



## US-INDIA TIES UNDER BIDEN: ROBUST, BUT WITH MORE IRRITANTS

BY VIBHANSHU SHEKHAR

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New Delhi's media bazaar has been rife with speculation over the last fortnight as to whether the presidency of Joe Biden will see continued upward trajectory or a slowdown in India-US bilateral relations. The Indian strategic community and India watchers worldwide have also begun to weigh in with the sure arrival of Biden presidency on January 20, 2021. While many believe the spectacular growth in bilateral ties will continue during the Biden presidency, others believe India-US relations will encounter new bumps in the road.

While no one has a crystal ball, India-US relations during the Biden presidency are likely to encounter three trends: robust and bipartisan progress in bilateral relations, soft depreciation of India's geo-strategic importance in US policy towards Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific, and the introduction of new irritants in the India-US ties. These three trends will converge, paving the way for a complicated partnership between the two largest, and most polarized, democracies in the coming years.

The robust progress in bilateral relations would come from the large-scale expansion in bilateral cooperation agendas over the last five years. Many of these agendas were laid out in the three summit meetings (September 2014, January 2015, and June 2016) between then-US President Obama and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the last two years of the Obama administration. The January 2015 summit saw a Joint Strategic Vision for peace,

stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region. The vision statement [introduced](#), among other things, technology and maritime agendas to bilateral strategic engagement. Then Vice President Biden was a key player in consolidating India-US ties. During the Trump presidency, the India-US partnership for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean was elevated to a comprehensive global strategic partnership. Moreover, these technology- and maritime-related engagements spread to new frontiers, such as 5G and quantum technologies, as well as the quadrilateralizing of the bilateral [Malabar naval exercises](#).

The ever-expanding agendas of bilateral cooperation have led to greater institutionalization of bilateral ties in the designation of India as a [major defense partner](#), the opening of the 2+2 ministerial-level framework, and the consolidation of the Quad (Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue) since 2017. In addition, more than 30 "bilateral dialogues and working groups" and an alphabet soup of the agreements that the two countries have signed [provide](#) a structured outlook to the vast spectrum of India-US cooperation to intensify their defense partnership. These agreements include Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA).

Additionally, Asia's geo-strategic environment has undergone a fundamental change over the last four years, marked by the rise of the new US-China Cold War with strong trade, tech, and maritime components. While the Trump administration gave a definite shape to the Cold War 2.0, the Biden electoral campaign sought to match President Trump's rhetoric on China and economic issues. Biden [called](#) the Chinese President Xi Jinping a "thug" as early as February 2020. Besides, Asian geopolitics has witnessed the increased assertiveness in China's Asia posture and skyrocketing levels of Sino-Indian hostility, due primarily to pandemic-induced Chinese adventurism. Indian and Chinese troops engaged in a deadly clash in June 2020 that led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers and the end of a tenuous trust that had developed over the last 40 years.

Second, the Biden era may see a soft-depreciation of India's geo-strategic importance in the US policy towards Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific. As Biden returns to traditional hierarchies with allies at the top, India will find itself clubbed more frequently in the second-tier category of strategic partners, defense partners, or democratic partners. On the other hand, the transactional, anti-multilateralist, and anti-China Trump administration bypassed the old-established hierarchies and snubbed allies as he sought to redefine the US foreign policy. Similarly, India's geo-strategic standing will see further contraction if the Biden presidency and its foreign policy apparatus concentrate on the Asia-Pacific canvas, where India wields limited geopolitical and economic influence, as opposed to the Indo-Pacific canvas. India is not a member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and it pulled out of the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) negotiations in 2019. While President Trump's Indo-Pacific policy has been termed "[unidimensional](#)," the Modi-Trump equation has been [labeled](#) as "a league of nationalists."

Moreover, although Biden is unlikely to go soft on China, his China policy will be moderated by new initiatives of a grand bargain and multilateral negotiations. Some experts have also [suggested](#) following the route of "competitive coexistence" with China that suggests some sort of G2 type Obama-era grand bargain, a proposition that may not sit well with the Modi government and India in general. The China threat proved a key catalyst in the deepening of India-US relations during the Trump years.

Finally, India-US relations are also likely to see more irritants, mostly relating to economic tensions in bilateral relations, accentuated by India's pandemic-induced economic contraction and the Modi government's policy towards Kashmir and minorities. While the pandemic-related economic challenges may begin to cease by the end of 2021, long-standing bilateral trade-related challenges, such as disagreement over the [Generalized System of Preferences](#) and India's [high tariff wall](#) will continue to put the two sides in an awkward embrace.

If the pro-democracy and pro-human rights Biden administration increases scrutiny over the Modi government's policy towards Kashmir, the latter may

harden its position, which may prove counterproductive. The best example is the [refusal](#) of India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar to meet with the US lawmaker team that included an Indian-American Representative Pramila Jayapal, who had introduced a resolution asking India to lift restrictions in Kashmir. The Biden-Harris campaign team had criticized the Indian government's three initiatives related to the Muslim minorities—Kashmir, Assam, and the Citizenship Amendment Act. It had [declared](#) these policies "inconsistent with the country's long tradition of secularism and with sustaining a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy."

Above all, the board is set, and the Indian establishment is ready for the Biden administration to get ready to make the first move in 2021. By then, there will be greater clarity on the directions of the US foreign policy and India-US relations once the new foreign policy apparatus, including the State Department's South Asia team, takes definitive shape.

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