

India's Engagement with Trump 2.0: A Pragmatic Start

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Summary

The visit of India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to the United States (US) in January 2025 for President Donald Trump's inauguration and the first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ministerial hosted by United States (US) Secretary of State Marco Rubio underscores the continuing American strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific and the significance of the US-India relationship even as the new administration reaches out to China.

As the presidential contest between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris unfolded in the summer of 2024, there was considerable confidence in India regarding the continuation of strong ties with the United States (US), irrespective of the electoral outcome. However, unexpected tensions arose, including allegations of an Indian plot to assassinate an American citizen and suspicions in New Delhi that the US orchestrated a coup against Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. These issues had begun to tilt the Indian public sentiment to the Democrats and their nominee, former Vice President Kamala Harris. In contrast, the popular enthusiasm for Trump and the Republican party has expanded, bolstered by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's positive rapport with Trump during his first term (2017-2021), which saw significant advancements in bilateral relations.

The Modi government, however, has not allowed partisan considerations to dictate its approach to the US. India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited the US to meet with Joe Biden administration officials in late December 2024, coinciding with their final days in office. The US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan also visited India in January 2025 to finalise aspects of the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies, a cornerstone of the Biden administration's engagement with India.

While collaborating with the Biden administration until its conclusion, New Delhi swiftly sought to establish productive ties with Trump's incoming team. During his December 2024 visit to Washington, Jaishankar met with Trump's National Security Advisor-designate, Mike Waltz. Jaishankar met Waltz again in January 2025 as he took charge. Jaishankar was also the first foreign leader to meet with the new Secretary of State, Marco Rubio.

Rubio hosted the inaugural Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) ministerial meeting with Jaishankar, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Japanese Foreign Minister Iwama Takeshi. The [ministers reaffirmed](#) their commitment to enhance "regional maritime, economic, and technology security in the face of increasing threats", expressing their intent to advance the Quad's initiatives in the months to come, leading up to the next Quad Leaders' Summit in India.

The early convening of the Quad during Trump's second term indicates the forum's continued relevance, having been revitalised during Trump's first term. Nonetheless, Trump's [January phone call](#) with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and his optimistic remarks about US-China cooperation for global peace and prosperity have raised concerns in New Delhi and other Asian capitals. Questions have arisen on whether Trump will privilege engagement with China at the expense of allies like Japan and Australia or partners like India. It is unlikely that Trump will favour one over the other; engagement with China is likely to be accompanied by reinforcing the traditional partnerships in Asia.

To be sure, significant shifts in relations among the major powers – the US, China and Russia – impact Indian interests. While New Delhi welcomes Trump's normalisation of ties with Russia, with which India has strong relations, it is wary about potential agreements with China, India's principal strategic challenge. India must acknowledge that the triangular dynamics among the US, China, and Russia are not static. As the two leading global economies and military powers, Washington and Beijing will always seek mutual engagement and understanding. Trump has shown interest in negotiating a grand bargain with China in the first term.

Rather than worrying about US-China ties, India should seize opportunities to strengthen its strategic partnership with the US. Traditionally, New Delhi has sought to slow engagement with Washington when the US reaches out to Beijing, a strategy that has proven counterproductive. A proactive approach to building US partnerships will serve as a natural safeguard against fluctuations in US-China ties. Meanwhile, New Delhi has every incentive to stabilise its complex relationship with Beijing.

Beyond great power dynamics, two other critical issues will shape India's relations with the US during Trump's second administration. The first is immigration, which has become a top priority for Trump. During talks between Jaishankar and Rubio, the issue of '[irregular migration](#)' of Indians into the US came up, as illegal immigration from India has surged in recent years.

Jaishankar was open and cooperative in addressing this challenge, emphasising India's commitment to promoting the legal migration of Indian professionals while facilitating the return of illegal immigrants. [Media reports](#) indicate that nearly 18,000 illegal Indian immigrants are awaiting deportation from the US, and India is prepared to accept them. At a press conference following his Washington visit, Jaishankar urged caution regarding this figure and suggested that India would take back individuals identified as Indian citizens. In the coming weeks, both sides may work on protocols for deportation.

The second pressing issue is trade relations, which became contentious during Trump's first term and are likely to gain even greater prominence this time. Throughout his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump frequently labelled India as a major "abuser of tariffs" and threatened punitive measures. In his conversation with Jaishankar, Rubio highlighted this concern. Although trade is not within his purview, Jaishankar indicated that New Delhi is prepared for a forward-looking approach to enhance bilateral trade and economic ties. [Media reports](#) from New Delhi say Indian officials are exploring ways to reduce the trade

deficit with the US. The goods trade surplus in India's favour during 2022 was [about US\\$38 billion \(S\\$51.5 billion\)](#).

By swiftly establishing communication with the Trump administration and signalling readiness to address illegal immigration, Jaishankar has demonstrated the Modi government's commitment to managing India's most crucial relationship with care. With speculation about [an early summit meeting](#) between Modi and Trump, New Delhi is eager to ensure continuity through pragmatic adaptation, which is likely to characterise India-US relations during Trump's second term.

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