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The US-India Relationship after Trump: A Return to Convention?

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Key Points

- While Donald Trump may not have conceded the election, the world is very much looking to the post-Trump era.
- Unlike Trump, President Biden is likely to focus on working closely with US allies and others on geopolitical, economic and environmental issues of concern.
- Biden's likely more flexible approach towards Iran, difference in approach to immigration issues, and even in countering China, are some areas where India and the US could find synergies.
- Absolute convergence is impossible between any two countries, but there are more convergences than divergences between the US and India. On human rights issues, as well as minority rights, the Biden-Harris White House will not mince words, as a result of which it could be tougher on China.

Summary

Over the past few months, there has been a barrage of commentary on the impact of a Biden Presidency on the India-US relationship. There is no doubt that India sought to benefit from the personal chemistry between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Donald Trump, clear examples being two big-ticket events at stadiums where they jointly addressed massive crowds: the "[Howdy Modi](#)" event in Houston (Texas, US) in September 2019 and the "[Namaste Trump](#)" event in Ahmedabad (Gujarat, India) in February 2020.

Not just the Indian political [opposition](#), but also a number of Indian commentators have been critical of that approach, arguing that it gives the impression that India is interfering in US domestic politics; that was even more so after Mr Modi said ‘*Ab ki baar Trump Sarkar*’ [‘This time it’s the turn of the Trump Administration’], at the Houston event.

After the semi-formal declaration of the US presidential election results on 7 November 2020, Mr Modi congratulated President-elect Joe Biden, as well as Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris. The Indian Prime Minister referred to [Joe Biden’s](#) positive contribution towards strengthening the India-US relationship during his stint as Vice-President under Barack Obama and said that he looked forward to working with Mr Biden to take the relationship to greater heights. In his message to Biden’s Vice-President, [Kamala Harris](#) (whose mother, Kamala Gopal Harris, hailed from the Indian city of Chennai), Modi referred to Harris’s Indian origin, also saying that her feat was a matter of pride, not just for her family back home in India, but for other Indian Americans as well.

Biden signalled on more than one occasion that he would seek to strengthen ties with India and also work jointly to counter the threat emanating from China. He reiterated the same point during his online address to [Indian Americans](#) during an event to commemorate India’s Independence Day. During that address he also alluded to his close links with the Indian Diaspora, including his choice for running mate. Said [Biden](#):

My constituents in Delaware, my staff in the Senate, the Obama Administration that had more Indian-Americans than any other administration in the history of this country, and this campaign with Indian-Americans at senior levels, which of course includes the top of the heap, our dear friend [Kamala Harris] who will be the first Indian-American vice president in the history of the United States of America.

Analysis

Immigration and H1B Visas

Biden, along with Harris, has repeatedly made the point that a Democrat Administration will reverse the Trump Administration’s policies with regard to H1B work visas, specifically the temporary ban which [Trump had imposed](#) on work visas until the end of 2020. In order to boost his “buy American, hire American” policy, Trump had made numerous changes to H1B policies, which made it difficult for American companies to hire Indian professionals, especially IT workers. According to estimates, the rejection rate of H1B visas had witnessed a significant rise of up to nearly [24 per cent in 2019](#), according to official figures. Apart from reversing the decision to suspend H1B visas, Biden has also stated that he would 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 US.

To be fair, Trump, too, had given indicators that he was working towards merit-based immigration on a [points-based system](#), rather than family-sponsored immigration, but his unpredictable policies with regard to both student and employment visas, have resulted in

Indian students beginning to look at neighbouring [Canada](#) as a favoured destination. There was a significant decline in Indian students registered in graduate-level engineering and computer science courses in US universities between 2016-17 and 2018-19, while there has been a corresponding increase in the number of [students enrolled in Canadian universities](#). Biden will be constrained in several ways, however, and, given the current narrative, major changes may not be possible, although some tinkering is certainly possible in the short run.

According to a [policy document](#) issued by the Biden campaign, one of the first steps he would take is to work with the Congress to legislate immigration reform, which will aim to keep families together by providing citizenship to nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants; an estimated 500,000 of those immigrants are from India.

Biden's Earlier Policies on India

It is pertinent to point out that while Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden played a positive role in furthering the cause of India-US relations. He backed the [Indo-US nuclear deal](#) (even though the initiative was the brainchild of the Bush Administration), one of the landmark achievements of the bilateral relationship, while Barack Obama, then a Senator, was reluctant to do likewise. It is important to also point out that even before becoming Vice-President, [Biden said](#), 'My dream is that in 2020, the two closest nations in the world will be India and the United States.'

