

India-US Relations: Will Continue to Flourish but in a More Structured Manner

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The post-Cold War world has witnessed India and the United States engaged in a strategic embrace. In the first four decades after India's independence, the relationship was fraught with mistrust and tension. However, as the Cold War era came to an end, the ties between India and the United States also started to become warmer. There were various reasons for this change. India was emerging as an impressive financial market. Indian foreign policy adapted to the changing world order of US uni-polarity. The two countries began to notice commonalities in democracy and pluralism, and began to consider each other as "natural allies".¹ The coming years saw deeper strategic engagements taking place between political leaders on both the sides.

The foundation of the Indo-US strategic relationship was laid by President Bill Clinton when he visited India in March 2000. The visit ended a turbulent period in the ties that followed US' strong reaction to India's nuclear tests in Pokhran in May 1998. A year before that, during the 1999 Kargil skirmish between India and Pakistan, President Clinton had pressurised Pakistan to withdraw troops from Indian territories seized by Pakistan. His visit to India, 22 years after the last US Presidential visit, ended India's pariah position. It was a significant turn away from the American Cold War time alliance with Pakistan, towards a strategic future with India. President Clinton's charm offensive in India was for everyone to see as he danced to folk tunes with Rajasthani women. His visit gave the feeling that the United States was genuinely looking for a partnership with the India that was emerging, and full of hope.

The relationship was bolstered further in the aftermath of 9/11 when the Bush Administration's 'global war on terror' dovetailed neatly with India's position on security issues and terrorism related concerns. Some of the major

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(This article was received from the author on February 18, 2021)

developments that followed in this regard were the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership announced in 2004; this was designed to increase cooperation in civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programs, high-technology trade, and missile defence. In 2005, a landmark deal was signed, popularly termed as the 'Indo-US civil nuclear deal'. The joint statement issued envisioned a multifaceted relationship, tackling topics such as terrorism, science and technology, agriculture, health, commerce, etc. Military-to-military ties have remained big ticket areas, with joint training, joint patrols, and a gamut of collaborative defence exercises.

Under President Barak Obama, the Indo-US relationship initially began on a rocky start. The two countries struggled to match the successes achieved in the earlier administration. The 2010 Indian Nuclear Liability Law gutted the much talked about India-US nuclear deal. In 2008, the USA was preoccupied with fixing a faltering economy. With respect to South Asia, the Obama Administration's decision backfired as the move to link Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) with India was criticised strongly in Indian policy circles. The US administration launched the US 'pivot to Asia', with India a lynchpin in this pivot. This turned out to be a non-starter.

Things improved, nonetheless, especially when Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power. Interestingly, there was scepticism regarding his ascendancy to power and the future of India-US relations. Prime Minister Modi had been on a US visa blacklist for ten years. Many assumed that it would be a business-only relationship. However, Prime Minister Modi and President Obama joined forces to tackle Climate Change issues and promote clean energy. In the final two years of the Obama Administration, visits and talks among high level delegations reached a new phase. Both the countries inked several agreements on defence issues and counter terrorism. President Obama codified India as a "major defence partner" - a unique definition that the USA does not use for any other country.² When President Obama visited India in 2010, he dangled UN Security Council membership support in front of India. When Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, Obama visited India as the chief guest for the Republic Day celebrations.

The relationship, nonetheless, had its share of irritants. President Obama's Af-Pak policy was criticised at length in India. The President's commitment to drawing down troops from Afghanistan did not allow the US Administration to call out Pakistan on the issue of terrorism. There were hiccups relating to visa and trade issues. The arrest of Indian Foreign Service officer, Devyani Khobragade, in the USA on the issue of visa fraud also strained the relationship between the two countries. Even as a parting shot, President Obama lectured

India not to stray from its constitutional commitment to allow people to freely “profess, practice and propagate”³ religion. Yet, the Obama Administration was successful when it came to cementing its relationship with India.

The baton was then passed on to the Trump Administration. Donald Trump as a Presidential candidate never hid his admiration for Narendra Modi. He recognised the potential of the 3.2 million strong Indian American community - a model minority in the USA. He also adopted Modi’s election catch phrase to “Ab Ki Baar Trump Sarkar” (This time, Trump’s government). Parallels were drawn between the two leaders in terms of being outsiders; anti- establishment, and pressing similar types of claims: President Trump’s ‘Making America Great Again!’ and Prime Minister Modi’s ‘Acche Din Aayenge!’

