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Trump-Modi Summit: Keeping United States-India Ties on Course

The meeting between India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the United States (US) President Donald Trump in Washington on 26 June 2017 was not followed by any major announcements in such areas as defence, civil nuclear energy, trade and greater Indian access to the American job market. However, the outcome of the visit will still be of considerable interest to both China and Pakistan. The focus now shifts to how the China-Pakistan factor may shape the US-India equation.

P S Suryanarayana¹

United States (US) President Donald Trump has struck a high note of optimism about his country's engagement with India, going forward. In a brief show of public diplomacy that matched his penchant for sound-bites in the social media, Trump treated his guest, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to a profusion of warm homilies on the Indo-American relationship. The rhetoric was in sync with the setting, the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, where the two leaders expressed satisfaction over their first round of official talks on 26 June 2017. Modi, on his part, reciprocated the sentiments of his host, who described

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himself and his guest as “world leaders in social media”² who were, therefore, able to keep pace with the pulse of their respective compatriots.

The multitudes who follow these two leaders in their twitter politics and diplomacy are obviously not the focus of our attention, which, instead, pertains to a reality check on the Trump-Modi bonhomie of positive sentiments. For good measure in this symphony, Trump told Modi, “During my campaign [for US presidential election in 2016], I pledged that if elected, India would have a true friend in the White House. And that is now exactly what you have – a true friend. The friendship between the United States and India is built on shared values, including our shared commitment to democracy. Not many people know it, but both American and the Indian constitutions begin with the same three very beautiful words: We the people.”³ Modi reciprocated, “I am sure that the convergence between my vision for a ‘new India’ and President Trump’s vision for ‘making America great again’ will add new dimensions to our cooperation...We are not just partners by chance. We are also partners in dealing with current and future challenges that we may be faced with.”⁴

It is by the outcome of the Trump-Modi summit with regard to the current and future challenges that the Indo-American engagement will be tested. The India-US bilateral agenda, especially on issues such as defence and trade, is also of interest to China and Pakistan. At the same time, India has concerns regarding the behaviour of these two countries towards its aspiration to emerge as a major player on the international stage. Finally, India’s neighbourhood concerns of this kind matter to the US in its global agenda of meeting the challenge of a rising China.

Bonhomie and ‘Barriers’

On the Indo-American bilateral side, there is hardly any specific agreement at this stage on any of the contentious issues such as the US residential visas (H-1B visas)⁵ for highly-skilled

² The White House (US), Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi of India in Joint Press Statement, 26 June 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/26/remarks-president-trump-and-prime-minister-modi-india-joint-press>. Accessed on 27 June 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In a programme on the Trump-Modi summit, telecast by China Global Television Network on 27 June 2017, immediately after the meeting in Washington on 26 June 2017, it was stated that 70 per cent of H-1B visas

Indian professionals or America's trade deficit with India. According to the US Census Bureau, America's deficit in trade in goods with India in 2016 amounted to US\$24.38 billion (S\$33.88 billion) out of a total value of US\$67.68 billion (S\$94.07 billion), with India exporting nearly US\$46 billion (S\$63.94 billion) worth of goods.⁶ In fact, Trump told Modi that, "It is important that barriers be removed to the export of US goods into your markets, and that we reduce our trade deficit with your country."⁷ However, setting much store by the "extensive economic and tax reforms" in both countries, Trump and Modi "resolved to pursue" greater "commercial engagement" between the two sides "in a manner that advances the principles of free and fair trade".⁸ For this, it was stated, the US and India "plan", that is, intend to "undertake a comprehensive review of [the bilateral] trade relations". Such a review will be aimed at, among other mandates, "increasing market access in areas such as agriculture, information technology, and manufactured goods and services."⁹ The catch phrases of information technology and services may please India, while the whole gamut must suit the US as well.

