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Book Review

INDIA-US RELATIONS: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES UNDER THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

STUTI BANERJEE

In President Joseph Biden, India finds a person who not only has an understanding of the dynamics of the region but has worked closely to strengthen the Indo-US partnership. He played a key role in lifting US sanctions on India in 2001. As Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he was instrumental in gaining the US Congress' support for the India-US civil nuclear deal in 2008 and as Vice President, he has worked towards deepening strategic engagement between the two nations.

As the US under President Biden tries to repair its relations with its partners and allies, India is looking to him to gauge the future trajectory of US-India relations. Asia continues to be of importance to the US especially as the Indo-Pacific gains prominence with the QUAD becoming more visible. The role of India in the Indo-Pacific, the keenness to engage India in the Afghan peace process and the recent developments in the India-US 2+2 dialogues show the growth of the relations. It is widely known that irrespective of the election results in Delhi and Washington, D.C., relations continue to remain strong,

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yet each government comes to power with its own priorities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pursued a close India-US partnership. President Biden has stressed the importance of partnership in the region and while there are foreign policy convergences, divergences on some issues might need to be examined. This paper briefly examines one area of convergence and divergence each, while examining one area of a shared goal with a difference in methodology.

INDIA-US RELATIONS: SHIFT IN STANCE OR CONTINUATION FROM THE PAST UNDER THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

In his first foreign policy speech after taking oath of office, President Biden stated, “America is back. ... Diplomacy is back at the centre of (U.S.) foreign policy.”¹ He has repeatedly spoken of repairing alliances, re-engaging with the world and pledged to take the US back on its role of becoming the leader in global affairs. He has rolled back some decisions taken by the previous administration, such as redoing the Climate Change agreement and the World Health Organisation. He has signed the New START with Russia which was soon to lapse and has advocated that the US and Iran need to negotiate to ensure that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or the Iran Nuclear Deal can be revived. Yet not all policies would be so easily rolled back. When one examines the first 100 days of President Biden and studies the major policy decisions he has highlighted for Asia, one finds more continuity than change from the previous administration. The paper examines three areas of convergence and divergences before India-United States relations.

The Growing Convergence on China

The Trump administration called China a strategic competitor and rival in its National Security Strategy and the National Defence Strategy,² which was further highlighted in the four speeches given

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1. The Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>. Accessed on May 23, 2021.
 2. In the NSS, China and Russia are termed as revisionist powers that challenge the United States. The NDS states China is a strategic competitor.

by high-ranking officials of the administration.³ President Biden has continued with this assessment and has maintained that China remains a threat to the United States. In his first speech to the joint session of Congress he stated that, “We’re in competition with China and other countries to win the 21st Century.”⁴ He added that his administration would ensure that all nations engage through the same rules in the global economy, including China, while stressing that the US would continue to maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific to prevent conflict in the region. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated that China represented America’s “biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century”, saying the Asian nation was the only country with enough power, political, economic, military and technological strength to jeopardise the current international order. For the moment, it would seem that the Biden administration largely views China as an economic rival, especially in the technology sector, and would be taking steps to protect IPRs and technological innovations. In continuing with the previous administration’s tariffs on China and not making changes to the Phase-1 trade agreement, President Biden has indicated continuity in the US’ China policy. He has also continued with the pressure on China by maintaining high-level engagements with Taiwan and participating in military exercises with friendly forces in the region. It is likely that the defence department’s review of its China policy will reflect change and a relocation of resources to the Asia and Indo-Pacific region. An indication in his announcement to withdraw from Afghanistan. “We have to shore up American competitiveness to meet the stiff competition we’re facing from an increasingly assertive China.”⁵ The one aspect on which they differ from the previous administration is the stress that Secretary of State Blinken has laid on multilateral international cooperation to address the challenges posed by China.

3. Speeches were given by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Director FBI Christopher Wray, National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien and Attorney General William Barr.

4. The Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, “Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/29/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress/>. Accessed on May 23, 2021.

