

CAN INDIA TRUST TRUMP?

BY

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If Trump's behaviour and attitude as was witnessed pre and post the G-7 summit is anything to go by, he would ensure that the US would be a disliked nation, despite all its positives. Trump arrived late for events, ignoring the dress code, seeking to convey a message that he does not care. He departed early and while on the flight, passed directions for the US representative not to sign the summit declaration. His belief that everything in policy is linked to business, which is his expertise, has broken all bonding with its allies.

The G-7 ended up becoming a G-6 Plus 1. Terming Trudeau, the Canadian PM, 'very dishonest and weak' has distanced relationship with their closest ally. During and post the summit he launched personal attacks on all members of the G-7. In a subsequent tweet he stated that the US paid 'close to the entire cost of NATO' to help protect the countries that 'rip us off on trade'. The fact remains that the US is enhancing its military to counter threats to its power across the globe, not solely to protect NATO.

This was not the first time that Trump has angered his European allies. In the similar summit in Italy last year, Trump upset all by ensuring that the final statement included 'the US is in the process of reviewing its policies on climate change and on the Paris agreement and thus is not in a position to join the consensus on these topics'. He subsequently withdrew from the Paris accord.

Trump's actions including ignoring allies, changing rules of the game based on his own assessment and opening trade wars is pushing the US into a corner. His withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, despite the French President and the German Chancellor seeking to change his mind has only increased distances. His imposing CAATSA has forced nations to seek options to bypass it. His questioning NATO spending on defence has had limited impact.

His decision to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem had no supporters in the UN. Despite all her threats, Nikki Haley could almost get none to back the US. Even US attempts to criticise the Hamas for attacks on Israel left them alone. Israel could only avoid international criticism because of US veto. Thus, the US seems to be losing support of its closest allies.

The latest was his announcement on cancelling annual US-South Korean exercises post his recent meeting with Kim Jong Un. He stated that these were being cancelled to cut down costs. As per Trump, 'We will be stopping the war games, which will save us a tremendous amount of money.' He also criticised South Korea for not bearing more of the costs. He added, 'We have to talk to many countries about treating us fairly.' Kathleen Hicks, a former senior Pentagon official stated that his comments are misleading as savings would likely decrease combat readiness.

He even commented that in case talks progress further with Kim Jong Un, he may even consider the withdrawal of US forces from the region. Trump's comments and decision has also surprised the Pentagon, which was never asked for its views and even angered his Asian allies, South Korea and Japan, who always considered the US presence and these exercises as a display of US security guarantee not only against North Korea but also China.

The summit with Kim Jung Un was nothing but a photo-op. Vague promises were made, no timelines laid down, no assurances made, yet Trump made grand announcements. The reality is that North Korea would never trust the US alone. Kim is aware of the US regening on its deals with Libya and Iran. Hence, he would need the backing of China and Russia. The fact that Kim flew for the summit on an Air China flight is an indicator of Chinese support, which Trump has conveniently ignored.

China has already countered the US by demanding removal or partial withdrawal of sanctions, despite Trump's statements. It may have been requested by Pompeo to hold fort for the moment but would in conjunction with Russia raise it soon. If the US backs down, it would lose respect from North Korea, if it agrees, Trump would lose face. China would never miss an opportunity to embarrass the US, with whom it is already in a trade war.

Trump has launched a trade war with all allies. No nation can sit back and let the US dictate terms. Hence, counter increase in tariffs are being announced. India has also responded with additional tariffs on US almonds, apples and Harley Davidson motorcycles amongst others.

Trump's actions and comments have resulted in his allies wondering if the US could be depended upon. In fact, nations may have begun having doubts onwhether Trump would even honour US military commitments. It is possible that he would ask the concerned nation or group to first promise to bear expenditure before he commits his forces. Therefore, many have begun charting their own paths, ignoring the US.

The EU decided for the first time to create a 13 Billion Euro defence and security fund to help build up depleted militaries that are heavily reliant on the US. Similarly, the EU also proposed a 10.5 Billion Euro 'European Peace facility' to fund EU military missions abroad. The reason for this are claimed to be two. Firstly, is the sharp criticism of his allies by Donald Trump and secondly is the departure from the Union of Britain next year.

India, with whom the US claims to be increasing its strategic relations has also begun ignoring US sanctions. It is ignoring US's CAATSA imposed on Russia and is moving ahead with its purchase of Russian military equipment. Indian foreign minister, Sushma Swaraj stated recently that India would ignore US sanctions on Iran, since they are not backed by the UN.

While Trump's closest aides are seeking better ties with India, there is always a doubt whether Trump would suddenly change direction. A team of 'specialists' from the Pentagon are in India to negotiate the text of the COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) as preparations for the 2+2 dialogue. There are also reports that the US is seeking to convince India to procure their Patriot 3 Missile systems, in lieu of the S-400, which India seeks to procure from Russia.

Understanding the unreliability of Trump, Modi has hardly made any visits to the US, as he had done under Obama, nor has he seriously considered inviting Trump to India. A visit to boost ties could become an embarrassment, as most US closest allies have experienced. His one meeting with Trump is possibly more than enough. On the reverse, Modi has begun mending ties with Russia and China, as he sees them as safer bets.

If Trump could cancel his South Korea exercises on a whim, it is quite possible that he would cancel the 'Quad' next, almost without warning. Therefore, India and Japan need to expand the grouping ignoring the US, as under Trump, it remains untrustworthy. Since India does not have any financial involvement in security matters nor a dependency on US for its security it can ignore his rantings. Cancelling defence deals would impact the US more. It would push India into the Russian fold for perpetuity as also impact US business, as India would be forced to cancel orders. Thus, India holds the cards for the moment, but it can never take an irrational Trump for granted.

The Indian defence and foreign ministers would be travelling to the US for the 2+2 summit next month. India should be ready to renege its deals if

the US is unwilling to grant it immunity from CAATSA and Iran sanctions. In the present environment, the US needs India as a counter to China, investment and development in Afghanistan and its huge defence orders. Threats is not the right approach but conveying its concerns firmly must be done. Trade wars with the US may continue but threatening allies with sanctions is another ball game.

Under Trump, the reliability of the US as a dependable ally is fast losing ground. Its own allies and partners are drifting away, only because Trump views everything on financial terms. If the US national leadership, barring Trump, does not act in unison, the US would be left all alone, seeking to battle everyone in domains beyond security, only because of the twisted belief of one individual. India is moving in the right direction, spending greater time and energy enhancing relations with China and Russia, rather than with the US.

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