

South Asia's Future: The Biden Way

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With Joe Biden currently leading all the major polls with around 50 percent of Americans showing intent to back the Democrat candidate, the race for White House is shifting more and more away from Trump. Some of the statements during the ongoing campaign, however, have raised some eyebrows in South Asia. Biden pledges to bring the remaining US combat forces back home and is against the idea of nation-building in Afghanistan, he has expressed disappointment over the Citizen Amendment Act and the implementation of the National Register of Citizens in state of Assam by the Indian government, he wants a way out of the Iran crisis through diplomacy, and he wants Pakistan to provide air bases for operations in Afghanistan.

This seems not just a stark contrast to the current administration's discourse of the relations with South Asian nations, but also provides a ground for understanding how the coming 4 years for the US-South Asia relations might look like.



Foreign policy and International Relations is not unfamiliar territory for the former Vice President of the United States Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. or Joe Biden. As a two-term vice president under Barack Obama, and as a US senator from Delaware from 1973 to 2009, he has extensive foreign policy background and has served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for three decades¹. When Obama had selected Biden as Vice presidential candidate, the headlines in India read “Obama picks India friend Biden as running mate”², a reminiscence of the fact that during his presence in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden stood with the fact that a nation of India’s size, importance and stature cannot be isolated forever and that the US will have to keep in mind its own long-term strategic interests while going ahead with steps like sanctions. As Vice-President, Biden was a leading figure in Obama administration’s policy on Afghanistan. In 2015, he was given the Hilal-e-Pakistan, Pakistan’s top civilian award for his contributions to democracy and socio-economic development in Pakistan³. However, since 2016, a lot has changed under the Trump era. Pakistan has moved closer to China, India government has found resonance with Trump’s administration in several dimensions, Iran’s relations with the US have worsened and resulted into US’ exit from the Iran nuclear deal, and South Asia as a region has become more and more complex with issues rising up between nations on a scale which was non-existent till the time Biden was in office back in 2015.

During his ongoing election campaign, Biden has not only vowed to do away with numerous Trump policies and actions but has also pledged to take the US back on its role of becoming the leader in global affairs. This might not be as simple as rolling back the actions and policies, as the realities in the world, especially in South Asia, stand at a very unfamiliar pedestal today.

The Indian Dilemma

According to Dr. Krishnaswamy, Biden is generally seen as a friend of India and one of the Democrat lawmakers who stood by the Bush administration at the time of the US-India civil nuclear deal. However very recently, in a policy paper posted on the campaign website, Biden has asked India to take steps to restore the rights of the people of Kashmir and has expressed disappointment over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which gives eligibility for Indian citizenship to illegal migrants who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who entered India on or before 31 December 2014,

and the implementation of National Register of Citizens in Assam, which would be a register of all Indian citizens and is purposed to document all the legal citizens of India in order to identify and deport the illegal migrants. Biden emphasizes that these are inconsistent with India's tradition of secularism and in sustaining for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy⁴. This has largely been dubbed by the media outlets across the globe as an effort to appease the Muslim American community which already has been distanced by Trump's policies. However, this stance came with a risk of alienating an impressively large and influential Indian American diaspora, which is 3.5 million strong and a majority of which are Hindus. To calm down the uproar and shift the focus of him being a 'Not so friendly figure for India', Biden declared a few days later that he will lift the temporary suspension on H1-B visas, the most sought after by the Indian IT professionals, if he wins the presidential elections.⁵ This has till now sent mixed signals to India, where the government, especially the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a part of bonhomie with his US counterpart Donald Trump, as seen during the grand scale events like 'Howdy, Modi!' and 'Namaste Trump', where the two visit each other's nation and held huge rallies.

The Pakistan Puzzle

In 2011, during a visit to Pakistan, Biden had dismissed the notions that the US wanted to dismantle or weaken Pakistan and that it favours India. He had emphasized that US would not abandon the country, as many Pakistanis feel it did in the past while at the same time underscoring the threat of extremism and rebuffing the criticism that the US was violating Pakistani sovereignty.⁶ However, by 2012, the relations between the US and Pakistan had turned icy and the hatred for the US grew in Pakistan. In comparison, US relations with Pakistan have seen its ups and downs during the Trump era, being largely positive in the present times. Even though Trump administration in its early days tried to toughen up and apply pressure on Pakistan to act on terrorist groups on its soil threatening US assets in Afghanistan, revoked the country's status as a major non-NATO ally, expressed through tweets his displeasure by saying, "They have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools... No more!"⁷, suspended Pakistani security assistance in early 2018, placed restrictions on the movement of Pakistani diplomats posted in the US, ended the military and education training program, nothing substantial happened and the present relations can be exemplified by Trump's remarks early in 2020 during his first trip to India when he said that

the US has a very good relationship with Pakistan and that the US is beginning to see signs of big progress with Pakistan.⁸

