

Indo-US Cooperation in the Post Covid-19 World

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INTRODUCTION

The debates on Indo-US relations is by and large clouded with slow paces, and great apprehensions. There is a customary ambience of caution and tardiness in the dialogues and involvements. This may be because of the political and security apprehensions resulting from historical and political trade-offs between the two nations. But in the context of emerging demands for multilateralism, new vistas of cooperation and a paradigm shift in foreign policy priorities are needed. There are many common concerns and issues that draws the two nations together. This includes terrorism, regional security concerns, economic interests etc.

In the economic front the emerging market argument is well propagated and widely debated. But the maintenance of such a market requires regional and global stability. That may occur in the form of trading platforms and stable policies. The present foreign policy initiatives of the Modi Government signals a paradigm shift in the policy orientations and objectives (Tellis, 2018). This is very particular for the Indo-US relations. Here both the countries are in need of pragmatic and progressive orientations. Beyond the promises and proclamations, it should be admitted that finding a common ground in many areas of foreign policy is not an easy task for politicians at New Delhi and Washington. The possibility of Indo-US cooperation is in fact a logical outcome of the new global developments.

The spread of the new pandemic namely Covid-19 seems to bring new patterns of engagement in the international politics. The pandemic has devastated all the mighty nations, sparing none. The death toll and destruction were unparalleled in the near history of humanity. Stock market is down to the rails and the economy is in utter shambles. The pandemic may result into new political equations and power structures in the Post Covid-19 world. America has to come out of its 'conservative

big tent' (Wagner, 2015) and to design novel strategies to cope with the immediate challenges.

In this context the present paper tries to examine the changes and challenges of Indo-US relations in a post Covid-19 world. The major focus here is the emergence of new multilateral politics in the context of new developments. Another issue is greater economic cooperation and stabilization of economic scenario in a crisis-stricken world. The proposed argument is that in the face of new foreign policy initiatives from the Modi Government, Indo-US cooperation can produce significant outcomes in terms of national and human security in a global level.

INDO-US RELATIONS: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical link between India and US is very weak. Till the days of second world war USA was a silent player in international politics. They focused on nation building and followed a policy of grand isolation. The Wilsonian intervention in the first world war was not well accepted in the US foreign policy circles and the league of Nations remained a league of Europe. In the case of India, the pre-independent Indian foreign policy was more or less in the lines of British foreign policy and India was having little interactions with US¹. The civil disobedience movement of Indian national Congress in 1930's had attracted the American public attention to a large extent. But this was not reflected in foreign or domestic policy of both countries². Further Indian leaders were critical of the imperialist and capitalist policies followed by the US administration³.

With the second world war, the Indian issue has become a global issue and as the United States was also involved in fighting a war for democracy against fascist tyranny, they also became sympathetic with the Indian demand for democracy and self-rule. President Roosevelt was open in expressing his sympathy for the Asian people striving for freedom. He criticized the British colonialism and its imperial policies. He was also in favor of the Indian demands (Maitra, 1995). But the attitude of the then British Prime Minister Wilson Churchill and his government made it impossible for USA to actively involved in the Indian issue. Thus article 3 of the Atlantic charter was interpreted as a charter for Europe and not for Asia⁴. The article reads:

“They respect the right of the peoples to choose the form of Government under which they will live: and they wish to see

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sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.”

Apart from Prime Minister level interactions, there were many attempts in US including the Senate Foreign relation Committee (1942) to address the Indian issue of self-domination and freedom from colonialism. But the responses were weak and war related politics sidelined every marginal demand for the time being. The question of independence to colony states thus remained a forgotten clause in the second world war.

After the second world war the relations with US and India remained cold and indifferent. It is admitted that there are many commonalities between the two countries. Historically, both had fought a common enemy, British colonialism; traditionally, both are democracies believing in the dignity of the individual; constitutionally. But in the initial days of independence both countries failed to understand the common interests. Singh (2009) observes that both have been seized by many misconceptions; both have tended to look upon their mutual relations in the context of third countries. The major issue here was the Indian perception that US foreign policy was only an extension of British policy as far as the former Asian colonies are concerned. It was also believed that the real interest of US is in West Asia and its oil resources. There was also greater apprehension about the US support to Pakistan and this was more or less interpreted as part of the oil politics⁵.

