

# As ties with US sour, India needs to rejig foreign policy

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June 3, 2025



Indians were shocked by US President Donald Trump asking American CEOs and industrialists to not base their manufacturing facilities in India. Trump reportedly told Apple CEO Tim Cook that he does not want him to manufacture iPhones in India. He threatened Apple with 25 percent tariffs if they did so. This is not the first time that Trump directed major industry leaders not to manufacture in India. Earlier, in February, he had told Elon Musk not to set up a Tesla factory in India as that would be “unfair” to the US. This directive came just after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met the US President and the Tesla CEO on February 13 with the hope that Tesla would build in India.

These provocative actions have sorely disappointed Indians who were expecting to be beneficiaries of Trump’s benevolence as US companies moved out of China. In addition, Indians were shocked at the way illegal migrants from the country were degraded, criminalised and transported back to India in fetters on a military aircraft. And now, Indian students are not getting visas or their visas are being cancelled disrupting their studies at US universities.

**Indians recovering from shock**

Trump's comeback electoral win of November 2024 was welcomed in India as he was seen by the establishment virtually as 'Our man in Washington'. This perception was bolstered by the hyped chemistry between him and Modi. However, public opinion has started shifting in the opposite direction. Trump's core foreign policy objectives rest on trade, tariffs, transactions and targets. He chose to target India as a "very high tariff nation" in his very first address to the joint session of the US Congress (March 7) when he implied that India imposed the most unfair tariffs on the US.

Trump called India a "tariff king" and a "big abuser". The US trade deficit of US\$100 billion with India irked Trump. Now, he is pushing for an almost zero tariff on US goods, especially cars — now that Tesla is ready to enter the Indian market.

However, Trump wants the opening of markets for free and easy entry of US goods — irrespective of whether they are in demand in India or not; e.g. he seeks to replace Scotch with American bourbon whiskey.

The US is targeting both China and India. Others in the Global South are likely to be targeted next.

Trump's 'Make America Great Again' policy seems to be about cutting the bottom out of any potential manufacturing adversary.

Trump equates India and Pakistan

As if the economic hit was not hard enough, the Trump team has gone after India's strategic interests in the light of the ghastly terror attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir (April 22), which India believes was Pakistan-sponsored, and the Indian retribution that followed.

Trump called the terror attack a "bad one", without naming Pakistan, but turned it into an even-handed India-Pakistan conflict, stating incorrectly that the two had been 'fighting for 1,500 years'.

As usual, Trump put the focus on himself as he said he was "close to both countries", and the two would "figure it out one way or another", distancing himself from any special relation with India that Indian strategic analysts used to boast about.

As India carried out military strikes against Pakistan, named Operation Sindoor, the US Presidential team reiterated 'good relations with both' countries and Trump said that if he could "help I will be there".

In the two days of the military operations that followed, the US Secretary of State repeatedly said that they were speaking to both sides, which subsequently agreed to an immediate ceasefire and start talks. He claimed that the 'US stopped nuclear conflict'.

Trump further said he would 'soon' give trade access to India-Pakistan, a claim that the US Commerce Secretary put on record.

India took pains to claim that while US Secretary of State Marco Rubio did speak to Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, the military operation was halted after the Pakistani Director General of Military Operations asked for a halt; i.e., the ceasefire was reached bilaterally.

India upset with US

Why did India feel slighted by the alleged US role?

The US hyphenated India-Pakistan, something that India does not like. It has sought to de-hyphenate itself with Pakistan by improving relations with the US for years.

India perhaps also saw the US infantilising both countries with its rhetoric that only a politically mature US could stop the two squabbling neighbours.

US claims also demonstrated its ability to intervene in South Asian affairs and underlined that the US remains a hegemon in this region.

India also saw in the US statements a challenge to its strategic autonomy. It was seen by India as siding with Pakistan's nuclear blackmail and threat, as it helped demonstrate that the US had saved the world from a possible nuclear escalation.

Lastly and most importantly, by pointing to Kashmir as the root cause of the war, the US was seen as internationalising an issue that India sees as an internal issue. It is quite possible that now, US think tanks will do their bit to showcase the US role and heighten this agenda.

What India needs to do

What can India conclude about the US behaviour?

First, that the US has no permanent friends or enemies — only permanent interests.

Second, that the US has a hub and spokes policy towards all — the US is the central hub and all other countries are spokes of different sizes that the US can manipulate and manage.

Third, that the US military-industrial technology complex will seek to derive the greatest benefits from both countries and across the region.

India will, therefore, have to rejig both its thinking and paradigm in foreign policy at the global, regional and bilateral levels as also in its domestic debates.

India must also be wary of US interests drowning Indian interests — the US has always been a predatory power and embeds itself in regional conflicts and gains from these.

India has been committed to multi-polarity, BRICS and other such forums and should stick with and enhance this. India must continue with self-reliance and its traditional time-tested partners.

It also needs to curb the domestic war rhetoric as that does not help the interest of peace or show India as a sane voice of the Global South.

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**(Cover Photo: Modi-Trump chemistry fails the trade and national interest test as India-US ties sour. Picture: The White House/Public Domain Mark 1.0)**