

## ‘FIRST TIER’: CHINA’S STRATEGIC COMMUNITY ON INDIA-U.S. TIES

by  
B. R. Deepak

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s U.S. visit in February 2025, both sides launched the U.S.-India COMPACT (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology), to strengthen cooperation in defense, trade, technology, energy security, and regional issues. The [Joint Statement](#) revealed that the U.S. will expand defense sales and co-production with India, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, Stryker combat vehicles, and six P-8I maritime patrol aircraft. Military collaboration will grow across air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace, highlighted by the upcoming Tiger Triumph tri-service exercise. The leaders set a goal to double bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030 under Mission 500 and pledged to negotiate a Bilateral Trade Agreement by fall 2025.

The two leaders also launched the U.S.-India TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology) initiative to promote cooperation in AI, semiconductors, quantum, biotechnology, energy, and space, and reaffirmed their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and strong people-to-people ties.

This was Prime Minister Modi’s second trip to U.S. within six months, following his attendance at the Quad Leaders’ Summit with the U.S., Japan, and Australia in September 2024. It was also Modi’s first visit since Trump began his second term. How has China’s strategic community viewed and opined on the visit? Let us examine the following.

China’s strategic community has deemed the visit a “First Tier” (第一梯队) event among foreign leaders’ visits to the U.S. India’s presence alongside U.S. allies like Israel and Japan in the “first tier” sends significant signals regarding strategic priorities, defense partnerships, and Indo-Pacific focus, according to an article in [Liberation Daily](#) featuring

perspectives from scholars like Zhang Jiadong, Hu Shisheng, and Lin Minwang. Prof. Zhang opines that Modi’s U.S. visit “highlights the U.S. prioritization of its alliance and partnership framework under “Trump 2.0,” with India surpassing Europe in importance.

### Serving U.S. Interests

[Liu Zongyi](#), a researcher at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies resonates the above argument when he says the visit reflects more of a strategic arrangement to consolidate U.S. influence. However, reflecting imperial China’s tributary mentality, he pronounces the visits as “Trump summoning America’s “henchmen” and “followers” (“打手”和“跟班”), to reinforce their allegiance.” Trump’s attitude toward Japan and India has been equated to “Host a banquet, behead, and make them your dogs”, a line from the Chinese movie *Let the Bullets Fly*, expecting them to act as “watchdogs” in the Indo-Pacific, serving U.S. interests by counterbalancing China. It is for this reason, Liu believes that the Quad meeting was held immediately after the inauguration, and India’s External Affairs Minister’s S. Jaishankar’s sitting arrangement in the middle of the front row was actually to “steal the spotlight” (为了抢镜头).

Trump’s vision for India in the words of Liu is clear – he seeks to strengthen security and defense cooperation, encourage India to purchase high-priced American weapons, and position India as a strategic partner to contain China in the Indo-Pacific. However, he argues that some high-tech military projects between the two remain “words without action” (口惠而实不至) and difficult to implement.

Liu gives two reasons for this: One, lack of strategic trust, as India is reluctant to become a formal U.S. ally or act as a “pawn” or “cannon fodder” (“排头兵”和“炮灰”) for America’s containment strategy against China. India also wishes to leverage American technology, and avoid over-dependence on U.S. weapons. Two, technical challenges such as procedural differences, complexities in defense technology transfer, and India’s underestimation of its own industrial capacity have been cited as some other examples for slow progress of technology transfer.

Liu believes that though Prime Minister Modi's U.S. visit suggested that it was aimed at discussing trade, tariffs, and immigration, however, the "Indo-Pacific strategy was the core focus of the meeting." He argues that Modi actively promoted the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy, which aimed to "create a strategic rivalry between China and the U.S." The strategy, in the words of the Chinese scholar, was designed to boost India's manufacturing sector and propel its economic rise by attracting investments and technology transfers from the West and Japan as companies seek alternatives to China's supply chains. India's proactive efforts (积极推动) pushed the Biden administration to formalize initiatives such as military cooperation within the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and mechanisms like Quad Plus.

