INDIA’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE US FOR DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT UNDER BIDEN ADMINISTRATION: EXPECTATIONS?

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, the shared democratic values and principles between the United States and India have contributed significantly towards the development of a strong partnership between the two democracies. Democracy has always been a prominent factor of cooperation between New Delhi and Washington. Although some efforts are made for making this democratic bond stronger, the full potential of partnership yet to be realised between these two countries. With the victory of Democrat’s Presidential candidate Joseph R. Biden Jr., who aims to make democracy stronger, new opportunities of cooperation and partnership emerged for India. How New Delhi will grab those opportunities, however, remains to be seen. In that context, assessment of President Biden’s foreign policy goals and the potential role for India in democratic development goal of the US needs a close attention. This article explores the various areas of cooperation between India and the United States under the new President Biden administration.

Key Words: India, USA, Democracy, Presidency, Foreign Policy, US President

INTRODUCTION

Democracy has always been at the forefront of partnership and cooperation between India and the US as it is based on a shared commitment to freedom, democratic principles, equality and the rule
of law. Both the countries also aim to promote global security, democracy and economic cooperation through trade, connectivity and investment. With the victory of Democrat Presidential candidate Joseph R Biden Jr., new opportunities of cooperation and partnership with the US emerged for India. The Indian policy experts are struggling with the following questions: Is India will be fit in President Biden’s view on multilateralism? Is India will be recognised as a trustworthy friend by the Biden administration? In that context, assessment of President Biden’s foreign policy goals and the potential role for India in democratic development needs a close attention.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Indo-US partnership has been on an upward direction. Before that, the two states frequently found themselves at odds due to opposing grand strategies. The main factors that can be identified for the emergence of new relationship between two countries are the world economy and nuclearism. According to Sumit Ganguly (2006) India was identified as a power that can no longer be ignored, must be brought under the hegemon’s calculations. The growing economic integration and the historic Indo-US nuclear deal were the example of India’s strategic importance in these calculations.

There are four core areas of Indo-US relations in 21st century: appreciation of democracy, anti-terrorism, institutional frameworks, and the agency exhibited by Indian the international system, even under structural constraints. Washington has already recognised India’s central role and capacity to influence global affairs. It also endorses a widely-accepted assumption that a stronger and more affluent democratic India is good for the United States in and of itself. The US – India relationship is multidimensional as at least five pillars of cooperation could be identified: defense and security, trade, global cooperation, people –to people ties and shared values (Madan 2021).

All of these have created multiple avenues of cooperation between the two countries. Here the 5th pillar - shared values - is significant for the ties, which includes democracy, pluralism and rule of law. Democracy also complements other pillars of partnership. The US identifies India as a “natural” or “like –minded” democracy and an important partner for democratic cooperation. With the change of leadership in Washington, there is a need to locate the importance of India in President Biden’s foreign policy strategy.
In reality, India stands among the working partners of the US, a country that Washington can never ignore responding to recent change to the geopolitics. Even previous American administrations have recognised India as a geopolitical counterbalance, an economic partner and a democratic alternative to rising China. This view supports the belief that India’s rise as a regional power complements the interest of Washington especially in Indo-Pacific. It was visible through growing defense and security cooperation, including historic Indo-US Nuclear deal. According to some Indian experts, the main reason for such positive developments is the shared value of “democracy.”

IS INDIA’S DEMOCRACY GETTING ENOUGH ATTENTION?

The American administration and the policy makers acknowledge the fact that being the largest democracy of the world, India is a natural partner of the United States, world’s greatest democracy. India’s democracy represents diversity in terms of language, ethnicity and religion. It is really surprising that despite maintaining a stable democratic culture and making available democracy at the grass root level, India still not a priority in the foreign policy of the US administrations. From American side, many terms were used to describe the relations between India and the US like “estranged democracies,” and “distanced powers”. However, from Indian side the relationship is described in a more positive way like “distanced democracies,” engaged democracies,” and finally “natural allies.” Although India refers the US as the powerful democracy and itself as the largest democracy in the world, the relationship between both the countries are still far behind from achieving common democratic goals. The US and India bilateral relation is so far complex that cannot be defined by any specific terms.

