

The Biden Administration: Elevating America's Shared Strategic Future with India

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In the last two decades, a broad strategic convergence has evolved between India and the USA, which is centred around managing the geopolitical ramifications of a rising China. The mutual understanding established between the political leaderships of the two countries has continued, irrespective of the change of guard in both New Delhi and Washington. The positive arc and the stability in the India-US relationship has remained firm even during the disruptive four years of the Trump presidency. In fact, new heights of understanding were achieved as far as the co-management of the Indo-Pacific region is concerned. These include the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Initiative (Quad), renaming of the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command, and the conclusion of the India-US foundational agreements that will lend greater interoperability to the militaries of the two countries. Hence, for the Biden administration, the task for carrying forward the India-US relationship may not involve dramatic shifts. It will rather mean cementing a rapidly growing and multifaceted partnership, and ironing out the irritants to elevate a shared strategic future in the Indo-Pacific.

To make a sense of what may happen under the Biden administration, the legacy of the Trump era needs to be put in perspective. The assessment and analysis of what the Trump presidency has meant for the broader direction of US foreign policy, its multilateral ties, and its bilateral relations with allies, partners, and adversaries is imperative; only then can one arrive at any propositions regarding the shape of thing to come in the Biden era. As the dust settles down in Washington, and President Biden and his team gets into the act of administration, Trump's foreign policy and what it meant for rest of the world will need to be soberly understood by not only external watchers but also by the Biden administration itself. Such an approach will be required to effectively strategise and implement any new direction in America's ties

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with the rest of the world. In general, Trump's personal approach to policymaking and communication has drawn the ire of many across the world as well as within the USA. There has been an overriding sense of disbelief and dismay over the conduct of American foreign engagements under the Trump administration. As the Trump administration set out to put 'American First', a number of countries around the world continued to assess and analyse its import in their own terms of engagement with the USA. Trump's presidential style began to be branded as transactional in nature, and his policy approaches as largely disruptive to America's traditional diplomacy and the inter-agency process in the American beltway. This led to the proliferation of mostly negative reviews regarding US foreign policy during the Trump presidency. However, does the same pessimism apply to the developments in India-US relations during Trump's presidency? From India's point of view, the Trump presidency was, it could be said, largely an era of continuity rather than change.

The year 2020 saw a more aggressive face of rising China - and that too, right in the midst of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. Recalcitrant Chinese behaviour was witnessed across the spectrum in its military adventurism in the South China Sea, the India-China border, and through its 'wolf warrior' diplomacy against any criticism of its handling of the Corona Virus pandemic. From a trade war with China to the return of great power competition in the Western Pacific, the Trump administration oversaw a rising confrontational streak in US-China relations. On the other hand, the military crisis at the India-China border brought down whatever confidence was built between the Indian and Chinese leadership through the informal summits in Wuhan and Mamallapuram. The downturn in US-China relations and in India-China relations has provided more ballast to the strategic rationale for a growing India-US defence partnership.

As the USA was undergoing a political transition, bringing an end to the Trump era and unfolding a new era in US foreign policy and domestic politics under the Biden presidency, the institutional linkages that had been set up under the India-US defence framework showed tangible results. Towards the end of the Trump administration, the US Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo, and Secretary of Defence, Mark T. Esper, visited India for the third '2+2' ministerial dialogue.

Moreover, Australia's inclusion in the latest edition of the Malabar Exercise adds more heft to the quadrilateral understanding between India, the USA, Japan, and Australia pertaining to the management of Indo-Pacific affairs amidst rising threat perceptions from China. The rebirth of the Quad took place during the Trump administration and, judging by the evolving geopolitics

of the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration, in all likelihood, will double down on the Quad. The increasing sophistication of the military-to-military engagement in peace time is aimed at creating a robust deterrence against any sort of unilateral activities. In both service-to-service exercises as well as the newly started tri-service exercise, an institutional synergy has been created between the militaries of India and the USA that will continue during the Biden administration as well.

All major US strategic documents have reflected an overriding sense of growing strategic competition with near peer competitors like China. China's growing military muscle and economic push in the Indo-Pacific region became a common cause of growing worry between India and the USA. Even as the USA under the Trump presidency was called out for discomfiting allies and partners, New Delhi saw its hard stance towards China's aggression and Trump's willingness to play hardball with Beijing as comforting to its own strategic intentions and objectives.

