

Engaging an inward looking US

PM Modi will need to work out a new roadmap that will help India navigate relations with Trump's America



RAJA MANDALA

BY C. RAJA MOHAN

AS HE HEADS to the White House later this month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a two-fold challenge. One is to preserve the gains in the bilateral relationship with the United States over the last two decades. The other is to find ways to cope with the unprecedented turbulence in America following the election of Donald Trump as the president last November.

All of the recent predecessors of Modi and Trump — from Rajiv Gandhi to Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Manmohan Singh in Delhi and Barack Obama, George Bush and Bill Clinton in Washington — have contributed to the transformation of India-US relations. In India, Modi devoted great personal and political energies to advance the partnership with the US. Even more important, Modi had sought to end India's long-standing ambivalence towards America by bringing a sense of self-assurance and realism to Delhi's engagement with Washington. As he told the US Congress during his visit to Washington last summer, India's "historic hesitations" in engaging America are now over.

Having brought India out of its defensive shell, Modi now finds he must deal with an America that is retreating into one. Trump's unexpected victory in the last presidential elections has pushed the United States onto a trajectory very different from the one that the world had got accustomed to since the middle of the 20th century. In Washington, large sections of the political elite and the permanent establishment are yet to reconcile with the surprise result of the 2016 election. Trump's personal and political styles have also contributed to the deepening of a rare political schism in Washington.

As the old policy markers in Washington disappear, Modi must devise a new map to navigate Trump's America. The traditional props that have framed India-US relationship over the last two decades — including those on shared democratic values and a common interest in Asian balance of power — can no longer provide an effective guidance to the Trump era.

Delhi has been wise to set a modest ambition to Modi's visit — of building a personal rapport with Trump. But the PM's talks with Trump will also be critical in shaping India's long-term national strategy in the emerging multipolar world. The PM's recent travels in Europe and Central Asia have already seen some first Indian steps in responding to Trump's impact on Eurasia. But getting America right at a mo-

ment when it is changing at home remains India's highest priority.

The quest for a multipolar world has been one of the central themes of India's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Although the rhetoric was all about multipolarity, the practice of the presumed partners in this enterprise — Beijing, Moscow and Delhi — was all about improving ties with the sole super power in Washington. Put another way, "multipolarity" was the insurance against potential problems with the "unipolar" moment. It was about creating some political leverage in their engagement with the United States.

The rapid rise of China, the assertion of Russia and the broader diffusion of power in the international system in the 21st century have indeed been chipping away at the unipolar moment. But what hastened the multipolar moment is America's internal political churn that propelled a rank outsider like Trump into the White House. Although China, Russia and India were eager to see limits on American power, none of them has been prepared for the prospect of American retrenchment.

Trump's surprise victory may have been inconsequential for Europe and Asia if he had stuck to the establishment world view. But his victory was in part due to his very questioning of the cost benefit calculus of America's expansive global role and the much vaunted Washington's leadership of the liberal international order.

Trump has challenged the value of America's Eurasian military alliances and demands that the allies do more if they want American protection. Trump has argued that the globalist policies of the US — from promoting free trade to mitigating climate change — have come at the expense of American workers. Trump has also declared that he is pulling America out of the business of promoting universal values and intervening in the internal affairs of other nations.

Ever since the Second World War, India had to deal with US internationalism. Under Trump, Delhi must learn to cope with American nationalists, who are asking "what's in it for me?". Since the end of the Cold War, Delhi has craved for a multipolar world. Thanks to Trump, its wish has come true. Modi's task in Washington is to get Indian diplomacy adapt to these twin changes in America.

In the seven decades since India's independence, it was Washington that set the agenda for bilateral relationship. With Trump, Delhi must figure out what it wants from America and what it is prepared to give in return. For many in Delhi this will be an awkward strategic moment. Modi, though, might want to see it as a historic opportunity to take the initiative and shape the terms of a new relationship with America.

The writer is director, Carnegie India, Delhi and contributing editor on foreign affairs for 'The Indian Express'