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INDIA-U.S. RELATIONS DURING THE NEHRU ERA (1947–1964): COOPERATION, CONFLICT AND THE DYNAMICS OF NON-ALIGNMENT

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Abstract:

India gained independence from British rule in 1947, and Jawaharlal Nehru became the country's first Prime Minister. He served as Prime Minister from 1947 until his death in 1964. During his period, India witnessed significant political, socio-economic, and institutional transformations. Nehru also played a crucial role in shaping India's foreign policy in the challenging international environment of the post-Second World War and Cold War era. He emphasized strategic autonomy, advocated non-alignment between the two Cold War superpowers, and sought to maintain friendly and peaceful relations with countries across the world. His foreign policy was guided by the principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and non-interference, particularly through the Panchsheel principles. Nehru's vision laid the foundation for an independent and pragmatic foreign policy that sought to safeguard India's national interests while promoting international peace and cooperation. This study examines the nature, development, and changing dynamics of Indo-U.S. relations and examines the major areas of cooperation, including economic assistance, food aid, development programmes, education, scientific exchanges, and peaceful nuclear cooperation.

At the same time, Indo-U.S. relations were affected by several political and strategic disagreements. The Kashmir dispute, U.S. military and strategic ties with Pakistan, India's recognition and engagement with Communist China, the Korean War, and India's opposition to military alliances created significant differences between India and America. India's growing political, economic, and defense cooperation with the Soviet Union further complicated bilateral relations. The study gives particular attention to the Sino-Indian War of 1962, which marked a major turning point in Indo-U.S. relations. After this war, the United States provided military and logistical assistance to India, resulting in a temporary strengthening of bilateral cooperation between two countries. The paper argues that Indo-U.S. relations during the Nehru era cannot be characterized simply as either friendly or hostile. Rather, they were marked by cooperation alongside ideological, political, and strategic differences. Nehru sought American economic and technological cooperation while firmly protecting India's strategic autonomy and commitment to Non-Alignment.

Keywords: India–U.S. Relations, Jawaharlal Nehru, Non-Alignment, Cold War, Kashmir, Pakistan, Soviet Union, Economic Aid, Sino-Indian War.

Historical background: Early Relations of Indo-US:

The historical relationship between India and the United States can be traced indirectly to the period of European exploration and the expansion of maritime trade. Christopher Columbus's voyage of 1492 was undertaken in search of a western maritime route to Asia, particularly to the prosperous markets of India and the East Indies. However, this voyage did not establish direct relations between India and the United States, since the United States had not yet emerged as an independent nation. Nevertheless, the European search for new routes to India contributed to the expansion of maritime contacts linking Europe, Asia, and the American colonies.

¹ American contacts with India gradually emerged during the eighteenth century, particularly through maritime commerce. Even before the American Revolution (1775–1783), merchants, sailors, and vessels associated with the American colonies had begun to participate in the expanding trade of the Indian Ocean. American merchant ships increasingly visited Indian ports, exchanging goods and establishing commercial connections with Indian merchants and European trading communities. These activities marked the beginning of a growing commercial interaction between the peoples of India and the American colonies.²

The American Revolution marked an important turning point in the development of independent American commercial relations with India. Following independence, American merchants sought greater access to the profitable markets of the Indian Ocean, while Indian ports became increasingly connected with the expanding network of American overseas trade. American vessels visited ports along the Indian coastline, many of which were under British or other European control. These early commercial exchanges gradually created the conditions for more formal diplomatic engagement. An important milestone came in 1792, when Benjamin Joy of Boston was appointed the first American Consul at Calcutta. His appointment represented an early formal institutional link between the United States and British India and demonstrated the growing importance of India to American commercial interests. Although this appointment did not constitute modern diplomatic relations between the two countries, it reflected the gradual transition from commercial interaction toward organized official contact.³

The Jay Treaty of 1794, concluded between the United States and Great Britain, also influenced American commercial activities within the British imperial trading system. The relations between India and the United States developed gradually through trade, migration, intellectual exchanges, missionary activities, and diplomatic contacts. The United States became one of the early countries to recognize and engage with independent India. The relationship subsequently expanded beyond traditional diplomatic and commercial contacts to encompass political, economic,



