

Trump or Biden, India's Stakes Are Higher Than Ever

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April 3, 2024



Scores of countries around the world are set to go to polls this year. The most consequential elections among those, to my mind however, will be the one in November in the US, given the global pre-eminence of the country.

Last month, it became clear that the 2024 US election will be fought between the incumbent president, Joe Biden of the Democratic Party, and Donald Trump, the opposition Republican Party nominee. Robert Kennedy Jr is not being seen as a serious contender, though the worry is that he may eat into Biden's votes. Opinion polls show that Trump has a slight edge, but predicting who will be the President of the United States is an exercise fraught with danger.

An Inflexion Point For The World

These polls, however, come at a major inflexion point globally. There are the Russia-Ukraine and Gaza wars for one, and attendant secondary problems like the shortage of food, fuel and fertilizer, and the Houthi rebels targeting shipping in the Red Sea. The unpredictability of China and its Taiwan posturing add to the uncertainties, as does Beijing's desire to redraw the global architecture. On the economic front, the International Monetary Fund predicts that the growth momentum will remain "tepid" in 2024.

Against these imponderables, the US polls will be most intently watched. India, which itself is preparing for general elections, is also keeping a close eye.

Once, the popular belief had been that Republican presidents are better for India given their focus on national security and little interest in issues like human rights and climate change. This assumption is simplistic, even erroneous. Consider this: Republican President Richard Nixon was unsympathetic to India's situation during the East Pakistan crisis in 1971, given that his priority at the time was to ensure a rapprochement with China, for which the conduit was Pakistan. Another Republican President, Ronald Reagan, transferred F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan, the frontline state in the war to dislodge the Soviets from Afghanistan. It was during Reagan's watch that Mujahideen fighters were trained for the proxy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, which eventually had serious implications for India.

Growing India-US Ties

Post the Cold War, India-US ties underwent a transformation. Today, the momentum is such that the argument that one US president might be better for India than another, is redundant. That India is a natural partner for the US is an opinion endorsed by current US politicians across the political divide. On its part, the US began to view India as a country with security interests paralleling its own, says former US diplomat Teresita C. Schaffer in her 2009 book *India and the United States in the 21st Century: Reinventing Partnership*. "The growing economic and military power of China enhanced US interest in the continent's other rising power. And India's economic growth, now one of the fastest in the world, made India an interesting economic partner in its own right," she writes.

The days when India and the US were described as "estranged democracies" are gone. The two are now "engaged democracies". The US and India, who have overcome "the hesitations of history" - as Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his speech to the US Congress in 2016 - are now in a "Comprehensive Global and Strategic Partnership" that is "anchored in a new level of trust and mutual understanding" (2023 India-US joint statement). Yes, there are differences, but these are now 'managed' mostly behind closed doors. Differences over the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan, India's oil imports from Russia in the middle of the Ukraine conflict, the controversy over alleged Indian involvement in the killing

of Khalistani figure Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, India's record on human rights, and, more recently, the US's remarks on Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest, are a few examples of issues that entered the public domain.

What A Biden Presidency Would Mean

Should we see four more years of Biden, it will mean continuity in policy with a familiar set of interlocutors in Washington. Under Biden, ties have seen a remarkable consolidation in areas like strategic technology and defence. The joint statement issued after PM Modi's US visit in June last year hailed the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), which promotes cooperation in areas like AI, quantum computing, semiconductors and wireless telecommunication. Following the iCET launch, the Idaho-based memory chipmaker Micron Technologies in September 2023 laid the foundation for building its first semiconductor plant in Gujarat. The US has also been silently pushing investment by foreign chipmakers in India. Last month, India greenlighted three projects, including a semiconductor fabrication plant and two assembly units, to be jointly developed by local conglomerates and firms from Japan, Taiwan and Thailand.

In defence, there has been tangible forward movement. In June 2023, India and the US announced a pact between Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and GE Aerospace to produce fighter jet engines for the Indian Air Force. It involves around 75% technology transfer to HAL and is expected to boost the export prospects of India's indigenous Tejas fighter aircraft. This is a leap from the Cold War days when India was a tech pariah with the US. Green technologies are another area where India and the US have looked to forge partnerships.

An important milestone in India-US ties in the Biden years has been the elevation of the Quad grouping, aimed at ensuring "an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific" - that is, countering Chinese influence - to the summit level. The Biden administration has also brought together South Korea and Japan in a trilateral arrangement with itself. The under-development US-Japan-Philippines grouping, and the AUKUS announced in 2021, which brings together Australia, the UK and the US in a security alliance, are other mechanisms to cope with the China challenge.

What To Expect With Trump

Views of India and the US on China are likely to continue being in sync should Donald Trump return as President. This is because a Trump administration, too, is likely to see a benign India as a counterweight to China. It was during the Trump presidency that the Hawaii-based US Pacific Command was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command, a symbolic move

underscoring India's growing importance for the Pentagon. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which allows the two countries' militaries to use each other's bases for repairs and supplies, was another key achievement.

Among the issues India will need to be watchful of under Trump are its ties with Iran, Trump's focus on a trade deal with India, and immigration. In his first term in office, Trump walked away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme. Tight sanctions were imposed on Tehran, which forced countries like India to stop buying oil from there. A deal to build the Chabahar port was left in limbo, with Indian companies fearful of investing in Iran.

Pressure Points

New Delhi would also need to anticipate pressure to reduce tariffs on US exports and to arrive at a trade deal beneficial to the US, given Trump's focus on his "Make America Great Again". Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, who served in the Trump administration, said in his book that the US believed India to be the "most protectionist country" in the world.

Under a Trump administration, it also may be tough for India to seek US cooperation on technology transfers, as well as to source US funds for its green energy initiatives given that Trump is climate-sceptic. On the immigration front, there could be longer wait times for US Green Cards and various visas. Then, there could be uncomfortable offers of 'mediation'. Trump had previously offered to settle India's disputes with Pakistan and China, both of which were politely refused by New Delhi.

While Trump has been variously described as "transactional" and "whimsical", having successfully navigated a Trump presidency in the past, India can be fairly sure of its strategy to handle the mercurial ex-president's possible second term - hopefully without too many hiccups.

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