

Biden Administration: re-engaging with South Asia

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Synopsis:

South Asia has been transpiring to the world as an important region with its evolving trade, policy, economy, security and its significance is increasing to the great powers. Since the 1990s, The United States has come to realize its geo-strategic importance and its influence in the upcoming geo-economic platform. USA has welcomed its 46th President, Joe Biden and the whole world is observing what alterations he might bring to this changing world system, recently struck with a pandemic, threats of wars, ongoing proxy wars and rise of new powers. Likewise, South Asia is also looking for as much as cooperation from them to ensure its inception on the global platform.

Commentary:

The foreign policy domain all around the world is changing due to the changing political, economic and security issues. Small states have started to be important stakeholders in world politics because the big powers are realizing that the continuous multi-polarization will keep them isolated at the end if these small nations do not provide alliance. Continuous procurement of nuclear weapons, incessant developments of technology making ways for bioweapons and possession of long-range missiles have increased the threat towards security and thus prevailing security dilemma, enhancing the value of collective security among the nations. The big powers are trying to establish their hegemony across the world and the most viable way to team up with newly emerging states who are in constant need of assistance, is through trade, commerce and economy. South Asia has its history of colonialism, partition, border conflict, civil wars and transition towards democracy. More or less every state here is in need of help from outsiders in terms of either foreign aid or political consultancy or economic development.

USA has its history of extending their hands towards these states from time to time, though mostly to sustain their own political agenda subjecting to the restriction of Russia and China and to maintain good economic alignment with others. Their interest towards South Asia mainly surfaced during the cold war when they saw threat from Russia of intruding into this zone. Later their interest incremented when extreme terrorism grew into this region and China became a problem of intrusion. Their concentration was focused on Indo-Pacific policy and individual country's measures to counter terrorism in this region. Biden has come with the plan of formulating a fundamentally distinct foreign policy and the spirit of renewing US alliance and sharpening the innovative edge through uniting with other democracies, which will clearly also benefit their own

purpose. He has instantly altered many of prior taken decisions, including return to Paris agreement, dissolution of travel ban on Muslim-majority countries, regenerate US commitment to ensure human rights and democracy all over and his manifesto says a lot more to come. The growing relation of the US with South Asia will of course be affected by these changes, now it is to see if that will be any different from the one during Obama or Trump.

The Indo-Pacific policy:

The rising economic powers are concerning the USA and presenting an all-inclusive manifesto, South Asia is of course on its list to be more pragmatic to. The most important policy that plays the game in this region involving almost all South Asian countries is the Indo-pacific strategy. “We’re a Pacific power, and we’ll stand with friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity, security, and values in the Asia-Pacific region,” Biden said in one of his op-ed in October (Funabashi, 2021). This statement clearly shows that Biden will be inclined to participate in the policy dynamics of this region. Now as it stands, it is necessary to evaluate if Biden will approach a strategic role here to enhance its impact over individual countries in this region or he will follow the existing rules of the play. Him issuing Kurt Campbell as the Coordinator of IPS on the first day shows his extensive plans towards this region. Campbell has served as the assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, and proponent of the US "pivot to Asia" policy during the Obama regime, and thus is expected to be viable to deal with China and be responsible to establish rapport with US allies in this region. (Avdaliani, Lappin & Shoham, 2021). The four nations of QUAD have already directed the Malabar drill in the Indian Ocean, which is being considered as the biggest naval drill involving warships, submarines and aircraft, creating condemnation in China with the threat that this might be a blueprint of USA to counter China’s military and political influence in the Indo-Pacific region. (Rasheed, 2020) With its modernized defense force and extended military presence in South China and East China Sea, China is expected to take initiative to maintain its status quo in this region by creating a competitive ground for US. Now the new administration formed by Biden with a cogent motive to establish paramouncy in this region will determine the course of action that China might have to initiate, which will definitely in turn affect South Asia.

Revision of Afghan policy:

Strategy formation regarding Afghanistan will be a very sensitive issue for the Biden administration. During his position as vice president during the Obama era, he recommended withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and moving towards an agreement and since Biden is in charge of office now, his decision might change the pace of this prolonged war. However, that does not mean he can establish peace just by returning the army from the ground and handing over power to Taliban. He needs to be very cautious about his policies and proposals in this situation because USA needs to maintain balance between the Afghan government and Taliban since the

mediation is going to affect its security in this region. Already Taliban has predicted the declining security concern in the country and is taking advantage by putting the lives of civilians at risk. His discernment to control the situation might be expressed if he shows some immediate action towards it; might be a statement to assure initiatives or appointing any official regarding this matter. It must abide by the “Doha peace negotiation”¹ and the withdrawal of troops should be stopped until the inter-agency review with other involved organizations like NATO and EU. Amidst all these, the security of the US forces, officials, diplomats and other personnel should be considered. USA might need to revive its relationship with the stakeholders in this war like China, India, Russia so that a peaceful negotiation can be done. Biden might succeed in this case of conflict because his administration is formed with Secretary of State-designate Tony Blinken, Secretary of Defense-designate Lloyd Austin, and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan who have expertise over the Afghan situation regarding their work experience during Obama era and they understand the value of ending the fight with an agreement, that provides a good chance of sustainable peace (Cunningham, Llorens & Olson, 2021).

