

myview

Narendra Modi goes to Washington, again

WORLDLY WISE
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As Prime Minister Narendra Modi plans for his fifth visit to the US in just four years and his first face-to-face meeting with President Donald Trump, there is a perception that the two polarizing and uber-nationalistic leaders could determine the future course of India-US relations in two diametrically opposite ways.

On the one hand, based on positive statements and early communications between both leaders, some experts optimistically argue that since both Modi and Trump consider themselves to be consummate dealmakers, the new direction in relations will manifest itself in new agreements and closer strategic proximity. This section believes that relations will mostly remain business as usual but would be based almost entirely on short-term transactional executive agreements.

On the other hand, citing negative statements mostly by Trump (such as on India's greed being behind its support for the Paris agreement), some experts assert that given the self-centered personalities involved as well as their unorthodox approach to foreign policy, the new direc-

tion will be fraught with new challenges and tensions. Here Trump's "America First" might collide head on with Modi's "Make in India" and stymie bilateral relations.

In reality, while India-US relations will not be business as usual, given the personalities of the two leaders, neither of these extremes will come to pass for a number of reasons.

First, although political leaders have played an important role in either advancing or derailing bilateral relations (the George W. Bush-Manmohan Singh nuclear deal is an example of the former while the Richard Nixon-Indira Gandhi spat is evidence of the latter), their initiatives alone are not the only determinants in an increasingly multidimensional partnership, which includes the legislature, the corporate sector, powerful bureaucracies, and the successful Indian diaspora in the US. Thus, at best, strong political leadership can determine the pace rather than the trajectory of India-US relations.

Second, Trump—a political neophyte—is not regarded as a successful executive and, despite his claims to the contrary, has

not been able to push through any of his signature domestic initiatives, be it on immigration, healthcare or the budget. All of these have been challenged by various domestic constituencies, including, ironically, a Republican-dominated Congress. Similarly, in the foreign policy arena, while his iconoclastic impulses are apparent in the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris Agreement, his abilities to forge new relations, either with Russia or China, or resolve conflict in the Middle East is suspect.

Moreover, the growing domestic storm over the Trump administration's alleged links to Russia during and after the 2016 campaign, and other scandals have all but paralysed the White House's agenda and further distracted a presidency with a lim-

ited attention span. Finally, Trump's ability to alienate friends and embrace foes has implications for bilateral relations as well as the emerging world order.

Against this reality, Modi's forthcoming visit is an opportunity to strengthen ties and nip in the bud challenges for India-US relations. Team Modi should pursue short-term transactional deals and build on the long-term strategic partnership, which will bear fruition long after the Trump era is over.

In terms of transactional deals, the most advantageous one are related to energy. While not rubbing Washington's nose in for rejecting the Paris agreement, New Delhi could take advantage of the fossil-fuel friendly administration. For instance, as India mulls privatization of its decrepit and ill-managed coal industry, it could ask

the US administration and companies for investment, expertise and modern technology to enhance efficiency. Similarly, India, which has been seeking additional sources for natural gas, could increase imports from the US. However, the most lucrative transactional deal might well be a bold bid to buy the bankrupt US nuclear giant, Westinghouse. Even if this bid is unsuccessful, it has the potential to enhance India-US relations and the global nuclear industry in one shot, while also improving chances for India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Simultaneously, Modi could also reach out to captains of the US industry, who are committed to the Paris Agreement and the driving force behind 21st century technologies and economy—in green energy, cyber and space security—by offering incentives to invest in joint ventures, which would allow them to make in India and the US simultaneously. It is no coincidence that in his annual hajj to the mecca of capitalism Modi has made it a point to meet with top CEOs and visit corporate centers of innovation, technology and infrastructure.

Transactions apart, the White House is also keen to build closer cooperation on countering terrorism and "expand security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region". The latter is likely to be determined by reaching an understanding on the US conduct of so-called Freedom of Navigation Operations in India's exclusive economic zone and on how Washington stands up to China's antics in the region and its perspective on the One Belt, One Road plan.

While the visit has been billed as a "no-frills" summit and both sides are downplaying expectation, the outcome is likely to be substantive in setting the tone for future interactions. And that will begin by how Modi reacts to Trump's handshake and how Trump deals with Modi's bear hug. Watch closely.

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