

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in America

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"I have travelled coast-to-coast, covering more than 25 states of America. I realised the real strength of the nation lies in the dreams of its people." Narendra Modi, Address to US Congress, Jun 8, 2016

He made good in the end – at least from the US perspective. Showing how political landscapes can transform as regularly as inclement weather, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi impressed his US hosts with promises – and more promises.

The pitch was that of a grand salesman, generously spiced with a range of exotica. For those in India, explained Modi in his address to a joint meeting of the US Congress, living in harmony with mother earth was "part of our ancient belief". Diplomats in New Delhi and Washington are far more prosaic, focusing on three themes in forging a joint document of principles that involve "protecting the commons, securing the frontiers, and increasing people-to-people contact."

Notwithstanding vague concepts of patriotic and environmental harmony, Modi has also stretched out the various materialist motifs. "This is the time the world needs a new engine of growth," Modi explained to those attending the USIBC annual gala. "It would be nice if the new engines are democratic ones."^[1]

Sweet words for the Obama administration, playing on the notion that certain "democratic" powers deserve to be the drivers of economic development, rather than police state, authoritarian aspirants. As President Barack Obama has previously opined, Modi is the man Washington wants to see prosper. He "reflects the dynamism and potential of India's rise" while his "ambitious vision" to turn his country into an "inspiring model for the world" should be lauded.^[2]

Then came the prowess of the Indian diaspora, though Indian watchers had noted that this US trip was going to be far more than self-congratulation. As *The Indian Express* noted, citing an official source, "During earlier visits, he reached out to the large Indian diaspora; this time, he will talk to the American people."^[3] This did not prevent Modi from telling Congress that such members of the diaspora "are among your best CEOs; academics; scientists; economists; doctors; even spelling bee champions." If you have a horn, toot it.

The Modi trip is far more than that. As sizeable as it is, economics is but one part of the pie. Knowing exactly what was sought, Modi explained that a deeper security relationship was needed between the countries, something that would be affirmed by the signing of a Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, permitting each country access to each other's military bases. "The fight against terrorism has to be fought on many levels. And the traditional tools of military, intelligence or diplomacy alone would not be able to win this fight."

The issue of a closer US-India relationship was always going to be a complicated one. India was one of the key figures of the Cold War non-alignment movement, and even today stresses the need to maintain relationships with other emerging powers. Washington saw greater value in its Cold War machinations regarding Moscow to supply and support Pakistan, which became a suitable anti-Soviet proxy. The results of that troubled and dysfunctional relationship – financed fundamentalists; destabilising regimes and creating a range of terror cells – is felt to this day.

Modi himself is hardly the angelic essence of political purity. His hand in Hindu nationalism has been a mighty one and his role, incidental or otherwise, in sectarian violence while Chief Minister of Gujarat state was something that plagued his prospects for entering the country.

Such matters have been placed on ice at the ceremonial level, though a few lawmakers from the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee have expressed concerns about human rights violations in India. Last month, a hearing on Capitol Hill featuring, amongst others, a previously vocal Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.), Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), and Timothy M. Kaine (D-Va.). (Cardin remains concerned by India's stellar performance in the Global Slavery Index and instances of people traffickers receiving bribes from officials.)

The members proceeded to grill a State Department official over India's efforts to restrict foreign funding to Green Peace and the Ford Foundation, a recent decision to prevent investigators from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom from entering India, and broader issues of religious intolerance and human trafficking. Corker's observation was that the US had been far from "brutally honest" with their Indian counterparts.[4]

Such statements always sound like hectoring cant. But they barely mask the points of order that states refuse to engage in when noisy money and clamouring security needs intervene. US foreign policy has tended to occupy an area of moralistic outrage, using human rights as points of order when needed. At other times, crude realpolitik makes short work of such concern. Empires will remain empires.

Modi understands that point better than most. Any closer move to Washington must be premised on dumping on his neighbours and showing New Delhi to be a truly muscular partner on the global stage. While his address to the joint meeting of the Senate and the House of Representatives did not explicitly name China or Pakistan, heavy hints abounded. These also form the subject of "protecting the commons or shared spaces".

Leaving no one in doubt which entity he was referring to, Modi suggested that closer ties between the US and India would be a counter to various militant aspirations in the South China Sea. "It will also help ensure security of the sea lanes and commerce and freedom of navigation on seas." Very much the current Modi: careful, calculating, and superficially reformed.

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Notes:

[1] <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/india-set-to-become-driver-of-global-economy-modi-2840442/>

[2] <http://time.com/4359522/india-modi-obama-visit-us/>

[3] <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/modis-us-visit-less-diaspora-more-diplomacy-as-modi-lands-in-washington-2838389/>

[4] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/01/u-s-senators-attack-indias-human-rights-record-before-modis-capitol-hill-address/>

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