

Trump's Board of Peace: Why India took part in meeting as an 'observer'

India's decision to attend the meeting as an observer was an attempt to maintain a circumspect level of engagement with a controversial body while not shutting the door on a country with whom it has just agreed a trade pact framework.

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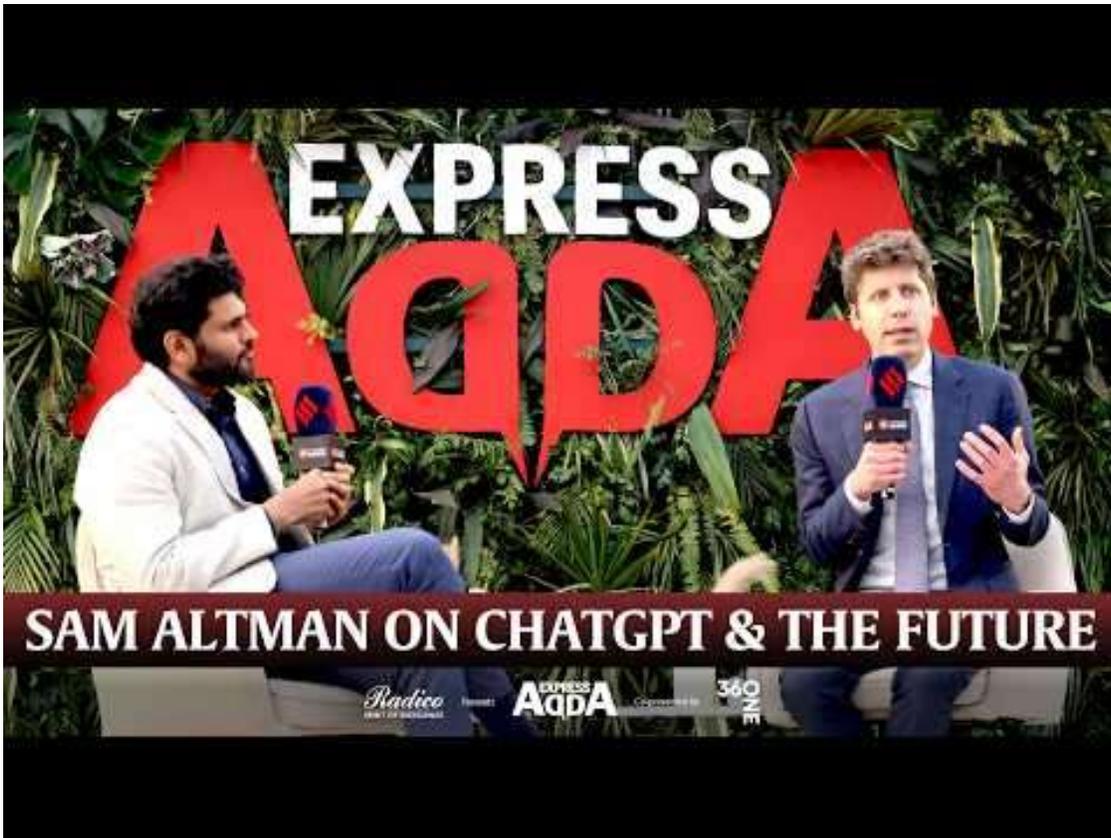


President Donald Trump with Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio arrives for the Board of Peace meeting on Thursday in Washington. AP

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US President Donald Trump's 'Board of Peace' held its first meeting on Thursday in Washington to discuss the reconstruction of Gaza, with India taking part as an "observer".

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The Ministry of External Affairs' official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said "India has supported the Gaza Peace Plan initiative of President Trump and the efforts underway due to UNSC resolution 2803".

Trump first announced the Board of Peace in September last year while outlining his plan to end Israel's war in the devastated territory, with the United Nations (UN) backing the plan. But since then, as the body's chair, he has expanded its mandate to "resolving global conflict", triggering criticism that it could undermine the UN.

While 27 countries, many of them from West Asia, have accepted Trump's invitation to join the board, India and several others in the West and Global South have not.

