



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Cover Images:

Donald Trump was sworn in as the 47th President of the United States on January 20, 2025. Source: [X/DrSJaishankar](#)

Russian President Vladimir Putin held talks with President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping via videoconference on January 21, 2025. Source: [President of Russia](#)

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi, on January 25, 2025. Source: [X/@prabowo](#)

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by

Nalin Surie

The Trump era 2.0 dawned swiftly and on cue, in line with earlier pronouncements both in respect of domestic US policies and US foreign policy. While this was not unanticipated, it still gave rise to consternation in many quarters. Domestically, legal challenges to several new policy changes or reviews have already begun. Internationally, the overall approach was one of caution and biding time, especially since mixed signals went out to China and Russia in particular. On the other hand, the Trump demand to take over Greenland was understandably not appreciated in Europe. There is also serious concern in Europe that Trump and his supporters would support and embolden right wing forces that are already growing in strength in important European states.

Panama bristled at the intention of the US to take back control of the Panama Canal, ostensibly to eliminate alleged Chinese control over it.

The demand on NATO members to increase their contribution to 5% of their budgets did not resonate well with most members.

The clear intent by President Trump to use tariffs as a weapon to achieve foreign, immigration and economic policy objectives is likely to further weaken the structure of international institutions already struggling to remain relevant following, in particular, the use of unilateral sanctions by the West against Russia on account of the Ukraine war. Canada and Mexico are first in the line of fire starting February 2025. China is not too far behind. Nor for that matter is India. (Announcements on tariff impositions on Mexico, Canada and China were made in early February, but with the first two countries a month's respite was negotiated.)

Colombia's attempt to confront Washington on the forced repatriation by the latter of illegal immigrants was very short lived.

There was concern in Kyiv whether a deal on Ukraine's future might get done by the US with Russia behind its back. European support is not enough, and President Trump's decision to virtually halt all foreign aid except to Israel and Egypt till it is ensured that such aid is consistent with Trump's policy objectives, was understandably worrisome for President Zelenskyy. At the same time,

Trump called on Putin to end the “ridiculous war” in Ukraine or face high tariffs and fresh sanctions. Trump was expected to speak to Putin. The Russian response was unhurried. They said they are prepared for an equal and mutually respectful dialogue.

The US and China have gingerly circled each other following Mr. Trump’s election. On January 17, before he was sworn in, Trump spoke to President Xi Jinping. Trump described their conversation as “very good”; that it was his “expectation that we will solve many problems together, and starting immediately”; and that he and Xi “will do everything possible to make the world more peaceful and safe”. The Chinese readout suggested that it was a polite conversation focusing on their “extensive common interests and broad space of cooperation between the two countries”. It was claimed that “the two leaders agreed to set up a channel of strategic communication to keep in regular touch on major issues of shared interest”. It remains to be seen when this will happen.

After President Trump’s swearing-in, his new Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, spoke with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on January 24. The respective readouts suggest that this was a more prickly conversation. The US version was short but flagged the primacy of US interests, commitment to allies in the region and serious concern over China’s coercive actions against Taiwan and in the South China Sea. The Wang Yi version of the conversation was more on the lines of past, pre-Trump, positions but relatively more polite. He suggested that the two countries must find the “right way” to get along “in the new era”, China’s political system is the choice of its people, China will defend its legitimate right to development, and that China will never allow Taiwan to be split from it.

Soon after Trump’s inauguration as President, and not surprisingly, President Xi and Russian President Putin spoke to each other on January 21. According to the Kremlin transcript, Putin told Xi that their bilateral ties “are self-sufficient as they do not depend on any domestic factors or the current global situation”; that the two countries “work to ensure indivisible security both in the Eurasian space and globally”; and their foreign policy ties and joint efforts “objectively play a major stabilising role in international affairs”. The transcript from the Chinese Foreign Ministry quotes Xi as stressing his readiness to work with Putin to guide bilateral relations “to a new height in 2025, to respond to external uncertainties with the stability and resilience of China-Russia ties”. Xi further “underscored the need for the two countries to deepen strategic coordination, firmly support each other, and defend their legitimate interests”.