The general Asian distrust on American foreign policy in Asia was further accelerated with the Indian involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Washington approached NAM with much reservations and was afraid that it will become a strong regional/global organization that will curtail the US role in Asia. This hesitation was further appended with the Indian association with former USSR⁶. This policy was continued without much modification till the disintegration of Soviet Union. There were considerable number of high-level visits, mutual agreements, assurances and the like peripheral diplomatic sweet coatings between the countries. But the underlying principles of foreign policy remained the same. This is most evident with the US position on Indo Pakistan conflict. The governments in United States of America always sided with Pakistan and delivered necessary arms and supplies to the country under various defense arrangements to contain communism (Rajan, 1964)⁷. But in practice this posed a real threat to India and the result was a direct confrontation between the two neighbors⁸.

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After the fall of USSR, the global order was soon shifted to unipolarism. United States emerged as the single largest player, replacing the already disintegrated communist bloc. It also coincided with a new global economic order which was ruled by high profile capitalist organizations like World Bank. By this time Non-Alignment Movement was almost faded away and the regional arrangements offered no alternative to the global hegemon. During this period there was an evident change in Indo-US relations marked with mutual dependence and cooperation. By this time the significance of Asia in the global politics was well acknowledged by the US policy makers. One of the dominant influences in this background was the emerging China. The United states was forced to devise a softer India policy in international politics.

With the shift to a multipolar global order, there was larger room for negotiations and mutualism. This gave a significant role to India in the US agenda. The role of regional organizations and platforms were well admitted. Regional security together with other soft threats compelled foreign policy quarters to make more open and democratic policies. This shift in policy orientations largely benefitted India.

During the period of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's term in office, Americans and Indians who understood the benefits of closer ties had hoped that they would steadily improve to enable the development of a genuine strategic partnership. Vajpayee himself had imagined this prospect when he boldly challenged the US and India to think of themselves as 'natural allies' (Tellis, 2018). It is during this period, the need of fighting against terrorism on a common platform was admitted by both parties⁹.

After him the next prime Manmohan Singh, tried to break the nostalgia of non-alignment that fixed a large shadow over Indian foreign policy. He followed the course chartered by Vajpayee and Indo-US relations became more realistic and cordial¹⁰. However, this tempo was not sustained during the second innings of Manmohan Singh. During this period India was also suffering from internal political issues and Singh was busy with dealing with the parliament and attending a series of political charges. This environment set the stage for Modi's historic electoral victory. The Modi government was very vibrant in maintaining international relations and the Indo-US ties became more intimate and closer. During his second innings also, Modi has been successful in operating a practical and realistic foreign policy that made India one of the major players in global politics.

Modi invested heavily in building up personal relationships with his peers abroad. Whether through his dramatic hugs, his

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invitations to Presidents Obama and Trump to visit India as honoured guests on major national events, or his repeated breaches of protocol by personally receiving visiting dignitaries at Indian airports, Modi sought to cement personal friendships with national leaders who were politically important to India. Beyond leaders within South Asia itself, or those of Japan, Israel and a handful of European states, no one was more important to Modi than the US president. Consequently, he invested heavily in developing strong friendships with his American counterparts, first Obama and now Trump, guided by the logic that, even if US and Indian national interests did not always cohere, the latter would always come out ahead if the individual steering policy in Washington were favourably disposed towards India (Tellis, 2018:529)

The latest development in Indo-US relations has taken the India-US strategic partnership to new levels. President Trump in his maiden visit to India in February 2020 assured that the US-India Strategic Partnership will bring good results in the near future. The policy inconsistencies of trump government (Guerlain, 2018) is not an Indian concern as the 'Modi magic' is very evident in Indo-US relations.

INDO-US TRADE: THE BIG MARKET QUESTION

The foreign policy of any country in a globalized world is essentially linked with trade and economy. With the end of the second World War United states of America became the largest global economic power. Most of the national states were depending on US for aid or trade. Incidentally US also adopted a policy of 'benevolent brother' by extending special economic packages to many countries, particularly in the third world. This was done in order to facilitate the political interests in Asia and Africa. The economic relationship between India and the United States also reflects the same trend. But there was no significant advantage for India in the balance sheet till the advent of the new economic order. As of now India is one of the largest trading partners to US.

