

Indo-US Relations under the Biden Administration: Predictable Difficulties Ahead

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There are expectations all around that Indo-US strategic partnership will remain robust during the next four years of the Joe Biden Administration in the United States. This expectation is derived from India's experiences with previous Democratic administrations, especially starting with the early years of the 21st Century.

The foundation of the bilateral strategic partnership between India and the United States was laid when Democratic President Bill Clinton made a path-breaking visit to India in March 2000. It was trailblazing because President Clinton had strongly responded to Indian nuclear tests in 1998 by imposing sanctions, and withholding cooperation with India in a number of areas. In less than two years after the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government declared India to be nuclear weapon power soon after the Pokhran nuclear tests, the Clinton Administration decided to restore cooperative ties with India. Clinton's India trip, however, was more than just the restoration of normalcy in Indo-US ties. Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Clinton signed a Vision statement to lift the bilateral relationship to new heights; and the work towards shaping up a strategic partnership between the two countries soon started.

The next Democratic President after Clinton was Barack Obama. Despite some initial glitches and diplomatic strains arising out of the Devyani Khobragade incident, the Indo-US strategic partnership expanded and deepened further during the Obama Administration. President Obama has, so far, been the only US president to have visited India twice during his tenure. His administration made India the "linchpin" of the US strategy of "pivot to Asia" that subsequently came to be known as the "Asia Rebalance" strategy.

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With this historical backdrop, analysts anticipate that the third Democratic President of the United States in this century would continue to carry forward the foreign policy goals and orientations of the party and, thus, there is little to suspect there will be any major disruption in US policy towards India in next four years of the Biden Administration. Significantly, Joe Biden had long innings in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and was also the Vice President during eight years of the Obama Administration, in which he played a significant role in building his country's flourishing cooperative ties with India.

The second reason that has generated constructive expectations of US policy towards India is the appointment of several Indian Americans in crucial executive positions in the administrative structure of the Biden Administration. While these officers will unquestionably seek to promote American interests, there is hope that they will be proficient communicators in bilateral Indo-US dialogues, and can better comprehend and appreciate Indian views on critical issues.

The third factor that has propelled hopes of healthier ties between India and the United States under the Biden Administration is a series of statements issued by Joe Biden himself during the 2020 presidential election campaign, later as president-elect, and then since his inauguration as the 46th president of the United States. In addition, several supportive statements about India-US ties were also made by his Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defence, and the National Security Adviser - Anthony Blinken, Lloyd Austin, and William Burns, respectively - during their confirmation hearings in the Senate. In fact, some of the key members of the Biden national security decision making team, including Kurt Campbell who has been designated as a special envoy for the Indo-Pacific, are expert India hands who have extensive knowledge of India, and have long experience in dealing with the Indian officials and leaders.

Now the main question is: are all the above three factors sufficient to project that the Indo-US relationship under the Biden Administration will be more constructive, cooperative, profound, and wide-ranging? In answer, one could say that, realistically, one need not be overly optimistic. While it can be anticipated that the areas of US-Indian bilateral cooperation will gather more steam in coming years, it would be more pertinent to foresee and focus on the challenges, complications, and probable impediments that may lie in the way.

What then could be the principal challenges in this relationship? First, it is essential to be cognisant of the fact that post the COVID-19 pandemic, international relations will no longer be the same in the coming years. The

COVID-19 pandemic has immensely disrupted the economic relations among nations that were built over the years through evolving rules, practices, a dynamic regionalism, and acceptable norms of economic behaviour. Restoring normalcy in the patterns of trade, investment, and foreign assistance in the post-pandemic world is neither going to be simple nor quicker in time and pace. In the process, new hitches and concerns are likely to arise that will require progressive solutions to resolve differences and ease economic transactions. India and the United States are, at present, outside economic groupings, such as the CPTPP and RCEP. Bilateral friction over issues such as IPR, market access, tariff rates and rules, ease of doing business, protection given to foreign direct investment, etc. are probable, and likely to pose significant impediments for a smooth bilateral affinity to emerge. There will also be some spill over bilateral differences over residual issues deriving from the Trump era, such as tariff and GSP.

Secondly, some Democratic legislators in the US House of Representatives and Senators, who often raise their voice over issues, such as human rights, governance, and religious freedom, will most likely be on the go to make anti-India statements during congressional hearings or otherwise, and kick up political dust. In this age of social media, with almost unhindered access of individuals to express opinions, political differences between the leadership of the two countries can generate controversies that may sometimes spiral out of control. Only in the recent past, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar had to cancel a meeting with a Congresswoman, Pramila Jayapal, to avoid bitter exchanges or unnecessary controversy. Statements made in the US, on Kashmir, NRC, CAA, or farmer protests, are particular concerns that need to be handled carefully.

Third, India and the US will continue to have a broad convergence of interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Both would like to oppose Chinese expansionist activities and predatory economic practices. Both would continue to defend the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue process, popularly known as the Quad. Both would keep supporting the principle of “ASEAN centrality”. However, real challenges will, no doubt, crop up in the details. As of now, the Biden Administration has made it amply clear that the Indo-Pacific strategy of his predecessor would continue to be in his foreign policy agenda. President Biden has expressed his resolve to act tough against Chinese policies and practices aimed at building Beijing’s hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. By repeatedly announcing that “America is back”, Biden has signalled his willingness to face the over ambitious Chinese in cooperation with the Trans-Atlantic allies as also with allies and strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

It is not clear yet how the US allies would react and respond to the Biden Administration's expression of interest to return to the world stage to play its traditional leadership role. The mistrust generated by the Trump Administration has not disappeared in the allied countries. The signing of an investment treaty between the European Union and China, and the decision of Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand to join the RCEP are indications that the traditional allies will not treat Biden's invitation to easily restore the old relationships of the pre-Trump era.

