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GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES WITH JOE BIDEN PRESIDENCY: IMPACT ON INDIA



Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd) is Senior Research Fellow in (CENJOWS). He is a qualified Master Fighter Controller and has an extensive experience in Air Defence in Field and Command Formations of Indian Air Force.

In the inaugural address after swearing in as the President of United States, Joe Biden singularly avoided any reference to a foreign policy issue. On the first day, he signed 17 executive orders reversing some of the former President Trump's orders. These related to the handling of the COVID-19, economy, environment, equality and immigration etc. Among other things, the executive orders reverted United States to rejoin the global forums, World Health Organisation (WHO) and Paris accord from which US had withdrawn. Being an election issue, the unprecedented loss of life caused by Corona pandemic and resultant job losses are expected to receive his greatest attention. A \$1.9 trillion relief package to help the jobless and to alleviate the financial pain from coronavirus has already been announced. He stopped further construction of the border Wall with Mexico border and revoked Trump's immigration policies including of lifting bans for people predominantly from the Muslim countries.¹

President Biden is an experienced politician, being a six times senator and had two tenures of vice President with President Obama. He is quite skillful

¹<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/20/politics/executive-actions-biden/index.html>

in foreign affairs and most likely his foreign policy is not likely to be greatly different than what was being pursued except that he would avoid the abrupt and brusque style of the former President Trump. He too would like to assert US power and maintain US position as number one nation though, his style will be collaborative. He would try to build the relationships which he perceives has suffered with President Trump "America first approach" and which relegated others to inconsequential. Yet with him in the saddle some changes in the geopolitical environment are inevitable.

Among others, the changes in US policies with respect our antagonistic Northern and Western neighbours remain our concerns. The threat of displacement by China as the predominant power, will keep United states obsessed with China. Even before Trump took presidency in 2016, US was already tackling the Chinese Challenge. The concept of "Pivot Asia" or "Rebalance Asia" emerged during President Obama tenure but, real muscle was given to it by President Trump. Many also opine that If President Obama had been more proactive, China would not have gained so much traction. US passive approach, led to increase of Chinese military activism in the South China sea. It reclaimed islands and built military infrastructure on them. In total disregard of the universally applicable rule based international order, it unilaterally declared Air Defence Identification Zone covering East/South China sea and sought control of the sea and air traffic in this zone. It also blatantly disregarded the adjudication by the international tribunal which questioned Chinese sovereignty claim on the South China sea. Since then, China has not lessened its aggressive stance and even has even opened land front with India in the Eastern Ladakh. United states will not slacken its policy with China though the focus from the statement of the incoming new National Security Advisor, Antony Blinken hints shift in focus from military during Trump time to economy and technology. Blinken admits that this relationship will have "adversarial aspects, competitive aspects, but also cooperative ones"; The last choice, "cooperativeness" highlights the difference in approach. There are some common areas between them such as climate change, non-proliferation, global health where both nations can cooperate. The emphasis would be to take on Chinese challenge with grouping of the techno- democracies

essentially a conglomeration of democracies with technical prowess to challenge China on technology front.² Of course the question remains whether it will contain China or it will lead to a reversal to the policy followed during President's Obama presidency, which will be a great mistake for China only acknowledges the strong opponents. How much China was anguished with President Trump is clear from its reaction that on the day of swearing in of the Joe Biden, it imposed sanctions on the entire cabinet of former President Trump. US public (73%) and the US congress (83% republicans and 63% democrats) in general remain opposed to China, the US administration therefore, has to continue opposing China. But, instead of handling China only on the economic front, President Joe Biden will adopt a multilateral approach to contain China in cooperative partnership with the nations of the region. In this endeavour, India will remain an important partner of the United States and because of its size, vantage location, capacity, influence and strength will remain irreplaceable.³ China is also expected to face strong indictment for its human right excesses in Tibet, Hongkong and Xinxiang region.

