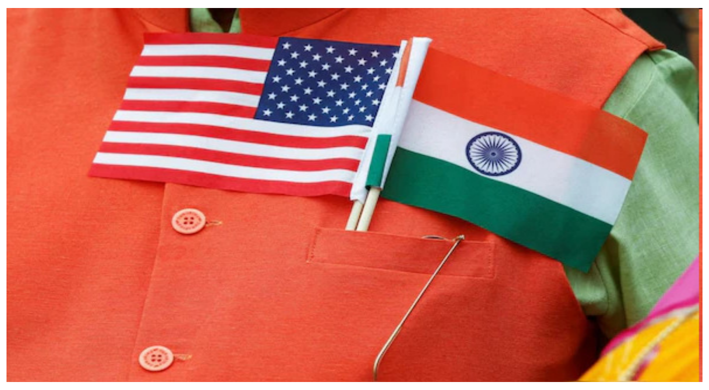
India and Maga-land: How Delhi can connect to America's conservative heartland



When a viral X post mocked New York legislator Zohran Mamdani for eating with his hands, it revealed a profound cultural disconnect. Mamdani is running to be New York City's next mayor. America's conservative heartland—Make America Great Again (Maga)-land—has woefully misinterpreted one of India's ancient traditions. Mamdani's Ugandan birth further intensified the debate on cultural belonging (The New York Times). Republicans like Representative Brandon Gill exacerbated the tension, labelling hand-eating "uncivilised" (NDTV). Defences of Indian customs flooded X, prompting a critical question: how can India effectively engage Maga-land?

India has a unique opportunity to bridge this gap through Vice President JD Vance and his wife, Usha Vance, an Indian-American. Unlike Pakistan, whose outreach is limited by resentment among Global War on Terror veterans (CFR). A resentment that stretches to most of President Donald Trump's cabinet, who see Pakistan as a necessary evil; India is free from such baggage. Leveraging shared values—strength, faith, and self-reliance—India can resonate deeply with Maga-land.

Eating with hands in India is a traditional ritual tied to Ayurveda, symbolising connection and simplicity (Ayurveda). Conversely, Maga-land—a coalition of rural, blue-collar, and faith-driven communities—now seems to view this practice negatively. JD and Usha Vance, with their visible celebration of Indian culture, provide a bridge, showcasing harmony between tradition and modernity.

Mirroring America's Search for Its Roots

Influencers like Joe Rogan and the Liver King have popularised primal lifestyles—raw diets, hunting, and survival skills—reflecting Maga-land's pursuit of authenticity. India's ancient practices echo these primal American trends. Yogic immersions in the Ganges parallel American cold-water rituals; Nagaland's bowmanship aligns with America's hunting traditions. Ayurveda's natural eating complements American primal food trends. India's warrior traditions similarly appeal to Maga-land's 'valorisation' of strength and discipline. But the fingers vs fork debate might derail any progress that has been made. Mixing India's rich heritage with American short and fast subcultures might not work, but it's worth exploring.

JD and Usha Vance's 2025 visit to India, including stops at the Akshardham Temple and historic sites like Agra and Jaipur, highlighted these shared values, underscoring India's potential resonance with Maga-land.

Not America's protégé: Rebutting Ashley Tellis' US-India analysis

Ashley Tellis, in his article "How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions," published on June 17, 2025, in Foreign Affairs, outlines a perspective on US-India relations that is rooted in an outdated and somewhat condescending strategic framework. His argument, though detailed and data-backed, reflects assumptions, predictions, and a tone that portrays India as a subordinate actor rather than an autonomous, civilisational power charting its own course in the international system.

Tellis writes, "Since the turn of the century, the United States has sought to help India rise as a great power." He begins by recounting how the US, since the turn of the century, has supported India's rise: from the civil nuclear deal under George W Bush to defence industrial cooperation under Obama to intelligence sharing and advanced technology access under Donald Trump and the jet engine tech transfer under Joe Biden. This chronological account is framed in a way that suggests the US has done India a series of favours.

But the reality is that none of these moves were altruistic. The US does not support or arm nations unless it serves its own strategic interests. These engagements were mutually beneficial, and portraying them as one-sided largesse from the US ignores the realist, Kissingerian logic that drives American foreign policy.

