

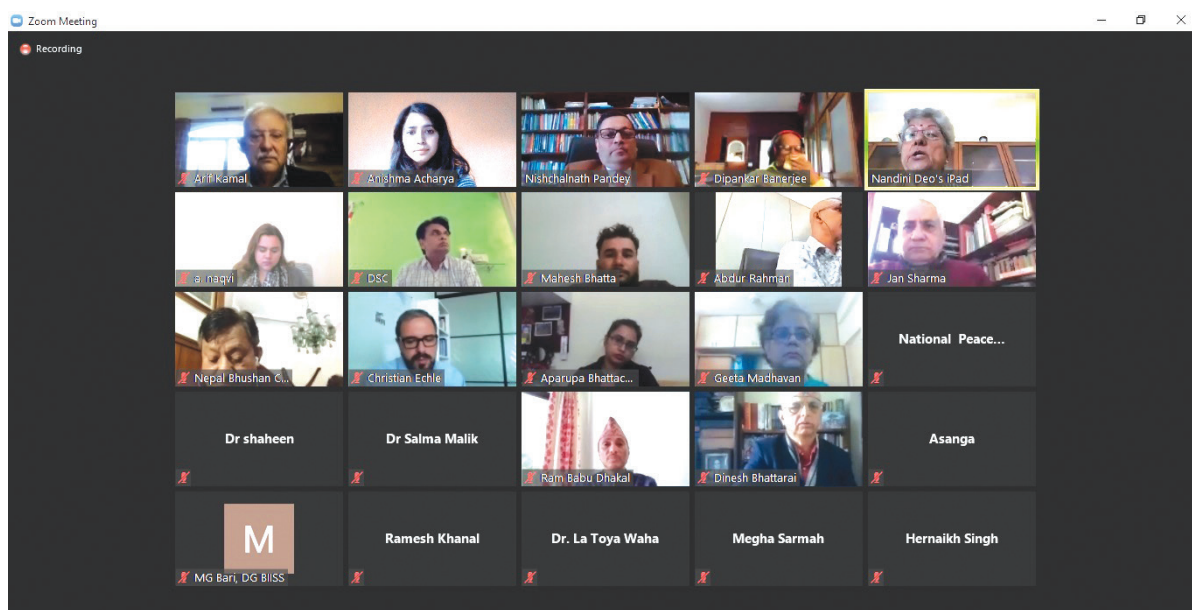
POLICY PAPER

US Elections 2020: Impact on South Asia

Date: Nov. 24, 2020
Number of Participants: 27

A zoom webinar on “US Elections 2020: Impact on South Asia” was organized by the COSATT in cooperation with the Political Dialogue Asia Programme of the KAS on Nov. 24, 2020. Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey, the convener of COSATT and Director of CSAS, Kathmandu, moderated the discussion with Amb. Neelam Deo, Director, Gateway House, Mumbai; Mr. Jehan Perera, Executive Director, National Peace Council,

The US Presidential elections hold substantial implications for the United States, both domestically and in terms of how it interacts with the world. The South Asian region is not an exception to this rule. Trump Administration, particularly its doctrine of ‘America First’, ‘make America great again’, withdrawal from ‘Paris Agreement’, ‘trade war with China’, stress on the ‘Indo-Pacific’, withdrawal from ‘UN Human Rights Council’



Colombo; Amb. Arif Kamal, former Pakistani Ambassador, Islamabad; and Amb. Dr. Dinesh Bhattarai, former foreign policy advisor to PM of Nepal. They explored how the new US administration under the Biden Presidency may impact the South Asian region. Mr. Christian Echle, Director KAS-Political Dialogue Asia, Singapore delivered a Vote of Thanks.

has changed critical contours of US foreign policy and country's overall relationship with rest of the world. Former Vice President Joe Biden's victory is likely to see the US pursue a more moderate policy, with greater emphasis on diplomacy and adherence to multilateral means of balancing international relations including re-setting ties with China.

The Afghan peace process, strengthening of US-India ties, China's increasing closeness with South Asian nations, and deteriorating India-Pakistan relations, could be some of the main concerns for the new US administration vis-à-vis South Asia. Similarly, democrats favour a more conciliatory position towards Iran. They want to bring America back to the Tehran nuclear deal brokered by President Obama. Even a modestly enhanced US-Iran relationship would be advantageous for New Delhi, Islamabad, and Kabul. All three want stronger commercial ties with Tehran, and they would prefer not to face a tough US sanction.

Sri Lanka-US

For Sri Lanka, the results of the US elections are particularly vital this time, because of the geopolitical arm wrestling currently going on in the Indian Ocean region. US foreign policy seems to have a long-term strategy for the Indo-Pacific. Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, coupled with the fact that the war has ended has attracted heavy investment from China. Any US attempt to curb Chinese influence in the region would certainly have to include the island nation.

The US-China relationship therefore will have an economic and geo-political impact on Sri Lanka. The Port City, the Hambantota Port, and the economic zone are already seeing major Chinese investments. Sri Lanka will be watching carefully what policies the Biden administration will pursue towards China and the Indo-Pacific. This will have a significant impact on the island.

A long history of violence and human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, particularly during its decades' long civil war has been a cause for concern for successive US governments. The Trump administration largely ignored these problems and in June 2018, even pulled the US out of the UN Human Rights

Council. The victory of Biden brings hope to many in Sri Lanka, as it is expected to stress on democratic values, liberalism and revisit multilateralism. Compared to President Trump, the Biden administration will intervene more on democracy and the rule of law in South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka. Biden Presidency is expected also to reduce confrontational posturing against China and seek a compromise with shared values of mutual cooperation that will benefit not only Sri Lanka, but entire South Asia.