Therefore, even as the Biden administration promises to bring back pre-Trump America, some of US foreign policy grandstanding executed by President Trump against China seems to have been welcomed in India. Hence, New Delhi will keenly watch Washington's approach to dealing with the China challenge under the Biden team. That there continues to be a formidable China challenge remains unchanged, irrespective of the change of guard in the White House. However, the team that President Biden has brought together to confront the China challenge has to traverse a wide and complex field, cutting across politics, security, economics, and the issue of bringing America back into the diplomacy of Climate Change. Which issue areas will call for a more hard-line approach with China, and which ones will require Washington to move with a more cooperative approach will remain a task cut out for the Biden team. The ramifications of this complicated juggling of concerned areas to protect and promote American interests will have implications for the course of India-US bilateral relationship.

India was named a major defence partner of the USA during the Trump administration which envisioned providing access to American defence equipment and technology in ways that are only accorded to America's North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) partners. A relationship beyond merely buyer-seller, and a move towards greater cooperation in co-development and co-production is being envisioned under the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI). Four joint working groups under the aegis of the DTTI have been focusing on cooperation on land, naval, air, and aircraft carrier technologies. Going ahead, the task before the Biden administration will be to

create synergy between the defence industrial bases of the two countries. Can the USA offer what India needs for its defence preparedness? On what terms and arrangements will this happen? These remain critical questions in the context of India's own drive of turning 'Make in India' into a reality. Moreover, with greater interoperability being operationalised after the signing of the foundational agreements - the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) - the sophistication and the scope of the military-to-military exercises between the two countries have been increasing. The Indian Navy and the naval arm of the US Central Command (NAVCENT) have been showing a greater sense of joint purpose and action for maintaining peace and stability in the Indian Ocean. How different military commands of the USA operating across the globe can engage further with the Indian military across different domains will remain a moot concern in the times to come.

In recent times, India's partnership with the USA had yielded tangible outcomes in its efforts at enhancing maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Defence acquisitions from the USA have been instrumental in India's growing anti-submarine warfare capabilities. The India-US partnership towards capability enhancement in the IOR is significant, given regular entry of China's submarines in the IOR and its strategic investments among the Indian Ocean littorals. Here, it is worthwhile recalling the India-US Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region. Without naming the Indo-Pacific, this vision - released during President Obama's visit to India in 2015 as the Chief Guest of India's Republic Day celebration - sealed a bilateral understanding in the region.

Although President Trump was known for undoing a number of high profile Obama-era policies, the convergence between India and the USA regarding the management of China's rise was on firm grounds, and continued to enjoy bipartisan support in the USA. Since the last days of the Clinton administration, an intention on both sides began to emerge to create a strategic understanding that was effectively taken forward by the George W. Bush administration through the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP), and the momentous negotiations leading to the India-US civil nuclear agreement. The implementation of the nuclear agreement in terms of deliverables has often been questioned. However, upon sober analysis, the rationale for the nuclear negotiations were much broader, and were aimed at creating confidence and trust by generating habits of cooperation over one of the thorniest issues in India-US bilateral relationship.

It is against the backdrop of this understanding, that more tangible outcomes were realised in a number of areas, most effectively in the realm of defence and security cooperation. Over the years, both the countries have developed a better understanding of the dangers relating to terrorist and extremist violence in the region. Although there could still be limitations to the extent in which any two sovereign countries can cooperate and share intelligence on security matters, marked institutional linkages that have been created over the years will have their impacts. Even during the pandemic, the 17th meeting of the India-U.S. Counter Terrorism Joint Working Group was held. Both at the bilateral and at multilateral levels, there are now more concerted efforts to designate and sanction terror groups and individuals, counter terrorist financing as well cross-border movements, and the use of the internet by terrorist groups. A cooperative working ecosystem between the US Department of Homeland Security and India's Ministry of Home Affairs through the Homeland Security Dialogue already exists, and such webs of convergences will continue to form the nuts and bolts of the India-US relationship under the Biden administration as well.

President Biden has a legacy waiting to unravel in South Asia - the endgame being played out in the war-torn country of Afghanistan. The war that started during the Bush administration as a response to the 9/11 attacks has morphed into a low intensity conflict, draining US attention and resources in the last two decades. Dealing with the Taliban has been a conundrum for not only the USA but also for a country like India. Despite being an undesirable outcome of the Afghan imbroglio, Washington has had to shift its redlines, start negotiating with the Taliban, and give priority to its withdrawal. The US-Taliban peace agreement that the Trump administration engineered, and which paved the way for the intra-Afghan talks, has given a new direction to the peace process, lending political legitimacy to the Taliban. As the Afghan government engages the Taliban for the future of power rearrangement in the country, how the Biden administration handles the Afghan situation will have immense consequences for the role of regional countries, like India.

