

India faces a defining moment

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OPINION

For three decades, successive American presidents have invested enormous diplomatic capital to cultivate a friendship with India.

Bill Clinton, who laid the foundations of the modern U.S.-India partnership, called the two democracies “natural allies.” George W. Bush described them as “brothers in the cause of human liberty.” Barack Obama and Joe Biden both cast the relationship as one of the defining global compacts of this century.

To Washington, India was a vast emerging market, a potential counterweight to China, a key partner in maintaining Indo-Pacific security and a

The country must decide whether to go all in with a capricious Trump or hedge its bets through a rapprochement with China.

rising power whose democratic identity would bolster a rules-based international order. For its part, India — mistrustful of the West after nearly a century of British colonial rule — shed its Cold War suspicion of Washington, which had armed and financed its arch-

nemesis Pakistan for decades, and moved steadily closer to the United States.

It took Donald Trump one summer to obliterate these gains.

In May, he claimed credit for ending a brief military conflict between India and Pakistan. This incensed India, which regards its dispute with Pakistan as strictly bilateral, and humiliated Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had touted his closeness to “my friend Donald Trump.” Mr. Trump proceeded to have lunch at the White House with Gen. Syed Asim Munir, Pakistan’s army chief and former head of the country’s spy agency, which the United States has accused of supporting international terrorist groups. He also called India’s economy “dead” and imposed punishing 50 percent tariffs on Indian imports to the United States.

This abrupt falling-out has profound implications. Mr. Trump’s insults have, to some degree, united India’s permanently clashing political parties — a striking development in a country where Mr. Modi’s divisive rule has left little political common ground. For the first time in decades, the United States is the common foe of almost every political faction in India.

No nation is entirely safe from Mr. Trump’s unstable temperament. But India had been lulled into the delusion that it was uniquely protected by the

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