He criticises India for not aligning fully with the US, especially because it champions a multipolar world rather than endorsing US primacy. But complete alignment is neither possible nor necessary. History offers no example of two sovereign countries—even allies—being perfectly aligned on every issue. Moreover, India's support for multipolarity is not an ideological or anti-US stance; rather, it is a strategic calculation. India sees multipolarity not as an end in itself but as a means to better protect and promote its interests. As the international system transitions—from the unipolarity of the post–Cold War era to a more fluid and fragmented order—India is responding to changes it neither initiated nor can halt. World order was never static: it was multipolar before the First World War, then bipolar during the Cold War, followed by a unipolar moment. The world is once again shifting, and India can neither halt this process nor afford to ignore it.

Tellis' observation that India "obsessively guards its strategic autonomy… maintaining ties with Western adversaries such as Iran and Russia" is presented almost as a flaw. Yet strategic autonomy is a hallmark of every sovereign state's foreign policy. The very structure of the international system, as per realism, is anarchic. If the US guards its freedom to act by engaging with whomever it wants—even adversaries—why should India be expected to surrender that same agency? The notion that India should align with US preferences on Russia or Iran or abandon its membership in forums like Brics or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation smacks of a colonial hangover, where the West reserves the right to moralise and dictate.

Ashley Tellis seems stuck in the early 2000s Bush strategic mindset, when the US pursued a balance-of-power approach to Asia and listed India as a strategic partner. The US has changed significantly since then. Under Trump, it became more transactional and less committed to alliances, often showing open disregard for them. It expects allies to shoulder more responsibility, even in Nato. If the US itself is withdrawing from global commitments, why is India being told to "do more"? The US is not the same strategic

anchor it once claimed to be. Tomorrow, Trump could make a deal with China even at the expense of Taiwan, and everything Tellis projects would collapse.

Tellis also overestimates his ability to predict long-term outcomes. He assumes India will rise, but not fast enough to match China or the US, and that multipolarity will remain elusive. These are speculative claims. History is filled with surprises. Karl Marx misjudged the inevitability of communism. No one predicted the First World War or the collapse of the Soviet Union. History is non-linear and unpredictable. India's trajectory, like that of any major power, is contingent and evolutionary. Assuming static futures and prescribing fixed alignments is intellectually limiting. The assumption that by 2050 only the US and China will matter is deterministic and reflects more of Tellis' strategic bias than grounded foresight. Just as Fukuyama's End of History thesis was challenged by resurgent nationalism and conflict, Tellis' vision of a binary future overlooks the inherent unpredictability of global politics.

He also claims that because India won't form alliances, it might struggle to secure external support as the US grows more transactional. But if the US becomes transactional, why should India not act the same? Strategic alignment must be mutual, not one-sided compliance. It is unfair to demand India subordinate its policies to US preferences.

Moreover, the US is no longer the same power that once believed in the hub-and-spoke alliance system. Today, it wants its allies to shoulder more responsibility. American society has changed—there is growing resistance to spending taxpayer money on foreign wars or propping up other countries. Trump is not an aberration; he is a clear reflection of this shift in American public sentiment. The US no longer seeks formal alliances—it prefers loose, informal partnerships where others are expected to do more and not be seen as burdens on American taxpayers.

Moreover, Ashley argues that India doesn't do enough on China, that it won't support the US in a Taiwan contingency, and that its desire for multipolarity is inconvenient. This has been his central argument across many of his past writings. But what exactly is the US doing to contain China? If Beijing is expanding its influence, the blame doesn't lie solely with India. It is primarily the failure of the US, which hasn't done enough itself. The US has more direct strategic allies in the region—Japan, South Korea, and Australia—yet its own contradictions (like supporting Pakistan for tactical reasons) weaken its position. If Washington wants India to be a balancer, it must itself be consistent in both the Indo-Pacific and South Asia. The recent Trump outreach to Pakistan undermines India's regional standing. That's not India's failure—it's America's strategic incoherence.

He asserts that India plays other powers against each other—claiming, "India played the Soviet Union against the United States to benefit itself" during the Cold War—and implies this as a negative trait. But every nation maximises its options. That is the essence of diplomacy. The US engages China, Russia, and even adversaries when it suits its interests. Why deny India the same strategic space?

He also says that India's membership in non-Western institutions like Brics and SCO could become liabilities if the US grows less tolerant. This again suggests that India must seek approval from Washington before charting independent global pathways. He warns that "a more jaundiced government, like Trump's, might penalise India" for its decisions. This tone resembles a colonial master issuing ultimatums.

