



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



GLOBAL HORIZONS

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Author

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Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

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Cover Images:

Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, participated in the International Kite Festival in Ahmedabad, during the latter's official visit to India, on January 12, 2026. Source: [Prime Minister of India](#)

Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi welcomed the President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan at 7, Lok Kalyan Marg, in New Delhi, on January 19, 2026. Source: [X/@MohamedBinZayed](#)

India's Prime Minister met the President of the European Council, António Luís Santos da Costa and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi on January 27, 2026. Source: [Prime Minister of India](#)

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by

Nalin Surie

January was arguably a momentous month during which the West, via Canadian PM Carney's speech at the annual Davos forum, acknowledged that actions taken, especially by the Trump administration during 2025 and other major powers in recent years, meant that the "partially false" story of the international rules based order premised on US based hegemony stood ruptured. The West suddenly discovered, in Carney's words, that more recently, "great powers have begun using economic integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited. You cannot live within the life of mutual benefits through integration when integration becomes the source of your subordination." He called upon middle powers to "act together because if we're not on the table, we're on the menu" (Canada especially), and to garner their own strengths.

Countries of the Global South had, long ago, come to this conclusion. The middle powers of the West can no doubt benefit from the experiences of the Global South in managing risks and evolving collective investments in resilience with a view to maintaining strategic autonomy and sovereignty. Their combination can be a game changer in the evolution towards a multipolar and more equitable international order.

Fresh from its success in removing the President of Venezuela, through a spectacularly successful military operation, reportedly aided by very high level collaborators in the Maduro establishment, the Trump administration renewed its focus on wanting to take over Greenland. However, very strong opposition from Denmark, Greenland and the EU (at its informal Council meeting on January 22) including the UK, and the likely negative impact on NATO, among other factors, appears to have hopefully bought time to find other ways of meeting US demands for security, rare earths etc. The NATO Secretary General helped find a via media for negotiations on this issue. (Incidentally, he also warned European parliamentarians on January 26 that "if anyone thinks here, again, that the European Union or Europe as a whole can defend itself without the US, keep on dreaming. You can't. We can't. We need each other.") It is not clear though that the end result will be acceptable to President Trump. In any event, this incessant demand on part of the US has only further ruptured the transatlantic alliance.

In Venezuela, the acting President Ms. Delcy Rodriguez, a former Maduro loyalist, continued to work with the Trump administration in conformity with the latter's diktat while support for Maduro remains visible among sections of the population. It remains to be seen how long and how successful this cohabitation will be.

President Trump's seeming backtrack on Greenland did not, however, prevent him from warning the Canadian PM on account of his speech at Davos that without the US, Canada was nothing! The Canadian response was spirited, and Canada continued efforts to further derisk from the US.

More concerning and of immediate consequence during the month, though, was the buildup of US forces around Iran and President Trump's threat that the United States could not countenance Iran's nuclear program and the killing of several thousand Iranians by the regime during recent very wide spread anti-government demonstrations. The threat of the use of force was combined with negotiations and at the time of writing, Trump expressed the hope that an agreement through direct talks may happen on Iran's nuclear future. Whether the issue of political repression in Iran remains on the table is not clear.

Given the recent example of the Venezuelan operation and the bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities by the US and Israel in June 2025, there is understandable scepticism in Iran over US intentions and Ayatollah Khomeini has warned that any attack on Iran will lead to a regional conflagration. Several GCC countries have reportedly counselled caution and the need for negotiations. Trump though will need at least a notional victory in the negotiations to back down from a military operation. It also remains to be seen whether the US and Israel can organise the kind of implicit domestic coup in Teheran that enabled the US to spirit Maduro out of Caracas. The Iran of today is not the Venezuela of Maduro.

A conflagration in the Gulf would certainly not be in the interest of countries like India. The UAE President paid a very short but focused and important visit to India on January 19. India's Deputy NSA was in Teheran on January 28 and its NSA in Saudi Arabia on February 03.

President Trump's activism on foreign policy touched a high-level of narcissism with the announcement on January 15 of his Charter of the Board of Peace envisaged under UN Security Council resolution 2803. The content of the proposed Charter resembles little of the content of the concerned resolution. Instead, it is a megalomaniacal effort to establish a new international organisation with Mr. Trump at the head forever and in which he has the last word and permanent veto

on all decision-making! A country can actually buy a permanent seat on the board by paying US dollars 1 billion!

