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## **Trump & Modi: Seeking a Global Partnership?**

By Walter C Ladwig III and Anit Mukherjee

### **Synopsis**

*The visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Washington DC provides an opportunity for the US and India to set aside some of the uncertainties that have set into the relationship. President Trump and Prime Minister Modi must be ambitious and spell out a vision befitting a global partnership.*

### **Commentary**

INDIAN PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's visit to Washington on 26 June 2017 is aimed primarily at establishing a rapport with President Donald J Trump, who attaches significant importance to personal relationships. However beyond "getting to know you" the first face-to-face meeting between them provides an opportunity to imprint a unique Trump-Modi vision on Indo-US relations by charting an ambitious agenda while guarding against potential irritants.

The good news is that the underlying strategic logic of the partnership makes more sense today than it did at the end of the 1990s. And a host of developments are pushing India and US even closer together.

### **Converging Interests Amid Difficult Issues**

Both countries recognise China as a long term rival and see Beijing's aggressive efforts to carve out a sphere of influence in Eurasia as a challenge to their core interests. Both countries want a politically stable Afghanistan and both have suffered at the hands of transnational terrorist groups that find safe haven in Pakistan.

Both have also pledged to safeguard maritime security and freedom of navigation in the sea lanes of the Indo-Pacific that many countries in Asia, Africa and Europe rely on for trade and energy. Responsibility for stewarding that relationship now rests with the Trump administration whose appreciation of the value of cooperation with India remains unclear.

A convergence of strategic interests can make a partnership possible, but it requires active efforts to make it work and move it forward. Behind closed doors, the pair will have to address several issues that could affect the relationship in the medium term.

First, President Trump's "transactional" approach to foreign policy raises a lot of uncertainty for India. Many observers believe President Trump has softened his tone towards China because of its perceived utility in managing North Korea. Could a similar logic apply to gain Pakistan's cooperation in Afghanistan, despite its continued support for anti-Indian terrorist groups? Would America demand that India to curtail its economic ties with Iran? Will the "strategic altruism" that has characterized U.S.-India policy in recent administrations be replaced with a "what have you done for me lately" mentality?

### **'America First' vs 'Make in India'**

Second, a strong Indo-US relationship requires a solid economic foundation. Although trade in goods in services between the two countries was nearly US\$115

billion in 2016, India has benefited significantly from the globalisation and outsourcing that President Trump has decried. Trump's "Buy American, Hire American" policy could be a roadblock for Modi's "Make in India" campaign.

Third, New Delhi is concerned by the fact that key foreign policy offices in the Trump administration remain unfilled—particularly those focusing on India and the broader Asia-Pacific. The President has yet to name an ambassador to India and the State Department is still waiting for an Assistant Secretary for South Asia to be appointed. At the Pentagon expertise in Southeast Asia has been privileged over South Asia in filling posts focusing on the region. Taken together, these developments have led observers of US-India relations, both in Washington and in New Delhi, to predict troubled times ahead.

### **Avenues for Future Cooperation**

Although President Trump and Prime Minister Modi must have some forthright conversations, in setting out an agenda for the future there are several avenues they can pursue to move the relationship forward. Under Modi, Indo-US defence cooperation has become much more ambitious, particularly with respect to the sharing of sensitive technology.

One idea explored by the Obama administration was partnering in designing the next aircraft carrier for the Indian Navy. Now that India has succeeded in developing an indigenous nuclear submarine, perhaps another area to consider would be naval nuclear propulsion to help extend the Indian Navy's reach across the Indian Ocean.

Second, the two countries could institutionalise the coordination of their foreign policies in South Asia and beyond, with a focus on responding to China's growing influence. This would require establishing a mechanism for regular and intensive dialogue on regional and global developments. While some of this is already happening, however, there is a need to regularise this process and give more discretion to bureaucracies to share information.

Third, the two countries should identify mutually beneficial areas to deepen economic partnership. Success in this endeavour will require India to grant American firms increased access to its markets, but at the end of the day, US cooperation is essential to achieve Modi's ambition of rapidly transforming India into a developed economy.

### **Need for a Long View**

Defence is one area where the US has considerable expertise and efforts to co-develop or co-produce hardware can provide new opportunities for American firms while enhancing the capacity of Indian partners. Energy is another sector where India's poorly-run and sometimes crumbling infrastructure could benefit from American technology, expertise and investment. A US-India partnership that enhances economic growth and deepens connectivity between South, Central, and South-East Asia could be a win-win for all.

Finally, both sides need to take a long-view of the relationship. Although many observers consider India and the US to be "natural partners," the two countries do have significant differences on substantive issues such as Iran, climate change, and intellectual property rights, just to name a few.

The key is to recognise that such differences exist in virtually all bilateral relationships and not let these areas of disagreement overshadow the breadth and depth of the strategic partnership that India and the US have forged over the past fifteen years.

President Trump has been bequeathed a significant legacy in America's strategic partnership with India. With the administration's attention demanded by China, Russia, North Korea, Syria and Islamic State, to date, the world's largest democracy appears to have been lost in the shuffle. Prime Minister Modi's trip provides an opportunity to solidify the bilateral relationship and chart a path towards transforming it into a truly global partnership.

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