

## ***India-US Relations under the Biden Administration: Future through Prism of the Past***

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In the globalised world of the 21st century, inputs that shape bilateral foreign relations come from multivariate sources. While personality matters, as was evident from the administration of US President Trump, relations are between States, and not Heads of States. Here other dynamics come into play: for instance, the quest for military and strategic supremacy; global supply chains and economic power; ideology and values; climate and environment; domestic constraints; and, in the current situation, a raging pandemic. The latter has resulted in huge casualties that have led to a global economic slowdown, and has focused money and attention on immediate health issues internationally. Further, the domestic and foreign policies of one country may have ripple effects worldwide. For instance, China's rise to economic power, and its expansionist policies are perceived as a direct challenge by the US which has a global leadership role since World War II. This has been partly responsible for the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) which China views as an Asian NATO (targeting China), and Japan as an 'Asian Arc of Democracy' (Prime Minister Shinzo Abe). Chinese incursions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) pushed an initially less committed India into further commitment to the Quad, and a closer security relationship with the US.

However, personalities should be factored into international relations because the perceptions and attitudes of people at the helm help shape foreign policy. So, while there has been continuity in a good India-US relationship since the 1990s - with each successive US President building on the legacy of his predecessor - perspectives may change, although given common challenges, relations are expected to prosper under the Biden Presidency.

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The present US administration is too young yet to invite comment on India-US relations over the next four years, However, an idea may be formed by looking back at President Biden's campaign pronouncements on India, China, the Indo-Pacific, Climate Change, Human Rights, and America's leadership role in the world, along with his important actions as a Senator and Vice President, as well as his early Executive Orders, Memorandums, and Proclamations.

First, it must be emphasised that he has a long experience in American politics and foreign policy, having served as a Senator from Delaware from 1973 to 2009, and as US Vice President from 2009 to 2017. He served in the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee for several terms, twice as Chair (2001–2003; 2007–2009), and has longstanding personal relations with world leaders, including Prime Minister Modi. As Chairperson of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when the Indo-US nuclear deal was being debated, he played a crucial role in pushing it through the Senate.

He has been criticised in former Defence Secretary, Robert Gates' memoir, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (2014) as being "wrong on nearly every major national security and foreign policy issue over the past four decades"<sup>1</sup>. Gates cites instances like voting against Operation Desert Storm; opposing many elements of President Reagan's defence build-up; and voting against a request for US\$ 1 billion in military and humanitarian aid to South Vietnam in April 1975 - the same month that Saigon fell. However, one must weigh Gates' words against the historical backdrop as well as Biden's own views, and temper them with the fact that Biden had voted against the nomination of Gates as CIA Director in 1991, and opted not to vote when he was confirmed as Defence Secretary in the second Bush Administration. Regarding the US\$ 1 billion bill, Biden, like many of his peers in America at that time, was against the Vietnam War and, in any case, the Bill died in Congress.

President Biden has always opposed nuclear proliferation. In 1991, he was not the only one who opposed military intervention in Iraq: after a long debate, the Senate passed it 52-47. His record highlights integrity in thinking. However, one must not mistake it for an anti-war stance. Biden has always been on the side of self-defence: he wanted the arms embargo lifted during the Serbian war so that Bosnians could get arms for self-defence, and asked for US military assistance for Bosnia in 1992 to help it defend itself against Serbia. Again, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Biden wanted to send weapons to Ukraine for its self-defence. On the other hand, he challenged President Obama's military surge in Afghanistan as well as the military overthrow of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi in 2011. On balance, Biden appears as a man of values, with a strong sense of what is right for his country.

This view is reinforced by his statements on foreign policy during the run-up to the election in November 2020. Unlike President Trump's unilateralist 'America First' rhetoric that withdrew America from key multilateral agreements and platforms, Biden stated his belief in shared western democratic values, and believes that America's strength lies in re-joining traditional alliances to combat transnational threats. He wished to end 'forever wars', and has noted that US foreign policy must be powered not only by diplomacy and multilateralism but with a view to strengthening the economic basis of middle class America.