As per the Congressional Research Service report (2020) Bilateral trade in goods and services is about 3% of U.S. world trade. The trading relationship is more consequential for India; in 2018, the United States was its second largest goods export market with 16.0% share, and third largest goods import supplier¹¹. In the matter of Foreign Direct Investment, the scenario is giving new hopes. It is seen that U.S.-India

Table 1: US Trade in Goods with India 2000-2019

(All figures in millions of U.S. dollars)

Sl No	Year	Import	Export	Trade Balance
1	2019	34,409.6	57,665.5	-23,255.9
2	2018	33,502.8	54,349.3	-20,846.5
3	2017	25,648.3	48,549.7	-22,901.5
4	2016	21,647.2	46,024.2	-24,377.1
5	2015	21,452.9	44,782.7	-23,329.7
6	2014	21,499.1	45,358.0	-23,858.9
7	2013	21,810.4	41,810.0	-19,999.5
8	2012	22,105.7	40,512.6	-18,406.9
9	2011	21,542.2	36,154.5	-14,612.3
10	2010	19,248.9	29,532.9	-10,284.1
11	2009	16,441.4	21,166.0	-4,724.6
12	2008	17,682.1	25,704.4	-8,022.3
13	2007	14,968.8	24,073.3	-9,104.4
14	2006	9,673.6	21,830.8	-12,157.3
15	2005	7,918.6	18,804.2	-10,885.6
16	2004	6,109.4	15,572.0	-9,462.7
17	2003	4,979.7	13,055.3	-8,075.6
18	2002	4,101.0	11,818.4	-7,717.4
19	2001	3,757.0	9,737.3	-5,980.3
20	2000	3,667.3	10,686.6	-7,019.3

(Source: compiled from United States Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5330.html> accessed on 02-04-2020)

foreign direct investment (FDI) is comparatively small, but showing an upward trend. The US FDI in India is showing steady increase whereas the Indian investment in US is stagnant over a small period of time. In terms of the total stock the figures are promising. It is also a positive signal that the FDI is mainly concentrated on promising sectors including Software & IT Services, Business services, pharmaceuticals, metals and industrial equipment's.

Table 2: Indo-US Foreign Direct Investment 2014-2018

In US Dollars (Billions)

Sl No	Year	US FDI In India (Position)	US FDI In India (In Flow)	US FDI In India (Position)	US FDI In India (In Flow)
1	2014	33241	4092	11514	1287
2	2015	35361	3820	11647	298
3	2016	38634	3786	12155	(-)537
4	2017	44458	4238	13123	928
5	2018	45984	2080	13734	(-)223

(Source: US government Select US; <https://www.selectusa.gov/servlet/servlet.FileDownload?file=015t0000000LKMV>)

In the year 2018 U.S. goods and services trade with India was at \$142.6 billion. Exports were \$58.7 billion; imports were \$83.9 billion. The U.S. goods and services trade deficit with India was \$25.2 billion in 2018. It is also to be noted that America is one of the few countries with which India has a trade surplus. On the other hand, India has a huge trade deficit with China¹².

The relations with the world's largest democracy and the world's oldest democracy was always not smooth. There were bundles of unsettled issues ranging from trade barriers to nuclear energy. The Trump administration is critical of India's trade practices and accuses India of its protectionist policies. On the other hand, India has its own problems in opening the market for a free competition at the cost of the ordinary billions. India believes that it is not yet equipped for the market reforms as anticipated by US administration. As to Modi government it is more or less a sovereign and democratic question.

In the matter of trade there are differences of opinion in various issues. India is demanding cut in visa fees, exemption from high duties imposed by the US steel and aluminium products, and greater market access for

its products from sectors such as agriculture, automobile and engineering. In the case of USA, Washington wants greater market access for its farm and manufacturing products, dairy items, medical devices, and data localisation, apart from cut on import duties on some information and communication technology products. The US has also raised concerns over high trade deficit with India. These are larger issues that should be sorted out in different layers with a wider time frame and with a different mindset. But the outbreak of Covid-19 has changed the scenario and the way to negotiation table may become smoother and faster.

POLITICS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

The breakout of a new virus pandemic Covid-19 in December 2019 has altered the global power structures. This pandemic is set to become the biggest catastrophe after the Second World War and is pushing economies towards depression. COVID-19 is set to impact US foreign policy, US-China geopolitics, and great power politics in the Post-COVID-19 world. (Sharma, 2020). Originating from China, COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel Coronavirus, has brought the world to a halt. Millions have been infected, and death toll is also unparalleled. Majority of the global population has been locked up and developmental activities halted for months. It may badly affect the global economic growth and the earliest predictions from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) says that COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting global supply chains and international trade. With almost all the countries closing national borders during the crisis, the movement of people and tourism flows have come to a screeching halt. As of the UN estimates, the global economy could shrink by up to 1 per cent in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, a reversal from the previous forecast of 2.5 per cent growth, UN also warned that it may contract even further if restrictions on the economic activities are extended without adequate fiscal responses. The report finds;

As the COVID-19 pandemic worsens, deep-seated economic anxiety—fueled by slower growth and higher inequality—is increasing. Even in many high-income countries, a significant proportion of the population do not have enough financial wealth to live beyond the national poverty line for three months. In hard-hit Italy and Spain, for instance, an estimated 27 per cent and 40 per cent of the population, respectively, do not have enough savings to allow themselves not to work for more than three months¹³

It is admitted that the new situation may bring in new political dispensations from the part of the so-called big powers like United States of America. In fact, the USA under the leadership of Donald Trump met the worst causality. During the pandemic the competence and capacity of the US state health care system was questioned and the government failed to manage the crisis as anticipated from a big power. They were sending SOS to every small and big states for mask, sanitizer, ventilators and medicines. Thus, the big power status of US was altogether set aside for the time being.

