

# US-India 'Defining Partnership' Expected To Soon Get More Defined

By Frank F Islam

Since the late 1990s, bilateral ties between India and the United States have blossomed under successive Republican and Democratic administrations. They have strengthened and deepened to such an extent that, on his first visit to India in 2009, President Barack Obama characterised the relationship between the two nations as "one of the defining partnerships for the 21st century".

Because of Donald Trump's unexpected election as US President in November of 2016, the year 2017 began with serious questions about the future of that partnership. This was due to the President-elect's vow as a candidate to rewrite many treaties and to bring about sweeping changes to America's international commitments.

During a campaign event, Trump had pledged to his Indian-American supporters that he would work to reinforce and improve relations with India. Nonetheless, his professed America First policy and attacks on H-1B visas created some apprehension in New Delhi about the direction his administration would take with regard to India.

That was the news of concern in January at the beginning of the Trump presidency. The good news is that those concerns were unwarranted. As the year draws to a close, it can be reported that the US-India relations have been, thankfully, one of the few alliances that withstood the tumultuous volcano that is the Trump presidency.



Narendra Modi and Barack Obama. Obama first described Indo-US ties as "one of the defining partnerships for the 21st century". On right is Modi with Trump at the White House. Pics: IANS

While the Trump administration did revisit or shelve a number of treaties and alliances, including the Paris climate accord, NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership this year, it stayed the course in its relationship with New Delhi.

The Trump administration as well as the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi deserve credit for sustaining this momentum. They accomplished this by focusing mainly on areas where they are on the same page -- such as cooperation on defence and terrorism -- and not letting issues such as H-1B become irritants.

One of the symbolic successes and highlights of the year was unquestionably Modi's Washington visit in late June. The two-day working visit was an eagerly anticipated event.

President Obama had hosted the Prime Minister at the White House in 2016. Prior to that, in 2015, Obama had visited New Delhi to be the Guest of Honor at India's Republic Day celebrations. As a result of these interactions, Modi had forged a good rapport with President Obama.

Whether Modi -- a practitioner of personal diplomacy who believes in nourishing and nurturing friendships with world leaders -- would succeed in establishing a similar rapport with Trump was on everyone's mind, prior to their get-together.

When the two leaders met at the White House, there were good vibes and strong indications that they would be able to establish a collegial and cordial working relationship. Trump and Modi



displayed camaraderie again and a shared perspective when they conferred on the sidelines in Manila at the ASEAN meeting in November.

This is evidence that the evolving India-U.S. relationship is on solid ground. A pair of high-level visits to India provided additional evidence. In September, Secretary of Defense James Mattis

became the first senior cabinet member of the Trump administration to visit India. In late October, Secretary of State Tillerson was in New Delhi on his maiden visit. A third piece of evidence of the high priority given to the India relationship by the US was the naming of **Kenneth Juster** (pictured) as America's 25th ambassador to New Delhi in September. Though the delay in nominating an envoy -- the position remained vacant for more than eight months -- had raised concern among India watchers, Juster's appointment was universally welcomed in both New Delhi and Washington.

Juster is a trade expert who had served as a deputy assistant to the President for International Economic Affairs and deputy director of the National Economic Council. He has had considerable experience and is a veteran in dealing with India.

He represented the US side during the negotiation of the historic civil nuclear deal nearly a decade ago. He also co-chaired the U.S.-India High Technology Cooperation Group.

The progress on the India-US front was not limited to the political and policy arena. Importantly, another positive trend for the year was the continued uptick in trade between the two countries.

By the end of October, the bilateral trade in goods was more than \$62.2 billion, a 10 percent increase from the same 10-month period in 2016. This is a powerful signal that trade will remain a cornerstone in relations in the years to come.

In summary, 2017 has been a good year for the evolving India-US "partnership".

As Modi commented at the ASEAN Summit in November, "The cooperation between India and the US can rise beyond bilateral cooperation and both countries can work for the future of Asia and the world." Speaking for the White House at the Summit, Deputy Press Secretary Raj Shah stated that the countries have a "strong relationship that is going to get stronger". Shah also said that the US-India relationship should "not be contingent" on any other relationship.

Actions speak louder than words. In 2017, the reality has aligned with the rhetoric. The seeds have been planted and are being nurtured for an even stronger and more substantial alliance between India and the U.S.

This is not a guarantee that 2018 will bring bigger and better things for the India-U.S. "partnership". Factors such as domestic concerns and/or unrest within either country or an international incident could impede progress going forward.

At this point in time, however, it can be stated that this "defining partnership" continues to be defined and that is a good thing.

(Frank Islam is an Entrepreneur, civic leader and thought leader based in Washington, DC. The views expressed here are personal. He can be contacted at [ffislam@verizon.net](mailto:ffislam@verizon.net))

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