This led to greater defence and strategic coordination. The 2005 New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship called for expanded defence commerce, joint exercises, information sharing, and cooperation in space and missile defence. A major arms supplier to India was the US by 2016. It was due to the two countries' exponentially rising defence commerce (Nawaz, Muhammad Zeeshan and Zaman, 2024). President Barack Obama improved US-India relations. President Obama's 2010 and 2015 visits to India helped underline their mutual duties.

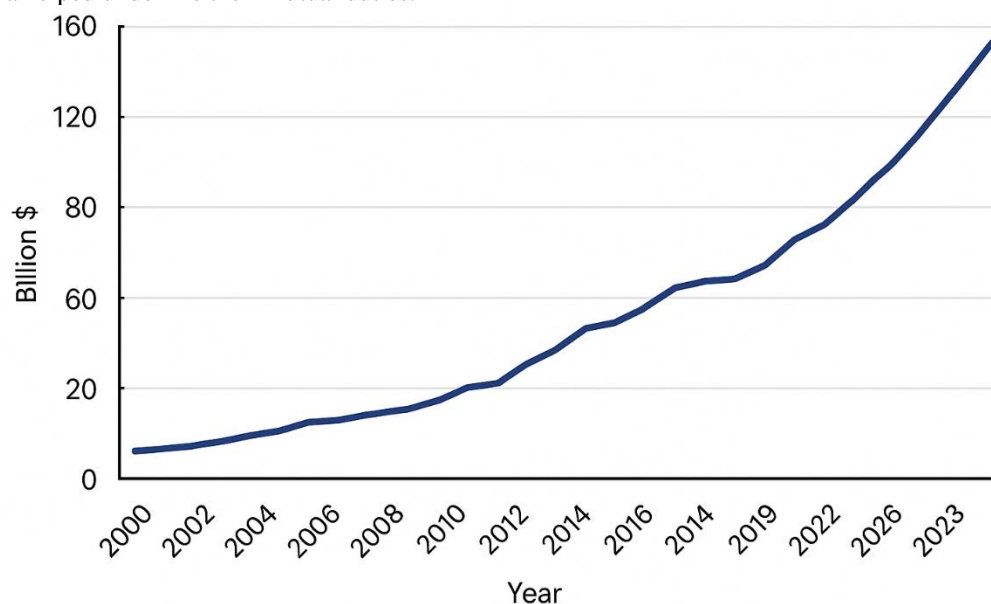


Figure: India–US Bilateral Trade Growth (2000–2023)

(Source: Self-created)

Obama supported India's 2010 UN Security Council membership application. This indicated that the US is supporting India's world power ambitions. India was named a "Major Defence Partner" in 2016. This title highlighted how vital top-level trust is and allowed advanced military technologies to be shared. One of the biggest institutional triumphs was signing military agreements (Panda and Gunasekara-Rockwell, 2021). The 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) simplified system integration and operational readiness. This arrangement allowed both sides to refuel and feed at military sites. India became more open to defence cooperation, notably in the maritime sector, as concerns about China's Indo-Pacific aggression intensified. Despite concerns about losing military independence, India proceeded. The magnitude and breadth of Malabar naval drills varied during this time. The drills began with two countries but later included Japan, making them trilateral (Portes, 2024). The drills focused on naval domain awareness, submarine combat, and teamwork. These exercises demonstrated to the Indian Navy how US and Indian vessels were working together better, bolstering the Indo-Pacific partnership. A major commercial partner for India is the US. FDI from the US increased dramatically in India, especially in technology, health, and services. However, commercial inequities, intellectual property rights, and US visa constraints for Indian workers strained relations. Despite issues, the US–India Trade Policy Forum and bilateral investment arrangements increased economic cooperation. Strategic collaboration expanded beyond counterterrorism, climate change, and cybersecurity (Rai, 2024). India and the US have resumed their Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism. This simplifies information sharing and collaboration. The India–US Cyber Security Forum was founded because both countries understand the importance of cyber infrastructure for national security and economic stability. This was done due to rising global cyberattacks. India increasingly aligned politically with the US's Asian strategic aims. India maintained its military independence but supported a US-led "free and open Indo-Pacific". India's "Act East" and the US's "pivot to Asia" share similarities (Sajid, Shahzad and Rafi Khan, 2022). Both want better connectivity, safer regions, and rules-based maritime governance. However, this time had issues. India's military links with Russia, energy cooperation with Iran, and refusal to join all key defence accords slowed alignment. The US, on the other hand, has criticised India's market entrance rules and regulatory barriers to American enterprises. Both parties were realistic and eager to resolve their differences to maintain strategic collaboration (Shiraev and Levy, 2024). The US and India formed a strategic cooperation from 2005 to 2016. The collaboration grew due to formalised cooperation, deeper military and security links, and more

strategic participation. The governments became strategic allies, sharing ideals and strengths that aided each other. This allowed them to collaborate more in the future. This happened because their economic growth, regional stability, and global governance goals aligned.

