

Joe Biden's India story

Despite scepticism at the outset of his presidency, Biden has done much to deepen strategic, economic and techno-industrial cooperation with Delhi. The stage is now set for a bolder bilateral agenda



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PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's meetings on Saturday with President Joe Biden at Wilmington — a two-hour drive south from New York — will celebrate the significant gains in the India-US partnership over the last four years. The Wilmington discussions will also continue translating some of the declared big ideas for India-US strategic cooperation on high technology, defence, and regional security into concrete outcomes.

That Wilmington, Delaware, is Biden's hometown adds a personal dimension to the proceedings of the summit of the Quadrilateral forum and the US President's bilateral meetings with partners from Australia, India, and Japan. President Biden and his advisers have invested significant amounts of political and bureaucratic capital in making the Quad a credible new forum in Asia. Biden's term has also seen the intensification of bilateral strategic cooperation with all three Quad partners.

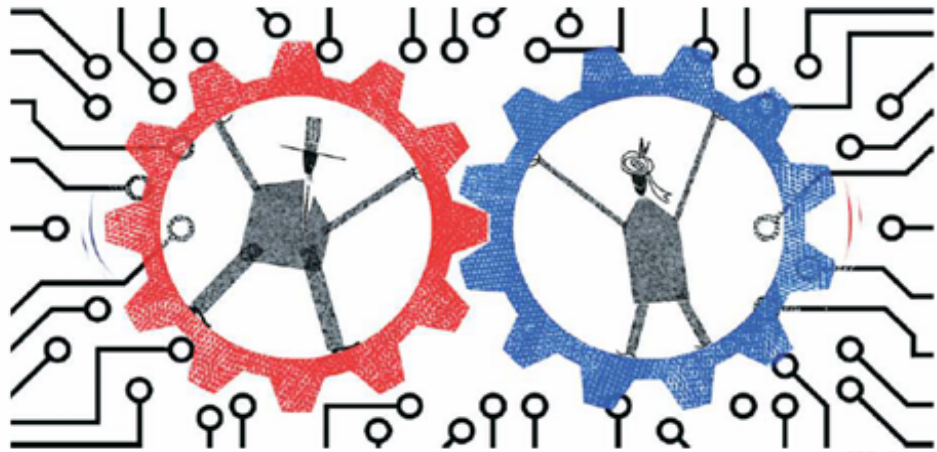
As the last round of engagements between Modi and Biden unfold this weekend, it is a good moment to reflect on Biden's contributions to India-US relations. For India, Biden's legacy is about supporting Delhi's plans to deepen the techno-industrial base of India's economy and security.

When Biden won the presidential elections in November 2020, there was widespread Indian scepticism, including in this column, about his capacity or will to sustain the political momentum that the Trump Administration had imparted to the relationship. The question was not about the lack of goodwill within the Democratic Party's foreign policy establishment towards India. There has been a strong bipartisan consensus across the political aisle in Washington since Bill Clinton visited India in 2000, the first presidential visit in 22 years, in favour of building strong ties with Delhi.

The question at the end of 2020 was whether the Biden Administration would persist with three key innovations under Trump — recognising the futility of continued military presence in Afghanistan, downgrading the relationship with Pakistan, and confronting Chinese assertiveness in Asia. Together, the three factors had elevated India's position in the hierarchy of US strategic priorities under Trump. The first two factors saw the marginalisation of Pakistan in the US strategic calculus — for the first time since Soviet Russia's military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. The third factor defined Beijing as a challenger to Washington after more than four decades of viewing China as a partner for America.

The Trump Administration's China strategy led to the reimagining of Asian geography as the "Indo-Pacific". Putting "Indo" into the "Pacific" marked a decisive break from Washington's tradition of seeing Delhi through the South Asian prism. This was accompanied by lending an institutional dimension to the new Indo-Pacific strategy by reviving the Quadrilateral forum (Australia, India, Japan, and the US) that went into a coma after a brief flicker in 2007.

