

Modi's homework on Trump paid off



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America's closest friends have had a bumpy adjustment to the Donald Trump presidency and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is no different. He had steadily moved India closer to the United States during the Barack Obama presidency. It seemed like a real strategic alliance was falling into place. Even in the eyes of India's traditional ally Russia, India had upgraded its US relationship, and Moscow moved closer to Beijing. Russia is now China's largest oil supplier and purveyor of high-end military hardware.

Now imagine Mr Modi's frustration at having to convince America's famously erratic new President all over again. Mr Modi watched as President Trump wined and dined Chinese President Xi Jinping at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida in April. For China, Mr Trump's presidency is an unimagined geopolitical windfall. An inward-looking Mr Trump is not interested in propping up India as a counterweight to China while building America's security architecture in the Asia Pacific region.

In fact, Mr Trump held high hopes for greater cooperation from China to exert influence over North Korea to rein in its nuclear programme. It was propitious for Mr Modi's visit to Washington when Mr Trump finally tweeted on June 21 that he was no longer relying on Chinese efforts to deal with North Korea.

Luck also favours the prepared. Mr Modi did his homework by watching Mr Trump's off-the-cuff interviews and parsing his tweets. The Indian embassy in Washington got personal insights into Mr Trump from mon-

eyed Indian-Americans who move in Mr Trump's rarified inner circle. Ultimately, Mr Modi succeeded in build a good rapport with Mr Trump by reading him correctly.

He grasped that Mr Trump's "America First" approach focuses on what countries can do for the United States. Therefore, Mr Modi went to the White House bearing gifts: big-ticket defence deals that will create American jobs and fire up Trump's Rust Belt base. India's role as a potential buyer of American military hardware, Boeing aircrafts and US-produced LNG (green-light liquefied natural gas) fit snugly into Mr Trump's "America First" battle cry.

What did the Indian Prime Minister get in return? A golden opportunity to protect India's important energy security. Energy-hungry India, looking to increase natural gas in its energy mix, is urging the US to allow LNG exports, arguing it would be an economic benefit to both nations. Mr Trump said the US looked forward to exporting more energy, including major long-term contracts to purchase American natural gas. India must hold Mr Trump to his promise as India imports 75 per cent of its energy needs today and expects to import 90 per cent over the next decade.

Washington doesn't allow gas exports to any country with which it doesn't have a free trade agreement, but in 2013 the US made an exception for India's state-run energy giant GAIL, which locked down a 20-year import deal to buy LNG from Houston-based Cheniere Energy in a deal worth \$15 billion. New Delhi is now pressing Washington to relax its restrictive export policy

for other Indian companies as well.

Mr Modi is also walking away with a new offer for a C-17 aircraft, worth an estimated \$366.2 million, which adds to India's existing fleet of transport aircraft. The US has also offered to sell a naval variant of the Predator drone, a deal that would be worth more than \$2 billion, although the final details on price and other aspects are still being negotiated.

In a good sign, Mr Modi's first meeting with Mr Trump was long on proclamations of friendship and short on confrontation over delicate policy issues. Mr Trump, however, said he sees a need for more balance in the US-India trade relationship. Last year the US trade deficit with India neared \$31 billion. Any enlarged scope for US companies to do business in India should be linked to India getting unrestricted access to US markets for onshore and offshore software services, including visas for our professionals. We also need to unashamedly and unequivocally link commerce with US pressure on Pakistan on terrorism. Declining empires do listen to rising economic powers if they want market access.

The Trump administration is considering taking a harder position against Pakistan for supporting terrorist groups in Afghanistan. The US is planning a deployment of 5,000 additional troops to its 16-year-long war in Afghanistan. A troop surge and hard Pakistan line will be music to India's ears. Among the tools considered by the Trump administration, are expanding drone strikes, withholding aid and revoking Pakistan's status as a major non-Nato ally. President

Barack Obama also tried to coerce Pakistan by cutting economic assistance and lowering diplomatic contacts. For instance, Mr Obama never visited Islamabad in his eight years as President.

Again, Pakistan will probably have to eat its heart out as Mr Trump has accepted an invitation from Mr Modi to visit India during his presidency. Meanwhile, Mr Trump's daughter Ivanka, who is being assiduously courted by Beijing, will lead a US delegation to India's Global Entrepreneurship Summit 2017. Going by the relaxed body language and number of bearhugs — three in front of the shutterbugs — that Mr Modi gave President Trump the two have established an easy rapport. Much like Mr Trump's own seesaw style of shaking hands, analysts say the quintessential Modi bearhug has become a signature move, and is only bestowed on a chosen few. Unlike Mr Modi, poor Angela Merkel, the powerful German Chancellor received a frosty welcome when she visited the White House in March this year. Mr Trump shared an awkward moment with Ms Merkel, apparently declining to shake her hand, a traditional gesture during a photo op at the Oval Office.

When reporters asked whether there would be a handshake, Ms Merkel leaned in and appeared to ask: "Do you want to have a handshake?"

Mr Trump did not even look back at her and stared glumly straight ahead. By contrast, Mr Modi has kindled a young bromance with Mr Trump.

The writer is a New York-based commentator