

Fifth-Time Tricky

Modi will have to hedge against the notoriously fickle and uncoordinated approach that Trump brings to foreign policymaking

:: Sreeram Chaulia

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's fifth bilateral visit to the US on June 25-26 is a test of his diplomatic skill and mettle wrought by the heterodox presidency of Donald Trump. Unlike the Indian leader's previous triumphal marches across America, when he preached to the choir and enjoyed the dotting attention of the White House, this trip is not guaranteed to be a joyride until it is over or not even then.

The notoriously fickle and uncoordinated approach that Trump brings to foreign policymaking has shaken US allies. No amount of prior preparation or coaching before meeting him can account for surprise elements that he might introduce. An experienced world leader like Modi will surely have a technique to handle Trump in one-on-one sitings, but the former must hedge against the latter's maverick behaviour by using other levers in the American system to ensure continuity of extensive ties between India and the US.

Diplomatic Stick and Carrot

Whenever Trump disses a partner country, his secretary of state, secretary of defence and national security adviser rush in as firefighters to reassure alarmed interlocutors that nothing is amiss and that America will keep working with them as usual. US senators and representatives have also acted as bridges to calm down agitated partners and sustain joint programmes with nations that get caught in the crosshairs of the irascible Trump.

Cultivating close understanding with second-rung American policy framers and implementers is thus essential for Modi and his team as they navigate an internally divided and strategically disjointed US administration.

Personal chemistry with foreign counterparts has been a cornerstone of Modi's diplomatic achievements, and he will surely want to hit it off with Trump. But this method of cultivating friendship and trust has to transcend his equation with Trump and become diffused throughout the American body politic. By thickening bonds with the "deep

state" in the US, Modi can insure India against flip-flops or sudden fluctuations from the populist and inward-looking Trump.

Trump's foreign policy is transactional, i.e. narrowly focussed on counting specific numeric benefits for America from each interaction. Modi is a master at convincing foreign partners that India is a dream economic opportunity which can deliver solid returns on investment to them. He needs to now extend this logic by statistically and argumentatively demonstrating how much material gain the US gets by engaging with India. He should cite examples such as Indian IT major Infosys, which plans to open four new centres in the US and hire 10,000 American workers in the next couple of years.

If Trump rants against the \$24 billion goods trade deficit that the US has with India, Modi has to remind him that the bilateral services trade deficit is only \$6 billion and that leapfrogging growth is currently happening in exchange of services rather than in goods. Moreover, the US's trade deficit with India is dwarfed by what it incurs with China, Japan, Germany or Mexico. In Trump's mercantilist worldview of nations playing "unfairly" against the US, India is a minor offender.

During the Barack Obama years, Modi piloted India-US relations via heavy geostrategic coordination to push back China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific region. But Trump lacks the liberal vision of India as a democratic counterbalance to authoritarian China. The erratic manner in which he first predicted that his summit meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping would be "very difficult", and later proclaimed that he "loves China" and has a "terrific relationship" with Xi, shows that today's White House can turn on a dime.

There is a lesson for Modi in the quid

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Modi



Trump

pro quo that Trump hopes to secure from Xi, wherein China is expected to moderate North Korea's behaviour while America tempers its pressure on China for stealing US jobs and bullying small nations in the South China Sea. Trump the businessman loves a bargain and chases "ultimate deals".

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In this context, Modi should offer an advanced global partnership on a worldwide basis with the US to counter terrorism and Islamist fundamentalism, which are Trump's favourite targets. From Afghanistan to the Philippines, and from the Middle East to Africa, India has the capacity of forging coalitions that tackle jihadist groups and rebuild post-jihadist futures.

In return, Modi must extract Trump's commitment to draw red lines

on Pakistan-sponsored Islamist extremism. The ongoing overall review of the Trump administration's South Asia policy is sounding harsh towards the menace posed by Pakistan. If a scheming Saudi Arabia could entice Trump into cornering Qatar for sponsoring terror, India has a spotlessly clean record to convince him to walk the talk on "eradicating radical Islamic terrorism from the face of the earth" by cutting aid to Pakistan, downgrading Pakistan's status as a major non-NATO ally, and bombing jihadist camps in Pakistani territory.

Trump could promise to take the Pakistani bull by the horns and maximise defence sector cooperation with India. But an inconsistent White House does not inspire confidence. Modi will score a national security victory only by embedding India's cause with practical executioners of US defence and commercial policies who can convert Trump's spur-of-the-moment rhetoric into a logical blueprint for the next four years. ■



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