

Pragmatism of Modi and Trump in the New Asia-Pacific

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India and the US relations have improved significantly in the last few decades because of structural reasons. Even though both the countries have some bilateral disagreements, the structural factors such as end of the Cold War, sharing of democracy and capitalism, and concerns about the rise of assertive China have pushed both the countries to cooperate with each other. Their common approach and cooperation is quite obviously seen in the Asia-Pacific region, which has been called by the US as Indo-Pacific. Even after coming of Donald Trump as the President of the US, the relationship between the US and India has continued to improve and it must be attributed to pragmatism of both the leaders.

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In the post-Cold War era, there have been consistent improvements in the India-US relations despite changes in domestic politics of both the countries. With the demise of bipolar international order and abandonment of non-alignment policy by India, the structural reasons which impeded the bilateral relations between the two countries have become extinct. In the Cold War days, India was non-aligned country¹ and the US was one of the poles in the bipolar world. Also whereas the US was leader of liberal economies in the world and India adopted a socialist mode of economy, there were very few interests in each other during the Cold War period. These structural divergences made it difficult for both the countries to understand and cooperate with each other. In the 1990s, these structural reasons have disappeared and there has been a bipartisan recognition in the domestic politics of both

the countries about the need to cooperate in shaping up global and regional order. There are many bilateral drivers who have been playing important roles in bringing oldest and largest democracies of the world closer but more significantly their common vision for the future of the global and regional politics have been the main driver which brings these two countries closer to each other.

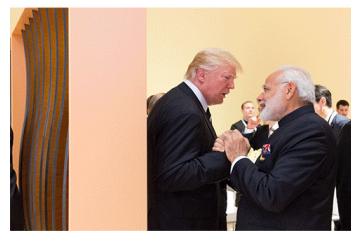
It was surmised that Donald Trump administration in the US might not be as accommodating to India's inspirations and his "America First"² doctrine might bring some frictions in the India-US bilateral relations. It did happen in the case of several other bilateral relations of the US and readjustments of varied degree have to be done to recalibrate with the new approach of the US. Even in the case of South Korea and Japan which are the two most important allies of the US in the Northeast Asia, trade, nuclear posture, missile defense, Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), etc. had to be reviewed and have been still under readjustment. However, in case of the US-India relationship, it seems that the global and regional drivers have been so strong that the bilateral relations between the two countries have improved significantly and have shown a clear trend of continuity.

Modi's Entry and Converging Strategic Interests

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi after coming to power in May 2014 had visits to the US in September 2014 and January 2015 and emphasized 'global strategic partnership' between the two countries. In January 2015, the US President Barak Obama was invited as the Chief Guest of the India's Republic Day celebration. Throughout 2014, 2015, and 2016, India and the US had high frequency of political interactions along with the summit meets between the leaders of two countries and called their relationship as an 'Enduring Partnership in the 21st Century'. India and the US had 'broad-based and multi-sectoral' cooperation on varieties of issues such as 'trade and investment, defense and security, education, science and technology, cyber security, high-technology, civil nuclear energy, space technology and applications, clean energy, environment, agriculture and health.'

On most of these fronts, India and the US have sustained or further enhanced mutual cooperation during the Donald Trump administration. Actually, the leaders of both the countries have had at least three meetings and frequent phone calls. Indian Prime Minister's visit to the US in June 2017 was well received and both the countries deliberated all possible issues of mutual concern. Even though at the bilateral level, both the countries have different stand on some issues such as trade and immigration, overall they have been in agreement to further talk and resolve these issues in accordance with their mutual benefits.

In the broad domain of global politics, India and the US have been cooperating closely to deal with terrorism, climate change, and other issues but the most salient aspect of the US-India relations before and during the Trump administration has been convergence of their approaches and objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. The region has seen significant changes in recent years and rise of 'assertive China', Japan's quest to 'militarization' and the US attempts to remain 'pivot to Asia' have brought tectonic churning in the regional politics. India seeks to have more space and role in the shaping of the regional order and the US appears to be also in agreement that India must be brought in as its economic and military capabilities along with its track-record of constructive role in bringing peace and stability in the global politics have increased remarkably (Paskal, 2017).