It is important to underline that both India and the United States are not party to the RCEP, or even the CPTPP. In the meantime, China's bellicose posture at the Line of Actual Control has made India toughen its stance over economic cooperation with China. The US hopefulness that economic engagement with China would make this country a stakeholder in the West-led international order has been belied. Similarly, the Indian belief that economic engagement with China would ensure a peaceful border and make for dispute resolution through dialogue and negotiations has also not fructified. Neither the US nor India support the Chinese stand on Pakistan-sponsored terrorist activities.

There are many such developments that make it appear logical that India and the USA should now be alliance partners. The signing of the four foundational agreements, such as BECA and LEMOA; regular and increasingly sophisticated joint military exercises by the Indian and American armed forces; procurement of billions of dollars' worth of US military hardware by India; and growing strategic convergences amidst fast changing geopolitics - all make it appear reasonable to alleviate Indo-US strategic partnership to the level of an alliance.

However, what appears to be rational and logical may not be realised in the foreseeable future. Rather, a coordinated Indo-US strategy, though required, will be hard to agree upon. The most complicated diplomatic challenge would be to devise a strategy that would allow India to retain its strategic autonomy, prevent Chinese aggression and, at the same time, enable it to leverage its equation with the US at the time of Chinese assertiveness.

It is a good development that, in less than a month since it came to power, the Biden Administration has hinted at its strategy of fiercely dealing with its "strategic competitor" - China. President Biden has announced that "America is back"; has reinforced the US commitment to NATO; and has assured the US allies in the Indo-Pacific - all with an aim to deal with an aggressive China along with the allies and partners. In a very rare pro-active

step, the members of the Quad have had an online meeting at the level of Foreign Ministers, emphasised the need for maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, and underlined the principle of “territorial integrity” and “freedom of navigation”. While the gesturing is clear, the details are as yet unspecified.

Will QUAD emerge as a mini-NATO type Pacific Pact? Will it be enlarged to include other willing countries of the region? Will it turn into a military grouping of nations? Will it openly turn into a mechanism to contain or constrain China? Will it take steps to undo the Chinese occupation of islands in the South China Sea? These are all difficult questions that may impinge upon future negotiations and the deliberations of interlocutors of India and the United States.

Fourth, Indo-Russian relations will set certain limits to Indo-US defence cooperation. While Russia is no Soviet Union, successive US administrations have not been able to live comfortably with President Putin’s Russia. The resurgence of Russia as an influential actor in the geopolitics of Eurasia has made it difficult for Washington to reverse Moscow’s actions in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, Crimea, and even Iran. India has a close strategic partnership with Russia, and would not like to end its arms trade with that country. The US Congress has enacted CAATSA to prevent third countries from having arms trade with Russia. It has already imposed sanctions on China for purchasing S-400 missiles from Russia. The Trump Administration refrained from imposing sanctions on India, but did not give the waiver either.

The Biden Administration has a difficult choice to make, and this issue will influence the course of Indo-US ties as long as the issue is not kept off the table of decision-making on sanctions. It may so happen that President Biden will stay away from imposing sanctions related to the purchase of Russian S-400 missiles by India. But what will Washington ask for in return? Will India be able to concede to American demands? These matters are beyond any speculation at the moment.

Fifth, India has come a long way from the time when Pakistan was a constant factor constraining Indo-US relations. India has managed to tackle Pakistan-sponsored terrorist activities in various sensitive regions of India. The Indo-US cooperation in counter-terrorism operations has been undoubtedly beneficial. But it would be rash to write the obituary of terrorism in India and its neighbourhood. As long as a nuclear powered, unstable, and backward country like Pakistan exists, and a rising superpower like China backs it for strategic reasons, India cannot afford to relax. In the process, the US role remains crucial. And the US role will be hindered to a significant extent as long as the US troops remain in Afghanistan, and US dependence on Pakistan

for safety and security of its forces persists.

The Biden Administration is currently in the process of reviewing the Trump Administration's deal with the Taliban. It is a welcome development since the Taliban did not live up to its commitment to abjure violence. Moreover, the Afghan government was kept out of the Doha Deal. The situation in Afghanistan, where India has invested nearly 3 billion dollars, is so volatile that the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces in the present circumstances will culminate in the victory of the Taliban. The second Taliban regime in Kabul will be a distinct failure of the USA and its allies, and the potential behaviour of the regime post the withdrawal of Western forces is anybody's guess. Alternatively, if the standoff between Western forces and the Taliban carries on, Pakistan will be the main beneficiary. The Pakistan lobby in Washington is already at work to team up with those political elements which raise questions on India's domestic issues, including human rights in Kashmir, religious freedom, CAA, NRC, and even farmers' protests.

Sixth, India will have to navigate the arduous waters of geopolitics in the West Asian region when the Biden Administration begins to address the issues related to the Iran Nuclear Deal, the Saudi-Iran cold war, the Shia-Sunni divide, the continuing stalemate in Syria, persistent civil strife in Yemen and Libya, and many other similar complicated developments.

West Asia is a region that houses millions of Indian migrant workers, provides the crucial energy resources that are so significant to fuel the Indian economy, and has had historical, social, and cultural linkages with India for centuries. India and the United States will continue to have critical differences on some of the issues in the region. The challenge before Indian diplomacy will be to ensure adequate and safe energy supplies, and deftly manage its differences with Washington.

One may thus conclude that India-US relations under the Biden Administration will witness further constructive cooperation in the trajectory of a burgeoning strategic partnership, but the difficulties and challenges will remain enormous as well. The Big Picture of Indo-US relations in next four years will be quite imposing, but the challenges that come in the way will be the real test for Indian diplomacy.

