

India - US Relations: Continued Convergence, New Vistas, Managing Differences

Arun K. Singh*

Four factors have historically impacted India-US relations: the US perception of its global role and challenges, and the resulting choice of strategy and partners; the relevance of Pakistan in this context, and its search for political, military, and strategic advantage against India; the prevalence of the cooperative or the adversarial in the assessment of China; and the strength of the bilateral economic, defence, and political relationship. The new US Administration faces the additional complexities of a COVID-19 ravaged economy, and a Trump-ravaged domestic political context.

In his post-election victory speech on 7 November 2020, then President-elect Joe Biden identified four priorities for his government: dealing with the pandemic; reviving the economy; addressing systemic racism in US society; and responding to the challenges of climate change.¹

The new National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, has said explicitly on a number of occasions, that US foreign and domestic policy would be linked. He feels “there [i]s need to put America’s middle class at the centre of foreign policy debates and decision-making”,² and that “right now, the most profound pressing national security challenge for the United States is getting our own house in order”.³ Clearly, the fact that 74 million Americans voted for Trump in 2020 (11 million more than in 2016, when he won the electoral college count by 306-232), will have a bearing on the external economic, technological, and political choices for the new President. Their impact domestically on jobs and global technological leadership would influence the control of the US Congress in the 2022 midterm elections (with consequences for the President’s legislative, economic, and judicial agenda) and, of course, the 2024 Presidential election itself.

***The Author**, Ambassador Arun K. Singh, is a former Ambassador of India to the United States, to France and to Israel.

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Donald Trump continues to hover in the background. His supporters, and those who seek political careers riding on the coat tails of his “Make America Great Again” rallying cry and divisive slogan, with its embedded dog-whistles to racism and ‘white nationalism’, will condition the battle playing out within the Republican Party, between them and the “traditional Conservatives”. The outcome will affect the Republican approach to the Biden domestic and foreign policy agendas, at times forcing or constraining choices.

Global Role

Accompanied by Vice President Kamala Harris, Biden made a visit to the US Department of State on 4 February 2021, his first to any cabinet agency. It was a deliberate message against Trump’s derision and undermining of the role of the organisation. Biden also declared that “America [wa] s back”, that American diplomacy was back, and that the USA would reinvigorate its alliances and partnerships, and re-engage with the world.⁴

The credibility and acceptability of the message will only be tested by time. Other countries have noticed the deep division within the US regarding its external role as well as its multilateral commitments. In May 2017, following Trump’s questioning of US commitments to NATO and its allies, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had said that Europe must take its fate into its own hands.⁵ The EU finalised a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China in December 2020 during the transition, ignoring National Security Adviser designate Jake Sullivan’s tweet at the time that “the Biden- Harris administration would welcome early consultations with [their] European partners on [their] common concerns about China’s economic practices”. In a conversation with Atlantic Council on 4 February 2021, French President Macron said that Europe must work for its “sovereignty” in decision making,⁶ since the US response to Libya in 2011 and Syria in 2013, even in the pre-Trump era, had shown that US domestic politics and resulting foreign policy choices were not always aligned with those of Europe, in which France, Germany, and the UK were inclined towards a more robust intervention for regime change in those countries.

The large voter turnout for Trump, and his continued hold over the Republican Party will, for now, reinforce questions regarding the post-Biden administration’s sustainability of the new US approach. Biden’s call for “Buy American”, his declaration that the US would not enter into any fresh trade agreements till the competitiveness of the US worker is restored indicate that he has absorbed some of the reasons for Trump’s victory in 2016.⁷

Divisions in the US about its external commitments have been sharpened by the mistakes made, and the ignoring of, till 2016, the negative impact on the “American middle class”. Since 1990s, post the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US had led the world towards the globalisation of trade and production. It was the “hyper-power” without any peer. The “End of history” was projected, with victory of democracy and liberalism over communism and authoritarianism.