July 7, 2017
The 2017 G20 Summit, Germany
Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald J. Trump



September 26, 2017
New Delhi, India
Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis



November 14, 2017
The 2017 ASEAN Summit, Philippines
Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald J. Trump



September 18, 2017
New York, U.S.
Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson



October 25, 2017
Ministry of External Affairs, India
Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj and U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson

Some important bilateral visits of the leaders of India and the US
Source: flickr, wikimedia
@ DIVERSE+ASIA

Common Concerns in Asia-Pacific

Rise of An Assertive China

India and the US relationship showed unique convergence especially in their approaches and objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. The region has been rapidly changing in its contours and orientations and it's being surmised that developments in the region are going to be arguably the most important determinant in deciding future of the world politics. In the region, China has increasingly become more aggressive and brazen which has been trying to alter the status-quo in more fundamental ways. Chinese growing assertiveness has been understood as 'revisionist'³ and many scholars fear that if the process continues, the rise of China may not be peaceful beyond a point. In the economic domain, China has not only emerged as the largest trading partner of the most of the countries of the region but has been trying to re-shape, dominate and control the economic interactions in the region. It has also tried to provide its own institutional frameworks such as Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to alter existing arrangements in the region. These Chinese initiatives, it is feared, are going to create alternate institutions rather than supplementing existing one such as Asia

Development Bank (ADB). In the security domain also China's President Xi Jinping demanded for 'exceptionalism' in his speech during the 19th Party Congress. China has also been raising slogan of 'Asia for Asian' which basically means that China must be allowed to assert its dominance in the region. In recent years, China's attempts to assert its influence in the South China Sea, East China Sea and even Indian Ocean are clear examples of such intent. In South China Sea, China has become more overt and active in operationalizing its unilateral and notional 'nine-dash line'. Beijing has not only refused to obey the judgment of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) Tribunal which came in July 2016 but also tried to make artificial islands in the Spratlys with their airstrips and military installations. Similarly in the East China Sea, Beijing unilaterally announced its own Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013 which has been quite assertive in its claim on the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands. Through its 'string of pearls' strategy and naval modernization, China has also been making its claims in the Indian Ocean.

Japan Also Getting Assertive

The second important change in the region has been shift in the orientation of Japan from 'pacifist' to more aggressive. Although a trend in Japanese politics at least from Junichiro Koizumi government has been to search for 'normal state' (which means that military power of the Japan must be in commensurate with its economic influence), the trend has become more overt and strong in the leadership of Shinzo Abe. It must be underlined that even though Japan's peace constitution does not allow the country to have military with aggressive intent and so Japan just have Self Defense Forces (SDF), Japan's defense budget is the third highest in the region after China and India. In 2017, Japan spent \$46 billion in defense and the figures are expected to move upwards in the coming years (Yamguchi, 2017). Shinzo Abe has also been trying to tweak the notion of defense and in September 2015, Japan reinterpreted the idea of 'collective defense' and allowed overseas role to its SDF. It was argued that it's required in the context of changing regional politics. Furthermore, there are also speculation that the Shinzo Abe government would do away with Article 9 of Japan's constitution which prohibits the country to have its own military in terms of its capacity and intent to offense.

Diminishing Role of ASEAN

The third important change in the Asia-Pacific has been decline of

collective capacity of the Association of South East Asian Countries (ASEAN). For a long time, ASEAN-way provided a model in Asia to bypass political differences and work together for common economic development and prosperity. ASEAN created several additional mechanisms to encompass larger region of Asia-Pacific by its additional platforms such as ASEAN+3, ASEAN+3+1+1, and East Asian Summit.⁴ However, these platforms have not been able to deliver as per expectations and have gradually marred by internal disagreements and lack of consensus. Actually, these countries have not been able to devise any effective collective voice towards China's assertiveness and mechanisms to deal with it. Moreover, most of these countries face dilemma of choosing between their economic and military interests and even though they find military stance of China problematic. They can not express or act against it as their economic interests which are linked to China may get jeopardized. Furthermore, China has also been able to create a divide in member countries of the ASEAN by co-opting few of them through its deep pocket and 'charm-offensive'.

Provocative North Korea

The fourth important development might be flagged as emergence of North Korea as a de facto nuclear power with its inter-continental delivery capabilities. The North Korean nuclear threat is considered to be arguably the most imminent threat in the Asia-Pacific and the issue must be addressed collectively by the world at large but importantly by the countries of the region. Even though there have been imposition of economic sanctions and isolations through the successive United Nations Security Councils resolutions and bilateral legislations, North Korea have remained undeterred and it's unclear and missile programs have achieved rapid success. The US has been trying to use all possible mechanisms to strangle North Korea and even has been contemplating 'secondary boycott' and banning ships which are involved in exchanges with North Korea. However, it has been alleged that Chinese cooperation in implementing these sanctions and bans have been far from satisfactory. China is still number one trading partner of North Korea and constitutes almost 85 percent of North Korea's external trade.