On the other hand, Biden, during his role as Vice-president where he played a leading role on policies on Afghanistan and Iraq, not only gained considerable exposure to Pakistan but also shape the landmark Kerry-Lugar Bill signed into law in 2009, which provided \$7.7 billion of non-military aid to Pakistan between 2010 to 2014.⁹ At present, Pakistan has moved much closer to China who is investing extensively in its own mega infrastructure projects like the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC) as part of its Belt-and-Road-Initiative. Here too, Biden stands at an advantage as he not only is familiar with the Chinese premier Xi Jinping and China much more than Trump due to his time in the position as Vice-president when Xi too was his own country's second-in-command but also because of the fact that as recently as 2016, Biden was promoting his "friendship" with the Chinese leader and in May 2019, even remarked that the world's second-largest economy is "Not a competition for us" and it leaders "not bad folks".¹⁰ However, as there exists a largely accepted view that China has become a threat to America in terms of economics as well as security, more so after the ongoing phenomenon of the COVID-19 which originated from Wuhan in China and has wreaked havoc in the US, Biden will find it extremely difficult to gain back the kind of influence he expected till last year in Pakistan or China, without seeing a heavy backlash from his own voters. Thus, even though Biden has at several occasions has criticised Trump's way of handling China through trade wars, it will become hard to take radical decisions opposite to the prevailing discontent in the US against China, and thus, gaining influence in Pakistan will be a tricky puzzle to solve.

Iran: The Hornets' Nest

Even though Iran might be considered more of West Asian than South Asian, there is no doubt that the developments in Iran and its relations with the US have huge reverberations in South Asia. Biden has called Trump's approach to Iran a 'Self-inflicted disaster', arguing that his withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal has failed to keep Tehran from advancing its nuclear program.¹¹ For this, Biden pledges to re-join the agreement if Iran returns to compliance. This will not just calm the nerves of traditional allies in Europe who have expressed their reluctance and displeasure to follow Trump's unilateral decision to walk out of the deal and impose heavy sanctions on Iran. But Biden's pledge to engage with Iran will also

give a much desired way forward for India, who banks on good relations with Iran to not only overcome its inaccessibility to Central Asia through the port in Chabahar where India has invested heavily in infrastructure in recent years, but also for its energy security as the country is one of the biggest energy consumers in present times and Iran was one of the biggest suppliers for India till the government was forced to cut imports after heavy sanctions on Iran were inflicted by the Trump administration. Like Pakistan, on one hand, Iran too has moved closer to China, and on the other hand, Russia has entered the Middle East region to fill the vacuum by presenting itself as the new power broker and has already showcased its clout through saving the Syrian Assad's regime from falling. This highlights the phenomenon that the more isolationist of a US Trump has tried to create by taking stringent unilateral decisions, more it has hurt the diplomatic relations with not only countries like Iran and Pakistan, but also with traditional allies in Europe.

Conclusion

The dynamics today are set up in a way that an incoming Biden as the President of the United States will not be able to simply bank upon his historical relations and achievements with the South Asian nations. He will have to figure a way to solve a conundrum where China, the arch-competitor as well as the biggest threat as perceived by US scholars and politicians, is taking away South Asia more and more away from the influence of US. Today, where the bilateral relations even between nations like India and Nepal are going through turbulent times, South Asia has become a hotbed of diplomatic issues, where a vacuum has gradually been forming demanding mediation which Biden should aim to fill if he wants to ensure the 'Best Days lying ahead', his slogan for the election campaign.

Endnotes

- ¹ CFR. (2020). *Joe Biden*. Retrieved from Council on Foreign Relations: <https://www.cfr.org/election2020/candidate-tracker/joe-biden>
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- ⁶ Masood, S., & Gall, C. (2011, January 12). *Biden Meets With Pakistani Leaders, Stressing Long-Term Ties and Extremist Threat*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/world/asia/13pakistan.html>
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- ⁹ Ibid.,3.
- ¹⁰ Martin, P., & Kate, D. T. (2020, April 23). *Biden Championed Close China Ties and Then Xi Came Along*. Retrieved from Bloomberg: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-23/a-biden-presidency-wouldn-t-mean-better-u-s-china-relations>
- ¹¹ Ibid.,1.