

# End of the Afghanistan Era in Washington's South Asia Strategy

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## Summary

*The chaos that ensued in Afghanistan after the hasty American withdrawal and the dramatic takeover of power in Kabul by the Taliban brought an era to an end, and with it, Washington's South Asia strategy stood at an inflexion point. As United States (US) President Joe Biden forcefully justified his decision to withdraw American forces and shift to the dependence on 'over the horizon' counter-terrorism capabilities, many across the world questioned the US' credibility and role as a security guarantor. The US' retrenchment from the Afghan theatre also meant a change in its relationship with Pakistan. Increasingly, US policymakers were becoming critical of Pakistan's duplicitous role in the war on terrorism, while Pakistan, on the other hand, accused Washington of not acknowledging its sacrifices. In this midst, the US approach to India was taking a much more strategic and broader direction in the context of shared concerns over China's assertive rise and the pursuit of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Therefore, it becomes imperative to assess Biden's approach to South Asia in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the turn towards the Indo-Pacific as the region of consequence.*

## Introduction

The fundamental shift in Washington's South Asia strategy during the Joe Biden administration has been the withdrawal of the United States (US) forces from Afghanistan. While there is broader continuity in Washington's strategic embrace with New Delhi, the US-Pakistan dynamics and maintaining America's retracted presence in Afghanistan have been more volatile. The international system is undoubtedly going through a point of inflexion. It is neither bipolar nor unipolar, but the characteristics of a truly multipolar system are not crystallised either. Washington certainly sees new strategic challenges from a rising and assertive China across the spectrum. To confront the same, it intends to cement old alliances and build new partnerships like the one with India. Therefore, the US under the Biden presidency views India in the broader scheme of strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Pakistan and Afghanistan remain more circumscribed in Washington's security and defence calculations. The release of the Biden presidency's National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS), besides revealing the US' strategic focus on the contest with China, also reflects that the broader Indo-Pacific region now subsumes South Asia, post the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Washington's approach to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan must be viewed in the context of this rapidly shifting geopolitics.

This paper will attempt to unpack what the Biden administration's outlook for national security and defence implies for South Asia, particularly India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan,

which remain the three pivot points for America's strategy in South Asia. However, first, the broader changes and continuities in Biden's foreign policy direction must be assessed.

## **Biden's Security and Foreign Policy: Rebooting for the Brave New World**

Biden's NSS and the NDS reflect the uncertain geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances in which America's national power needs to be deployed in the face of China's growing capabilities and aspirations. The NSS contends that "the post-Cold War era is definitively over, and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next."<sup>1</sup> The US is shifting its strategic priority from battling violent extremist organisations to a new long-term great power competition with China and more current aggression from Russia in the Atlantic theatre amid the aftermath of its withdrawal from Afghanistan. The policy pronouncement of the rebalancing strategy during the Barack Obama administration heralded such a shift from costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Donald Trump administration gave an acute dimension to it with the official recognition of the Indo-Pacific region. Biden's decision to decisively end America's "forever war" in Afghanistan, despite mounting criticism at home and abroad, mirrors a rebooting of US security and foreign policy for the new era of strategic competition. To end costly and poorly strategised foreign wars and focus on nation-building at home has been an enduring call in US national security and foreign policy, following interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, plus the financial crisis of 2008.

The Biden presidency commenced office at the White House, with the promise to bring American leadership from the tumultuous years of the Trump era and aligning US engagement abroad to the benefit of American people back home. The decision to pull back from Afghanistan was clearly in line with doing externally, what was required for doing more at home, even though how the American withdrawal took place and the Taliban took over Kabul made voices across the world echo US retrenchment, and question its role as a security guarantor in other geopolitical regions. The NSS says, "in an interconnected world, there is no bright line between foreign and domestic policy."<sup>2</sup>

As the Biden team set out to craft a foreign policy for the American people, it meant doing around the world what was required to make America stronger at home and doing at home what was needed to make America stronger in the world.<sup>3</sup> However, such a perfect alignment is easier said than done since the US's first president, George Washington, warned of foreign entanglements in the earliest days. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was playing out when the Biden presidency was promising the return of "American leadership and engagement". US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken, in laying out the essence of Biden's "foreign policy for the American people", contended that the US pulling back from the global landscape either meant "another country tries to take our place, but not in a way that advances our interests and values; or, maybe just as bad, no one steps up,

