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THE CURRENT: What did Trump's India trip accomplish?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

This week President Donald Trump made a state visit to India, speaking at a rally in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, Gujarat, visiting the Taj Mahal, and meeting with the prime minister in pursuit of a still-elusive trade deal. During his visit, riots broke out as Hindu nationalists attacked Muslim groups protesting a new citizenship law in India.

With us to discuss what happened on the trip and current relations between the U.S. and India is Tanvi Madan, senior fellow and director of the India Project here at Brookings. Tanvi, thanks for being here.

MADAN: Thanks for having me on the show.

PITA: Tanvi, this visit by Trump to India seemed sort of long on spectacle, short on policy. What was the purpose of this trip, did it achieve the aims that both sides had for it?

MADAN: I see it slightly differently from the critics who say it was kind of "all hat, no cattle." The symbolism is important in U.S.-India relations, sometimes more so than in, particularly, alliance relationships that the U.S. has, but what you did see was, I think the purpose for both sides was to consolidate some of the gains particularly in defense and security cooperation over the last three years, and to ensure that some of the trade frictions they have don't spill over into those areas of strategic convergence. So I think the hope will be that they have succeeded in that front, because there was some progress made on both those questions, defense and security, as well as to some extent trade. Though I don't think we'll know about that for another week or so, perhaps a month.

I'll also say that I think for both Prime Minister Modi and for President Trump, they'd been looking to get a political boost out of this trip, and I think both come away from it quite pleased. For Prime Minister Modi, it was also important from a strategic perspective to keep President Trump on-side, so to speak, given how important that is in U.S. relations with anyone these days. So I think the fact that clearly Indian efforts to put a lot into these optics that they know President Trump cares about, whether it was an audience of 110,000-plus people in the city of Ahmedabad, which is Modi's home town, or the state dinner and the red-carpet welcome in Delhi. I think this was all laid out to appeal to President Trump, and I think Prime Minister Modi would have thought that those efforts paid out in the fact that President Trump was in a very good mood, stayed on-message, and from Prime Minister Modi's perspective, he also refrained from criticizing the prime minister or his party or his government on certain of the domestic developments that have been of concern to domestic policymakers.

PITA: The violence in New Delhi which so far has resulted in – the numbers that I saw this morning – appears to be more than 20 killed, maybe as many as 200 injured, mosques burned along with homes and businesses. The Citizenship Amendment Act that's sort of at the root of this, it's fueling

protests since it was passed in December. First, can you give our listeners a little bit of context about the CAA and why it's so controversial?

MADAN: Sure. It was the prime minister's party, the BJP, had said before the election that they won last year in the spring, that they were going to institute the Citizenship Amendment Act that they said was going to give refugees in India from three countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, of certain minority communities – and the ones particularly mentioned were Hindu Sikhs and a few others – they would give them kind of a fast track to citizenship in India, those who were there. Now, conspicuously missing from the list of minorities from other countries were Muslims, and I think that created, both from a constitutional point of view but in combination in India with some fears about a potential national register of citizens, there was some fear that even among Indian Muslims that this would have an impact on their rights and liberties down the line. So that has led to protest not just by Muslims but by others either on the basis of how constitutional this is or not, and other concerns; you had a lot of young people and students in particular show up to protest as well. So this is what has caused some of the pushback against this government move. And you've also seen some Indian states say they will fight this in the courts and not implement some of the act or potentially this national register of citizenship that is being proposed, or at least, has been rumored to be in the works. The government has denied that they plan to do a national register of citizens, at least for now.

PITA: And do we know what it was that sparked this flareup of violence particularly this week?

MADAN: The details are still kind of emerging, and there's a lot of misinformation, contradictory approaches people have taken to this question, but what we think happened at the moment is that certain leaders who are affiliated with the prime minister's party – not the prime minister himself, but certain leaders who consider themselves Hindu nationalists – said they were going to clear out the protests, or that they police had to. Then you did see clashes between Hindus and Muslims that resulted first in a policeman being killed and then greater violence after that. What we didn't see is law enforcement stepping in to stop some of this. We have in the last 24 hours or so, and I think there's some hope that it will hold. We haven't seen communal violence in Delhi at least for a while, so it sparks concerns among many, and of course overshadowed Trump's trip to Delhi in particular, not just in terms of the headlines, but also in terms of the country's attention in India.

PITA: The U.S. is one of India's largest trading partners, but in June the U.S. ended India's preferential trade status. They've been working for a while now on trying to reach a new trade deal between the two countries. What are some of the issues that have held up a new deal on this?