However, after assuming power, President Trump’s understanding of the relationship with India remained transactional at best. There was significant progress in the area of security, defence, and counter terrorism. In the last four years, both the countries reached an enhanced level of strategic convergence on the need to counter China’s role in the Indo-Pacific region. The Trump years witnessed India-US cooperation also growing in the areas of connectivity, and on geo-strategic issues. During the course of different US administrations, India and the USA have inked four foundational agreements to bolster defence ties: the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA); the General Security Of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA); the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA); and the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA).

These agreements led to opening the provisions for more accurate military intelligence, encrypted defence technologies, logistical support, supplies, and services, etc. These further facilitated regular interactions between military services, and cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as counter-terrorism, maritime security, special operations, and humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.

In 2020, the relationship was further elevated to a “comprehensive global strategic partnership” with Donald Trump’s visit to India. A recently declassified “US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific” shows confidence that a strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, would act as a counterbalance to China. The framework underlines the US objective to “accelerate India’s rise and capacity to serve as a net provider of security” in the Indo-Pacific, with America as major defence partner. During the Trump Administration, the defence deals included the acquisition of 24 MH-

60R *Seahawk* anti-submarine warfare helicopters, AH-64E *Apache* Guardian attack helicopters, *Chinook* helicopters, etc., as well as the transfer of technology from Lockheed Martin to Indian contractors. Between 2008 and 2020, India ordered seven different major US military platforms. The USA is India's fourth largest source of arms after Russia, Israel, and France, with India-US defence trade increasing significantly from US\$ 200 million to US\$20 billion. There are plans in place to acquire anti-submarine warfare P-8I *Neptune* as well.

Chinese aggressive manoeuvres towards India in the Galwan valley have also prompted the Indian establishment to get cosy with the USA. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue - a strategic forum between the USA, Japan, Australia, and India, seen with scepticism by the Chinese government - held its first joint military exercise in November 2020, when Australia joined the other Quad members for India's annual Malabar naval war games. The Blue Dot network - a multi-stakeholder initiative focusing on shared standards for global infrastructure development, and a response to China's Belt and Road Initiative - added a new feather to the convergence of interests in the Indo-Pacific.

On a personal front, the world got to see the camaraderie between the two leaders in the 'Namaste Trump' and 'Howdy Modi' events. However, when it came to deliverables on many fronts other than defence, President Trump's actions did not suit India. He imposed a temporary ban on work visas to boost his 'buy American, hire American' policy. This had an impact on the hiring of the Indian IT service workforce. The rate at which H1B visa was being denied reached a high of 24 percent.⁴ President Trump's trade balance obsession led to the withdrawal of Generalized System of Preferences (GSP).

With Joe Biden assuming US Presidency on 20 January 2021, there has been a divided house in policy circles. While some are looking at the Trump Presidency with nostalgia, others are confident that the relationship will continue to flourish, but in a more structured manner. The Capitol Hill violence is a grim show of a deeply divided and a polarised America. There is an understanding that a United States that is isolationist, nativist, and losing an economic war with China is of no use to India. This gives rise to the hope that the Biden administration will bring some semblance of predictability to the USA and, in turn, to its relationship with the World.

Both Biden and the (Indian origin) Vice President, Kamala Harris, have alluded to close links with the Indian Diaspora. The Biden Administration has repeatedly stated to reverse the previous administration's decision to suspend

H1B visas. The new administration has additional plans to expand the number of high skill visas, and also bring in policies whereby students obtaining a doctorate in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Management) subjects would be encouraged to stay on in the USA. During the Trump Administration, there was a decline in Indian students studying engineering and computer science courses in the USA.

President Biden's earlier policies towards India have remained largely positive. In 2008, as a senator he voted to approve the 2008 nuclear deal that had a huge bearing on India-US relations. He was the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the time, and led the effort to ratify the agreement. This was despite the fact that Vice President Biden had criticised India for carrying out the nuclear tests in 1998. In 2013, Vice President Biden had visited India with the ambitious aim of raising bilateral trade to US\$ 500 billion.

On the Iran issue as well, President Biden's approach is more flexible. President Trump's Iran policy put India in a difficult position. India relies on Iran's crude oil, and was left scrambling for energy security after President Trump's sanctions on Iran. Even as the US administration offered to replace the loss of Iranian oil, many Indian refineries are configured to process Iranian oil. This had an adverse impact on India-Iran diplomatic relations, even as Indian policy makers have sought to convince Iran regarding the seriousness of the bilateral relations.

