

American voyage

The PM's meeting with Trump gives India a chance to study its options in a changed world

Three years after his first visit to meet U.S. President Barack Obama, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to Washington for his first meeting with the new President, Donald Trump, on June 26. His visit in 2014 was made easier by a strong Indo-U.S. relationship built steadily over the previous two decades, and grounded in Mr. Obama's personal commitment to enhancing strategic ties. It also benefited from Mr. Modi's willingness to let bygones be bygones, over the earlier denial to him of a visa to the U.S., in order to build a new relationship, and his show of diaspora strength in the U.S. Mr. Modi now goes to Washington as a seasoned interlocutor, not the 'new kid on the world leadership block' he was in previous visits. But the situation in 2017 is different. In the five months since his inauguration, Mr. Trump has made it clear that no international relationship can be taken for granted, and it will be difficult to predict which American foreign policy principles will be adhered to in the new administration, and which will be dropped without ceremony. On the partnership with India, few will be willing to hazard a guess on what Mr. Trump has in mind. As President he has spoken to Mr. Modi twice, and sent his National Security Adviser to the region. But he has also criticised India on a tough tariff regime, on immigration and professional visas, and while withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, accused India of taking "billions and billions" of U.S. aid to fund its commitments. India has not been the biggest priority on Mr. Trump's list of meetings with world leaders; the focus has been on America's closest alliances in Europe and Japan, and problem areas such as China and Turkey.

Given the changed circumstances, officials in both India and the U.S. have reportedly set aside any formal agenda for the meeting on Monday, placing the emphasis on how the one-on-one meeting between the two leaders goes. Both sides have also, appropriately, toned down expectations of any big announcements. There are indications of likely agreements to be announced on counter-terror cooperation, maritime traffic facilitation and trade. However, it would be wise to put off more substantive decisions, on military cooperation, large defence purchases, Afghanistan and fighting regional terror, and the long-pending operationalisation of the nuclear deal to the next bilateral meeting, and focus instead on firming up the ground rules of engagement. That will allow Mr. Modi to get a true sense of what Mr. Trump's commitment to the relationship is, while India studies its options on how to chart its course amid the new uncertainty in world politics. That he is getting a sense of the changed U.S. administration may be clear from the decision not to hold any large gatherings of the Indian-American community this time, presumably in deference to the prevailing sentiment in Washington over immigration.