

India 2025: A Time of Reckoning

Post the devastating COVID 19, the world is witnessing grave and continuing geopolitical disruptions as never before since the end of World War 2 in 1945. The emergence of Cold War 2.0 appears graver than its original avatar with powerful nations striving exclusively for their own selfish ends. That the globe's sole super power, the United States (US), who it was hoped, after the installation of a new President on 20 Jan 2025, will give a new direction to the comity of nations and help restore sanity and peace appears, unfortunately, doing just the opposite !

America's new President Donald Trump, known since his first presidential term in for his mercurial nature and an unconventional orientation has surprised the world, including US's allies, by voicing and implementing rather incoherent economic policies buttressed by naive and unacceptable political declarations. Some of the recipient nations targeted by Trump are responding strongly to the US president's kite-flying whether in the case of tariff tyranny unilaterally imposed by him or the latter's wayward political declarations. Notwithstanding the unsound economic health of many nations, they are mostly condemning Trump's unilateral decisions. And now, where does India stand in the current geopolitical turmoil affecting not only the Global South but also the developed nations of Europe, Asia, and South America? The fact that the bulk of the global media since the last two months or so has been trying to decipher Trump's likely trajectories in his strategic relations with the rest of the world —particularly his economic policies, whether coercive or otherwise—needs no further elaboration.

Among the many nations on Trump's radar is **India**, an emerging power whose global and regional significance the US acknowledges and has publicly emphasised. India is a much sought after power for any bloc in the world owing to its adherence, since its independence, to democracy, freedom of speech, secularism and the pursuit of human values. The fact that India is the world's fifth-largest economic power, continuing to grow, and potentially the largest market for both military and non-military goods only enhance its global standing. The U.S. is more than aware of India's strategic significance, especially as it recognises China as an emerging competitor in many domains and seeks to position India as a counterbalance. Somewhere the US keeping a check on China especially in the Indo-Pacific region leads to strategic convergence between India and the US. It will be interesting to observe the shaping up of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Australia-United Kingdom-United States set-ups in the months ahead to keep in check the ever-growing Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese media, in the past one month, has referred to India-US relations getting closer much to Chinese discomfiture. However, another Chinese viewpoint going around also suggests that uncertainties in dealing with Trump may prompt India to improve ties with China. This viewpoint, however, forgets that China, overall, is a cause of concern for both

the US and India and when it comes to China there is a fair degree of strategic convergence between the two large democracies.

It may be recalled that Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi had established good personal relations with then US President Donald Trump in the latter's first term as the president and thus analysts surmised that in Trump's presidency 2.0, it will be a cakewalk for the continuation of more than warm India-US relations across many domains of human endeavour. The visit of PM Modi to Washington on 13-14 Feb 2025 and early in Trump's second avatar (preceded only by the Israeli and Japanese PMs) was a mere 40-hour trip but has been touted as a success. The devil lies somewhere in the details, and beyond the seemingly warm welcome and the optics, India too has been called a 'Tariff Abuser' by the US President. After the trip, both the US president and Indian PM conducted a long press conference in Washington and shared details of the broad agreements reached between the two democracies. The Agreement embraces a new broad 10 years framework with cooperation in matters defence, trade, energy security, counterterrorism, space exploration, technical cooperation in frontline technologies, co-production arrangements and increasing people to people contacts. This Agreement carries forward the thrust in cooperation between the US and India conceived in the 2005 Framework of US-India cooperation. Tariff differences between the two nations will be sorted out jointly by the fall this year which is thus a sound recommendation.

India has been seeking state-of-the-art defence technologies from the U.S. for years, but with limited success. Looking back at the chequered history of Indo-U.S. relations, it is evident that the United States has not been entirely reliable in its defence supplies to India, having imposed multiple sanctions during the 1965 and 1971 operations against Pakistan, as well as after India's nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998. The US has not been particularly keen on supplying the latest defence technologies to India in recent years. The prolonged failure to supply India aeroengines for the TEJAS indigenous aircraft is a case in point. India's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence squadrons also invited major US sanctions on many Indian companies via their 'Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act' in 2018. Thus, India must look beyond mere compliments to its resurgence in the years ahead and avoid falling for flattery, to which it is often susceptible. Since India pays for whatever, it acquires, it must engage with the United States on an equal and sovereign footing.

The positive outcomes in Defence Cooperation and other areas post PM Modi's visit have been the launch of a new initiative—the US-India COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology) for the 21st century. Both nations would aim for USD 500 bn in trade by 2030. Currently, the US is India's second largest trading partner with a trade surplus for India as of Financial Year 2024-25. The U.S. has also offered India the F-35 stealth fighter, which the IAF may now

consider for trials alongside other fighters being offered by France, Russia, and the European consortium. Off course HAL, Bangalore is endeavouring hard to double its production of the indigenous TEJAS for the IAF. In addition, the co-production of the Javelin Anti-Tank Guided Missiles and Stryker Infantry Combat Vehicles in India appears well on the cards. Cooperation in co-production of unmanned aerial systems appears also in the pipeline.

Keeping in view the modus operandi of President Trump in furthering the sale of US material to India, India will need to exercise financial prudence and be highly selective in acquiring only those platforms and defence equipment that are essential, cost-effective, and suitable for future deployment by the Indian Armed Forces. While bilateral relationships may be transient, national interests remain paramount. We do not have to be hustled into any purchases which do not meet India's operational requirements. India must never forget that as, a pivotal player in the emerging global order, it carefully navigates its strategies with equity keeping a long-term perspective in mind.

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