Given the Democratic Party's hostility to Trump, few expected Biden would stick to his predecessor's policies. Biden, however, chose



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to double down on Trump's Asia strategy. But unlike Trump, Biden put alliances and partnerships at the centre of his global strategy.

It was no secret that Trump was uncomfortable with the continuing US military presence in Afghanistan. Less well known was Biden's conviction that the US can't win the war in Afghanistan; but few expected him to unilaterally withdraw the US military. Although the manner of withdrawal turned out to be disastrous, it freed the US from its dependence on Pakistan to sustain its Afghan policies. This meant the end of Pakistan's prolonged primacy in America's South Asia policy.

Biden brought greater coherence to the operationalisation of the strategy to build a new Asian balance of power amid the growing challenges from China. On the economic front, Biden refused to withdraw the Trump tariffs on Chinese imports. Biden sought a more comprehensive effort to de-risk the economic relationship with China and put in place tighter controls on the transfer of advanced technologies.

Reinforcing the economic pressure, Biden undertook several political and institutional steps in Asia that looked beyond the Trump legacy. These included the elevation of the Quad to the summit level barely two months after Biden was sworn in; expanding the ambit of the strategic partnership with India; the announcement of the AUKUS partnership with the UK to transfer nuclear propulsion technology to Australia; the upgrading of the alliances with Australia, Japan, and the Philippines; the effort to resolve the historical differences between Seoul and Tokyo and build a trilateral compact in North East Asia; high-level re-engagement with the ASEAN; and end to the prolonged neglect of the Pacific Islands.

The Indian and American perceptions of the China challenge began to converge in the Trump years. India's simmering tensions on the border reached a breaking point with the Galwan clashes in eastern Ladakh in the summer of 2020. On the economic front, Delhi recognised that the growing trade deficits with China represented a long-term challenge to India's economic security.

Shared perspectives between nations on objective reality do not always translate into outcomes. That is where subjective contributions matter. Biden's policies helped build on that convergence with new initiatives on high technology, defence, and regional stability. Modi, in turn, nudged Delhi's hesitant and self-doubting establishment to seize the opportunities presented by the Biden Administration.

The most consequential development of the Biden years is undoubtedly the initiative

on critical and emerging technologies (ICET) that was unveiled in January 2023. If more intensive technology cooperation has long been India's ask from America, the ICET has taken it to a new level. The ICET has also helped expand the focus beyond cooperation between the S&T agencies to building industrial cooperation that is set to boost India's national capabilities in advanced sectors like semiconductors and jet engine production in India.

Biden's emphasis on building resilient supply chains and developing deeper cooperation among trusted geographies has not only put India at the centre of this strategy but also mobilised America's allies to join the efforts to accelerate India's growth in the emerging technology areas.

It is important to note that intensifying bilateral cooperation is not a one-way street. Indian talent, companies and startups are now contributing to the US economy and security. It is not by accident that the US has emerged as the main destination for India's defence exports.

Biden chose to go along with the Indian view that the Quad should not be developed as a military alliance but as a provider of public goods in the Indo-Pacific. This has seen a steady expansion of regional cooperation on maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cybersecurity, telecommunications, and health to mention a few.

The depth of shared strategic interests in Asia, the political commitment in both capitals to build on it, the new institutional mechanisms for cooperation, both bilateral and regional, the deepening of economic, technological, industrial and security engagement, and the growing links between the private sectors have given India-US partnership unprecedented stability.

The new resilience in bilateral ties has allowed Delhi and Washington to withstand unexpected turbulence from different directions — including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the alleged Indian involvement in the attempted killing of a US citizen, and the divergence over political change in Bangladesh. Despite persistent scepticism in both capitals about the utility and durability of the relationship, the Biden years have seen Washington and Delhi advance purposefully in the last four years and set the stage for an even bolder agenda under the next US president.

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