

India and the Biden Presidency

Annpurna Nautiyal*

The change of guard in the US with Donald Trump's departure from the White House, after the bloody mayhem created on Capitol Hill by his supporters, highlights the fact that the Democrats under the Presidency of Joe Biden will have to pave a realistic way for healing the wounds of the American people, and rebuilding America's image in the world. No doubt it will be a very tough challenge to unite a badly fractured society, secure and ensure its diversity, and repair America's tarnished image worldwide, especially with the Trump Administration's inept handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the unusual acrimony and unpleasantness witnessed during the presidential election in one of the oldest democracies like the US has done its image more harm than good. Now, as things are settling down in the US, anguish is slowly giving way to compassion; order is returning; and the vaccination drive against the COVID-19 pandemic is working slowly to changing the internal mood in the country. Inevitably, discussion and debate about the US role and its relationship with countries like China, Russia, India, and Pakistan has also started to surface.

Joe Biden's Assurances

President Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord, withdraw all support to Saudi Arabia's military intervention in the Yemeni War and take appropriate action against Russia's cyber attacks on the US departments and institutions are clear indications that his administration will alter some of the policies of his predecessor which, in effect, were not serving the national interest of the United States. Instead of resetting relations with Russia, President Biden has indicated a new strategy of deterrence, after the US and Russia formally approved the five-year extension of the New START treaty - then the only surviving nuclear arms control treaty between the two countries.

***The Author**, Annpurna Nautiyal, is Vice Chancellor, HNB Garhwal University, Srinagar, Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

(This article was received from the author on February 16, 2021)

President Biden has also changed President Trump's attempts to force NATO nations to enhance their burden sharing and to redeploy 12,000 US troops stationed in Germany. President Biden declared that the US has no plans for such troop withdrawal and proposed stronger alliance relationships to deal with Russian and Chinese expansionist policies.

President Biden, moreover, has assumed leadership role to deal with humanitarian and health crisis, such as COVID-19 pandemic that can be better addressed in cooperation with other nations. President Biden has displayed his clear support to multilateralism in place of his predecessor's tendencies to resort to unilateralism.

Obstacles and Opportunities

Significantly, promotion of democracy not only in the US but throughout the world has also been listed as a priority by President Biden.¹

The recent military coup in Myanmar, and the arrest of democratically elected leaders by the military junta, and the Russian government's harsh treatment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny have posed a challenge to this goal of promoting democracy. President Biden has urged the military in Myanmar to hand over power to the civilian government, and also threatened both the military junta of Myanmar and Russian leader Vladimir Putin of consequences if democracy is not restored in Myanmar at the earliest, and if Russia does not put an end to its provocative activities worldwide. However, it is yet to be seen how these warnings of the US are taken by these countries. Importantly, President Biden has also underlined the need to engage even with adversaries and competitors diplomatically in the interest of the security of the American people. On the one hand, President Biden's message assures that the US foreign policy will be charted to fulfil the needs of the American people; but on the other hand, he also knows that the US will have to compete from a position of strength by improving domestic politics, work with allies and partners, and renew its role in international institutions so that its credibility, leadership position, and authority to deal with shared challenges is established again.

For this, the US will need the proper coordination and support of the world's democracies, and also a favourable consideration towards their concerns and interests. Presently, the US has many more partners and allies throughout the globe than does China. But China's attractiveness through its trade, infrastructure loans, and Belt and Road initiative projects have increased its reach in all parts of the globe. It is also being predicted that China's economy

will be the world's largest by the end of the decade and, therefore, President Biden will have to persuade his allies to have a coordinated approach to that country to overcome challenges. This becomes more important in view of the European Union's decision to sign an investment accord with China despite US concerns and anxieties against such deals.

Although democratic countries are quite fearful of Chinese designs, Beijing's growing footprints through trade and infrastructure development projects have lured many democracies to fall into its debt trap. In such a situation, President Biden will have to develop much closer understanding with like-minded democracies like India. At the same time, the Biden administration may also seek ways and means to work amicably with China. China's trade and aid policies have earned it a degree of acceptance with quite a few nations of the world and, therefore, the use of deft diplomacy in place of coercion would be the best course of action for the US to disengage the democracies from the influence of China. As China's rise and expansions cannot be easily reverted, coordinating with democracies and taking them along to manage China would be the best option. Although it is also true that many US partners aspire for economic benefits from expanding more trade and commerce with China, they are equally very worried and suspicious of China's intentions.