His early Executive Orders and statements point in the direction of a more pragmatic and multilateralist foreign policy - for instance, re-joining the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Climate Change Accord, reversing Trump's restrictions on entry to the USA for passport holders from seven Muslim-majority countries, and revoking Trump's order justifying the separation of immigrant families at America's borders.

In his first foreign policy statement on 4 February 2021, President Biden spoke of facing international challenges in cooperation with allies using the tool of diplomacy "rooted in America's most cherished democratic values". He then stated, "Defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law and treating every person with dignity. That's the grounding wire of our global policy, our global power".<sup>2</sup>

Given this background, what can be expected for India-US relations during the Biden administration? Many Indians had hailed the Trump Presidency for taking the relationship to a new level, largely because of the two massive rallies held in the USA and India for the two leaders: 'Howdy Modi' and 'Namaste Trump', with Narendra Modi undiplomatically calling for "*Agle Baar, Trump Sarkar*" in the USA, and Trump publicly saying at Ahmadabad, "Prime Minister Modi is a friend of mine, and he is doing a very good job". These are actually statements of personal chemistry between the two leaders.

In more concrete terms, India-US relations were elevated to a "comprehensive global strategic partnership" in 2020, and the two countries held the first 2+2 defence and foreign ministers' dialogue in 2018, India being the second country to have such a dialogue. The two countries signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA), by which the two penned all four of the foundational agreements to bolster defence ties. The two countries also concluded the Strategic Energy Partnership, and currently, pharmaceutical companies from both countries are cooperating on vaccine development, and expanding critical supplies to counter Covid-19.

However, on the flip side, the Trump administration terminated India's preferential trading status under the Generalized System of Preference. There were tensions over each other's tariff policies, and even a limited trade deal did not materialise. Negotiations under prior US administrations on a Bilateral Investment Treaty were stalled; visas remained a sticking point as also did India's commercial relations with Russia and Iran. Thus, despite all the bonhomie and flattery of the personal relationship between the leaders, Indo-US relations during the Trump administration rested largely on only one pillar of a comprehensive bilateral relationship: security and defence. These promoted both Trump's and Modi's interests in strengthening India in the face of China's challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

President Biden has always been considered a friend of India, and his views on China ensure that the bilateral security relationship will continue to grow in the coming years. During the campaign, he had called India a "natural partner", and in a telephonic conversation between Modi and Biden shortly after the November election, both reiterated their commitment to the India-US strategic partnership, and discussed shared priorities including the commitment to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. However, as noted, President Biden has a strong sense of values, which includes Human Rights, and his action in re-joining the Climate Change accords implies that the other pillars of bilateral relations will not be ignored.

But first, President Biden's observations on China and the Indo-Pacific need to be examined. He has publicly denounced China's President Xi Jinping as a "thug", and vowed to enforce the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act (2019). Further, he has described China's mass detention and re-education policy targeting the Uyghurs "genocide", and expressed a wish to meet the Dalai Lama. He has promised to "fight like hell" to defend America's global standing against China's growing power. Post-election, he has again slammed China for 'abuses' in trade, technology, and Human Rights, and noted that America can best pursue its goals through "security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region" when it is "flanked" by like-minded allies and partners. His use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' as against 'Asia-Pacific' - which is preferred by China - is significant, as is his call for a "Secure and Prosperous Indo-Pacific" instead of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" - a strategic construct coined by Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

In the context of security, the Trump administration favoured making the Quad the security architecture to check China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. There are signs that the new administration will build on this: the new National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, said at a function in late

January 2021, that the USA sees the Quad as “fundamentally a foundation upon which to build substantial American policy in the Indo-Pacific region”. The new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, had earlier stated that one objective of a future Biden administration would be to engage China from a position of strength, and “India has to be a key partner in that effort”. Some analysts note that President Biden’s prioritisation of Climate Change and nuclear proliferation by North Korea will need China’s cooperation, and his administration may have a more conciliatory approach than Trump’s. However, his appointment of Kurt Campbell, a China hardliner, as China coordinator, and John Kerry as climate envoy, may signal otherwise. Senator Kerry has pledged not to sacrifice military or economic priorities for a climate deal.

