

# Why will India's foreign policy be a tightrope walk?: Explained

**Why did Bangladesh events come as a shock to the government? What about relations with China, the U.S., countries in the neighbourhood and West Asia?**

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All eyes will be on Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Delhi, his first since the war began, expected to be finalised early in 2025. | Photo Credit: Reuters

## The story so far:

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi was sworn in for a third time in June, the year was jam-packed with incoming and outgoing visits. Above all, 2024 was full of global insecurity and shocks in the neighbourhood, particularly Bangladesh. As 2025 looks to be even more uncertain, Indian foreign policy's biggest challenge is to remain poised for change.

## What were the high points in India's external relations?

The most difficult negotiation completed this year was for disengagement at the Line of Actual Control with China. While restoring ties and rebuilding the trust shattered by the Chinese PLA's transgressions since 2020 is a more prolonged task, the first formal Modi-Xi Jinping meeting in five years at Kazan, on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Russia, was a turning point.

The year began with a visit from French President Emmanuel Macron as a guest on Republic Day and a reaffirmation of the dependability of bilateral ties. Mr. Macron was not the government's original invitee, as Mr. Modi had hoped to host U.S. President Joseph Biden and also hold the Quad in Delhi that time. But when Mr. Macron stepped in, Mr. Modi set the seal on a number of India-France future forays in defence, energy and maritime cooperation. Early in 2024, the conclusion of the India-European Free Trade Association agreement, India's first with Europe, was heralded as a template for India to complete other such negotiations, although the year ended without similar progress on FTAs with Australia, the U.K., and the European Union.

The neighbourhood was also the subject of some bright spots, including the attendance of leaders of most of the neighbouring countries for Mr. Modi's swearing-in. Pakistan wasn't invited, but External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made the first such visit in nearly a decade to Islamabad for the SCO summit. Several visits by the Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay as well as Mr. Modi's visit to Thimphu to receive an award, and successful visits by the new Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu, setting aside the tensions earlier, were other high points of the year.

## What kept South Block awake at night in 2024?

The transformation of Bangladesh, from a friendly neighbour and most important connectivity partner under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to becoming estranged over her ouster from power in August was the year's biggest shock for New Delhi. The MEA repeatedly raised concerns over the sharp rise in attacks on Hindu minorities that followed, and Ms. Hasina's stay in India has become the biggest thorn in the once close partnership.

Ties with Canada took a turn for the worse as Canadian authorities doubled down on allegations that Indian officials had ordered the Nijjar killing, even naming Home Minister Amit Shah in the alleged conspiracy. New Delhi dealt with Canada by slamming

its doors shut on PM Justin Trudeau, with the hope a new government will be elected there in 2025. But it wasn't easy to do the same with the U.S., where the Department of Justice filed indictments against the Adani group and a new indictment against an Indian official for the alleged Pannun assassination plot. The U.S.'s role in the South Asian neighbourhood, especially with the changes in Bangladesh, and China's forays into Nepal and other neighbours are a continuing challenge. However, the election of U.S. President Donald Trump and the largely pro-India team he has picked could be a breather.

## How did Indian foreign policy navigate global conflict?

With both the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Israel's war in Gaza, India consistently put itself on the "side of peace". Mr. Modi's visits to Russia and Ukraine within weeks of each other raised speculation that he would play mediator in future negotiations. There were no high-level visits from or to Israel, and Mr. Modi made a point of meeting Palestinian PM Mahmoud Abbas at the UN. While New Delhi repeatedly called for an end to the civilian casualties, it continued to hedge its position at the UN on resolutions seeking to bring Israel to account for the killing of more than 45,000 in Gaza. With multilateral initiatives like IMEC (India-Middle East Europe-Economic Corridor) and I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE and U.S.) in trouble, India sought to engage West Asian countries bilaterally. In 2025, a more difficult tightrope walk for South Block is expected between Iran and the Israel-U.S. combine.

## What's on the diplomatic calendar in 2025?

Mr. Jaishankar's year-end visit to Washington and meetings with the Trump transition team indicate that ties with the U.S. will be a priority in 2025. Mr. Trump is expected to visit India for the Quad Summit next year and Mr. Modi is likely to call on him in Washington before that. 2025 is expected to begin with a ministerial visit from Iran, followed by U.S. NSA Jake Sullivan for a last-moment iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology) meet.

Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto will be the Republic Day guest. All eyes will be on Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Delhi, his first since the war began, expected to be finalised early in 2025.

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