The Board is intended to be an international organisation that seeks to promote stability, restore dependable and lawful governance and secure enduring peace in areas affected or threatened by conflict. The Charter includes the development and dissemination of best practises capable of being applied by all nations and communities, seeking peace. Indeed, an all encompassing mandate!

Interestingly, Trump's Charter makes no reference to Gaza, the reconstruction etc. of which was the thought behind resolution 2803. The direct attack that this charter represents on the United Nations as it is presently constituted needs no gainsaying, and reflects US frustration at not having its way in the UN system in recent years. Incidentally, during the month, the US also withdrew from 66 UN organisations.

As on February 03, 27 countries had signed on, including Israel and 13 Muslim countries. However, no major power or major European country has signed on. Nor, rightly so, has India. The EU Council at its informal meeting on January 22 concluded that we "have serious doubts about a number of elements in the charter of the Board of Peace related to its scope, its governance, and its compatibility with the UN Charter". It was added that the "EU is ready to work with the US on implementing the comprehensive peace plan for Gaza, with the Board of Peace carrying out its mission as a transitional administration, in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 2803". The dissonance with the US proposal is clear.

January 2026 also witnessed the release by the United States of its National Defence Strategy for 2026. This document supplements the National Security Strategy issued in December 2025. The NDS recognises that China's growth has implications for America's security, prosperity, and freedom. Deterring China in the Indo-Pacific through strength, not confrontation, is listed as the second of four priorities for the Department of War. For this purpose, conditions have to be created to enable the United States to negotiate with China from a position of strength. The objective is to prevent anyone, including China, from being able to dominate the US or its allies, and set the military conditions required to achieve the goal of balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. To that end, the United States will erect a strong denial defence along the First Island Chain and also urge and enable key regional allies and partners to do more for "our collective defence". The intention is not to dominate, humiliate or strangle China, but to simply ensure that neither China nor anyone else can dominate the US or its allies. The Chinese will no doubt have taken serious note of and exception to the intention to keep them

contained within the First Island Chain, and will prepare themselves further to meet this challenge.

Of the four priorities, the pride of place is again given to defending the US Homeland. The third and fourth are to increase burden sharing with US allies and partners and to supercharge the US defence industrial base. These are consistent with Trump's oft stated positions. It is also recognised though that maintaining US access to the Indo-Pacific, the world's most dynamic economic region, has fundamental implications for US vital interests.

Russia is seen as a persistent, but manageable threat to NATO's eastern members for the foreseeable future. It is argued that the Russian military threat is primarily focused on Eastern Europe and that it is in no position to make a bid for European hegemony; that the US's NATO allies are substantially more powerful than Russia, and are strongly positioned to take primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defence, with critical but more limited US support. The US is and will remain engaged in Europe, but will prioritise defending the US Homeland and deterring China. This approach would be scarce consolation for Europe and it has no option but to substantially enhance its defence capabilities in a comprehensive manner. The onus to defend Ukraine is essentially being put on Europe.

Interestingly, the NDS also stipulates that South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited US support. It is further postulated that South Korea has the will to do so! It really is not a good time to be a long time US ally.

It has been clear for sometime now that the policies being followed by the Trump administration in its second incarnation have compelled its oldest allies to begin to derisk their partnerships with the United States. This was visible in visits during the month to China by the President of ROK and Prime Ministers of Canada, Finland and UK. It was no doubt also a factor in the finalisation of the game changing India-EU FTA announced in New Delhi on January 27; an agreement that had been under on and off negotiation since 2007. Following their visit to India, the EU leaders visited Vietnam, during which the EU-Vietnam partnership was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

The process of derisking and search for new partners is clearly under way in the political, security and economic dimensions. Interestingly, it is also forcing those in the West that were sceptical about the growing trend towards multipolarity to take this trend more seriously as also recognise the need for reformed

multilateralism. However, this is not going to be an easy ride. Besides, these evolving tendencies and arrangements will have to contend with the clear intent of the United States to “unabashedly prioritise American concrete interests with an approach of flexible realism” and to “revamp our (US) network of allies and partners to meet the threats we (US) face”. [NDS January 2026.] The US clearly intends to remain in the driver’s seat.