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India's decision to attend the meeting as an observer was, therefore, an attempt to maintain a circumspect level of engagement with a controversial body while not shutting the door on a country with whom it has just agreed a trade pact framework.

The members and the meeting

The board's 27 members include major West Asian countries such as Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Turkey and Bahrain. Trump's right-wing allies Argentina and Hungary are members, as are Vietnam and Cambodia. Pakistan, too, is a member. Its Prime Minister, [Shehbaz Sharif](#), himself attended Thursday's meeting in Washington.

Besides the board members, 22 countries took part in the meeting as "observers". These include the UK, Germany, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, Poland and the Netherlands. The EU, too, took part, as did Oman and Japan.

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India was represented by its Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington [DC](#), Namgya Khampa. Sources said the government weighed a range of pros and cons before taking the call to participate as an observer.

At the meeting, Trump announced that nine of the board members had pledged a combined \$7 billion towards relief in the war-battered strip. He also announced that

the US was pledging \$10 billion for the Board of Peace, but did not specify what the money would be used for.

“Every dollar spent is an investment in stability and the hope of a new and harmonious (region),” he said.

An off-ramp

On January 24, when Trump unveiled his Board of Peace in Davos, India stayed away. It chose to wait and watch which countries would end up joining — and which ones would not.

Now, with the board holding its first meeting, its composition has become clearer: West Asian countries with much at stake, Trump's ideological allies, and those seeking favours from the US President or looking to placate him.

Also important to note is who is not part of the board — Russia, China, France and the UK, the permanent members of the Security Council.

The absence of these major powers reduces the Board of Peace's heft and legitimacy.

New [Delhi](#) is also assessing its longevity. As of now, it is Trump's passion project. The day he demits office — in three years — the Board of Peace becomes infructuous.

Besides, Trump's reliability is a factor to be considered. There is a real concern that the US President — if he doesn't get his way during diplomatic parleys — may choose to walk out, leaving allies in the lurch. An observer status means India can limit its exposure to the initiative and keep an exit route ready.

Stepping on the UN's toes

India's commitment to the UN and multilateralism will be put on test if the Board of Peace tends to undermine the UN framework and positions itself as a parallel body.

Trump, on his part, has added a role for the UN in the board's functioning. “Once this board is completely formed, we can do pretty much whatever we want to do. And we will do it in conjunction with the United Nations,” he said.

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New Delhi is wary of the fact that the Board of Peace might wade into other conflicts, beyond Gaza. After all, its charter does not even mention Gaza. Trump has said the body “is for the world”.

And Trump’s penchant for getting involved in the India-Pakistan conflict is something that concerns India the most. On Thursday, with Pakistan Prime Minister Sharif in attendance at the meeting, Trump yet again reiterated the claim that he stopped the fighting between the two nuclear-armed neighbours — something India has repeatedly denied.

He claimed he had threatened to slap 200% tariffs on India and Pakistan if they didn’t stop the fighting last summer.

There is a view within the government that Pakistan’s inclusion makes it difficult for India to stay completely out of the loop. In that case, India’s presence as an observer gives it eyes and ears in the room, and a chance to be a part of the table to foil any possible attempt to bring up India-Pakistan issues. An outright exclusion poses a risk to India being cut out of any decision on the future of the dispute.

PM’s visit to Israel and the economic stakes of peace

The choice of taking part as an observer also comes ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Israel. India is well aware of the diplomatic negotiations as part of the next steps in the fragile ceasefire. India, which has consistently backed a “two-state solution” to the Palestine question, wants peace to return to the region. A peaceful West Asia will help the government push for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

So, the Board of Peace observer status gives it a ringside view of how the players in the region are navigating the issues regarding bringing peace and stability to the region, without being part of the negotiations.

Outreach to Trump

India also has to consider Trump's unpredictable attitude, with New Delhi and Washington attempting to mend their ties. Since last month, the two sides have finally agreed on an interim trade deal arrangement. India on Friday also joined Pax Silica — a US-led initiative focused on securing AI and tech supply-chains. By joining as an observer, India is looking to dodge a bullet, since Trump can deem the refusal to join the board as a slight.

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