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[Home](#) > The Trump–Modi Summit

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The Trump–Modi Summit

Big Meeting, Low Expectations

C. Christine Fair and Bharath Gopalswamy

C. CHRISTINE FAIR is a Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor in Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. She is the author of *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* ^[1] (Oxford University Press, 2014). BHARATH GOPALASWAMY is Director of the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council.

On June 26, U.S. President Donald Trump will hold talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At first glance, the two might seem aligned. Modi heads the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which has sustained criticism ^[2] at home and abroad for its divisive rhetoric about India's Muslim citizens, who number some 189 million ^[3]. The Trump campaign was likewise anti-Muslim, which motivated at least some Hindus in India and the U ^[4]nited States to support Trump's bid for the presidency with the expectation that contempt for Muslims would translate into harsher policies toward Pakistan and other Muslim states. Moreover, both Trump and Modi are populist leaders ^[5] who have capitalized on their politics' demands for political upheaval. Both also have surrogates who have pushed divisive identity issues to the forefront of politics, and they have been described by journalist Ashok Singh as "theatrical and... narcissistic" ^[6]. He is not alone in making such comparisons ^[7]. Yet despite their posited—if contested ^[8]—similarities, the two have remained at odds for several reasons.

First, Trump ran on the premise that immigrants are "taking American jobs." ^[9] (In fact, robots are taking American jobs ^[10], and they will continue to do so.) Trump recently signed an executive order that would make it more difficult for Indians to obtain H-1 visas ^[11], which are highly sought after and comprise an important source of remittance revenue in India. Modi, in response, urged Washington to keep an open mind ^[12] on admitting skilled Indian workers, as the *Hindustan Times* reported.

Second, Trump's anti-Muslim vitriol may have been greeted enthusiastically by some Hindus, but racists in the United States have also assaulted Hindus and Sikhs ^[13]. Many Indians now fear for their safety ^[14] and are reconsidering working and studying in the United States ^[15]. More recently, Trump snubbed India when he suggested that India's commitment to the Paris climate accord was motivated by financial incentives ^[16] rather than dedication to decelerating climate change. India's Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj, retorted that "anyone who says we have signed Paris because of the lure of money, I reject that as baseless" ^[17].

Worse yet, whereas previous Democratic and Republican administrations have deepened ties with India on the shared premise that this partnership will help manage China's worrisome rise, Trump has at times appeared to prioritize better ties with China.

Finally, under Trump, the U.S. State Department remains deliberately under-staffed ^[18] as a part of White House adviser Steve Bannon's plan to "deconstruct the administrative state" ^[19]. Consequently, there is no assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, much less deputy assistant secretaries, who are the work-horses of U.S. policymaking. The understaff thus report to work without a principle, policy, or strategy to guide them. Equally problematic, Trump has not appointed an ambassador to India, which is often a political appointee rather than a career diplomat. The Defense department likewise remains understaffed ^[20].

On top of these bureaucratic problems, which are replicated throughout the U.S. government ^[21], Trump's own staff and foreign policy team are in violent disagreement on virtually every U.S. policy, ranging from Russia to Qatar, which is further muddled by Trump's unpredictable tweetstorms. Given all this, it is difficult for the Indian leadership to know whom to listen to.

NOT-SO-GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Trump and Modi have spoken three times over the phone since Trump's election. The first occurred ^[22] after Trump's victory in November when Modi called the new president-elect to congratulate him and to tell Trump that he looked forward to taking the Indian-U.S. strategic partnership to new heights. They spoke again four days after Trump was sworn in. During that conversation ^[23], Trump emphasized that the United States "considers India a true friend and

partner in addressing challenges around the world” and invited Modi to visit the United States. For his part, Modi tweeted that the conversation was “warm.”^[24] The latest discussion took place in March when Trump telephoned Modi^[25] to congratulate him on the BJP’s victory in state elections and expressed support for Modi’s economic agenda.

Despite these cordial phone calls, the upcoming meeting should be understood as aimed at establishing a better personal rapport. So far, the Trump administration has offered little of substance on what observers may expect from the meeting. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer told reporters^[26] that Trump and Modi could “set forth a vision that will expand the U.S.-India partnership in an ambitious and worthy way of both countries’ people.” He also explained^[26] that both leaders would likely put forth a “common vision” on expanding the U.S.-Indian partnership based on mutual interests, including “fighting terrorism, promoting economic growth and reforms and expanding security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.”

It is unlikely that Modi will touch on the contentious issue of H-1 visas, as Trump’s positions are well-known. Nor is Modi likely to raise the issue of security for persons of Indian heritage in the United States or revisit any of the rancor over the Paris accord. Instead, Modi may be best served by trying to shape Trump’s thinking about issues that are central to his country’s strategic interests: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China.

Despite statements made during his campaign, Trump has shown little commitment to treating Pakistan any differently from his predecessor. U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, during his confirmation hearing^[27], expressed doubts that more coercive measures toward Islamabad would yield results. He suggested that enticements rather than punishments are most likely to cajole cooperation on Islamist terrorism in Afghanistan and the region.

That is not what New Delhi wants to hear. Trump needs to listen to New Delhi’s perspective on Pakistan’s pernicious role in the region and the accumulating and deleterious effects of American efforts to buy Pakistani cooperation. Modi should take the opportunity to articulate very clearly India’s position on Pakistan and, by extension, its preferred policy measures in Afghanistan. As it turns out, India’s own position on these issues^[28] overlaps with those articulated by General John Nicholson, who leads U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan.^[28] It is also time for Modi to urge caution on China. Although some Americans see the country as a potential partner for stability, India views China’s efforts to expand its presence in Pakistan as a means to solidify China’s presence in the region, including a military establishment in the deep-water port at Gwadar.

