



US ELECTIONS 2020 AND THE FUTURE TRAJECTORY OF ITS FOREIGN POLICY

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



In his first four years in the office, President Trump returned to classic isolationist policies under his ‘America First’ ideology. His policies dismantled essential elements of globalization as he stepped back from many international agreements including the Paris Climate Change, the Iranian Nuclear Deal, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well as banning an entire faith from entering in the US.

At the national front, US witnessed deep homespun problems like the black lives matter campaign, increased racial profiling, Islamophobia, and healthcare problems as well as the distorted response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump’s policies of abandonment have put a question mark on America’s global leadership role and have made way for other powers such as China and Russia to take prominence internationally. His policies have created an image of a fortified America with strict refugee laws, Muslim ban, and a cold-war like posturing against China.

With a weakened international order due to the pandemic, a global economic recession, and declining American leadership, the 2020 presidential election will be more consequential than that of 2016. The upcoming elections will define United State’s future trajectory in the growing multi order world with competing powers like China and Russia.

Trump vs. Biden – Key Takeaways

President Trump continues to campaign for his second term with “fighting for you”¹ banner, while Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden is campaigning on ‘rebuilding America’.² A second Trump

¹ “Trump Campaign Announces President Trump’s 2nd Term Agenda: Fighting for you!” August 23, 2020

presidency could put an end to the international alliance system; increase more American isolationist policies and damage the postwar liberal international order. There is no reason to believe that President Trump will pursue a more multilateral and cooperative strategy in his second term. However, a Biden administration would be a reprieve for the current US led international order, with active engagement on multiple levels such as Climate Change, Covid-19, immigration, and multilateralism, as well on the US's foreign policy overtures.

Both the candidates share differing policy choices on many domestic issues. However, there is convergence in the broader strokes of their foreign policy trajectory, especially towards South Asia, on issues such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, US relations with India, relations with Pakistan and countering the rise of China. There is little likelihood of any drastic or fundamental shift in the core foreign policy. Nonetheless, a new Biden administration may reconfigure United States foreign policy strategy according to the priorities of its global engagement.

Relations with Pakistan

The result of the upcoming US election is much less likely to matter for America's policy towards Pakistan; the trajectory of the relations will likely remain the same with conditional re-figuration. A new administration is not likely to disengage with Pakistan, but the policy will, in all probability, be more conditional than before. With Trump's second term, however, it is unlikely that there will be a major shift in US policy towards the South Asian region, especially Pakistan. Pakistan's relations with the US have widely been described as 'transactional' and 'frenemies'. Although, over the past two decades, relations between both the capitals have witnessed varying amount of highs and lows, yet both have managed to continue to engage on issues of mutual interest and importance.

A new administration, whether Trump's or Biden's will continue to maintain a partnership with Pakistan on issues of mutual interest such as counter-terrorism, which is viewed as a shared security interest. Engagement with Pakistan will be important to administer Washington's national security interests to counter terrorism and violent extremism, as the US plans to depart from Afghanistan. In recent years, the US has understood the necessity for maintaining workable ties with Pakistan to overcome many challenges in Afghanistan as well as in the region, especially for creating an environment conducive for an agreement with the Afghan Taliban – the results of which we have witnessed in progress of the Afghan peace process. It is imperative for both Pakistan and US to revamp their relations and rebuild them on mutually beneficial grounds such as trade partnerships and business investments. Restarting Pakistan-US strategic dialogue will be useful as it covers many

<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/media/trump-campaign-announces-president-trumps-2nd-term-agenda-fighting-for-you/>

² <https://joebiden.com/joes-vision/#>

grounds other than security cooperation like trade, economic growth, education, and science and technology.³

Moreover, as Pakistan's relationship with the US has faltered in the past few years, Pakistan has remained actively engaged in defense cooperation with China and more recently an economic, infrastructure and development centric engagement. China's commitment towards building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is seen as a game changer for Pakistan. Initially, the US was ambivalent about the CPEC projects. However, it has become more vocal on its reservations regarding the increased Chinese influence and has often criticized the initiative as dictated by one country.⁴

Afghanistan has remained an important factor of highs and lows between Pakistan and the US. While initially the Trump administration took a hard line on Pakistan, making it a scapegoat for its own failures in Afghanistan, it later realized that winning in Afghanistan and peace in Afghanistan without Pakistan is a difficult task. This led to the change in Washington's tone towards Pakistan.

India Pivot

There is a strong bipartisan support in Washington on US relations with India. Trump and Joe Biden hold almost similar views when it comes to close strategic partnership with India. Both the presidential candidates as well as the capitals consider China as a mutual challenge and have similar views on issues such as China's technology theft⁵, its claim on the South China Sea, and territorial aggression along the India-China border⁶. This sets the bigger picture of the Indo-US strategic partnership regardless of who ever come into power in the US.

