



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the US President, Donald Trump. (Photo: ANI)

## Opinion | Balancing the strategic gains made with us

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Despite Donald Trump at the helm, US remains one pillar of the Modi Doctrine of foreign policy

On 26 January 2015, then US President Barack Obama stood alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi to celebrate India's military might at its Republic Day parade. It was a historic sight. Obama was the first American leader to be chief guest at a grand ceremonial occasion when India flexes its muscle and signals its strategic intent. He also became the first American president to visit India twice (2010 and 2015), conveying that it mattered much more to the US than before.

While previous India visits of presidents Bill Clinton (2000) and George W. Bush (2006) had laid the foundation for a lasting embrace, Obama's second India trip in 2015 carried greater geostrategic urgency. His initial efforts to accommodate an assertive China had failed and disputes over trade, the South China Sea and the mounting challenge posed by China to American dominance worldwide, had soured Sino-US ties.

In the final years of Obama's presidency, democratic and bouncy India under Modi looked the surest bet to fulfil Washington's "pivot to Asia" strategy of checking China's hegemony. India's high economic growth and the freer business environment for US companies, which Modi was facilitating, were the icings on the cake. Modi's follow-up high-profile visit to the US in September 2015 and the dynamism with which he was remaking India's foreign policy impressed Washington. In Modi, Obama found a rare Indian leader willing to shed old inhibitions about closer strategic coordination with the US. Free from the ideological cobwebs of non-alignment and overcautious diplomacy, Modi signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with Obama in 2016, increasing interoperability of the two militaries.

Yet, if Obama's presidency ended on a high, the unexpected advent of a populist Donald Trump to the White House in 2017 sowed uncertainty in New Delhi. Unlike Obama, Bush and Clinton—all dyed-in-the-wool mainstream liberal internationalists in foreign policy—Trump lacks any special appreciation for India as the world's largest democracy and a perfect foil to Chinese authoritarianism. The "calculated altruism" underpinning earlier US foreign policy toward India has been replaced by Trump's domestically motivated economic transactionalism. Like all other US allies and partners, India has not been spared punitive tariffs and removal of trade preferences. Trump has cast aside Obama's broad geopolitical "pivot to Asia" and replaced it with narrow, bilateral foci, wherein each country is judged by whether or not it runs trade deficits with the US or steals American jobs.

Given Trump's disinterest in forging multilateral coalitions to check China, Modi has adjusted to this turning point. The present focus is on striking a bilateral trade deal with Trump and ensuring the strategic gains accumulated since President Clinton's time are not lost. Modi has also worked away at nurturing linkages with the liberal "deep state" within the Trump administration and other institutions in the American system, which continue to see India as the ideal counterbalance to China. The signing of the Indo-US Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, and the ramping up of the 'Quad', comprising the US, Japan, Australia and India, to the level of a ministerial dialogue in 2019, are indicators that, in spite of the Trump disruption, the US remains one pillar of the Modi Doctrine of foreign policy.

Still, Trump's aversion to financing and sustaining geopolitical balances of power around the world remind Modi that he cannot afford to bank on the US to mitigate India's strategic dilemmas. Trump's desperation to pull out US troops from Afghanistan and his lack of any new policy to replace or deepen Obama's "pivot to Asia", are pushing Modi to invest more strategic energy in other crucial powers like Russia, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia. With China itself, Modi has effected a rapprochement from Wuhan (2018) to Chennai (2019).

The vacuum that Trump is leaving in India's extended neighbourhood is an opportunity for Modi to be bolder and take the initiative in South-Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Expecting the US to carry the burdens of regional stability and balance of power made sense until Obama. With Trump at the helm, the onus is on India to show its mettle.

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