The very idea that India could be "penalised" for trading in local currencies or preserving ties with Iran and Russia reflects an alarming tendency to see the US as a global disciplinarian. This is not a partnership—it's a hierarchy. He further says the US "deliberately overlooked" India's behaviour—implying that India must now repay that favour. But the US pursued the civil nuclear deal and other engagements to serve its own interests. Tellis suggests that India may drift closer to China. He writes, "India may edge closer to China as circumstances demand." This ignores the geopolitical and security realities of India's position—its border disputes, strategic rivalry, and civilisational contrast with China. India balances China not because Washington wants it to, but because it must. Its engagement with non-Western forums like Brics and SCO stems from strategic hedging, not ideological alignment. Moreover, he asserts that shared democratic values held the relationship together. But during the Cold War, both were democracies and still adversaries. Values alone never drove US-India ties—strategic interests did. The US has supported numerous non-democracies for decades. Let us not whitewash American foreign policy.

His conclusion warns India to be "wary of multipolarity" because it might have to assume more burdens and lose US-supplied global goods like maritime security. He argues, "India would benefit less from the collective goods the United States supplies… such as protecting sea-lanes." But sovereignty comes with responsibility. If India wants to be a leading power, it will bear costs. Yet the suggestion that these burdens are too heavy, or that India is incapable of carrying them, reveals a lack of faith in Indian capacity and vision.

Even in his treatment of Indian democracy, Tellis credits the Constitution but strategically downplays India's civilisational ethos. Democracy thrived in India not only because of institutions but also because of ingrained cultural values: tolerance, pluralism, and civilisational continuity. Other post-colonial states had constitutions too—many failed. India's success lies in its long-standing civilisational political culture, not merely its legal frameworks.

Ultimately, Tellis' article is built on selective assumptions and strategic nostalgia. He ignores how the US has transformed under Trump and how the world order itself is shifting. He indirectly praises China while telling India to "do more." He frames India's choices as selfish but ignores America's own self-serving behaviour. This is not scholarship—it is strategic sermonising.

Conclusion

India is a civilisational state—confident, capable, and clear-eyed about its place in the world. It does not take dictation. It will align with the United States when interests converge and stand alone when they don't. That is the essence of strategic autonomy—not a hurdle to partnership, but its most stable foundation.

Ashley Tellis, in his critique, makes too many assumptions, adopts a prescriptive tone, and promotes a worldview in which India is expected to subordinate its priorities to those of the US. He seeks to shape India's trajectory in a particular direction and comes across as authoritarian and dominating in the language of the article. India's independent stance on Ukraine has especially troubled Western thinkers. The geopolitical agenda becomes evident when one reads between the lines—this is a piece marked by an assertive, almost coercive tone.

India of today is not a postcolonial appendage. It will engage with the US as a partner, not as a client. A true India-US relationship must rest on mutual respect—not on expectations of alignment or veiled warnings of "penalties". As Karl Popper reminded us, all knowledge is provisional. Predictions in international politics often fail. India's choices will be shaped by its national interest, and no amount of moralising can change that fundamental principle.

Why Hamas, Hezbollah must face the same moral scrutiny as Israel

Days after Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, I reread Japanese author Haruki Murakami's 2009 acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society. In it he said, 'Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg […] [y]es, no matter how right that wall may be and how wrong the egg, I will stand with the egg.' While this was widely interpreted to be a pro-Palestinian message, I believed that Murakami was making a subtler point about 'the wall' in his metaphor, which he also calls "The System".

'The System,' Murakami tells us, 'is supposed to protect us, but sometimes it takes on a life of its own, and then it begins to kill us and cause us to kill others—coldly, efficiently, systematically.' This description, I believed, tacitly extended the blame to forces like Hezbollah and Hamas. So I read it as a call to re-examine blind, angry loyalty to one's own side.

Subsequent reporting suggested Murakami had been more stridently critical of Israel elsewhere and that Murakami inadvertently held anti-Israel notions due to 'the cultural milieu in which he dwells'. This question in itself doesn't interest me, but another re-reading has convinced me that the speech's inclusiveness was less intended than superimposed by a wishful reader.