In the resulting hubris, US leaders failed to account for the limits of their influence, leading to overreach through a military intervention in Iraq in 2003, and “taking the eye off the ball” in Afghanistan during 2005-06, resulting in the revival of the Taliban. Subsequent interventions, even though done with some reluctance, in Libya and Syria created vacuums of governance, ceding space to extremist and terrorist groups as well as the ISIS declaring a Caliphate. More than twenty years of “forever wars” has had a deep impact on US society, through lives lost, disabling injuries, and disrupted families.

To this has been added the economic impact. The US GDP overall benefited from globalisation, despite the 2008 global financial crisis and the current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The elite in the US benefited, with the top 1 percent now accounting for around 40 percent of income and wealth.⁸ However, the fabled middle class and manufacturing in the US took a hit. Income levels for 35-40 percent of the population stagnated for nearly three decades, longevity came down, and death rates and drug addiction went up. This was the vote that Trump tapped into, along with those motivated by racist and anti-immigrant sentiments. They were energised by the slogan of “take our country back” from the growing power and presence of minority and immigrant groups. Trump walked out of the 2015 Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership on trade; raised tariffs on imports from China as well as European and Asian allies and partners; decried US global commitments; pushed European allies into spending more on their defence; forcing Asian allies to pay more for American bases; and worked to end US military involvement in Syria and Afghanistan. All this kept his voting base with him, and added to his numbers in 2020.

The Biden team is aware of this. But they are also aware that the world “does not organize itself”;⁹ others will seek to fill any vacuum, and set rules, norms and standards geared to their own interests. They will, therefore, seek to redefine the US role, “for the world as it is and not as it was before 2016”. As this effort is made, there will be some continued convergence and some new opportunities for the US-India relationship.

At the State Department, Biden also said that the “American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy”. Iran, North Korea, Climate Change, and terrorism have been listed as the other priorities for the incoming administration.

Continued Convergence

The Indo-Pacific will provide for the continued convergence of interests of India and the US.

Since the George Bush administration, there has been a growing sense in the US of the potential challenge from China, and the resulting need also to reinvigorate the India relationship. The India-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, finalised in October 2008, enabled the lifting of technology restrictions and, starting from near zero then, India has now contracted for US\$ 20 billion of defence supplies from the US.

As the Biden administration was coming in, questions were raised about its China policy, and whether or not it would continue with the adversarial approach articulated by the Trump administration since December 2017. At his confirmation hearing on January 19, Secretary of State designate, Tony Blinken, said that he agreed with the substance of Trump’s policy on China, and his predecessor Mike Pompeo’s formal characterisation of Chinese actions against Uyghurs in Xinjiang as “genocide”.¹⁰ Secretary of Defence designate, Lloyd Austin, said, at his own hearing the same day, that Asia would be the focus of US effort, and he saw “China, in particular, as the pacing challenge”.¹¹ Following Blinken’s February 5 call to Yang Jiechi (Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party), the spokesperson of the State Department said that, ‘Secretary Blinken stressed the United States will continue to stand up for human rights and democratic values, including in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and pressed China to join the international community in condemning the military coup in Burma. The Secretary reaffirmed that the United States will work together with its allies and partners in defence of our shared values and interests to hold the PRC accountable for its efforts to threaten stability in the Indo-Pacific, including across the Taiwan Strait, and its undermining of the rules-based international system’.¹²

Questions were also raised about the Biden approach towards an “Indo-Pacific” strategy. The term had been brought into more general use under the

Trump administration, which had also renamed the Hawaii based Pacific command as the Indo-Pacific command - a signal that India was an integral part of US strategy in the region. After Blinken's call with his Indian counterpart, Foreign Minister Jaishankar, on January 29, the spokesperson of the State Department noted that "the Secretary underscored India's role as a preeminent US partner in the Indo-Pacific".¹³

Following Biden and Blinken's calls with their counterparts in Australia and Japan, there has been support articulated for the Quad with India. Austin also reiterated (on January 19) that he would "seek to deepen and broaden our defence cooperation through the Quad security dialogue".

