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Second Trump Administration: India's Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract
The return of Donald J. Trump to the United States presidency in January 2025 inaugurated a markedly transactional phase in India–United States relations. Within eighteen months the relationship swung from the optimism of a February 2025 joint statement envisioning a Bilateral Trade Agreement, through an acute 2025 crisis marked by punitive tariffs of up to 50 percent and a $100,000 H-1B visa fee, to a February 2026 interim trade deal that lowered tariffs to 18 percent and reset diplomatic momentum. This paper applies a structured research framework combining Neoclassical Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and a transactional-bargaining model to analyze the drivers, mechanisms, and consequences of this volatility for India. It examines four interlocking domains: trade and tariff policy, immigration and human-capital mobility, strategic and defence cooperation under the Quad and Indo-Pacific architecture, and the geopolitical triangle involving Russia, China, and Pakistan. The paper argues that India's central challenge under the second Trump administration is managing structural asymmetry and policy unpredictability while preserving strategic autonomy, and that its prospects depend on diversifying economic partnerships, accelerating domestic manufacturing and defence-industrial reform, and institutionalizing ties that can withstand personality-driven diplomacy. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for Indian foreign policy practitioners.

Keywords: India-US relations, Trump administration, tariffs, H-1B visa, Quad, Indo-Pacific, strategic autonomy, trade policy

1. Introduction

Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 reopened a relationship that had been built carefully across five US presidencies and three Indian prime ministerial terms. Unlike the institution-driven continuity that characterized India-US relations since the 2005 civil nuclear initiative, the second Trump administration has approached India through an explicitly transactional lens, in which trade deficits, tariff leverage, and burden-sharing demands are treated as primary instruments of statecraft rather than peripheral irritants to an otherwise settled strategic partnership.

This shift has produced a relationship of unusual volatility. Within a single eighteen-month window, India experienced a high point of cooperation (the February 2025 joint statement targeting a Bilateral Trade Agreement), a severe trough (50 percent tariffs, a $100,000 H-1B fee, and the lowest point in bilateral trust in two decades), and a tentative recovery (the February 2026 interim trade agreement). Understanding this volatility, its structural drivers, and its implications for India's foreign policy choices is the central purpose of this paper.

The paper is organized to first establish a research framework and theoretical model, then trace the empirical timeline, analyze findings across four policy domains, and finally assess the structural challenges and prospects facing India, concluding with policy recommendations.

2. Research Framework and Methodology

2.1 Research Questions and Objectives

This paper is guided by one overarching question and four sub-questions:

Primary research question: How has the second Trump administration's transactional approach to foreign policy reshaped the structure, stability, and strategic value of the India-US relationship, and what challenges and opportunities does this create for India?

1. RQ1: What are the principal mechanisms (tariffs, visas, defence procurement, multilateral signalling) through which the Trump administration has exercised leverage over India?
2. RQ2: How has India responded strategically — through retaliation, accommodation, diversification, or institutional insulation?
3. RQ3: What structural factors (trade asymmetry, immigration dependence, defence-technology gaps, the Russia-Pakistan-China triangle) condition India's bargaining position?
4. RQ4: What policy pathways can enhance India's resilience and strategic autonomy under conditions of US unpredictability?

2.2 Theoretical Model

The paper adopts a composite analytical model integrating three theoretical traditions, on the premise that no single paradigm adequately explains a relationship that mixes structural power asymmetry, institutional path-dependence, and idiosyncratic personalist bargaining.

Neoclassical Realism: Used to explain how systemic pressures — principally the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific — continue to anchor strategic convergence between Washington and New Delhi even amid surface-level friction. Neoclassical realism's attention to domestic-level intervening variables (leader perception, bureaucratic politics, threat assessment) helps explain why personalist decisions by President Trump (tariff announcements, visa fees) can override structurally rational cooperation in the short run.

Liberal Institutionalism: Used to explain the resilience of the relationship despite leader-level volatility. Institutional architecture built over two decades — the Quad, the India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), the Major Defence Partnership framework, and bureaucratic-to-bureaucratic ties — has provided a floor beneath the relationship that prevented full rupture even during the 2025 crisis.