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scientific, educational, technological, defence, and cultural cooperation.⁴ Thus, the historical relationship between India and the United States represents a long and gradual evolution. This historical evolution provides an important foundation for understanding the development of Indo-American relations during the Jawaharlal Nehru era (1947–1964) and the emergence of India's independent foreign-policy approach in the context of the Cold War.⁵

Indo-US Relations before 1947: Cultural and Diplomatic Relations:

American traders were among the earliest groups to establish commercial contacts with India. Over time, relations between India and the United States expanded beyond trade and commerce through the activities of missionaries, travelers, intellectuals, educators, and Indian political activists.⁶ These diverse interactions contributed significantly to the growth of mutual understanding between the two countries. An important development in early Indo-American relations was the establishment of the American Marathi Mission in 1813. It was one of the earliest Protestant missionary organizations to operate in western India, particularly in the Bombay Presidency and the Marathi-speaking regions. The missionaries played an important role in introducing American society to Indian social, cultural, educational, and religious conditions.⁷

The missionaries established schools, promoted modern education, printed and distributed religious and educational literature, and worked among disadvantaged sections of society. Their activities also provided Americans with first-hand information about Indian society, customs, religious practices, poverty, and social conditions. Missionaries produced books, reports, and other publications that contributed to the growing body of American knowledge about India. Apart from their religious activities, several American missionaries became involved in educational and social reform initiatives. American missionary organizations also participated in humanitarian relief during periods of severe famine. During the famines of 1896–97 and 1899–1900, missionary organizations and other voluntary groups provided food, shelter, medical assistance, and other forms of relief to affected communities. Such humanitarian activities strengthened people-to-people contacts between India and the United States.⁸ Thus, the early relationship between India and the United States was not confined to commercial interests. Trade, missionary activities, education, humanitarian work, intellectual exchanges, and the movement of people gradually created a wider foundation for Indo-American relations.

American writers and intellectuals developed considerable interest in India's rich cultural, philosophical, and religious heritage. The ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau influenced Indian thinkers, particularly Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of civil disobedience was influenced by Thoreau. P. C. Majumdar, a prominent leader of the Brahmo Samaj, visited the United States and delivered lectures in several American cities, introducing American audiences to Indian religious and social ideas. A major milestone was Swami Vivekananda's participation in the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893. His speech introduced Indian philosophy and Vedanta to a wide American audience. He began his address with the famous words, "*Sisters and Brothers of America*," which received a prolonged and enthusiastic applause.⁹ His visit greatly increased American interest in Indian culture and spirituality.¹⁰

Lala Lajpat Rai, a prominent Indian nationalist leader, visited the United States and became an important link between the Indian freedom movement and American public opinion. During his 1914–1919 stay in the United States, he travelled to several cities, including New York, Chicago, and Boston, where he delivered lectures on Indian nationalism and India's struggle for independence.¹¹ His book, *The United States of America: A Hindu's Impressions and a Study*, published in 1916, examined American society, education, politics, and democratic institutions. His experiences in the United States broadened his understanding of American democracy and influenced his views on political and social development.¹² Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927)¹³ was a controversial and strongly critical work on Indian society. It highlighted issues such as social inequalities, the condition of women, caste practices, and religious customs. The book was widely criticized by Indian nationalists, including Mahatma Gandhi, who regarded it as a one-sided portrayal of Indian society and as indirectly supporting British colonial rule.

Rabindranath Tagore visited the United States during 1912–13, 1916–17, 1920–21, 1929, and 1930. His literary reputation grew rapidly in the United States, particularly after he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Through his lectures and writings, Tagore introduced American audiences to Indian literature, philosophy, and culture.¹⁴ During the early twentieth century, sections of the American public, intellectuals, journalists, and political groups expressed sympathy for India's struggle for independence. American support took various forms, including public advocacy, intellectual engagement, fundraising, and criticism of British colonial policies. These developments contributed to growing people-to-people and political contacts between India and the United States before India's independence in 1947. Several Indian associations and organizations were established in the United States to promote Indian interests and support the country's struggle for independence. These organizations helped spread awareness about British colonial rule and India's nationalist movement among the American public.¹⁵



