

# The Modi government will find a Biden presidency to be less volatile

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If present trends continue, Joe Biden will be president of the United States on January 20. While the situation remains in flux, certain elements are worth keeping in mind for the next few months.

First, Donald J Trump will still be president till then, with the power to handle crises that emerge and to take actions such as personnel changes and executive orders, including on China and Iran.

Second, control of the Senate is not yet clear. It will be determined by the outcome of the two Senate races in Georgia, which will be headed for runoffs on January 5. Senate control could shape President Biden's choices with regard to personnel appointments that require Senate confirmation, and policies — including on trade, immigration, democracy and human rights, an economic stimulus package and the defence budget. If Republicans keep control of the Senate, centrist — rather than progressive — appointments and approaches will be more likely.

Third, personnel appointments could have an impact on a Biden administration's approach on key issues of interest to India, like China and trade. Positions to watch include the leads of agencies involved in foreign and security policy (national security adviser, secretaries of defence and state, CIA director) and economic policy (secretaries of treasury and commerce, US Trade Representative). Lower-level positions of interest will include the NSC senior director and the assistant secretaries covering the region, and the US ambassador to India.

Fourth, Biden's main policy priority will be dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. This will include controlling its spread, vaccine development and distribution and dealing with the economic fallout.

That does not mean President Biden would ignore foreign policy. He might indeed have more space in this arena than in domestic policy if Republicans control the Senate — in part because this is where they could find areas of convergence, especially on China policy.

Biden has an internationalist instinct and has committed to working more effectively with allies and partners. His first few visits are likely to be in the neighbourhood (Canada and Mexico), and to Asian and European allies. India might not feature on his short-term itinerary, but could get visits from senior members of the administration, or invitations for high-level meetings in the US.

In addition, Biden has promised to rejoin the Paris climate change agreement. He would also likely halt US withdrawal from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and reengage in multilateral organisations — which would please Delhi.

Whatever his own preferences, however, Biden's approach will be affected by an American public that has shown little appetite for interventions and investments abroad, and remains concerned

about the consequences of globalisation at home. This will likely mean a continued drawdown of forces in Afghanistan (with a remaining counter-terrorism-focused presence), and an expectation of burden sharing from allies and partners. And it could shape Biden administration's approach to trade and immigration. However, his promise to "build back better" could benefit American allies and partners, including India, if it strengthens the US, and could even present opportunities if it includes, for instance, investments in innovation.

Among other key issues of relevance to India will be the administration's approach in Asia. While it might get relabelled, Biden advisors have shown support for a number of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific policies and objectives. As for China, the Biden campaign's tough rhetoric on Xi Jinping and Xinjiang, promises on Tibet and Taiwan, and indication that tariffs would not be automatically dropped reflect that strategic rivalry is here to stay. However, it is the terms of US-China competition — and any potential cooperation — that a Biden administration envisions that could be consequential for India.

Delhi should watch closely how Beijing and Moscow approach the administration. Will they seek to temper competition or test Biden? A Sino-US accommodation would create complications for India — so would Moscow testing Washington, reducing the already low likelihood of a US-Russia rapprochement.

How American allies and partners see the new administration will also matter. Uncertainty among Asian and European allies (including Australia, France, Germany, Japan and South Korea) over the last few years has fuelled their desire to deepen relations with Delhi bilaterally, in issue based coalitions and at international institutions. The close election outcome will likely reinforce this trend, even as the countries seek to engage Washington.

Global issues that are likely to be priorities for Biden could be areas of cooperation for India and the US, including climate change, global health security and democracy.

On the issue of concerns about internal developments in India, like the Obama administration, a Biden administration would likely convey them privately and temper public criticism.

Overall, the Narendra Modi government will find a Biden presidency to be less volatile, more fully staffed and relatively familiar with India. There are some known unknowns to keep in mind though. Crises can disrupt the best laid plans. Furthermore, it is not yet clear what the impact of the polarisation in America will be on its power and purpose.

However, it is premature to write off a Biden presidency as some have done, arguing he can get little done if there is a Republican-controlled Senate. American presidents have a lot of power, agenda-setting ability and instruments at their disposal. India will benefit if Biden can find ways to use them toward strengthening America and keeping it engaged in the world. And, along with other American allies and partners, Delhi would do well to find ways to facilitate that outcome.

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