

## DEFINE 'STRATEGIC PARTNERS'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

It is no surprise that U.S. President [Donald Trump has turned down an invitation from India](#) to attend next year's Republic Day parade as the chief guest. We shouldn't have expected Mr. Trump to rearrange his schedule at home to attend an event abroad that entails sitting for hours in polluted air and observing another country's military parade, even if that country is a purported U.S. strategic partner. That's how Mr. Trump rolls.

To be sure, former U.S. President Barack Obama shifted the date of his State of the Union address so that he could come to India in January 2015. But the U.S.'s relationship with India, and the broader world, is drastically different now, amid the revolution in its foreign policy since Mr. Trump's arrival in the White House. For more than a decade, a bipartisan consensus in Washington had supported India's entry into an exclusive club of the U.S.'s strategic partners. Only the likes of Israel, the U.K., Australia, Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia — all of which attract the "strategic" or "special" relationship designation — enjoy membership. Today, U.S. officials pay lip service to notions of a strategic partnership with India; the Trump administration, led by its businessman-in-chief, is transactional to the core.

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There's nothing wrong with transactional relationships, and the t-word need not be a dirty one in international diplomacy. Indeed, Mr. Trump's emphasis on deal-making has helped move the needle forward on U.S.-India security cooperation, as evidenced by the recent inking of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement. Additionally, the emphasis on the transactional hasn't harmed bilateral ties. On the contrary, the fact that U.S.-India relations have remained relatively robust despite a flurry of new tension points — from U.S. tariffs and sanction policies to controversial statements by Mr. Trump about India — attests to the partnership's overall strength.

Still, what's missing from the relationship in the Trump era is a commitment from the U.S. side to go deeper than deal-making. For example, Washington and New Delhi need to resolve critical definitional issues to make the relationship truly strategic. What does "strategic partnership" mean for each side? Indian conceptions emphasise technology transfers and intelligence-sharing, while U.S. conceptions envision deep levels of operational cooperation to which New Delhi hasn't assented. To fully take advantage of the relationship's repositories of trust and goodwill, and of its enduring shared interests — from China's rise to terrorism — these fundamental questions must be addressed. But for Mr. Trump, doing deep dives on the definitional disconnects in U.S.-India relations is simply not a priority. And neither was that Republic Day invitation, despite the pomp and prestige that the trip would have generated for the U.S. President.

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