According to George Perkovich (2010) from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, although the nature of India’s democracy has tremendous value, it does not serve any instrumental propose for US interest. One of the basic objectives of US foreign policy is the promotion of democracy around the world, so an expectation from India is to promote democracy among the developing countries. According to US policy makers, Indian leaders are reluctant to perform this duty. Indian leaders culturally resist the goal of promoting democracy abroad. So it was never featured in India’s foreign policy. According to the American view point, India has invested and
struggled a lot to perfect its own democracy, which could be used an example to the rest of the world. In fact, India’s democratic formation provides the means for citizens to organize in parties and NGOs to advance their interests and aspirations for justice. However, Indian democracy has been facing many challenges in the form of caste discrimination and violence, religious violence and breakdown of law and order in troubled areas like Kashmir and Manipur.

There is no doubt that in 21st century, South Asia emerged as one of the core areas for US foreign policy interest. Being the dominant actor in the region, India was considered as promising power and “indispensable partner” of the United States. However, New Delhi has not received full attention from Washington in terms of achieving common goals for democratic development. Despite improvements of US-India relations in recent times, many foreign policy experts and observers remain skeptical about a strong India- US cooperation. They dismiss the idea that India is confident enough to promote democracy and human rights abroad especially among the neighbouring states.

Considering the exceptional character of both democracies based on extraordinary size, history, diversity and giving respect to open and diverse societies, there are many common grounds of cooperation between the two democracies. According to Dr. Tanvi Madan (2021), from Brookings, the two democracies will work together in the future to ensure i) the democratic flexibility in the Indo-Pacific region and ii) the resilience of the rules-based international rulers.

**PRESIDENT BIDEN’S FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA & DEMOCRACY**

Democrat’s presidential candidate Joseph Biden Jr. contested for the presidency on a policy of change i.e. aiming adjustment in domestic policy and change in foreign policy. In foreign policy, his importance on change prioritized on an range of issues- China factor and Russia; "resetting" and "restarting" US ties with allies and other major democracies all over the world; The bigger goal of this "change" emphasis was to enable the United States to reconnect with the world and to move away from the isolated position that the US found itself after the apparent unilateralist policies of President Donald Trump administration.
Although India-US ties flourished under the Trump Presidency, the Modi administration welcomed President Biden’s victory. During his inaugural address on 20th January 2021, President Biden announced that “America is back” and declared that “diplomacy is back at the center.” President Biden (2021) further stated: "America's alliances are our greatest asset, and leading with diplomacy means standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and key partners once again." The speech deserved careful attention because it hinted at the priorities of Biden administration and set out its foreign policy agenda in detail. For many observers, President Biden’s speech indicated a dramatic shift from President Donald Trump.

The Biden speech is also notable for its stress on democratic values and human rights as guiding principles of American diplomacy. He declared that “we must start with diplomacy rooted in America’s most cherished democratic values; defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity.” (Biden, 2021)

During the election campaign, Biden was critical about Trump’s foreign policy as he had turned away from American democratic values. During the Trump administration, the US saw rapid advancement of authoritarian forces, extreme nationalism and illiberalism around the world. He felt democracy faced major threat through hyperpartisanship, corruption, and extreme inequality, which weakened the foundation of democratic institutions. Therefore, Biden promised as a president, he will renew U.S. democracy and alliances, protect the US economic future, and once more have the United States lead the world.

For President Biden, democracy is not just the foundation of American society; it is also the wellspring of its power. Democracy is always placed at the heart of US foreign policy, he added. In the article published in Foreign Affairs in March/April 2020 issue, “Why America must Lead Again? As a Democrat’s Presidential candidate, Joe Biden (2020) indicated that he would invite democratic leaders around the world to put strengthening democracy back on the global agenda. Referring to the successful models during the Obama administration, he stated that the US will
prioritize results focusing on new commitments in three areas: fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights in their own nations and abroad.

He further indicated that the US will host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world. The Summit aims to bring together the world’s democracies to strengthen the democratic institutions, will confront nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda (Biden, 2020). The Summit will be inclusive as the civil society organizations from around the world will be represented.

In addition, President Biden aims to equip American citizens to succeed in the global economy – with a foreign policy for the middle class. He gave special emphasis on the American middle class and appealed everyone for their contribution irrespective of someone’s race, gender, zip code, religion, sexual orientation and disability.

