

# Is America's Trump, South Asia's loss?

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The victory of Donald Trump was not anticipated in most of South Asia. But here he is, as the next American president. While some people here are in shock and others are demonizing him, we need to coldly calculate what his victory means for us.

From Afghanistan to Myanmar, American engagement has been significant for the region in recent years, despite the surge and withdrawal. Outside India, the US still remains one of the favourite destinations for our students and as an economic opportunity. There is a sizeable South Asian diaspora in the US from all over this region and depending on their roots, their reaction has been mixed to him. Trump's views on religion and immigration have created a stir in their perceptions of America.

Most of us are unhappy and upset about his election, as we fear it would impinge on American society and how it sees the rest of the world in terms of immigration, religion and the US global role. Is the opposite also true for this line of thinking? Is it possible that Trump is a reflection of new American thinking? If this is (also) true, then it is even more dangerous. The ongoing protests in the US reflect a polarization within American society. However indirect they may be, these would have implications for American perception and a US role in South Asia.

Even more importantly, the State in South Asia and its immediate neighbourhood, from Afghanistan and Iran to Myanmar and China, is also anxiously looking at the new president, based on each country's own geostrategic projections and forecast in Asia, the Indo-Pacific and even beyond. So what does this mean for us as a region, and India in particular?

## **Trump and South Asia**

First, a general regional outlook, starting from Kabul. Afghanistan needs sustained American support. Though the tail-end of Karzai's tenure experienced an uneasy relationship between Afghanistan and the US, under Ghani's rule, there has been tremendous synergy between the two countries. Besides military support, the American contribution to Afghanistan, especially on building its infrastructure has been crucial. Similarly, you have the American push on CASA-1000, an electricity grid linking Central and South Asia. The US is also a part of the strategic QCG along with Afghanistan, China and Pakistan.

If Trump wants to pursue a minimalist global approach, it would have significant implications for Afghan security, which would in turn impinge on regional security. Given the current level of tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a minimalist Afghan approach will not only affect Kabul, but the entire region. In this context, public perception in the US will play an important role as well.

Another strategic issue, though not directly on South Asia, but related to it would be the Iran nuclear deal. Both Iran and the international community have come a long way in recent months. The Iran nuclear deal is not only specific, but also symbolic. This has been one of the biggest achievements of the Obama administration in our neighbourhood. If Trump would like to break this deal or alter it, it would not only affect Iran-US relations, but also Tehran's partnerships with other powers, especially Europe. Iran's foreign policy is precariously positioned now vis-a-vis the Middle East. More importantly, a negative American process would affect Tehran's geo-political perception of its own neighbourhood, which will be borne primarily by South Asia.

Outside Afghanistan and Iran, will Trump reconsider the US-Pakistan relationship and tilt towards India, thereby forcing Islamabad to align even more closely with Beijing? US-Pakistan relations in recent years have been strained and China-Pakistan relations have been on an upward trajectory. This trend is unlikely to change dramatically. Pakistan's nuclear weapons, to an extent, act as a deterrent against any dramatic political shift for Washington away

from Islamabad. Pakistan's diplomatic and strategic community have further exploited American fears of nuclear terrorism. As a result, multiple institutions (for example a section within the US Congress, Pentagon etc) and think tanks would want to continue US-Pakistan relations.

Though it will remain troubled, the US-Pakistan relationship is unlikely to be completely ruptured. Trump, at his best, may muddle this already strained relationship, but he will continue to use the carrot and stick policy with more stick than carrot. But he is unlikely to abandon or pull out completely from Pakistan; the above-mentioned institutions will dilute any such approach.

## **Trump and India**

For India in particular, the victory of Trump and its implications will depend on how New Delhi sees its role in the immediate and extended neighbourhoods, maritime and global table. Irrespective of the changes in the last fifteen years in the White House, from Bush to Obama, there has been a steady rise in the Indo-US strategic partnership.

In recent years, there has been a steady partnership at multiple levels, with various ministries, departments and institutions working together. At the track-II levels as well, from universities to think tanks, there have been multiple interactions between the two societies, focussing on issues from cyber and space to maritime. In short, US-India relations are broad based today whether within government or outside it. The engagement between the two countries goes beyond the State and also beyond one or two issues. From an Indian perspective, change in the White House should be seen against this background.

From an Indian foreign policy perspective, Trump would be closely watched for his strategies towards China and the Indo-Pacific. The rise of India in the American calculus has a crucial China factor in it. Washington sees India as a potential strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific due to its geo-strategic location, especially in the Indian Ocean. It is not difficult to fathom the reasons behind the US approaches towards Asia and its maritime through the American Pivot and later the Indo-Pacific. The Obama administration carefully calibrated its strategy towards China; it was a strategic posture involving balancing and appeasing. Accordingly, his administration calibrated its strategies further towards Japan, Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and India. Can Trump afford to change this course?

For a rising India, American interests in the region form an important component of its own calculus. Though New Delhi's strategies of "Looking East" remained more on paper and rhetoric in the 1990s, in recent years, there have been substantial developments in making it active. The recent change in nomenclature "Act East" signifies the need to convert the rhetoric into reality; also noteworthy is the expansion of its definition of "East" to beyond Southeast Asia and covering East Asia and even Australia. India is making substantial political and economic investments, starting from its immediate east in Myanmar and all the way to Japan. Modi's recent visit to Japan and the bilateral statement would signify this eastward push. New Delhi is well aware, it cannot pursue this strategy on its own; the Indo-Pacific push by the US suits it well.

In this context, Trump's approach towards the Indo-Pacific would be important. If the Pivot and Indo-Pacific has a strong China component, it would mean Trump would need more allies along the Chinese belly, from Central Asia to East Asia. India would be happy to reap the benefits of such an American approach, though it has also impinged on Sino-Indian bilateral relations. Despite the tremendous increase in trade and bilateral contacts at multiple levels, the political relationship between India and China remains volatile. Much would depend on India's diplomatic ability to maintain a triangular relationship, to achieve its own larger interests.

If Pakistan could have managed such a relationship earlier, it would not be impossible for India to pursue a similar strategy vis-a-vis US and China. As mentioned earlier, much would depend on the Ministry of External Affairs. Though many in the region would like to see India's foreign relations primarily through a Modi prism, there is not enough appreciation of the slow but steady revolution within the MEA in terms of its global approach. Especially in the last decade, perhaps starting from Shyam Saran's term, the Indian foreign ministry has come a long way and is still in the process.

To conclude, each of us in the region is likely analyse Trump and what he stands from our own national perspective. In this process, let us not demonize him; we have to work with him and the larger US administration. Let us also not see him narrowly as anti-Pakistani or pro-Indian. Let us also not forget, there is a bit of Trump in every one of us; we would like to see the world through our negative prism, irrespective of that fact that it affects our larger body politic and the regional fabric. We are tied to the US; one of our largest diaspora lives there and most of our youth would love to visit the US either to study or work. Our economy is also tied to it. Trump may very well become a disaster for us. But, we still have to manage him. Is there any alternative?

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