Afghanistan is in India's neighbourhood, and what the Biden administration chooses to do in Afghanistan will have serious implications for peace and security in the country, and hence, for the nature of India's involvement there. Since 2001, India has played a significant role as one of the highest donors of civilian aid and assistance to bolster the Afghan reconstruction. However, as uncertainty hangs over the future of Afghanistan, and New Delhi is forced to develop a thick skin in dealing with the Taliban, Biden's strategy in Afghanistan will be keenly watched. His preference for a leaner counter-

terrorism oriented force is well known. On the other hand, Afghan government representatives - including President Ashraf Ghani - has urged the Biden administration to revisit the terms of the deal with the Taliban. Although President Biden's decision on Afghanistan, like on any other issue, will essentially be guided by keeping "America First", the specifics of the American withdrawal is bound to have consequences for India's future role in Afghanistan and, as such, it is imperative for New Delhi and Washington to establish better communication regarding Afghan affairs.

By corollary, how the Biden administration approaches Pakistan will have implications for India. From India's point of view, the Trump administration started by making all the right noises by calling for holding Pakistan's feet to fire when it came to their role in Afghanistan, and in fighting terrorism. Despite being at the receiving end of the American aid as a major Non-NATO ally in the war on terrorism, Pakistan has been accused of playing a double game, and of being selective in confronting terror groups. While the Trump administration was, by and large, seen to be more upfront about America's political tilt towards India, its stance towards Pakistan in the later stages, changed when the USA began opening channels of negotiation with the Taliban. Despite the diminishing returns from its ties with Pakistan, American political leadership has often been found wanting in its efforts to extricate itself from its complex relationship with Pakistan. A case in point is the Bush administration's much debated policy of de-hyphenating America's bilateral relations with India and Pakistan. Therefore, how the Biden administration will handle Pakistan and what it will mean for US-Pakistan relationship, will be a matter of significance for New Delhi.

How New Delhi and Washington align their respective threat perceptions, and work around differences will bear significance for the relationship. Particularly in this category are two countries: Russia and Iran. India has very close ties with both the countries and, despite ups and downs, India's relationship with them will remain important from multifaceted points of view. However, irrespective of the change of administration in the USA, Iran and Russia have been consistently ranked as the two states that are among the most threatening to American interests. Despite efforts to reset ties with both Russia and Iran, the outcomes have been rather dismal; both Russia and Iran have ended up being the targets of the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). This creates challenges for India, which still has a deep defence cooperation with Russia, and a substantial relationship with Iran, particularly in the areas of energy security and in connectivity projects. Therefore, as the Biden administration sets out to reorient US foreign policy

at large, and its relationship with countries like Russia and Iran in particular, India will require to be nimble footed in terms of protecting and promoting its own interests. It will need to juggle its ties with American adversaries like Russia and Iran, at the same time as it goes about elevating its shared strategic future with the USA in the Indo-Pacific.

Outer Space and the Cyber domains are fast emerging as new areas of cooperation between India and the USA. Given the emerging technologies shaping the contours of the cyber world and the Outer Space, it is prudent for India to engage with the United States for shared concerns and opportunities. India and the USA have started engaging in an India-US Cyber Dialogue, including in the defence realm as well. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the USA, have been cooperating for greater space situational awareness. Projects like the NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) satellite are being accorded priority in the times to come, with intentions to go forward in terms of discussing cooperation relating to potential space defence. A couple of areas that might see some change in the Biden administration are in trade and commerce, Climate Change, and immigration. Including expectations of a mini trade deal between the two countries that did not fructify, the economic relationship remained far below potential. President Trump's obsession with balance of trade and tariffs, seemed to have missed the forest for the trees by not realising the importance of the strategic aspect of India-US economic cooperation.

Moreover, Biden's overall approach to immigration issues and Climate Change is bound to bring a substantial shift when implemented - something that New Delhi will need to assess objectively. Another dimension in the Indo-Pacific affairs that needs to be assessed will be how India and the USA coordinate with like-minded countries towards implementing multi-stakeholder, transparent, and high-quality infrastructure projects through the Blue Dot Network in the midst of China's ambitious and ambiguous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In the final analysis, as the post-World War II financial and security order that the USA orchestrated weakens, and the new order is yet to emerge, US engagement with the rest of the world has been going through dynamic shifts. The threats that the US confronts in the 21st century are significantly different from the ones it faced earlier, leading it to recalibrate the way it approaches its military alliance network, and how it looks for new sets of partners, like India. India and the USA share the vision of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order amidst the uncertain strategic repercussions of

China's rise. This relationship has come out much stronger, despite the disruptive times of the Trump presidency. Therefore, in all likelihood, the Biden administration will continue to build on the positive strategic arc of the India-US relationship while ironing out and managing any irritants that come with the specific mechanics of a relationship between two complex democracies.

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