Trump's willingness to antagonize the world triggers China-India rapprochement

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An old Chinese proverb states "crisis is opportunity riding a dangerous wind." Trump's trade war with China and accusations of political meddling against Beijing are dangerous winds & have hurt relations between the great powers.

But given that Trump has also been targeting other countries over trade, defense and energy security, China has company in a lot of disgruntled nations that are perplexed and disappointed by the US leader's diplomatic unpredictability, unilateralism and meanness.

Trump's populist willingness to upset and antagonize the whole world in the name of protecting and promoting US jobs and American manufacturers offers Beijing a unique opportunity to reset ties with several affected nations and strengthen its claim to global leadership based on peaceful intentions.

Sooner than you think': Trump vows swift reaction to India’s S-400 purchase from Russia
India is topmost in this list. As the Sino-US trade war has escalated, Beijing has dispatched delegations to New Delhi to lobby for increased coordination on trade policy and a reduction in tensions between the two giant Asian neighbors.

The Chinese Embassy in New Delhi has directly linked Trump's disruptive behavior to Sino-Indian ties. Its statement on October 10 asserts that "facing unilateralism and bullying, China and India have more reasons to join efforts to build a more just and reasonable international order." Besides invoking "common interests in defending the multilateral trading system and free trade" from Trump's protectionist assault, China has also proposed establishment of a "buyer's club" with India to "safeguard common interests" of resisting Trump's threatened sanctions on any country which imports oil from Iran.

Presently, China and India are the two largest buyers of Iranian oil. South Korea, Turkey, Italy and Japan are the other 'culprits' confronting US sanctions after November 4 if they continue buying Iranian oil.

In light of the Chinese overtures to India to turn over a new leaf, it is worth analyzing whether Trump's narrow and selfish mantra of 'America First' at the cost of everyone else can become a catalyst to overcome long-held mutual suspicions between Beijing and New Delhi.

Unresolved disputes about demarcation of the 4057-kilometre-long border (2520 miles), the presence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees in India, and China's 'all-weather alliance' with Pakistan have hampered Sino-Indian relations for decades.

In recent times, these historical problems have been exacerbated by China's extraordinary military and economic rise, symbolized by the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which India fears is a means for Chinese encroachment into its sphere of influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

Beijing has also watched warily since the turn of the millennium as New Delhi cozied up to successive US administrations with the implicit goal of countering the expansion of Chinese power in Asia. Key geopolitical concepts that security elites in India cite, such as China's 'string of pearls' to surround India, and China's 'debt trap' through BRI to
lock out India from Asia and Africa, are widely shared by American and other Western thinkers too.

Apprehensions about China becoming a dominant global power keep not only Western governments awake at night but also the Indian establishment. India’s population nurtures suspicions about China's motivations and impact. During the Sino-Indian military standoff over Bhutan at Doklam in the summer of 2017, nationalistic calls for boycotting Chinese goods could be heard across India. A survey by the Pew Research Center that year showed that 41 percent of Indian citizens held an unfavorable view of China while only 9 percent of Indians felt that negatively about the US.

So, in spite of Trump's belligerent and strategically incoherent approach, a sort of national consensus exists in India that China is a competitor and rival which does not want India to go up in world affairs. There is a structural rootedness to this perception because India believes it alone among all the emerging nations has the size, demographic and economic potential to become China's equal in the international power configuration. Just as China is looking to narrow the power gap with the US, India seeks to do the same with China.

Yet, there is a catch in India's aspiration to eventually match China on the global stage. New Delhi needs consistent and guaranteed military and economic support from the US and other powers like Russia to be able to strengthen itself and attain parity with China.

With Trump wavering on the bet that presidents George W Bush and Barack Obama placed on encouraging and beefing up India's capabilities through trade, technology transfer and military interoperability, New Delhi faces a dilemma on how much it should bank on a US-fueled rise.

The receptiveness that India has shown this year to mending fences with China, especially at the Wuhan 'informal summit' between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping, indicates that New Delhi is hedging against Trump's threats of tariffs and sanctions and his open disregard for the interests of America's strategic partners and allies.
'They have to keep us happy': Trump brandishes his ‘powerful’ tariff stick at India

Trump's unreliability has introduced interesting tactical rapprochements between India and China. State-owned Chinese news media have heralded the 'China-India Plus One' model of cooperation, beginning with joint work on connectivity to link Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Beijing wants to extend such trilateral projects with New Delhi to Myanmar and Nepal as well.

With India flatly objecting to entering BRI owing to sensitivities of sovereignty and loss of control in its own backyard, there is scope for workarounds where it can team up with China in specific developing countries where there is no tug-of-war for ascendancy between New Delhi and Beijing. Modi and Xi's commitment at Wuhan to issue "strategic guidance" to their respective militaries and avoid flare-ups at the border in the high Himalayas is also being implemented.

On economic matters, China and India have lately paired up to oppose Trump's attempt to undermine the rules-based trading system represented by the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The US president's fake argument that America is a "developing country" just like India and China and that he will force these two to end their domestic subsidies has enhanced Sino-Indian amity. However, these tactical policy adjustments and efforts to get India and China in sync are unlikely to progress quickly into a Sino-Indian alliance or coalition against Trump's arrogant and chaotic foreign policy.

Both Beijing and New Delhi keenly follow US domestic politics and electoral cycles. Decision makers in the two Asian capitals are in a 'wait-and-see' mode pegged to Trump's zigzagging fortunes in the domestic US political arena. Instead of burning all bridges with Washington or going hammer and tongs at it, Beijing and New Delhi are keeping channels open to different layers of the complex US state establishment in the hope of riding out the Trump storm.

Hypothetically, if Trump is impeached by the US Congress or if he loses the 2020 presidential election, the old Sino-Indian underlying structural contradictions will probably re-emerge and prevent cooperation from blossoming. On the other hand, if Trump turns out to be a two-term president, an unintended byproduct of his political longevity could be a higher level of partnership and trust between China and India.

Trump has taken up cudgels against all and sundry in the international community during his first two years in office. His indiscriminate offensive foreign policy, if prolonged, can set up a 'US versus Rest of the World' matchup. By virtue of their clout and ambition, China and India will then find themselves at the forefront of a collective pushback against Trump. But these future diplomatic possibilities hinge on whether the self-described "stable genius" keeps winning American hearts and minds.
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