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<sup>1</sup> "The National Security Strategy", The White House, October 2022, 6, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Antony J Blinken, "A Foreign Policy for the American People", US Department of State, 3 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

and then we get chaos and all the dangers it creates. Either way, that's not good for America."<sup>4</sup>

The deployment of US power is indeed passing through a phase when it can no longer ignore the tectonic forces of a changing balance of power, not only in terms of its competition with its nearest peer but in its capability to affect regional outcomes in its favour.<sup>5</sup> As the Biden administration doubles down on America's democracy being pitted against China's autocracy, there is a clearer appraisal of the character of the military and non-military assets that the US needs to marshal unilaterally, and in cooperation with allies and partners. The NDS says:

"Now and over the next two decades, we face strategic challenges stemming from complex interactions between a rapidly changing global balance of military capabilities; emerging technologies; competitor doctrines that pose new threats to the US homeland and to strategic stability; an escalation of competitors' coercive and malign activities in the "gray zone"; and transboundary challenges that impose new demands on the Joint Force and the defense enterprise."<sup>6</sup>

## **End of the Afghanistan Era in Washington's South Asia Strategy**

When the US intervened in Afghanistan, along with its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) partners, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, NATO, for the first time, invoked Article 5, which was at the heart of the alliance's commitment to defend any of its member states. It is indeed ironic that NATO, which was established in the first place to defend American allies against Soviet aggression in Europe, invoked its cardinal purpose in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda and Taliban roughly after half a century.<sup>7</sup> The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021, and the complete chaos that ensued in the Kabul airport, turned many against Biden's foreign policy choice.<sup>8</sup> Watching the Taliban takeover, on television screens and social media, many around the world, particularly Afghans, furiously expressed their anguish at being left in the lurch. However, Biden stood firm, justifying his decision as being hard and controversial, but the right one to make. Biden reiterated his intention to not bequeath a 20-year-old war to another presidency and concentrate more on the clear and present dangers to America's national security. "I'm now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Monish Tourangbam, "The Future of American Power in Uncertain Times", *The Diplomat*, 25 October 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-future-of-american-power-in-uncertain-times/>.

<sup>6</sup> US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, 2022, 4*, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>7</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO and Afghanistan, 31 August 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_8189.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Susannah George, Adam Taylor, Dan Lamothe and Jennifer Hassan, "Scenes of Deadly Chaos Unfold at Kabul Airport after Taliban's Return", *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/16/afghan-kabul-airport/>

Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth”, Biden said.<sup>9</sup> Biden pronounced in his speech, confirming the withdrawal, “to those asking for a third decade of war in Afghanistan, I ask: What is the vital national interest? In my view, we only have one: to make sure Afghanistan can never be used again to launch an attack on our homeland.”<sup>10</sup> When the Biden presidency took over, a withdrawal was imminent, but how it played out led to an unbridgeable security gap that the Afghan security forces were never equipped to deal with. Even if Biden contended that the US was never meant to do nation-building in Afghanistan, that is exactly what it had been doing there in the last two decades following the Bonn negotiations after the ousting of the Taliban regime.

The primary question post the Taliban takeover in 2021 has been about the continuity and change in the resources that could be and should be deployed to safeguard America’s interest, which remains to prevent any future attacks on the American homeland.<sup>11</sup> The end of the military campaign in Afghanistan is also seen as the culmination of a long-drawn debate on redirecting the resources and strategy of the US military forces towards greater and more imminent threats, and not on nation-building efforts. The NSS emphasised, “We ended America’s longest war in Afghanistan, and with it an era of major military operations to remake other societies, even as we have maintained the capacity to address terrorist threats to the American people as they emerge.”<sup>12</sup>

Since the Taliban took over the levers of power in Kabul, the terms of engagement with Washington have shifted dramatically. This did not come as a surprise as the Trump administration had already negotiated a peace deal with the Taliban in Doha, sans the Afghan government. Therefore, the Taliban entering power arrangement in Afghanistan in some form or the other was a foregone conclusion. The Biden administration has been propagating an approach towards peace and security in Afghanistan that is not US-led, but one with great involvement from the regional powers. The NSS highlighted Washington’s intention to “increase cooperation and support to trusted partners” and shift from a “US-led, partner-enabled” strategy to one that is “partner-led, US-enabled”.<sup>13</sup>

The national security approach of the Biden administration reflects one that aspires to be cognisant of the evolving full spectrum of terrorism threats in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reorient capability and strategy effectively. Washington believes that its true objective in Afghanistan had been fulfilled almost a decade ago with the killing of Osama Bin Laden and other key leaders of Al-Qaeda, and the recent assassination of Ayman al-Zawahiri reaffirmed

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<sup>9</sup> Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, The White House, 16 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>

<sup>10</sup> Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, The White House, 31 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Bateman, “A Year After the Taliban Takeover: What’s Next for the U.S. in Afghanistan?”, United States Institute of Peace, 11 August 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/year-after-taliban-takeover-whats-next-us-afghanistan>.