The future Indo-US relations are expected to remain on the growth trajectory. The interstate relations are dictated by the national interests and strategic compulsions and are not personality dependent, still these may get tempered to some extent by the leadership past experience and their beliefs. In past, both President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have shown sensitivities to the human rights issues on the India's policy on Kashmir and Indian laws on CAA and NRC. India is conscious on its responsibilities and treatment of its minority communities; it may therefore, attempt to correct their perception which is otherwise based on unauthenticated sources and opinions of individuals/groups who are inimical to India's interests. Pakistan in particular is expected to exploit it to the hilt to swing US new administration views on India to create fissures in Indo-US relationship. India needs to be proactive to neutralise this development at the same time, India would need not be unduly concerned and this is not expected to come in the way of growing Indo- Us relationship. Hence, close

²<https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/us-foreign-policy-under-joe-biden-presidency-will-not-be-greatly-different-from-that-of-the-past/article33416309.ece>

³<https://www.forex.com/en/market-analysis/latest-research/will-uschina-relations-continue-to-deteriorate-in-2021/>

Indo- US relations will remain the hall mark of Biden administration and the previous statements/ beliefs of US President and Vice President will not derail our growing relationship since it is based on convergence of national interests and a strategic need for both nations in face of growing Chinese Challenge.

India continues to remain important to the United States and it is likely to remain committed to India's rise firstly, because in IOR, India alone can remain a counter balancing power against China, Secondly, India is huge defence market which despite its effort to develop indigenous defence manufacturing capacity will have to remain import dependent for high technology defence equipment. US has already emerged as a leading exporter of the defence equipment to India and this advantage it cannot ignore. Finally, consumption demand of the India's large population will remain attractive to the United States. Therefore, despite the Presidency change, India will remain important for United States especially as the relationship has turned closer after seven decades of hesitancy and distrust. Both nations have signed several defence foundational agreements and are strategic partners. The trade relations too are on upswing. In 2019-20, US was India's top trading partner with surplus trade of more than \$17 billion in favour of India. We had some irksome trade issues with the previous US regime. This will hope fully will get solved and we may soon conclude a trade agreement with US which has been eluding us during the previous regime. President Joe Biden while being collaborative is expected to continue with America First approach in view of economic down turn forced by the Corona pandemic and job losses in the United States. In the international for a, US will continue support especially for India's aspirational permanent membership in the UN Security Council and membership in the other forums such like Nuclear Supplier Group where despite US consistent support, India could not gain the membership so far due to the Chinese stiff opposition.⁴

The relevance, continuation and further growth of China centric QUAD and Indo- Pacific should remain a focus point for the new administration. QUAD

⁴<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/us-president-elect-joe-biden-to-keep-india-us-relations-chugging-on-track/article33051806.ece>

despite its old vintage of 2007 has been resurrected in ASEAN summit at Manila with US initiative in 2017 as QUAD 2.0 to balance several strategic challenges from China's. The grouping though has been upgraded to the ministerial level in Oct 20 at Tokyo, is still at the consultative level. Unless it is formalised, it may remain toothless. US is a receding power, it needs partners to protect its interests in the Indo-Pacific thus, continued traction is needed to keep it relevant and check China. QUAD provides one such instrument. Though, India led Malabar naval exercise is not claimed to be a military wing of the QUAD, actually provides a good template to take this initiative forward. Since China despite its growing military strength remains vulnerable at sea, both Indo-Pacific and QUAD will retain relevance provided US continues to take lead in both initiatives. US strategic approach has undergone change with respect to China since Obama's first tenure in 2008 and it is pushing back Chinese hegemonistic assertiveness.

The situation will only worsen with President Xi Jinping's aspiration to dominate the world, US thus will have to oppose it in partnership with regional states. On this, co-operation with India finds mention even in the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States. India in the region thus remains irreplaceable for United States.⁵

President Trump was harsh on terrorism and had blocked \$2 billion military aid for Pakistan's failure to check the terror groups like Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network and their safe havens⁶. Pakistan is following the façade of being victim of terrorism itself and of late has initiated legal action on the terrorist activities to shift world focus at being the fountainhead of terrorism. Unlike Trump, Joe Biden may have soft approach towards Pakistan. In the past, Joe Biden along with Senator Richard Lugar favoured \$1.6 billion non military aid to Pakistan and was awarded the highest civilian honour of Hilal-e Pakistan⁷. Under the circumstances, military to military engagement between US and Pakistan cannot be ruled out.