Strategic Shifts under Changing Geopolitics (2017–2024):

India-US strategic collaboration altered dramatically from 2017 to 2024. Political factors, especially China's expansion and international order changes, sparked this movement. Previously, partners India and the US now cooperate strategically with countries worldwide, particularly in the Indo-Pacific (Silverman and Smith, 2024). This change occurred under Narendra Modi, Trump, and Biden. The resumption of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—India, the US, Japan, and Australia—was a major event. After founding in 2007, QUAD was mostly defunct till 2017. As China asserted itself in the South China Sea, Belt and Road Initiative fears grew. Since holding monthly meetings for world leaders on health, infrastructure, and climate resilience, the Quad has grown from an informal gathering to a formal place to engage on vital issues. The Quad has become more than a hangout. India and the US consider the Indo-Pacific geopolitical (Sudheer Singh Verma and S, 2024).



Figure: Public Perception and Favorability Trends

(Source: Self-created)

They want a free, open, norm-based regional order. Official military and security cooperation was a huge step. America and India agreed to secure communications in 2018. A 2020 Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement will be inked. Both agreements are crucial supporting agreements since they build on previous ones. BECA shares real-time geographic information, while COMCASA helps forces communicate and work securely. These agreements bolstered India's maritime defences. More than the 2020 Galwan Valley border clashes between India and China illustrate that India and the US share strategic goals. New Delhi gained strategic credibility from US support quickly (Sutton, 2024). Yearly 2+2 Ministerial Dialogues between the army and foreign affairs ministries formalised high-level policy exchanges. These meetings regularly and formally discussed national and local issues. A crucial new approach to collaborate on tech innovation and advancement. The US and India launched iCET in 2023. Critical and emergent technologies are becoming geopolitically relevant. This project aimed to improve AI, quantum computing, defence, semiconductors, and semiconductor technology collaboration. The International Centre for Technological Transfer (iCET) sought to standardise R&D, promote innovative teamwork, and minimise tech supply chain dependence on China (Turner, 2024). Despite disagreements on data localisation, digital sovereignty, and regulatory frameworks, both countries wanted strong and safe technological ecosystems. The two countries also increased climate and green energy technology R&D collaboration. US funding and technical help aided energy transitions. The US backed India's I Solar Alliance. To decouple economically and technologically from China, bilateral collaboration

focused on semiconductors, 5G/6G technology, and digital infrastructure (Briggs and Hallin, 2024). There was friction throughout this time. Washington worried India would keep quiet about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and continue energy and security deals with Moscow. Both actions frightened Americans. IP issues, immigration limitations, and trade disagreements hampered business (Davis and McMurtry, 2024). US politics sometimes highlighted India's human rights atrocities and fears of losing democracy, complicating the global democratic picture. India and the US got along. Countries cooperated despite political differences because they shared geopolitical goals and were pragmatic. Finally, this phase showed a shift from bilateral transactionalism to strategic alignment. This change occurred because both parties were concerned about China's rise, shared an Indo-Pacific vision, and had rising technical goals.

Conclusion: Continuity Amidst Change

The strategy between India and the US has altered since 1993 and will till 2024. Despite big changes and long-term differences, the partnership persisted. Cold War reluctances have given way to global strategic ambitions in the two countries' partnership. Each new age has brought new aspects, from the 1990s normalisation to 2000s consolidation to 2010s and 2020s strategic recalibration. All along, mutual gain has been the goal. Institutionalising the two countries' partnership is consistent. Both countries have communication, defence cooperation, and strategic coordination structures. LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA are early diplomatic talks and agreements. Teamwork is mature and adaptable, as seen by the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, ICET, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and energy security working groups. After the Cold War, the partnership prioritised economic independence and realignment; presently, it prioritises Indo-Pacific security, technology collaboration, and climate resilience. New strategy considerations necessitated this change. China's rise has transformed US-India relations with Japan and Australia. The QUAD was originally unknown but is now vital to regional involvement. Economic alliance conflicts persist as it grows. Trade deficits, protectionist policies, and regulations persist. Collaboration is challenging due to differing perspectives on Russia, data privacy, and local government. Many of these disagreements have been handled peacefully. India and the US may strengthen their strategic alliance in a multipolar world of technology competitiveness, unpredictable climate, and broken global institutions. Developing AI, space, cybersecurity, and resilient supply chains requires collaboration. Trust and strategic independence will be vital to this.

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