



## ***FROM DELHI'S WATCHTOWER: THE TRUMP-XI SUMMIT AND INDIA'S ENDURING VIGILANCE***

***BY SRIPARNA PATHAK***

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In mid-May 2026, US President Donald Trump concluded his state visit to Beijing with the familiar optics: handshakes in the Great Hall of the People, declarations of “very successful” talks, and a high-profile American business delegation in tow. Yet the summit produced precisely what many in New Delhi had expected—symbolism without substance. No major new trade agreements beyond vague tariff easements. No firm outcomes on the Iran conflict or reopening the Strait of Hormuz. Taiwan differences persisted. And no overarching G2 framework emerged to dictate global rules.

From India’s vantage point, this was a measured relief. It confirmed that Washington now treats China less as a primary strategic rival requiring containment and more as a complex economic partner essential for supply chains, critical minerals, and global market stability amid multiple crises. Trump’s transactional focus on “fantastic trade deals” highlighted this shift. Beijing gained some economic breathing room while promoting its preferred narrative of cooperative great-power relations.

This flirtation with G2 dynamics raises legitimate concerns in New Delhi. A true duopoly between the world’s top two economies could sideline rising powers like India, Japan, South Korea, and many others, limiting the strategic space. However, the summit’s thin results, marked by underlying mistrust, modest deliverables, and no transformative joint initiatives, suggest any G2 condominium remains aspirational rather than operational. For India, this

reinforces the wisdom of strategic autonomy: building comprehensive national power independently rather than relying on great-power bargains.

### **China as persistent threat: The view from the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean**

While the US recalibrates toward managed interdependence with China, India’s assessment remains firmly grounded in geography and history. The 2020 Galwan incident and prolonged Ladakh standoff laid bare the limits of border management agreements. Though 2025–2026 brought tactical stabilizations, including resumed patrols in select areas and renewed diplomatic mechanisms, core challenges endure: no mutually agreed-upon clarification of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), sustained forward deployments, and asymmetric Chinese infrastructure development.

Recent developments confirm this pattern. The 35th Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) meeting in Beijing on May 27 this year yielded “constructive and forward-looking” discussions. Both sides expressed satisfaction with the maintenance of peace and tranquility, paving the way for gradual normalization. Yet Indian assessments note persistent gaps: no breakthrough on delimitation, continued gray-zone activities, and China’s reluctance for equitable boundary resolution. Tactical calm masks unresolved strategic distrust.

India’s response is proactive and visible in the Great Nicobar Island project. This ambitious multi-billion-dollar initiative, including a major transshipment port at Galathea Bay, international airport, township, and supporting dual-use infrastructure, enhances India’s maritime posture near the Strait of Malacca. Located roughly 150 kilometers (95 miles) from this vital chokepoint, the project bolsters monitoring, logistical resilience, and power projection capabilities.

Chinese analysts openly acknowledge that the project sharpens Beijing’s longstanding Malacca Dilemma, China’s vulnerability stemming from its heavy reliance on the strait for energy imports and trade. By positioning India to better oversee this critical sea lane, Great Nicobar complicates China’s Indian Ocean ambitions and counters its regional port strategy. Amid ongoing Hormuz

disruptions, accelerating the project underscores New Delhi's commitment to securing its own sea lanes and reducing external dependencies.

Further examples illustrate India's consistent threat perception. Accelerated border infrastructure development (roads, bridges, and habitations), enhanced Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") maritime domain awareness initiatives, and supply-chain diversification continue unabated. High tariffs on many Chinese imports and rigorous FDI scrutiny persist, reflecting a prudent approach shaped by a live border dispute, unlike America's more compartmentalized economic engagement.

### **Trump, definitional agendas, and the Thucydides Trap lecture**

The summit also exposed risks in how Washington sometimes absorbs Chinese framing. Xi Jinping reportedly emphasized the "Thucydides Trap," invoking the risk of conflict between a rising and an established power while advocating a "new type of major-power relations." This classic Beijing narrative reframes competition as a misunderstanding best resolved on Chinese "win-win" terms, subtly advancing its peer-status claims and downplaying issues like military modernization and assertiveness in contested waters.

Trump's positive tone and deal-making emphasis suggested some rhetorical alignment with this definitional agenda, prioritizing economic complementarity. For India, this is a familiar tactic seen in border talks, where China portrays disputes as minor differences while advancing facts on the ground. The US economic pivot does not diminish the value of Indo-US defense and technology ties, but it reinforces the need for Indian self-reliance. New Delhi has been and must continue to calibrate its China strategy based on its own realities, not fluctuating American priorities.

### **India's path forward: Autonomy amid flux**

Ultimately, the Trump-Xi summit, with its limited outcomes, validates India's strategic clarity. The absence of a robust G2 preserves multipolar space for India to emerge as an independent pole. Under Prime Minister Modi, India has adeptly balanced deepened US partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, all the while advancing Atmanirbhar capabilities.

Recent engagements further illustrate this balanced approach. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's late-May 2026 visit to India, culminating in the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi on May 26, reaffirmed the grouping's vitality through a substantive joint declaration. The Quad partners announced ambitious initiatives, including a joint port development project in Fiji to enhance infrastructure in Pacific Island nations and a Critical Minerals Initiative Framework targeting up to \$20 billion in investments for diversified supply chains. These steps underscore India's proactive role in building resilient regional architectures alongside like-minded partners.

Going forward, priorities are clear: fully realize Great Nicobar's potential, expand Indian Ocean naval presence, diversify critical technologies and minerals, and strengthen minilateral and bilateral ties with Japan, Australia, Europe, and ASEAN. Credible deterrence along the LAC continues, alongside open diplomatic channels, for sustained communications.

India remains open to dialogue and practical cooperation with like-minded powers on shared concerns such as maritime security and supply chain resilience. However, it will not adjust its core national priorities or long-standing threat perceptions of adversaries based on the shifting whims of even its closest partners. New Delhi's strategic calculus is rooted in its own geopolitical realities and interests.

The United States may view China through a transactional G2-lite lens, but India confronts a neighbor with a strategic culture oriented toward long-term dominance in its region. Until Beijing demonstrates concrete respect for India's interests, including fair boundary resolution, balanced trade, and non-encroachment in the Indian Ocean, as just a few to name, New Delhi's vigilance will remain undiminished. The Trump-Xi meeting altered little in this regard.

In this age of great-power pragmatism, India's approach stands distinct: pragmatic engagement paired with relentless capacity-building. The Himalayas and the approaches to Malacca require nothing less. India's ascent does not depend on summits in Beijing or Washington, as it is being secured through its own determined efforts.

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