

13 November 2017

Narendra Modi to meet Donald Trump today: 3 issues likely to be discussed

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to meet US president Donald Trump in Manila on Monday, their second interaction in a little over four months

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Narendra Modi and US president could also discuss the new quadrilateral arrangement.
Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to meet US president Donald Trump in Manila on Monday—their second interaction in a little over four months. The meeting—that follows an exchange of pleasantries at the dinner organised by Philippines president Roderigo Duterte in Manila on Sunday evening—is to take place on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit. And it comes after the Trump administration, in two major foreign policy speeches, outlined a greater role for India in the war against the Taliban in

Afghanistan as well as in the maintenance of stability in the “Indo-Pacific” region.

The first meeting between the two leaders took place in Washington in June.

So what are the issues likely to be on the table when Modi meets Trump on Monday?

Trade

Fair trade has been a key theme highlighted by Trump throughout his 12-day visit across five countries in Asia. India’s trade imbalance with the US is not as great as, say Japan’s or China’s, but it is still an issue for the Trump administration. The US president could, therefore, seek increased market access for US goods into the Indian market as a means to reduce the trade deficit.

The Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral group

Given that the Trump administration has popularised the geo-strategic term “Indo-Pacific” for a swathe of sea and land, stretching from the US Pacific Coast to Africa, the two leaders could exchange notes on their vision for the region. Trump, in a speech to the Asia Pacific Economic Community business leaders on Friday in Vietnam, spoke of fair and open trade, free sea lanes of communication, access to funds for infrastructure that do not come with strings attached—all a seeming criticism of China’s engagement with countries in its periphery as well as those who have signed up for its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. India and Japan are already looking at infrastructure development and capacity building through their Asia-Africa-Growth Corridor.

The two leaders could also discuss the new quadrilateral arrangement, talks about which took place between officials of India, US, Japan and Australia. The group could form the basis of a new security architecture in the region as China flexes its muscles.

Af-Pak policy

It was in August that Trump outlined his new policy for Afghanistan in which he said that Washington would not announce any timetable to leave the insurgency-wracked country. He had also berated Pakistan for its role in sheltering insurgents and delineated a role for India in stabilising Afghanistan economically. Inviting India to play a role has been something previous US administrations have been reluctant to do, unwilling to upset Pakistan through which run the supply routes that sustain US and other international troops in Afghanistan.

India which considers Afghanistan as part of its extended neighbourhood has since August announced 116 new development projects in Afghanistan, hosted an Afghan trade fair and sent a consignment of wheat to the country through Iran's Chabahar port. The wheat consignment reached Afghanistan on Sunday.

Monday's meeting will allow the two leaders the opportunity to possibly exchange views on Afghanistan given that this is their first meeting since the new US policy for Afghanistan was unveiled in August. So far the Trump administration has been seen as responsive to India's worries on terrorism—it banned Pakistan-based United Jihad Council chief Syed Salauddin, a terrorist, just before Modi was to meet Trump for talks in the White House on 26 June. The Trump administration has also spoken tough against terrorist havens in Pakistan and shown an intent to withhold financial aid if Pakistan fails to comply with Washington's requests on cutting support for terrorists.

First Published: Mon, Nov 13 2017. 10 02 AM IST

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