Modi would be wise to speak to Trump’s desire to create jobs in the United States. One of the surest ways of doing so is to continue developing and deepening defense ties, including by purchasing U.S. weapons systems with the proviso that any deal would also satisfy Modi’s “make in India” imperative. The current offer to locate the entire production of F-16s in India would satisfy both countries’ needs. India also has numerous investors that can help revive American coal production. Although a strong coal industry is not a long-term solution, buttressing it can help buy time while the United States seeks a soft landing for coal workers. India can also help the United States continue developing affordable, clean energy. India has made important strides in this field. Motivated by the urgency of global climate change, India, which is currently mainly powered by coal, is “adding 50 percent more solar and wind”^[29] than the U.S. currently has installed,” according to *National Geographic*. “It is replacing 770 million street and household lights with energy-saving and long-lasting LEDs and bringing electric access for the first time to tens of thousands of poor rural villages.”

India is even the world’s leader in a new type of business^[29] called an energy service company (ESCO), which makes money only on energy costs it manages to save its customers. According to *National Geographic*, India expects that “more than 300,000 new workers”^[30] can be employed in wind and solar jobs and more than one million total employment opportunities can be created in achieving India’s ambitious clean energy goals to install 175 gigawatts (GW) of renewable power by 2022.” And India may be an important future market for American liquefied natural gas.^[31]

LOOKING FORWARD

The Trump administration would be wise to learn the lessons of the past administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama: India—not China—is the best bet for securing U.S. interests in Asia^[32]. The Bush administration prioritized the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear deal with the explicit intent of helping India become a global power^[33] that can counter Chinese hegemony in Asia and beyond. The Obama administration, in its final months, tried to further this agenda by pushing for India’s admission to the Nuclear Supplier’s Group^[34], a move that China blocked, to Obama’s vexation.

Relatedly, Trump would do well to understand that Pakistan is the single most important security threat in the region because it relies on Islamist terrorist groups to promote its foreign policies^[35] while ensuring immunity via its actions from its ever-growing nuclear arsenal^[36]. There is some evidence that at least part of the Trump administration is moving in this direction^[37], despite Mattis’s earlier public statements to the contrary as well as recent rebuffs from some lawmakers^[38].

If it comes to these conclusions, the Trump government will be able to adopt a very different policy toward Pakistan. And Pakistan would have to take Trump’s threats seriously. For one, the administration could vacate Pakistan’s status as a major non-NATO ally, which was granted in 2004. Revoking this status would send an important signal to Pakistan

that the United States has reached the limits of its patience while also depriving Pakistan of diplomatic, political, military, and financial advantages [39] that are otherwise not available to non-NATO countries.

Second, the Trump administration could assert its intentions to declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terror unless immediate and verifiable steps are taken to dismantle the jihadi infrastructure [40] long deployed by the state. Pakistan has long met the criteria for a state sponsor of terrorism, but past Republican and Democratic administrations have failed to take this step, fearing blowback for U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Trump would have to make it clear to Pakistan that any further efforts to disrupt U.S. efforts to stabilize Afghanistan will not be tolerated. Give Trump's erraticism, Islamabad would be foolish to dismiss his threats.

Washington could—and should—work to revise its long-standing position on Kashmir as “disputed.” The Pakistani position is not supported by law or fact. Kashmir was a princely state that was not bound by the Indian Independence Act of 1947 [41]. Despite signing a standstill agreement with the sovereign of Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh, Pakistan invaded Kashmir in an effort to snatch it using a combination of state and non-state actors. Despite Pakistani claims to the contrary, the work of the Atlantic Council's Shuja Nawaz demonstrates that this was very much a state-sponsored adventure [42]. Singh requested Indian military assistance. In exchange for such help, India demanded that Singh join India's dominion. After Singh signed the instrument of accession, India airlifted troops [43] to defend what was now sovereign Indian territory. India referred the matter to the UN Security Council, which promulgated Resolution 47 in 1948 [44]. The resolution called for three sequential steps. First, Pakistan was to withdraw all forces from Kashmir. Second, India was to withdraw most of its troops but was permitted to retain a defensive force to protect against further Pakistani intrusions. Finally, when both sides satisfied the sequential withdrawals, UNSCR 47 stipulated that India would facilitate a plebiscite to discern the wishes of Kashmiris under the auspices of the United Nations. Pakistan never complied with the first necessary step. Pakistan—not India—is responsible for obviating the plebiscite when it was still feasible and relevant. In light of these facts, it is time to stop indulging Pakistan on this issue.

Trump has several options here. First, the United States could unilaterally declare that it views the current line of control as the de facto and de jure international border between India and Pakistan and revise maps to reflect this position. However, the real work will come at the United Nations, where Pakistan's claim to Kashmir continues to sway many. Washington could announce a desire to vacate the various but now-obsolete UN Security Council Resolutions on Kashmir. Retracting such resolutions is not easy, but it may not be impossible [45]. Even if such a bid fails, American efforts along these lines are an important signal to Islamabad. China will surely object to such a measure on behalf of its client state, but the point is that Washington would demonstrate its dedication to turning over a new leaf by pursuing such an initiative. Washington can also work to defund and render defunct the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan. [46] UNMOGIP came into being in January 1949 to oversee the ceasefire of the first war between India and Pakistan. Ironically, the ongoing presence of the force in Kashmir rewards Pakistan for its use of Islamist terrorists in the region.

It is unlikely that Trump will consider such policies. In fact, the United States will be lucky if Trump doesn't undo the progress made in U.S.-Indian relations since the late 1990s. If the meeting goes well, it could lay the foundation for deeper and more consequential engagement on issues that both states will prioritize in the future. But that is a big if.

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