US Persistent and India's Aspirations

In the above context, the relationship between the US and India becomes quite salient. The US appears to be committed to maintain its superiority in the Asia-Pacific and in past it categorically expressed its

object to remain 'pivot to Asia'. After the world financial crisis of 2008, the US has to face several limitations and there have been prophecy about 'the post-American world'. Although, it's true that there is relative decline of the US economic and military capacities to remain dominant power in the Asia-Pacific singularly, it's not appropriate to write obituary of the US in the regional politics yet. Even though the most important contest of the US with China in the regional politics appears to be noticeably moved away from Washington, their bilateral contests would remain a long and open case, which would be influenced and shaped by many variables such as continuation or otherwise of China's economic growth, role of Japan, various options of unfolding of the North Korean nuclear issue, role of emerging India, interest of Australia and future of ASEAN countries. Actually, in the given scenario, it might not be advisable for the US to think in the binary of the 'gear-up' or 'give-up' policies to deal with China. Pragmatically, the US should have adopted and have already adopted a policy of 'indirect gear-up' (Berkley, 2017) by bringing in more roles and responsibilities for its allies such as Japan and South Korea as well as for other like-minded strategic partners such as India and Australia.⁵

For an emerging India also, its economic and military role and responsibilities to shape-up Asia-Pacific region appear to be getting more significant. India under the leadership of Narendra Modi has adopted a more realist foreign policy strategy in which previous reluctance to assume more role and responsibilities in the regional politics have largely disappeared. Narendra Modi announced a change in India's Look East Policy and renamed it as Act East Policy.⁶

The policy earlier was limited in its contents and spread as it was more focused on economic issues and Southeast and Northeast Asia regions. In its new revision of Act East Policy, the policy includes security and strategic issues also and its scope has been extended up to the whole of Asia-Pacific. The Modi government feels that rising India must play more significant role in the regional politics and it must have more overt positions and preparation for the changes happening in this part of the world. On the rise of assertive China, India under Narendra Modi has shown much overt reactions as it feels that the process has not only serious implications for the South China Sea or East China Sea but also for the Indian Ocean. India is also aware that it shares more 4000 kilometers land border with China which is not official settled and Chinese

growing assertiveness may impact India in a more serious manner.

After coming to power as Indian Prime Minister, Modi made his first foreign visit outside South Asian neighborhood to Japan and stated that India would not tolerate 'expansionist tendency' of any country in the region and showed strong support to Japan under the Shinzo Abe leadership which appears determined to counter Chinese assertiveness in the region. Actually, it has been quite clear after a realist turn in the Indian foreign policy that the US, Japan, Australia and India are determined to work together in dealing with assertiveness of China.

As the US is interested in allowing Japan to take up leadership in the East Asian regional theatre and in agreement with Japan's attempt to do away with restrictions of the peace constitution, India also does not find it objectionable to work with Japan and create a network of like-minded countries to contain China. Actually, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are geared up to work together in shaping of course of Asia-Pacific in future. The annual joint naval military exercises among India, the US, Japan and Australia which earlier were largely bilateral between the US and India has become quadrilateral in recent years.

The US and India have also been aware about split in ASEAN countries and trying to make ASEAN a success by instilling collective concerns and efforts to deal with the future issues of common concerns among them. Rather than allowing China to manipulate interests of individual countries of the ASEAN, the US and India have been working to bring them together. Actually, through various bilateral mechanisms, the US and India both have been trying to reach out countries of the region and trying to connect them for a multipolar, rule-based, institutionalized inter-state relations in the region under the centrality of the ASEAN.

On the issue of North Korea as well, India shares concerns of the US that the issue may cause huge destructions and disruptions in the regional politics. India, which has diplomatic relations with North Korea, has conveyed it to Kim Jong-un regime its displeasure with its non-stop nuclear and missile tests, which have caused huge security problem in the region. India has been cooperating with the international community in the leadership of the US which has put various economic sanctions on North Korea. India supported all the United Nations Security

Council (UNSC) resolutions as well as in May 2017 and March 2018 put bilateral bans on several trade items⁷ North Korea. Although, India does maintain its embassy in North Korea and have remained second largest trading partner of North Korea its bilateral trade has declined to \$133.43 million in 2016–17 from \$198.78 million in 2015–16 (Business Standard, 7/March/18). Decline in the bilateral trade of India and North Korea is significant in the process to isolate North Korea economically. Furthermore, it means that politically also both the countries have been drifting apart and North Korea may fear that India's conventional position that North Korean issue must be solved through diplomatic means, might be changed in future. Actually, India participated in meeting of all those countries who participated in the Korea War under the United Nations auspices in Vancouver and it must have caused concerns in North Korea. Until now, although India shares a large part of the US diplomatic strategy to deal with the North Korean crisis, it has been against military intervention in North Korea (military actions on North Korea in the form of 'preventive/preemptive' attack has been argued by many leaders of the US administration). Unlike the US, India has also been of the opinion that channels of communication with North Korea must remain intact and for the same reason, does not support any proposal to shut down Indian Embassy in Pyongyang. Notwithstanding these few divergences between the US and India to deal with North Korea, India and the US are of the opinion that China should do more in the process of resolution of the matter as Beijing has deep historical, political, economic and strategic linkages with North Korea.

