

Prioritizing India in Biden’s “America Is Back” Foreign Policy

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The time has now arrived to recalibrate India’s rise as a geopolitical and strategic power for the liberal international order. How can India’s policy choices fit in President Joe Biden’s “America Is Back” foreign policy?

Speech Matters

President Biden gave his first foreign policy speech at the Munich Security Conference on 19 February 2021.¹ The phrase “America is back” resonated with and was celebrated among US allies and partners. Biden pointed to the urgent need for multilateral actions to tackle the pandemic, global economic issues, and climate crisis. India could best align its approach to Biden’s America Is Back policy in three ways: shared values, shared interests, and managing China.

Shared Values

India and the United States have common ideals and share strong democratic values as enshrined in their constitutions. Both countries have progressive open societies. India has always shown a deep commitment to democratic values in the region: for example, in the reinstatement of the democratic process in Bangladesh, fighting against insurgent groups with Sri Lanka, shouldering with Nepal, supporting Bhutan in Doklam, and more recently, resolving to stop expansionist China in eastern Ladakh through a six months-long stand-off. India and the United States have, since their respective inceptions of independence, committed themselves to democracy and have developed competitive and educated workforces that actively engage in and appreciate these civil rights. Both countries are ideal models of democracy and are always at the forefront of dealing with crises democratically, be they humanitarian, political, geographical, or environmental.

In his Munich speech, Biden called on “fellow democracies” to work together because of their deep-rooted democratic values and their faith in the rule of law. In his remarks, Biden showed his commitment to defend and fight for democracy. Additionally, a call between India’s and America’s national security advisors, Ajit Doval and Jake Sullivan, underscored the importance of shared values between the two countries, particularly being “leading democracies” and possessing firm beliefs in “an open and inclusive world order.”²

Shared Interest

In his speech, Biden spoke about securing peace and defending the shared values across the Indo-Pacific and particularly mentioned the region, where China poses a serious threat to US interests and stability and peace. He explicitly mentioned the preparedness for the “long-term strategic competition with China” and stressed preserving the global system in the Indo-Pacific.³ To make this happen, the Biden administration is collaborating very closely with Quad partners. Recently USINDOPACOM commander, ADM Philip S. Davidson, proposed 27 billion USD to strengthen the defense missile system and establish a Fusion Information Center in America’s “priority theater.”

The US-India Counterterrorism Joint Working Group is another shared interest where both countries could strengthen their ties and work more robustly on the war on terror. Apart from the 2+2 ministerial dialogue, the Strategic Energy and Nuclear Energy Partnerships are powerful platforms that could make the world’s two largest democracies the future model for new security arrangements. Indian External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, articulates this point well in his book, *The India Way*, stating, “a shared interest in securing the global commons and contributing to global goods has brought about a convergence between very different polities.”⁴

Managing China

It appears the Biden administration views China as America’s chief near-term threat. There are several reasons for US resentment: Beijing’s nontransparency and disinformation regarding the coronavirus; China’s aggressive behavior in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the South China Sea; the rise of China’s economic clout in the Indo-Pacific; Beijing’s crackdown on Hong Kong’s special status; and China’s oppression of its Uyghur minority.

All these irritants are more than enough to glue US and India relations and create a robust shield to control China. The growing synergy in the US–India strategic partnership could accelerate due to China’s growing assertiveness in the region and Beijing’s efforts to counter US hegemony. America’s recently released *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* showed concern for China’s increasing aggression and Beijing’s challenge to a “stable and open international system.”⁵

The United States considers India a vital partner. However, what India must do is preserve and nurture the democratic values within the country and foster a more resilient India, which could silence the anti-India voices globally. India needs to mitigate Washington’s fear of Russian influence in New Delhi. It is not time to take refuge in the old framework of nonalignment. India needs to pro-

mote its broader interests. India–US ties need more visibility and steadiness to keep the interest high from both sides. That is the real “Indian Way” of recalibrating its statecraft.