On the broader bilateral economic ties, Trump told Modi that, "We are looking forward to exporting more American energy to India as your economy grows, including major long-term contracts to purchase American natural gas, which are right now being negotiated, and we will sign them."¹⁰ For good measure, Trump quipped that he was now "trying to get the price up a little bit"¹¹ for the sale of natural gas to India. The two sides also "looked forward to [the] conclusion of contractual agreements", a diplomatic euphemism for the lack of progress, on the installation of six nuclear energy reactors for electricity generation in India; the issue of "related project financing"¹² was also merely stated with no specific accord being mentioned. The story of these six nuclear power reactors is the unfulfilled story of the anticipated economic spin-off for India from its civil nuclear accord with the US in 2005.

were being granted to Indian nationals (monitored by the author in Singapore). Some media reports have put the number of H-1B visas available each year at about 85,000. Trump is revamping the system.

⁶ United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5330.html>. Accessed on 27 June 2017.

⁷ The White House, (US), *op. cit.*

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Joint Statement – United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership*, 27 June 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28560/Joint_Statem... Accessed on 27 June 2017.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The White House (US), *op. cit.*

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *op. cit.*

With no economic specifics emerging from the Trump-Modi meeting, much focus centred on strategic affairs which are partly bilateral in nature but certainly global in scope. On India's neighbourhood agenda in this regard, Trump spread the impression of being in the mood to be accommodative towards India which is concerned about the relentless rise of China just next door.

In a subtle reference to Chinese President Xi Jinping's proactive implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of regional and global connectivity, Trump endorsed the principles on which India remains opposed to China's activism in this regard. The relevant portion of the US-India Joint Statement issued after the Trump-Modi talks is worth noting in full: "[T]he leaders...support 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 integrity, the rule of law, and the environment; and call on other nations in the [Indo-Pacific] region to adhere to these principles."¹³

India opposes the BRI on the ground that China is not adhering to these very principles. Much public attention has remained focused on the fact that the BRI flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through areas that Islamabad controls but India regards as its sovereign territory. However, India has also implicitly stated that the Chinese are not adhering to all of the above principles. On that basis, India had declined to attend the inauguration of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in Beijing on 14 May 2017.¹⁴

Indeed, Trump's endorsement of India's principles for international connectivity projects can be seen as a major diplomatic gain for Modi. When India cited these principles while staying away from the inauguration of the BRF and the related summit of political leaders in Beijing in mid-May 2017, many were of the view that India was isolating itself from the global community. Indeed, although Trump had also stayed away from the BRF summit, he did send a representative to the BRF's inaugural meeting which was attended by the heads of several

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For details of the India-China spat over the principles governing the Chinese BRI, read P S Suryanarayana, *ISAS Insights No. 411 – 23 May 2017, The Belt and Road Initiative: China Acts 'Global', India Plays 'Local'*. For challenges in the BRI implementation, read Amitendu Palit, *ISAS Insights No. 420 – 16 June 2017, Chinese Projects in South Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative: Disrupted by Debt?*, both available at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg>.

international organisations, including the United Nations and the World Bank. Now, with Trump supporting India's connectivity principles, Modi may have retrieved some lost ground on the world stage.

A Nuanced Approach towards China

While supporting Modi on his objections to Xi's BRI, Trump was careful not to tread on China's toes. He simply ignored his predecessor Barack Obama's explicit 'vision' of wanting to co-opt India to maintain maritime security in the geopolitical areas of Chinese core interest, including the South China Sea. With Modi, Trump merely agreed to "reiterate the importance of respecting freedom of navigation, overflight and commerce throughout the [Indo-Pacific] region."¹⁵ In contrast, Obama had, during his visit to India as the chief guest at its Republic Day celebration in January 2015, spelt out a 'vision' of working with New Delhi on maritime security in the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁶

On boosting India's military capabilities which alert its key neighbours, China and Pakistan, Trump gave Modi little in terms of specifics during their public appearance together after their first round of official talks on 26 June 2017. In the continuing context of America's recognition of India as a designated "Major Defence Partner" (in capital letters), the two countries reaffirmed their intention of "working together on advanced defence equipment and technology *at a level commensurate with that of the closest allies and partners of the United States*".¹⁷ (Emphasis added.) The italicised catch phrase appears to place the US-India co-development and co-production in the defence domain at par with America's links with Japan and South Korea, both China's neighbours, like India.