India-US

India, in recent decades, has become an increasingly important country for US foreign policymakers. Since the early 90s, and especially since the mid-2000s, the Indo-US relationship has seen forward movement. Its growth has been fueled by two key US interests with strong bipartisan support: combating terrorism and counterbalancing China. Moreover, the recent India visit of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper for the third annual US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue has further strengthened the bilateral ties, which would persist also under a Biden Administration. A continuation of a strong alignment of interests between India and the US, both in the region and globally is expected. PM Modi's strong connection with both Presidents Obama and Trump depicts that he was able to develop a friendly relationship under both democratic and republican leaderships. Therefore, it is anticipated that PM Modi will be able to build close relations with the newly elected US President also.

Taking a broader view of South Asia, especially of India, the speakers of the webinar looked at the changes that could come forth with a rise of the Democratic Party in power in the US. Within the Democratic Party, for example, there are elements that

are very concerned about human rights issues, freedom of expression, violation of democratic rights, concerns on religious freedom concerns, etc. This will have a bearing on South Asian countries.

Similarly, the discussion delved into the issue of China's strong presence in the region. Amidst ongoing US-China rivalry - the US-India partnership would remain a strategic imperative. They see India within the Indo-Pacific region as a like-minded player keen to work with Washington in order to push back Beijing. Whether or not President Biden will use the term 'Indo-Pacific' as often as his predecessor has to be seen.

Pakistan-US

Trump regime has worsened the relationship worldwide therefore, the new administration in Washington will have a tough task to repair and reclaim the lost political ground globally. Biden is expected to have a more traditional approach to foreign affairs, supportive of multilateral organizations, focusing on restoring Washington's international standing and alliances, unlike his predecessor, with his 'America First' policy.

So what will this mean for US-Pakistan relations? Biden's rise in power is unlikely to drastically change the specific and transactional nature of the relationship between the two nations but it will provide Pakistan the opportunities to strengthen its strategic and economic ties with the US, especially in lieu of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The overall nature of the relationship has been transactional-both states have enjoyed good relations when their interests converged. Despite the absence of common strategic objectives and long-term mutual interests, layers in the relations were not mutually exclusive. The bilateral relations has witnessed several

highs and lows over the past two decades, but both countries have continued to engage closely, even if they diverge on certain issues.

President Biden is also likely to continue to support India in the region against China, but unlike Trump, he is also expected to take steps to restore the role of the US as the Islamabad-New Delhi strategic balancer. In its critique of the oppressive policies of India in Kashmir, the new administration with Kamala Harris as Vice-President is expected to be more vocal. Likewise, it is also expected that his administration will be more critical of human rights violations, and media censorship in Pakistan as well. If the ongoing Afghan peace process results in a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and a power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government, US-Pakistan relations will likely have a positive trajectory in the Biden era.

Mr. Biden may even reach out to Pakistan for support as the US draws down troops presence in Afghanistan.

Considering the 'China Factor'

The US election was held against the background of a crisis with China and its assertion in the South Asian region, impacting Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, and the Maldives. Dealing with a self-confident China will be the biggest foreign policy challenge for Biden. It will be interesting to see what new policy the administration will pursue to balance China in the region. Biden Administration may try to engage with China, through competition or cooperation, or both. Foremost, State Department itself as an institution needs to come to the forefront which was seen weak and feeble during the Trump era.

Trump has hit China badly over the course

of his Presidency. He has completely transformed the global landscape and confronted the rise of China as a direct challenge to the hegemony of the United States. On the other hand, however, Biden was an advocate for Obama's 'pivot to Asia', placing much greater emphasis on building alliances and appearing far less keen on increasing tariffs.

The likely US-China relationship may develop in three main ways: the end of the trade war and threat of tariffs, strengthening economic cooperation, and improving communication and multilateral dialogue. It is not just China that is seeing its relations with the US reach an all-time low, but relations between the US and the EU is also at its lowest ebb. Therefore, the Biden administration will also have plenty of opportunities to improve US relations around the world which will win accolades early on.

What does Biden Presidency mean for Democracy?

Democracy in America appears fragile and democratic institutions need repair. President Trump even falsely declared in a speech outside the White House that he had won the election and would ask the Supreme Court to stop the count. Never has a candidate declared victory in modern American history before the results were reported in key states. After the election results, now he is challenging the legality of the US election. What kind of a message does this send to other democracies- especially fragile ones around the world?

In his article, "Why America Must Lead Again", the winning candidate Joe Biden in his very opening sentence writes, "by nearly every measure, the credibility and influence of the United States in the world have diminished since President Barack Obama and I left office on January 20, 2017. President

Donald Trump has belittled, undermined, and in some cases abandoned US allies and partners. He has turned on our own intelligence professionals, diplomats, and troops. He has emboldened our adversaries and squandered our leverage to contend with national security challenges. Most profoundly, he has turned away from the democratic values that give strength to our nation and unify us as a people." He further writes, "Trust in democratic institutions is down. Fear of the other is up. And the international system that the United States so carefully constructed is coming apart at the seams." These strong words themselves prove that instead of being a symbol of soft-power, US Presidential polls is becoming a travesty of sorts to televise all around the world, therefore serious thinking has to go into this aspect.

Discussion

American interest and influence in South Asia is going to be limited during the Biden Presidency. The South Asian scenario is completely different today than it was a decade ago. Any external player(s), including the US, will have a tough fight to neutralize Chinese forays.

Unlike with Europe and Australia, US relationship with South Asia has always been transactional and will remain so for the next four years as well. It is never a strategic or an equal partnership with South Asia and unless this region has little or nothing to offer, the Americans are not going to consider South Asia as a priority. Apart from the American interest in the Indo-Pacific, the US will have limited appeal in this region once their troops leave Afghanistan.