⁵<https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/quad-2-0-is-off-to-a-good-start-it-must-keep-going/>

⁶<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-suspends-2-billion-military-aid-to-pakistan-over-terror-inaction/articleshow/62386728.cms?from=mdr>

⁷<https://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-joe-biden-as-new-us-president-likely-to-make-pakistan-very-happy-know-why-2854831>

President Biden will maintain favorable policies with traditional allies like Europe and Canada. Along with them will like to present a combined front against China but, most European states will remain neutral where China is concerned. President Trump had pressurized NATO members to share the burden of European defence. This likely to continue especially due to economic losses of United States caused by Corona Pandemic. But now most European states believe that that they cannot depend on US for their defence and many of them believe in developing their own defence capabilities.

Unlike President Trump, who preferred allies to build up their defence preparedness to tackle the Chinese military threat, Joe Biden true to his collaborative style, and to reassert US military dominance, is expected to reassure its allies in East Asia like Japan and Philippines and South Korea of military assistance. Taiwan unlike other Eastern allies do not have US forces stationed on its soil, may face increased challenge from China and US may give only traditional military help like weapon sales but, it will not question China's one China policy as before like in President Trump tenure.⁸

US policy on Iran and Russia hits at our relationships with these nations. As far as Iran is concerned US will like revert to the Nuclear Agreement viz Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) 2015 and remove economic sanctions provided Iran rolls back its nuclear programme which it has ramped up after US withdrawal. The onus therefore, now lies on Iran to show its sincere intentions to de-escalate. While Iran is willing to revert to the old deal, the US and other European partners seek to renegotiate the nuclear deal to bring in Iran's ballistic missile programme in its purview.⁹ Arrival of agreement on this issue has vital significance on India- Iran relations which has suffered post US withdrawal from the Nuclear deal. Apart from denial of energy source, Chabahar port where India has invested considerably (\$8billion was committed) and provides means to transact with Afghanistan and central Asia. But, due to US sanctions, development work on the port was affected. In fact, in 2019 India could utilise mere 10% of the

⁸<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-a-biden-presidency-could-change-us-relations-with-the-rest-of-the-world/>

⁹<https://www.dw.com/en/biden-and-iran-back-to-the-old-nuclear-deal-or-negotiate-a-new-one/a-55983851>

capacity of the port.¹⁰ Normalisation of the situation will help India to resurrect and use the port to its capacity.

As regards to Russia, Joe Biden will not be friendly with Russia. Democrats hate Russia primarily for its alleged role in annexation of Crimea in 2014 and US election of 2016 and in Syria. India is a close partner of Russia and is facing prospect of imposition of US sanctions for its purchase of S400 Ballistic Missile Defence System from Russia which considering the US congress bi-partisan opposition to Russia remains real unless President Joe Biden grants waiver.

Conclusion

The US foreign policy is not personality dependent hence, no cataclysmic changes are expected with Joe Biden assuming US Presidency. There are however geopolitical consequences of US growing strategic weakness. It has already ceded some influence to China which by 2035 sees itself as a world dominant military power. Despite weakening and losing its strategic ground to China United States still by all accounts remains a most powerful military power. Recognising Chinese challenge, it is adopting measures to contain China who of late has become more abrasive and assertive much against the world rule based order. India remains a trusted partner in the region to contain the Chinese Challenge and this partnership will only grow with time irrespective of the fact whosoever leads these nations. US National Security strategy 2107 recognises this fact and same once again has been affirmed in a recent media disclosure of the Department of Defence document which specifies India rise with US help. There may however be some irksome issues between US and India which inevitably emanate with change in leadership and would have to be managed.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

¹⁰<https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/100558/chabahar-port-operations-rise-50?>