5. The Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed on May 25, 2021.

India's views converge with the United States on China's assertive posturing and growing influence in the region. Nonetheless, while there is shared concern, there is a lack of consensus on how to approach the challenge. For India, any China policy has always required deft strategic calculations. As an immediate neighbour, it does not have the luxury of distance that the United States enjoys. India and China both are civilisational powers that are expanding their global influence. India and China both have witnessed economic growth which has consequently increased their influence in the 21st century and has found reflection in their respective foreign policies. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea as well as its activism along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the growing China-Pakistan friendship and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the repeated attempts by China to block the listing of Masood Azhar as a terrorist and China's opposition to India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) have changed the perception of China in India. Looking ahead, the likelihood of persistent tensions on the India-China border remains high. Adding to the complexity of crisis both China and India extended their land border confrontation into other areas of their bilateral relationship. The moves were intended to signal resolve and communicate the costs of escalation. Indian signalling included its June 2020 deployment of a warship to the South China Sea, which immediately drew Chinese objections; a ban on fifty-nine Chinese web apps, including WeChat and TikTok, from Indian markets; and new barriers to participation by Chinese companies in a variety of Indian infrastructure projects, such as highway construction. Chinese signalling included engineering a brief but debilitating October 2020 electrical blackout in Mumbai through a cyberattack by Chinese hackers.⁶ Along with the border tensions, the two nations are also competing for influence and support within the region. Keeping all this in mind, India along with other members of the QUAD has been making visible efforts to showcase the foreign policy synergies through a unity of purpose and shared values that respect the rule of law. Under Prime Minister Modi India's focus has been on the neighbourhood first policy to ensure a peaceful regional security

6. Centre for Foreign Relations, "Preparing for Heightened Tensions Between China and India", April 19, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/report/preparing-heightened-tensions-between-china-and-india>. Accessed on May 23, 2021.

environment. India has also laid stress on its maritime region and has enhanced engagement with the United States, the most powerful extra-regional power in the region. India sees the United States as crucial to maintaining the balance of power in Asia while helping India build its capabilities in the economic, military, and technology sectors. As India and the United States have gravitated towards each other, China has hardened its stand towards India. It has viewed India from two geopolitical developments: one, India's stand on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and India's support for the US-led initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific is one area where India is becoming more of a factor in China's foreign policymaking since 2017 because of its association with America.⁷ While China is aware of India's vision for the Indo-Pacific—which is based on the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)—it believes that India's position is strategically inclined towards the United States and damages Chinese interests and India-China trust.

The Divergent Views on Russia

While China has been assessed as an economic threat, Russia is viewed as a security threat by the United States. During the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference (February 19, 2021) President Biden stated, "The challenges with Russia may be different than the ones with China, but they're just as real.... Putin seeks to weaken the European project and our NATO Alliance. He wants to undermine the transatlantic unity and our resolve...."⁸ As a result of the investigations into Russia's role in the elections, the United States expelled Russian embassy officials in Washington and also placed sanctions to address specific harmful actions that have been taken by Russia against US interests.⁹ It named 32 Russian individuals and entities for their roles in attempting to influence

7. Vijay Gokhale, "The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China Relations", March 10, 2021, <https://carnegieindia.org/2021/03/10/road-from-galwan-future-of-india-china-relations-pub-84019>. Accessed on May 24, 2021.

8. The Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, "Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference>. Accessed on May 24, 2021.

9. The Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, "Remarks by President Biden on Russia", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/15/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russia/>. Accessed on May 24, 2021.

the 2020 US presidential election, five individuals and three entities linked to Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, and six technology companies for supporting Russian Intelligence Services. The sanctions come even as President Biden has expressed his desire to meet President Putin. The White House has indicated that the two heads of government would likely meet in Europe in June 2021 to discuss the differences in relations, such as the situation in Ukraine and the arrests of opposition members and critics of President Putin. Russia has proposed to include strategic arms control as a discussion point. The two nations approved a five-year extension of the New START nuclear arms control treaty that limits the numbers of strategic nuclear warheads, missiles and bombers that Russia and the United States can deploy. (Former President Trump had initially declared that he would not extend it unless China also joined.) The extension, however, does not cover tactical nuclear weapons, nor does it reverse the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Force Agreement. Nonetheless, unlike former President Trump, who had time and again expressed his regard for President Putin, President Biden has stated that Russia is a threat to the United States. The differences in the '*values*' such as human rights, democratic rights that has been a focus area of the Biden administration will make it difficult to have '*traditional predictable relations*'. Domestic political considerations will further compound efforts to reset the relationship.

