



THE TIMES OF INDIA

What a Biden Presidency Will Mean for US-India Relations

Sean Randolph – November 20, 2020

Joe Biden's election as President of the United States will bring major changes in U.S. foreign policy. Some directions are already clear.

You will not hear the term "America first" again. Every nation of course looks to its own interests first, but under Donald Trump that usually meant going it alone. Relationships were mostly transactional and multilateral agreements and organizations were not considered important, as the United States pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, withdrew from the Paris climate accords and the World Health Organization, exited the nuclear agreement with Iran, undercut the WTO, and cooled to NATO.

Look for that to change. A Biden administration will be less unilateral and will invest more in global relationships. Look for the U.S. to rejoin the Paris Accords and the World Health Organization, and to remove the Trump administration's block on appellate appointments at the WTO. While pursuing reform at international organizations where needed, a Biden administration will emphasize engagement over abandonment. Support for U.S. manufacturing will be a priority as it was under Trump, including "buy America" policies to encourage the purchase of US-made products. But as an alternative to raising trade barriers, more will be invested in science as a key to competitiveness.

Restrictions on immigration instituted by the Trump administration will be loosened. Human rights, rarely spoken of in the last four years, will return to the agenda and shared democratic values will grow in importance as partnerships with friends and allies are strengthened.

The U.S. relationship with China is also set to change. Expect the confrontational rhetoric of the Trump era to subside. The trade war, currently on pause, may also be dialed back. US-China relations will not, however, revert to the status quo ante. Even if political relations improve, technology, market access, national security and geostrategic issues aren't going away. There is agreement in both parties that a firmer line with China was overdue, and support for the general direction of recent China

policy if not its details. The upshot is that a Biden administration won't walk away from the table that Trump has set. His approach will be less unilateral and more multilateral – using international institutions and building agreement with like-minded partners on joint strategies to address shared issues with China. As a pragmatist Biden will look for areas where both countries can cooperate, such as global health and climate change, but even with a reset US-China relations are likely to remain strained.

In this environment India should remain an anchor of Indo-Pacific policy and a key U.S. partner both globally and in the region. Biden knows India well and helped deliver the US-India civilian nuclear deal. While his personal relationship with Prime Minister Modi may be less central than President Trump's, the larger U.S. relationship with India should strengthen based on their common commitment to multilateral processes and a rules-based global order. Look for the U.S. to build closer ties with democracies around the world that share its values, with India a key partner. Deepening defense and security cooperation will be reaffirmed, through the bilateral agreements that have already been reached, the 2+2, and the Quad. Also on the upside, the limits imposed on immigration in recent years, including H-1B and other skilled workers coming from India, are likely to be reversed, re-opening the door to the historic flow of talent of talent from which both countries have benefitted.

Opportunities to deepen economic ties will also be on the agenda. Most prominent are renewable energy, health, e-commerce, and the development of secure global supply chains. As technology leaders, both countries should also cooperate with other market economies to set global standards.

Differences will inevitably surface. A Biden administration will carry a stronger brief for human rights and may raise concerns over issues such as Jammu and Kashmir or the Citizenship Act. Conflicts over tariffs, market access, and data regulations impacting U.S. technology companies also need to be resolved. Debate, however, will occur in a setting framed by broader systemic alignment, and it will be in the interest of both countries to resolve those issues quickly so the larger relationship can expand.

In short, India can expect less personal but more stable ties with the U.S. under Biden, and a continued deepening of trade, investment, technology and security relationships. Restoration by the U.S. of GSP privileges and an early US-India trade deal would help to get the new relationship off on the right foot.

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