All this augurs well for India. China being perceived as the common enemy, Indo-US security relations are bound to strengthen, and India’s position as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific and the Quad appear to be undiminished, especially now that Pakistan has agreed to provide China naval base facilities in Sind, in addition to the existing one at Gwadar in Baluchistan. In fact, even before being elected, President Biden had stated, at a July virtual event, that India is critical to US national security: “That partnership, a strategic partnership, is necessary and important to our security”.

However, security is not the only parameter that should be considered; his statements made during his campaign on certain internal issues of India - like Kashmir, CAA etc are also relevant. On the other hand, in an Indian-American paper Op-Ed article, he wrote: “The U.S. and India will stand together against terrorism in all its forms, and work together to promote a region of peace and stability where neither China nor any other country threatens its neighbours”, and continued, “[we will] confront other international challenges together, like climate change, global health, transnational terrorism and nuclear proliferation”, but then added, “We will meet every challenge together as we strengthen both democracies - fair and free elections, equality under the law, freedom of expression and religion, and the boundless strength both nations’ draw from our diversity”.<sup>3</sup> While unproblematic at first glance, ‘freedom of expression and religion’ and ‘diversity’ may appear nuanced to some analysts, given his views mentioned earlier on ‘restrictions on dissent’, etc.

Vice-President Kamala Harris too has been vocal on the Kashmir issue. Responding to a question on ‘human rights abuses’ in Kashmir in October 2019 following the revocation of Article 370, she said that Kashmiris need to be reminded that they are not alone, and “There is need to intervene if the situation demands”.

There is also a sticky situation that needs to be remembered: during a visit to the USA by Indian Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar, in December 2019, the Indian government communicated to the US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairperson that Jaishankar would not attend a meeting of the Committee if Pramila Jaypal, the first Indian-American to be elected to the US House of Representatives, was present. The reason for this was that she had co-sponsored H.Res.745, urging India to end restrictions on communications and mass detentions in Jammu & Kashmir, and preserve the religious freedom of all residents. The Chairperson, Eliot Engel, refused to concede to this demand, saying that it was totally inappropriate for any foreign government to dictate which members may participate in Capitol Hill meetings, and that it was a sign of weakness in any great democracy to refuse to allow those who are critical to participate in a meeting. Harris sided with Jaypal in the face-off with Jaishankar, as did many other Congress members. Jaypal has since been elected Chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus in the current 117th Congress.

While these statements and actions will not go away since the government in India remains the same, most analysts feel that as President and Vice-President, Biden and Harris will temper public criticism of India. The slew of Indian-Americans who have been nominated for key posts in the Biden administration is unprecedented, and augurs well for better understanding and good relations between the two countries.

Presidential actions to date that directly affect Indians also promise hope. The Biden administration has announced that it is delaying the H-1B policy of the Trump administration by continuing with the lottery system until 31 December 2021. The H-1B visa allows US companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations; typically, 75 percent of such visa holders are from India. Trump's policy would have affected Indian IT professionals who had been granted this visa for the fiscal year 2021. Now they get some breathing space while the new administration works out how best to boost jobs for Americans and draw from the best talents worldwide.

Although Trump and Modi called each other friend, international relations go far beyond personal relationships in modern times. Prime Minister Modi was quick to post three tweets in quick succession post the inauguration, congratulating President Biden and expressing hopes for strengthened India-US ties. External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, has had a telephonic conversation with his American counterpart, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, reiterating Indo-US commitment to a strategic partnership; and India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, has had a similar conversation with the US Defence

Secretary, Lloyd Austin. But again, this focuses on only one pillar of the relationship: security. Nothing has been said on Human Rights or Climate Change with regard to India.

