

India is on a deal-making spree

NEW DELHI

Country pushes to build new economic ties as U.S. becomes less dependable

BY ANUPREETA DAS

France. New Zealand. The Seychelles. Malaysia. Slovakia. Italy.

In the past year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India has zigzagged around the world at a breathless pace, pursuing new partners or bolstering ties with existing ones, jolted into action by a grim reality: India's only way to combat the global turbulence unleashed by President Trump and fortify its economy is to spread its bets widely.

Since August last year, Mr. Modi has paid official visits to at least 20 countries. Last month, he visited Uzbekistan, and last week he traveled to Kyrgyzstan for the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a 10-member regional security group.

Among the economic benefits for India that Mr. Modi has scored in his meetings are submarine technology from Germany, student visas from France and cheaper Scotch whisky — arguably India's most popular alcoholic beverage — from the United Kingdom.

"We want to build better ties with the rest of the world as the size of our economy grows," said Priyam Gandhi-Modi, an executive director of the Future Economic Cooperation Council, an initiative of the government of Maharashtra, a western Indian state. She described India's approach as "plurilateral" — pursuing "smaller goals, more targeted goals and a smaller set of countries, until the time that goal is achieved."

Unlike the diffuse nature of previous meetings, the recent partnerships are more focused, outlining goals and numbers.

Many so-called middle powers — countries like France and Canada — have been kneecapped by the same forces India faces, making them more amenable to Mr. Modi's overtures. Some are seeking him out to meet their own strategic needs and to get access to the world's fastest-growing large economy.

India's recalibrated approach to foreign policy made its debut about a year ago, following the 25 percent global tariffs Mr. Trump announced in February 2025. The Trump administration began calling out India for its protectionist economy and in August last year, Mr. Trump slapped India with an additional 25 percent tariff for buying Russian oil, saying the purchases were helping finance its war in Ukraine.

During Mr. Trump's first term, he and Mr. Modi cultivated a personal relationship that India expected to yield dividends. But New Delhi's mood soured after Mr. Trump claimed repeatedly that he had played a role in ending a four-day conflict between India and Pakistan in May last year.

India has since rushed to find new partners to minimize the economic hit, as the United States was its largest single export market, as well as to strengthen relationships with countries like Japan and Australia that want to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region. The Iran war has made India's mission only more urgent: With 80 percent of its crude oil imports coming through the Strait of Hormuz, it has been forced to find other transport routes.

WHO IS MODI DOING DEALS WITH?

In addition to his overseas visits, Mr. Modi, 75, has received visits from the leaders of at least 13 countries since December last year.

Many such meetings produced specific agreements:

- India and France have developed an especially close partnership, centered



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President Lee Jae Myung of South Korea, top left, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India in April. Mr. Lee promised investment in India and to provide shipbuilding assistance. Above, Mr. Modi and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia in February.

on artificial intelligence and governance, and on doubling bilateral trade within the next five years.

- Mr. Modi and Norway's prime minister, Jonas Gahr Store, reaffirmed Norway's commitment to creating one million jobs in India under an agreement India signed in October last year with the European Free Trade Association.

- President Lee Jae Myung of South Korea promised investment in India and shipbuilding assistance. India aims to become one of the world's top five shipbuilders by 2047.

- Mr. Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit New Zealand in four decades. The meeting focused on maritime security, building on a defense cooperation agreement signed last year and doubling bilateral trade.

- India signed a major free trade agreement with the European Union, the world's largest economic bloc, in January. Roughly two decades of trade negotiations had been sped up by the newly upended world order.

WHAT'S DRIVING THE POLICY?

India's priorities can be grouped into thematic categories: defense technology; regional security; energy imports; critical minerals; artificial intelligence;

and the ability of its people to study and work abroad, based on a review of its recent agreements.

Broadly, they reflect India and its partners' goal of creating well-functioning economic corridors within which they can build resilience to future geopolitical shocks, analysts said. To maintain its "strategic autonomy" — a favored foreign policy stance — Mr. Modi has pursued economic diplomacy.

Many of the pacts underscore India's need for support to create manufacturing jobs and technology to drive its growth, analysts said. But India is also working with countries to build infrastructure and find new buyers for its pharmaceuticals, as the world's biggest maker of generic drugs. Unlike the diffuse nature of many previous meetings with leaders, the recent partnerships are far more focused, outlining specific goals, targets and numbers.

The E.U. deal — which Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, labeled the "mother of all deals" — marked a move away from India's longstanding policy of protectionism. As part of the agreement, India agreed to make concessions, including slashing tariffs on European cars and wine, among other products. Last year,

India also struck a deal with the United Kingdom — the latter reduced tariffs on garments and the former slashed duties on alcohol.

The India-U.S. relationship is in "flux" and lacks "strategic focus" at the moment, said Chietig Bajpayee, a South Asia expert at Chatham House, a London-based think tank. Mr. Bajpayee compared a recent meeting between Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump on the sidelines of the G7 summit in France to a "one-off coffee" rather than a relationship-building step.

Without a dependable relationship with the United States, he said, "India is back to pursuing a strategy where it balances and manages its relationships with both smaller countries, middle powers like Canada and Japan, and the global powers, U.S. and China."

But Mr. Modi is hardly one to shy away from advertising personal chemistry where he can, to the cheers of his fellow Indians. During a meeting with Giorgia Meloni, Italy's prime minister, Mr. Modi presented her with a bag of Melody toffee, a popular Indian candy. That very day, shares of an unrelated company with a name similar to the candy maker that produces Melody shot up on the Indian stock market.