

India and the US Presidential Elections: A comment

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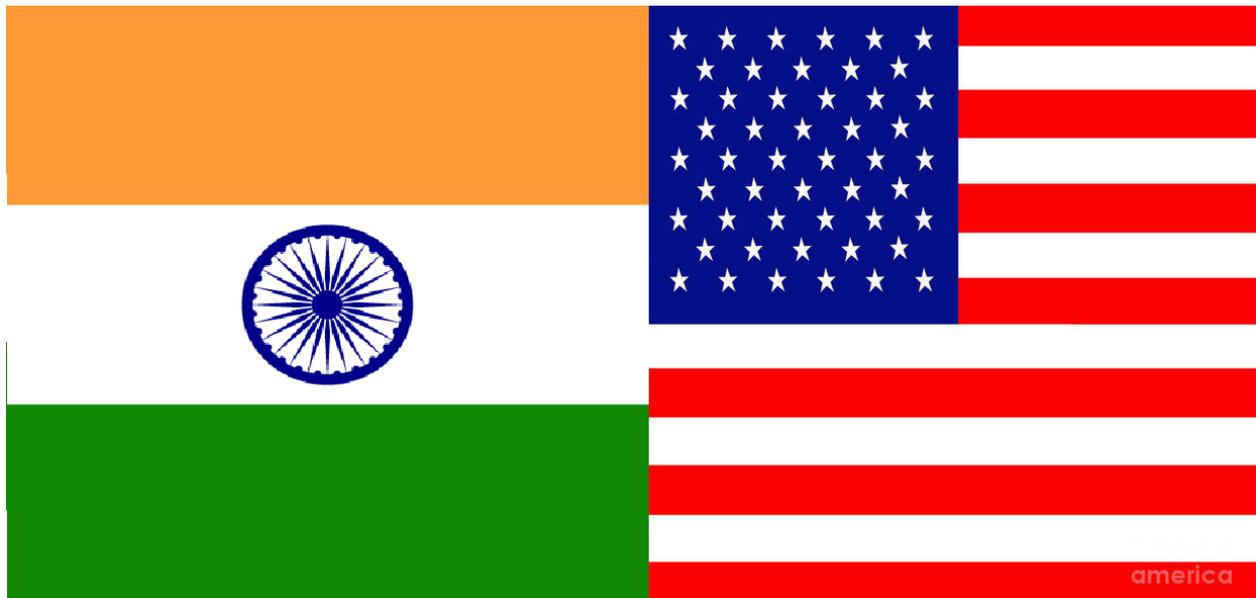
India and the US Presidential Elections: A comment

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What does the US Presidential Election result hold for India?

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The results of the US Presidential elections have reached its inevitable conclusion despite the last-minute political jostling where it is still making headlines. One of the interesting points that emerges is that not only the elections results are going to change the national politics in the US, but also the international affairs too. Incidentally, it is already being clear that there shall be essential policy decisions related to major contemporary issues like climate change, Iran, and China, etc. that will bear down as reversals from existing stands. Particularly, the expected US re-engagement on climate change since the surprise exit in 2017, is now a declared intention [i] of the new President-elect. At the same time, the challenge for the new administration would be to stitch back some of the old geopolitical alignments lost in the last four years. In this setup of geopolitical realignments where West Asia or Middle East has sought consolidation and bridging of ties, Russia has looked for resurgence, China is attempting domination and the US looks to re-engaging global

interplay, away from its recent isolationist trends under Trump administration, India's interests and its leadership role entwine in ensuring global and regional stability and growth.

In this regard, the Democrat Joe Biden's Presidential victory has direct and indirect consequences for India, especially in the backdrop of the rising India-US bonhomie. Leading political commentators and analysts foresee the India-US road ahead to be a continuation of the past measures in the strengthening of relations. According to senior political analyst and expert Harsh Pant in his article 'Seasoned faces who could aid the return of America,' has said "...the Biden administration's agenda on India will hardly be different, given Mr. Trump's own continuity on the Obama years' progress on the U.S.-India portfolio" [ii]. The President-elect's call to see America taking up the world stage, as the global leader, shall benefit India on larger broad-based interests of world affairs. Though some have suggested caution given India's past predicaments, it is poised to overcome the challenges in its global commitments with larger leadership roles.

