Strategic Analysis Paper

Trump or Biden? The Potential Impact of the US Election on India

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Key Points

- Joe Biden’s remarks, as published on his campaign website, regarding India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), its National Register of Citizens (NRC) project and the restoration of liberties in Kashmir, have drawn ire in certain quarters in India.

- It is important, however, not to take a simplistic view of the bilateral relationship using the lens of parties and individuals, but to understand that the relationship is driven by geopolitical dynamics and economics.

- If Biden is elected, it may not result in an absolute convergence between India and the US, but it could pave the way for closer economic ties between both countries and ensure that their strategic ties continue to grow.

Summary

Democratic Party presidential nominee and former Vice-President Joe Biden’s remarks, in which he criticised the CAA, the NRC and the restrictions that New Delhi imposed in Kashmir, are being closely watched in India. Biden’s campaign website, referring to the need to lift security restrictions in Kashmir says:

In Kashmir, the Indian Government should take all necessary steps to restore rights for all the people of Kashmir. Restrictions on dissent, such as preventing peaceful protests or shutting or slowing down the Internet, weaken democracy.
Those remarks have once again sparked the debate in India over whether a Trump presidency is better for India than Biden, with Biden’s detractors in New Delhi pointing to his remarks to support their argument. Trump’s Indian supporters, on the other hand, forget that a Republican president other than Trump would also pay attention to India’s social fabric and issues pertaining to civil liberties. Trump is an exception and not the norm, even in the case of Republicans.

The other point, which those sceptical of Democrats forget, is that the current warmth in the US-India relationship was created by a Democrat, Bill Clinton, and that, during the Cold War, there were differences between India and the US even during Republican Administrations because of the broader geopolitical circumstances in South Asia. During the Obama Presidency, the “Pivot to Asia” initiative sought to reduce China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific, with India playing an important role and during both meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, their joint statements referred to greater co-operation in the Indo-Pacific. During his visit to India in 2015, President Obama also called for further growth in the bilateral economic relationship.

It is noteworthy that Biden, when he was a US Senator, voted in favour of the Indo-US Nuclear Deal. Biden, who visited India as Vice-President in 2013, has been an ardent supporter of strengthening the bilateral economic relationship.

Analysis

India-US Ties under Trump

Under Trump, while strategic and defence ties have strengthened, differences on economic issues not related to trade have surfaced. The US President imposed a restriction on temporary work visas such as the H-1B and L-class visas until the end of the year, which will have a detrimental impact on Indian and Irish information technology professionals and India’s overall IT Industry. Non-US nationals granted any of those visas after 23 June will not be allowed to enter the US until 31 December, according to that ruling.

The main reason cited by Trump for suspending H-1B visas was the fact that more than 20-million US workers had lost their jobs between February and April 2020. In May 2020, unemployment rose to over 13 per cent and the US argued that, since temporary workers were accompanied by their spouses, who were also allowed to work in the US, and children, that negatively affected the job prospects of American workers, especially newly-graduating American citizens. US government officials have argued that Trump’s proclamation would open up over 500,000 jobs to American citizens.

The Indian Government, reacting to Trump’s decision, issued a statement to the effect that the movement of skilled Indian professionals who contribute positively to the US economy would be impacted.

It is noteworthy that Indian professionals receive a whopping 70 per cent of the H-1B visas that are issued every year. The Indian IT industry body, the National Association of Software
and Service Companies, stated that it is not only Indian IT professionals and India’s IT industry that will be affected; the US also needs to bear in mind that many Indian companies also employ Americans.

For his part, Biden has stated that, if elected, he will move swiftly to lift Trump’s suspension of H-1B visas.

It would be pertinent to point out that Trump’s decision has faced scathing criticism from a number of US CEOs, such as Sunder Pichai, the CEO of Google and Alphabet, as well as US policymakers, who have argued that it is the US that will lose from the Trump Administration’s decision, and that such an approach goes against the US ethos of encouraging skilled immigration. A number of other business groups, and the US Chamber of Commerce, have also criticised Trump’s decision. Trump has also been under pressure from other policymakers who want to suspend employment-related visas. They argue that such suspension is necessary to ensure that American workers can readily find work, given the rising unemployment in the US as a result of Covid-19.

