



SPOTLIGHT

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Trump in India —Building a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership

Patryk Kugiel

The first state visit of U.S. President Donald Trump to India on 24–25 February confirmed the importance of India as a key strategic partner of the Americans, despite the unresolved trade disputes. Trump also aimed to win over some voters in the November presidential election among the Indian diaspora in the U.S.

What happened during the visit?

This was [Trump's first visit to India](#) as president but the [fifth official meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#). The U.S. president visited Ahmedabad, where he addressed more than 120,000 people at a special “Namaste Trump” rally at a cricket stadium, then Agra, where he visited the Taj Mahal, and finally a stop in Delhi. He was accompanied by his wife Melania, close advisers (including daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner) and several cabinet officials. In India’s capital, he was received by Modi and held talks with the president and met with the CEOs of major Indian companies. Trump may have felt comfortable in India thanks to the level of confidence he enjoys there (56% of residents in January said they had confidence he does the right thing regarding world affairs), comparable to Poland (51%). The positive image of the visit was undermined, however, by inter-religious riots that broke out in Delhi shortly before Trump arrived over a controversial citizenship act amendment, in which at least 20 people were killed.

What were some of the results of the visit?

A joint statement announced the upgrading of the “strategic partnership” to a “comprehensive global strategic partnership”. The most tangible result of the talks was the \$3 billion in defence contracts, under which India promised to buy 24 MH-60R naval and six AH-64E Apache helicopters. In addition, an MoU on mental health and another on the safety of medical products were signed together with a “Letter of Cooperation” between Indian Oil Corporation Limited and ExxonMobil India LNG Limited on import of U.S. LNG. The American company Westinghouse was called to prepare an offer for the construction of six nuclear reactors in India. Both leaders announced joint projects in space exploration and maritime security, among others. In a gesture towards India, the statement condemned “cross-border terrorism in all its forms” and specifically urged Pakistan to “ensure that no territory under its control is used to launch terrorist attacks”.

Have trade tensions been resolved?

Contrary to expectations, a limited agreement that would end the growing trade dispute with India failed to be signed. Trump has in the past defined India, with which the U.S. has about a \$25 billion trade deficit, as a “tariff king” and the U.S. has imposed duties on imports of Indian steel and aluminium, withdrew trade preferences under the Generalised System of Preferences regime, and removed India from the U.S. list of developing countries. India, in turn, increased tariffs on 28 U.S. products and tightened its law on data localisation. Although Trump announced that both sides will continue to work on a comprehensive trade agreement, it is unlikely that it will be concluded before the presidential election in the U.S. India will not join [China](#), [Japan](#), or Mexico, which received new trade deals after the U.S. pressured them for economic concessions.

Will India join the Americans in containing China?

The visit confirmed the [important role of India in the American strategy of ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific”](#), which is [meant to stop China’s rise in the region](#). Trump contrasted the achievements of democratic India with another “nation that seeks power through coercion, intimidation, and aggression”—a lightly veiled reference to China. He also pointed to the need to strengthen cooperation within the Quad (India, U.S., Australia and Japan) and the development of 5G technology, which would be “a tool for freedom, progress, prosperity” and not “suppression and censorship”. Both leaders called for freedom of navigation and compliance with international law in the South China Sea. Moreover, purchases of U.S. armaments will strengthen the interoperability of the armed forces. At the same time, India is reluctant to join the anti-Chinese alliance. Although it uses American engagement to counteract Chinese domination in the region, India also does not want U.S. hegemony.

What is the overall significance of the visit?

Trump’s trip confirmed the direction of engagement with India in U.S. foreign policy, ongoing since the Clinton administration. The visit strengthened the strategic, military, and energy cooperation between the U.S. and India, despite the persistent trade disputes. It also revealed the good personal relations between the two leaders. At the same time, it proved that India is not an easy partner and that barriers to access to the Indian market will for the US, as well as for the EU, be the most difficult challenge in future cooperation. Trump’s praise for India and complements for Modi, in turn, can help the U.S. president in his re-election campaign, possibly by picking up votes among the nearly 3 million Americans of Indian ethnicity, who traditionally support the Democrats. Political benefits for the Indian prime minister, however, were negated by the bloody riots in Delhi.