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Trump Is Driving Xi Into Modi's Arms

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Body

Apr 27, 2018(Foreign Policy: <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/> Delivered by Newstex) Chinese President **Xi** Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra **Modi** at the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, on September 4, 2016. (Lintao Zhang/Getty Images) The first ever 'informal summit' between the leaders of China and India in Wuhan, China, began today. The talks are officially set to tackle a range of bilateral issues, from border disputes to trade, as Chinese President **Xi** Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra **Modi** promise a 'heart-to-heart'[1] dialogue. But there's an unacknowledged third party — U.S. President Donald **Trump**. Wuhan's bilateral diplomacy has a triangular twist.

Both Beijing and New Delhi find it hard to view each other outside of the framework of relations with Washington. China has long feared that India is being lured into a U.S.-led alliance meant to contain China and block its rise to superpower status. And while wary of a full-fledged alliance, New Delhi sees the United States as a necessary strategic partner to build up India's economic, technological, and military muscle and to withstand Chinese expansionism. This dynamic has been in place for the last two decades since Washington and India began courting each other strategically, but **Trump** has shaken up the equation with his chaotic and unorthodox policymaking. America's volatile president has become the unwitting trigger forcing China and India to rethink their core assumptions about the trilateral relationship. Since coming into office in January 2017, **Trump** has pursued protectionist and economic nationalistic policies to heighten tensions with China. He has abruptly ended an era when U.S. presidents tolerated their nation's gigantic trade deficit with China, and the rapid erosion of their technological edge. The ambiguity under previous presidents about whether or not the United States would name China as a currency manipulator or accord it 'market economy' status in trade has today given way to all-out economic warfare where China is explicitly framed as the enemy and an unfair competitor in the minds of **Trump** and his hawkish advisers. **Trump**'s National Security Strategy clearly labels China as a rival and pledged[2] that 'the United States will no longer turn a blind eye to violations, cheating, or economic aggression.' The tariffs **Trump** has slapped on China and his targeting of China's hi-tech industrial policy 'Made in China 2025' have conveyed to Beijing that it cannot count on the continued inflow of American foreign direct investment and open market access for Chinese exports — the two key engines for China's extraordinary economic growth since the 1980s. Yet, despite the unilateral economic attack that **Trump** has launched on China, he has shown little interest in maintaining and oiling the multilateral U.S. alliance system in Asia that could truly hem in China's rise. His decision to abandon the Trans-Pacific Partnership and his failure to offer key allies in the Indo-Pacific region the generosity and magnanimity they usually expect from the United States are offering wiggle room to China to bring nearby nations into Beijing's sphere of influence. So far, **Trump** has not lived up to his pledge in the National Security Strategy that Washington would focus more on 'great power competition' with 'revisionist powers' than on countering terrorism by extremist nonstate actors. But his threats to broaden the anti-Chinese economic assault, and the sense in China that this is 'just the beginning' of a war that would imperil **Xi**'s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, has led Beijing to recalibrate its approach to its main Asian neighbor, India. China also perceives a new threat from India, not just because of incidents on the disputed border but also due to shifting economic circumstances, namely the fact that India's GDP growth rate now surpasses China's. The Doklam incident[3], where a tense military stare-down over a disputed corner of the Himalayas was eventually defused by talks, prompted serious discussion on both sides of the

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border. China used to ignore India, but it is now taking the country more seriously. India's opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative, and in particular to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that passes through territory disputed with Pakistan, rankles Beijing. In the run-up to the Wuhan summit, Chinese Communist Party-linked news media have reissued[4] warnings that India 'should stay clear and independent to avoid being used as a pawn' by **Trump**. The Global Times, a nationalistic paper that has taken an increasingly antagonistic tone on India, has also explicitly linked the 'Wuhan spirit' of trying to patch up differences over the border and geostrategic competition[5] to 'an era of great uncertainties featuring **Trump**'s opportunistic maneuvers, braggadocio and threats.' Explicit hostility from the United States, it seems, is compelling China to moderate its tensions with India. In India too, while the political and defense establishment still has faith in the United States and **Modi** has found a certain personal rapport with **Trump**, there are questions about how reliable an ally Washington would be in the event that conflict with China in the Himalayas or the Indian Ocean grows hotter. **Trump**'s narrow 'America First' ideology has sent strong signals to U.S. treaty allies in Asia such as the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, and South Korea that Washington might not stand by its commitments in a conflict. The so-called grown-ups in the **Trump** administration such as Defense Secretary James Mattis have tried to convince U.S. allies of continued commitment, but **Trump**'s harsh words asking allies such as South Korea and Japan to pay up for the U.S. security umbrella and his moves toward trade war with almost all Asian partners have dampened spirits. **Modi** is a nationalist politician who wants India to emerge as a leading power in the world, and he will not simply cave in to China's demands the way that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte did by refusing to further press the Philippines' territorial claims in the South China Sea after its landmark victory[6] in international court over disputed islands. **Modi** displayed his gutsy side in 2017 by resisting Chinese threats of 'annihilation' during the border standoff at Doklam. Still, he is aware of India's vulnerabilities vis--vis a more powerful China and has no delusions that **Trump** will come to his aid in the event of a new military faceoffs with China. Moreover, **Trump**'s economic czars have also trained their guns on India as a problem-maker for American firms. The trade deficit that the United States runs with India, although tiny compared to that with China, has been blamed by the U.S. trade representative on India's[7] 'system which is not particularly open.' **Modi**'s desire to review Chinese-Indian ties with **Xi** at Wuhan 'from[8] a strategic and long-term perspective' may not mention **Trump**, but the U.S. president's lack of appreciation of India's role as a democratic stabilizing force in Asia is both recognized and resented in New Delhi. Nevertheless, the United States remains one of the key players, together with Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, that India needs to march to what it sees as its destined spot as a global power. Even if **Trump** fails to check threatened Chinese hegemony in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, **Modi** will not throw away the American card to pacify **Xi**. Excitement about a reset in Chinese-Indian relations is palpable in both New Delhi and Beijing, and there is intense speculation about a package deal that could involve quid pro quo, such as India endorsing the Belt and Road project in some form in return for China condemning Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Indian closeness to the United States is on **Xi**'s mind as he attempts to regain trust with **Modi**. China barely cooperates with the U.S. military, while U.S.-Indian military ties have grown exponentially in recent years, with joint manufacturing of weaponry and technology transfer on the cards. The hyperbole from China ahead of the Wuhan summit about a 'major shift' and a 'new course like never before' in Chinese-Indian ties camouflages many of China's fundamental strategic anxieties in the **Trump** era. **Modi** will attempt to use this as leverage in what could be an intense encounter with **Xi**. For all of India's weaknesses, **Modi** has the advantage of not being caught in **Trump**'s crosshairs in the same way that **Xi** is. [1]: <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/narendra-modi-xi-jinping-wuhan-summit-sino-india-ties-china/story/275666.html> [2]: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> [3]: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/17/is-india-starting-to-flex-its-military-muscles/> [4]: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1099307.shtml> [5]: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1099486.shtml> [6]: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/philippines-v-china-one-year-later-a-surprising-compliance-from-beijing/article35660244/> [7]: <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/sOV4d2HQ1gb8qdCFNtF3pL/India-may-be-in-a-position-to-retaliate-to-US-tariff-hikes.html> [8]: <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-will-review-sino-indian-ties-from-strategic-and-long-term-perspective-pm-modi-ahead-of-talks-with-xi-jinping-2608902>

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