A prediction on the nature of the Post Covid-19 international politics is a complex job, as the nature of the Corona Virus itself is not clearly established. The impacts are long term and deep rooted that affect every aspect of human life. However as of now it can be assumed that the new world will be forced to become more cooperative and flexible. For example, the traditional focus on military strength as a major contributing factor of national power may be disputed. Governments may be forced cut down defense budget for welfare measures like betterment of health facilities. In the field of economic relations, trade in services and BPO business may be hit to a great detail. This may also coincide with the large cut down in FDI's as the stock values and investment instruments may be affected by the crisis. This new economic intervention may bring in new partnerships and policies. There may be new trade wars as the issue of tariffs will become a hot debate.

Kumar (2020) argues that the COVID-19 crisis is also a crisis of neo-liberal capitalism. To him the world may face contradictory tendencies of globalization and deglobalization and the crisis can reinforce the trend towards a 'more powerful and interventionist state'. This may in turn affect the basics of foreign policy by altering the democratic and popularist notions of policy making and implementation. Governments can now take realist and active policies instead of hiding behind ideological popularist slogans. There is a larger possibility of new focus on nontraditional security threats in the international strategic discourse.

It is also suggested that the pandemic may significantly reduce the role of international agencies like UN. This will operate in three dimensions. In the first level, these organizations including WHO were reduced to the role spectators during the crisis. The pandemic management was vested mainly with individual countries. Secondly COVID-19 has shown bankruptcy of international organizations as the major donors of the organization are also in bankruptcy. The shortage of funds will derail the functions of major international organizations. Lastly with the failure

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of international agencies, regional forums and platforms may emerge as stronger agencies of decision making in the global arena. This may benefit a country like India, which is active in leading many regional associations.

The changed global politics may also influence Indo-US relations. Covid-19 has automatically shaken the Indian economy. But the final impact of the crisis is yet to be assessed. The trade graph may plunge down and remittances will be at the bottom level. Revenue from own sources will also be heavily affected. This may prompt the nation to design a vigorous export-oriented industry, at the same managing internal resources maintenance. In this new economy countries like India may benefit from the new supply chain management strategies of the industrialized world. The industrialized nations will try to create new sustainable markets so as to reduce its over dependence on big markets like China. The US may prefer India as a major choice for the new supplies and services. The tempo created by the 2020 Modi-Trump meet in India may sustain for the coming years.

Sharma (2020) is of the assumption that the post-COVID-19 era will reignite the US-China rivalry. During the pandemic US was openly critical about the Chinese attitude towards addressing the pandemic. In the initial days of the virus outbreak American President Trump and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was proposing conspiracy theories and using terms like 'China Virus'. The disengagement with China may benefit India in different ways. US have to accept India as the next 'emerging Asian leader'. Incidentally the Pakistan factor in Indo-US relations may be minimized. In a post Covid-19 world US have no other options but to reduce the arm supplies and un-profitable engagements. The historical affiliations that US have maintained with Pakistan in the context of the anti-communist policies of 50's may be revised to suit the new circumstances. It does not necessarily mean that India will get more arms and ammunitions, but means that more orders will come and more money will flow. And finally, both countries are in need of others support for the many years to come.

CONCLUSION

India and United States of America are natural allies in a historical, geographical or cultural milieu. The political affiliations are also not a natural outcome of the democratic context of the both parties, but largely operated by the necessities of global politics and security and trade compulsions. The China factor also contributed to this

development. The foreign policy innovations of Narendra Modi and his personal diplomatic adventures also brought a substantial warmth and closeness to the relations. It is clearly acknowledged that New Delhi and Washington are trying to reduce the diplomatic distance between two headquarters and in a near future the relations will be more intimate and sustainable. Perkovich (2010) observes;

The United States should continue to emphatically support India's efforts to prosper, secure itself, and gain international influence. Democratic India's success will be an achievement of unprecedented scale and complexity, and it will benefit not only Indians but the entire world. Yet a U.S.–Indian partnership should not be conceptualized as a means to contain or contest China—a notion that many self-proclaimed realists in America and India wish to project onto the relationship. The United States should appreciate India's intrinsic importance more fully (Perkovich, 2010:9).

