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Republicans Think India's Narendra Modi Is New Reagan

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In a country where reincarnation is a part of life, one man has tapped into the soul of an old American cowboy from the Oval Office. Some in the Republican Party have named India's Prime Minister as the reincarnated conservative deity, Ronald Reagan.

"He is the new Reagan. We need someone like Modi here in the U.S.," says Shalabh Kumar, an Indian-American who wears many hats himself. As the CEO of AVG Advanced Technology in Chicago, he is just as busy moonlighting as the chairman of the Indian-American Advisory Council to the House Republican Conference and as chairman to the National Indian-American Public Policy Institution, which took 18 Republicans and Chicago-area business leaders to India in 2013 to meet with Modi. He's organizing a similar Republican trip in November.

For those who thought the change mandate and the oratory prowess of Modi were more reminiscent of Barack Obama than "rappin Ron", think again. Though word of caution, this comes from a die-hard Republican in the Indian-American community. **"He is nothing like Obama. He doesn't want government to be involved in businesses. I think pretty soon you'll start hearing about 'Modinomics'," he tells me from his cell phone in O'Hare, waiting to board an Air India flight to New Delhi. What might that look like, I asked. "A lot like Reaganomics, only modified to fit India's needs."**



Modi? Is that you? Some in the Republican party think India's new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, is the new Ronald Reagan. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

India is a country with a lot of needs. The poorest of the BRICS with a per capita GDP of less than \$2,000 annually, India is poor, dirty, and has the infrastructure of the old Third World that existed when Reagan was in the White House. Like Reagan, Modi is taking over a hamstrung economy with promises to streamline government. But unlike Reagan, he governs a much more diverse society, largely filled with extremely poor people and sharing a border with two countries — Pakistan and China — that are known to be foreign policy headaches.

"I particularly like his thoughts on small government," said Republican congressman Aaron Schock. "Modi's commitment to maximum governance and minimum government promises to strengthen (our) relationship through more enduring diplomatic ties, mutually beneficial trade in goods and services, and cultural collaboration with the United States," [he said in a statement dated May 29](#), a few days after Modi and his BJP party swept India's month-long general election. Schock was one of the Republicans who traveled with Kumar to Modi's home state of Gujarat last year.

Kumar introduced former presidential candidate Newt Gingrich to become a Modi loyalist. Gingrich, who also took the March 2013 junket to India, has discussed Reagan-esque economics with Modi via Skype.

Other than the usual modus-operandi of holding up world leaders who can

help sell your ideology, a budding defense relationship between Washington in Delhi makes India even more promising.

Lockheed Martin builds the C-130 in Hyderabad, with the handiwork of its partner, Tata Advanced Systems. Tata also builds the main cabin for the Sikorsky S-92 helicopter in the same city.



Newt Gingrich in a Skype call with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi last year. Some Republicans liken Modi to Reagan.

Reagan was big on defense. So is Modi. His latest budget opened the market to allow for 49% foreign ownership of Indian defense contractors.

Reagan's other trait, cutting bureaucracy, "trickled down" to Modi from across the seas. Modi has been streamlining government since he stepped into office, reducing government positions in hopes to reduce waste and the amount of time it takes to approve large infrastructure projects. India needs that. Voters thought so too.

Similarities in style mask substantive differences, notes Hunter College professor Rob Jenkins in a nice piece he wrote about the two leaders this [April in *Foreign Policy*](#). Associated with the religious right, Reagan was really a centrist. Modi, by contrast, presents himself as a centrist despite having spent much of his adult life with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an organization whose ideology promotes the idea of India as a Hindu nation, Jenkins wrote. In 1990, Modi helped organize a notorious, religiously themed tour by his BJP political leaders through Gujarat's most tense Hindu-Muslim neighborhoods. It left a "shameful trail of inter-communal violence in its wake," Jenkins notes.



The India flagged Desh Gaurav crude oil tanker outside of Mumbai. Republicans like India as a potential importer of American LNG. (Photo by Jackie O. Cruz/FORBES)

Kumar, who told me he was also a former member of the RSS, says Modi is no terrorist. According to U.S. media reports, Modi has even been exempt from traveling in the U.S. because of his association with the group. The State Department told FORBES on Tuesday that it could neither confirm nor deny the account, saying it does not give details about individual travel bans.

Republicans aren't alone in liking Modi. Democrats recently signed a resolution to invite him to address Congress in September ahead of his speech to the United Nations that month. But the Reagan comparison is all GOP, and at that, it is all Kumar, India's biggest U.S. lobbyist for the House Republicans.

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When it comes to economic times, either Reagan or just plain Modi-style, India has a lot to go.

Despite the budding business relationship, and a long-held IT services trade, this nation of more than a billion trades with the U.S. about as much as triple-dip recession Italy. Last year, the U.S. exported \$21.8 billion worth of goods and services, a little more than the roughly \$17 billion exported to Italy. Going the other way, the U.S. imported \$41.8 billion of India products in 2013 compared to \$38 billion from Italy. Within emerging markets, Brazil surpasses India for trade with the U.S. too. U.S. export values to Brazil were \$44.1 billion last year, but imports were lower at \$27.6 billion.

"We think there is a much bigger opportunity for trade," says Kumar.



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I've written about Brazil pre-Lula and post-Lula and spent the last five years covering all aspects of the country for Dow Jones, Wall Street Journal and Barron's. Meanwhile, for an undetermined amount of time, and with a little help from my friends, I will be parachuting into Russia, India and China. (I figure if Anderson Cooper can parachute, I can parachute.)