<sup>12</sup> “The National Security Strategy”, The White House, October 2022, 20, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 30.

America's "ability to maintain the fight against al-Qa'ida, ISIS, and associated forces from over the horizon."<sup>14</sup>

While focussing attention on evacuation exercises and other humanitarian efforts, the US, in concert with other like-minded partners, has been geared towards using all forms of leverage to make the Taliban uphold "its counterterrorism commitments; demonstrating respect for human rights, particularly those of women and girls; and establishing an inclusive and representative political system."<sup>15</sup> As the US reassesses the level of its involvement and engagement in a Taliban-run Afghanistan, the emerging dynamics of its relationship with Pakistan will be highly consequential. Even as Biden promised to "defend and protect America-not against threats of 2001 but against the threats of 2021 and tomorrow", justifying his decision to pull back troops from Afghanistan, the question remains whether Afghanistan will prove to be a threat of yesteryear or a threat that will still need American policy attention despite the growing shift to a great power competition with China.<sup>16</sup>

### **Pakistan in the US' Strategy: Transactional and Circumscribed**

Despite Pakistan's central role in America's Afghanistan strategy since 2001, either Washington has accused Islamabad of not committing to fighting terrorism wholeheartedly, or Islamabad has called out Washington's failure to recognise Pakistan's sacrifices. Whether it was fighting a proxy war in Afghanistan, post the Soviet intervention in 1979, or joining America's war on terrorism following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan's role has been intriguing. Pakistan, which had gone off the radar of Washington's theatre of priority after the end of the Cold War, entered as the pivot of America's global war on terror, in Afghanistan, by dint of its close links with the Taliban. As early as 13 September 2001, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, spoke to Pakistani leader General Pervez Musharraf, providing him with a list of what had been called non-negotiable demands that included "condemning the 9-11 denying Al-Qaeda safe havens in Pakistan, sharing intelligence", granting "overflight rights" to the United States", and "breaking diplomatic relations with the Taliban".<sup>17</sup>

Obama made it clear that his administration saw the road to peace in Afghanistan passing through Pakistan. Pakistan was seen to be a part of the problem in Afghanistan and the solution. Obama called Afghanistan and Pakistan the "central front" in America's "enduring struggle against terrorism and extremism".<sup>18</sup> From an optimistic assessment in the earlier days of the global war on terror to a more frustrated and pessimistic view in the later years, Pakistan has been viewed as an ally, which is inevitable, but not necessarily desired, in the protection and promotion of American interest. The Trump administration also concluded that the US faced immense security threats from the terrorist organisations active in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Bateman, "A Year After the Taliban Takeover: What's Next for the U.S. in Afghanistan?", United States Institute of Peace, 11 August 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/year-after-taliban-takeover-whats-next-us-afghanistan>

<sup>16</sup> "Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan", The White House, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (U.K.: Virgin Books, 2010), 188.

<sup>18</sup> "Afghanistan, Pak Central Front in War against Terrorism: Obama", *The Economic Times*, 23 January 2009, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/afghanistan-pak-central-front-in-war-against-terrorism-obama/articleshow/4020174.cms>.

Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Trump's strategy intended to change America's approach to Pakistan, making the latter realise that Washington would not ignore Pakistan providing safe havens to terrorist groups that were detrimental to peace and security in the region.<sup>20</sup>

The see-sawing of geopolitics from the Cold War to present times has led to either the upgrading or downgrading of Pakistan's role in US strategy towards South Asia. American retrenchment from Afghanistan has yet again brought a phase of the US-Pakistan relationship devoid of any grand strategic purpose; hence, vulnerable to a downturn and the US lawmakers losing interest in Pakistan. When geopolitics is in favour, any shortcoming in the relationship tends to be overlooked, and the larger purpose of the partnership seems to override all other cases.

