



FROM 'HOWDY MODI' TO 'NAMASTE TRUMP'

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



US President Trump was hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the city of Ahmadabad marking his first official visit to India since taking office. The trip was more about the optics, and was particularly designed to impress Trump's vanity.

The magnanimity of the trip was important for both the capitals especially for New Delhi, as it desperately needed some good headlines after being under the spotlight due to the controversial decision to revoke Kashmir's autonomy and the ongoing protests against the new citizenship law.¹ The 2-day official visit (February 24-25, 2020) of President Trump came in backdrop of the trip Prime Minister Modi made to US last year and negotiations of the trade deal between the two countries.

The 'Namaste Trump' rally in India came out as a complete Xerox of the 'Howdy Modi' rally in the US last year where Modi addressed a gathering of around 50,000 people in Houston. The clasped handshakes and hugs were meant for the media and the world to see, especially for the regional actors such as China and Pakistan. President Trump made a speech at the Motera cricket stadium in front of a large gathering, maybe the biggest he has had. However, the crowd of listeners grew thin as one third appeared to have left before the end of President Trump remarks, and another third by the time Mr. Modi took the floor.²

¹ Vikas Pandey, "What did the Trump-Modi 'bromance' achieve?," *BBC News*, February 25, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-51638345>

² Michael Crowley, "America Loves India,' Trump Declares at Rally With Modi," *New York Times*, February, 24, 2020, Updated February 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/24/world/asia/trump-india.html>

The trip concluded with plenty of impressive photos but without any major announcements on trade or security.³ While the show of friendliness did carry some weight as Washington sees New Delhi as a capital in South Asia to counter China's rapid development in the region,⁴ it didn't deliver as expected and achieved barely beyond a gathering of a 100,000 people in the stadium that Trump and Modi addressed.

The joint statement issued by both the leaders revolved around the customary narrative of the US and India's Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership, mutual trust, shared interests, goodwill, and robust engagement of their citizens⁵ and the need to continue cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, as well as in a revived homeland security dialogue.⁶ On trade, there remain numerous concerns for both the parties including agreements on data rights, patents on pharmaceuticals, the issues of tariffs and the trade deficit. Although Washington and Delhi share deep strategic ties, relations on the trade and economic front don't share the same convergence of interests. Both the capitals failed to harness a successful trade deal due to Modi's protectionist economic policies, coupled with Mr. Trump's fixation on balancing trade deficit that currently favors India.⁷ Nonetheless, a mini-agreement was achieved between the trade negotiators,⁸ while disagreements remained on both the sides over many issues including pricing of different food related articles, medical devices, e-commerce market, and lowering of Indian tariffs.

On the defense deal front, India agreed on buying attack helicopters and other US military equipment worth \$3bn, another deal was agreed upon with Exxon Mobil which will enable India to import more Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from the US.⁹ Although political pundits in Washington and Delhi see this relationship as a counter balance to Pakistan and China's relationship, many fear that the slowdown of the economy in India, growing social unrest,¹⁰ and a future crisis with regards to

³ Kevin Liptak, "Trump concludes India visit without major agreements," *CNN*, February 25, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/24/politics/donald-trump-india-narendra-modi-trade/index.html>

⁴ Imad Zafar, "Trump's India visit a lesson for Islamabad," *Asia Times*, February 25, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/02/trumps-india-visit-a-lesson-for-islamabad/>

⁵ Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for the United States-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership," White House, Statements and Releases, February 25, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-vision-principles-united-states-india-comprehensive-global-strategic-partnership/>

⁶ Tanvi Mandan, "Opinion: Despite No Major Deal During Trump's Visit To India, There Was Progress," *NPR*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/26/809301250/opinion-despite-no-major-deal-during-trumps-visit-to-india-there-was-progress>

⁷ "What will Trump's visit do for US-India ties?," *BBC*, February 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51489042>

⁸ Mandan, "Opinion", op.cit

⁹ Pandey, "What did the Trump-Modi 'bromance' achieve?," *BBC News*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-51638345>

¹⁰ Ibid.

Pakistan could drive dangerous escalation pressures that undermine India's professed goal of moving beyond the regional rivalry.¹¹

Another element of discomfort during the visit remained the mention of Pakistan and Kashmir by Donald Trump while addressing the gathering in the Motera stadium. India holds a stated policy on the issue of Kashmir as a domestic matter, while Pakistan welcomes mediation from international powers such as the US. More so, mentioning of Kashmir and Pakistan in a favorable manner is not a line that many foreign leaders tend to cross during their trip to India. However, President Trump has repeatedly offered mediation on the issue of Kashmir, as was reiterated in his trip and further praised Pakistan US relations, calling it a very good one.¹²

Trump visit also came at a time when the capital of India was incubating the ongoing riots as a result of the Citizen Amendment Act - that aggressively marginalizes Muslims in the country. The clashes in Delhi coincided with Trump's visit and while both the leaders exchanged hugs and pleasantries, India's capital was caught up in the whirlwind of killing of Muslims and destruction of their homes and holy places. While both the leaders flaunted love for each other, their countries and swapped platitudes, the visit was overshadowed by the alarming chaos in New Delhi. The silence of both the leaders over the brazen targeting of Muslims gained criticism internationally, whereas many feared that the violence would get even worse in the aftermath of Trump's visit.¹³

¹¹ Paul Staniland, "India's New Security Order," *War on The Rocks*, December 19, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/indias-new-security-order/>

¹² Full Text of US President Donald Trump's Speech In India , <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/full-text-of-us-president-donald-trumps-speech-in-india-2185045>

¹³ Jeffery Gettleman, Suhasini Raj, Sameer Yasir, "New Delhi Streets Turn into Battleground, Hindus vs. Muslims," *New York Times*, February 25, 2020, updated February 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/world/asia/new-delhi-hindu-muslim-violence.html>