

India and the Biden-Trump Rematch

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Summary

As the United States (US) prepares for a Joe Biden-Donald Trump ‘rematch’ for the White House at the end of 2024, India, arguably, is among the least apprehensive about the outcome of the elections. Unlike the US’ allies in Europe and Asia, who are deeply anxious about the return of Trump to the White House, New Delhi is confident about the familiar bipartisan continuity in the US’ engagement with India. Yet, New Delhi should pay close attention to the potential volatility in the US’ engagement with the world under Trump and its consequences for India.

Among the world’s major powers, India perhaps is the least worried about the presidential rematch in the United States (US) between incumbent Joe Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump. With Biden and Trump having won sufficient delegates to win the presidential nomination of their respective parties, the world’s chancelleries and corporations are focused on the global political and economic impact of the rematch. The turbulence triggered by Trump during his presidency (2017-21) on security and trade issues provides a valid foundation for these concerns.

[In Asia](#), the US’ allies recall Trump’s threat to withdraw troops from Asia if Japan and South Korea do not pay more for US protection. The US’ [European allies](#) worry that Trump might make good on his oft-repeated threat to withdraw from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the sheet anchor of European security since the Second World War. If anyone had doubts, Trump dispelled them recently when he insisted that his administration [would not defend](#) those allies who do not contribute their fair share for collective defence against the Russian threat.

Beyond his longstanding concerns about the inequitable security burden-sharing between the US and its allies, Trump has also been vociferous in his lack of reciprocity on market access between the US on the one hand and its European and Asian partners on the other. Trump has not only been critical of China’s trade policies that exploit the US but also those of Washington’s allies. He imposed significant tariffs on imports from both its allies and China. Trump has also actively sought to undermine the framework of economic globalisation that his predecessors had constructed with much commitment since the end of the Cold War.

If the US’ allies in Asia and Europe had endured much political uncertainty during the Trump years and are naturally anxious about his return, India’s lack of concern is rooted in the fact that New Delhi had benefited from productive relationships with the administrations of both Trump and Biden. The bipartisan commitment – between the Democrats and Republicans – for a solid partnership with India has endured and expanded since President Bill Clinton’s visit to India in March 2000. The expansive scope and the profound intensity of India’s relations

with the US today stand in contrast to mutual indifference in the Cold War years and serious tensions in the 1990s over the issues of nuclear non-proliferation and the Kashmir question.

In the 21st century, the US has emerged as India's most valuable strategic partner, growing engagement in trade, technology, investments, regional security and global governance. Undergirding the new India-US dynamic is the unprecedented political comfort between India's current leadership and the US establishment. The Indian officialdom has built a working relationship with the policymakers from both the Republican and Democratic establishments.

Yet, Delhi would be unwise to take the relationship for granted and underestimate the importance of the impending presidential election in the US that could accelerate the rearrangement of the global economic and political order. The last eight years under Trump and Biden have already heralded an unprecedented change in the US' engagement with the world. If Trump reversed the four-decade-old US policy of befriending China, Biden has persisted with his predecessor's determination to confront Beijing's expansionism in Asia and the quest to rewrite global rules. This shared understanding of China between Trump and Biden has boosted the India-US partnership amidst Beijing's aggressive policies towards Delhi.

India, however, has yet to come to terms with [the US' policy of global trade](#) that has changed under the Trump and Biden leadership. The two leaders agree that the mantra of globalisation, which the US has preached for decades, has yet to work for the American working people. They also insist that global trade rules, defined by the World Trade Organization, must be rewritten. India's trade policy has struggled to deal with this new political reality. While the Biden administration had not made trade policy a matter of confrontation with India, Trump will adopt a [more aggressive tone](#). Trump promises to [impose a 10-per cent tariff](#) on all imports into the US, demand greater access to the partners' markets and refuse to subordinate commercial interests to geopolitical considerations. The time is now for Delhi to develop a domestic reform agenda to effectively deal with the inevitable changes in the global economic order driven by Washington.

Biden and Trump, however, have significant differences in the nature of US alliances in Europe and Asia; the latter will demand that the allies pick up a more significant share of the security burden. Their views on multilateralism are radically different. Trump is bound to walk out of the climate commitments made by the US in the past and demand greater accountability from the United Nations and its various agencies. Whoever wins this election, the US' role and leadership in the global order is about to change significantly. As a rising power, India needs to think creatively about this change, find ways to address its consequences and seize the possibility of elevating its own position in the global hierarchy.

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