



A Second Trump Administration and South Asia



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A most consequential transition of guard will take place in just about a month from now. On 20 January 2025, Donald Trump will take over the baton from Joe Biden to become the 47th president of the USA. This will be more than just a matter of domestic significance for the USA since the president of the most powerful country matters to the rest of the world too. This time the interest in the change of the occupant of the White House is more than usual owing to the nature of Donald Trump and the experience with him as president. His slogan then was America First and he showed little concern for issues of international security. On matters related to climate change, he was a denier and chose to withdraw the US from the Paris agreement. On several bilateral arms control agreements with Russia too he opted for the same course. He also did not hesitate in taking steps even if these upset many relationships, including with American allies and partners.

Given this experience of his last term as president, it is not surprising that every nation is busy evaluating what it may face from the new US administration. Interestingly, most articles on the subject are using the word ‘brace’ with respect to how countries will have to deal with the new old occupant of the White House. Nearly all agree that Trump will be unpredictable throughout his four years and will maintain a transactional approach to issues and nations. How will he deal with South Asia?

In South Asia, the relationship of most consequence to Trump will be that with India. Fortunately, the fundamentals of India’s relationship with the USA are strong. Both have convergent security concerns, especially from an assertive and aggressive China. These are expected to keep President Trump suitably engaged in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, it may be recalled that some of the elements of institutionalization of US-India ties took place under the previous Trump administration. Today, the bilateral relationship is built on the bedrock of 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, India’s status as a Major Defense Partner, four foundational agreements,

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and arrangements that enable real-time intelligence sharing in the Indo-Pacific. President Trump is unlikely to disturb these.

Of course, there is apprehension that the economic relations might be rocked if President Trump decides to raise tariffs. But, the overall American interest in India is unlikely to faze given its market size and value, as also the position, reach and influence of the Indian diaspora in the US. To add to this is the relatively good relations between President Trump and PM Modi. Both seem to know how to deal with one another. They are on terms good enough and understand the other's relevance and importance enough to manage a cordial working relationship.

As regards Pakistan, Trump did not have a pleasant relationship with the country in the last term, and there is little reason for him to want to invest too much time, attention or resources to building that relationship. For now, the strategic location of Pakistan that has always been of importance for Washington appears to be of little salience. Moreover, Pakistan's close relations with China could be an irritant for the Trump administration. Unless, in a masterstroke, as it happened in 1971, Pakistan is able to get China to deliver something to Trump that matters to him. Pakistan could increase its relevance for the Trump administration if, for example, it could persuade China, on behalf of USA, to join it on the table for arms control. Keen as Islamabad is to mend its relations with Washington, it will have to look for ways to catch positive attention of the Trump administration.

Amongst the other South Asian nations, most likely Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives would be of more interest to the new administration, especially from the security from China point of view. In the past too, these were seen as important for their potential for offering logistics in case of military operations against China. The same logic will operate even now. But, it is likely that Trump will let India take the lead on economic and security connections within the region.

Issues of indirect impact on the region

The manner in which the incoming Trump administration handles three issues could have positive or negative implications for the region. The first of these would be whether President Trump is able to achieve his expressed desire of finding a resolution for the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Any progress on this front will be good for India since US involvement in Europe distracts it from handling the China threat. It also tends to

push Moscow closer to Beijing and strengthens the likelihood of an alliance between China, Russia, Iran and North Korea.

Secondly, any initiative that President Trump may take for a fresh re-engagement with DPRK that may enable securing a freeze on further nuclear and missile capability build-up under international inspections, would help address the risk of illicit proliferation of nuclear material, equipment or technology to non-state or other state actors. This is a security concern for South Asia which is infested with terror organisations and religious fundamentalism besides expanding nuclear power programmes.

Lastly, if Trump could somehow bring China into some sort of nuclear arms control, either bilaterally with USA or at a more multilateral level, it would be a benign development for India and the region since it would avert the risk of a nuclear arms race, and its accompanying dangers.

South Asia needs to find its own coherence

It is likely that Trump will treat South Asia much like as he did in the past. Each nation in the region will try to find its own equation with the new administration. Memories of his behaviour in the last administration will help nations be better prepared to handle his mercurial tendencies. President Trump, meanwhile, can be expected to judge the relevance of each country for its economic and security value.

The president of USA is always an important figure for all regions of the world. But for a region like South Asia which is so united by geography, history, culture and common regional and global concerns such as those of climate change and terrorism, it would be best to find its own regional coherence. Irrespective of their ties with the US, South Asian countries must build their own relationships and linkages to benefit the peoples of their region.

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