India's Role and Expectations

India's role in the Asia-Pacific was recognised clearly by Barrack Obama and Hilary Clinton, and they both promoted cooperation with India on issues, such as counterterrorism, enhanced trade, collaborations on Climate Change and also cultural issues. The Trump Administration also followed through on some of these areas of cooperation. Since Sino-Indian differences over border and territorial issues, India's opposition to China's encirclement tactics, do not make it difficult for the US to have Indian support to handle China on some issues. As a matter of fact, almost all of India's neighbours have cordial ties with China and are generally supportive of its developmental aid policies. The Chinese encirclement of India through its Belt and Road Initiative, and the luring of all its neighbours through loans for the development of roads, railways, and sea port networks is a major source of worry for India. India is trying to counter anti-India moves by China through aid and development diplomacy, conducting joint naval and military exercises with partner countries, playing a pro-active role in the QUAD, and expanding connectivity from east to west through its Act East policy, Sagarmala, and Spice route projects. The security of its land and sea borders, increasing its reach and say in world

affairs, and managing relationships with its neighbours is very important for India to maintain its global image.

In fact, in its second term, the Modi led government is facing various challenges which were absent in his first term. Management of international reactions to the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the CAA, and the farmer's movement can be cited as examples of these challenges. While the Biden Administration has advised that the democratic right of protest should remain unhindered, it has also supported three farm laws which have been passed by the Modi government. And, it is also noteworthy that, despite hurdles and problems, India is moving with confidence and courage in international forums, and diversifying its friends. This has been exhibited by the purchase of Rafale fighter planes from France, and other weaponry from Russia and the US. India is also showing clarity in its preferences by broadening its options, and choosing like-minded democracies as its partners.

The development of an Indian vaccine against the COVID-19 pandemic, and free distribution of vaccines to many countries, including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives have earned considerable goodwill for Indians in the international community. India's deft handling of the pandemic at home by imposing a timely lockdown, saving a large number of lives, and managing the economy ravaged by the pandemic has also enhanced its international image.

India's export of hydroxychloroquine to willing importers, its commitment of around US\$ 2 million to the WHO, and its early call for a cooperative fight against the pandemic are some other goodwill gestures made by the Indian leadership. During the G-20 summit in Osaka (28–29 June 2019), Prime Minister Modi succeeded not only in hammering out the fact that Climate Change and Terrorism were two common enemies of mankind but also promoted a trilateral understanding among Japan-US-India to deal with Chinese illegal expansionism in the Indo-Pacific. However, India continued to be part of the India-China-Russia trilateral as a mechanism to promote a multilateral world order.²

India is not only making attempts for fast paced reforms in the economic sector for achieving the goal of becoming a US\$ 5 trillion economy by 2024, surpassing the current US\$ 2.8 trillion, but it is also working hard to create many "smart" cities, villages, to improve public amenities, and enhance quality of education in higher education. The extraordinary connection of Prime Minister Modi with the Indian Diaspora and his popularity was seen during the Howdy Modi programme organised in support of the mercurial US President Trump in Houston Texas and a similar event in for President Trump

before the 2020 US presidential elections. They clearly indicated Prime Minister Modi's ability to maintain a very close relationship with the US despite President Trump's unpredictable policies, and his criticism of India's trade policies and specific curbs on H-IB visa issues.

The Way Forward

The USA under President Biden can benefit from India's experience of dealing with China, which continues to exploit the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang; destroyed democracy in Hong Kong; and has made unfriendly moves towards many countries in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, Japan and India. President Biden should work together with the US's alliance partners and other democracies to deal with the aggressive China.

The level at which India is currently playing out its foreign policy is certainly adding to India's diplomatic and political capacities. One issue that India would not like the US to interfere is Kashmir. If the Biden Administration stays off it, it will facilitate unhindered political cooperation between the two countries. India's insistence on the non-acceptance of third-party intervention in India's internal matters is part of its long-standing principles. India will continue to hold the position that, talks and terrorism cannot go together. The Indian Defence Minister's statement that talks with Pakistan - and that too only on POK - can be held only after it stops terrorism of all kinds is a message to all third countries, including the US. The displeasure shown by India in a very mature and measured manner against the former US President Trump's desire of mediation in the India-Pakistan dispute, and getting support from Russia and Saudi Arabia for bilateral resolution of disputes with Pakistan symbolise the apt handling of foreign relations by the Modi government. The support from neighbouring countries (like the Maldives) which termed the issue of Jammu and Kashmir as India's internal matter is also a success of Indian diplomacy. The USA understands China's tactics, which include its greedy geo-economic and geo-political ambitions which are opposed to the ideas of the free world. The absence of clarity of US positions on global issues, and the isolationist tendencies of the Trump Administration actually made China bold enough to expand its reach and influence. In India's perception, an economically and geo politically powerful China is not only an obstacle for India's dream of becoming a leading power in Asia but also crushes the freedom and security of weaker nations of South Asia and South East Asia. China's constant moral, economic, military, and infrastructural support to its all-weather friend, Pakistan; Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal after the

