

This Boat Still Floats

As Modi meets Trump for the first time, soul of India-US strategic partnership is intact

Indrani.Bagchi@timesgroup.com



That slightly awkward hug at the end of the Modi-Trump summit settled one important debate about the future of US-India relations in the Trump administration – hugs will stay, white-knuckle handshakes are for others.

The Modi visit was tightly crafted, with most of the heavy lifting being done by foreign secretary S Jaishankar and NSA Ajit Doval well in advance. Jaishankar and Doval have logged many frequent flyer miles to get the desired outcome, with the foreign secretary negotiating directly with Rex Tillerson and James Mattis, while Doval did the hard work with McMaster and Kelly.

The Trump administration is seriously short-staffed and battling external, internal and virtual enemies – India did not want to fall into these boxes or through the cracks. The US relationship is much too important for that.

The Indians went into this summit intent on preserving the strategic contours of the relationship. That has received strong endorsement in the joint statement. A summary of the US-India priorities for the next few years is “combatting terrorist threats, promoting stability across the Indo-Pacific region, increasing free and fair trade, and strengthening energy linkages.”

With the designation of Syed Salahuddin as a global terrorist, India has sealed the narrative of the Kashmir unrest as one of being Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. This should be seen together with the surgical strikes, ongoing crackdown on militants in the Valley and a refusal to start official talks with Pakistan.

From the US point of view, it appears to be a sign that Washington is less inclined to “incentivise” Pakistan to improve – both in Afghanistan and India. The US is ready to call out Pakistan for its support and sanctuary to terror groups from Haqqanis to Hizbul Mujahideen. Pakistan is probably the country with the largest number of global terrorists under its protection.



Interestingly, India and the US decided to set up “a new consultation mechanism on domestic and international terrorist designations listing proposals”. This mechanism could be a way to counter China’s protection of Pakistan, as in the Masood Azhar case in the UN Security Council. Going forward, India might expand its security footprint in Afghanistan, because the next phase of the battle there is likely to be very different from what you see today, and would focus more on countering terrorism.

The Trump administration has preserved the soul of the Strategic Vision Document of 2015, which is important as India puts wind under its wings across the Indian Ocean, hoping to expand its sphere of influence from Aden to Malacca. The Sea Guardian drones, if India buys them, will have a role in giving India maritime domain dominance, keeping China in check.

Big move: America today endorsed India’s language, red-flagging China’s enterprise in Pakistan by supporting “regional economic connectivity through

With the designation of Syed Salahuddin as a global terrorist, India has sealed the narrative of the Kashmir unrest as one of being Pakistan-sponsored terrorism

the transparent development of infrastructure and the use of responsible debt financing practices, while ensuring respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the rule of law, and the environment”. China has watched this summit closely – the strong statement on North Korea, where China’s feet are still held to the fire is as much a matter of concern as Indo-US maritime convergence, terrorism and Afghanistan.

Trade and economic issues will continue to be a problem with the US, but they have been shoved into committees and consultations, which means no

surprises. India conceded on “fair” trade in addition to “free” trade, and Trump was clear that India had to open its economy further and trade should be “fair and reciprocal”.

What did we not see? Despite the line on supporting India in the non-proliferation regimes, it’s clear India will have to row this boat alone. We also did not see Indian wailing on H-1B visas – Modi has decided he has bigger fish to fry. Trump has already walked back on some of his tech visa ban ideas. Anyway, Indian companies would be better off lobbying on Capitol Hill rather than the White House.

With Obama, Modi persuaded the US to engage deeply in India’s transformation exercise – education, skills, smart cities, etc. That has completely disappeared, despite the PM saying US was India’s “primary partner”. The India-US outcomes are all in the realm of hard power. Modi is taking his developmental agenda to the Europeans instead. In The Netherlands yesterday, India signed a big pact on water, and getting Dutch assistance to clean up the Ganga. We will partner the EU on our developmental goals, with the US on security and strategic objectives.

Climate change is, unsurprisingly, conspicuous by its absence. Instead it is a forward-looking energy relationship, which includes clean coal technology, US gas exports, etc. There was a time in the past when India-US statements imagined a better world. The goals are less vaulting now. In Trump’s words, they are, “to create jobs in our countries, to grow our economies, and to create a trading relationship that is fair and reciprocal”.

This administration will remain challenged on the people front. We now know Kenneth Juster is the next envoy to India, but the process could take months. On the other hand, the India-US relationship is becoming institutionalised, less prey to leadership vicissitudes. Things will be a lot more transactional, but India has to live in the real world.

It’s past 2am and Trump hasn’t tweeted anything about Modi. Could anything be better?