

A ROCKY ROAD FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

India is the largest beneficiary nation under the GSP scheme. (Representational image) | Photo Credit: [Getty Images/iStockphoto](#)

The Donald Trump administration's recent actions threaten the foundation of trust and flexibility on which India-U.S. relations are premised. However, they seem to be part of a pattern progressively visible in American foreign policy in which bullying friends has become the name of the game. The Trump administration's insensitive approach towards its allies in Western Europe by denigrating the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union (EU), threatening to impose tariffs on EU goods in connection with trade disputes and Europe's relations with Russia, and Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal that roiled its European partners are all evidence of this policy.

The same paradigm explains Washington's recent moves *vis-à-vis* India. These stand in sharp contrast to the first year of the Trump administration when the U.S. was actively wooing India as a strategic counterweight to China and because of its rapidly expanding market that was seen as providing great opportunities for American business. In a major foreign policy speech in October 2017, then U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that India and America were "two bookends of stability — on either side of the globe" and that the "emerging Delhi-Washington strategic partnership" was essential to anchor the rules-based world order for the next hundred years.

Even before Mr. Tillerson's speech India had come to be seen as a pillar of American policy in Asia. The term 'Indo-Pacific region' appeared prominently in the joint statement issued by Mr. Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the end of the latter's visit to the U.S. in June 2017. Since then, it has come to replace the term 'Asia-Pacific region' in American foreign policy jargon. In May 2018, the Pentagon changed the name of the U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, emphasising not only the strategic linkage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans but also the geo-political prominence of India in the U.S.'s Asian strategy.

However, the Trump administration seems to have reversed course in recent months. U.S. unilateral actions on three fronts have simultaneously demonstrated what amounts to downgrading India in American strategy. The announcement on April 22 by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Washington would not renew after May 2 the exemption that it had granted India and seven other countries regarding import of Iranian oil was one sign that American unilateralism had trumped coherent strategic thinking.

The Iranian share of Indian oil imports stood at 10%. While it would not be impossible for India to replace Iranian oil, the American announcement failed to consider the strategic importance of Iran in Indian foreign policy and the damage it could do to India-Iran relations. Iran's strategic location and the common concerns of both countries regarding the future of Afghanistan and the threat of terrorism emanating from Pakistan make Tehran an ideal geopolitical ally of New Delhi. India is also engaged in building the Chabahar port in southeastern Iran, which could act as the gateway for India to Central Asia, bypassing a hostile Pakistan. Moreover, by forcing India to tamely accept the American diktat on Iranian oil, it has torn off the veneer of "strategic autonomy" that Indian policymakers had long touted as the fundamental creed of Indian foreign policy.

The second leg of this tripod is the U.S. threat to impose sanctions on India if it buys the S-400

missile defence system from Russia for which a deal had been signed in October 2018 by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Mr. Modi. The U.S. has argued that India's purchase of the S-400 systems will violate the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), a U.S. federal law that requires the country to impose sanctions on states entering into major military deals with Russia.

This puts India in a Catch-22 position. If it defies U.S. threats and goes ahead with the purchase, it would subject India to economic sanctions and curtailment of defence and high-tech cooperation with the U.S. If it buckles under American pressure and cancels the S-400 deal, it will have major negative implications for India's relations with Russia, its largest arms supplier and a time-tested friend. Furthermore, it will make it clear that India is for all practical purposes a "lackey" of the U.S., thus once again severely damaging its standing and credibility in international circles.

The third and latest instance of unwelcome U.S. pressure was the announcement on May 31 that, beginning June 5, India will be removed from the preferential trade programme, known as the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), which gives developing countries easier access to the U.S. market and lowers U.S. duties on their exports. Mr. Trump signed off on a presidential decree to that effect alleging, "India has not assured the United States that India will provide equitable and reasonable access to its markets."

India is the largest beneficiary nation under the GSP scheme, and exported goods worth \$6.35 billion to the U.S. under the preferential regime last year. This is close to 10% of the goods exported by India to the U.S. While the Indian reaction to the American decision has been mild so far — the Commerce Ministry termed it "unfortunate" — it is bound to cause resentment in New Delhi, especially since U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross had assured the government that benefits would not be cut off until after India's elections, thus allowing the new government time to reflect on the issue.

Taken together, these three decisions indicate that Washington is impervious to Indian strategic concerns and economic interests despite its earlier pronouncements that it considers India a valued "strategic partner". These decisions are part of a unilateralist syndrome that currently afflicts American foreign policy. Mr. Trump and his advisers, principally National Security Adviser John Bolton and Mr. Pompeo, no longer seem to discriminate between friend and foe when making important policy decisions. Such an attitude does not bode well for the future of America's relations with its friends and allies. Washington appears to have overlooked the fact that even the "indispensable nation" needs reliable friends and allies.

S. Jaishankar, India's new Minister of External Affairs and an outstanding diplomat with a wealth of experience in dealing with Washington, will have to convince American policy-makers that this maxim is relevant to the U.S.'s relations with India. Mr. Jaishankar should subtly communicate to his interlocutors that this is especially true now that the international system is becoming progressively multipolar, thus increasing foreign policy options available to Indian policymakers.

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