Clearly, while some rhetoric and tactics may change, there is no going back for the new administration from the essence of the Trump Administration's China strategy.

China was recognised as a major global rival in the National Security Strategy Report of December 2017,¹⁴ after some flip flops in the earlier part of the year. Chinese President Xi was invited to Trump's Florida resort at Mar-a-Lago in April 2017, and Trump visited China in November of that year. Post December, there was broadly a 'whole-of-government' approach, with the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defence, National Security Adviser, Attorney General, FBI Director, and a host of subordinate officials coming out with a series of coordinated policy pronouncements. Exceptions to this were the Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, and Adviser to the President, Jared Kushner, who was seen as continuing to focus on advantages from cooperation.

There was also a 'whole-of-society' approach with the Administration's messages directed at US businesses, universities, Governors, think tanks, and the entertainment industry, to recognise the dangers emanating from China, and not give in to blandishments, or short term financial or profit needs. China's authoritarian system under President Xi was described as a challenge to US espoused democratic values; its predatory economic and forced technology transfer practices were described as a challenge to US technological leadership; and its unilateral military assertions in East and South China Sea and elsewhere were assessed as challenge to a rules based international order. A series of measures were adopted to deny technology and financing access targeting Chinese technology companies; those linked to its military; and those involved in internationally illegal construction activity in the South China Sea. Constraints were placed on the operation of Chinese media and Confucian Institutes in USA, its Consulate in Houston was closed, and sanctions were

placed on Chinese officials involved in the crackdown and human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and higher level US government contacts authorised with Taiwan.

The Obama-Biden Administration, over 2009-16, had also vacillated on China, initially calling for “strategic reassurance”, but eventually gravitating to “pivot” and “rebalance”, recognising the growing economic, technological, and military challenge, including Chinese unilateral assertions in the East and South China seas, and the militarisation of certain features.

There are, nevertheless, differences among US policy makers about the specifics of the strategies to be adopted. Unlike the approach to the former Soviet Union, “containment” is ruled out because of the deep Chinese linkages with the Western and global economy. In an article he had co-authored in September/October 2019 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, had argued that while the “era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close ... each will need to be prepared to live with the other as a major power ... coexistence will involve elements of competition and cooperation.”¹⁵

The specifics of the new administration’s China policy will, therefore, only congeal over time, and in responses to emergent challenges. Its European allies, including Germany and France, are also canvassing against a solid anti-China front, hoping to keep opportunities open for their business interests. Western countries and their allies have also, so far, not shown a united front against the Chinese selective targeting of Norway, Sweden, Australia, ROK, Japan, at various times, through coercive economic measures. US and European businesses have not cut down on investments in China over 2020, despite the pandemic, and various measures adopted by the Trump administration.

Given the challenges in its own relationship with China, India will find convergence with the US approach, but will have to be prepared for US decisions guided by its own interests and domestic advantages.

New Vistas

In a COVID impacted world, the search is on for “trusted and secure supply chains”, going beyond the earlier globalisation driven imperative of least cost suppliers. With the experience of 2020, the nature and location of work is bound to change. New frontiers of technologies in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber, digital, and biotech are going to fundamentally change how we live and work. All these will create new opportunities for

India-US relations, as leaders on both sides seek to build on the convergence of interests and values.

A base has been laid for the next leap. Bilateral trade now stands at US\$ 147 billion, a seven-fold increase since 2000. There is deep interlinkage in IT.¹⁶ A significant part of India's output in this sector is exported to the US. While visiting Silicon Valley, one can see that the Indian origin skilled work force and tech entrepreneurs are an integral part of US global leadership in innovation. This sector has grown impressively even amidst the pandemic, and will continue to provide the backbone for post COVID economic restructuring.