In an interesting address to the European Parliament on January 22, the new President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, conveyed impressions of the outcome of the first Council meeting he chaired in December. The backdrop to the latter included the election of President Trump for his second non-continuous term, and his belief that Europeans are freeloaders on matters of security and trade. He conveyed that the Council had a strategic discussion on Europe's role in the world and in that context agreed on the need to renew relations with the UK and work for a stronger Transatlantic relationship; to working closely with the new US Administration to "advance a positive and fair economic cooperation and to work on our shared priorities for prosperity and security while naturally protecting our own interests"; and the need "for Europe to assume greater responsibility for our own defence, our strategic autonomy, our sovereignty".

Costa went on to convey that there is an overall sense of urgency and strategic purpose among the European Council, and that they are on the right track to build the "Europe of Defence". It is in Europe's interest to become more resilient, more efficient, more autonomous and a more reliable security and defence actor. This will make the EU a stronger transatlantic partner, including in the context of NATO. It will entail investing in defence in an integrated way while building a safe European supply chains network.

It remains to be seen whether Europe will indeed grasp the challenge of becoming a relatively independent, more equal partner of the US, especially in matters geostrategic and of European security.

The Trump Administration, importantly, moved quickly to signal that its commitment to the further development of the QUAD was not in question. The new Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, met his QUAD counterparts, including Indian EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar, in Washington on January 21, soon after being sworn in. A short but clear two-paragraph press release was issued, that also reaffirmed that India would host the next QUAD leaders summit. It was underlined that the partners are committed to strengthening regional maritime, economic and technological security in the face of increasing threats, as well as promoting reliable and resilient supply chain networks.

As if on cue, days before his term ended, the Biden administration was able with the help of Qatar and Egypt to put in place on January 17 a three-phase ceasefire agreement over Gaza. Reportedly, this was facilitated by the incoming Trump administration. Ironically, this proposal had originally been made by Biden in May 2024 (some possible motivations behind the delay were reported in the December 2024 issue of Global Horizons). Besides, the incoming Trump

Administration would not want to start with this millstone around its neck which would prevent the furthering of the Abraham Accords which started during Trump's first term.

So far, the ceasefire in Gaza is holding, but the contours are such, the time frame so extended, Hamas has not been destroyed as a political force, and Israeli politics are so convoluted that it could break down at some point. But for now, the wanton killings, destruction and violations of international law are on hold though Israeli actions in the West Bank continue. Yet, the resettlement of the huge number of displaced Palestinians and the resources required for reconstruction will pose a huge challenge for the traditional donors, especially in the light of the ongoing support for Ukraine and the economic slowdown in Europe. And, a two-state outcome is nowhere in sight.

(Note: at his joint press conference with Israel PM Netanyahu on February 4, President Trump unleashed great consternation when he announced a far-fetched proposal wholly violative of international law and decisions of the UN, including its Security Council, for the US to take over and reconstruct Gaza while permanently moving the Palestinian population out to Egypt and Jordan. The regional and international reaction was understandably negative and hostile. Trump's aides have begun to walk back aspects of his proposal.)

The situation in Ukraine remained grim.

Ukraine did not renew Russian gas company Gazprom's five-year transit contract with Europe which ended on December 31, 2024. Prior to concluding his Presidency, Biden added sanctions on Russian oil companies and a large number of tankers still shipping Russian oil to different clients, including China and India. These steps are expected to have some impact on Russian energy exports and earnings.

However, the situation on the war front remained difficult for Ukraine, and Russian attacks on infrastructure also continued. Lack of clarity so far on the Trump administration's approach to the war, and the announced review of US aid programs, understandably caused serious concern in Kyiv.

The NATO Secretary General proposed that Europe could pay for weapons supplied by the US. The EU, which has contributed very substantially to Ukraine, ostensibly stands firm in long term support for Ukraine but differences are clearly visible within the EU where the economic situation is difficult.

Putin is awaiting a meeting/conversation with Trump which has so far not been forthcoming. Zelenskyy appears to be reconciled to having to work on a

deal, but obviously with safeguards that would guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity, security and redevelopment. But, he holds a weak hand.

Will Trump and Europe be able to deliver or will the war drag on and drag Europe down further? Putin will no doubt wish to drive a hard bargain, and as long as the Russia-China alliance stands firm, his hand is not weak. Till there is a mutually acceptable settlement, international institutions and the Global South will continue to suffer from collateral damage over which they have no control.

