

Trump-Modi meet must go beyond power plays and photo ops

The maverick persona of Trump and Modi alike offers the potential for their first summit to upend the world order and rewrite the rules that will govern the post-cold war security relations.

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At their upcoming summit, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi can choose the inevitable - political expediency consistent with their predecessors in office. In that case, the summit will achieve bonhomie and nothing more. (Agencies)

President Donald Trump will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi on June 26 to discuss a gamut of bilateral issues. The maiden meeting between the two leaders would “set forth a vision” to expand the bilateral partnership in an ambitious way, the White House said on Monday. Summits involving US presidents and Indian PMs are carefully choreographed by the foreign policy establishment. This summit is more likely to address the concerns of the well-heeled and politically connected: H1B visa headcount and defence trade, rigged to benefit American and Indian chaebols. The hard work necessary to forge a meaningful security partnership usually gets short shrift in such meetings.

Summit engagement must go beyond the usual political power plays and photo opportunities. A game-changer can be a summit focused on a security partnership, which meaningfully address the threats as well as the opportunities shaping South and West Asia in the 21st century. The two leaders must also acknowledge the state of affairs vis-à-vis China and the

Let us examine the facts and circumstances driving the convergence of strategic interests between the US and India, which today has reached critical mass. We know China’s rise is not peaceful. We also know that China has every intention of keeping – by whatever means possible - the gains it has made. In 1949, the year that communists overthrew a democratically elected government in China, the country was a small rump with limited natural resources. Since then, China’s annexations – legally and illegally - is noteworthy in one aspect – a southward march to access and dominate the Indian Ocean.

The Chinese Communist Party has staked its survival not on ideological battles, but on the rising living standard of its population. Access to the major trade routes and the unrelenting pursuit of energy, metals, and strategic minerals to fuel economic growth is understandable. But the fact remains, that the push southward towards the Indian Ocean, as opposed to the shorter route to the North Pacific, is the path of least resistance. China does not want a direct conflict with America. Rather than a confrontation, China's military and economic modernisation is designed as deterrence against American interference in its growing sphere of influence.

Through systematic population shifts of Han Chinese, oligarchic corporate control, and by brutally crushing freedom movements, China has consolidated its territory-holdings annexed in the last 50 years. These areas include Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macao. Chinese-built islands have expanded the flash point zone in the South China Sea beyond the Taiwan Straits.

In India's backyard, Chinese military and Chinese-sponsored Maoists continue to foment skirmishes and exert creeping border control into India, the Russian Far East, Mongolia, Nepal, and Myanmar.

Pakistan, a client-state of China for most of its military purchases, has ceded parts of "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir" (PoK) to Chinese control, allowed Chinese-built roads through the ancient Khyber Pass for rapid military deployment, and facilitated Chinese military deployments inside Afghanistan.

Eighteen Chinese naval bases are in various stages of completion as strategic choke points surrounding the Indian Ocean, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka,

Myanmar, Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Seychelles, and Madagascar. Chinese hegemonic ambitions to dominate the Indian Ocean should not be taken lightly. But the fact remains, China's deliberate and very visible march towards the Indian Ocean is because of India's inaction and also America's ambivalence towards Chinese hegemony in South and Western Asia.

Generations of PMs have tolerated repeated Chinese border incursions into India as well as Chinese occupation of a large chunk of Kashmir that is an integral part of India through millennia. Preferring diplomacy with China over confrontation, India focuses its animus on Pakistan, which today is a de facto vassal state of imperial China. On the other side of the equation, since Nixon established diplomatic relations with communist China, American Presidents (Ford, Carter, Reagan, and H.W. Bush) have been pre-occupied fighting the cold war against the Soviet Union where China was a necessary ally to weaken Soviet influence in Asia.

In the post-cold war milieu, the burgeoning US-China trade relations and entrenched cold-warriors in America's diplomatic and political establishment remain significant deterrents against decisive American action towards China. While American Presidents (Clinton, W. Bush, and Obama) are known for tough anti-China campaign trail rhetoric, they have predictably failed to address the Chinese threat when they are in office.

At their upcoming summit, President Trump and Prime Minister Modi can choose the inevitable - political expediency consistent with their predecessors in office. In that case, the summit will achieve bonhomie and nothing more. On the other hand, the two leaders can decisively address the Chinese

hegemonic control of the Indian Ocean trade lanes and forge a path to peace in South and West Asia. Indeed, the maverick persona of Trump and Modi alike offers the potential for their first summit to upend the world order and rewrite the rules that will govern the post-cold war security relations.

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