The current US administration is renegotiating re-entrance to the JCPOA (the Obama Administration's offspring) which can work out well for India's strategic interests in the Middle East. Notably, in the past, it was US sanctions that left little room for India to trade with Iran, and use its ports. This resulted in the Chinese entry into the region, and an increased bonhomie between China and Iran. If India is able to convince the new US administration to remove sanctions, New Delhi can speed up its work on the Chahabar port which is seen as India's gateway to Central Asia. The port is strategically located near the Gwadar port of Pakistan that is being developed by China. India's presence in Chahabar is, therefore, strategically important for regional power politics.

Under President Biden, there is likelihood of greater cooperation in the areas of climate change, trade, and visa related issues. Nonetheless, it needs to be understood that, at present, the USA faces burgeoning domestic challenges - from healing a divided nation, dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, and handling issues of immigration, the economic downturn, to other domestic

security concerns. The Biden Administration would no doubt also be working on handling China. In the last four years, the relationship between the two countries have worsened. China has become more aggressive, and presents a significant challenge to Washington. Till now, the Biden Administration has not come up with a clear approach towards Beijing. There has been a show in some policy continuity with respect to China's alleged "genocide against Muslim Uyghur's" in Xinjiang. Washington is also advocating the need for a "balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region and cooperation with allies and partners⁵ to address the China challenge. This indicates that India will continue to play an important role in the US scheme of strategy. The new administration is poised to continue on the path of a "strategic partnership". This would mean concentrating on greater policy collaboration and intelligence sharing between India and the USA. American defence companies are looking to up their arms sales to India, with the aim of replacing Russia as India's largest defence partner. This would mean the transfer of high technological systems from the USA to India aimed at enhancing India's defence capabilities.

Despite these successes, there is scepticism over irritants related to US policy towards Pakistan and position on Human Rights issues that could stall the ties between India and the USA from attaining full bloom. Some American analysts have reportedly viewed a rise of right wing majoritarianism in India in the last few years. President Biden had earlier been critical of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the implementation of the NRC in Assam. Similarly, Vice President Kamala Harris, despite batting for strong ties with India, has been critical about the situation that has emerged in Kashmir after the revocation of Article 370. She has stated, "We are keeping a track on the situation. There is a need to intervene if the situation demands."⁶ She had also publicly criticised the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar's decision to cancel the meeting with the members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. If the US administration continues on its path of criticising the Indian government on internal matters, Indian public opinion might turn against a closer partnership with the USA. Notably, President Trump's repeated offers to negotiate a "peace deal" between India and Pakistan had not gone down well in New Delhi.

Conclusion

It needs to be realised that policy making is an incremental process, involving different stakeholders - the legislature, the state department, leaders from both the sides as well as the shaping of the world order. Many a times,

bureaucracy and diplomacy do not align well. A good example in this regard is the nuclear agreement signed between the two nations hitting an impasse despite great diplomatic push from both the sides. Agreements and their implementations can only be successful if there is a bipartisan approach on both the sides. That is the way democracies function. For now, President Biden's focus on a multilateral, collective approach to regional security issues is expected to align closely with Prime Minister Modi's emphasis on multilateralism and regionalism. The aim will be to create a coalition of democracies to balance China. India, on its part, will continue to work on issue-based coalitions, allowing itself to pick and choose approaches according to its interests.

Notes :

- ¹ "Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Opening Remarks at the Meeting with Speaker of the House of Representatives and Ranking Member of the House", in Washington D.C., 9 November 2001, Government of India, at <https://archivepmo.nic.in/abv/speech-details.php?nodeid=9153>, accessed 13 February 2021.
- ² Raj, Yashwant, "Obama signs into law bill declaring India a 'major defence partner'", *Hindustan Times*. 25 December 2016, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/obama-signs-618bn-defence-bill-boosting-security-cooperation-with-india/story-tPeP7ljuiLW3x4PIYU15vI.html>, accessed 15 February 2021.
- ³ Daniel, Frank, "In Parting Shot, Obama Prods India On Religious Freedom", Reuters, 2015, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-obama-idUSKBN0L00FD20150127> accessed 15 February 2021.
- ⁴ Anderson, Stuart, "Latest Data Show H-1B Visas Being Denied at High Rates", Forbes, 28 October 2019, accessed 15 February 2021, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2019/10/28/latest-data-show-h-1b-visas-being-denied-at-high-rates/?sh=1f61238354c3> accessed 15 February 2021.
- ⁵ Bhatnagar, Arman, "President Joe Biden: What it means for India, China", *Times of India*, 20 January 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/what-india-china-should-expect-from-biden-administration/articleshow/80364479.cms> accessed 15 February 2021.
- ⁶ <https://theguardian.com/indian-diplomats-ambivalent-over-kamala-harris-pick/> accessed 15 February 2021.