The United States has been made to understand the importance of India-Russia relations. Russia has not only provided India arms to maintain a formidable military profile, but also provided invaluable political support to India on a variety of regional issues. Russia continued to assist India in areas where Western countries would not. Its most significant example is the help provided by Russia to build its nuclear propelled submarines, two of which have been launched, and provide an SSN on lease along with the BRAMOS missile.¹⁰ The defence and strategic relations that India shares with Russia has been a contentious point in Indo-American relations. In recent years, India

10. Manoj Joshi, "India's strategy in the China-Russia-USA triangle", December 20, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-strategy-in-the-china-russia-usa-triangle-59417/>. Accessed on May 24, 2021.

and Russia have signed a number of defence deals across domains, including guided missile frigates, T-90 battle tanks, and lease of a nuclear-powered attack submarine. The possibility of sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) has been hinted at by the United States, nonetheless New Delhi has maintained that it will take its independent decisions on security requirements. For example, India has remained committed to the purchase and induction of the S-400 air defence system from Russia. In the face of threat of CAATSA sanctions, India has stressed that the agreement on the defence system was negotiated and signed before the CAATSA came into being in 2017. India has stressed that the S-400 system serves its air defence requirements on which it will not compromise. While the CAATSA does provide for waivers based on the idea that some friendly countries may continue to buy products from Russia, it provides no blanket exception that will insulate India. The fact that India and the United States are not formal allies, the induction of the S-400 may place some constraints on technology transfer in the future affecting India-US defence cooperation. While the US Congress did grant a modified waiver to India (along with Vietnam and Indonesia) under Section 231(d) of CAATSA via the National Defence Authorization Act of 2019, the possibility of sanctions was not eliminated. The authority to continue to grant the waiver lies with the office of the US President. For the moment, the Biden Presidency is focused on increasing US defence sales to India. It remains to be seen if increased Indian imports of US arms will be the price for waiver of CAATSA sanctions. If so, India would have to consider the long-term viability of this option.

There is a realisation within the Biden administration and the strategic community in the US that it cannot impose conditionalities on India's relations with Russia, that India is a major partner in the region capable of counterbalancing the rise of China crucial to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, with similar democratic values. Continued threats of sanctions and penalties for relations with Russia may risk ongoing and future India-US defence business that is worth billions of dollars. India has over the past few years reduced its military imports from Russia, and there has been an increase in its interaction with the United States and other 'Western' nations. However, the use

of secondary sanctions will likely be perceived as an infringement on India's strategic autonomy and cause ruptures in bilateral relations.

India has experience and knowledge of balancing its relations with the two nations. It is aware of the strategic proximity being shared between Russia and China and Moscow's growing unease with New Delhi's engagements with Washington and active participation in the QUAD. It has tried to address Russia's concerns and is working towards expanding its relations with Russia by diversifying its non-military economic relations. India has also initiated a trilateral grouping with Japan and Russia aimed at stimulating investment in Russia's sparsely populated Far East. The trilateral is aimed both at reassuring Russia of the 'inclusiveness' of India's vision for the Indo-Pacific and easing Moscow's reliance on Chinese investment in the region.¹¹ They also have interest in ensuring a peaceful Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American troops in September 2021. They can pool their resources to protect Afghanistan from proxy wars and the global terror networks. India is looking to build partnerships to ensure that the gains of the past two decades are not lost, and inch closer to an end to the Afghan conflict. While not everything about the India-Russia relationship is compatible with US interests and a similar thinking is visible in Washington, in trying to deal with the growing Chinese footprint, Washington and Moscow may realise that a functional Russia-India relationship and a US-India relationship, respectively is not necessarily detrimental to the other.

