

Promises in the Rose Garden

In a well-calibrated programme, Prime Minister Modi's U.S. visit reaffirmed an indispensable partnership



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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's much anticipated visit to Washington has come and gone. The chemistry was positive, and the physics (that is, the structural content and equilibrium) and the geometry (the angles and alignments along which the visit was pitched) well-calibrated. Mr. Modi's fifth visit to the U.S. as Prime Minister concluded on a note of reassuring affirmation about relations between the world's most important and largest democracies.

President Donald Trump is a man of many moods and 'humours', a personification of impulse and impetuosity. The fact that the two leaders struck a good rapport, marked by mutual "respect and friendship", despite the difference in their personalities, augurs well.

In Mr. Trump's own words, he had "tremendous success" in his meeting with Mr. Modi. Progress in bilateral relations over the last few years received the imprimatur of endorsement of the new President, and there were no missed heartbeats or gut-wrenching moments.

Arc of cooperation

Besides claiming that both leaders were "world leaders in social media", Mr. Trump's Rose Garden statement spoke of both countries working together to create jobs and grow their economies (a foundational ideology for Mr. Trump which is not antithetical to priorities in Mr. Modi's India) and ensuring a trading relationship that is fair and reciprocal. Mr. Trump announced that the U.S. will sign major contracts with India for the sale of natural gas, although he was trying "to get the price up a little bit".

On the security front, he expressed the joint determination of both countries to destroy "radical Islamic terrorism" as also to en-



hance military cooperation, with mention of the forthcoming 'Malabar' naval exercise involving the Indian, American and Japanese navies. He had a good word for Indian efforts to help Afghanistan and for India's joining in sanctions against the North Korean regime – a regime that was causing "tremendous problems" and which had to be dealt with, "and probably dealt with rapidly". This last aside, where Mr. Trump departed from prepared remarks, should get East Asia analysts and experts ready with their dissection tools to understand what looked like a clenched warning to Pyongyang.

Mr. Modi, as an astute student of human psychology, was effusive in both body language (the three "diplohugs" directed towards what some call a "germophobic" President!) and words of warm appreciation for the First Lady and Mr. Trump. He invited Ivanka Trump to India, and she has accepted. His key words were "mutual trust" and "convergence" to describe his meeting with Mr. Trump, as he referred to the "common priorities", and the "robust strategic partnership" that unites the two countries. He called the U.S. the "primary partner" for India's transformation, stressing convergence between his vision for a new India and Mr. Trump's vision of "making America great again".

Striking a high note, Mr. Modi spoke of Mr. Trump's successful experience in the business world as lending "an aggressive and forward-looking agenda to our relations". For his part, he said, he would remain "a driven, determined and decisive partner" of the

U.S. The two leaders have set aside the "hesitations of history", it would seem.

Close watch on Afghanistan

Interestingly, on Afghanistan, Mr. Modi spoke of maintaining "close consultation and communication with the U.S. to enhance coordination between our two nations", and terrorism in that country being "one of our common concerns". This space must be watched to determine the contours of future cooperation. So too, the reference to the increasing consultations on West Asia in the joint statement, "in accord with India's Think West policy" flags an issue of important ramifications, requiring more elaboration. The triangulations involving Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran are extremely complex today, and common India-U.S. perspectives (apart from eradicating Islamic radicalism) await more specific identification.

The delineation of shared interests as "democratic stalwarts" and "responsible stewards" in the joint statement ("Prosperity Through Partnership") on the Indo-Pacific (a formulation more India-inclusive than earlier ones) is to be noted. There is clear messaging to China in the call for respecting sovereignty and international law, with a distinct echo of the Indian position on China's Belt and Road Initiative, when the statement called for "bolstering regional economic connectivity through the transparent development of infrastructure and the use of responsible debt financing practices, while ensuring respect for sovereignty and territorial integ-

ity, the rule of law, and the environment". That is a good screen grab of Indian concerns about China's strategic overreach and suggests that the U.S. has no fundamental disagreement with this assessment.

The defence and security partnership (of interest was the Foreign Secretary's designation of "defence, security and connectivity" as key concerns), and counter-terrorism remain central to the relationship. The naming of Hizbul Mujahideen's Syed Salahuddin by the U.S. State Department as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist as well as the launch of a new consultative mechanism on domestic and international terrorist listing proposals was a definite boost. The call on Pakistan to "expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators" of the Mumbai and Pathankot terror attacks was reiterated. The reference to these attacks being perpetrated by Pakistan-based groups is to be noted. The expansion of intelligence-sharing and operational-level counterterrorism cooperation signals greater mutual confidence about working to eliminate terrorist threats. It remains to be seen whether the affirmation of U.S. support for a UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism will translate into a more coordinated India-U.S. approach.

Deepening security and defence cooperation between India and the U.S. has marked this bilateral relationship for some years now. Interoperability, given the growing proportion of U.S.-bought equipment with the Indian armed forces, is a concrete possibility. The offer of sale of Sea Guardian Unmanned Aerial Systems to India was confirmed and this will provide for an enhancement of Indian capabilities in maritime defence and deterrence. India's offer of support for U.S. observer status in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium was flagged. The organisation has a membership of 22, including Iran and four observers, including China and Japan. Levels of activity have not been high in recent years.

Unfinished agenda

Digital partnership was a concept projected in the briefing by the For-

eign Secretary and found mention in Mr. Modi's remarks and the joint statement. This is an omnibus term that can encompass many meanings – including innovation, technology flows, as well as the give and take of knowledge in the cyber sector (and its human-resource, professional component). The H-1B visa issue did not come up for specific mention in these public statements, but obviously remains on the agenda.

Finding creative ways to enhance bilateral trade and increased market access including in agriculture (a particular U.S. concern) and information technology (of Indian interest), as mentioned in the joint statement, will be monitored carefully. The energy partnership has survived the visit, contrary to apprehensions, and besides U.S. natural gas (read shale), there was mention of clean coal and renewable resources and technologies for India – in order to "promote universal access to affordable and reliable energy".

Civil nuclear energy cooperation merited a brief mention, but just that. The resolve to sealing the contractual agreements between the financially stressed Westinghouse Electric Company and the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. and related project financing over the next few months offers hope without the promise of finality. On another front, U.S. support for India's permanent membership of the UN Security Council, Indian membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Australia Group has been reiterated.

There is a final footnote to the visit. And it involves President Abraham Lincoln. There are some in India who regard Mr. Modi as similar to the 16th U.S. President, as unusual as this may seem. The fact that Mr. Modi chose to give Mr. Trump a commemorative stamp issued by India in 1965 to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of Abraham Lincoln should offer interesting and intriguing insights about our Prime Minister.

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