

US-India: Diamonds Are Not Forever. Modi's Gift to Biden

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*The US state department disclosed on Thursday in an accounting of gifts received from foreign leaders during 2023 that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's was the "priciest" gift that President Biden received, rather, his wife **Jill Biden** received — a diamond valued at \$20,000 (over Rs. 17 lakh.)*

To an observer of the US political culture, it would invoke the analogy of a Middle Eastern sheikh from the Gulf region kow-towing to curry favours from the White House. Indeed, [troubling questions](#) do arise.

Touched to the quick, [Delhi reacted immediately](#) to put the record straight — that it was an artificial lab-grown diamond with a cost price between Rs. 15000-25000, which would put the value of the gift between Rs. 1.1-1.9 lakh only.

What Delhi didn't say, or more likely its bureaucrats didn't know, is that while real diamond has no limits on its shelf life, a lab-grown diamond may look the same, but has zero resale value. Suffice to say, the brilliance of the relationship may be gone, but the stone won't lose its lustre and doesn't get worn out with time.

Delhi's clumsy clarification, unattributed of course, makes things worse. Actually, none of the three famous people looks good in this controversy. It makes Jill Biden who apparently took the gift seriously and retained it for official use, somewhat foolish.

A lavish edition of *Mahabharata*, the great epic that tells a millennia-old tale about the futility of war would have probably made a more appropriate gift from Modi to Biden who poked his nose into a fratricidal strife in distant Eurasia, undermined a nascent peace treaty between two brothers, and coaxed the impetuous kid brother to instead go into a futile proxy war that ultimately caused the death of hundreds of thousands of his subjects and destroyed his kingdom.

Biden is still unrepentant. Earlier this week, columns of American military vehicles loaded with weaponry were crossing border from Iraq into Syria in anticipation of some war in the making just 4 years after the old one ended.

However, the good part is that the diamond controversy is emblematic of the matrix of US-Indian relationship beneath the rhetoric. Some sixteen months after gifting the diamond, BJP accused the Biden administration of conspiring to overthrow Modi government. Which means that the estimation of Jill Biden being a 'silvery influencer' in the White House was a

wrong notion.

The Biden administration is no longer believing that in Modi government it has a potential ally to curb China's rise as superpower that would spell doom for the 5-century old Western hegemony in the world order. The Biden Team belatedly realised that Delhi was not only boosting the ties with Russia but also had a master plan to engage with China bilaterally and work out the guard rails of co-habitation as immediate neighbours.

The common refrain is that constraints in India's development path forced the government, under pressure from the industry and business, to ease the tensions with China to attract investments and boost trade. But that is not the whole story. Chinese commentaries are stressing that the two countries have a higher destiny that is easier to realise if they cooperate rather than undercut each other. There is much truth in this, as the colonial history would testify.

At any rate, the defining moment in the US-Indian relationship came with the G20 Summit, which Modi hosted in the third quarter of 2023, when Biden came to Delhi and in tandem with his Canadian counterpart Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took up with Modi the report of the Five Eyes (US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand) that India was involved in trans-national crimes in North America.

The whiplash, albeit administered in private, came as a bolt from the blue when Indian diplomacy was riding high — oil trade with Russia going hand in hand with the “consequential” partnership with the US. The entire delusional foreign-policy matrix began unravelling. And a cat-and-mouse game began, culminating in the Biden administration installing a hostile regime in Bangladesh. It was a stark reminder that diamonds are not forever.

Indeed, there are heartrending tales in literature of young love and passion turning into betrayals, vendetta, revenge and marginalisation, and an entire world tumbling down around diamonds.

Fortunately, the sordid chapter is ending as the Trump presidency begins on Jan. 20. The big question is what conclusion Trump would have drawn by now. Perhaps, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar is doing the right thing by reminding the Trump Team tirelessly that their boss holds the patent for Quad.

But, a rearguard course correction is already being advocated in the US intellectual discourses. The prestigious DC-based Stimson Centre addressed two back-to-back policy briefs on the Indo-Pacific in quick succession to the new administration no sooner than Trump was elected on November 5:

1. [Revive the South Asia Strategy](#) by Elizabeth Threlkeld • Elizabeth Zazycki dated November 26, 2024, which argues that “The next administration should craft a standalone South Asia strategy to address regional complexities while aligning with Indo-Pacific priorities”, and,
2. [Think Small to Win Big in the Indo-Pacific](#) by Kelly A. Grieco • Evan Cooper dated November 21, 2024, which argues that “The next administration should lean into smaller, more flexible alignments and issue-based coalitions and lead more with economics and diplomacy rather than military and security policies.”

Succinctly put, the thesis advanced by these policy wonks in a think tank known to be leaning toward the Democratic Party, is, paradoxically, what Jaishankar also has been espousing — multi-alignment as India’s foreign-policy doctrine.

There is a saying that our dreams ought to be what define our individuality. As the English poet and philosopher William Blake put it in sharper focus, ‘No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings’. But the Modi Government’s diplomacy leaps out of [Kautilya’s Arthashastra](#), the ancient Indian Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, politics, economic policy and military strategy which overlooks that this is an era of Internet and Artificial Intelligence.

Delusional mantras still continue — ‘There is a bipartisan consensus in America for relations with India; so-and-so in Trump Team has been in the India Caucasus; we got along fine with Trump, etc.’ From available indications, however, Trump 2.0 can be radically different.

Trump has no more elections to fight and his soaring ambition, which is no secret, will be to carve out a presidential legacy that outshines by far all his mediocre predecessors. Trump’s turnaround on [H-1B visa debate](#) shows that he can take [tough decisions](#) and there are no holy cows in his domain.

Then, there is the [X factor](#), the known unknown, while navigating his compass. By the way, I go along entirely with the incisive opinion of Mick Mulvaney, who served as Trump’s second chief of staff, when he [told the Times](#), “What makes (Elon) Musk such a valuable adviser is that he has enough money — and enough other things to do — that he is uniquely situated to be the bearer of honest news. More than perhaps anybody else on the planet, he doesn’t need the job.”

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Featured image: Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla, meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Beijing, Sunday, April 28, 2024 ([Source](#))

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