In the absence of an imminent concern for America's interest, and with the spectre of rising China engulfing American strategic thinking and implementation, the glaring gaps in the relationship are more prominent. The domestic churning in Pakistan, leading to the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan, who also accused Washington for the outcome of his fate, has almost brought the US-Pakistan relationship to a standstill. Even as the new administration in Pakistan and the Biden team attempt to create some traction to bring a new sense of purpose to the relationship, Biden publicly called Pakistan "one of the most dangerous nations in the world" possessing "nuclear weapons without any cohesion" has sparked another round of verbal volleys. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari retorting, "I believe this is exactly the sort of misunderstanding that is created when there is a lack of engagement."<sup>21</sup>

Pakistan's strategic value in Washington is intertwined to a large extent with the developments in Afghanistan. The extent of American involvement post-withdrawal and the nature of its relationship with the Taliban regime will largely determine the terms of engagement between the US and Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> Biden's national security outlook and national defence strategy clearly envision a future of competition, contestation, and cooperation with China, most particularly in the mega geopolitical region of Indo-Pacific, which has subsumed other sub-regional theatres, including South Asia. As a result, Washington's engagement with Islamabad is circumscribed, less strategic and more tactical, although still relevant. It seems merely focussed on a transactional negotiation of what Pakistan can offer

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, US Embassy & Consulates in India, 21 August 2017, <https://in.usembassy.gov/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Antony Blinken's Call to Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari Hints at US-Pak Ties Reset", *Hindustan Times*, 8 May 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/blinkens-call-to-bilawal-hints-to-possible-reset-in-us-pak-ties-101651928835678.html>; "Dismiss US Ambassador over Biden Remark, says Pak's Islamist Party", *ANI*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/dismiss-us-ambassador-over-biden-remark-says-paks-islamist-party20221017201300/>; and Sayantani Biswas, "Pakistan to Summon US Ambassador Donald Blome over Biden's 'Most Dangerous Nation Remark'", *Mint*, 15 October 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/pakistan-to-summon-us-ambassador-donald-blome-over-biden-s-most-dangerous-nation-remark-11665835534525.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Washington's Divergent Diplomacy in South Asia", *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/07/india-pakistan-wendy-sherman-visit-diplomacy-south-asia/>



in America's counter-terrorism efforts and the quid pro quo towards Pakistan's need for military and civilian assistance.<sup>23</sup>

## The Big Picture in US-India Partnership

On the contrary, Washington's approach to Delhi is clearly strategic, reflecting a broader frame of reference: Indo-Pacific security and stability. Geopolitics resulting from China's assertive rise favours a closer embrace between the US and India. The strategic convergence has withstood the change of administrations at both ends and any conflict of interest emerging out of divergent threat perceptions. Although India's close defence partnership with Russia and relations with countries like Iran that remain at the top tier of America's adversaries have often come in the growing US-India bonhomie, policymakers on both sides have managed to leverage the broader strategic purpose and positive arc to tide over such differences. For instance, more recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and India's response to the same sparked some concerns. However, high-level meetings between the Indian and American leaders, the Quad summit and the '2+2' dialogue between the foreign and defence ministries of the two countries testify to the strong structural convergence in joint management of the Indo-Pacific.

At the heart of the US-India partnership has been the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and the uncertainties inherent because of China's comprehensive rise and power projection. India had started featuring in the US grand strategy of counteracting China's rise and given India's challenge of dealing with a proximate power like China, it serves India's strategic imperative as well.<sup>24</sup> The rise in India's material capabilities and its more overt aspirations to become a power of global consequence, made the US reorient its strategy to accommodate India's own concerns and align expectations. In the last two decades and more, both Washington and New Delhi have invested time and energy to impart more clarity into the strategic partnership, which will become even more important in the coming times, when the global order is at a point of unmistakable geopolitical, geo-economic and technological transition. As the NSS contends:

“...the post-Cold War era is definitively over, and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next. No nation is better positioned to succeed in this competition than the United States, as long as we work in common cause with those who share our vision of a world that is free, open, secure, and prosperous.”<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the NDS clearly mentions that “the scope and scale of threats to the homeland have fundamentally changed” and that the “PRC and Russia now pose more dangerous challenges to safety and security at home, even as terrorist threats persist.”<sup>26</sup> In such a changed strategic outlook, South Asia and, more particularly, the US strategy towards its

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<sup>23</sup> Monish Tourangbam, “The Hype and Reality Of Pakistan Factor In India-US Relationship”, *IndiaTimes.com*, 25 September 2022, <https://www.indiatimes.com/explainers/news/the-hype-and-reality-of-pakistan-factor-in-india-us-relationship-580475.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest”, *Foreign Affairs*, 79, no. 1 (2000): 45-62.

