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The Biden Presidency

Potential China-India Dilemma?

By P S Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

China's centrality in US president-elect Joseph Biden's likely foreign policy is universally expected. As he deals with China, India's recent emergence as America's 'global partner' may become relevant too. With the latest China-India border crisis remaining unresolved, a critical challenge awaits him in Asia.

COMMENTARY

CHINA AND Russia, with a partnership of "coordination", have opposed United States President Donald Trump's "unilateralism", code for hegemonic attitude. India, friendly towards Russia and closer to the US, has experienced unsettled relations with China for most part of Trump's presidency.

The current volatile situation along the long-disputed China-India boundary has eroded the promise of their confidential summit talks in 2018 and 2019 before this crisis in 2020. So, Biden cannot comfortably ignore this grim reality amid all his competing priorities.

The Core Factor

Three perspectives make China a core factor in US foreign policy, going forward. First, China seems to have weathered its novel coronavirus challenge. President Xi Jinping has also given his country a chance to lead the post-pandemic global economic recovery.

Xi's interest in promoting a concert of economies could be inferred from his speech at the recent annual meeting of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). It is,

therefore, worth assessing whether AIIB can become a Beijing-led global bank. China is already a key member of the Group of Twenty (G20), a forum of established and emerging economies.

Beijing also aims to become the force multiplier in the ASEAN-initiated Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The vast trade and investment region covered by RCEP is relevant to the US which quit the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

An obvious priority, though, in Sino-American economic engagement is to address disputes over bilateral trade and the terms of transfer of US technologies etc.

The CCP Factor

Second, the criticism of China's political system in some US circles is taken seriously in Beijing. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson has countered that the long-governing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Unmistakable is the mood to yield no ground to external forces that seek changes in how China governs Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet.

Third, Xi's strategy to deal with the US goes beyond the Chinese acquisition and modernisation of military, cyber, digital, and outer-space capabilities. His statements indicate that China wants to preserve the existing international system "centred" on the United Nations. Why?

Alone or with Russia, Beijing can continue to compete with the US in global strategic affairs. All three enjoy veto right in the UN Security Council.

The Collateral Factor

Three other perspectives make India a collateral factor in US foreign policy choices to deal with China. First, Delhi made common cause with Trump's America, among a few other Sino-sceptics, in seeking a "new template of globalisation" in the economic domain.

This translates into a desire to diversify the sources of global industrial- and supply-chains instead of relying heavily on China. But, far from seeing the existing situation as a net-negative for the world, Beijing does not want to give up its centrality in this sphere.

Second, the US-India political engagement so far has not had much to do with their shared value of democracy. Instead, several successive American presidents focused on supporting India's 'rise'.

George W Bush engineered a civil nuclear deal with Delhi against heavy odds. Without having to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, India kept its atomic arsenal, and gained access to the external civil-nuclear market.

Barack Obama made India a "major defence partner", almost on par with US allies. Trump intensified bilateral defence ties through exercises, secure communications

and interoperability between the two militaries. Annual '2+2 Dialogue' among foreign and defence ministers of the two sides was institutionalised in 2018.

The Strategic Crux

Above all, India's support for Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy as well as the politicisation and militarisation of the "Quad" informal strategic forum linking India with Australia, Japan and the US is viewed seriously by Beijing. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has described this strategy, underpinned by the Quad, as a "new NATO" aimed against Beijing.

The American-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was a defining feature of the now-bygone US-Soviet Cold War. Now, the Quad holds ministerial meetings. In 2020, India hosted the first-ever four-navy military exercise. These steps reflect the Quad's politicisation and militarisation.

America's New Options

It is possible, though not certain, that Biden will see the emerging China-India military and strategic tussle as a dilemma or challenge for the US. In any case, he may have to shape his policy towards China and India, collectively or separately, they being major Asian powers.

America's three options in this regard are easy to conceptualise but difficult to accomplish. These are: stabilise and re-energise US-China relations; promote India as a pro-US swing-state in the Asian power-play; or pursue viable policies towards both these countries without playing favourites.

Credible containment of the novel coronavirus pandemic or its total rollback across the world will be an ideal situation for any of these options. The global dimension of this pandemic may itself take precedence in Biden's presidency.

With this caveat, protagonists in China and India may clamour for their own nationalistic objectives. For global peace, though, a stable US-China equation, whether or not re-energised, will look sensible. Washington may weigh its core interests vis-à-vis China even while looking for global stability.

If the US were to consider China as an 'intransigent' competitor, the option of promoting India as a swing-state may gain attention in Washington. As this is easier said than done, the idea of not playing favourites can be attractive in the US capital.

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