Pragmatic Partnership in the Trump Era

With the advent of Trump administration in the US, there were some doubts about the future of the US–Indian bilateral relations. Donald Trump's statements about 'America first' and aversion to regional mechanisms to achieve common and collective goals appeared to be in contradiction with Indian policy and preferences. Donald Trump met leaders of Japan, Germany, United Kingdom and China before he could meet Indian leader Narendra Modi in June 2017. However, all the apprehensions proved to be unfounded. During the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to the US, Donald Trump expressed his pleasure with the 'emergence of India as a leading global power as well as stronger strategic and defense partner'. The US national strategy document in December 2017, stressed

an important role for India in the Asia–Pacific. The US openly expressed that it 'will deepen... (its) strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region' (Times of India, 19/Dec/17). Most of these objectives are going to be achieved by the US through bilateral mechanism and increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia and India. More specifically, both the countries agreed to enhance their cooperation on the issue of regional connectivity and South China Sea in their joint statement. The US and India underlined that a 'more transparent development of infrastructure, use of responsible debt financing practices, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, rule of law and environmental protection'. It was obvious that by emphasizing on freedom of navigation, safe and uninterrupted flight in the open space along with the emphasis on peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes, the joint statement between of the two countries was conveying a strong message to China. During the Indian Prime Minister's visit to the US, both the countries gave more importance to strategic contents in their relationship including on the issues of 'Afghanistan, North Korea, Middle East, Pakistan, Indo–Pacific region, India's membership in export control agreements, and UNSC, cyber space, Malabar naval exercises, reaffirmation of India's designation as a Major Defense Partner, support to the US to join as an observer in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium⁸ and so on.

In a way, Donald Trump administration has continued previous US administration notion that India must be seen and supported as a 'net security provider' in the Asia–Pacific region. He further raised Indian expectations and role in the regional politics by calling the region Indo–Pacific. Actually, after the Narendra Modi's visit to the US in June 2017, Donald Trump and the US policy makers have been using this term without exception to mention Asia–Pacific region. The change of the word has important strategic meaning as it indicates exclusion of China from the Asia–Pacific and thus it also indicates that Indo–Pacific vision is an instrument to contest China's vision for the region.

In the same quest, both the countries share common vision for the region and feel that their cooperation with each other would be quite

significant in achieving each other's strategic goals in the region. Actually, the three principles outlined by Donald Trump to ensure 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) namely the rule of law, individual rights, and freedom of navigation and over flight are in consonance with the Indian vision for the region and obviously targeted to contain China's behavior, actual or prospective, to challenge these principles. The US has full support from Japan and Australia in their quest for FOIP and Donald Trump administration has been making attempts to make India also as an integral part of the objective.



The US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Manila at the sideline of the ASEAN summit
Source: Wikimedia Commons

More Role for India in East Asia

The US has also encouraged India and Japan to counter China's BRI by proposing an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC).⁹

The US has also been more active in promoting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's 'democratic security diamond' or 'democratic alliance' in the form of the QUAD. Actually, the Trump administration's strategy in the region might be called 'pivot to Asia 2.0, which is basically operationalized through a more active role of India and that is demanded and encouraged through the proposals of Indo-Pacific.

The US has also been quite supportive of India's Act East Policy as it goes along well with the US vision for the future. When Indian government invited all the leaders of the ASEAN countries as the chief guests for its Republic Day celebrations on 26 January 2018, the US appreciated India's responsible and consultative diplomacy. Alex Wong, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the East Asian and Pacific Affairs stated that India has 'capability and potential' to play more important role in the Indo-Pacific region and cited the visits of ASEAN

leaders to New Delhi in January 2018. India has also reciprocated the US support and encouragement and in November 2017, when on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit in Manila Donald Trump and Narendra Modi met, the India assured the US that as 'it has made efforts to fulfil the US expectations till now, it will continue to do so in the future too.'