Transactional Bargaining Model: A framework specific to this paper, modelling Trump-era diplomacy as a repeated bargaining game in which the US administration uses high-leverage instruments (tariffs, visa fees, public statements) as opening moves to extract concessions (market access, defence purchases, energy imports), with outcomes contingent on the targeted state's perceived strategic indispensability and willingness to absorb short-term costs without retaliating in kind. India's WTO-based, non-retaliatory response to the 2025 tariffs is read through this model as a calculated strategy of patient accommodation rather than weakness.

2.3 Methodology and Data Sources

This is a qualitative, document-based policy research paper employing process tracing and a structured-focused comparison of four policy domains (trade, immigration, defence/strategic affairs, and geopolitical triangulation) across the January 2025–June 2026 period. Primary sources include official statements and fact sheets from the White House, the Government of India's Ministry of External Affairs, and the US Department of Homeland Security/USCIS; secondary sources include think-tank analyses (Stimson Center, CSIS, IISS, International Centre for Defence and Security), and reporting from Reuters, Bloomberg, Al Jazeera, and Indian and international press. Data triangulation across official, scholarly, and journalistic sources is used to mitigate single-source bias, given the fast-moving and at times contradictory nature of public statements during the period under review.

Limitations: As an analysis of an ongoing and rapidly evolving relationship, this paper reflects developments known as of June 2026; trade deal implementation details, the outcome of the 2026 US midterm elections, and the trajectory of US-China relations remain open variables that could materially alter the conclusions drawn here.

3. Literature Review

Scholarship on India-US relations through 2024 generally characterized the relationship as a 'natural partnership' anchored in shared democratic values, convergent China concerns, and expanding defence-technology cooperation, exemplified by frameworks such as iCET and the Major Defence Partnership. Analysts at institutions such as CSIS framed India as 'central to U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy', emphasizing the Indian Ocean as an emerging arena of strategic competition with China and calling for deeper Quad institutionalization.

Post-2025 literature reflects a sharper, more cautionary turn. Think-tank assessments produced during and after the 2025 tariff crisis describe a 'strategic recalibration' in Indian foreign policy thinking, noting that tariff shocks, stalled Quad initiatives, and ambiguous US signalling on the India-Pakistan conflict rendered India's prior assumption of a stable, deepening US partnership 'untenable' in its earlier form. Analysts at the Stimson Center and IISS have characterized the February 2026 trade deal as a 'reset' that addresses symptoms of the 2025 crisis without resolving the underlying sources of friction, while noting that competing powers — China, Russia, and Pakistan — used the period of US-India distrust to advance their own positions in the region.

This paper builds on this emerging literature by integrating the trade, immigration, and strategic-defence dimensions into a single analytical frame, and by foregrounding the bargaining-model logic that existing single-domain studies have tended to treat separately.

Trade and Tariff Policy

The 2025 tariff crisis saw the US impose 50% duties on India — a 25% "reciprocal" tariff plus a 25% penalty linked to Russian oil purchases (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). This was eased in February 2026, when Trump and Modi announced a deal lowering tariffs to 18% in exchange for Indian market-access concessions and $500 billion in purchase commitments (The White House, 2026a; CNBC, 2026). The Stimson Center (2026) frames this as a "reset" rather than full resolution, while Deccan Herald (2025) had earlier called the original tariffs a "major setback" to bilateral relations.

Immigration and H-1B Visas

The $100,000 H-1B fee imposed in September 2025 disproportionately hit India, which accounts for roughly 70% of approved H-1B beneficiaries (Al Jazeera, 2025). India's Ministry of External Affairs warned of "humanitarian consequences" (Al Jazeera, 2025), while Bloomberg (2025) described 2025 as a year that turned the "American dream" into a "nightmare" for Indian aspirants. Observer Voice (2026) further documents steep declines in Indian student-visa issuance amid tightening rules.

Strategic and Defence Cooperation (Quad)

CSIS (2025) and IISS (2026) emphasize institutional resilience, noting continued defence-industrial cooperation and rising high-level contact since early 2026. However, Deccan Herald (2026) and Eurasian Times (2026) highlight growing uncertainty — including a Trump-Xi thaw and the symbolic renaming of US Indo-Pacific Command — that has unsettled confidence in sustained US commitment to the Quad. Foreign Policy (2026) takes a middle view, arguing bureaucratic ties remain "self-sustaining even in rough patches."