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The American press also gave considerable attention to India's freedom struggle. Some newspapers and journals expressed sympathy for Indian nationalists and criticized aspects of British colonial rule. These developments helped strengthen American public awareness and support for India's demand for self-government and independence.¹⁶ The Second World War marked an important stage in the development of official India–U.S. relations. In 1941, the United States agreed with the British Government to establish an exchange of diplomatic representatives with India. In October 1941, Thomas H. Wilson was appointed the first U.S. Commissioner in New Delhi, while Sir Girja Shanker Bajpai became India's Agent-General in Washington.¹⁷

However, India's representative functioned under the overall supervision of the British Embassy, as India was still under British colonial rule. These appointments nevertheless established direct official channels of communication between India and the United States and laid the foundation for closer bilateral relations after India's independence in 1947.¹⁸ Historically, the United States and sections of the American public expressed significant sympathy and support for India's struggle for independence. American journalists, intellectuals, organizations, and political groups often criticized British colonial policies and supported India's demand for self-government. However, U.S. government policy was not uniformly supportive of Indian independence, as it also had strategic relations with Britain during the Second World War.¹⁹

Indo-US Relations during Nehru Period (1947-64):

The United States initially viewed India as an important democratic country with considerable potential in Asia. Both countries shared an interest in representative government, economic development and international stability. After India's independence in 1947, India–U.S. relations remained limited and were often affected by differences over foreign policy and regional security. The Nehru era (1947–1964) was the formative period of India's foreign policy. As the first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru played a central role in shaping India's relations with the major powers, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union. Indo-U.S. contacts had already developed before independence.²⁰ In 1944, Asaf Ali was appointed India's representative in the United States, strengthening official contacts between the two countries. After independence, Nehru recognized the importance of maintaining friendly relations with the United States while preserving India's independent foreign policy.²¹

The Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan became a major source of tension, particularly because the United States developed close strategic and military ties with Pakistan. During the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the United States provided military assistance to India. However, this cooperation did not lead to a lasting improvement in bilateral relations. The 1965 Indo-Pakistan War further complicated U.S.–India relations, as Washington sought to maintain its strategic relationship with Pakistan.

During the Cold War, India's policy of Non-Alignment and its growing relations with the Soviet Union created differences with the United States. The signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971 further strengthened India's strategic ties with the USSR. At the same time, the United States regarded Pakistan as an important regional partner and provided it with military and economic assistance. India's increasing dependence on the Soviet Union for defence equipment and economic assistance contributed to mutual suspicion between New Delhi and Washington. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 further widened the strategic differences, as the United States strengthened its partnership with Pakistan to counter Soviet influence in the region. Thus, during the Cold War, Indo-U.S. relations were characterized by strategic differences, U.S.–Pakistan cooperation, India's non-alignment, and its close partnership with the Soviet Union. Despite occasional cooperation, these factors prevented the development of a close bilateral relationship until the end of the Cold War.²²

After the end of the Cold War, India–U.S. relations improved significantly. A major turning point came in 1991, when India introduced economic reforms, including liberalization, privatization, and globalization. These reforms opened the Indian economy to greater foreign investment and expanded opportunities for international trade and cooperation. As India emerged as a rapidly growing and increasingly important global economy, economic ties with the United States expanded. Bilateral cooperation gradually increased in areas such as trade, investment, technology, education, and services, providing a stronger foundation for the development of a broader strategic partnership.²³ India–U.S. relations have improved significantly, particularly in the areas of economic cooperation, defence and security, technology, and civil nuclear cooperation. However, the relationship has also faced challenges due to regional strategic issues, especially the complex India–U.S.–Pakistan relationship.

Differences over Kashmir, U.S. relations with Pakistan, and regional security concerns have periodically created tensions between India and the United States. Nevertheless, the two countries have gradually strengthened their partnership and expanded cooperation across a wide range of areas.²⁴ India and the United States have maintained diplomatic relations since 1947, following India's independence. Although the relationship has experienced periods of



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cooperation as well as differences, successive Indian governments and U.S. administrations have continued to engage with each other. Over time, bilateral relations have expanded from diplomatic and economic cooperation to include defence, security, technology, education, trade, and civil nuclear cooperation.

