

The Biden-Modi Paradox: Implications for Asia

C Raja Mohan

Summary

Although bilateral cooperation on technology, defence, climate change, and trade and investment dominated Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in June 2023, Asia was the running theme in the background. Although neither side mentioned Beijing's role in bringing them together, China and Asian geopolitics will now be decisive factors driving the India-United States partnership.

Soaring rhetoric on 'shared democratic values' has traditionally provided the mood music that dominated India's high-level political engagement with the United States (US) over the decades. However, the question of democracy became a discordant note during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in June 2023. India's main opposition leader, Rahul Gandhi, [visited the US a few weeks before Modi](#), and [many members of the US Congress](#) chose to insert the question of Delhi's current human rights record into the public discourse on India-US relations. Leading newspapers, including [The New York Times](#) and [Washington Post](#), demanded that US President Joe Biden's administration put the question of India's democratic decline at the heart of the conversations with Modi. That criticism, however, had little impact on the outcomes from Modi's visit.

That brings us to the paradox of the [Modi-Biden partnership](#). When Delhi and Washington celebrated shared political values during the Cold War, there was little the two sides could cooperate on. While the relationship has acquired greater traction in the 21st century, there was previously considerable hesitation in both capitals on building a sustainable strategic partnership.

It is Modi, criticised for presiding over a growing democratic deficit in India, who has boldly discarded India's historic reluctance to engage the US in deeper strategic cooperation. Biden, who framed his worldview in terms of an irreconcilable contest between 'democracies and autocracies', has gone out of the way to celebrate Modi's leadership and pushed Washington closer to Delhi.

Asian observers, though, are not surprised by the Modi-Biden paradox. Although the question of political values did figure in US engagement with Asia, it never shaped the evolution of Washington's ties with the region. Commercial and strategic considerations have weighed far more heavily in the US' relations with Asia over the decades. Seen from that perspective, three broad implications for Asia emerge out of the Modi-Biden vision of deeper India-US strategic partnership.

The first is in the defence domain. In recent years, there has been a steady growth in the defence cooperation between India and the US. As Modi put in his [address to the joint session](#) of the US Congress, Delhi and Washington "were strangers in defence cooperation

at the turn of the century. Now, the United States has become one of our most important defence partners”. What is new now is the Biden administration’s commitment to [significantly enhance](#) India’s defence capabilities – marked by the rare transfer of fighter jet engine technology to India and facilitating joint research, development and production of weapons.

This new approach is driven in part by the new imperative of reducing Delhi’s historic dependence on Moscow for its weapons. The other part is about strengthening India’s deterrent capabilities against China – with which Delhi has been locked in a military conflict in the high Himalayas as well as a naval competition in the Indian Ocean. Equally significant is the US’ desire to boost India’s role as a ‘net security provider’ in the Indian Ocean and help it become a key factor in shaping the military balance of power in Asia and its waters.

The second implication is restructuring of the commercial and technological supply chains in Asia by reducing the US dependence on China and promoting deeper integration with India. The [joint statement](#), issued by Modi and Biden, called on their respective industries to embark on “greater engagement and technical cooperation to build resilient supply chains for emerging technologies, clean energy technologies, and pharmaceuticals; promote an innovative digital economy; lower barriers to trade and investment; harmonise standards and regulations wherever feasible; and work towards skilling our workforces.”

India is certainly not comparable to China either in economic size, trade volume or manufacturing skills. Still, Washington is eager to boost the [commercial rise of India](#) as part of its new strategy to “de-risk” the intense economic partnership with China built over the last four decades. Modi’s India, in turn, sees the opportunity to elevate its economic standing in Asia through deeper commercial cooperation with the US. The channelling of American investments into [India’s semiconductor industry](#) and Delhi’s facilitation of those investments underline the new approach in both capitals. In case the message did not go through the corporate boardrooms, Modi and Biden spent time with [the top technology chief executive officers](#) of the two countries and urged them to go full steam ahead in strategic techno-economic cooperation.

The third is in the arena of Asian multilateralism. In their [joint statement](#), Modi and Biden reaffirmed their commitment to “empowering the Quad as a partnership for global good”. The Quad or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, as a forum, brings together Australia, India, Japan, and the US. They also promised to continue working with the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations “to achieve shared aspirations and address shared challenges in the Indo-Pacific region”.

Modi and Biden also welcomed the depth and pace of enhanced consultations between the two governments on regional issues including South Asia, the Indo-Pacific and East Asia, and looked forward to their governments holding an inaugural Indian Ocean Dialogue in 2023. On economic multilateralism, the leaders “welcomed the progress on negotiations to conclude the proposed IPEF [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity] Supply Chain Agreement”. Biden also invited India to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in San Francisco in November 2023 as a guest of the US.

The two leaders also sent a message to China without naming it by [affirming](#) their “enduring commitment to a free, open, inclusive, peaceful and prosperous India-Pacific region with respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, and international law. Both leaders expressed concern over coercive actions and rising tensions, and strongly oppose destabilising or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force.”

By any measure, the new India-US bilateral agenda is of consequence to Asian security. The chancelleries in the region, used to indifferent relations between Delhi and Washington, would, however, want to see how effective the implementation of the impressive Modi-Biden vision for India-US cooperation is.

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Professor C Raja Mohan is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at crmohan@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.