However, other aspects of the relationship must not be overlooked. On the issues of human rights, environment, climate change, and health issues there is a stark difference in the policy overtures of both the presidential candidates. A Biden administration may take a harder stance on the issue of human rights violations in Kashmir as manifested by severe criticism by both Joe Biden and his Vice

³ "U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement," Office of the Spokesperson, *US Department of State*, March 1, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/03/253857.htm>

⁴ Comments made by Secretary Mattis during his testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on President Trump's military strategy in Afghanistan, October 3, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-82_10-03-17.pdf

⁵ "How China's Economic Aggression Threatens the Technologies and Intellectual Property of the United States and the World," White House Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, June 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FINAL-China-Technology-Report-6.18.18-PDF.pdf>

⁶ Happymon Jacob, "China's LAC aggression, India's obfuscation," *Hindu*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/chinas-lac-aggression-indias-obfuscation/article32546823.ece>

President nominee Kamala Harris. He has criticized the actions taken by the Modi government in Kashmir that has made it easier to discriminate and ultimately kick out Muslims from India.⁷

China factor

Washington's growing tilt towards India is a clear outcome of the growing power and influence of China in the region. US policy makers are concerned over China's ability to challenge US domination and its position as the upper power in the world. Moreover, Washington has time and again expressed concern over China's holdings of the US government debt⁸ - which if China plans to sell might cause serious destabilization in the US economy. These factors have given China a huge advantage to leverage itself over the US. Policy makers in Washington already view Trumps hard-line on China as a right choice. Under the Trump administration, US has pushed back against Beijing regardless of the increase in friction in their bilateral relations. A new Biden administration will face a dilemma of whether to build on the China policy that he inherits from Trump and exercise the same pressure or seek a reset button.

Afghanistan

While both the candidates maintain contrasting views on various issues, their views on the issue of Afghanistan remain convergent with minor alterity. Both Trump and Biden have favored withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan. The Trump administration has pledged a complete withdrawal by November 2020 with less interest in a post-withdrawal Afghanistan. The withdrawal does not follow the timeline of the peace deal signed with the Taliban in February 2020 which stated that withdrawal of troops below 8600 would proceed on a 'conditional' approach as to pressure the Taliban to reduce violent attacks.⁹ Whereas, Biden has **announced** a more measured policy approach by keeping a minimal footprint in Afghanistan for the sustenance of peace,¹⁰ while he promises to end the 'forever wars' and 'unwinnable wars' in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Biden also calls for an end to the US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen and with narrow focus on Al- Qaeda and the ISIS.¹¹ In his interview to the CBS, Joe Biden made it clear that America bears

⁷ Anik Joshi, "A Biden –Harris Administration Would Mean a Harder Eye on Kashmir," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/-3/bide-harris-kashmir-policy-india-modi/>

⁸ Wayne M. Morrison and Marc Labonte, "China's Holdings of US Securities: Implications for the US Economy," *Congressional Research Service*, August 19, 2013, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34314.pdf>

⁹ Jack Detch, Robbie Gramer, and Dan Haverty, "Trump Signals he wants Troops Home by November," *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/28/trump-signals-wants-troops-home-afghanistan-november-2020-election-taliban-peace-deal/>

¹⁰ Kimberly Dozier, "Biden Wants to Keep Special Ops in the Mideast. That Doesn't Mean More 'Forever Wars,'" *Time*, September 23, 2020, <https://time.com/5890577/biden-middle-east-special-operations-forces/>

¹¹ <http://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>

zero responsibility if the Taliban return back to power and organizations such as the United Nations should be put to use to solve problems around the world rather than to send American troops to solve issues whether of human rights or otherwise.¹² During his democratic debate in 2019, Joe Biden pointed out to the possibility of insisting Pakistan to provide air bases to the US for airlift and support to its troops in Afghanistan instead of maintaining air bases in Afghanistan post withdrawal.¹³

Issue of Kashmir

It is quite clear that when it comes to the issue of Kashmir, the US administrations neither want to intervene, nor support Pakistan's stance in the practical sense like taking up the issue in the UN or in a more serious tone with India. The issue has time and again been discussed in Biden campaigns through the window of human rights abuses. Trump's indifference for other countries' internal affairs has been a sigh of relief for the Modi government as it has overtaken major changes inside India including the nullification of Article 370, Citizenship Amendment Act, and human rights abuses in Kashmir which largely got a muted response. However, Biden has strongly criticized the Modi government on the Citizenship Amendment Act as well as the National Register of Citizens. Many suggest that Biden may not go easy on the issue of Kashmir with the Modi government.¹⁴ Although it is too early to suggest a final approach of Biden administration's towards the issue of Kashmir, it is fairly evident as of now that ease of relationship between Trump and Modi will likely downsize and fade under the scrutiny of the issue of human rights.

¹² "Joe Biden Talks Afghanistan; Future of Troops Presence Overseas," Interview with CBS, February 23, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/joe-biden-talks-afghanistan-future-of-troop-presence-overseas/>

¹³ Marisa Schultz, Nikki Schwab and Aaron Feis, "Democratic Debate 2019: Joe Biden Stands Out for all the Wrong Reasons," *New York Post*, September 13, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/09/13/democratic-debate-2019-joe-biden-stands-out-for-all-the-wrong-reasons/>

¹⁴ Anik Joshi, "A Biden –Harris Administration Would Mean a Harder Eye on Kashmir," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/-3/bide-harris-kashmir-policy-india-modi/>