

WITH PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI IN DRIVER'S SEAT, US BILATERAL TIES TAKE HISTORIC TURN

NEW DELHI: It was after the first dinner between Narendra Modi and Barack Obama on September 29 that the Indian side received a call from the White House. The president, they said, wanted to go with Modi to visit the Martin Luther King memorial the next day. On Tuesday, Modi rode "The Beast" with Obama and wrote a new chapter in bilateral ties. That journey was powered by a high-voltage show at Madison Square, but involved a level of painstaking planning unusual for the Indian system.



First, Modi succeeded in changing the India narrative. "We are no more a 'could-have-been' power," said many of those present at the various meetings. The scorching pace of 35 meetings set by the fasting PM showed very clearly that Modi went to the US with a clear strategy, one that would stretch well beyond the visit.

Unlike both Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, Modi went to the US with a strong domestic agenda. Modi's aim was to converge his domestic priorities with his foreign policy, which explains why the joint statement bears such a strong stamp of the prime minister himself. Modi put his shoulder to the wheel to turn India's US policy to align itself to India's domestic transformation and its global aspirations. In many ways, that is his greatest success.

The India story had a global bounce until 2009, but in the past few years, the narrative has wilted, dogged by myriad problems in India. Modi's primary intention was to inject energy into the India story, and to turn that narrative around. Modi's big outreach was with the US business community - he met 11 companies together and six CEOs individually. These were no accident. Indian officials had approached each one of these companies weeks in advance, and got from them a five-year perspective for India. So when Modi met them, he had answers. By the time he met them he had designated a senior official in the PMO to be their point person to facilitate investment.

For instance, Lawrence Fink of Blackrock said they would hold an investors' meet in India in early 2015, giving a conservative estimate of \$6 billion in investment pledges. Modi was ready with everything the government could do to facilitate such a meet. The joint statement reflects this. A mechanism between finance ministry and the US department of commerce will clear US investment projects in infrastructure on priority, by bringing together ministries and state governments, as necessary. The US Treasury will be roped in to expand the flow and sources of capital through an investment platform.

Modi's meetings with US leaders Chris Christie, Hillary Clinton, Nikki Haley and Martin O'Malley

were carefully crafted. Modi was investing in not only the present US leadership, but also in the future.

The Modi team's outreach to the Indian American community at MSG was equally important. A 3-million strong, wealthy and very influential minority in the US, Indians are only now coming into their own as a political force. Modi's intention was to enthuse them to bat for India even as they exercise their influence on US politics. The community leadership responded with their own show of strength — 33 Congressmen, one Senator and three governors engaged Modi exclusively, deepening his outreach in the US Congress.

Less noticed was Modi's meeting with 13 leaders of the American Jewish community representing seven organizations. The India-US relationship has traditionally received strong support from the powerful Jewish community in the US. By meeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York, Modi discarded with the secretive nature of the India-Israel relationship. It brought the Jewish leaders more securely on to India's corner of the game.

As with China and Japan, with the US too, Modi pushed his infrastructure initiative. US firms will build new generation locomotives in India (two US firms have already qualified) as well as help in track overhaul, as Modi pushes the transformation of Indian Railways.

On defence, Modi pushed the envelope much further than previously imagined. The defence production secretary was in the US weeks before Modi's visit to set the stage. India and US have extended for another decade the landmark defence framework agreement. For the first time, US has offered India high grade technology for the next generation of Indian Navy vessels. The Navy, according to sources, is in the process of building over 40 different classes of warships and destroyers.

On the business end, Boeing recently signed a deal in Bangalore to build part of the mainframe of the Chinook helicopters in India as well as some sustainable components for the C-17 aircraft, this, before the Chinook deal is finalized. Sources said GE is opening a new manufacture and skilling-integrated plant in Pune in November.

India will draw heavily on US assistance to create the next IIT in Goa, recreating the success of the Kanpur IIT; a new national defence university in India, as well as bringing 1000 US professors from the top 100 universities each year to teach in Indian universities. The Indian government has promised to pay them a minimum of \$3000 a month for their efforts.

The Indian side was clear that every item on the agreements harmonized with the PM's focus areas, with the overriding objective—to get the job done.