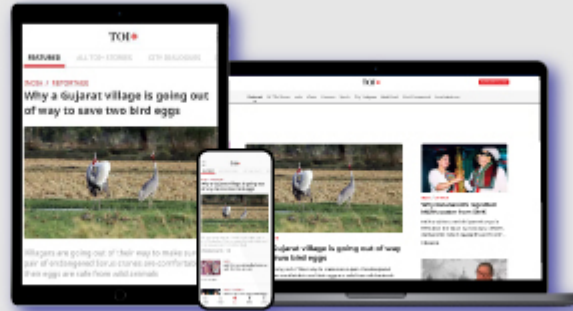


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FROM TOI PRINT EDITION

# The limits of American liberalism: From vaccines to climate change the Trump effect continues to tie Biden's hands

April 26, 2021, 8:44 PM IST / Sreeram Sundar Chaulia in TOI Edit Page, Edit Page, India, World, TOI

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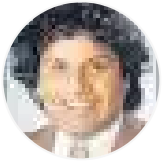
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Although the United States belatedly lifted its

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**Sreeram Sundar  
Chaulia**

Sreeram Sundar Chaulia  
is dean, Jindal School of  
International Affairs.

embargo, which began on February 5, on exporting raw materials for manufacturing Covid-19 vaccines in India, the episode has touched a raw nerve and raised doubts about the liberalism of the Joe Biden administration.

Since President Biden took office in January 2021, Washington has trumpeted that 'America is back' on the world stage and that it will resume being a generous team-player, supporting allies and partners who had been spurned by the presidency of Donald Trump. To be fair, the Biden administration has tried reinvigorating institutions that had been laid low by Trump-era populism. Washington rejoined WHO, re-entered the Paris Climate Accord, lifted sanctions on the International Criminal Court, and made criticism and sanctioning of China and Russia over democracy and human rights signature issues.

Guided by the slogan that America should lead by the power of its example rather than the example of its power, Biden pledged \$1.2 billion to the Green Climate Fund to assist developing countries reduce carbon emissions, and \$4 billion to the COVAX facility for equitable vaccine distribution. The US vow to join hands with the

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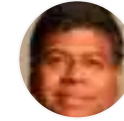
Quad group of nations to boost India's vaccine-making capacities also showed Biden in positive light. While these measures look impressive, a closer examination suggests limitations to the US munificence and ability to shore up the world from crises, partly owing to America's structural flaws and weaknesses.



On fighting the pandemic, the Biden administration may have relented and released vaccine raw materials to India but it has not budged on longer-term core hurdles such as IPR on vaccines invented by American companies so that they can be reproduced by generic manufacturers in developing countries at a low cost and in sufficient volume to save precious lives. India and South Africa have been



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campaigning for a waiver on vaccine patents at WTO on humanitarian grounds, but the Biden administration has not obliged.

The delay in American raw materials to Indian vaccine producers was justified by the Biden administration by saying that American citizens needed vaccines and the US government had to prioritise the lives of its own citizens. But this argument rang hollow because the US already had a massive stockpile of vaccines, enough to inoculate all its citizens manifold.

The official rationale for the hold-up in giving India the vaccine raw materials was 'Americans first', but the underlying reason could well have been 'American big pharma first'. The main American vaccine makers, Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, see it in their best interests to have an assured domestic supply of raw materials, which if shared internationally could benefit Indian competitors like the Serum Institute, Bharat Biotech and Biological E.

When it comes to lobbying and influence peddling, irrespective of whether Washington is in liberal or illiberal hands, the US pharmaceutical

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industry is unbeatable. Biden cannot ignore this special interest group while formulating his domestic and global Covid-19 response strategies. Developing nations which are struggling to lift IPR protections at WTO know this truth well from past bitter battles over patents during the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

As to climate change, it is a step forward for the US to come back into the picture and pledge carbon emission cuts of 50-52% by 2030. But from the angle of climate justice and climate finance, the US under Biden is offering peanuts to enable poorer countries to adapt and mitigate the environmental disaster for which the US bears historical responsibility. Due to the backlog of the Trump effect and fear of domestic political backlash, Biden is not confident to go the whole hog and implement a truly progressive foreign policy.

The same applies to ICC and WTO. Trump's obnoxious sanctions on the apex court mandated to tackle grave crimes against humanity are gone now, but the US continues to be a non-member and vehemently opposes any ICC prosecution of its closest ally Israel. In WTO,



the Biden administration has retained a tough line against developing countries and is not relaxing its demands fuelled by American corporate pressures.

Liberal internationalism is Biden's vehicle to restore American leadership in the world. But as India recently felt the pinch, some things do not change easily because of the power structures within the US. America may be back, but it is falling short.

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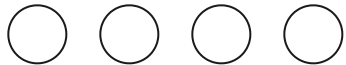
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