Another area where India has had differences with Trump is dealings with Iran. The US President removed the waiver provided to India and other countries on buying oil from Iran in May 2019. Trump’s former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, in his book The Room Where it Happened: A White House Memoir, makes the point that Trump was not sympathetic to India’s request for a waiver to purchase oil from Iran.

Since India stopped purchasing oil from Iran, ties between Delhi and Tehran have witnessed a downward spiral. Iran has grown closer to Pakistan and criticised the abrogation by the Modi Government of Article 370 of the Constitution in relation to Kashmir. Iran is strategically important to India, as Chabahar Port in Iran is India’s gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. India has invested in the Chabahar Project, with the first phase of the project being managed by an Indian company. Over the past year, the souring of ties between India and Iran has resulted in India slowing down work on the Chabahar project and this point has been conveyed by senior Iranian officials. In December 2019, both sides decided to expedite the Project.

During the coronavirus pandemic, India used Chabahar Port to transport relief materials and medical aid to Afghanistan.

**A Democrat President and Iran**

It is possible that a Democrat President may adopt a more nuanced approach vis-à-vis Iran, which may give India more space to develop economic links with Iran and to accelerate work on the Chabahar Project. During the coronavirus pandemic, Biden urged the Trump Administration to relax its sanctions on Iran. In a letter to US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, Biden said:

> Whatever our profound differences with the Iranian Government, we should support the Iranian people.
A nuanced approach from Biden vis-à-vis Iran would thus benefit India significantly and give it more room to manoeuvre.

In his book, Bolton has also pointed to the fact that Trump had objected to India’s decision to purchase S-400 missiles from Russia and had threatened to impose sanctions on New Delhi under the “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act”.

**Trump’s Approach in Regard to China**

India’s main threat at this point in time is from China. That fact illustrates an interesting point: while publicly the US President has taken a firm stance against China and has been especially tough when it comes to economic issues (such as trade tariffs and sanctions on Chinese telecommunications company, Huawei), in the aftermath of the pandemic, there remains a shade of transactionalism in his dealings with Beijing.

While the Uighur Human Rights Act was recently signed, thereby sanctioning the Chinese officials who are involved in the detention, torture and harassment of minorities, for long the administration refrained from imposing sanctions against China in spite of human rights violations against the Uighur minority in Xinjiang. Trump’s reason for not imposing sanctions was that the US was negotiating a trade deal with China and that imposing sanctions at the time would make no sense. Bolton’s memoir alleges that Trump was willing to not just look the other way with regard to Xi Jinping’s decision to set up detention camps (Xi has put one million Uighurs in concentration camps) but, in fact, support the decision.

Biden is likely to make use of Bolton’s revelations, and has also stated that he would be far tougher on China with regard to human rights issues. Even if Bolton’s revelations are to be taken with a pinch of salt, Trump’s behaviour with allies like Japan, Canada, EU member states and India, has been unpredictable. He has, simultaneously, given the impression that he is comfortable with dealing with authoritarian leaders. A presumably more predictable Biden may thus be better in some ways for India, and may be tougher to deal with for China. As a number of commentators have argued, Biden’s ability to work with US allies may prove to be problematic for China.

**Absolute Convergence Is Impossible**

India cannot afford to adopt a simplistic approach to foreign policy issues and must realise that absolute convergence is impossible with any country. It is important to realise that ties between India and the US are driven by mutual economic and strategic interests and the prevailing geopolitical situation, rather than the personal chemistry between leaders. Under a Democrat president, strategic ties between India and the US are likely to remain robust and, in the economic sphere, could further strengthen if one were to go by Biden’s statements from when he was Vice-President. It is also important to note that the Indian diaspora in the US has traditionally backed the Democratic Party, and a number of Democrat policymakers have spoken in favour of bolstering economic links with India and on issues such as work visas.

If the convergence between India and the US is based on deeper shared values, such as democracy, diversity and commitment to strengthening globalisation rather than just parties
and personalities, Indian interests should not be affected; in fact, the relationship would be more robust. Such a partnership would be better placed to take on China’s belligerence and increasingly hegemonic tendencies.

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