

# Americans love Prime Minister Narendra Modi's strategic clarity

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Sreeram Chaulia

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India is like a fast-moving train that everybody wants to hop on.

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first-ever State visit to the US is a big honour. It is a recognition of our rising stature in the world. This will be the second time PM Modi will address the US Congress.

Getting the legislators into our good books is going to be critical. He has impressed them before and he's going to do it on a larger scale this time.

These are policymakers, they understand strategy and the big picture. They are not looking at exaggerated depictions of India. There is nobody better than PM Modi as a messenger to assure them that India is on the right path and that they should be backing it.

The US-India ties are getting deeper, more strategic, and more impactful to shape the world order. US presidents have been saying for generations now that US-India is the defining relationship of the 21st century. This is going to be a milestone visit because it will set the tone for this relationship's next level.

India's rise has compelled the US to take PM Modi more seriously. There was a time when India was still seen as a swing state which might go this way or that. Since PM Modi has come to power, the economic growth, the military modernisation, the infrastructure, the confident diplomacy, all this has made them sit up and take notice. They can't afford to ignore or sideline him or India as a whole.

Be it the US Congress or the White House, and even the general public, they are very anxious about China and other authoritarian countries taking over and destroying democracy worldwide. So to them, it looks like India is the last bastion, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, that is standing tall under PM Modi's leadership. They feel like they have to invest in this or else democracies worldwide will be wiped out and dictators will rule the world.

Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used to say, "I don't want to see a world where my grandchildren are under China's control. I don't want to see a world that is Sino-centric." For the US, India matters much more as a counterweight, and they have realised it more now because of the increasing US-China tensions. For them, India is the best bet and indispensable.

The current strategic and defence partnership between India and US is growing exponentially. It can be seen in the form of the US-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET). There's a talk of the jet engines from General Electric being manufactured in India for fighter aircraft. Drones are likely to be purchased. Intelligence sharing has also risen.

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There was a time when we were a little more hesitant about taking information from the Americans because that would be seen as a sign of weakness. With the combination of PM Modi, National Security Advisor of India Ajit Doval, and External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, we have worked out a plan to extract as much benefit and leverage as we can from our relationship with the US.

Now they are willing to share as they need a big pie of the Indian market. And we are willing to play that market card. If you want to gain access to our 1.4 billion-strong market, then you better share technology and know-how. It is a more balanced relationship, two sovereign democratic powers that have mutual dependence.

PM Modi is very strategic, irrespective of who occupies the White House. He knows this relationship is critical for India to rise and match China. He may be on the right in the political spectrum and US President Joe Biden may be on the left, but that doesn't hinder them from embracing and clasping hands because of a broader global picture.

It's important to note that we are the fastest-growing major economy, consistently having 6-7% growth while the rest of the world, including the US, is looking flat in terms of growth. The US placed a long bet on China that has now become sour. The Chinese have declared a kind of economic war or what the Americans call economic coercion on their companies. The US wants an alternative, and our market size and growth potential are positive, so they cannot let go of this opportunity.

India is like a fast-moving train that everybody wants to hop on right now, especially corporate America. So PM Modi makes sure to meet the top global CEOs. For them, India is no more seen as just a potential market.

They are already trading in goods and services worth \$191 billion approximately. According to Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal, \$500-600 billion is possible by 2030. It depends especially on service sector trade and as India increases its manufacturing capacity, they would look towards India as part of the diversification strategy away from China. Some of them are looking to Vietnam and Bangladesh, but India is much bigger than any of these Asian countries.

The US is betting on long-term stability under PM Modi, as well as less regulatory burdens and a freer investment climate.

What the Americans really like with PM Modi, compared to previous regimes, is the strategic clarity and willingness to cross the red lines. The Modi factor has definitely zoomed the US-India relations to another level. I would also give credit to the 4.5 million-strong Indian diaspora in the US.

The kind of lobbying they have done to convince all levels of government and policymaking that India is your best bet and you should help India rise to be China's equal. So, PM Modi plus the diaspora explains a lot of the bounce in this relationship.

When it comes to balancing our ties with the US and Russia, the Americans have understood our compulsions. One of the successes of the Modi government's diplomacy since the Ukraine war started is to address their concerns and explain our constraints that in terms of defence, there are certain things with the Russians that we can't just let go of overnight. They understand it because Russian-made weaponry helps to counter Chinese aggression against India. Russia actually helps to keep some checks on China, even though they are close national strategic partners or even near allies.

Given the kind of penetration that China has done in terms of economics, aid, and all these dependencies that it has created across the Indo-Pacific, it is not possible for India and the US alone to control it. Our bilateral relationship is a key counterbalancing pillar. But there are other ones, such as the Quad, ASEAN countries, the Pacific Island countries, South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are also important.

It has to be a multilateral or a plurilateral strategy. Ultimately, it will take a coalition of the willing to keep a check on Chinese expansionism.

The author is a world affairs analyst and the dean of Jindal School of International Affairs. He has written books such as Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister and Crunch Time: Narendra Modi's National Security Crises.

(As told to Aditya Raj Kaul)

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