The US and India had, during Obama's visit to New Delhi in January 2015, identified future-generation technologies for aircraft carriers and jet engines as areas of bilateral collaboration. In addition, now, Trump has offered for "India's consideration the sale of [America's] Sea

¹⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ The White House, (US), US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, available at www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-jointstrategic-vision-asia-pacific-indian-ocean-region. Accessed on 26 January 2015.

¹⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *op. cit.*

Guardian Unmanned Aerial Systems”.¹⁸ More significantly, Trump announced that the US and Indian navies would join Japan soon “in the largest maritime exercise ever conducted in the vast Indian Ocean.”¹⁹

Prior to meeting Trump, Modi had also taken steps to boost ties with the US, capitalising on the significant foundations that the previous administrations in both countries had crafted. As pointed out by Sumit Ganguly, “Modi has also brought about substantive improvements in Indo-US relations. To that end, he has increased military acquisitions from the US, he has signed a major logistics agreement that had long been hanging fire and has seen India being accorded the status of a major defence partner.”²⁰

It is well known in the international strategic affairs circles that the relations between the US and India, no longer the “estranged democracies”²¹ of the past, are still far from being close in the bilateral and multilateral domains. The dilemmas of the present are best captured by Ashley Tellis, a one-time participant in Washington’s engagement with New Delhi. According to Tellis, there is indeed “one gigantic confluence of unparalleled significance: the rise of China...Beijing’s ascendancy would be dangerous to Washington if it precipitates a power transition [from the US] at the core of the global system...China’s growing preeminence would be dangerous to India [too] if it results in the entrenchment of a new superpower on India’s doorstep – an outcome that could [among other things]...enable the successful assertion of all of Beijing’s territorial claims [against New Delhi].”²² However, the “strong headwinds” impeding the productive and mutually-beneficial evolution of US-India strategic ties are two-pronged. “In the United States, bolstering ties with India is not a pressing foreign policy priority...In India, the US relationship with both Pakistan and China [as during various periods in the past] fuels doubts about American credibility.”²³ These

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The White House (US), Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi of India in Joint Press Statement, 26 June 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/26/remarks-president-trump-and-prime-minister-modi-india-joint-press>. Accessed on 27 June 2017.

²⁰ Sumit Ganguly, *ISAS Brief No. 493 – 20 June 2017, Indo-United States Relations at a Cusp*, available at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg>.

²¹ For an early phase in India-US relations, read *Estranged Democracies: India and the United States 1941–1991* by Dennis Kux, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1994.

²² Ashley J Tellis, *US – India Relations: The Struggle for an Enduring Partnership*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, David M Malone, C Raja Mohan, Srinath Raghavan (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2015, p 491.

²³ Ibid, p 492.

comments, made in 2015, seem to hold good even today following the latest Trump-Modi meeting which led to no significant public announcement of outcomes on any specific issue.

On the geo-economic side, as distinct from the geopolitical constraints in US-India ties, Raymond Vickery, a former US Assistant Secretary of Commerce, has, while commenting on the Trump-Modi summit, called for triangular US-China-India cooperation in the long run. In his view, the US' technological prowess, China's goods-manufacturing abilities and India's skills in services should augur well for such triangular cooperation in the future.²⁴