In the Republic of Korea, the political stalemate continues. The President's impeachment is being deliberated by the Constitutional Court and he also faces criminal charges. At the same time, there is expression of both support for and opposition to Yoon among the public. If the judgements go against impeached President Yoon, violence cannot be ruled out. This is an extremely serious test for ROK democracy, which will also impact on the region. The implications for the evolving trilateral among the US, Japan and ROK, brokered by the Biden administration, which Yoon favoured, are open to interpretation, especially since the new Trump administration's approach to China is still evolving and the current government in Japan has arguably begun a process of rapprochement with a willing China.

The devastating civil war in Sudan appears to have intensified and the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan has strongly condemned the indiscriminate killings and deliberate targeting of civilian areas. The humanitarian crisis is worsening, but there appears to be no immediate end in sight for the battle for supremacy between the SAF and the RSF. The latter reportedly have the support of the UAE, Chad etc., and the former of Egypt etc.

In a belated move by the outgoing Biden administration, the US State Department announced on January 7, 2025 that the Secretary of State had determined that "members of the RSF and allied militias have committed genocide in Sudan". The RSF leader known as Hemedti was sanctioned, along with seven RSF owned companies based in the UAE etc. The statement went on to claim that this action did not imply that the US supports or favours the SAF. Both belligerents, it said, "bear responsibility for the violence and suffering in Sudan and lack the legitimacy to govern a future peaceful Sudan".

The new US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, during his confirmation hearings, clearly acknowledged that what was happening in Sudan was genocide that had to be stopped, including through conversations with US allies like the UAE which support the RSF. Hopefully, he will follow through on this.

While the world focused on the ceasefire deal and exchange of hostages between Israel and Hamas, in Syria, the rebranded leader of HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham of ISIS lineage) continued to consolidate his power after overthrowing the Assad regime. Ahmad al-Sharaa was confirmed on January 29 as interim President of Syria by the Syrian factions of the Military Operations Command. The Syrian constitution was suspended and Parliament dissolved, as were the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, the Progressive National Front Parties etc. of the Assad period. The Ba'ath Party's re-establishment was prohibited.

On January 30, al-Sharaa outlined Syrian priorities as "filling the power vacuum, maintaining civil peace, building state institutions, developing an economic and developmental infrastructure and restoring Syria's international and regional standing". The foreign ministers of Germany and France visited Damascus on behalf of the EU, as did the UN special envoy for Syria and a delegation from Russia.

In so far as the EU is concerned, it was announced that at its meeting on January 27, the EU Foreign Ministers "reached the political agreement to begin easing sanctions on Syria. This could give a boost to Syrian economy and help the country get back on its feet." The ministers also clarified that "while we aim to move fast, we are also ready to reverse the course if the situation worsens. And in parallel, we will scale up humanitarian aid and recovery efforts." For historical and strategic reasons, Europe does not wish to get left out of the future evolution of the Syrian dynamic.

During his confirmation hearings, the new US Secretary of State reconfirmed support for the Syrian Democratic Forces backed by the US which "have made significant sacrifices and have been a key factor in defeating ISIS". He also spoke of the need to maintain the ceasefire between Turkey and the SDF, notwithstanding the power transition in the US. Syria should not become a haven for ISIS; religious minorities must be protected, including Kurds, Alawites and Christians. Rubio also made clear that "the new individuals in charge in Syria cannot escape FBI investigations, and they do not have a record that makes us happy or reassured".

There appears to be a disconnect between the EU and US positions on the new regime in Syria. The latter is apparently not convinced that HTS has genuinely transformed and discarded its ISIS roots, and that Turkey willing to play fair. A justified caution. There will no doubt be conversations between Washington and Brussels on the way forward.

India has made it clear that there is need for all parties to work towards preserving the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, and

advocated a peaceful and inclusive Syrian-led process respecting the interests and aspirations of all sections of Syrian society.

Conflict again spread in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. On January 27, the Rwanda backed M23 rebel group announced that it had taken over the eastern city of Goma. The fighting spread. MONUSCO bases were also hit.