The Iran Issue

It is not only Biden's past record, but also his approach towards important international issues which could pave the way for robust co-operation. First, on the Iran issue, his approach of being flexible suits India's economic interests. Biden has already stated that he would be willing to re-enter the JCPOA (an initiative of the Obama Administration), subject to certain conditions. In an interview with CBS News, Iranian Foreign Minister [Javad Zarif](#) had viewed statements by the Biden campaign positively, saying that 'the statements by the Biden camp have been more promising, but we will have to wait and see.'

This means that India could get more options, at least in the longer run, with regard to economic relations with Iran (which includes not just the import of oil, but trade which has dropped significantly from 2018-19). Most importantly, India can also go ahead with the strategically-important Chabahar Port project, which is important for its strategic goals, as well as regional connectivity ambitions vis-à-vis Afghanistan; in the last year or so, little progress has been made in this direction. Interestingly, only recently Iran asked India to provide equipment for an important component of the project – the [Chabahar-Zahedan railway](#). Recently, there were question marks raised over India's participation in the project, even though visits in September 2020 by India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, and Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, sent a clear message that India took the Chabahar Project and the overall bilateral relationship seriously.

Climate Change

Under Biden, the US is also likely to re-join the Paris Climate Change Agreement and has proposed a US\$2 trillion fund to deal with climate change. Biden has already indicated that

he would like to work with India [on the issue](#). Here it would be important to remember that Trump, who withdrew from the agreement, had been critical of India's emissions; during the fag end of the presidential campaign [Trump had referred to India's air](#) as filthy, eliciting strong reactions from sections of the Indian commentariat and media.

Economic Issues

Even on economic issues, Biden is likely to be less transactional, and while the US domestic agenda has become more insular in recent years and Biden would need to address the interests of some of the key constituencies of Democrats, it is highly unlikely that, like Trump, he will take an excessively simplistic stance. In the short run though, India's demands like the restoration of the [Generalised System of Preferences \(GSP\)](#), which Trump removed in June 2019, may be high on Biden's agenda. As a result of the removal of the GSP, tariffs were imposed on nearly 2,000 Indian imports. The reason cited was the fact that India had not addressed US concerns with regard to market access.

A lot will depend upon his choice of Secretary of State, but it is likely that he will choose someone with experience and who is familiar with India.

Possible Problems

Despite Biden's past record vis-à-vis India, Kamala Harris, the support that Democrats receive from Indian Americans, geopolitical compulsions, and India's economic importance, there is a scepticism in certain quarters with regard to Biden's remarks on policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act, as well as Kamala Harris's remarks on the [revocation of Article 370 in Kashmir](#), that have resulted in certain quarters raising question marks in regard to the future of Indo-US relations under a Biden Administration.

But Bear in Mind...

While it is true that no two countries can have absolute convergence on all issues, and the US and India are no exceptions to that truism, the fact is that there are more commonalities than differences – especially with regard to China's increasingly belligerent approach. Biden's conservative approach towards foreign policy and a less transactionalist approach than Trump took would also benefit India. As for the criticisms of some of the policies of the Modi Government, it would be pertinent to point out that even domestic commentators have been critical of social polarisation and the increasingly ultra-nationalist narrative. To link differences of opinion with a few policies is, therefore, a bit of a stretch.

The other misconception, which exists in many strategic circles, is with regard to the notion of the Republican Party being better for India than the Democrats. That misses the point that, during the tenure of a Democratic President, Bill Clinton, the foundations for a strong bilateral relationship were laid. A lot also depends upon issues and the prevailing circumstances. During the Cold War period, there were tensions with the US, even under Republican presidents.

Similarly, while it is true that during his first stint President Obama did not focus much on India, during his second term he sought to strengthen the strategic partnership. Not only

was there an emphasis on strengthening ties with India, but the foundations of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” were laid during that time. Some of the other important steps taken in the direction of improving strategic relations were naming India a major defence partner and the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which was done towards the end of Obama’s second term. As a result of LEMOA, militaries of the US and India can ‘[replenish](#)’ from each other’s bases, and access supplies, spare parts and services from each other’s land facilities, air bases, and ports, which can then be reimbursed’. This paved the way for other defence pacts such as the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement and the recently signed Basic Exchange and Co-operation Agreement.

It is thus important for the Indian strategic community to not view a complex relationship through the simplistic lens of which party is in power, but rather the prevalent geopolitical situation, as well as national interests. What is also overlooked is the fact that the vast majority of the [Indian community](#) supports Democrats, whose stand on many issues is favourable to them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Biden’s focus is likely to be on addressing domestic issues, such as containing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as dealing with the US economy. Apart from that, politically he will have numerous challenges, especially to provide “healing” to a country that is so polarised, as is evident from the election results. Yet, foreign policy is high on the agenda and the world will be watching the Biden Administration’s approach to crucial issues, New Delhi being no exception. While there could be differences over some issues, the relationship is likely to grow and unlikely to be uni-layered.

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