At present the US and India view one another as important strategic partners to advance common interests. The challenge here is to sustain this tempo for tomorrow. It can be assumed that the post Covid-19 politics will bring in the desired stability and sustainability in the relations.

End Notes:

- [1] Maitra (1995) notes, *“For the sake of historical accuracy, one must note that in 1792, the first American President, George Washington, had sent Benjamin Joy to Calcutta, then the capital of British India, as consul. However, there is no available evidence suggesting that any other American President from 1792 to 1942 was involved in any serious manner to question the continuity of the British colonial rule over India. Despite a surfeit of missionaries from America, the building of hospitals, an inflow of visiting educators, and the publication in 1927 of Katherine Mayo's book Mother India, which pictured Indian society as depraved, squalid, and without any redeeming virtue, little was heard about India from the seat of power in Washington”*. See (Maitra, 1995:53).
- [2] In this context the work done by India League of America, established in the 1930s is to be acknowledged as a platform for presenting the Indian realities to America. The league published a monthly named India Today and the magazine has prominent US elites like Albert Einstein, Hooray Luce, Philip Murray, Richard Walsh, and Louis Fischer in its advisory board.
- [3] In 1927 at the Brussels International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism Jawaharlal Nehru, described the United

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- States as an imperialist power and later observed, "*It is the United States which offers us the best field for the study of economic imperialism*".
- [4] With regard to the Clause 3 of Atlantic charter the US maintained that India came within the purview of the Atlantic Charter. But the then British prime minister Churchill said that it did not. On September 9, Churchill, in his statement to the British house of commons made it clear that Article 3 applied only to European nations under Nazi occupation.
- [5] Singh (2009) observes, "*The United States turned to Pakistan as the centre of American interest in South Asia. The American policy-makers, obviously, assumed that Pakistan would be responsive and its Islamic connections could be exploited. The suggestion in Sir Olaf Caroe's book, Wells of Power, that the Muslim Middle-East from Turkey to Pakistan was vital for the security of the Western alliance and that the Pakistan Army could be built up to substitute the influence once wielded by the Indian Army was, it seems, accepted by the US Government. The Truman Doctrine was extended to Iran in 1947 and Pakistan was considered vital for the West*". (Singh, 2009:932)
- [6] Many a people are of the opinion that the major bone of contention between India and US in the early period was not NAM but the Indian affiliation to USSR. For US policy circles even India's role in the decolonization process became suspect and her votes in the United Nations for speeding up the liquidation of colonialism, were regarded as votes against the United States'.
- [7] Rajan (1964) observes; *When the Indian Government brought this fact to the attention of the US Government, the President of the United States gave a solemn pledge to India. He wrote to the Indian Prime Minister: 'I am confirming publicly that if our aid to any country, including Pakistan, is misused and directed against another in aggression, I will undertake immediately, in accordance with my constitutional authority, appropriate actions both within and without the United Nations to thwart such aggression'*(Rajan, 1964:270). However the promise was not kept by US.
- [8] Another example of the discriminative approach of US to India is reflected in the liberation of Goa. While the United States has shown no scruples in dispatching its armed forces to foreign countries in support of its interests, the US Representative at the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, came out with a scathing attack in the United Nations on the Indian action in Goa without appreciating its anti-colonial aspect (Singh, 2009:934).
- [9] An important turning point that marked the upswing in Indo-US relations was President Bill Clinton's trip to South Asia in March 2000. The spate of high-level visits and issuance of joint statements emphasized the need for cooperation on terrorism. During his return visit to the United States later in 2000, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee addressed a joint

- session of the US Congress and issued a second joint statement with President Clinton, agreeing to cooperate on arms control, terrorism etc. (D'Souza, 2008:1068).
- [10] Responding to Bush's special consideration for India, Manmohan Singh concluded a nuclear accord that realised the essence of Vajpayee's dream: an agreement with the US that would permit India to maintain its nuclear weaponry while still benefiting from international nuclear cooperation in the civilian arena (Tellis, 2018:526).
- [11] Source: US-India relations, Congressional Research Service, Updated on 14 Feb 2020. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10384.pdf>, accessed on 22-03-2020
- [12] <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/south-central-asia/india>
- [13] See, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/policy/april-monthly-briefing.html>, Accessed on 04-04-2020

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