An Alert on the Geopolitical Front

Significantly, however, there was, coincidentally or otherwise, a trumping of geo-economics by geopolitics on the Sino-Indian front at about the time Modi met Trump. On the night of 26 June 2017 (Beijing time), ahead of Modi's summit with Trump in Washington on the same day (US time), Colonel Ren Guoqiang, spokesman of Chinese Ministry of National Defence, said that "Indian troops recently crossed the border with China in an attempt to block a road construction" on the Chinese side in "the Sikkim section". India, it was said, was, therefore, "seriously endangering the peace and stability of the [Sino-Indian] border areas".²⁵ In a diplomatic reinforcement of this statement, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Lu Kang, said a day later that, under Article one of the 'Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet (1890)', "there is solid legal evidence to support the delimitation of the Sikkim section of the China-India boundary."²⁶ India's External Affairs Ministry did not immediately react to the Chinese assertions so as to keep the focus entirely on the Modi-Trump summit.

The Sino-Indian issues at stake in this sub-context – the stalling of the Indian pilgrims' journey to the holy Hindu site of Kailash Manasarovar in Tibet through the Nathu La Pass in India's Sikkim State, and the overall Sino-Indian border dispute – fall outside the scope of this paper.

²⁴ Raymond Vickery in a programme on the Trump-Modi summit, telecast by China Global Television Network, anchored by Anand Naidoo in Washington, monitored by the author in Singapore on 27 June 2017.

²⁵ Ministry of National Defence, People's Republic of China, China slams Indian troops' provocation on border, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-06/27/content_4783803.htm. Accessed on 28 June 2017.

²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1473592.shtml. Accessed on 28 June 2017.

However, the timing of China's statement about "Indian troops' provocation" reinforces the image of a US-China-India triangle in geopolitics.

On Pakistan, China's well-known "all-weather strategic partner" which has had decades of conflictual relations with India, Trump was very supportive of Modi. Trump told Modi that, "Both our nations have been struck by the evils of terrorism, and we are both determined to destroy terrorist organisations and the radical ideology that drives them. We will destroy radical Islamic terrorism."²⁷ Significantly, Modi did not, in his response, speak of "radical Islamic terrorism". On that very day, Modi greeted the entire Indian society, both the majority Hindus and the minority Muslims, on the Islamic festival of Ramzan.²⁸

The Joint Statement issued after the Trump-Modi talks was categorical about the two countries working "shoulder-to-shoulder against terrorism" – a "global scourge." More significantly, "the [two] leaders called on Pakistan to ensure that its territory is not used to launch terrorist attacks on other countries [a code for India, Afghanistan and the US]. They further called on Pakistan to expeditiously bring to justice" all the perpetrators of various terrorist attacks on India carried out by "Pakistan-based groups" over a long period of time.²⁹ However, no US-India action plan to restrain these Pakistan-based terrorists has been announced.

Significantly, nonetheless, China has taken exception to Pakistan being singled out by the US and India as the source of terrorism. The Chinese spokesman Lu Kang defended Pakistan on these lines, "We oppose all forms of terrorism and linking terrorism with any specific country...I must say that Pakistan is at the forefront of counter-terrorism and has made important contributions to the international campaign against terrorism. We maintain that the international community should step up cooperation against terrorism, and should also fully recognise Pakistan's efforts in this regard."³⁰ Surely, the geopolitics of counter-terrorism, too, is stark indeed.

²⁷ The White House (US), *op. cit.*

²⁸ Prime Minister of India (PMINDIA) website, http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-greets-the-nation-on-eid-ul-fitr/?comment=disable. Accessed on 27 June 2017.

²⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1473905.shtml. Accessed on 29 June 2017.

Viewed in totality, the latest Trump-Modi talks have kept the US-India engagement on course, without the two leaders actually announcing any new breakthrough in any of the potential areas of collaboration. Trump seems to have taken note of India's concerns regarding China and Pakistan, while Modi appears to have accepted the fact that the US will craft its India policy at a pace that it is comfortable with. In this perspective, the officially-labelled strategic partnership between India and the US is still very much strategic in intent and a partnership in potentiality.

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