During the month, the United States remained content to not put any real pressure on Russia to stop the war in Ukraine. Indeed, Russian bombardment of Ukrainian power infrastructure and Ukrainian targets, including civilian, continued. The death toll continued to rise and the severity of the hardship being faced in the severe cold by the Ukrainian population grew in intensity. There was though a ray of hope and negotiations to work out a ceasefire and other arrangements among the US, Russia and Ukraine began under UAE auspices, and are expected to resume during February. There is, however, no clarity, from information available in the public domain, that Russia has agreed to soften its territorial demands on Ukraine. There are also many other important issues from the Russian perspective which will need to be resolved to undo the sanctions that have been imposed on Russia by the West since the war began in February 2022.

Likewise, Israeli military actions in Gaza continued notwithstanding the ceasefire, and many deaths and injuries were reported during the month. Limited humanitarian assistance trickled through. Hamas refused to unilaterally disarm. Israeli forces also conducted operations in the West Bank. The Palestinians continue to be overwhelmed. Notwithstanding the announcement of the formation of a Board of Peace by President Trump, there was no clarity on the implementation of phase 2 of the Trump plan for Gaza.

As of February 4, 2026, Sudan’s civil war crossed 1,000 days, becoming what the United Nations describes as the world’s largest humanitarian crisis. A permanent ceasefire remained out of reach, as regional/external rivalries continue to fuel the hostilities. The world’s conscience seems to be impervious to the suffering of the Sudanese people.

Violence in Syria remained elevated in the first two weeks of January 2026, driven by clashes between the transitional government and the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Aleppo. The large-scale military confrontation on January 17 served as a turning point, resulting in a comprehensive ceasefire deal on January 18 under which the SDF lost major territories to the government. Although sporadic breaches of the truce occurred, the comprehensive ceasefire agreement was formally finalised on January 30. Accordingly, the Syrian

Government is to take control of all border crossings, oil fields, and gas fields in the region, with protection secured by regular forces to ensure the return of resources to the Syrian state, while considering the special case of Kurdish areas. Further, the SDF has committed to the removal of all non-Syrian Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leaders and members outside the borders of the Syrian Arab Republic to ensure sovereignty and regional stability.

It will not be easy for the transitional government in Syria in its efforts to restore unity, peace and stability in the country. External and internal players have vested interests which will not disappear overnight. The ongoing flux in the region and in international affairs adds to the complexity. Its own past antecedents and actions will also have a bearing in this effort.

As per a Reuters report from Kinshasa on January 20, the DRC sent a "shortlist of state-owned assets - including manganese, copper-cobalt, gold and lithium projects - for U.S. investors to consider as part of a minerals partnership". Quoting unnamed government sources, the report claimed that according to them: "The list, delivered to United States officials last week, represents Washington's most tangible progress in converting peace and investment deals with Congo into influence over the country's critical-minerals supply chain". Neither the DRC government nor the US State Department commented.

On January 17, African and international leaders met in Lome with a view to reducing hostilities in eastern DRC and implementation of agreements between DRC and Rwanda. They agreed to strengthen and unify mediation efforts to end the conflict in eastern DRC, endorsing the central role of the African Union mandated mediation led by Togo. A Mediation Framework Document was endorsed. Its effectiveness though remains in doubt.

It was an active month for Indian foreign policy. There were three significant incoming high level visits, the implementation of the outcomes of which will add substance to India's development and comprehensive national strength.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz paid an official visit to India from January 12-13. The outcomes were comprehensive. A joint statement was issued on January 12 and covers bilateral collaboration in defence and security; in trade and economy; in technology, innovation, science and research; in green and sustainable development partnership/renewable energy; on Indo Pacific connectivity, and global issues; and in education, skilling, mobility and culture. 26 agreements or MOUs or announcements were made during the visit. These included joint declarations of intent on strengthening bilateral defence industrial cooperation; on

a semiconductor ecosystem; on partnership and cooperation in the field of critical minerals; on cooperation in the field of telecommunications; on joint cooperation in research and development on bio economy; on a roadmap on higher education; on establishment of a bilateral dialogue mechanism on the Indo-Pacific; and on new funding commitments of € 1.24 billion under the green and sustainable development partnership (GSDP) etc.