WHERE DOES INDIA STAND IN BIDEN’S FOREIGN POLICY?

In his first foreign policy speech delivered on 4th February 2021, President Biden categorically missed out India, Indo- Pacific, South China Sea and most importantly Quad, leaving the Indian policy experts predicting about the future of US- India ties and Washington’s engagement with the South Asia region. For the Indian policy experts it appeared that India and South Asia are not a priority for the Biden administration. Doubts surfaced whether India will be a key partner for the Washington under President Biden.

However, President Biden’s telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 8th February 2021 provided some relief. The call was significant as laid out the foundation of US-India ties under President Biden and Prime Minister Modi. Both the leaders shared view to a “rules-based international order” and looked forward to “consolidating strategic partnership” to further peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. They also reconfirmed the commitment for free and open Indo-Pacific. They further acknowledged and agreed that the Indo- US relationship is firmly based on democratic values and common strategic interests. However, the
phone call did not refer to the US highlight on democratic institutions and norms that shared commitment to democratic principles is the foundation for the US-India relations.

In addition, President Biden called for closer strategic ties with India through number of methods, including the Quad. The Quad is at the center of US’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.” Even the White House mentioned that both the countries will work together building “close ties to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, including support for freedom of navigation, territorial integrity, and a stronger regional architecture through the Quad.” President Biden’s seriousness for the “Quad” was reflected as he convened the first ever virtual leadership summit of the Quad countries and invoking “The Spirit of the Quad.”

In addition to the call between President Biden and Prime Minister Modi, there was another call between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Minister of External Affairs of India Dr. S. Jaishankar in early January. That call was also significant in indentifying the key strategic issues between Washington and Delhi. Also, there was one more call between the Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and his American counterpart, Jake Sullivan, which also referred about the shared values and features regarding closer ties between the US and India. The call also emphasized the significance of the two countries being “leading democracies” of the world and they must work closely on regional and international issues like fighting against terrorism, maritime security, cyber security and peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Previously, President Biden in an article in Foreign Affairs had hinted that he would support close ties with India. He sought cooperation in fighting against terrorism and stand together against an assertive China. In the article he indicated his support to the concept of rule-based Indo-Pacific and criticised the Chinese bullying tactics. Therefore, it is predictable that on these crucial issues, Washington’s support towards New Delhi would continue.

In March 2021, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin made his first visit to India as US defense secretary. He met his counterpart India’s Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh and concluded important talks on defense ties. During the visit Secretary Austin mentioned India as an
“increasingly important partner” among today’s rapidly changing global dynamic. He desired for a strong bilateral ties to strengthen free and open Indo-Pacific region.

**CHINA FACTOR**

Apparenty, the US has strategic interests in containing Chinese ambition for global domination. In the Foreign Policy speech, President Biden made five references to China calling it the “most serious competitor.” According to Dr. Ryan Hass, China expert from Brooking, it appeared from President Biden’s foreign policy speech that the US views China as a central challenge but not a burning issue. The speech highlighted that China poses significant challenges to America’s interests and values.

China represents a special challenge to the US as expansionist and an ambitious China is bringing potential instability and tensions in the Indo-Pacific through its territorial and maritime revisionism and heavy-handed use of economic and military power (Chellaney, 2021). China’s global ambition is visible as it is trying to extend its global reach through ambitious projects, promoting its administrative model and paying attention in the technologies of the future. For President Biden, best way to counter the challenge posed by China is to call and unite all US allies and partners to confront assertive China. However, he said clearly that on issues that are important to US interests, Washington will engage with China.

In fact, in last three decades, China has expanded its engagements in the Indian Ocean notably, which made American and Indian strategists worried. China has been in investing in building, developing and owning strategically located ports in countries surrounding India, including Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Myanmar. The Biden administration sees New Delhi as one of the most crucial partners in controlling China’s increasing ambition in the Indian Ocean.

Apparently, the US-China confrontation will remain part of the geopolitical landscape. So, the US must join together with fellow democracies. However as China is integrated in the global economy, so, few members of the Biden administration are hopeful about China’s role. So they believe that
instead of Washington branding China as its primary opponent, both the countries must aim for shared leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

The larger picture that could be predicted about the likely way of Indo-U.S. ties under Biden regime is that the strategic partnership between the two democracies will not decline at the level of complete idleness and exchange of military intelligence that had been already been reached. One of the primary reasons is the two significant democracies do share a common threat from an ambitious China.