This realisation was disappointing at several levels. The primary one being that Murakami's greatest appeal was his alienation, an estrangement from society that seemed to place him beyond familiar political divides. His distaste for Japanese nationalist writers like Yukio Mishima is well-known, and his novels like The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle were deeply political, but they seemed to emerge from the depths of the individual 'psyche' where mundane political ideas gave way to universal emotions and images. So this binary, uninsightful nature of his political stances felt like a betrayal of promise. It is my impression—an unverified one—that his 'anti-nationalist' pronouncements grew shriller after the annual Nobel Prize speculation began.

Murakami, the master storyteller, surely needn't be warned of the perils of creating paper-thin antagonists. The playwright Aaron Sorkin insists, 'You can't think of your villain as a villain'. Instead, he suggests writing them like 'they're making their case to God about why they should be allowed into heaven'. To be fair, Murakami didn't make Israel out to be an outright villain, and he did defy calls from Palestinian groups to decline the prize. Still, his metaphor of a state having convinced its people to 'kill others—coldly, efficiently, systematically' comes dangerously close. And it's telling that such calls to conscience fall only upon Israel: is Murakami unaware that forces like Hamas and Hezbollah, with the sponsorship of the likes of Iran and Qatar, strive to 'coldly, efficiently, systematically' kill Israelis? Is he also unaware that terrorist acts are designed to invite state clampdowns and cause alienation? His framing of the issue is of interest because it is indicative of a wider moral incoherence that surrounds this and other conflicts and only accentuates their tragedy. Observe how Murakami's wall-and-an-egg symbolism perpetuates the symbolism of an armed state at war with unarmed people.

Gaza's tragedy (and that of Palestinians as a whole) would have been better approximated with the image of an egg being crushed between two steel blocks: one gripping the egg in place and the other closing in and smashing it against the first. The second steel block consists of Palestinian extremist groups and their sponsor states. And it is precisely because serious moral pressure isn't mounted upon this second block that Israeli suffering is perpetuated and Palestinian tragedy compounded.

To illustrate, let's take Israel's accusation of Hamas 'unlawfully' embedding military assets in densely populated areas and using them as human shields. New York Times paraphrases Oxford Professor Janina Dill countering the charge with '[e]ven if Hamas uses civilians as human shields, those civilians are entitled to full protection under international law unless they directly participate in the fighting'. Israel can neither be expected to ask its soldiers to get shot rather than fire at terrorists attacking from behind civilians nor will it give up its military objectives. Then why not call for an international ban on Hamas and for the sanctioning of its supporters? Such pressure may well force Hamas to return the hostages and thereby compel Israel to cease fire.

Such calls don't arise because global realpolitik and ideological pressures suppress them. Also, the fact that these pressures weigh disproportionately upon individual states suggests that keeping states off balance is desirable to multiple players. But let us stay with the moral discourse here.

Counterintuitive though it might seem, international law allows 'certain limited uses of insurgent force, including uses directed toward "self-determination"'. Using this outdated anti-colonial provision, ideologues project terrorism as a struggle for self-determination (therefore a 'just cause') to justify violent means. [Incidentally, it isn't clear that Hamas's military wing is legitimate in international law.] But even with 'just cause', attacking civilians is illegal, and so a more roundabout intellectual exercise begins.

For example, Neve Gordon points to Israel's celebration of the roles of Zionist paramilitaries—some murderous—in Israel's creation, seemingly to equate future Hamas's legitimacy with Israel's today. He bemoans the tendency of states to describe civilians they've killed as human shields while describing civilians killed by 'non-state actors'—Gordon won't call them terrorists—as 'civilians.' He also suggests that states locating military offices in densely populated areas should invite similar condemnation. Citing anti-colonial struggles, Gordon then justifies 'the ability to blend into the civilian population' as being 'necessary for military survival' of paramilitaries, given the 'asymmetry of power.' He further holds state militaries' 'new surveillance technologies and enhanced weapon systems' responsible for forcing paramilitary groups to hide in 'densely populated urban settings' and concludes, 'Hamas, in this sense, is no outlier.' This is a 'hardboiled egghead' version of Murakami's egg-and-wall stuff. A question worth posing here is why Gordon doesn't worry that making a military case for human shields is self-defeating, as it would lead us to the concept of 'proportionality'. Legal scholar Louis René Beres writes, 'When Israel's enemies declare an IDF attack on a Gaza high-rise building to be "disproportionate," they wittingly ignore ipso facto that the rule of proportionality does not demand any tangibly equivalent infliction of military harms, but only an amount of force that is militarily necessary.'