Strategic Autonomy and Geopolitics

ICDS (2026) argues that tariffs, stalled Quad progress, and ambiguous US signalling on Pakistan have made India's earlier strategic assumptions "untenable," pushing New Delhi toward recalibration. News on Air (2025) cites Trump himself acknowledging that tariffs over Russian oil "strained ties" with India. Behorizon (2026) situates this within a broader US Indo-Pacific strategy demanding greater burden-sharing from allies.

News-Media Tracking

Real-time reporting from Deccan Herald (2025, 2026), Gulf News (n.d.), and News on Air (2025, 2026) chronicles the relationship's swings — from the initial tariff shock to Trump's optimistic statements about Modi and a possible Delhi visit, to confirmation that the trade deal held even after a US Supreme Court tariff ruling. This press record underpins the broader analytical literature but requires cross-checking against official statements.

4. Timeline: From Reset to Crisis to Recalibration (2025-2026)

Period	Development
Feb 2025	Trump-Modi joint statement launches Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) negotiations; target of first tranche by fall 2025.
Apr 2025	Trump declares a national emergency over the US trade deficit, setting up broader 'reciprocal tariff' actions worldwide, including against India.
Aug 2025	US imposes a 25% reciprocal tariff on Indian goods, followed by an additional 25% penalty tied to India's continued Russian oil purchases, bringing total tariffs to 50% — among the highest US tariffs on any trading partner.
Sep 2025	Trump administration imposes a $100,000 fee on new H-1B visa petitions; India's Ministry of External Affairs warns of 'humanitarian consequences' given India accounts for roughly 70-71% of approved H-1B beneficiaries.
Sep-Dec 2025	Student and work-visa issuances to Indians decline sharply (over 30% drop in student visas Jan-May 2025, deepening to near 50% by July); US-India high-level contact remains limited amid trade and India-Pakistan-conflict-related tensions.
Dec 2025	US judge upholds the $100,000 H-1B fee; Trump signs NDAA 2026, emphasizing deeper US engagement with India and the Quad on Indo-Pacific security.

Jan 2026	New US Ambassador to India (Sergio Gor) arrives in New Delhi; high-level US visits to India increase markedly.
Feb 2026	Trump and Modi announce an interim trade deal: reciprocal tariff reduced from 25% (plus the 25% oil-linked penalty, removed) to 18%; India commits to over $500 billion in US purchases of energy, technology, and agricultural products over five years.
Feb 2026	US Supreme Court strikes down sweeping Trump tariffs on other grounds; Trump confirms the India deal remains unchanged.
Mar-Apr 2026	Senior US officials (Deputy Secretary of State, Under Secretary of War for Policy, NSC officials) visit India; Indian service chiefs and Foreign Secretary visit Washington; defence and trade delegations exchanged.
May-Jun 2026	US Secretary of State visits India; renewed Quad ministerial-level engagement; US renames Indo-Pacific Command amid debate over the durability of 'Indo-Pacific' framing in US strategy.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Trade and Tariff Policy

Trade has been the most volatile and consequential domain of the relationship. The Trump administration's use of tariffs as the primary lever reflects the transactional bargaining model: the 50% tariff regime imposed in August 2025 combined a generic 'reciprocal tariff' rationale with an explicit secondary-sanctions logic tied to India's continued purchase of discounted Russian crude oil, conflating trade-deficit grievances with geopolitical pressure over the Ukraine war.

India's response — filing a WTO challenge rather than imposing retaliatory tariffs — reflected a deliberate strategy of calibrated restraint, consistent with a state that judges direct confrontation as disproportionately costly given the asymmetry in market size and the importance of the US as India's largest single-country trading partner and a critical export market for textiles, pharmaceuticals, gems and jewellery, and IT services. The February 2026 interim deal reduced the reciprocal tariff to 18% and saw India commit to eliminating or reducing tariffs on US industrial goods and a wide range of agricultural products, alongside a stated intent to purchase over $500 billion in US energy, technology, and agricultural products over time. However, the deal remains an interim framework; substantial elements of the broader Bilateral Trade Agreement — non-tariff barriers, services, intellectual property, labour and environmental standards, and treatment of state-owned enterprises — remain under negotiation.

