India and Trump: A New Symphony in Play

By Rupakjyoti Borah

Despite widespread uncertainty in many world capitals about the foreign policy of US President Donald Trump, New Delhi and Washington have only deepened the growing ties between the two countries under his administration. Whether the issues are economic, military or people-to-people, India and the US are growing closer together, and the strategic implications are significant for the Indo-Pacific region, writes Rupakjyoti Borah.

THE ELECTION of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States has given rise to a new era of uncertainty in Washington's ties with other countries, as many world leaders are still trying to figure out how to deal with the new administration and the maverick president himself. At the same time, however, the growing bonhomie between India and the US has been one of the defining features of New Delhi's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. During this period, India embarked on what is now known as the "Act East Policy" (earlier known as the "Look East Policy"), in addition to taking steps to open up its economy. This marked a sea change in India's foreign policy, which had inched closer to the former Soviet Union until its dissolution.

Although Indo-US relations went into a tailspin following New Delhi's nuclear tests in 1998, things rebounded quickly with the visit of then US President Bill Clinton to India in March 2000. The next major step in bilateral ties was the signing of the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal in October 2008, which ended India's pariah status when it came to nuclear trade.

Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was the first state guest of the Barack Obama administration in November 2009, and although relations once again soured toward the end of Dr Singh's second term, they were back on track after Narendra Modi took over as prime minister in May 2014. He paid a visit to the US in late September that year and soon thereafter, Obama became the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2015.

Since Trump took office in January 2017, New
Delhi and Washington have become closer than ever. A host of factors are driving this, and they merit a deeper analysis.

**ECONOMIC FACTORS**

India has one of the world’s fastest-growing major economies and is now a market no large American company can ignore. An array of US companies (including those under the Trump banner) are present in the Indian market and are doing well. The Indian aviation market is one of the world’s biggest, and US aviation firms are doing brisk business in India. At the same time, Indian companies such as Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Wipro, Essar America, Piramal, Mahindra and others are making a mark in the US market.

Former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson noted in a major policy speech in October 2017 that “as our economies grow closer, we find more opportunities for prosperity for our people. More than 600 American companies operate in India. US foreign direct investment has jumped by 500 percent in the past two years alone. And last year, our bilateral trade hit a record of roughly US$115 billion, a number we plan to increase.”

India is also wary of China’s attempts to make greater forays into the Indian Ocean region with its so-called “String of Pearls” policy. Under this policy, Beijing has helped with the construction of ports in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. China also now has its first overseas military base in Djibouti, which is strategically located on the Horn of Africa near the Indian Ocean.

New Delhi has not joined the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative because of concerns over the violation of its sovereignty. The US, too, has stayed away from the Belt and Road, although it did send a representative to a meeting in Beijing on the initiative in May 2014. Hence, there could be greater room for co-operation between the US and India in the field of infrastructure also. Meanwhile, India and China recently narrowly avoided a major skirmish in the Doklam region of Bhutan, where Chinese troops had started constructing a road in what they consider to be their own territory. The tense standoff was resolved after almost two months, although in all likelihood it was only the first of many such incidents.

In addition, new opportunities for co-operation are emerging in the field of energy as the US has begun to export energy to India, which is a net energy importer. Energy security is now an important determinant of India’s foreign policy and this is where co-operation with American firms could be key. India and Washington are also co-operating in the field of nuclear energy and US-based Westinghouse will be setting up nuclear reactors in India as part of the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal.

At the same time, India has emerged as a big market for American defense manufacturers. This is a far cry from the time when India depended almost solely on Russia for its military hardware. New Delhi is one of the biggest arms importers in the world, and the US, beginning in 2005 with the signing of the New Framework for India-US Defense Relations, has recognized India as a “major defense partner,” and New Delhi has now bought military hardware worth more than US$13 billion from the US. The recognition of India as a major defense partner in June 2016 allows for the transfer of technology to India, which is also a major plank of Modi’s “Made in India” campaign pledge.