Chennai connect; the cementing of many agreements (including those of a trans Himalayan corridor between China and Nepal (CNEC), and a railway line to connect Tibet and Kathmandu); its engagement in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; its expansion of naval power across the IOR; and its focus on connectivity and infrastructure development through BRI - all confirm India's apprehensions of an expansionist China. India thus has enough reasons to coordinate its diplomatic and other strategic moves with partners, such as the United States to deal with the emerging Chinese threat to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. However, despite showing firmness not to support BRI, and the attempts to save neighbours from the debt trap, India has carefully crafted a policy that would not enhance hostility with China. During the fourth meeting of the QUAD (in Bangkok in May 2019) while supporting the idea of partnerships to promote a transparent, rule-based approach to trans boundary challenges, India avoided issuing any statements which could offend China. India is also collaborating with Vietnam, Japan, and other regional powers, but without annoying China. The unresolved border dispute; frequent scuffles with Indian troops; the Kashmir issue; the trade imbalance; the growing power disparity between India and China; and the unpredictability of US support have also forced India to play its cards with precision. Despite knowing that China is eating into Indian Territory in Ladakh, and Pakistan's support to various terrorist outfits, a face-saving exit from Afghanistan forced the US under the Trump Administration to ignore all these, even at the cost of India's national interests. The helplessness of India in such situation - sandwiched between China and Pakistan and no assurance of support from either the US or Russia - has made the challenge more serious. Therefore, India has to have a balanced and nuanced approach towards China. During the Trump Administration, the US and Indian governments seemed to have moved closer. The two countries signed certain agreements and cooperative frameworks which made ties stronger. Such a projection of stronger ties gained importance in the wake of the China-India stand-off in Ladakh. In view of the current pace of growing Indo-US relations, it is unlikely that there will be major changes in Indo-US relations under the Biden Presidency.³ It can also be assumed that, in the larger global scenario, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, the US concerns about countering China's power which directly affects America's global role, will require closer relations with India as it is the fulcrum in Asia and can help in establishing a power equilibrium. And, the USA requires a friendly country which is interested in burden-sharing and checking China's growing aggression - a role which India can fulfil easily as it is not dependent on other countries.

While China cannot be thrown out from the international scene, the US can, however, deny it technology, scientific research, investment in sensitive US companies - all of which will adversely affect China. According to some analysts, Atma Nirbhar Bharat issues can affect India-US relations, but good communications between the interlocutors can remove misunderstandings. The US also intends to replace Russia as India's biggest defence partner. However, this will not be possible despite best efforts by the Biden Administration in the foreseeable future. The Modi government is also apparently under political pressure for alleged curbing of religious freedom in India by enacting the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA); discriminating against Muslims; and building up the Hindu agenda - all of which are not true. But as the Democrats are pro-active on Human Rights related issues, and use them as pressure tactics tools of foreign policy, India is apprehensive about US policies under the Biden Administration, and is watching developments in this regard carefully. However, presently the US is also a divided society, and the movements for the protection of the civil rights of people of colour and diversity will not allow the US administration to use this card comfortably. In view of this, it will be too early to make any judgement about the future course of US policy towards India, Pakistan, China, and the Indo-Pacific despite US concerns about Chinese expansion and aggression. However, it can be hoped that the US will not act against India's interests.

Notes:

- ¹ S. Shaji, "Expect continuity in policy, but a more rule-based multilateralism is likely to define India-US relations", *The Indian Express*, 11 November 2020.
- ² Annpurna Nautiyal, "A New World Order", *The Pioneer*, 2 April 2020.
- ³ Elizabeth Roche, "The Biden presidency will not materially affect US-India ties", *Mint*, 18 January 2021.

