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Narendra Modi plays the Trump card

WORLDLY WISE
W.P.S. SIDHU

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first meeting with US President Donald Trump was, by most accounts of Raisina Hill and Washington, DC beltway watchers, a success for both countries. From an evenly matched handshake to the deft signature Modi baby bear-hug (a notable feat given Trump's germ phobia) to the joint statement, the "no frills" summit, contrary to predictions of gloom, advanced the pace of India-US relations, but only modestly. Even the timing of the visit—early in the Trump administration—signals the growing bilateral engagement. In doing so, it shows continuity rather than dramatic change from previous top-level interactions. And that's good news for India.

Consider the following: The joint statement declared that both sides "resolved to expand and deepen the strategic partnership between the countries and advance common objectives", especially in "combating terrorist threats, promoting stability across the Indo-Pacific region, increasing free and fair trade, and strengthening energy linkages". This is boilerplate language from previous statements and the emphasis on specific issues underlines the

key areas of concern for both.

In geopolitical terms, the Indo-Pacific region—stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Pacific Ocean—and concern over a more assertive China is centre stage and the joint statement makes several references to its significance: The US and India will be "joint stewards" to ensure "peace and stability in the region", uphold international law, freedom of navigation, overflight, and commerce, and the peaceful settlement of territorial and maritime disputes in accordance with international law; the importance of the Malabar naval exercises and the sharing of "white shipping" data in achieving these objectives; and, as a corollary, the sale of the naval unarmed version of the Predator drone and support for India's entry into various non-proliferation groups, notably the Nuclear Suppliers Group. While the statement also makes geopolitical references to Afghanistan, India's "Think West" policy, and North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations, it is clear that China (without being mentioned) is the primary focus.

Pakistan remains de-hyphenated, and has been dismissed as a state in crisis that,

either through omission or commission, is unable or unwilling to prevent cross-border terrorist attacks from its territory. Predictably, Islamabad has rejected the joint statement, setting itself up for continued non-dialogue with both Washington and New Delhi.

In geo-economic terms, the emphasis was "to find creative ways to improve bilateral trade", and radically—given Trump's rejection of the Paris Agreement—"a rational approach that balances environment and climate policy, global economic development, and energy security needs". The latter has translated into a call for the US to remove barriers for the export of more natural gas, clean coal, and renewable energy sources to India. Similarly, the statement also expects forward movement

on the sale of six nuclear reactors, while disregarding the fact that the bankrupt US nuclear giant Westinghouse might not be able to supply the reactors. Modi, clearly, didn't make a bid to rescue Westinghouse.

The emphasis of the joint statement on geopolitics, especially the Indo-Pacific and counter-terrorism, and geo-economics, particularly energy and trade, reveals that the primary drivers of the first Trump-Modi meeting were the White House, notably the National Security Council (NSC), the Pentagon, the department of energy, and, only thereafter, the state department. This is unsurprising given that the state department has still not nominated an assistant secretary of state for South Asia or an ambassador to India. In contrast, the NSC and the Pentagon in par-

ticular have benefited from the presence of seasoned experts on India and their operational-level interactions with New Delhi.

The statement also reveals the influence of bottom-up operational activities, such as the ongoing and expanding naval exercises, as well as top-down aspirational objectives, such as Washington's perennial support for India's permanent membership of the UN Security Council, which are not backed by any working-level cooperation.

Similarly, the statement also includes desire for cooperation in areas where there is clear disagreement between the two sides. For instance, Modi's Think West policy, which calls for engagement with every key actor in the region, from Israel to Saudi Arabia to Iran, is at odds with Trump's efforts to move closer to Saudi Arabia and isolate Iran. Against this backdrop, the call to "increase cooperation, enhance diplomatic consultations, and increase tangible collaboration with partners in the Middle East" is likely to remain a non-starter, unless the two sides can work out how to resolve differences and ensure their mutual interests.

Finally, there is a clear distinction in the 'value'-based approach of Modi and the more 'interest' and transactional approach of Trump. In his *Wall Street Journal* op-ed and his opening comments at the White House, Modi stressed "shared values" and emphasized the need for the world's oldest and largest democracies to work together. In contrast, the transactionally-focused Trump highlighted India's purchase of the Sea Guardian drone. This underlines the need for New Delhi to stress interests over values, especially when dealing with the Trump administration. Semantics apart, the success of the first Trump-Modi outing is no mean achievement given that relations between the US and some of its closest allies have become distinctly frosty and frayed. Clearly, in the first round Modi has played the Trump card to his advantage.

W.P.S. Sidhu is visiting professor at New York University's Center for Global Affairs and associate fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy.

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