



# A visit like no other

It would be wrong to say there was no substance to Trump's India tour. In fact, the mutual pay-off was significant

The just concluded visit of US President Donald Trump to India has been an unprecedented spectacle and the backdrop to a significant upgrade in India-US relations. That a US president would undertake a standalone visit to India despite electoral preoccupations at home reflects the importance attached to relations with India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave him an extravaganza, which will play well with his core constituency back home. It will highlight a rare bright spot in his foreign policy record, which has few successes to flaunt. The Indian diaspora in the US, increasingly rich and influential, may even swing to supporting a "friend of India". We may well see a repeat of what happened in the recent UK elections where "friends of the BJP" engaged in open lobbying for the Tories while attacking the Labour Party. Since one of the important Democratic candidates, Bernie Sanders, has been making critical remarks on Kashmir, there could well be a concerted campaign to dissuade Indian-Americans from voting Democrat. This would be welcome to Mr Trump but it will damage the bipartisan consensus India has enjoyed in Washington over the past two decades.

Mr Trump returned the favour to PM Modi. This was one leadership summit where Mr Trump said all the right things, heaping praise on Mr Modi and his leadership, scrupulously avoiding making any remarks which might have discomfited his host, whether on Kashmir or the Citizenship Amendment Act. He refused to be drawn into any comment on the large scale communal violence that broke out in Delhi during the visit. His praise of India as a successful plural and diverse country and PM Modi's commitment to the values of a liberal democracy were a very public snub to the latter's critics both at home and abroad. As leaders who thrive on public

adulation and have perfected political showmanship on a grand scale, the mutual pay-off from the visit was significant. For Mr Modi, some of the shine has worn off as a consequence of the horrific violence unleashed on the streets of the capital but the after-glow will remain.

Was there no substance to the visit? In fact, there was. Mr Trump showed remarkable restraint in not berating the Indian side on trade issues. His complaints on tariffs imposed by India were relatively restrained. The attitude was forward-looking and optimistic, even if the objective of a grand and ambitious trade agreement seems unrealistic. Despite the two sides being under tremendous pressure to conjure up a limited "first phase" agreement for the visit, the differences were simply too great to allow this. The economic pillar of the relationship will continue to be shaky but there is relief for now.

The substantive gains are on the political and security side. The joint statement issued at the conclusion of the visit announced a decision to upgrade the relationship to a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. The phraseology reflects the much broader and tighter security embrace between the two countries. The Indo-Pacific figures prominently but it should be noted that the formulation reflects the more limited geographical conception which the US prefers — Hollywood to Bollywood, or the Western Pacific. The reference to "Asean centrality" as a keystone of the Indo-Pacific would also suggest that, in operational terms, India accepts the more limited definition even if rhetorically Indo-Pacific stretches to cover the western reaches of the Indian Ocean. PM Modi specifically referred to the interoperability between Indian and US forces but this may extend, in time, to other partners. An important element in the joint statement is India's acquies-



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cence, for the first time, to formally using the term "Quadrilateral" with reference to security cooperation among India, Australia, Japan and the US. This is significant since it suggests that India is no longer as sensitive to Chinese, even Russian, allergy to the Quad as a potential "Asian NATO". Earlier, India did not want to use the term quadrilateral, settling, coyly, for the word, "plurilateral."

Of interest, too, is the reference to the ongoing negotiations between China and Asean on a legal Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, warning that "it will not prejudice the legitimate rights and interests of all nations according to international law." China has reportedly insisted that the Code exclude activities of countries from outside the region from both security and economic activities unless there is consensus among the parties concerned. Clearly, a China battling the coronavirus epidemic provides more room for bolder ripostes.

On Afghanistan, what has not been said is more significant than what finds mention in the statement. There is no reference to the ceasefire and the possibility of a US-Taliban peace deal being concluded shortly in Doha. This is a point of worry for India and one can see why the latest developments are not reflected. To compensate for Indian apprehensions on this score, we find a more explicit formulation on the issue of cross-border terrorism and the listing of various Pakistan-based terrorist groups. But there should be no doubt that Pakistan's role is considered critical in paving the way for US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan before the US presidential elections.

There is likelihood of progress on the purchase of six US nuclear reactors under the Indo-US nuclear deal. The prospect of these sales together with increased purchases of US oil and gas, are being held out to compensate for the inability to offer the US greater market access so dear to Mr Trump's heart. This transactional approach may work for a time but the US trade establishment is unlikely to relax its pressure on several longstanding issues such as market access for agriculture and intellectual property protection.

PM Modi may take satisfaction from his display of considerable political skill in managing a mercurial, temperamental and unpredictable US president and nudging him into uncharacteristic restraint and even carefully orchestrated remarks. This broke down only when reacting to a CNN journalist. This personal chemistry will come in handy if Mr Trump returns as president in the November elections. That seems to be the bet India is taking.

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