One of the direct impacts of the US policy that India will have to inevitably face will be the growing Sino-US competition. Irrespective of the stance the new US establishment takes viz. China, India's position in the backdrop of the ongoing standoff at LAC shall remain a regional issue. Despite US interest in building a coalition against China's ambitions in the geopolitical sphere, India might have to draw its own lines given practical limitations of direct US or international participation in any conflagration. These trends have the capacity to put India on the sea-saw of the US-China competition. Extensive engagement of Indian interests to this new default position of politico-military fault lines between the US-China contests will become the new normal. In times of such realignments, options like QUAD and Indo-Pacific against aggressive tactics of states may face newer challenges of implementation beyond a posturing stance.

In the wake of the concluded strategic agreements like LEMOA, COMCASA, and recently concluded BECA [iii], along with the continued purchase of advanced military hardware, the underlying strength of Indo-US relations that deal with the subjects of defense and security exudes a relationship threshold at an all-time high overall. The recent agreement, BECA, gives India the capacity to garner geo-location of all types of weapons of war from aircraft to ships. It increases the effectiveness of precision weapons and provides geo-location during natural disasters. Further, communication and geo-spatial intelligence cooperation expand the scope of India-US relations for critical security requirements. It may be premised that any country that shares the existing levels of strategic, military, and intelligence cooperation can expect an open channel of communication and understanding for all issues, routine and exigent. Added to this list is the trade deal which is a much-sought pursuit and is still in the process of negotiations. Importantly, given underlying economic benefits at large, a mutually agreeable arrangement overcoming the present challenges would serve a larger interest. The US economy will have an impact on the global economy especially in post pandemic recovery phase.

However, some analysts have also cited concerns where India may have to deal with newer challenges, because of changes in US policies. For example, Ashley J Tellis (Tata Chair for Strategic Affairs) was of view that not all may be smooth sailing with the new administration cautions. He first mentions about the "gnawing qualms surrounding

possible shifts in U.S. policy cannot be dismissed as easily". Further, in his article in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [iv], he cautions for four possible impediments in the India-US narrative, if changes in US policy occur that may create detriments in India's prevalent position of interest. It includes the possibility of (re)growing a closer tie to Pakistan and shifts in Af-Pak policy constructs.

Second, there is a need for a thaw in the trade disputes between India and the US, which culminated in Trump administration removing privileged access as a developing country under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) trade program, third is the scrutiny of internal political developments, and fourth is international partnerships for transnational challenges where India and US may have differing opinions. A combined effect of these policy derivatives, the continuation of the India-US like-mindedness may require a re-visit to maintain the levels of comfort in the current status quo. The ongoing deal between India and Russia for the S-400 missile system and consequent sanctions by new American administration may further complicate matters

The future course of President elect Biden's policy and direction will invariably be a challenging journey for the US administration. India's requirements for playing a larger role along with the US would require it to enhance its economic, technological, and political prowess. In this situation, creating conducive environment for increasing avenues of investment and facilitating transfer of high-end technology shall play a decisive role. India's growth story needs it to transform its relationship from a buyer-seller to technology cooperation and partnerships, with like-minded parties. The intermittent period may be led by new and old constraints, but the decades-old presence of Indian diasporas and its significant contribution to the American society, manifest in the high offices in this US Presidential election; the growing association between India and the US, and common goals provide an opportune platform for pursuing larger national interests of India.

Notes and References:

[i] Matt McGrath, Joe Biden: How the president-elect plans to tackle climate change 10 November 2020, Joe Biden: How the president-elect plans to tackle climate change, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54858638>

[ii] Professor Harsh V Pant is Director, (Former) Studies and Head of the Strategic Studies Programme at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi & Department of Defence Studies and King's India Institute as Professor of International Relations at King's College London. Biden's election will bring continuity for India's military

[iii] MEA - Documents announced during the 3rd India - US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, October 27, 2020, at <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33143/Documents+announced+during+the+3rd+India++US+2432+Ministerial+Dialogue>

[iv] Ashley J. Tellis, Tata Chair for Strategic Affairs and is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Pivoting to Biden: The Future of U.S.-India Relations, November 09, 2020. At <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/09/pivoting-to-biden-future-of-u.s.-india-relations-pub-83179>