5.2 Immigration and Human Capital: The H-1B Disruption

The September 2025 imposition of a $100,000 fee on new H-1B petitions struck at a uniquely India-specific channel of bilateral exchange: Indian nationals account for roughly 70-71% of approved H-1B beneficiaries, and the visa has functioned as both an economic and a soft-power bridge connecting Indian technical talent to the US economy. The policy, justified domestically as protecting American workers and incentivizing only the highest-skill sponsorships, produced acute short-term disruption — including advisories from major employers cautioning H-1B holders against international travel — and longer-term structural effects: a measured decline in student-visa issuance to Indian applicants, proposed replacement of the flexible 'duration of status' rule with fixed deadlines, and a documented narrowing of the entry-level pathway from US study to H-1B sponsorship.

These changes intersect with India's IT and business-process-outsourcing sector (valued in the hundreds of billions of dollars), which has historically relied on H-1B mobility to service onsite client engagements, and with India's diaspora-linked political economy of remittances and reverse technology transfer. The cumulative effect, per industry and government assessments, is a likely acceleration of 'offshoring' of skilled work back to India and other delivery hubs, alongside increased emigration of skilled Indian professionals toward alternative destinations such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Gulf states.

5.3 Strategic and Defence Cooperation: Quad and the Indo-Pacific

Despite trade and immigration friction, the strategic-defence track has shown comparative resilience, consistent with the liberal-institutionalist expectation that bureaucratized cooperation persists even through periods of leader-level discord. The ten-year Major Defence Partnership framework, the iCET technology initiative, and recurring exercises such as Yudh Abhyas and the Quad's Malabar naval exercise have continued, and the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2026 explicitly mandated deeper US-India defence-industrial integration.

Nonetheless, three sources of uncertainty persist. First, the Quad's institutional momentum has been inconsistent — a planned India-hosted Quad leaders' summit was postponed, and the grouping's joint statements have at times been muted by intra-coalition differences. Second, a partial US-China thaw following a Trump-Xi meeting in October 2025 introduced ambiguity about Washington's long-term prioritization of China-balancing versus transactional engagement with Beijing. Third, and most symbolically, the 2026 renaming of US Indo-Pacific Command back toward a 'Pacific' framing — alongside senior US officials' rhetorical shift away from the term 'Indo-Pacific' — has raised questions in Indian strategic circles about whether India's centrality to US regional strategy is being quietly downgraded relative to the Obama- and Biden-era framing that explicitly bridged the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

5.4 The Geopolitical Triangle: Russia, China, and Pakistan

India's relationship with the second Trump administration cannot be separated from three external vectors. First, Russia: India's continued, discounted purchase of Russian crude oil — a position rooted in energy security and a decades-old defence relationship — became a direct target of US secondary-tariff pressure, forcing New Delhi into a difficult balancing act between US-aligned strategic convergence and an independent Russia policy reflecting strategic autonomy. Second, China: even as Washington frames China as the Indo-Pacific's 'pacing challenge,' a parallel Trump-Xi diplomatic opening in late 2025 has unsettled India's assumption that US-China rivalry alone would anchor sustained US investment in the India relationship. Third, Pakistan: ambiguous US signalling around the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict — including Trump's public claims of having brokered peace between the two countries — generated friction in New Delhi, where such framing was seen as elevating Pakistan's profile and overlooking India's preference for strictly bilateral resolution of disputes with Islamabad, consistent with India's long-standing Simla Agreement-based position.

6. Challenges for India

- Policy unpredictability: The transactional and often abrupt nature of US tariff and visa announcements (e.g., the one-day implementation window for the H-1B fee) complicates long-term Indian economic and policy planning.

- Structural trade asymmetry: India's reliance on the US as a top export destination gives Washington disproportionate leverage in tariff negotiations, despite India's growing economic weight.
- Human capital and diaspora exposure: Heavy Indian dependence on H-1B and student-visa channels makes India's technology and education sectors unusually vulnerable to unilateral US immigration policy shifts.
- Strategic ambiguity in the Quad and Indo-Pacific framing: Inconsistent US institutional commitment to the Quad, combined with rhetorical and bureaucratic shifts away from the 'Indo-Pacific' framing, creates uncertainty about the durability of India's centrality to US regional strategy.
- The Russia-Pakistan-China balancing act: India must simultaneously manage US pressure over Russian oil imports, anxiety about a possible US-China rapprochement, and sensitivity around US engagement with Pakistan, without compromising its strategic autonomy doctrine.
- Domestic political economy costs: Tariff and visa shocks have tangible effects on Indian exporters, the IT-BPM sector, and middle-class aspirations tied to US migration, creating domestic political sensitivities for the Indian government.

