

India Still Wants to Work With Trump



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

New Delhi
As Sergio Gor, the recently confirmed U.S. ambassador to India, sets up housekeeping here, wish him well. The former director of personnel at the White

House is walking into a firestorm. With President Trump levying 50% tariffs on India and Washington imposing a \$100,000 fee for new H-1B visa petitions, Indian public opinion has turned sharply against the once-popular American leader.

Worse, many Indians believe that the Trump administration is tilting toward Pakistan. Two White House visits by army chief Asim Munir, the second including Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, sent shock waves across India and left many Indians feeling stunned and betrayed.

China has noticed. Senior Chinese diplomats are reportedly whispering sweet nothings in Indian ears. China, they say, started pressing on India's borders only when India deepened military relations with the U.S. Dump Uncle Sam, they suggest, and calm will return.

India isn't standing still. It is matching Washington's fancy footwork with Pakistan with some slick moves of its own. Last week Pakistani and Afghan forces engaged in

clashes along their long and disputed border. As the conflict flared, the Afghan foreign minister popped up in New Delhi and India announced closer relations with the once-heralded Taliban. The Hindu nationalists who run India and the fanatical jihadists of Afghanistan may not agree on much, but there is one idea that works for both: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Most Indians hope that Mr. Gor's mission will be a success. In meetings with Indian government, opposition and business leaders from Prime Minister Narendra Modi on down, your Global View columnist heard a consistent message. India's political and business leaders still want to work with the U.S.

This is good news. China isn't playing nice. Between doubling down on support for Russia's war in Ukraine, buying oil from both Russia and Iran, boycotting American soybean exports, and restricting its exports of rare earths and other critical materials, China is doing its best to push Mr. Trump into a corner. Deepening ties with India can be an important way for the Trump administration to push back in the short term and to build a strong defensive coalition for the future.

It may not be that hard. On trade, many Indian officials believe the remaining narrow differences with the U.S. can be resolved. MAGA concerns that India wants to follow

China's path by feasting off access to U.S. markets, refusing to make reciprocal concessions, and cheating on trade rules are misplaced, Indians say. China's authoritarian government can pursue a long-term growth strategy based on the suppression of domestic consumer demand. Politicians in a democratic country like India must focus more on

Pakistan, tariffs and visa fees have caused tensions, but they can easily be resolved.

raising voters' living standards than pursuing hegemonic dreams. Indian negotiators have their red lines—the farm lobby is even more powerful in New Delhi than in Washington—but negotiators on both sides say a deal is within reach.

Ironically, the two issues that most divide New Delhi and Washington are those on which their interests most converge. Both powers see Russia's current alignment with China as a national-security threat and would like to pull the two apart. And Indians and Americans agree that China's growing military, economic and political clout in the Indian Ocean is a threat.

Despite the current upheavals, the Trump administration remains well-positioned to take U.S.-India relations to a

new level. On tech policy, building close ties between the U.S., India and friendly countries like Israel and Japan offers a path to countering the Chinese push for leadership in a strategic domain. On regional issues, American and Indian interests are broadly aligned. Chinese efforts to pull countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives and Sri Lanka into its orbit threaten both India and the U.S. A serious push at the State Department to coordinate Indian Ocean policy with friends like India and allies like Japan and Australia would bolster our common security and deepen trust with New Delhi.

Even on Pakistan, historically the most difficult issue in U.S.-India relations, signs point to improved U.S.-India ties. In the Cold War, America valued Pakistan as an ally against the Soviet Union. But in the emerging cold war with China, Pakistan has chosen Beijing. It has a troubling record of supporting illegal nuclear proliferation, and its hands are far from clean when it comes to supporting terrorism. This isn't a country likely to attract much long-term love from Mr. Trump.

An improved U.S.-India relationship would be one of the president's most important accomplishments. Failure would be an indelible blot on his record and vastly complicate life for his successors. Let's all hope Mr. Trump finds a way.