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## The Trump Modi tango: How the PM used Houston event to tactfully reset the India-US relationship

September 23, 2019, 7:47 PM IST / Sreeram Sundar Chaulia in TOI Edit Page, Edit Page, India, World, TOI

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If statecraft and stagecraft are becoming indistinguishable, there could

WRITE TOI



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have been no bigger illustration than the star-studded joint rally by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump in Houston before a humungous crowd of Indian Americans.

But this unprecedented diplomatic mega show was more than symbolic razzmatazz. It revealed a hardnosed economic and political calculus underlying the soft glow of cultural and people-to-people links between the world's two largest democracies.

Trump's rare acceptance of Modi's request to share the dais with him and the bulk of the American president's speech at the 'Howdy Modi' rally reconfirmed that he is focussed on a predominantly economic agenda. The list of investments by Indian companies in the US economy and sales of American energy supplies and weapons to India that Trump rattled off spoke of his core motivation to judge every country through the prism of jobs for American workers and profits for American companies.

Trump came into office in 2017 with a sceptical mindset that America's allies and partners were bilking it and taking undue advantage of its liberal policies in trade and immigration. India was targeted as one of several offenders which had run up a trade surplus with the US and which was misusing the H-1B visas to flood the American job market.

The fact that India was a democracy whose rise could check authoritarian China's giant strides did not matter to Trump, whose narrow populism discounted broad liberal values. In his worldview, the only 'good' countries were those which bought more 'Made in USA' products and services.



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Illustration: Uday Deb

Modi came up with a twofold response to this altered reality. First, his government kept up engagement with liberal-minded 'globalists' among the US strategic elites, both within and outside the Trump administration, so that the distinction between free and responsible India and unfree and predatory China would remain a factor at the lower levels of the American

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state machinery. External affairs minister S Jaishankar's quip that the China-US trade war "may not be such a bad thing" if it helps create fairer market access throughout the world was a nudge in this direction.

Second, Modi grasped the essence of Trump's transactional attitude and reset the tenor and dynamic of bilateral ties in an intensely pragmatic way that addresses Trump's pet peeves. India bought American oil, pared down the trade deficit by 7% in 2018, avoided publicly attacking Trump on his tariffs and immigration restrictions. Negotiations to settle the trade dispute and promises to buy more American weaponry were thrown in to pacify Trump's hard line instincts.

Reading Trump as an out-and-out political animal who measures the worth of each country by how it may or may not be aiding his domestic popularity ahead of the 2020 US presidential elections, Modi also dangled the large Indian diaspora as a concrete carrot. The 4.4 million Indian-origin community in the US, the bulk of whom voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016, could potentially aid Trump in hotly contested states next year.

If Trump's confrontational foreign policy towards Cuba, Venezuela and Iran have been driven by coldblooded plans to capture the Cuban American, Venezuelan American and Jewish American supporters, Modi is betting that he will mellow down vis-a-vis India by virtue of benefits accruing from Indian Americans as voters and donors for him. Modi's reminder in Houston about how Ab Ki Baar Trump Sarkar resounded in the 2016 US election was not just a refrain on his own 2014 Indian election

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tagline, but a tantalising hint to Trump to tap the goldmine of the Indian diaspora.

In an earlier era, such crafty playing of the diaspora card would have been shunned as risky and avoided as unwarranted interference in internal affairs of the US. But it is a gamble worth taking in today's shockingly unorthodox populist America, where Trump often welcomes foreign interventions of various forms, provided they aid his electoral chances.

Modi was, of course, cautious to ensure bipartisan presence of politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties in Houston. But if the unintended effect of 'Howdy Modi' – where Trump sang praises of 'legal immigrants' from India but dissed 'illegal immigrants' pouring in via Mexico – is to give the US president's political fortunes a lift, so be it and India would not mind that.

One keyword that Trump uttered in Houston was 'reciprocal'. Prior to his meteoric rise, the ethos of American foreign policy was that the US would be a generous patron of developing countries in return for their willingness to second American geopolitical goals. Today's Washington has abandoned that 'strategic altruism'. Modi has read this shift and is making concessions here and there to Trump, without letting the latter cross India's red lines on mediating over Kashmir or buying hi-tech weapon systems from Russia. India is not eating the proverbial cake and having it too, but rather preparing for sharing the cake.



Given Trump's rank opportunism and utilitarianism, one cannot rule out the possibility that he may turn on a dime and revert to prickly positions that challenge India's interests to suit his evolving domestic political needs. But so far, the damage to bilateral ties has been contained. Other countries reeling from the Trump effect could study the Indian model of handling him for a few lessons in tactful readjustment.

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