The UNSC met twice in late January but to no avail, although a press statement was issued on January 26 calling upon M23 to reverse its territorial expansion without delay and urging Rwanda and the DRC to return to diplomatic talks to peacefully end the protracted conflict in the region, including the issue of the presence of Rwandan Defense Forces in eastern DRC and DRC support to the Forces Démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR). Use of regional bodies and processes to resolve the conflict was urged.

US Secretary of State Rubio spoke to DRC President Felix Tshisekedi on January 27. He condemned the assault on Goma by M23 and reaffirmed commitment to the sovereignty of DRC.

This region continues to suffer on account of its abundance of natural resources over which covetous eyes of all shades continue to be cast.

Following his visit to India in December 2024, the new President of Sri Lanka, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, paid a state visit to China from January 14-17. It was an important visit. Sri Lanka "reiterated that it will never allow its territory to be used for anti-China, separatist activities and will firmly support China on issues relating to Tibet (Xizang) and Xinjiang". (See Global Horizons December 2024 for the stronger commitment given to India.)

Projects such as Hambantota Port integrated development and Colombo Port City are to be advanced and a cooperation plan signed to upgrade China-Sri Lanka high quality Belt and Road cooperation.

Sri Lanka sought early implementation of the debt restructuring plan agreed with Chinese financial institutions. The currency swap agreement was renewed. It was agreed to work towards early conclusion of a comprehensive free trade agreement in one package.

Maritime cooperation will continue on the basis of equality, mutual trust, openness and mutual benefit. The two sides will "pool their strength to build a maritime community with a shared future".

Finally, Sri Lanka “affirmed its commitment to supporting and actively participating in the development of a community with a shared future for mankind, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilisation Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping”.

Sri Lanka will continue to walk the fine line between India and China.

The state visits to India by the Presidents of Singapore and Indonesia during the month were part of the ongoing focus on strengthening India's Act East policy.

The Singapore visit (January 14-18) was part of the commemoration of 60 years of diplomatic relations and followed the upgradation of bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership during PM Modi's visit to Singapore last September, at which time six pillars for further development of cooperation were identified. (See Global Horizons September 2024.) A business delegation accompanied the President who also visited Odisha. Bilateral cooperation is expected to receive a fillip following agreements entered into during the visit. Singapore also plays a catalytic role in the India-ASEAN relationship.

The visit by the new President of Indonesia (January 23-26) Prabowo Subianto, was significant in several respects and reflected the understanding that the bilateral relationship needed a strong boost in today's complicated world. India-Indonesia relations had been upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during PM Modi's visit to Indonesia in 2018.

President Subianto was the Chief Guest at India's 76th Republic Day, that also marked 75 years of the coming into force of India's constitution and the 75th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations. As a special gesture, a 352-member complement of Indonesia's armed forces participated in the Republic Day parade.

Significantly, the Chief Guest at India's very first Republic Day celebration in 1950 was the then, first, president of Indonesia, Sukarno.

A detailed joint statement was issued that covers several segments of bilateral relations including Defence & Security, Counter Terrorism, Economic Engagement, Health & Pharmaceuticals, Food Security, Energy Security, Infrastructure & Connectivity, S&T, Space cooperation, Consular Cooperation, Education & Skill development, Cultural & Heritage, Climate change & Disaster resilience and ASEAN. It also covers multilateral issues: BRICS, of which Indonesia is now a new member, Indian Ocean Rim Association, Indo-Pacific initiatives and trilateral cooperation among India, Indonesia and Australia.

In his address to the media at the joint press conference on January 25, PM Modi noted that the two sides had, inter alia, agreed to strengthen cooperation in the defense sector and to work together in defence manufacturing and supply chains; in maritime security, cyber security, counterterrorism and de-radicalisation; and to diversification of market access and the trade basket (bilateral trade exceeded USD 30 billion last year). He underlined that Indonesia is India's important partner in the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific regions, and that both countries agree that Freedom of Navigation must be ensured in accordance with international laws.

The stage has been set to fully exploit the extensive opportunities for concrete mutual benefit in the bilateral relationship with a country that is perhaps India's most important partner in ASEAN. The proof of the pudding, though, will lie in the implementation.

The world stepped into February 2025 confronting the glorious uncertainties created by the not unexpected rapid fire policy change onslaughts unleashed by the new Trump administration in Washington. We do indeed live in interesting but uncertain and precarious times.



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