Policy Recommendations

In this changed security nomenclature, India needs to reorient its policy toward its vital and long-term interests. When America and China appear to be in a new Cold War situation, due to the reasons mentioned above (and America’s distrust of Pakistan), India could conquer the case in its favor and for the region’s peace and stability.

First, as the major South Asian defense partner with the United States since 2016, India needs to be more open and audacious regarding defense trade, military interoperability, and other defense collaborative programs. There needs to be more joint exercise series like Malabar, Yudh Abhyas, and Cope India that would lead to converging strategic interest that include China’s threat and the Indo-Pacific’s security as well. However, Russia plays a great role in India’s defense trade, with New Delhi being Moscow’s second-largest importer of arms and primary buyer of Russian arms (25 percent).⁶ India needs to extend this relationship with the United States by focusing its interest and promoting democracy in the region—ultimately connected to like-minded democracies.

Second, the trajectory of the Indian economy is predicted upwardly. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has projected 12.6 percent of India’s growth domestic product (GDP) for FY22.⁷ Also, by 2025, India will surpass China in population.⁸ India will thus be a major market for import and export and an attractive foreign investment destination for the United States. However, despite the strained relations and trade war with China, the United States Census Bureau statistics show that China is still the topmost trading partner of America with \$39.1 billion in imports and \$12.9 billion in exports, while India is not even in America’s top five.⁹ The demographic dividend of India can be transposed to be a major market opportunity. India’s skilled workforce can be trained for a long-term association with the United States and the growing economies of South Asia, which would also work to repulse China economically.

Third, the Indo-Pacific has become a new flashpoint for great powers. In his recent testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Admiral Davidson expressed his concerns about China’s growing prowess and the “erosion of conventional deterrence” across the Indo-Pacific region. The growing strategic and economic importance of this region needs a rules-based international order, and India could be the linchpin. India’s geographical size and geopolitical reach in the entire Indian Ocean region favors India to be a dominant actor with Quad partners to

promote a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. In the first-ever state leaders-level summit of the Quad on 12 March 2021, all four heads of state recognized the Quad as a “force of global good” and reaffirmed commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, based on international law and universal values. Australia’s prime minister, Scott Morrison, stated that based on “common hope and shared values” the Indo-Pacific will shape the destiny of the world in the 21st century.” Besides, India is already in active engagement in the region with its “Act East Policy” and “Extended Neighborhood” Policy. The United States must invest more and support the economic and regional independence of Southeast Asian countries to promote a rules-based regional architecture and ASEAN centrality.

Notably, India has shown immense competence in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and championed the new normal. The World Health Organization has applauded India for effectively handling the situation, which shows India’s resolve to fight against the humanitarian crisis given the geography, demography, and population density. In addition, India has risen its stature through “Vaccine Maitri” by supplying vaccines to countries worldwide and applauded by the United Nations Secretary for its vital role in combating the global health crisis. These humanitarian efforts show India stands by its founding principle of universal brotherhood and peaceful coexistence (Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, and Sabka Vishwas).

Finally, India aspires to be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. That aspiration could be materialized by America’s bold and vehement support inside and outside the United Nations.

Apart from geopolitical factors, the United States and India have numerous areas to cooperate and collaborate, such as space discovery, technology transfer and knowledge sharing, intellectual property, and the wealthy and educated Indian diaspora.

Conclusion

In summary, India is an epitome of democratic values, a trailblazer in establishing peace and stability in the region since its inception—and this is not limited to US–India bilateral relations. Asserting India’s role as an emerging global leader in the international arena and actively pursuing India’s capability to collaborate with like-minded partners for peace and stability could magnify the Indo–US ties under the Biden administration. Also, India needs to augment its claim to be a leading global power with vigorous action, not merely rhetoric. Now is the time to build upon New Delhi’s narrative of being a strategic and geopolitical power in the region and the most vibrant democracy in the world. In essence, there exists tremendous opportunities for the United States and India to

work together in the changing security dynamics—opportunities that can only be realized via “deep engagement” in Indo-Pacific. 🌟

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Notes

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9. US Census Bureau, “Foreign Trade Statistics,” <https://www.census.gov/>.