With china

Balancing the relation with China is going to be major game play for Biden and it's going to affect South Asia and the countries here. Trump has shown more of a rigid relation with his “America first” policy, but Biden being a democrat, as to maintain his values, must ensure democracy and thus maintain its own strategies with China. Xi Jinping, already giving the threat of another “Cold war” in case US decides to continue its protectionist policy², Biden has to know about the insights of the former trade deals to keep China under its dominion. In his last written essay in April 2020³, Biden has perceived China as a competition in many sectors including economy, investment, technology and intellectual property. More of a hawkish attitude was expressed in his language, which places the relation between US-China at a pedestal importance in this region, since China is also keeping South Asia in its vision to enrich its influence on. China is lately trying to extend its influence in South Asia through its better association with Pakistan and Bangladesh, two both important countries in this zone, which might be a problem for US. China is trying to re-shape the Indo-pacific region's socio-economic structure through multilateral project like BRI and USA is trying to establish its influence in this region through free and open indo-pacific policy ("China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia", 2020). Continuous border conflict with India is allowing USA to bring India towards its side and thus the region, since India is becoming a

¹ Doha Peace Negotiation, also known as the Afghan peace process, which comprises the proposals and negotiations in a bid to end the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

² On 2019, former president Donald Trump imposed a 10% levy on \$200bn (£150bn) worth of Chinese products and thus creating the sense of a “trade war”

³Biden, J. (2020). Why America Must Lead Again. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>

significant player. The human rights violation in China is giving USA another point to pull the trigger and in this case it would need the support of the surrounding countries to ensure human rights protection, transparency and the rule of law.

Relation with India:

India is one of the most important emerging powers in this region, other countries have to manage their economic and political balance with them, and so holding onto India will be very vital to Biden. Though Trump managed a good relation with India, he did not involve into the atrocities and human rights violations done against the Muslims and Kashmiris, whereas Biden is expected to exhibit his democratic attributes and criticize the actions to ensure the peace and stability in this region. But the measures should be taken very cautiously since US cannot afford to deteriorate relations with India at this moment because the Sino-Indian conflicts will help USA to intervene here and Biden's administration will use the QUAD as a re-engaging tool here with the help of India, by sidelining China. Cooperation through foreign direct investment, intelligence sharing and coordinated military training exercises is expected to increase during his regime. Biden has acted as a friend to India by lifting US sanctions on India in 2001 as well as in getting the US-India nuclear deal through the Senate in 2008 and during the Obama administration the US has declared India a 'Major Defense Partner' (Dave, 2021). Now his decision towards India needs to be less enraging and more traditional for seeking the betterment of this overall region.

Relation with other countries:

Countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and others are coming out as significant economic and political power and re-engagement of the Biden administration will be related to their individualistic relation with US. Amidst this pandemic and economic depression, these countries are facing serious hit and being developing countries on the verge, they need strong foreign aid as well as diplomatic back up from countries like US. Bangladesh is currently going through an enormous refugee crisis with more than 10 million Rohingya inflows from Myanmar. Though US has expressed its concern regarding this issue when the crisis occurred but eventually could not play any vital role to pressurize Myanmar to repatriate them. Recently the military government overtaking Myanmar might change the diplomacy but still Biden will be expected to make an influence here. Besides, the existent terrorism mostly in Pakistan is not only a concern to US but all stakeholders in this region. US has different dynamics of relation with Pakistan but presently, China is moving towards Pakistan by investing extensively in its own mega infrastructure projects like the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC) as part of its Belt-and-Road-Initiative, US will have to advent with more cautious moves (Bhatti & Shaheen, 2021). In regards to other south Asian countries, Biden might have to use more diplomatic and stronger geopolitical tactics to ensure its influence over Sri Lanka, a country which has come out of its own civil wars few years

back, trying to rise up through different statistics of development, but unfortunate for USA, is a strong ally to China.

However, the presiding of Biden to the US office after Trump is being considered to have some common grounds of cooperation and might bring good news for countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Maldives on issues of climate change, immigration laws, protection of rights, fighting the pandemic with extended assistance and so on.

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