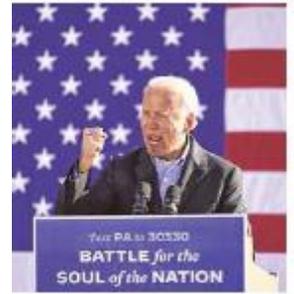


The real significance of the Biden win



Its impact on ties with New Delhi apart, it is more about whether it can re-energise India's democratic values

The Indian media has analysed the impact of a Joe Biden presidency on relations between the United States and India in some detail. Most commentators are right in saying there will be little overall change and what there is might be marginally beneficial: India will remain a potential ally in a troubled neighbourhood, defence and counterterrorism cooperation will continue as will trade negotiations, and there will be greater potential for cooperation on climate change.



They are also right in saying that there will be no more free passes for the Narendra Modi administration on human rights, in particular the targeting of Muslims, Islam and Kashmir; and right too in saying that while the Biden presidency will raise these issues with Indian counterparts, they will not significantly impact on other areas of cooperation.

Spotting the nuance

Yet, in making these points, most commentators miss the nuance. Contrary to the Bharatiya Janata Party's projection, U.S. India ties did not strengthen under the Modi-Trump administrations (Mr. Trump weakened the U.S.'s ties to most countries, and India was no exception). The only moment at which U.S. India ties really did display strength was during the Singh-Obama administrations. At that moment, India was no longer a potential ally for the U.S.; it was an ally, period.

It is not that both countries did not strive for better ties earlier. Since the Cold War ended, the two countries have stressed common interests. But the process of outlining and acting upon these interests has been frustratingly slow. The first breakthroughs came during the Clinton-Vajpayee years, but they were in the nature of 'getting to know each other'. Bill Clinton was eager but India's traditional caution, coupled with Atal Bihari Vajpayee's long silences, baffled U.S. policymakers.

Manmohan Singh's willingness to stake his entire political capital on the U.S. India civil nuclear agreement made U.S. policymakers sit up. But the timing was off. The Bush administration depended on Pakistani cooperation for its war in Afghanistan, and India's importance was mostly as a lever to pressure Pakistan. The chief progress was in trade, and it was considerable, with U.S. India trade hitting close to \$40 billion.

THE OBAMA ERA

It was only when Mr. Obama was elected President in 2009, with Mr. Biden as Vice President, that ties truly deepened. Between 2009 and 2014, U.S.India trade nearly doubled, the U.S. agreed on a strategic partnership with India, supported India for permanent membership of the UN Security Council and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, helped it become a member of the East Asia summit, promoted Indian engagement in Afghanistan and opening to Central Asia, encouraged the European Union to engage more closely with India, and strengthened military to military ties in the Indo Pacific region.

Post 2014, when the Modi administration came to power, most of these initiatives whittled down, including even counterterrorism cooperation. U.S. military strategists were surprised by the weakness of India's 'surgical strikes' on Pakistan in 2016 and 2019. This year, they were astonished by the Modi administration's quiescence on Chinese intrusions into Ladakh, arguably the gravest security threat to India since the 1962 SinoIndian war. While the U.S. military will continue such important symbolic gestures as joint exercises with the Indian military, few U.S. strategists see India as a major security asset in Asia. Even trade, though it continued to grow between 2014, 2019, grew at a slower rate than in the preceding five years.

A TIME OF VALUE SHARING

In other words, the high points of the U.S.India relationship occurred when both countries were governed by liberal democrats. Values do matter, despite what purported realists say. Indeed, they matter so much that when two countries share common values, the benefits accrue to the ordinary citizen. Manmohan Singh's administration may take the greatest share of credit for lifting hundreds of millions of Indians into the middle class, but it is also true that he was aided by the Obama administration's support for his cause. Indeed, it was President Clinton who first made support for such a cause a key part of the U.S.'s India policy, as he did for the U.S.'s Africa policies.

ISSUE OF RIGHTS AND A MESSAGE

Clearly, the Biden and Modi administrations will not share common values. While this gap may not directly impact U.S.India ties, it will surely do so indirectly. Speculation on whether the Biden presidency will mount pressure on India's lamentable state of human rights, which now rivals that of the McCarthy era, is already rife. India is not high on the Biden Harris list of priorities, which is topped by dealing with COVID19, healing domestic divides, reviving the U.S. economy, repairing ties with Europe, evolving a calibrated China policy, rejoining multilateral initiatives such as on climate change, reinstating the Obamaera Iran policy and furthering peacemaking in Afghanistan.

So, the Modi administration has some time to put its house in at least token order on human rights, should the Prime Minister wish to do so. That is a big if, but it would make a big difference, not only in terms of much needed human rights reforms and, especially in the case of

Kashmir, political rights. At a time when the COVID19 pandemic has driven so many economies inwards and virtually devastated our own, a U.S.India business as usual approach will not help. We need countries that will actively work with us to revive our economy, even if their own benefit is less than ours.

For a troubled democrat such as myself, however, the real significance of this U.S. election is not how it will impact U.S.India ties but whether it can reenergise our democratic values. Mr. Biden's win shows that even under an autocratic administration and deeply polarised society, such as the U.S. had, appeals to unity based on compassion, 'decency and hope', as Kamala Harris put it, can succeed.

This is a lesson that our Opposition parties, independent institutions and civil society should take to heart. As we slide rapidly into autocracy, and are as deeply polarised as the U.S. (if not more), we desperately need leaders who will appeal to our better rather than baser instincts. It should give our Opposition leaders inspiration that the BidenHarris message of healing, civility and responsibility instantly struck a chord. They too can refuse to sink to the 'era of demonization' as Mr. Biden put it, no matter how much our hate filled trolls try to draw them in.

A LAST TAKEAWAY

Our judiciary and media can draw their own lessons from the U.S. example, where so many State level courts and the national media fought back against Mr. Trump's attempts to cow them. They paved the way for this election result. And for those of us members of civil society who care, here is the comforting Biden Harris message: all is not lost, it never can be. Maybe Bihar will reinforce the point.

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