

China gains from America's alienation of India

Trump's unpredictability risks pushing New Delhi and Beijing closer together

The symbolism is powerful: days after the US hit most imports from India with punitive 50 per cent tariffs, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will this weekend make his first visit in seven years to China. Long-standing tensions between New Delhi and Beijing began easing before Donald Trump's second presidency, and India has played down any link between Modi's trip and the US tariff barrage. But it is clear that Trump's actions in recent months have dealt a heavy blow to efforts by successive US governments to build a relationship with India that would act as a bulwark against Chinese domination of the Indo-Pacific.

Trump, who has dismissed India as a "dead economy", argues that the 25 per cent "reciprocal" tariffs he had already

imposed were justified by New Delhi's hefty trade surplus and highly protected domestic market. But his claim that the additional 25 per cent rate implemented on Wednesday was a response to Indian purchases of discounted Russian oil that were helping to fund Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine will only fuel complaints about US hypocrisy and capriciousness. Until recently, Washington had no objection to such purchases. Nor has Trump taken similar action against China — an even bigger buyer of Russian crude.

New Delhi was already upset about Trump's deepening embrace of its arch-rival Pakistan. The US president has echoed some of Islamabad's phraseology on the disputed territory of Kashmir since he claimed to have brokered the ceasefire that ended bloody clashes between the Asian neighbours in May. In June, Trump held a two-hour private lunch in Washington with Pakistani strongman Asim Munir.

It is a remarkable change of approach

even for the mercurial president, who has previously described Modi as his "true friend". In 2020, Trump told a cheering crowd of over 100,000 people in Gujarat that "America loves India, America respects India, and America will always be faithful and loyal friends to the Indian people." His U-turn will only help China's efforts to portray itself as a more reliable international interlocutor. America's unpredictability will do little to persuade major nations such as India that they should distance themselves from Beijing or Moscow.

On Sunday, Modi will join Xi and other leaders including Russian President Vladimir Putin at a summit in Tianjin of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation security grouping. His attendance caps a warming of ties between New Delhi and Beijing chilled in 2020 by deadly border clashes along their disputed Himalayan border. During a visit to India this month by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, the two sides agreed to resume direct flights soon, to

It is a remarkable change of approach even for the mercurial US president, who has previously described Modi as his 'true friend'

reopen border trading posts and to facilitate travel visas. The likely extent of the rapprochement should not be overstated. India will remain highly concerned about the security of its northern flank. Beijing is also extending its influence in South Asia and is a crucial supplier of funding and military equipment to Pakistan. Indian and Chinese leaders will need nimble footwork just to avoid bumping into each other.

Eyes will now turn to the fate of the "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue", a grouping of US, India, Japan and Australia that was promoted by previous US presidents including Trump as a way of countering Chinese influence. Indian foreign secretary Vikram Misri said this week that India attached "high value" to the Quad, but officials say the timing of a group summit that New Delhi is scheduled to host this year is still unclear. Some diplomats in the Indian capital now wonder if it will be held at all. By alienating its friends, Washington is playing into Beijing's hands.