

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 United States 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 around 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 quite usual 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 State Mike Pompeo 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 presided 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.

As his recent wont, Mr Pompeo attacked the Chinese Communist Part while in Delhi. The Modi government might not have been too comfortable with such

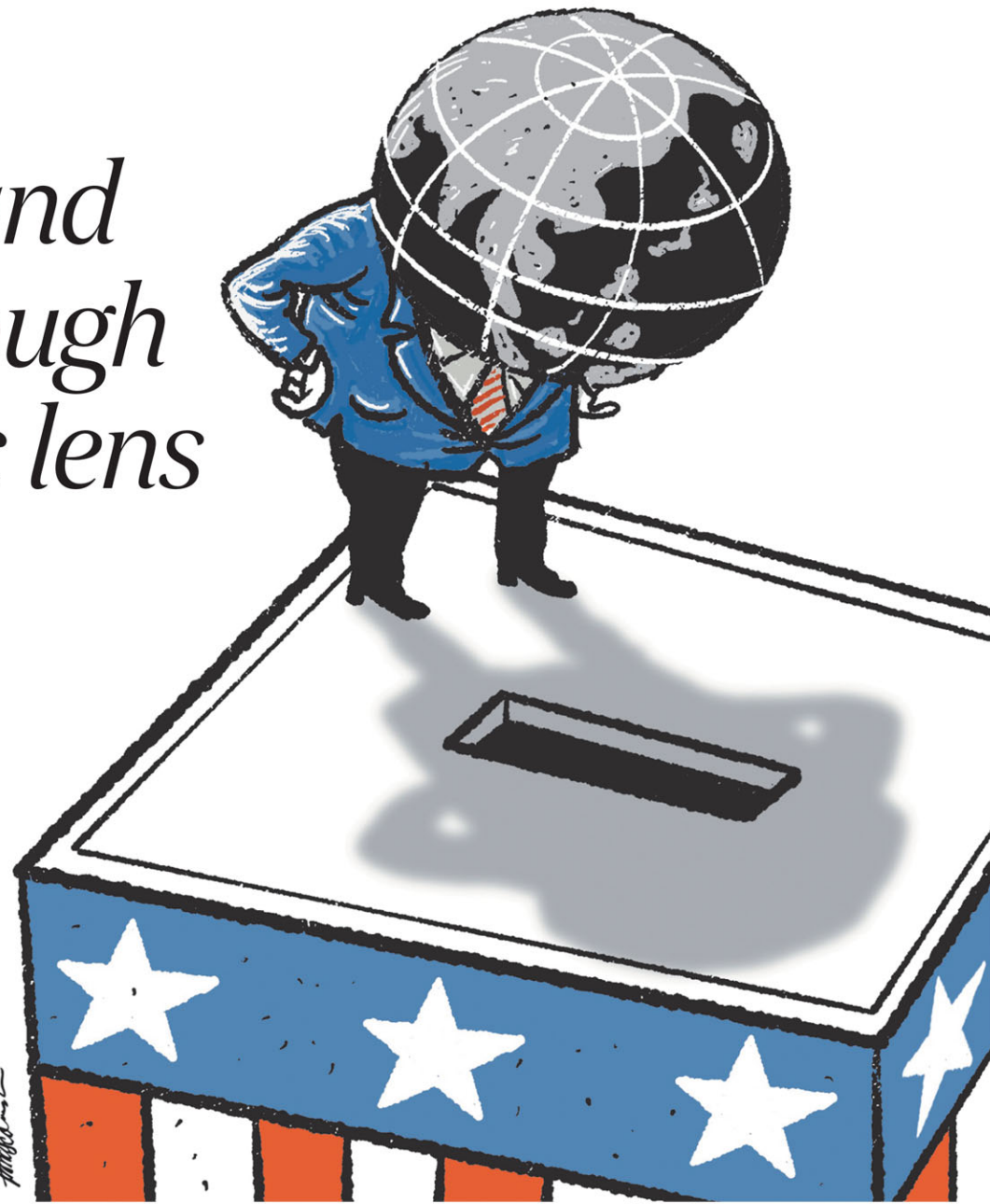
criticism from its soil, but at the same time India too has its own China challenge – its soldiers are locked in a stand-off with the People's Liberation Army in the high Himalayas that's entering its seventh month.

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



before heading out to Jakarta and Hanoi. The framing for the entire visit was clear – it's the US response to the rapid expansion of China's profile in the Indo-Pacific. Mr Pompeo's deputy, Mr Steve Biegun, travelled to Dhaka after his visit to Delhi earlier this month.

Until recently maritime South Asia was widely viewed as a strategic backwater. That perception has dramatically changed in recent years, as the waters of South Asia figure prominently in China's Maritime Silk Road and Beijing's long-term strategy to project military power into the Indian Ocean.

In Colombo, Mr Pompeo publicly warned Sri Lanka of the dangers of excessive economic dependence on China and close security ties to Beijing. In Male, he celebrated the recent advances in bilateral ties beyond the defence cooperation agreement that the two countries signed last month.

As for Pakistan, it has long been a major partner for the US in the region and is formally designated as a major non-Nato ally. Pakistan remains rather important as the Trump administration is focused on withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since the Sept 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US, Afghanistan has been the dominant prism through which Washington saw the region. In August 2017, Mr Trump unveiled a South Asia policy which in essence was about Afghanistan. It gave the US one more military shot at stabilising Afghanistan and mounting some pressure on Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table; and both were driven by domestic politics. Mr Trump has been eager to leave Afghanistan at the earliest, and wants to tell his supporters that he has kept the promise to end America's endless wars. It is an idea that has much resonance too among the progressives of the Democratic Party.

There is no expectation that a Biden administration wants to reinvigorate the US military presence in Afghanistan, after nearly two decades of occupation. Die-hard internationalists in the Biden establishment might agree with Mr Trump's former national security adviser H. R. McMaster that the White House is trying to appease the Taliban. But few are willing to put down political

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 foreign 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 its 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 and 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 condoning 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 it is unlikely to change much when the Democrats come to power.

UNIONS AND CLIMATE HAWKS

India, which has trade issues with most of its partners, will find the going as tough with a Biden administration as with the present one. Given the pressures on the Democratic Party leadership to accommodate its trade union supporters and its vocal 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 change accord. While India 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 Rohingya 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 as pragmatic as Republicans in addressing them only on a selective basis while in power. That is unlikely to change under a Biden administration.

FRACTIOUS DEMOCRATS

The real challenge for South Asian governments, as elsewhere in the world, will come from continuing uncertainty in the US' international trajectory under 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 fractiousness of the coalition that supports him. The very moment Mr Trump disappears from the scene, the contradictions on the Democratic side are likely to express themselves vigorously.

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