

India and Trump 2.0: Strategic Convergence and Tactical Challenges

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Summary

India's confidence, in contrast to many other partners and allies of the United States, in engaging the tumultuous second term of Donald Trump may lie in the convergence between New Delhi's interests and the ideological force driving his presidency = 'America First'. While the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi sees strategic opportunities in the current global crisis triggered by Trump, New Delhi faces significant tactical challenges in converting those opportunities into concrete outcomes in the negotiations with Washington.

In his [remarks at Chatham House](#), a London-based think tank, in early March 2025, India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar suggested that United States (US) President Donald Trump's 'America First' policy is something that New Delhi could work with. At the root of Jaishankar's optimism is the fact that under Trump, the US has turned nationalist and is focused on self-interest rather than the pursuit of global leadership.

Although India's post-independence elite fully shared the values of liberal internationalism, it was never comfortable with Washington's claim to be the self-appointed champion of that ideology. Representing a newly sovereign state with a strong commitment to choose its own path of political and economic development, the Indian elite rejected the idea of the US acting as the judge of other nations, assessing their democratic credentials and punishing other nations for deviating from the presumed standards of liberal internationalism.

If the Indian left was traditionally the most vocal in denouncing the US meddling in the affairs of other nations, today it is the [Indian right](#) that dominates that noise. New Delhi, which was unsettled by the Joe Biden administration's support to anti-Narendra Modi groups in India and its support for ousting Sheikh Hasina from power in Dhaka, hopes that Trump is not looking to use American power to promote internal change in other societies and is focused on material gain and self-interest.

India also welcomes the [Trump administration's departure](#) from the idea of a unipolar world dominated by the US to a recognition that today, there are many consequential powers, constituting the so-called 'multipolar world' that New Delhi has long preferred. Washington's allies in Europe and Asia that have long relied on the US for their security are shocked by Trump's demand that either they contribute more to collective defence or forego American protection. In contrast, India's strategic partnership with the US is not one-sided but based on shared interests and obligations. As a non-ally with independent foreign policy, New Delhi is much better prepared to engage with 'America First' on the basis of give and take. Jaishankar suggests that in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) coalition with the US, Australia and Japan, there are no arguments about who is paying more and who is doing less. [Jaishankar also sees](#) the Trump administration's emphasis on

technological transformation and lowering hydrocarbon energy prices as being in India's interest.

For India, a transactional engagement with the US comes amidst Trump's reckless or bold, depending on one's preference, plans to rearrange the global order. What Trump and his team have in mind is nothing short of restructuring modern capitalism that emerged out of the 1929 global economic crisis and remaking the post-war international system led by the US. There is a strategic premium on getting this right for major countries like India in the international system.

New Delhi has begun the engagement with Trump on an [ambitious note](#) with Modi's visit to the White House in February 2025. At the core of the new understanding between Modi and Trump is the agreement to negotiate a [bilateral trade treaty](#) between the two nations. However, the negotiations with the Trump administration, as expected, are not pretty. Given the Trump administration's rough and ready style, New Delhi has a challenge in holding its nerve and avoiding distractions being thrown at the talk from the highest level in Washington.

Well before the results from Indian Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal's visit in to the US in early March 2025 to advance trade talks became known, [Trump declared](#) that New Delhi is now ready to make deep cuts in its tariffs and took credit for "exposing" India's protectionism. Trump's repeated and graceless emphasis on India's high tariffs has inevitably produced a domestic reaction in India. Yashwant Sinha, a former finance and foreign minister of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government said New Delhi had entered a ["surrender"](#) mode. The Congress party's spokesman, Jairam Ramesh, [expressed concern](#) at India's approach to trade talks with the US.

Adding fuel to the fire were the remarks of the US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, who [told a gathering](#) in New Delhi about US concerns about India's membership of the Brazil, Russia India China and South Africa (BRICS) forum and the talk there about replacing the US dollar as the global reserve currency. Jaishankar has [often clarified](#) that it has no desire to dethrone the dollar but the general rhetoric of replacing the US-led global order emanating from the BRICS generates negative impressions in New Delhi even as it enthuses the traditional anti-American ideologues within India. Although successive post-Cold War prime ministers in India, including Modi, have moved closer to the US, they have been reluctant to abandon the old rhetoric.

While previous American administrations were unwilling to confront this duality, the Trump team has no hesitation in doing so. This, in turn, presents a domestic political challenge for India. That challenge is gathering in the trade domain. The hyper-sensitivity of the Indian political class to real or presumed external pressures is well known. The Trump administration, in contrast, has little sensitivity to the domestic concerns of the Modi government or any other interlocutor.

To be sure, Modi has considerable reserves of political capital at home to cope with difficult external challenges. However, Modi has his task cut out in navigating the gap between

objective possibilities for building a new comprehensive trade relationship with the US, and the subjective difficulties in negotiating with the Trump team.

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