



TRUMP OR HARRIS: INDIA-US RELATIONSHIP CANNOT AFFORD STRATEGIC DRIFT

BY MONISH TOURANGBAM

Monish Tourangbam (monish53@gmail.com) is Director at the Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies (KIIPS), India.

The following is the first in a series on the challenges facing the next US presidential administration in managing the most crucial Indo-Pacific relationships.

The US is just a few weeks away from electing its 47th president in one of the tightest races to the White House in recent history. Every four years, as the American electorate goes to the polls, to elect who they believe will best serve their interests, countries around the world keenly watch the outcome. While the presidential election in the United States is primarily fought and won on social and economic issues that directly affect the lives of the American people, the foreign policy implications of this election cannot be ignored. Given America's political, economic, and security footprints across the world, foreign policy matters greatly in the US election. Even as the rest of the world calculated the pros and cons of either a Trump sequel or a second term for President Joe Biden, an unprecedented moment disrupted the election campaign, waking the world to a new electoral contest between former president Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris. While there are unknowns about a Harris presidency, a Trump 2.0 is the cause of much anxiety and suspense around the world.

In Delhi, however, there is a sense of relative calm and confidence that the India-US bilateral relationship has bipartisan support in the US and that

the broadly positive arc will continue irrespective of who wins in November. The Delhi-Washington partnership could be described as a geopolitical Goldilocks, with a hitherto unseen strategic congruence to counteract China's comprehensive and assertive rise, reshaping the security and economic landscape across the Indo-Pacific. From trade to technology, and Taiwan to Tibet, China is on collision mode with India, the US, and their like-minded partners. The strategic imperatives have created a conducive environment for India and the US to craft a multi-sectoral relationship traversing both military and non-military affairs. A cursory glance at the joint statements of bilateral leadership meetings or the fact sheets of multilateral summits like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") show engagements across the spectrum, from defense to infrastructure, from new technologies to public health, and from outer space to maritime security.

No time for strategic drift

That both Delhi and Washington put a high premium on this relationship is apparent. The challenge will be in terms of navigating mutual expectations in terms of delivering commitments and converting convergences to cooperation. Whoever comes to power in Washington will have the task of moving this relationship forward while tackling occasional irritants and fixing operational hazards.

Washington maintains and envisions a partnership with Delhi like no country beyond its traditional set of allies. However, the geopolitical imperatives of Delhi and Washington will set them on strategic paths that might create challenges of alignment and limit traction. The second-order effect of respective foreign policy choices need to be handled keeping in mind the larger picture of a "free, open, inclusive and rules based" order in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the growing US-Russia animosity amid the Ukraine war, the strategic imperative of India-Russia ties, and the growing Sino-Russia alliance create a rather complex dynamic of commission and omission in the Delhi-Washington tango.

Besides, the US-China competition is global in scope, while the India-China competition is a regional one, more concentrated in continental South Asia and the maritime Indian Ocean region. Both Washington and Delhi see benefits in engaging and leveraging each other's capabilities and intentions in managing the China challenge. However, both also employ their own playbooks of "de-risking without de-coupling" from China. Therefore, whether India is a good bet for Washington vis-à-vis China and vice-versa will remain a pivot point in India-US engagement.

Delivering the deliverables

Cooperation in the defense sector has perhaps the highest consequence in this relationship. Both sides show earnestness to walk the mile to upgrade defense ties to one of co-development and co-production. This makes linkages between the defense industrial conclaves of the two countries significant, given the growing involvement of the private sector in India's defence modernisation. The budding synergy needs to translate to timely deliveries for induction into India's armed forces and in this effort; initiatives like the India-US Defense Industrial Roadmap and India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) are important milestones.

Two new agreements have been signed, one relating to ensuring resilience of supply chains to meeting national security demands, namely [Security of Supply Arrangement](#) (SOSA) and a memorandum of agreement regarding [Assignment of Liaison Officers](#) to increase interoperability between the two militaries. Moreover, overarching agreements like the [Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology](#) (iCET) show a multi-sectoral and multi-agency partnership cutting across commercial and military technologies that are going to shape the security and economics of the 21st century.

Trade and technology will be increasingly intertwined in times to come and a new [memorandum of understanding](#) aims to strengthen supply chains for lithium, cobalt, and other critical minerals to be used in green energy transition efforts such as electric vehicles. The trade aspect will perhaps see a more marked difference between a

Harris and Trump presidency. If Harris wins, Delhi would have to brace up for trade deals that carry strong climate and environment components. On the other hand, a Trump 2.0 will most probably be more disdainful of multilateralism, and focused on reciprocity of trade and tariffs, irrespective of allies and adversaries. Trump, during his presidency, and more recently, as well, has often called out India as a "very big abuser" of tariffs.

Global aspirations and regional challenges

As India envisions leadership of the Global South and find itself at the center of many pressing global concerns, regional challenges closer to home in its neighbourhood throw up more imminent trials. The mounting civil unrest in Myanmar, the chaotic regime change in Bangladesh, the foreign policy orientations of neighboring Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives plus the uncertain transition in Afghanistan will call for sober discussions between Washington and Delhi. While the geopolitics and geoeconomics of South Asia is broadly framed under the India-China competition, the role of the US is significant because the US is a distant power in terms of geography, but not in terms of strategy. As Washington navigates South Asia post two decades of shaping its regional policy through the Afghanistan lens, how the region features in India-US partnership will be a crucial question for the next American presidency. More particularly, how Washington and Delhi cooperate on infrastructure building and financing in the region and how both sides would coordinate strategies for bolstering maritime security in the Indian Ocean region will be germane.

The India-US relationship, currently called a defining partnership of the 21st century, has seen all kinds of highs and lows in its journey. Two decades ago, it would have been hard to imagine the level at which the two countries currently engage across all sectors and domains. However, relationship between these two complex democracies with their own distinctive worldviews and priorities will go through several ups and downs in the times to come as well. Moreover, the world is going through seismic geopolitical, geo-economic, and technological

transitions. The challenge for Delhi and Washington, in the near future, will be to leverage the political support on both sides and institutional linkages built over the years, to stitch together a partnership that is aspirational yet grounded in realpolitik.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.