Germany is amongst India's most important partners in Europe. There is now a clear recognition in Germany that India is a significant partner not only in terms of economic relations, but also in terms of defence, security, technological, and mobility partnerships. These have assumed greater significance in the context of the current churn in international relations. Both countries realise that they can be each other's reliable and trusted partner.

The short but outcome heavy visit of the President of the UAE to India on January 19 had a particular significance in the context of India's steadily growing partnership with that country and its importance in the context of its Act West policy. The UAE is a significant economic and security partner of India in the region. Close to 4.5 million people from India live and work in the UAE.

The joint statement issued at the end of the visit acknowledges that strong bilateral defence and security cooperation is a core pillar of the bilateral comprehensive partnership. It has also been agreed to double bilateral trade to USD 200 billion by 2032.

Twelve agreements/MOUs/LOIs were finalised during the visit. These cover development of the Dholera Special Investment region, space industry development and commercial collaboration, strategic defence partnership, purchase of LNG by HPCL, establishment of a super computing cluster in India, promotion of bilateral civil nuclear cooperation, explore the setting up of Digital Embassies etc.

Foreign Secretary Misri described the visit as "extremely substantive".

The visit of the President of the European Council and President of the European Commission on January 25-27 as Chief Guests at India's 77th Republic Day celebration was of particular importance, and a reflection of the EU's positive recalibration of its relations with India. Both are evolving poles in a world where multipolarity is growing in salience. As the President of the Council Antonio Costa put it, at a time when the global order is being fundamentally reshaped, the EU and India stand together as strategic and reliable partners.

The outcomes of the visit marked, in PM Modi's words, a new era in India-EU relations. They include: the joint announcement on the conclusion of negotiations on an India-EU FTA (the mother of all FTAs as per Commission President von Der Leyen), a joint India-EU comprehensive strategic agenda towards 2030, a security and defence partnership, an MOU on a comprehensive framework on cooperation on mobility(including skilling), constitution of a green hydrogen task force, launch of exploratory talks for India entering into an association with the EU's Horizon Europe Program etc.

In his briefing on the visit, Foreign Secretary Misri conveyed that "the outcomes are deeply strategic in nature". This is indeed true but, for the successful implementation of several of these agreements, the EU member states will have to consciously act in the broader interest of the partnership and not focus on narrow national interests.

The freshly minted India-EU partnership has the potential to be a real and positive game changer for both Europe and India in the evolving geostrategic and geoeconomic order. The complementarities for mutual benefit are manifold. It is the need of the hour that this opportunity is not wasted.

[Note: the India-FTA requires ratification by both sides. On the EU side this could take some time but is not expected to pose any problem.]

While speculation continues on the timing of the announcement, in an interesting and important development, President Trump announced on February 02 through a message on social media portal X that India and the US had agreed on what would be the new rate of tariffs that the US will impose on India. Under this , inter alia, tariffs on imports from India into the US would be reduced to 18% against the present unilateral punitive tariffs of 50%. In a response on X, PM Modi confirmed that an agreement has been arrived at. The messages of the two leaders are not identical on detail. The two sides are working out the text of the agreement to be signed in the near future and hence an assessment of the content will have to await a study of the detailed agreement. Nevertheless, it is a good development and should remove the pall of uncertainty hanging over India-US trade and investment ties which are an important pillar of the strategic partnership between the two countries. It will also help ensure that Indian exporters are not put at a continued disadvantage vis a vis their competitors in the US market. It would also help in restoring a semblance of normalcy in the overall bilateral relationship that has taken a serious beating on account of the capricious behaviour of the US establishment vis a vis India since May last year.

It remains to be seen whether the war in Ukraine will come to an end in February 2026, four years after it started. The future of Gaza remains under a dark cloud. There is no resolution in sight either to the other major conflicts raging across the world. The United States game plan with respect to Iran remains shrouded in ambiguity. The future of Greenland hangs in the balance. Terrorism continues to plague the world. An arms race is underway. Technology continues to rapidly open up opportunities to enhance development and resolve problems, but is also creating those for destruction, disaffection and other evils. The need for peace, stability, statesmanship, sagacity, dialogue, and commitment to the greater good and respect for international law has never been greater.



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