However, the Chinese believe that under Trump, the focus will shift more towards defense and security rather than economic cooperation, for Trump seems more focused on "friendshoring" and "nearshoring" ("友岸外包" "近岸外包") aiming to bring manufacturing back to the U.S.

### Behind the Bonhomie

[Hu Shisheng](#), Director of the South Asia Institute at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, offers a counter view. He believes U.S.-India relations under "Trump 2.0" may not be as close as they were during the Biden era." Trump operates strictly based on transactional principles and "America First." Unlike the Biden administration, he does not prioritize alliances or multilateralism. India worries that Trump's global retreat and unilateralism could undermine the "quasi-alliance" built during Biden's term, ultimately affecting India's role and interests in the Indo-Pacific.

[Yan Shujun](#), an officer at the PLA Logistics Command Academy with the rank of Senior Colonel argues on similar lines when he says the visit was initially seen as a "friendship show" (友谊秀); Trump greeted Modi with enthusiastic hugs, boldly declaring the two as "good friends", while outlining plans to strengthen energy cooperation, arms sales, and even build a

"great trade route" (伟大贸易路线). However, this "buddy-buddy" (哥俩好) act quickly fell apart over the issue of tariffs, as Trump signed a "Reciprocal Tariffs" order on the very day of the meeting. Lowering of the tariffs in 12 sectors, including electronics and medical devices, expanding energy imports from the U.S., and even considering the purchase of F-35 fighter jets by India from Trump's perspective, are nothing more than a "mosquito's leg" (蚊子腿肉) far from the "whole ox" (整头牛), desired by Trump, according to Yan.

[Xinhua](#) while reporting on the visit contended that even though the U.S. and India have notable differences in areas such as climate change and trade, these were "deliberately downplayed" (尽量淡化). Instead, both sides emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation. Tariff reduction by India along with its technological, energy and defense partnership were spelled out as "big gift package" (大礼包) from Prime Minister Modi to the U.S. during his visit, according to an article in the [Time Weekly](#) that also has inputs from China's leading scholars on India.

### Testing Times for India-U.S. Ties

Another India watcher, [Lin Minwang](#), deputy director of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, told Yicai Global that India has adopted a "soft" (服软) approach, avoiding public criticism of the U.S. and opting for private diplomatic channels to manage differences between the two. He opines that these are testing times for U.S.-India relations. Like Liu, Lin also believes in India's pro-U.S. tilt, but argues that it has strained India's relations with other major powers. "Modi fears that a shift in U.S. leadership might leave India "empty-handed on both fronts," (两头落空)" claims Lin. While Modi was treated as an honored guest at the White House, Trump simultaneously demanded "fair" trade from India and took harsh measures against Indian illegal immigrants. Professor [Zhang Jiadong](#) opines that under "Trump 2.0," the focus on domestic priorities, combined with the president's unpredictable nature, could further complicate U.S.-India cooperation.

Yan Shujun, on the other hand posits that Prime

Minister Modi did not play the “China card” to win Trump’s favor, as some had speculated. However, according to Yan, Trump’s stance was clear: “I’m going after China, and every other country too!” Yan believes that “in Trump’s transactional worldview (交易主义世界观), there are no permanent interests – only perpetual exploitation. If India hoped to gain tariff exemptions by aligning against China, it was wishful thinking.”

#### **‘Not even a backup’**

In Yan’s view, Trump does not even consider India as a “backup option” (备胎) for replacing China’s supply chain efficiency and scale of the market. The real solution for India, according to Yan, might lie in returning to the non-aligned movement and strengthening ties with China. If India can abandon its “competition with China” (与中国争高低) mind-set and instead promote cooperation through platforms like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), it could significantly enhance its bargaining power.

*Dr. B. R. Deepak is a Professor at the Centre of Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. He is a recipient of many scholarships and awards including the prestigious Nehru and Asia Fellowship, and India-China Cultural Exchange fellowship for his doctoral and advanced studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Peking University, Beijing, respectively.*