**CHALLENGES FOR INDIA**

Just as Washington likes to project itself as the leader of the free world, India always present itself as the world’s largest democracy. Although the two countries have been proudly democratic, it has not always been enough to bring them closer. Strong differences were emerged on a variety of issues during 1970’s and 1980’s between Washington and New Delhi, from nuclear disarmament to the war in Afghanistan.

According to Washington, there are number of issues where India fails to bring democratic justice. One issue is definitely protection of human and minority rights of Muslims in Kashmir. On number of occasions, US officials condemned these issues through various techniques. Washington expects India to pay attention towards these crucial issues of democracy as it a skilled democracy. Such skills could be demonstrated to the rest of the world. According to the US view, there are number of efficient Indian nongovernmental organizations, which could be used as model for other developing countries.

Despite improvements of US-India relations in recent times, many foreign policy experts and observers remain skeptical about stronger India-US cooperation during Biden administration. According to American observers, India has not endorsed democratization or supported U.S. democracy promotion efforts more energetically. Indian observers on the other hand have condemned both American interventionism on grounds of democracy promotion and U.S. support for various authoritarian regimes. Recently, there are also differences between the two countries.
on issues like freedom of speech, the right balance between national security and civil liberties, and how to deal with non-democratic countries. In addition, there are many issues that are bothering sound India-United States relations like issue of climate change, management of Iran’s nuclear challenge, and most importantly Kashmir issue.

During 2019 and 2020, number of actions and series of policies by the BJP government led by Indian Prime Minister Modi generated debate in the US among policy experts and academic circle. Among the issues revocation of Muslim majority Kashmir’s semi-autonomous status and the controversial Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) generated enough attention in the US. Americans also shared concern about Indian Government’s detention of political leaders in Kashmir, Internet ban in Kashmir and Assam, proposed National Register of Citizens, the protection of religious freedom, restrictions on foreign funded Non-Government Organisations, arrests of journalists, police violence and handling of student’s dissent. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris both were vocal about India’s human right violation and expressed concern about rise of non-secular elements recently. However, New Delhi has always been firm that the situation in Kashmir is a domestic issue, not for interference by outside powers. President Biden has indicated to put more emphasis on values, and irony is that since 2019, Prime Minister Modi has shown a tendency to ignore the democratic norms. Disagreements over democratic values could undermine the tone and pace of the bilateral ties, however, unchecked, may create doubts in the Biden administration over India’s trustworthiness as a strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific.

**THE WAY AHEAD**

The relationship between New Delhi and the Washington has seen a transformation from minimal cooperation during the Cold war days to solid partnership from the first decade of 21st century. Relied on shared values i.e., democracy, pluralism and rule of law, both the countries have been pursuing a strategic partnership since 2004 during the time of President George W. Bush. The US sees India’s emergence as an emerging global power and recognizes as a significant partner in its efforts to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is a region of peace, stability, and growing prosperity. According to US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, India is a “bipartisan success story.”
further confirmed that the strategic partnership between the US and India will remain strong, especially on the Indo-Pacific.

As President Biden announced that he will take quick steps to renew US democracy and alliances, the prospects for democratic cooperation and development between India and the US are bright. Both the countries could focus on the following key areas of democratic development:

- Democracy and the democratic institutions even supplements free trade and market economy. The US and India enjoys robust economic relations. In fact, both the countries are open economies and the existence of democratic institutions and legal systems have complemented economic cooperation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge and people. Taking advantage of the common features of democracy, more trade and investment could be expected in the future. So, under President Biden, we could predict that U.S.-India trade relations may be more meaningful. A de-emphasis on trade deficits and a return to more traditional rules of engagement may ease economic cooperation.

- During the phone call between President Biden and Prime Minister Modi, both the leaders reconfirmed the importance of working with like-minded countries to ensure a rules-based international order and a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. With the common goal of prioritizing democracy, both Washington and New Delhi along with their like-minded partners could perform number of duties like providing assistance to countries in need; jointly perform duties to strengthen democratic institutions and civil society capacity and to provide economic assistance. They could also provide support to democratically weak countries to survive so that they can resist external interference. Both Washington and New Delhi could also work together to ensure the resilience of the rules-based international order. They could ensure that rules, norms, and laws are followed internationally.

