



Decoding Biden's presidency, for India and the world

GS II: Effect of Policies and Politics of Developed and Developing Countries on India's interests

CruX: New Delhi should concentrate on building its economy and reset its external relations, reverting to the recently discarded formula of pluralist multi-alignment.

A weakened America

1. American global dominance has relied on economic, military and cultural power, and a foreign policy that operates on threat and force through its military deployed in nearly 800 bases in approximately 70 countries, and extravagant use of direct, secondary and extra-territorial sanctions which currently afflict an estimated 30 countries and territories.
2. Unilateralism based on presumed exceptionalism masks America's weakened moral and political authority and loss of confidence in its leadership.
3. The U.S. political system is dominated by powerful corporations and entrenched interests which control politicians for their own interests and not those of the working population.
4. Massive trade deficits reveal that the U.S. is no longer a manufacturing economy, and collapsing social conditions are indicators of deficiencies ranging from health care to civic infrastructure.

Biden's concerns

1. Mr Biden's preoccupation will be on his domestic agenda in a country divided down the middle. Half the electorate is seething with discontent stoked by Mr Trump.
2. Mr Biden must deal urgently with the novel coronavirus pandemic, the economy and race relations; in his short tenure, he must work for a more equal society though Mr Trump has packed the Supreme and Federal Courts with reactionary nominees.
3. The 2,497 counties that voted for Mr Trump generate only 29% of GDP, while 477 counties won by Mr Biden contributed 70%, revealing the economic divide even as the stock market registers record gains.

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4. Mr Biden is an eminent politician with political skills, but because Trumpism looms so large, much will depend on his relationship with the Senate.
5. The Senate has the right to confirm 1,200 of Mr Biden's appointments, endorse or reject treaties, and can frustrate restoration of membership of the World Health Organization, the Climate Change accord, the Iran nuclear deal, and restoring credibility to the World Trade Organization.

Conclusion:

The United States is the nation of shopkeepers. American business regards China as a major market and driver of its economic prospects, as do Japan and Australia. Without the impetus, driven for blatantly political purposes, of the Trump administration, the future viability of the Quad formation is in doubt. New Delhi should concentrate on building its economy and reset its external relations, reverting to the recently discarded formula of pluralist multi-alignment.

New challenges

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Context: With the late-night call on Tuesday between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President-elect Joseph Biden done, Indian and U.S. officials can begin their formal interactions on the future of bilateral relations.

Highlights:

1. According to the readouts, the leaders committed to strengthening the Indo-U.S. Comprehensive "Global" Strategic Partnership, and cooperating on global challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic, affordable vaccines, climate change and the Indo-Pacific region.
2. Mr Biden's readout also included "strengthening democracy at home and abroad", which was dropped from the MEA version, indicating New Delhi's discomfort. Critical and recent comments made by Mr Biden and Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris over Jammu and Kashmir, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and actions against NGOs should not make the Modi government shy from engaging with the U.S. on these issues.



COVID, economic recovery and more

1. Making affordable vaccines available to their afflicted populations will be the immediate challenge.
2. On the need for economic recovery, their projected policies do not appear to be too divergent. Unveiling his administration's economic revival policy, Mr Biden announced a plan to "Buy American", and to ensure no government contract goes to companies that do not make their products in America.
3. The Modi government has already launched its "Atma Nirbhar Bharat" programme on similar lines, with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made it clear that the globalised economy and trading arrangements have been assessed as detrimental to India's manufacturing industry.
4. On climate change, a decision by the U.S. to re-enter the Paris Accord will be welcomed by India, which is also hoping to promote cooperation on the International Solar Alliance that it co-founded in 2016 with France.
5. Finally, it is significant that Mr Biden expressed his commitment to the Indo-Pacific policy, but New Delhi will be keen to see just what shape the new administration intends to take in its measures to maintain a "secure and prosperous" Indo-Pacific, and how far the Biden Administration will challenge China's moves in the region.

Reinventing cities

GS I: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies

Context: A new urban development paradigm should focus on cutting disease spread Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for a reimagining of urban planning and development to make cities and towns healthy and liveable after COVID-19 reflects the reality of decrepit infrastructure aiding the virus's spread.

Concerns with cities:

1. He emphasised resetting the mindset, processes and practices for safe urban living, and acknowledged that governments actually do little for the working millions.

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2. In the first hundred days of the pandemic, the top 10 cities affected worldwide accounted for 15% of the total cases, and data for populous Indian cities later showed large spikes that radiated into smaller towns.
3. Rapid transmission in Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru and Chennai was the inevitable outcome of densification and an inability to practise distancing norms.
4. It is only clear that the cities are not as they were before. If governments are serious about the reset moment — PM likened it to a post-World War reconstruction plan — they must resist returning to business-as-usual.

Challenges

1. Good, affordable housing is the cornerstone of a sustainable and healthy city, but it also represents India's weakest link.
2. A well-designed rental housing that is key to protecting migrant labour and other less affluent sections remains poorly funded.
3. Mumbai is estimated to have added only 5% of rental housing in new residential construction (1961-2000), and that too led by private funding.
4. The post-COVID-19 era, therefore, presents an opportunity to make schemes such as the Centre's Affordable Rental Housing Complexes deliver at scale, focusing on new good houses built by the state — on the lines of the post-war reconstruction in Europe, Japan and South Korea.
5. It is also an open secret that laws on air pollution, municipal solid waste management and water quality are hardly enforced, and tokenism marks the approach to urban mobility.

Conclusion:

Past scourges such as cholera, the plague and the global flu pandemic a century ago led to change — as sewerage, waste handling, social housing and health care that reduced disease. Governments are now challenged by the pandemic to show the political will to reinvent cities.



The storage tale of two vaccines

GS II: Issues Relating to Development and Management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

CruX: Moderna's vaccine offers great promise, especially for developing countries, compared to Pfizer's vaccine

A striking difference

More than the marginally better efficacy of the Moderna vaccine compared with the Pfizer vaccine, the striking difference lies in better thermostability at relatively higher temperatures. The stability of the Moderna vaccine at -20°C for up to six months, 2°C - 8°C for 30 days, and at room temperature for up to 12 hours will be critical for the broad roll-out of the vaccine in most countries, particularly in developing countries.

In contrast, Pfizer's mRNA vaccine requires storage at -70°C to -80°C , which makes vaccine shipping and storage logistics a nightmare even in developed countries. Against this background, Moderna's vaccine offers great promise.

India Specific

Most districts in India that are under the universal immunisation programme already have facilities to store huge volumes of the oral polio vaccine at -20°C . Hence, Moderna's mRNA vaccine can be made available in most parts of the country as it remains stable for 30 days at 2°C - 8°C .