The role of India in resolving North Korean nuclear and missile problems has also been encouraged by the US but till now India appears to be reluctant to play an active role in the process. Actually, India is aware that any direct interest of India in the Korean affairs may annoy China and rather than resolving the issue, it may further complicate the issue. When Donald Trump administration enhanced the US tough approach towards North Korea after coming to helm, India too expressed its willingness to work together. However, India wants that the channels of communication with North Korea must be kept open and diplomacy must be given more chance to resolve the issue. When Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj met her counterpart Rex Tillerson in October 2017, she tried to explain maintenance of Indian embassy in Pyongyang in the context of Indian approach and reportedly Tillerson got satisfied with the Indian position. India has been quite satisfied with the recent developments on the North Korean nuclear issue and welcomes proposed summit meets between North and South Korea on 27 April 2018 and between the US and North Korea in May 2018. India appreciates the changed stance of the Trump administration and further expects that denuclearization would be achieved by bringing in more trust and mutual considerations in the concerned countries towards one another.

What needs to be done?

In brief it may be said that the India-US relations even though have few small bilateral differences, the structural reasons emanating from changing global and Asia-Pacific politics, have continued to push both the countries close to each other during the Trump administration. The structural propellers of the bilateral relations demand pragmatic foreign policies from both India and the US and current leaders Narendra Modi and Donald Trump have not been averse to such pragmatism. On most of the significant issues, both the countries appear to be ready to work together even though they have few differences over priorities and approaches and it has reflected in the India-US interactions not only during the Donald Trump administration but even prior to it. However, the biggest challenge to the bilateral relations might be inconsistencies

in the conducting of the US approach. Even though both the countries share the broader visions for the future of Asia-Pacific, India have been uncomfortable with certain statements and informal utterances of the US administration. Furthermore, India and the US would also have to be more accommodating in resolving their bilateral issues such as trade and immigration. If this is not dealt with care, both the countries have to face problems in their domestic politics and it would also have its impact on their bilateral relations. Overall, the present and future of India-US bilateral relations looks positive and both the countries rather than taking it for granted should work carefully to enhance it further.

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- 1 · India was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was established in 1956. The movement was joined by all those countries which were not willing to participate in the bipolar competition in world politics during the Cold days.
- 2 · In his inaugural address, the US President Donald Trump used 'America First' expression to argue for a more nationalist and anti-interventionist position. The idea is considered to be contrary to open world trade and free flow of goods, services and people across the borders.
- 3 · There has been an intensive debate about whether an increasingly powerful China would seek a more important place in the existing international order or it would seek to change the international order itself in accordance to its design. In the first scenario, China would be called a 'status-quo power' but in the second scenarios it would be characterized as a 'revisionist power'.
- 4 · ASEAN includes Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. ASEAN+3 includes ASEAN countries, China, Japan, South Korea. ASEAN+1+1 includes ASEAN+3 countries, Australia and India. East Asian Summit includes ASEAN+3+1+1 countries, the US, Russia and New Zealand.
- 5 · India, the US, Japan, Australia, and South Korea along with most of the countries of the Southeast Asia are interested in a free and open Asia-Pacific, rule-based order, freedom of navigation and overflight, respect for international law, maritime security and so many other important issues of strategic importance and such common concerns must be constructively articulated.
- 6 · India initiated its Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1990s, when it intended to engage more with the Southeast Asian countries. In the first decade of LEP, the policy focused more on economic exchanges with Southeast countries. In the next phase of LEP from 2003, Northeast Asian countries were also included in its ambit and its content also expanded to political and strategic domains. In 2014, to make it more active by seeking more people to people connects and include whole Asia-Pacific region in its scope, the name of the policy was changed to Act East Policy (AEP).
- 7 · On 7 March 2018, India put restrictions of supply, sale and transfer/export of crude oil, industrial machinery, iron, steel and other metals, food and agricultural products, electronic equipment, stones. In 2017, India put restrictions of trade in condensates and natural gas liquids, refined petroleum products.
- 8 · The symposium was initiated by India in 2008. In its' biennially meetings, the navies and maritime security agencies of 35 littoral states of the Indian Ocean region participate. Nine countries have observer status in the symposium, including China and Japan but still the US has not been given any role in the process.
- 9 · Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) came to existence by a vision document of India in May 2017 at the African Development Bank Meeting in India. It is a framework of economic cooperation agreement between India, Japan and some African countries. The framework largely seeks to establish sea corridor linking Southeast Asian countries to Africa. It proposes to work in areas such as infrastructure and institutional connectivity, capacity and skill building, development and cooperation projects and people to people partnership. The framework is still as a vision document and more concrete measures are required to shape it up as an alternate to the BRI.

*본 기고문은 전문가 개인의 의견으로, 서울대 아시아연구소와 의견이 다를 수 있음을 밝힙니다.