- Similar to President Obama, President Biden is also an advocate of multilateralism. Biden announced that the US will play a much more active role on the multilateral front. The US decisions to return to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the resumption of
Taking advantage of these positive developments, the India-US ties could be extended in and on multilateral organizations and groupings on number of relevant issues like climate change and public health. Both the countries could strengthen the democratic foundation of these multilateral institutions. The US has already supported India’s membership as non-permanent member in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In addition, New Delhi and Washington could continue to engage together with the like-minded countries and increase the sphere of multilateralism in international politics. They must also reach out to troubled states in order to contain authoritarian regimes.

President Biden’s grand plan to organize a summit of democracies may create more avenues of engagement for India. Assuming India will be invited to the summit, a more solid and constructive plan of democratic cooperation between both the countries could be proposed.

China will continue to influence the Indo-US ties in the near future. China’s aggressive move has helped drive India’s shift towards closer strategic collaboration with Washington. During the President Trump administration, India and the United States signed a series of foundational defense, logistics, and intelligence-sharing agreements that pave the way for close security cooperation. We must also note that the US is also turning a major supplier of military weapons to India. New Delhi even planning to buy 30 armed drones from
Washington to strengthen sea and land defenses. According to geostrategic expert Brahma Chellaney (2021), the depth of strategic collaboration between the world’s most powerful and most populous democracies will ultimately be shaped President Biden’s China policy. He has yet to declare Washington’s clear policy towards Beijing. The Quad – a coalition of democracies in the Asia-Pacific will be another platform of cooperation between the US and India. However, President Biden did not mention about Quad in his first foreign policy speech.

- Finally, without a strong and multifaceted people-to-people ties between India and the US, a strong bilateral relation could not be predicted. As both the countries have shared values of democracy, it has facilitated the movement of people, knowledge production, cultural connections, and civil society interaction etc (Madan, 2021).

However, two events created enough gossips among the Indian experts within the 100 days of the Biden administration regarding India-US ties. First, regarding the freedom of navigation operation and the likely transgression of India’s Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) by the US. The second more controversial one was the Biden administration’s intentional delay in responding the second wave of Covid 19 pandemic creating health crisis in India. However, President Biden finally responded as US Air Force C-5 M Super Galaxy aircraft reached Delhi carrying oxygen cylinders, medical equipment, and test kits for the disease on 30th April 2021. It really proved that India is still significant for the Biden administration.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the shortcomings, democracy arguably offers more areas of cooperation than conflict. President Biden’s foreign policy agenda will put the US and democracy back at the centre of the table, which will allow to work with its allies and partners to mobilise collective action on global threats. President Biden aims to restore the historic partnership on democracy. To achieve that aim he plans to strengthen collective capabilities with democratic beyond North America and Europe by reinvesting in US treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea and deepening
partnerships from India to Indonesia to advance shared values in a region that will determine America’s future.

Most crucial question arises now- is President Biden’s foreign policy to be a ground breaking for Indo – US bilateral relations? In addition to shared democratic values, India must feature into number of important foreign policy objectives of the Biden administration like China and Indo-Pacific, climate change, and global health security. A softer Washington’s stand on China will definitely impact its long-sought alliance with India. Other key issues like US engagement with Pakistan and violation of human rights in India could act as hindrance toward New Delhi’s full association with the US- led security architecture. There is a possibility that President Biden may warm with Pakistan with a hope of getting concession in Afghanistan. So, a robust and action-oriented conversation between Washington and New Delhi on bilateral and global democratic cooperation is mandatory during Biden’s Presidency.

According to the US Department of State, the US has engaged with India in multilateral context as well through the Quad. We could still predict continuity of the overall India- US ties despite the change of the administration. India always prefers a steady and smooth relationship with the United States. However, this steadiness of relationship likely to happen with a degree of scrutiny and criticism on domestic issues, which leadership in New Delhi may not appreciate. While summing up, we could predict that India and the United States by the virtue of being democracies, will continue with a stronger and steady bond. Still there are enormous opportunities of sharing in terms of democratic values and ideas between the two prominent democracies of the world.

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