Nehru's Visit to the United States and Diplomatic Relations:

In July 1949, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit became India's Ambassador to the United States. In October 1949, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited the United States to strengthen bilateral relations and seek American cooperation in India's economic development. During his visit, Nehru sought to build greater American understanding of India's foreign-policy priorities and emphasized the importance of economic and commercial cooperation. He aimed to develop friendly, mutually beneficial relations while maintaining India's independent foreign policy.²⁵ However, differences emerged over issues such as Non-Alignment, Kashmir, and U.S. relations with Pakistan. Despite these differences, cultural, educational, economic, and diplomatic contacts between India and the United States continued to develop during the Nehru period.

The Nehru era laid the foundation of modern Indo-U.S. relations, characterized by cooperation as well as significant differences arising from the two countries' differing foreign-policy priorities.²⁶ The Kashmir issue emerged as one of the earliest sources of tension in Indo-U.S. relations. After the dispute was taken to the United Nations in 1948, India became increasingly concerned about the position adopted by the United States and other Western countries, which New Delhi perceived as more sympathetic towards Pakistan. Differences over the Kashmir dispute created a degree of mistrust between India and the United States. India's dissatisfaction with the Western approach to Kashmir became an important factor affecting bilateral relations during the early years after independence.²⁷ In 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established under Mao Zedong, India recognized the importance of maintaining relations with the new Chinese government. India adopted a more conciliatory approach towards China, while the United States remained opposed to the Communist government in China. During the mid-1950s, India strengthened its relations with the Soviet Union while continuing to follow a policy of Non-Alignment. This difference in approach became another source of divergence between Indian and American foreign policies during the early Cold War.²⁸

During the Korean War (1950–1953), India and the United States adopted different positions, further widening their foreign-policy differences. The Kashmir dispute, disagreement over the recognition of Communist China, and India's policy of Non-Alignment became major sources of tension in bilateral relations. In 1951, India also declined to participate in the San Francisco Peace Conference on Japan, reflecting its independent approach to international affairs.²⁹

During President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration (1953–1961), Indo-U.S. relations remained mixed. The United States viewed India's Non-Aligned policy with suspicion, particularly because America was building military alliances to contain the spread of communism. India, however, rejected military blocs and advocated peaceful coexistence, disarmament, and independent decision-making in international affairs.³⁰ At the same time, economic cooperation continued. In 1953, the Aid India Consortium was established with U.S. participation and support from other countries to assist India's economic development and strengthen its development programmes. Thus, the period witnessed political differences alongside continued economic and developmental cooperation between India and the United States.³¹ These were clearly illustrating the gap between India and U.S relations till 1954.

In April 1954, America entered into an alliance with Pakistan. After this, Pakistan joined SEATO and started received huge military aid from America. This was strongly opposed by India, but America gave an assurance to India that, American military aid to Pakistan shall not be used against India. But this was failed to convince Indian leaders, hence the relations are stagnated. India's Tibet Agreement with China, the 'Panchseela' agreement between Nehru and Chou-En- lai, the Indian refusal to allow U.S. planes to fly over India. It's damaged the cause of Indo-U.S. friendly relations.³²

In 1955, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Soviet Union and met Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin. The visit strengthened Indo-Soviet friendship, popularly expressed through the slogan "**Hindi-Rusi Bhai-Bhai**." Meanwhile, U.S. military and strategic support for Pakistan, particularly within the context of the Cold War and the Kashmir dispute, increased Indian concerns. The Soviet Union, in contrast, increasingly supported India's position on major international issues. These developments contributed to growing differences between India and the United States.³³ India also disagreed with several U.S. policies in Indo-china and the Middle East, reflecting the wider differences between India's Non-Aligned foreign policy and America's Cold War strategy.

Nehru visited the United States in 1956 to strengthen bilateral relations. Although the visit did not remove major political differences, economic cooperation continued, particularly through American food assistance to India. The U.S. position during the Suez Crisis of 1956 also helped reduce some tensions between the two countries. However,



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India's refusal to condemn the Soviet intervention in Hungary and its opposition to U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1958 again highlighted the differences between two countries.

