



TRUMP'S INDIA VISIT: OPTICS VS SUBSTANCE

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



US President Donald Trump led a 12-member delegation to India on a 36-hour long visit from February 24-25, 2020 at the invitation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Trump was the fourth consecutive President of the United States to visit India. The main takeaways of the visit have been a US \$ 3 billion deal where India would buy state of the art US military equipment including MH60R naval and AH-64E Apache helicopters. Other deals were also signed in the fields of health and energy. However, the much speculative trade deal could not be signed and it seems would have to wait till the elections in the US are concluded later this year.

The joint statement issued after the visit expressed the desire of both the countries to further enhance India-US comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. It was decided to deepen defence and security cooperation through maritime and space domain, awareness and information sharing, advanced training and exercises between all services and special forces, and collaboration on co-development and co-production of defence components. India's status as a major Defence Partner was also reiterated providing it the highest consideration for procurement and technology transfer purposes. The joint statement also welcomed the joint venture by Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) for development and launch of a joint mission with the world's first dual-frequency synthetic Aperture Radar satellite in 2022. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited and Westinghouse Electric Company were also encouraged to finalise the techno-commercial offer for the construction of six nuclear reactors

in India. President Trump also announced his support for India's permanent membership in the United Nations and its entry into the Nuclear suppliers Group.¹

Throughout his stay in India, President Trump repeatedly said that US relations with Pakistan have improved and he once again offered to mediate on the Kashmir dispute. However, the joint statement while dealing with the issue of terrorism was not only unfair, but also uncalled for. The menace was denounced by both the countries and called on Pakistan to ensure that territory under its control is not used for launching terror attack and expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of Mumbai attack.² It is unfortunate that while in India, the President of United States completely forgot the sacrifices that the armed forces and people of Pakistan have rendered in the war against terror. Mr. Trump seemed to be completely ignore the fact that it is Pakistan that is actually the victim of Indian-sponsored terrorism and the confessional statements by India spy Kulbhushan Yadav, who was captured by Pakistani security forces, were a testament to that.

The two leaders also held discussions on "Blue Dot Network". Both India and US seek to counter China's expanding role through its Belt and Road Initiative with the help of this network. The Blue Dot Network is a part of US Indo-Pacific strategy which will bring together governments, private sector and civil society to promote quality standards for global infrastructure development.³

It was strange that while Delhi was burning and mourning the rising counts of Muslims killed by Hindu mobs, President Trump was all praise for Prime Minister Modi's record on religious freedom. When confronted with a question posed by a journalist regarding controversial laws, President Trump simply refused to make any comment and showed his reluctance to publically criticizing the enacted Citizenship (Amendment) Act or the controversial National Register of Citizens saying that he would leave that to India.⁴ Interestingly, this reluctance was in the backdrop of repeated concerns that were expressed by the State Department on both the above mentioned laws as well as the continuous lockdown of Indian occupied Kashmir and detention of political leadership there. It is also interesting to note that just few days before the President embarked on his India trip, the

¹ "Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for India -U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint+Statement+Vision+and+Principles+for+IndiaUS+Comprehensive+Global+Strategic+Partnership>

² Ibid

³ "As Trump visits India, on the table: plan to counter China's reach with Blue Dot Network," *Indian Express*, February, 23, 2020

⁴ Anne Gearan, Joanna Slater, Seung Min Kim and Niha Masih, "Trump Praises Modi's record on religious tolerance as violence erupts over India's treatment of Muslims," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-india-modi-citizenship-law-muslims/2020/02/25/9358aef8-57b5-11ea-ab68-101ecfec2532_story.html

US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which is a government body, had described the current situation in India as "significant downward turn in religious freedom in India."⁵

The visit was largely symbolic and high on optics. Thousands of people lined up in the streets to welcome the US President who later also addressed the crowd of more than 100,000 people. These optics will be helpful for both these leaders. For Modi, Trump's praises would help in shaking off the negative image that is being increasingly associated with him - both at home and internationally. For Trump also, though he failed to finalise the most crucial trade deal, the defence agreement would give him credit for creating jobs in the US. Taking advantage of his India tour, Trump also did not miss the chance to praise the contribution of four million Indian Americans.⁶ It is worth mentioning here that this is the election year in the US and therefore, appeasing Indian Americans make perfect sense. President Trump was severely criticised by the Democratic Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders saying that it is a "failure of leadership on human rights".⁷ Similarly, Elizabeth Warren also tweeted that "It's important to strengthen relationships with democratic partners like India. But we must be able to speak truthfully about our values, including religious freedom and freedom of expression—and violence against peaceful protestors is never acceptable."⁸

Indeed, it is time for the world, particularly for a country like the United States which claims to be upholding the values like religious freedom, freedom of expression, human rights or democracy, to play its role in ensuring that the Kashmir lockdown is lifted and the issue is resolved according to the wishes of the Kashmiri people as ratified in UN resolutions. It is equally important that the international community also play its due role to prevent the repeat of 2002 Gujarat riots where a thousand Muslims fell victim to Hindu mobs.

⁵ Anne Gearan, Joanna Slater, Seung Min Kim and Niha Masih, "Trump's India visit opens with more symbolism than substance as he celebrates ties with a fellow nationalist, *Washington Post*, February 24, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-india-visit-opens-with-more-symbolism-than-substance-as-he-celebrates-ties-with-a-fellow-nationalist/2020/02/24/4396ea2c-56d1-11ea-ab68-101ecfec2532_story.html

⁶ "Rousing welcome in Ahmedabad, bilateral talks in new Delhi today, " *Indian Express*, February 25, 2020

⁷ "Delhi Violence: 'This is a failure of leadership on human rights', Bernie Sanders condemns Donald Trump's remark," *Indian Express*, February 27, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/delhi-violence-maujpur-babarpur-jaffrabad-bernie-sanders-6288884/>

⁸ Ibid.