

Trump's Tariff Threat Is Propelling India Back Toward China

By DAVID PIERSON
and ALEX TRAVELLI

HONG KONG — It may be another case of the adage "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Either way, it has come as a welcome surprise for China to see its top global rival, the United States, pick a fight with Beijing's biggest Asian competitor, India.

Relations between Washington and New Delhi are on the friz after the Trump administration threatened early this month to double tariffs on Indian goods to whopping 50 percent, citing India's imports of American oil.

The sudden rift threatens to undermine years of growing cooperation between the United States and India in areas like security and technology that had been fueled in large part by a shared desire to keep China's global ambitions in check.

It has also injected new momentum into an easing of tensions between China and India, which had ramped up in recent years. The war started in earnest last year when President Xi Jinping of China met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India at a summit of emerging economies in Kazan, Russia. Since then, the two countries have increased bilateral visits and discussed easing trade barriers and the movement of people.

"I assume that there is a certain amount of schadenfreude among some folks in Beijing when they look at the trade issues between India and the United States," said Manoj Kewararamani, head of Indo-Pacific studies at the Takshashila Institution in Bangalore, India. "A breakdown of political trust between New Delhi and Washington works in Beijing's favor."

To be sure, there is still much that divides the two Asian giants. That includes control of a 2,100-mile shared border; China's coziness with India's adversary, Pakistan; and India's ambition to attract the multinational manu-

facturers that have been trying to reduce their dependence on China.

The October meeting between Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi was the first time the two leaders had spoken in person since a 2019 summit in India, a year before relations cratered following a deadly Himalayan border fight between China and Indian troops.

Since the Russia talks, the two countries have eased travel visa restrictions and are working to restore direct flights. In June, Beijing allowed pilgrims from India to visit holy sites in Tibet. China and India are also in discussions to re-open three trading posts along their mountainous boundary, according to the spokesman for India's foreign ministry, said last week.

China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, arrived in India on Monday for the latest round of talks on border issues, and economic and trade issues. It is the first time Mr. Wang has visited India in more than three years.

In welcoming Mr. Wang, India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, said their "two nations now seek to move ahead" from a difficult period in their ties.

"When the world's two largest nations meet, it is a natural and inevitable international situation will be discussed. We seek a fair, balanced and multipolar world order, including a multipolar Asia," he said. "In the current environment, there is clearly the imperative of



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BRACING FOR HIGHER TARIFFS

The U.S. is set to double the rate to 50 percent, which poses a threat to industries in India. Page B1.

maintaining and enhancing stability in the global economy as well."

This month, Mr. Modi will visit China for the first time in seven years, for a regional security meeting in the northeastern city of Tianjin. Xi and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia will also be there, bringing together three leaders at odds, to varying degrees, with the United States.

The Modi government has also been careful not to raise the Indian public's ire over the way China helped Pakistan's military during a clash with Indian forces in May

— a sign of New Delhi's commitment to smoother relations with Beijing.

Vijay Gokhale, a former Indian ambassador to Beijing, said in an opinion piece in *The Times of India* published last Tuesday that China and India still had many diverging interests. But he wrote that China provided India and other developing countries a critical counterbalance to "Trumpian disorder" as a source of capital and technology and as a partner in fighting climate change.

"China is beginning to look better than at any time in the previous five years," Mr. Gokhale wrote.

Beijing has responded to India's friendlier posture with cautious optimism, taking into account the chance that the reorientation

could simply be a ploy to hedge against the Trump administration, analysts said.

Earlier this year, Mr. Xi called for relations to resemble a harmonious "dragon-elephant tango" in a nod to the two countries' symbolic creatures. Despite the gesture, China continues to fortify its border with India by building new roads, rail networks and villages that can also serve the Chinese military.

The two powers are also vying for influence across the Indian Ocean, the critical waterway for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure project intended to deepen China's supply chain networks.

One of the biggest drivers of tension with India from China's perspective is the suspicion that

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and President Trump at the White House in February. Mr. Trump's tariffs on India have frayed relations between the countries.

New Delhi was abandoning its historically nonaligned foreign policy to move further into Washington's sphere. Beijing points to the Quad defense group, which brings together four large democracies — India, the United States, Japan and Australia — to counter China's military rise.

Whether the next meeting of Quad leaders, expected later this year in India, goes ahead will depend on whether the Trump administration and New Delhi can mend their trade spat and rebuild trust, an Indian official said.

Chinese state media has been all but gloating about the strains between the United States and India. The *Global Times*, a Communist Party tabloid, said Mr. Modi's upcoming visit to China was a sign of Washington's failure to draw New Delhi into its strategy to "contain" Beijing.

"China and India are neighbors, and the list of areas in which they can cooperate is long," the newspaper said.

Still, if Indian officials want to improve ties with China, they will have to do it on Beijing's terms, analysts said.

That means opening up India more to Chinese firms and investment and continuing to loosen restrictions on visas for Chinese businesspeople. India has blocked the Chinese carmaker BYD from setting up factories and has banned Chinese apps like TikTok.

"If India seeks to improve its relations with China, China welcomes that," said Lin Minwang, an expert on China's relations with South Asia at Fudan University in Shanghai. "However, China will not make significant concessions or sacrifices to accommodate India's so-called diplomatic posture."

Mr. Lin said China would not budge on its national interests, even those that irk New Delhi the most, such as Beijing's close support for Pakistan.

India is also wary, Mr. Modi having been bitten once before after trusting Mr. Xi too readily, other analysts have said.

"India's current approach is primarily driven by strategic calculations," Mr. Lin said. "Given its deteriorating relations with the United States, it has adopted some China-friendly gestures. I believe the Chinese side will at least assess these developments cautiously."



POOL PHOTO BY MARIO SIPOPOVICH

Mr. Modi with China's leader, Xi Jinping, and Russia's, Vladimir V. Putin, in October at an economic summit in Kazan, Russia.



WARNA NAZIR/GETTY IMAGES

An Indian Army convoy in Ladakh, India, near the border with China. The nations' forces clashed on a nearby ridge in 2020.

David Pierson reported from Hong Kong, and Alex Travelli from New Delhi. Mujib Masah contributed reporting from New Delhi. Berry Wang from Hong Kong and Daisuke Wabakyashi from Seoul.