

## Explained: India-US ties and the illegal immigration issue

Indian officials have told their US interlocutors that India is ready to take back immigrants who have entered the US illegally. This is a low-cost give for New Delhi — its priority is to ensure that the legal channels for Indians to travel to the US are not constricted in any way.

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Honduran migrants after arriving on a deportation flight from the US in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, on January 31. (Reuters)

Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had his first phone call with US President Donald Trump after the latter returned to the White House.

Asked by reporters later whether the Prime Minister had “agree[d] to take illegal immigrants”, Trump said: “He (Modi) will do what’s right. We are discussing.”

The two leaders had had a “long talk” on Monday (January 27), the President said, and announced that Modi would visit the United States “probably [in] February”. “We have a very good relationship with India,” he said.

### **India’s diplomatic actions**

Foreign policy observers in New [Delhi](#) noted the restraint in the President’s language. He was not threatening or bullying while talking about the call with Modi, and he did not demand that “illegals” and “aliens” — undocumented migrants whom he has often described as “criminals” and “gangsters” — be taken back. Trump, who is typically transactional, seemed to have decided that the US relationship with India is too high-stakes to be addressed in the same way as he did with, say, Colombia last week.

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For New Delhi, dealing with the new regime in Washington has been a diplomatic work-in-progress, and being nimble-footed has worked well so far.

During two back-to-back visits in December, and again for the inauguration in January, External Affairs minister S Jaishankar met with senior leaders in the new administration — Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz (twice), and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Commerce Secretary nominee Howard Lutnick, FBI Director nominee Kash Patel, and Energy Secretary nominee Chris Wright.

He has also met with senior leaders of the US Congress, including Senator majority leader John Thune and House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson.

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### **No strong reason to resist**

India has decided to play ball with Trump on the Number 1 priority on his domestic agenda — immigration. Illegal immigration has been identified by the American right as the primary reason for the poor law and order situation in the country.

Indian officials have told their American interlocutors that India is ready to take back immigrants who have entered the US illegally. This is a low-cost give for New Delhi — its priority is to ensure that the 20,000 illegal immigrants who are set to be deported as part of Trump's mass deportation plans do not constrict any legal channels for Indians to travel to the US.

The one concern for the Indian government would be that the Trump administration does not make the deportations a high-visibility public spectacle for PR purposes. That would embarrass New Delhi and make it politically difficult to justify the return of the immigrants, especially to political constituencies that do not differentiate clearly between legal and illegal immigration.

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The US mission to India issued more than a million nonimmigrant visas for the second year in a row in 2024, including a record number of visitor visas, underscoring the huge demand among Indians for travel to the US for tourism, business, and education. (More on this below.) In contrast, the US deported only about 1,100 illegal immigrants to India in 2024.

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### **Deportation challenge for US**

Overall, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) removed 271,484 non-citizens in the 2024 financial year (October 1, 2023 to September 30, 2024), according to the ICE Annual Report for FY2024 published in December. Trump wants to deport a million undocumented migrants in a year — or about 2,750 people every day. Last week, ICE agents detained about 900 people a day on average.

American media reports suggest every ICE field office has been given a daily target for rounding up illegal migrants, which has led to fears of detentions at workplaces and homes. Many of those employed in low-paying jobs are reported to be staying away from work and workplaces.

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ICE, however, has limited capacity — and only about 40,000 beds for detained people. Trump has said he will order the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security to prepare for up to 30,000 detainees at a facility at the infamous prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Immigration officials are pulling in resources from local police and the military to round up illegal immigrants.

The US will also have to increase capacity on aircraft to undertake deportations on the scale that Trump desires. The US could ask countries to pay for these deportation flights.

While some 20,000 illegal immigrants from India have been identified for deportation, the total number of Indians living illegally in the US is estimated to be 7,25,000. Trump's massive deportation push could, therefore, still be only scratching the surface.

### **H-1B, Trump, India's concerns**

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New Delhi's real concern is with the fate of the large numbers of students and professionals who go to the US to study and work. As of May 2024, there were about 3,51,000 Indian students in the US, mostly in graduate (Master's) programs in STEM fields, according to the Ministry of External Affairs.

Between October 2022 and September 2023, as many as 72% of the nearly 4 lakh visas issued by the US under its H-1B program (foreign worker visas for specialty jobs) went to Indian nationals. During this period, the top four Indian IT majors with a presence in the US — [Infosys](#), [TCS](#), [HCL](#), and [Wipro](#) — obtained approval for around 20,000 employees to work on H-1B visas, as per latest US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) data.

Both categories of immigrants — students (F category) and skilled professionals (H-1B) — add value to the US economy and are an asset to American society, Indian officials have reasoned with their US counterparts.

Trump himself has backed the H-1B program so far. In December, he said he was a “believer in H-1B”, and that he has “always been in favour of the visas”. And in January, he said that the US needs “very competent” and “great” people, and this is possible through this visa program.

Several states have already challenged Trump’s immigration orders. Some analysts feel that the President is not bothered about the legal validity of the orders — and that he is only sending signals to his MAGA base.



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New Delhi will be happy to reconcile with some tweaks in US immigration policy, as long as there is no large-scale disruption.