Both countries have agreed to cooperate in defence innovation and technology, and Indian companies are beginning to be a part of the global supply chain of US defence manufacturers. They have signed agreements in defence, providing for reciprocal logistics support, communications compatibility and security, and exchange of geospatial data. US has declared India as a Major Defence partner in 2016, and later placed it at STA 1 (Strategic Trade Authorization Level 1) for highest level technology releases. They now do more military exercises with each other than with any other country bilaterally and, in 2018, initiated a 2+2 dialogue at the level of Defence and Foreign Ministers. They also meet in a trilateral format with Japan, and further in the Quad with Australia.

President Biden has been a consistent supporter of the India relationship: calling for the removal of sanctions against India in 2001; piloting the Civil Nuclear Cooperation agreement through the Senate in 2008; visiting India as Vice President in 2013; and describing the relationship as a “defining partnership” of the 21st century. In an interview in 2006, he had said that his dream was that, “in 2020, the two closest nations in the world will be India and the United States.” In a special message on India's Independence Day in August 2020, the campaign had asserted that a ‘Biden Administration will also work with India to support a rules-based and stable Indo-Pacific region in which no country, including China, is able to threaten its neighbours with impunity ... Biden will deliver on his long-standing belief that India and the United States are natural partners ... Biden believes there can be no tolerance for terrorism in South Asia – cross-border or otherwise.’¹⁷

Managing Differences

There will inevitably be differences, since each country takes decisions based on its own interests, compulsions, historical legacies, and geopolitical imperatives.

Empathetic management of these differences will facilitate continued consolidation.

India cannot align with the adversarial US approach to Russia, since more than 60 percent of its defence inventory is still of Russian origin; there is significant reciprocal investment in energy; and it must be prevented from aligning with China on India-China issues. India would expect that the US will see it to be in its own interest not to impose CAATSA sanctions for the purchase of S-400 - otherwise the US would be perceived here as an unreliable partner.

India would hope that in its review of the agreement with the Taliban, the US will insist on the Taliban meeting its commitments on ceasing support to terrorist groups; keep its military drawdown conditions-based; and support the Afghan government to ensure a peaceful political reconciliation. Pakistan's feet will also need to be held to fire to ensure that it stops providing safe havens and support to terrorist groups active against Afghanistan and India, despite its current relevance for enabling agreement with the Taliban.¹⁸

There could be nuances in the reaction following the recent military coup in Myanmar, with the US emphasising the overthrow of a tentative democratic power sharing,¹⁹ and India keeping in mind also the strategic imperative with a neighbour,²⁰ wherein anti-India insurgent groups have found safe havens and support in the past, and disengagement could open the space completely for Chinese domination.

India began a new two-year term at the UN Security Council in January this year. In the past, India's position on preferred responses to many global crises has differed from that of US. It will be a test for both countries how they reconcile differences that still persist.

The Biden Administration has come in with a very progressive and proactive approach to issues of Climate Change. India would expect that as reinforced efforts are made to cap global warming, and it has taken initiatives through the International Solar Alliance, calls for disaster resilient infrastructure, ambitious domestic plans for renewable energy, its differentiated responsibility as a developing country is recognised, and support is provided through finance and technology access.

US leaders have expressed concerns over human rights issues on some of the actions of the Indian government in Jammu and Kashmir, or on NRC and CAA, etc. US has its own challenges in systemic racism and voter suppression. These would need to be discussed, as a dialogue among friends,²¹ recognising that each society has its own challenges, and keeping in mind the broader strategic frame of the partnership, especially in the context of the current global flux.

Prognosis

It can be expected that the new phase in India-US relations, initiated with the Bill Clinton visit in 2000, and sustained in an upward trajectory under the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations, will be further consolidated under President Biden. He has himself claimed credit for the progress in the Obama-Biden administration over 2009-2016.²² There is now reinforced convergence with the common challenge from China. Global economic, trade, and technological ferments will create new opportunities for both countries. The mature handling of divergences, and giving each other some necessary geopolitical space will prevent unnecessary turbulence.

Notes :

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