

US-India Strategic Partnership and incoming President Trump

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US President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration on January 20 2017 ushers in a new era and a challenging one for the US-India Strategic Partnership and the personal diplomatic qualities of PM Narendra Modi.

The challenge is greater because little is known about the real foreign policy preferences of President-elect Trump. Nor can any assessment be presently made from the yet to be constituted Cabinet. During the election campaign, President-elect Trump made many laudatory references to India and India's role in global affairs. But it remains to be seen whether the election campaign rhetoric gets translated into American policies which synergise with Indian national security interests and national aspirations.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had been able to strike an excellent personal relationship with outgoing US President Barrack Obama which helped in a substantial resuscitation of the US-India Strategic Partnership. It would therefore be fair to expect that PM Modi would be able to establish an equally beneficial personal rapport with incoming US President Trump.

United States foreign policy even when redrafted in terms of new priorities cannot operate in a vacuum. US foreign policy in 2017 under the new President is likely to face greater geopolitical challenges than those faced by the outgoing President, chiefly because of China and Russia.

Russia is engaged in playing an assertive role in the Middle East with special reference to Syria where Russian and American interests clashed for many months now. Russia is also engaged in flexing its muscles on its Western Flank resting on Eastern Europe and the Baltics. But more significantly Russia is solidifying its strategic nexus with China, which for quite some time was being viewed in the West as an

expedient relationship based on a marriage of convenient strategic convergence, basically anti-United States.

China should be a greater concern and challenge for President-elect Trump as China is intent on establishing a hegemonistic sway over the Western Pacific which is aimed at prompting a US exit from the Asia Pacific. China's aggressive moves in the Western Pacific also are aimed at undermining the bilateral spider web of mutual security relationships with countries like Japan and South Korea.

In 2017 the United States is likely to face its biggest test as the incoming US President grapples with maintaining US traditional predominance in the Asia Pacific and President-elect Trump's election campaign statements that Japan and South Korea should pay more for US Forward Military Presence. Both Japan and South Korea live under the shadow of China's military rise, the consequent aggressive military brinkmanship against its neighbours and China's attempts to establish hegemonic sway over the Asia Pacific.

In the above context, the US-India Strategic Partnership comes into geopolitical focus both in terms of US national security interests and likewise India's national security interests. Undeniably, the inception and the subsequent evolution of the US-India Strategic Partnership was impelled by the 'China Factor'.

In the past the United States may have disowned this rationale because of its 'China Hedging' Strategy and India shied away from acknowledging it due to similar reasons, but the geopolitical moments has arrived in 2016 where both the United States and India can only stick their heads in the sand at their own peril.

Reflected many times in my Column earlier and in my Papers and more recently in my Book "China-India Military Confrontation" was the constant thread that if the United States was to stay embedded in Asia Pacific and the wider Indo Pacific Asia, it can only do so in a strong strategic partnership with India.

The United States has its traditional allies like Japan, South Korea and Singapore but this coalition can only emerge strong and as geopolitical game-changers by adding the strategic ballast of an Emerging Power like India. India by its existing and potential power attributes adds immense existential counterweight to restrain China.

President-elect Trump and his prospective national security advisers would be well advised to focus on the above even in the run-up to the Inauguration Day. They also have to recognise that India has excellent strategic relationships with the sheet-anchors of US security in the Asia Pacific and Singapore.

India also has proved its credentials as the nett provider of regional security in the Asia Pacific as to what now seem as a pro-active 'Act East Policy'.

The incoming US Administration has also to recognise the pivotal role that India plays and can play in the Indian Ocean Region, a maritime of

high strategic concern for both the United States and India in terms of the not so benign China's push for an intrusive presence in the Indian Ocean.

The United States under the Trump Administration may attempt to repair relations with Russia, an interest indicated by both sides. While India's deep ties with Russia may have lost their earlier sheen, Russia seems to have realised that strategic petulance with regard to India does not pay. India still could play some limited role in repairing the punctures in the US-Russia relationship.

In the run-up to the Inauguration Day both the United States and India should attempt to establish working relationships with the Trump Administration policy establishment. It would enable working relationships to be established at the functional level and lay the basis of an early Trump-Modi Summit Meet.

So while much unpredictability may be aired in the media on the foreign policy directions of President-elect Trump, the predictable element in this whole process is that the US-India Strategic Partnership has enjoyed bipartisan political support within the United States under both Republican and Democratic Administrations.

Concluding, one can highlight that with the geopolitical landscape in the wider Indo Pacific Asia having drastically changed with China's presently pronounced hegemonistic designs targeting the United States and India, the call of the hour for President-elect Trump is to add more vigour and substance to the US-India Strategic Partnership. India assisted by the United States to emerge as an Emerged Power of note would result in a multi-polar Asia, much to China's strategic chagrin.

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