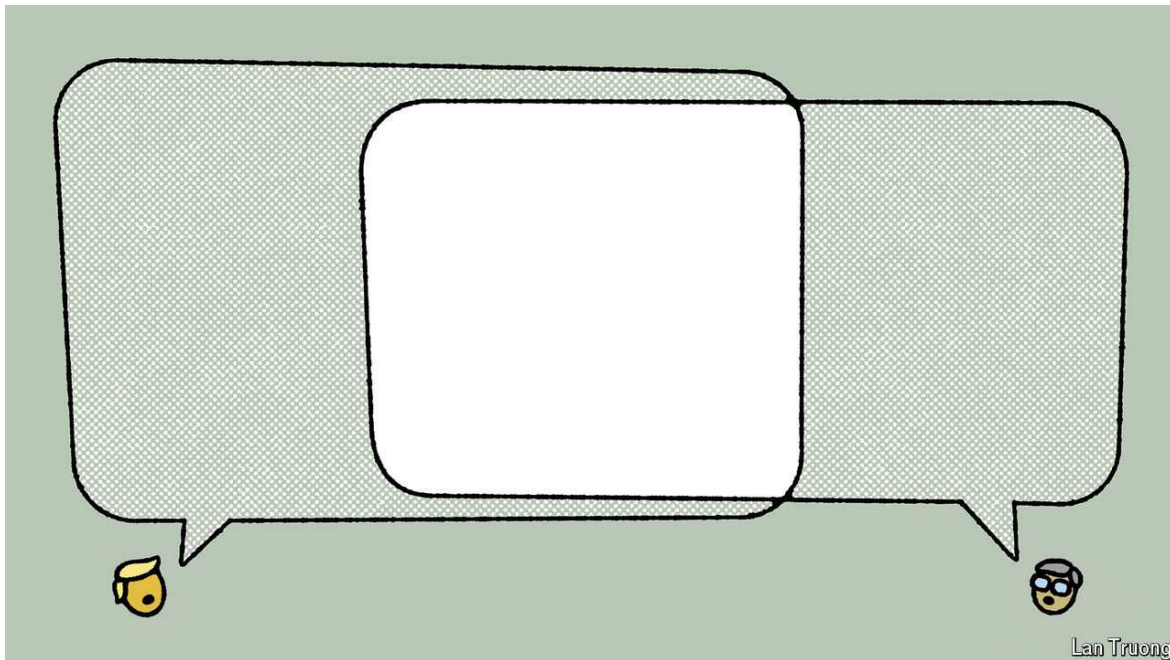


India is benefiting from Trump 2.0

Its top diplomat is also echoing the president's language

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On March 5th Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's minister of external affairs, was in his element. At Chatham House, a think-tank in London, he parried criticism of Indian foreign policy with waspish one-liners about Western double-standards. But one Western leader was not included in Mr Jaishankar's barbs: Donald Trump.

Politicians everywhere are scrambling to make sense of Trump 2.0 but India wants to get ahead of the pack by emphasising how its non-aligned stance fits comfortably with America's new worldview. India is also honing a new art: articulating existing positions with language from the MAGA lexicon.

Mr Jaishankar and Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, both dealt with Mr Trump in his first term. Already back then, the bonhomie was on display when the two strongmen addressed huge rallies in Gujarat and Texas. At their latest meeting in the White House in February, Mr Modi announced that MAGA had inspired MIGA, or "Make India Great Again". Mr Jaishankar's Chatham House talk showed the new dynamic in action and revealed some of its shortcomings.

Start with alliances. Mr Trump's scorn for them echoes India's long-standing non-aligned position (which has been recast as "multi-alignment"). In the past America was frustrated by India's aversion to creating a more muscular security partnership, let alone a formal alliance. India's long-standing and close military and energy-trading relationship with Russia was considered a liability by the Biden administration.

Now in a world where treaty allies matter less to America, conditional relationships, such as those with India, have been relatively upgraded. It is true that Mr Trump has demanded that the Quad, a coalition of America, Australia, India and Japan, take a more overt military role, to India's discomfort. Nonetheless Mr Jaishankar described the Quad as "an understanding where everybody pays their fair share", designed, he argued, to ensure that "there are no free riders". The not so subtle comparison was with NATO. Without promising policy changes or greater spending, Mr Jaishankar used the MAGA language of free riding to present India as a more straightforward partner than Europe.

Another way that America's shift affects India relates to minority rights. The Trump administration places low priority on these and has triggered a mass scrapping of diversity, equity and inclusion schemes by many American firms. Traditionally, India has responded to charges of religious tensions and discrimination at home in front of Western audiences by insisting that it is a secular country that respects all religions equally.

But Mr Jaishankar's speech showed how the terrain has shifted, with India's top diplomat using the language of America's culture wars. Asked about discrimination against India's 200m Muslims, he criticised "tokenism" and "identity lobbies" that "cater to minority demands". Then he pivoted to talking about housing and loans, instead.

The bonds between Team Trump and the Modi machine may deepen. Tulsi Gabbard, America's director of national intelligence will visit soon. So will J.D. Vance, the vice-president. Ms Gabbard is the first practising Hindu to occupy her role; Usha Vance is of Indian heritage.

Yet despite the closer proximity between their worldviews, the new shared vocabulary and personal ties, relations between America and India are hardly risk-free. America's trade war is unlikely to bypass India. The price of doing business with Mr Trump may be that India buys more American weapons, while India wants to build up its domestic defence industries. After decades of arguing for a multipolar world that is not dominated by the West and by institutions created in the aftermath of 1945, India may have got what it wants. But it may find, too, that the resulting instability, security dilemmas and arms proliferation in Asia and beyond sometimes threaten Indian interests.

Mr Jaishankar's audience laughed nervously as he made one euphemistic concession: he said American foreign policy is "interesting" at the moment. You will not catch him formulating a stronger critique. After the humiliating encounter between Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, and Mr Trump in the Oval Office, many Indian commentators have argued that Europe should learn from Indians how to talk to Mr Trump. India's strategy appears to involve talking more like him, too. ■

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