By Invitation

Trump, Biden and South Asia through the Indo-Pacific lens

Will a Democrat president depart much from the present deepening engagement with the sub-continent as the US shifts its strategic focus from the continental to the maritime?

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For The Straits Times

Next week’s US presidential election is being closely watched in South Asia. Senator Kamala Harris is certainly a draw as she could be the first American vice-president of Indian heritage should the Democrats win. But the interest in the election outcome goes beyond Senator Harris’ background. The ties that bind the US and South Asia have grown in recent years, in many varied ways. At one level, the Indian diaspora in America is being wooed with some intensity by both the Democrats and Republicans. While the diaspora stands at 4.5 million, the voters are said to be divided between two million, with small but significant numbers in some battleground states that are expected to pick the winner in the presidential race.

Meanwhile, the US government is consolidating the advances made towards India in the last few years. It is not unusual for two top US Cabinet members to arrive together at a distant corner in the world barely a week before bitterly contested national polls. But that exactly is what US Secretary of Defence, Mr. Mark Esper and Defence Secretary Mark Esper did this week when they travelled to Delhi for a “two plus two” dialogue with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. The meetings celebrated the extraordinary progress in bilateral ties in the turbulent Trump years and prevailed over the signing of a new agreement on bilateral defence cooperation. The four ministers also issued a ringing joint statement on the shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

In his recent visit, Mr Pompeo attacked the Chinese Communist Party while in Delhi. The Modi government might not have been too comfortable with such criticism from its soil, but at the same time India too has its own China challenge – its soldiers are locked in a stand-off with the People’s Liberation Army in the high Himalayas that is entering its seventh month.

The Indo-Pacific legacy

Mr Esper has described India as the most consequential partner for the US in the 21st century. Future historians looking at the last four years might conclude that the formalisation of a new strategic geography, the Indo-Pacific, and elevating the security engagement with Delhi are probably among the lasting legacies of President Donald Trump’s first (and only?) term at the White House.

But the story is not just about India. Mr Pompeo travelled from Delhi to Maldives and Sri Lanka capital now to save Afghanistan. But as the US focus shifts from land wars to maritime contestation with China, the American attention has begun to move away from Pakistan to building a strong partnership with India and renewing ties to the smaller states of the region. Pakistan’s value for the US might become less salient.

Over the last few years, the China challenge has emerged as the principal international focus for the US policy establishment and Mr Trump has presided over that definitive transition. For a potential Biden administration too, China is likely to be the topmost priority but the ways it might approach the issues involved are likely to be somewhat different from those of Mr Trump and will have a bearing on his approach to India and South Asia.

The Democrats insist that they have no desire to pursue a new cold war with China. Mr Joe Biden says China is not a threat but a competitor that can must be beaten. Unlike Mr Trump, he promises to bring America’s allies together in developing a common strategy to deal with Beijing.

Some in Delhi, as probably in Tokyo and Canberra too, worry that Mr Biden might simply go back to the policies of the Obama administration that emphasised engagement with China at the cost of coddling its regional aggression. But there are others in India who bet that the US security establishment has moved decisively towards a strategy of standing up to China’s assertiveness and that is unlikely to change much when the Democrats come to power.

UNIONS AND CLIMATE HAWKS

India, a key ally of the US, is one of the few countries with most of its partners, will find the going rough with a Biden administration as with the present one. Given the pressures on the Democratic leadership to accommodate its trade union supporters and its ideological progressive wing, Mr Biden has said there will be no signing of new free trade agreements without factoring in the interests of American workers. There are two other issues that a Biden administration is likely to deviate markedly from the Trump White House. One is a return of the US to the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

The framing of the US decision is likely to be shaped by the Indian and its neighbours are likely to welcome the shift, they might not be ready to engage with the Democrats’ “climate hawks” who are dead set against the use of coal, which remains a major source of electric power generation in the sub-continent.

The other issue is a renewed focus on human rights. To be sure, human rights issues have not really disappeared from the US agenda under Mr Trump. Consider the special focus on Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong in the last few months – all targeted at China. The sub-continent has its share of problems that draw human rights concerns among the Democrats. These range from gender rights in Afghanistan under Taliban rule to Pakistan’s blasphemy laws and Tamil minority rights in Sri Lanka to the repatriation of the Rohingyas from Bangladesh to Myanmar.

Some Democrats have raised questions about the Kashmir situation and India’s Citizenship (Amendment) Act. While the Democrats tend to emphasise human rights issues on the stump, their presidents have been keen on working with India and in addressing them only on a case-by-case basis while in power. That is unlikely to change under a Democratic administration.

FRACTIONAL DEMOCRATS

The real challenge for South Asian governments, as elsewhere in the world, will come from continuing uncertainty in the US international security policy and a Biden administration. Democratic administrations are prone to deep internal policy contestation, given the wide range of interests that support the party. That problem is likely to get sharper under a president Biden, thanks to the growing diversity and fractionalism of the coalition that supports him.

Democratic leaders are likely to support the House and its ideological progressive wing. Mr Trump disappears from the scene, the contradictions on the Democratic side are likely to express themselves vigorously.