

President Trump's Second Term: India-United States Ties

C Raja Mohan



Summary

Donald Trump's historic comeback as United States (US) president for a second term presents both new opportunities and significant challenges for India. As the US adopts a less ideological and more transactional foreign policy under Trump, India must adapt to further advance its partnership in the coming years with Washington which is now New Delhi's most important. This brief analyses the implications of Trump's victory and its historic significance, and outlines key areas of concern for India in navigating this new era of US-India relations.

Donald Trump's re-election marks a watershed moment in American politics. In regaining the White House, Trump has defied all predictions and intense hostility from the liberal establishment to assert his dominance over American polity. A major aspect of this victory includes a significant majority for Trump in both the electoral college and popular vote, surpassing his 2016 performance. This underlines Trump's success in the construction of an expansive and [inclusive Republican coalition](#), drawing in traditional Democratic voters. The Republican Party has also succeeded in gaining control of the Senate and retaining the House majority. With the White House and the Congress under his party's control, Trump will have a free hand in pursuing his agenda for the second.

Trump's [victory speech](#), while striking a tone of reconciliation, signals potential radical changes in the US' global engagement. His second term promises a more vigorous effort to reshape America's international relations and restructure the global order, focusing on three important aspects. These include securing the US' borders against illegal immigration; reducing the US' trade deficit through high tariff walls; and rearranging great power relations in the US' favour.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's prompt congratulatory message to Trump and the [telephonic conversation](#) underscores the importance India places on this relationship. Modi's social media post highlighted the value he puts on his relationship with Trump, an eagerness to strengthen India-US relations across various sectors, including technology, defence, energy and space, as part of the effort to elevate the strategic partnership to a higher level. While this warm exchange sets a positive tone, India must prepare for the complexities of dealing with Trump's second term.

Two additional factors complicate this landscape: Trump's intensely transactional approach and the strengthening of the US' position relative to Europe and China, bolstered by impressive recent economic performance. Together, these elements enhance America's power as an interlocutor.

At the top of the list of Indian concerns is the question of immigration which has become a toxic issue in American politics and has been a key factor facilitating Trump's electoral success. Trump's anti-immigration stance has raised concerns in India, where many young Indian professionals see the US as their natural destination for higher studies and long-term employment. The Indian diaspora in the US is now more than five million and is growing rapidly. [Trump's differentiation](#) between 'legal' and 'illegal' immigration presents opportunities for a productive engagement between New Delhi and Washington.

India should contribute positively to the US' debate on separating 'bad' and 'good' immigration. Trump has acknowledged the need to facilitate the movement of technical professionals into the US to boost the American industry. On its part, [New Delhi is now open](#) to accepting the deportation of illegal immigrants from the US. The return of Trump provides a basis for New Delhi and Washington to explore a new and sustainable linkage between India's technical talent pool and the American plans for a new phase of technological innovation. This would necessarily involve looking beyond the 'body-shopping' of Indian information technology professionals under the H-1B visa system and [New Delhi appears ready](#) for it.

A second issue is Trump's determination to [reindustrialise the US](#) through the imposition of massive tariffs on exports into the US. If that goal demands an overturning of the global trading order established by his predecessors, Trump says, "so be it". His hostility to the idea of 'free trade' and his focus on fair trade poses serious challenges for India, given the US is now India's most important commercial partner. To cope with trade policy challenges, New Delhi needs to go beyond minor policy adjustments to recraft its approach to commerce with the US.

The third issue is Trump's approach to great power relations, especially China and Russia. It was under the Trump administration that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) framework was revived in 2017. There is no reason to expect the Trump administration to dilute its commitment to limit Chinese power in Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

The problem, however, will be with the Republican strategists' impatience with New Delhi's reluctance to make the Quad a robust regional 'security coalition'. Many of them worry that the Quad is ["drifting towards irrelevance"](#) with its wide-ranging non-military agenda and losing primary focus on producing a military balance against Beijing. Addressing this Republican discomfort on the Quad will be a major issue for Indian policy.

Trump's focus on ending the war in Ukraine and his willingness to explore a potential deal with Russia's President Vladimir Putin would ease some of the US' pressures that India faced in the Joe Biden years on isolating Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. There is much speculation about Trump abandoning Biden's policy of fighting both Russia and China and finding a way to separate them. Negotiating a new 'grand European bargain' between the US and Russia has not been easy; if Trump does the impossible, it will be very welcome in New Delhi which sees [Moscow as an important component](#) of building a stable Eurasian balance of power.

Trump's bid to end the war in Europe also opens the door for India to make more active contributions to peace in Ukraine. Even more important, as Trump puts pressure on Europe to defend itself, New Delhi has every reason to intensify its security partnership with key European powers as well as collectively with Brussels.

Finally, there is the question of Trump's style of statecraft. Reciprocity is key to Trump's approach and New Delhi will have to be less inhibited in deal-making with the new administration. Such an approach is alien to India's strategic culture though. New Delhi, however, needs to recognise that there might be no "free lunch" in Trump's world and it should be open to sensible give and take.

.

Professor C Raja Mohan is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at crmohan@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.