Shared Goal but Differing Ideas: Peace in Afghanistan

The Biden administration's Afghanistan policy has called for US withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. The withdrawal has raised concerns in India with respect to a possible rise in terrorism and future relations with Afghanistan. India has not recognised the Taliban and was not part of the peace talks; however, it has been involved in the Afghan rebuilding process and shares the goal of a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. However, as the US has announced its withdrawal plans and President Ghani has offered

11. Henry Storey, "Cracks Beginning to Appear in the Russia-India Relationship", March 3, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cracks-beginning-appear-russia-india-relationship>. Accessed on May 25, 2021.

to talk to the Taliban for a future role, India may have to be open to engaging with a future Afghan regime that may include the Taliban. Apart from the threat of terrorism, India is also gauging the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US. Pakistan's role in the peace negotiations and its support to the Taliban has not been a secret. It is fair to say that it will have influence over Afghan policy, especially its relations with India. There is also the possibility that Present Biden may repair relations with Pakistan in an effort to gain concessions in Afghanistan. Former President Trump had taken a tough stand on Pakistan's role but Pakistan now wants a closer relationship, with investment and trade included. Pakistan's civilian and military leadership have together been promoting a new focus on "geo-economics"—an approach that emphasises regional trade and connectivity and focuses on Pakistan's economic requirements. Pakistan's willingness for a broad-based relationship and the United States' requirement of a peaceful Afghanistan can bring the two together. However, unlike the previous administration, the Biden administration has proposed India, Iran, Russia and China, along with Pakistan, as countries that may play a role in Afghanistan peace process. For the moment it has also continued with the Trump administration's suspension of security assistance to Pakistan. The Biden administration is likely to view Pakistan from the prism of the countries of the neighbourhood—India, Afghanistan and China.

For India, the US withdrawal carries certain risks. The first being terrorism. With the US withdrawal, there is little clarity on how the agreement will be implemented on the ground. It is also unlikely that the Taliban will end its dependence on Pakistan soon. With the Pakistan sponsored terrorist organisations targeting India, they pose a threat to India's future in Afghanistan and peace in the region. India is concerned about the possible political vacuum that may emerge in Afghanistan. While the peace agreement does talk of power sharing between the Afghan political parties and the Taliban, the success of such an alliance remains a question mark. India would have to look at its options which would have to recognise that it would not be able to rely only on the Afghan government. Apart from this is the concern over Pakistan, and its role in Afghanistan—given its close proximity to the Taliban—is naturally not a comfortable position for India.

Given the past, engaging with the Taliban has been not been viewed enthusiastically; nonetheless, with some version of the Taliban now set to be part of the government, India would have to build prudent scenarios on how it would voice its concerns with the future Afghan government, while continuing to be positively engaged in the country.

Successive US administrations have praised India's role in peace and development in Afghanistan. India and the United States share the end goal of a peaceful Afghanistan, however, they differ on the path to this goal.

CONCLUSION

The foreign policy of a country is likened to its domestic imperatives and this remains true for the United States. The change from "America First" to "Restoring America" will impact how the United States engages with the rest of the world. As the Biden administration completes its first 100 days in office, the focus has been on domestic issues, namely, trying to bridge the partisan divide and overcome the surge of the pandemic. Having achieved some success in the latter, the United States is slowly reopening businesses to return to 'normal'. As President Biden works to regain America's position in the world and engages with partners to meet the challenges of the future,¹² deepening the Indo-US partnership would prove to be beneficial to both nations. The priority accorded to India in Washington's strategic thinking—especially on the Indo-Pacific—remains strong. High-level virtual calls between the officials of the two governments along with the visits of Secretary of Defence Austin and Climate Change Envoy Kerry have set the tone as to how Washington intends to chart the course for its strategic partnership with New Delhi. The "2+2" dialogue between the defence and foreign ministries of the two countries, the signing of foundational agreements, and the many joint working groups are tangible features of this growing partnership. As India looks to build a multifaceted relationship, a realistic and balanced approach by both will bolster development.

12. The Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>. Accessed on May 23, 2021.