India, Japan and the US also participated in the Malabar 2017 naval exercises, in which the three nations brought in their biggest naval assets. India’s aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya participated while the US brought in the USS Nimitz and Japan brought in its biggest post-Second World War warship, the JS Izumo.

**COMMON INTERESTS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Under Obama, the United States launched the so-called pivot to Asia. While Trump has not abandoned the “pivot,” he and members of his administration have been increasingly using the term “Indo-Pacific” to describe the focus of US strategy, which clearly reflects the increasing importance accorded to India by the Trump administration. During his speech at the APEC CEO Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, in November 2017, Trump said: “I’ve had the honor of sharing our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific — a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace.”

The APEC summit was part of a five-country Asian tour for Trump that took him to Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines, helping to some extent to lay to rest questions regarding the US commitment to Asia, especially in light of Trump’s decision to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement in the opening days of his administration.
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Modi has already met Trump for a bilateral summit, in June 2017, in addition to interacting with him on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Manila. During this meeting in November 2017, the two leaders “pledged to enhance their co-operation as major defense partners, resolving that both of the world’s great democracies should also have the world’s greatest militaries.” Under Trump and Modi, the US, India, Japan and Australia have come together to form what has been dubbed “the new Quad,” following the failed “Quad.”

OTHER FACTORS
At a people-to-people level, Indians have risen to the highest ranks in some of the top US companies and also in the American bureaucracy. The 3.5 million-plus strong Indian diaspora in the US has helped to bring the two countries closer together. In addition, the burgeoning relations between India and the US have also been helped along by the warm ties between India and US allies such as Japan and Australia. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has built a close rapport with Trump and also has a very good relationship with Modi. India, Japan and the US have also been holding a trilateral dialogue among themselves since December 2011. The de-hyphenation of US-India and US-Pakistan relations has also helped to bring India and the US closer. This became more pronounced after Osama bin Laden was traced to Abbottabad in Pakistan at the time he was killed by US special forces.

AREAS OF CONCERN
However, it is not as if all is well between the two sides. The issue of H1 temporary foreign worker visas to the US is a major stumbling block in bilateral relations, because Trump has many times in the past talked about slashing the number, and Indians are one of the biggest beneficiaries of these visas. The two countries also do not see eye to eye on some issues, such as Syria, since India still maintains close ties with Russia, especially on the defense front.

There could also be issues with New Delhi’s relations with countries such as Iran. India has recently opened a new trade route with Afghanistan and Central Asia via the port of Chabahar in Iran. However, since the Trump administration came into office, US relations with Iran have once again turned sour, and this may impact India’s fledgling ties with Iran.

There are also continuing issues regarding Washington’s relations with Pakistan. New Delhi has had issues with Islamabad because of its backing of anti-India terror groups operating from its soil and would like to see Washington use its leverage over Islamabad to rein in such terror groups. New Delhi’s ties with Washington will also depend on the extent to which the Trump administration would be willing to exert pressure on Islamabad on the terror front. In one of his first tweets of this year, Trump said: “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit . . .”5 perhaps signaling his administration’s resolve to go after Pakistan on this front.

In addition, Trump’s penchant for cutting deals with the likes of China may also damage relations with India, since New Delhi is loath to accept a China-dominated Asia.

THE ROAD AHEAD
India under Modi has also been getting close to Israel. Modi became the first Indian prime minister ever to visit Israel and this was followed by the landmark visit of the Israeli prime minister to India in January this year. Given Trump’s views on Israel and keeping his domestic audience in mind, India, Israel and Washington are also likely to get closer under Trump and Modi.

India wants to get into key international forums like the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group (NSG) and has been pitching for full membership on the United Nations Security Council, for which it has already secured the backing of the US. During Modi’s visit to the US in June 2017, Trump “reaffirmed the support of the United States for India’s permanent membership on a reformed UN Security Council.”

Although there are still many areas of divergence between India and the US, the possible areas of co-operation far outweigh the differences. As Modi noted in his speech to the US Congress in June 2016, in the Indo-US bilateral relationship there seems to be a “new symphony in play.” Let the orchestra play on.

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