



## MODI, TRUMP AND STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE IN THE INDO- PACIFIC

BY DAVID SCOTT

*David Scott ([davidscott366@outlook.com](mailto:davidscott366@outlook.com)) is a prolific writer, Indo-Pacific analyst for the NATO Defense College Foundation, member of the Center for International Maritime Security, and Associate Member of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies.*

President Donald Trump's visit to India from Feb. 24-25, his first, represents an important moment in United States-India relations. Potential fracture lines were avoided and the way cleared for ongoing convergence. Having secured re-election with a strong majority in May 2019, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi represents an important ongoing feature for US strategic calculations. Good personal chemistry between the two leaders remains evident.

One noteworthy aspect of Trump's trip is that the US president did not go off script, sticking to a measured line of drawing India into convergence on the Indo-Pacific. Limits remain clear, in the shape of India's much vaunted "strategic autonomy," which makes any formal alliance a non-starter. Nevertheless, India is of high value for US strategy, as expressed in the Robert Blackwell and Ashley Tellis article in *Foreign Affairs* Sept-Oct. 2019 titled "[The India dividend](#)," where "New Delhi remains Washington's best hope in Asia" for constraining China, on account of India's sheer size and weight.

Trump's trip to India showed continuing Indian convergence with the US over delicate but deepening constraint of China, and opportunities for further development. This was evident in the [joint statement](#) released in February, entitled "Vision and Principles for the United States-India Comprehensive Global

Strategic Partnership." To what extent did this represent the US drawing India into its fold? What was Modi signing up to?

On the economic front, while no overall trade deal was announced, the two leaders agreed that good progress was made and that they expected an early signing. Extended military cooperation was flagged in the joint statement, where Modi and Trump "pledged to deepen defense and security cooperation, especially through greater maritime and space domain awareness and information sharing; joint cooperation; exchange of military liaison personnel; advanced training and expanded exercises between all services and special forces; closer collaboration on co-development and co-production of advanced defense components, equipment, and platforms; and partnership between their defense industries."

In that vein, specific sales were announced: around \$3 billion worth of American military helicopters, mostly for the Indian Navy. Its significance was not in the amount, but that it continues India's slow move away from dependency on a pro-China Russia towards increasing military sales with the United States, and strengthens maritime cooperation between the US and India. The statement formally noted an "early," i.e. impending, signing of a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), which will enable exchange of geo-spatial information, and complete the foundational military agreements already made.

The key significance of the visit was "Strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific," an extended section of the joint statement. This is the first time a joint summit has had an explicit "Indo-Pacific" underpinning. The strategic imperative remains evident: the US feels threatened by China's advance into the West Pacific and India feels threatened by China's advance across the Indian Ocean. Strategic logic is simple; this common Indo-Pacific challenge posed by China is driving India-US strategic cooperation.

In the Indo-Pacific section of the joint statement, a close alignment of values was evident, in its affirmation that "a close partnership between the US and India is central to a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. This cooperation

is underpinned by recognition of ASEAN centrality.” The inclusion of the moniker “inclusive” nods toward not appearing as overt containment of China. Still, the statement went on to pinpoint China-centred concerns: “adherence to international law and good governance; support for safety and freedom of navigation, overflight and other lawful uses of the seas; unimpeded lawful commerce; and advocacy for peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international law.”

The advocacy by both leaders of “freedom of navigation and overflight” was a clear reference to the South China Sea, and indicated tacit Indian acceptance of the legitimacy of United States’ freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea, increasing in frequency, which China of course objects to.

In a shot against China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) infrastructure initiative, the joint statement noted that “India and the United States remain committed to sustainable, transparent, quality infrastructure development in the region.” More specifically, and perhaps most significantly, Modi recorded India’s “interest” in the US Blue Dot Network (BDN) infrastructure initiative, a [counter](#) to China’s MSR initiative in the Indo-Pacific, which already has Australia and Japan on board. Both India and the US are now boycotting China’s MSR initiative.

Modi and Trump also agreed in the joint statement that “India and the United States took note of efforts towards a meaningful Code of Conduct in the South China Sea and solemnly urged that it not prejudice the legitimate rights and interests of all nations according to international law.” We can note their caveat on it being a “meaningful outcome,” as well as not being an agreement in which China restricts the involvement of outside countries like India and the United States.

The US can be happy with Modi’s agreement in the joint statement to “strengthen” three mechanisms; namely the 2+2 foreign and defense ministers mechanism (started in 2018), the India-US-Japan trilateral summits (a format started in 2011, but in 2015 upgraded to foreign ministers level and with trilateral naval exercises also initiated), and the India-US-Australia-Japan Quadrilateral consultations

(restarted in 2018) over which some Indian hesitations have been apparent. Further India-US cooperation was on show with their convening, from March 20 onward, of weekly Quad-plus discussions, in which the four Quad members were joined by New Zealand, Vietnam, and South Korea (but not China) to coordinate responses to the Covid-19 virus.

Finally, the statement said that “Prime Minister Modi and President Trump looked forward to enhanced maritime domain awareness sharing among the United States, India, and other partners.” This is indicative of India’s and the United States’ naval relationships with countries like Australia and Japan, but also France, Vietnam, and Indonesia—all of whom have concerns about China and are strengthening defense links with both India and the US. This is all part of an emerging cross-bracing strategic geometry in the Indo-Pacific.

Chinese state media’s attempts to undermine such US-India convergence were evident. Its state-run *Global Times* on Feb. 23 [said that](#) “Modi must maintain strategic independence of Trump pressure tactics.” The next day, as Trump arrived in India, it stressed [continuing divisions](#). On Feb. 25, as the trip concluded, the *Global Times* was [somewhat dismissive](#), claiming India “won’t do US bidding against China.” Indian opinion was very different, with the *New Delhi Times* [reporting](#) that “China’s intransigence drives India to US fold.”

In retrospect, Trump’s visit and the agreements made represent not so much the US getting India to do its “bidding,” but rather this ongoing and mutually recognized “[strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific](#)” directly acknowledged for the first time at this summit level. Washington now has a good opportunity to further deepen strategic cooperation with India during 2020.

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