Nothing has also been said on trade, which is a major lubricant in bilateral relations. As Vice-President, Biden had visited India's financial hub Mumbai in 2013, ostensibly to improve bilateral trade ties. However, trade relations became acrimonious during the Trump administration, with the two countries failing to sign a trade agreement, and the talks stalled over the import of American dairy products and medical devices like coronary stents. With the economic slowdown making both America and India focus on domestic growth, trade relations will, perhaps, continue to bedevil India-US relations, especially since the Indian and American agendas for reform and liberalisation have always differed. Prime Minister Modi's call for an "*Atmanirbhar* Bharat", a slogan lacking in details, is also bound to confuse the new administration on the way forward.

The Biden administration's early actions also raise doubts. The President had indicated that he wished to revive the Iran nuclear deal; but, in early February, he turned down an Iranian initiative at simultaneous return to the agreement, demanding that Tehran return to compliance before the US nixes the sanctions that Trump re-imposed. On 3 February, the USA went to court seeking to seize two million barrels of oil in a Greek-owned ship that it claims came from Iran. This indicates a continuing hard-line policy vis-à-vis Iran, despite campaign statements. The H-1B policy does not mean an elimination of Trump's stance; it only provides some breathing space.

In his first major foreign policy address on 4 February 2021, President Biden addressed current domestic crises in two countries: Myanmar and Russia. He said that he was working on a bipartisan approach to urge Myanmar to release detainees and end the coup. His National Security Advisor, Jack Sullivan, has also mentioned that the USA is working with international partners on sanctions for individuals and entities controlled by the military in Myanmar. On Russia, while renewing the START treaty for five years in accordance with his commitment to arms control, President Biden said that he had made it clear to President Putin that the days of interfering with elections, cyber-attacks, and poisoning its citizens are over.

While these have little to do with India (although an easing of sanctions against Iran would have benefited India's energy sector), they reflect that the Biden administration is going to be tough where US interests are concerned. This implies that India should wait and watch. Interestingly, while several countries, including Japan, Australia and South Korea, were mentioned as

“partners” in restoring democracy, India was not. One wonders if the restoration of 4G internet services in Kashmir by the Indian government, and the granting of interim bail by the Supreme Court to comedian Faruqui - who had been incarcerated for over a month on allegations and refused bail, both on 5 February - are feelers to the new US administration!

In conclusion, a comprehensive relationship covering all pillars - from the economy to democratic values - is something to wish for beyond a strategic partnership focusing on security which is, of course, essential in contemporary circumstances. Both India and the US strongly value national interest: the US is keen on re-establishing its global leadership while India robustly defends its autonomy. There are bound to be differences in perceptions between the two countries as always, but India and the US need each other to confront many common challenges: to fight the pandemic; to oppose China’s expansionism; to contest Climate Change, to help economies recover, to face international terrorism, to develop new technologies in science and medicine, etc. India-US relations, as in the past 20 years, can only go forward with accommodation as well as agreements to disagree. After all, both countries are vibrant democracies, and this itself make them “natural partners”.

**Notes :**

- <sup>1</sup> <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/518548-joe-biden-has-foreign-policy-ideals-that-can-work-in-this-chaotic-world>
- <sup>2</sup> “America is Back”, Joe Biden Speech on Foreign Policy, 4 February 2021, at <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-speech-on-foreign-policy-transcript-february-4-america-is-back>, accessed 6 February 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> “A More Prosperous Future for the Indian American Community: Op Ed by Vice President Biden for India-West”, India-West, 22 October 2020, at [https://www.indiawest.com/blogs/a-more-prosperous-future-for-the-indian-american-community-op-ed-by-vice-president-biden/article\\_91434690-143a-11eb-8c0f-d33f2c48d683.html](https://www.indiawest.com/blogs/a-more-prosperous-future-for-the-indian-american-community-op-ed-by-vice-president-biden/article_91434690-143a-11eb-8c0f-d33f2c48d683.html), accessed 31 January 2021.