7. Prospects and Opportunities for India

- Trade diversification and deal consolidation: The February 2026 interim agreement, if converted into a durable Bilateral Trade Agreement, could anchor bilateral trade growth beyond $200 billion and open expanded US market access for Indian agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and technology exports, while diversifying India's own trading relationships (EU, ASEAN, Gulf, Africa) to reduce future exposure to US policy volatility.
- Manufacturing and supply-chain repositioning: Persistent US-China strategic competition continues to create incentives for supply-chain diversification ('China+1') toward India, particularly in electronics, pharmaceuticals, and critical minerals processing, provided India accelerates domestic manufacturing competitiveness and ease-of-doing-business reforms.
- Defence-industrial deepening: The Major Defence Partnership framework and co-production initiatives (e.g., jet-engine technology co-production) offer India a pathway to reduce import dependence and build indigenous defence-industrial capacity, advancing the broader Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliance) agenda.
- Technology cooperation: iCET-linked cooperation on semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and space technology provides an avenue for India to upgrade its innovation ecosystem, provided bureaucratic and export-control barriers are addressed.
- Institutional resilience as insurance: Continued investment in bureaucratic, parliamentary, and track-1.5/track-2 institutional channels can help insulate the relationship from future leader-level volatility, regardless of the outcome of the 2026 US midterm elections or subsequent US administrations.
- Strategic autonomy as an asset: Demonstrated willingness to absorb short-term costs (tariffs, visa shocks) without abandoning an independent foreign policy — on Russia, on Pakistan, and on multilateral fora such as BRICS — may, over time, strengthen India's long-run bargaining credibility with Washington and other partners alike.

8. Policy Recommendations

1. Pursue rapid conclusion of the full Bilateral Trade Agreement to lock in tariff gains and reduce the

risk of renewed unilateral US tariff action, while building in dispute-resolution mechanisms less susceptible to leader-level reversal.
2. Diversify export markets and deepen trade agreements with the EU, UK, Gulf Cooperation Council, ASEAN, and African partners to reduce structural dependence on the US market.
3. Advocate, through bilateral and multilateral channels, for predictable, rules-based treatment of skilled-worker mobility, while simultaneously investing in domestic high-value-added IT and R&D capacity to reduce reliance on H-1B-dependent business models.
4. Sustain and institutionalize Quad cooperation at the working level even amid summit-level uncertainty, ensuring that defence, technology, and maritime-security cooperation continue independent of fluctuations in leader-level rhetoric.
5. Maintain calibrated strategic autonomy on Russia and avoid full alignment with any single major power, while using energy diversification (increased US, Gulf, and African crude purchases) to reduce vulnerability to secondary-sanctions-style pressure.
6. Strengthen indigenous defence manufacturing and critical-minerals supply chains to reduce exposure to any future disruption in US defence-technology cooperation.
7. Engage proactively with both major US political parties and Congress, given that the 2026 midterm elections could alter oversight dynamics and the political coalition supporting the relationship.

9. Conclusion

The first eighteen months of the second Trump administration have transformed India-US relations from a presumed glide path toward deeper strategic and economic integration into a relationship characterized by sharp volatility, transactional bargaining, and periodic crisis followed by negotiated recalibration. Applying a composite neoclassical-realist, liberal-institutionalist, and transactional-bargaining framework, this paper finds that systemic convergence around the China challenge and durable bureaucratic institutions have prevented full rupture, even as tariff and visa shocks have imposed real economic and human costs on India and exposed the structural asymmetries underlying the partnership. India's central challenge going forward is to convert short-term accommodation into long-term resilience — through trade diversification, domestic manufacturing and defence-industrial reform, technology-sector upgrading, and sustained institutional engagement — so that the relationship's strategic logic can withstand the personalist unpredictability that has come to define this period of US foreign policy. The trajectory beyond 2026 will depend significantly on the outcome of the US midterm elections, the durability of the February 2026 trade reset, and the evolving contours of US-China engagement, all of which warrant continued close monitoring by Indian policymakers and scholars.

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