A significant improvement came with President Dwight D. Eisenhower's visit to India from December 9–14, 1959, the first visit by a sitting U.S. President to India. The visit helped improve mutual understanding and gave fresh momentum to bilateral relations, although fundamental differences over the Cold War, Pakistan, and Non-Alignment remained.³⁴

During the period of John F. Kennedy (1961–1963), India–U.S. relations improved considerably. Kennedy viewed India as an important democratic country and a potential leader in Asia. He supported India's economic development and sought to strengthen bilateral cooperation. His speech in California, Kennedy emphasized the importance of the competition between India and Communist China for economic and political influence in Asia. He expressed U.S. support for India's democratic development and stated that America wanted “India to win that race with Red China” and become “a free and thriving leader of a free and thriving Asia.” Kennedy's approach reflected the U.S. effort to strengthen India's position in Asia while promoting democracy and economic development. The 1962 Sino-Indian War further increased U.S. support for India, including military assistance, and temporarily brought the two countries closer.³⁵ The Sino-Indian War of 1962 brought India and the United States closer. The United States provided India with military equipment, transport support, and other essential supplies, and assured India of further assistance. India welcomed this support, which strengthened bilateral relations during the crisis.

Despite this cooperation, India remained committed to its policy of Non-Alignment and did not abandon its independent foreign policy. In 1962–63, India–U.S. relations reached a relatively positive phase. The United States also encouraged India and Pakistan to hold discussions on the Kashmir issue, although the talks did not produce a lasting settlement.

During the Nehru era, the United States also provided substantial economic, food, and development assistance to India. Through the Aid India Consortium, the United States and other donor countries supported India's Five-Year Plans and broader economic development. Thus, economic assistance became an important pillar of Indo-U.S. relations during this period.³⁶ A new phase of Indo-U.S. cooperation in nuclear technology began in the 1960s. The United States agreed to provide financial and technical assistance for the construction of the Tarapur Atomic Power Station in Maharashtra. Under the agreement, the United States also supplied enriched uranium fuel for the reactors. The Tarapur agreement marked an important development in bilateral cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. However, despite progress in nuclear and economic cooperation, political differences and strategic disagreements continued to create tensions in Indo-U.S. relations.³⁷

Conclusion:

India and the United States differed considerably in their geographical settings, social structures, cultures, and traditions, yet they shared several common democratic ideals. Both countries had experienced colonial rule and struggled for independence, although they adopted different methods in their respective freedom movements. After India gained independence in 1947, its leaders sought to establish cordial and mutually beneficial relations with the United States. Indian leaders appreciated the American contribution to the cause of freedom and were particularly influenced by the democratic ideals of the United States. Jawaharlal Nehru, in particular, sought to maintain friendly relations with America while safeguarding India's independent foreign policy.

The Nehru era (1947–1964) was a foundational period in the history of Indo-U.S. relations. The study concludes that, despite considerable tensions, the Nehru era established important foundations for the subsequent development of India–U.S. relations and shaped the strategic framework within which bilateral relations evolved after 1964. The relationship moved through several stages: initial diplomatic engagement, political tensions over Kashmir and the Cold War, expanding economic cooperation, growing Indo-Soviet ties, and renewed U.S.-India cooperation following the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Nehru sought American friendship without sacrificing India's strategic autonomy. Consequently, Indo-U.S. relations during this period were neither consistently cordial nor fundamentally hostile, but rather a complex combination of cooperation, disagreement, negotiation, and mutual strategic adjustment.

However, significant differences emerged between the two countries during the early years of the Cold War. The United States adopted a policy of containing communism and formed military alliances to counter Soviet influence, whereas India under Nehru pursued a policy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. India's refusal to join U.S.-sponsored military alliances and its independent positions on major international issues, including the recognition of the People's Republic of China, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Afghan crisis, created tensions with American policymakers.



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At the same time, India's relations with the United States were affected by Washington's close ties with Pakistan. American military and economic assistance to Pakistan, particularly through Cold War security alliances, generated serious concern in New Delhi. The United States' position on the Kashmir issue at the United Nations, its support for Portugal during the Goa crisis, and its policies concerning Pakistan during the Bangladesh crisis further strained Indo-US relations. Thus, although both countries shared democratic values and sought peaceful international relations, their divergent strategic interests and approaches to Cold War politics created recurring tensions during the Nehru era. Cultural relations, however, provided an important foundation for closer ties between the two countries. Indian music, dance, art, literature, cuisine, and cinema gradually gained popularity in the United States. Cultural exchanges, largely supported by private institutions and communities, helped increase public awareness of Indian traditions and strengthened people-to-people contacts. These exchanges contributed to the broader development of Indo-US relations beyond the political and strategic spheres.

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