<sup>25</sup> “The National Security Strategy”, The White House, 6, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 5, op. cit.

three important vectors -India, Afghanistan and Pakistan will be seen through the Indo-Pacific lens, and, hence, India stands out clearly as a partner of choice in the broader scheme of things. Over the years, this relationship has come to enjoy enviable bipartisan support in the US and has equally witnessed enthusiasm from the two major political parties in India. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised during his speech to the joint session of the US Congress in 2016, “Today, our relationship has overcome the hesitations of history. Comfort, candour and convergence define our conversations. Through the cycle of elections and transitions of administrations, the intensity of our engagements has only grown.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the relationship has grown beyond recognition and is truly multifaceted, cutting across the military and non-military dimensions.

The burgeoning defence partnership between the two countries through the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative has been the mainstay of the relationship. The growing sophistication plus regularity in defence purchases, the growing linkages between the defence industrial conclave, and prospects for co-production and co-development reflects an undeniable dimension of cooperation. The partnership between the American defence industries and India’s defence industrial ecosystem is instrumental to India’s goal of self-reliance.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the military-to-military exercises between all the armed forces increase the level of interoperability. The foundational agreements, signed after long negotiations, have put the two countries on a higher level of coordination. Rear Admiral Micheal L Baker, US Defence Attaché in India, commented:

“India has the ability to choose its partners. It has made a conscious decision to diversify over the last decade. It has made a conscious decision to continue to diversify going forward. And it has made a conscious decision to partner with the US on a host of areas. My focus is on how to take that forward.”<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the bilateral, the US and India are equally motivated to engage in multilateral platforms, most prominently the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit that brings together these two countries with Japan and Australia for a coordinated and increasingly multifaceted agenda to shape the rules of the road in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad, at its core, shows a shared interest among the four democracies to manage the strategic ramifications of China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific. However, it has developed a more multifaceted outlook, covering diverse aspects of non-military issues that are of common concern and will need a coordinated strategy.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister’s Office, Text of the Prime Minister’s address to the Joint Session of U.S. Congress, 8 June 2016, <https://archive.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=146076>

<sup>28</sup> “India-US Defence Engagement: From Buyer-Seller to Co-Production and Co-Development”, Event Reports, Observer Research Foundation, 2 September 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-us-defence-engagement/>.

<sup>29</sup> Dinakar Peri, “We Want to be the Partner of Choice for India: U.S. Defence Official”, *The Hindu*, 2 November 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/we-want-to-be-the-partner-of-choice-for-india-us-defence-official/article66087413.ece?homepage=true>.

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Quad Joint Leaders’ Statement, 24 May 2022, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35357/Quad\\_Joint\\_Leaders\\_Statement](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35357/Quad_Joint_Leaders_Statement).



## Conclusion

Despite Biden entering the White House on a campaign call to bring “America back”, following four years of the Trump presidency, the US faces a world with new powers at a time when its resources to shape global outcomes stand depleted. The policy shift towards the Asia-Pacific and now the Indo-Pacific is a response to China’s comprehensive rise and the uncertainties it brings to America’s primacy and influence in the international system. While Washington had been propagating an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Biden presidency finally brought an end the longest war in US military history in 2021. Even as the US raises questions about the Taliban’s failure to adhere to human rights and counter-terrorism commitments, Afghanistan is no longer on the priority radar screen of US policymaking and strategy. This means a definite reduction in the geostrategic value of Pakistan for US strategy and a larger room for criticism of Pakistan’s democratic deficit.

Moreover, it also means a stronger shift of focus to the partnership with India in the context of the evolving geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The US has called India “a major defence partner” and recognises India’s pivotal role as an Indian Ocean power in the shape of things to come in the Indo-Pacific. Despite that, Washington has had to learn, relearn and unlearn new terms of engagement in dealing with New Delhi, with its worldview and unique sense of partnerships in the international system. The NSS and the NDS of the Biden administration have, in categorical terms, doubled down on the Indo-Pacific era that will demand more strategic attention from Washington since World War II.

At a time when the prevailing security and financial order spearheaded by the US is under scrutiny more than ever before, and with China’s growing ability to influence outcomes in regions beyond its own, the withdrawal from Afghanistan portends a new era in the US’ South Asia strategy. This new era, in which Washington addresses the three major vectors of its South Asian strategy – India, Afghanistan and Pakistan – will be determined by the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy and how these countries feature in that larger picture.

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