MADAN: So, the concerns have been, from the U.S. perspective, in particular there've been concerns about Indian tariffs, as well as certain regulations that restrict American companies' abilities to operate in terms of tariffs and market access particularly for agricultural products is something President Donald Trump has been focused on, not least because they affect his constituencies in red states. So he's been looking for access in terms of dairy products and poultry, so you can imagine there's been discussions about everything from chickens to walnuts over these last few months. There's also some more structural issues that it was clear they were not going to take on during this trip or in a mini-trade deal, including some data localization rules that India has which are quite similar in some ways to ones that countries in the European Union are proposing, but those have raised concerns about American companies. Also some restrictions on American e-commerce companies that are operating there, and potential legislation to regulate the digital economy that has created some concerns about American companies.

Now the Indian side also has concerns. They've been hit with some steel and aluminum tariffs, but also by the administration taking away their benefits under a generalized system of preferences. There was some hope they would reach a mini-trade deal, but even before President Trump went to India that was clear it wasn't going to happen. They'd reached sort of 70 to 80 percent of the way with some concerns at the end, which could've been they couldn't quite get over them because of negotiating styles,

changing goalposts – each side said the other kept changing what they wanted – but at least from the joint statement during this visit, it seems that we'll see over the near future that they have got over those final hurdles toward that mini-trade deal. So I'd watch that space over the next month or so to see if the political leaders actually just got together and said, "we need to do this" and got a mini-trade deal or a phase one trade deal, as it's called in the joint statement, so there'll be a cease-fire for the next few months while they work towards a more comprehensive trade agreement at the end of the year.

PITA: You said they did make some progress on certain security cooperation concerns. What were some of the agreements that did come out of this, that were announced at this meeting?

MADAN: So I think the one that, for different reasons both Delhi and Washington will be pleased with, is the Indian announcement that they would be procuring additional military equipment from the United States. That was particularly in the form of a defense deal for the Indian Navy to purchase some American helicopters, as well as some additional Apache helicopters – India already has some in its arsenal. These totaled to about \$3 billion. So from the Trump administration perspective, that not just gave President Trump a dollar figure to tout but also, I think, they've been quite frustrated that while many other aspects of defense and security cooperation between the U.S. and India really deepened in the last three years, the Trump administration hasn't actually got a defense deal with India for India to procure equipment, so they'll be pleased on that front. India will be pleased because the Navy helicopter deal involves the transfer of technology that they've been seeking from the U.S. for a while.

PITA: One thing that didn't come up, at least not in any sort of explicit mention on this trip was about China and China's place in the relationship. You have a new book out, "Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations during the Cold War." How is China fitting in to the current U.S.-India relationship at this time?

MADAN: It's quite interesting because I think China has been driving the U.S.-India strategic partnership – concerns about China have been driving the U.S.-India relationship for the last two decades. And that has become even more the case as Delhi and Washington share concerns, not about China's rise per se, but particularly about its behavior in the region, both in territorial Asia as well as maritime Asia, which both countries have started referring to as the Indo-Pacific. And so what you've seen over the last few years is deep defense & security cooperation, conversations about how to offer alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative, collaboration with not just each other, but with countries like Japan and Australia, with trilaterals, with quadrilaterals, and the two countries working together with countries in Southeast Asia, in South Asia, to help them to build their own capacity, or working together for the militaries to be able to operate together. This has been driven by these shared concerns about China. In the U.S. case, whether in the Bush administration, the Obama administration, or amongst Trump administration officials has been, the strategic case for the relationship with India has been, that as China rises and poses concerns, and particularly if it becomes assertive, a democratic, strong, prosperous India would be in American interests to support as both a democratic contrast to China as well as a strategic counterbalance.

As you said, China was not mentioned explicitly during any of the Trump or Modi speeches; that's actually quite common. They don't mention "the c-word"; it's the country that shall not be named. But what we did see was allusions to it, for example in Trump's speech in Ahmedabad, drawing a contrast between democratic India and its success, and he said, countries that "seek power through coercion, intimidation, and aggression." He also kind of referenced it in comments about how India goes about choosing who to put in, which companies to allow into its telecom infrastructure, or participate in critical infrastructure development, here alluding to 5G and Huawei. India has not made a decision yet; it has its own concerns about Huawei. It was a good move for the president not to pressure India publicly, but this is clearly something the two countries talked about. And finally you saw it in some of the things they agreed to, whether it was more collaboration in the Indo-Pacific, whether to deepen each one of the aspects that they have talked about it; whether it was the defense deal, which the U.S. sees as helping India to build its defense capacity so it can burden-share; or whether it was their agreement for this new

Development Finance Corporation that the U.S. has started to be able to finance projects with global standards that's setting up a new office in India. And finally, an agreement for USAID and its India counterpart to work on infrastructure projects together and connectivity projects in third countries.

PITA: Well, Tanvi, thanks for being here today and telling us about this.

MADAN: Thanks so much, Adrianna.