

Report on Virtual Panel Discussion on JOE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

3 February 2021, RIS, New Delhi



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Research and Information System
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विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली

Report on
Virtual Panel Discussion on
“The Biden Presidency: Global order and India”



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Report on Virtual Panel Discussion on “The Biden Presidency: Global order and India”

With the Inauguration of the Biden Presidency, the new administration took over on 20th January, 2021, in the US. Several commentaries on the importance of the global order have emerged. What exactly it would entail for India as well was the focus of the webinar that RIS organised on February 3, 2021. Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri, Distinguished Fellow, TERI and former diplomat chaired the webinar. The Panelists included: Rajeev Kher, Distinguished Fellow, RIS; Dr. Sreeram Sundar Chaulia, Professor and Dean, Jindal School of International Affairs; Dr. Srikanth Kondapalli, Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, Diplomatic Editor, The Economic Times; and Professor Gulshan Sachdeva, Centre for European Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Professor Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, RIS, also spoke on the occasion. This report covers various aspects of the topic. They include the implications and the way forward on bilateral relationship between India and the US, the ‘Beijing and Brussels’ effect on India-US ties, and the emerging views on multilateralism as well as on strategic affairs.

India-US



Mr Rajeev Kher
Distinguished Fellow, RIS

RAJEEV KHER

Any discussion on India, an emerging power, and the US, most dominant power as of now globally, needs to be done in a comprehensive global context. This includes ongoing pandemic, the US-China trade conflict, Trumpism, India’s rough patch of economic development, a rising China being India’s neighbour, and the US being a natural partner for India with shared values.

When it comes to India-US relationship, there is a much greater focus on the strategic and the larger geopolitical dimension than just economic or trade dimension. Economic and trade dimension necessarily has to be subsumed within the overall context. The idea of an India-US trade deal sounds unrealistic and impractical because when one looks at India-US relationship from a very narrow segment of bilateral trade, what one gets and what one loses, then both the countries may not achieve much.

Biden has, during the course of his campaign, during his earlier incarnation as Vice President, and before that, in the Senate has been talking about positive things about India and the US. So, there is a natural complementarity between two sides in several areas, but then there are challenges as well.

The first area is health. In the Union Budget 2021-2022, India has given a lot of attention to comprehensive healthcare. There are complementarities with the US in many aspects. In pharmaceuticals, India needs to look at the higher echelons of pharmaceutical industry, that is investments in research and development, investments in therapeutic diversions which have now occurred because of scientific progression and investments in technology, in larger capital creation in the pharmaceutical sector itself, something that will be of interest to the US. There are complementarities as the US is interested in the medical devices sector. The US and India can also work together in the services sector and the skill based medical technology sector. Also, if you have a great amount of collaboration with the United States in the healthcare sector, you will necessarily have to look at intellectual property related institutional processes, institutional mechanisms and laws in a manner protecting mutual interests. Same is the situation in climate change.

On climate change, Biden has already spoken that US will instantly join the Paris Agreement. India has an ambitious climate change mitigation agenda and a renewable energy-based power generation program. With the US reinforcing its commitment to climate change mitigation, India and the US will be able to work together. But there are also challenges such as an agreement on environmental goods and services. India will have to continuously review its positions vis-à-vis these challenges.

Regarding the services sector, in the digital sector, there is a need to talk about data governance and the challenges therein.

India and the US will have to look at all these issues from a very dynamic and a forward-looking perspective to move forward.

On the trade deal, the US market access interest lies in areas which India at the moment, particularly at the moment when the farmers agitation is on, will not be able to offer them. Therefore, India will have to find ways in which many other areas where it can get strategic, technological and investment advantages while it makes certain commitments.

And lastly, this is a great opportunity for India to pursue a membership of APEC. It has been eluding India for a very long time.

The US had indicated some interest earlier on this, but because of the internal issues in APEC and because of India's own, the US didn't push it as hard as it had to be. APEC will give India an opportunity of getting its economy on a pathway, which is a forward looking, liberal, economic pathway, which will take care of 20 years from now, of the economic processes and growth that take place in India.

An India-US partnership in the economic sphere is very well constructed and available. There, it is about give and take. India should be prepared to be able to give something and see the benefits of what it gets a decade or two from now, recognizing fully well, that this India-US partnership also needs to be balanced with the fact it cannot ignore the rising neighbour, China. There are huge lot of issues which we can get from China as well, if we get into a negotiating stance with them.



Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi
Director General, RIS

SACHIN CHATURVEDI

On the India-US trade deal, there are issues related to agriculture, non-tariff barriers, India's growing import of defence equipment, crude oil, data localization, market access-related issues, tariffs, and IPR-related issues.



Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva
Centre for European Studies,
JNU

GULSHAN SACHDEVA

On trade, India needs to get the GSP benefits back. It has to be noted that India has not signed any trade deal in the recent past with any other country, so it is difficult to see any serious trade deal happening even with the US. There are also issues relating to movement of skilled professionals from India's side and issues relating to investment in India as pointed out by the US. But it is important for both the countries to discuss issues from the context of their bilateral relations than being overshadowed by what is happening in China, and between China and other players.



Amb. Manjeev Singh Puri
Distinguished Fellow, TERI
and former Diplomat

MANJEEV PURI

Pre-COVID, India had become one of the five largest economies in the world. This should be played up because of geostrategic competition and geostrategic cooperation. In all probability, India is going to become one of the three largest economies in the world, the other two being China and the US. Therefore, the strategy in the next two decades would be related to competition and collaboration. This needs to be borne in mind when anyone looks at India-US relations and where things could possibly pan out in terms of the global situation.

President Biden also brings with him a whole lot of positive things for India-US relationship as India becomes a larger player in the world, perhaps provides a better playing field or even disruption in the global state of play might be of help.

However, stability is also important for India when it takes things forward in its interest as it builds upon its demography and economy. These are opportunities for India to play domestically and take advantage of this situation globally.

Regarding India-US ties, one main issue is mobility, more specifically H1B visa and L-visa curbs, because it has impacted middle-class growth in India. President Biden has relaxed some of the rules related to spouses working. India needs to be engaged with the US on the other visa restrictions as well. As long as the Biden administration is one that listens to the US economy and not just those who are all about protectionism, India can seek to leverage what the leaders of the US economy has to say on the issue.

India also needs to understand what the world's perception of Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, and the need to address the view that there is a protectionism in India. India needs to look at attracting greenfield FDI such as the ones from companies like Tesla. India also needs to understand what it can for digital America and what sort of access it wants to give American companies in the Digital India initiative. This is certainly going to be a very big issue, perhaps bigger than the issue of IPRs, in the coming days. India needs to think about what it means from an Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative perspective. At the time of the India EU Summit, the Prime Minister was very clear that it certainly doesn't mean to keep foreign companies out of India. That was music to the ears of many, but India has to roll out the necessary policies, and the US can be a test case from that perspective.



Dr Sreeram Sundar Chaulia
Professor and Dean,
Jindal School of International Affairs

SREERAM CHAULIA

India should be alert to this opportunity to be able to extract as much as it can from the US by partnering with the US, officially in India's extended neighbourhood, or even beyond on this point. As to fears of US liberals criticising India for its internal developments, the Indian state is not strong and the state is not repressive. We actually have a strong society. That's the ideal model for the liberals. India should be able to gain concessions from the US on a range of issues related to economic as well as purely bilateral, military and other forms of cooperation.

India also needs to harness the Kamala Harris factor and get her over to Chennai, to her ancestral home, as soon as possible. Given the enormous domestic crisis that Biden is facing, he may not be able to visit India anytime soon. But vice-presidential visit can be lower profile, and important for bridge building. America has a lot of women among the Indian diaspora who are suddenly feeling very confident about getting into public office. Kamala Harris is very pragmatic as seen on aspects of law enforcement and for much of her career in California. So, India should use that South Asian heritage angle as there is a lot of ethnic pride about this factor in the US and how well the Indian diaspora is doing even if one takes into account the number of Indian Americans in the Biden administration. Let's capitalize on Harris and strategise for her visit to her ancestral home in India.



Dr Srikanth Kondapalli
Professor, Centre for East
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SRIKANTH KONDAPALLI

In the light of that, in fact, India has a lot of opportunities. India should increase its bilateral trade with the US to over USD 500 billion. During President Trump's visit to India, there were agreements signed on a host of issues with the US. So, the fifth largest economy (India) and the largest economy (the US) suggest that there is actually a lot of opportunity for India to work through with the US in this period.

The 'Beijing And Brussels' Effect

SACHIN CHATURVEDI

India-US partnership would be impacted by the Brussels effect and the Beijing effect. China and the EU factors are going to be important in terms of approach to new technologies including 5G, where the contested area would be the aggressive Chinese efforts to have Chinese standards as global standards, technology and the US fund that China has been attacking, and semiconductor industry and issues related to intellectual property rights (IPR).

MANJEEV PURI

Indications are that President Biden would go back to the old foreign policy constructs of 'take-your-allies-together'. Just because the EU inked a comprehensive agreement on investment with China, one can't say it will affect the EU-US ties. China can be co-opted into a global order where free riding is not really easy and where being much more rules-bound is the order of the day. The world will have to deal with China in the long run as it is the leading economy in the world. For India, this comes as a challenge. But a better and more settled world order gives India an opportunity to grow its economy, and for it to be able to play a more meaningful role in the world. For this, India needs to work with allies, and in this regard can 'cultivate Europe'.

Not only is China a huge economy, but also while most countries were economically badly hit due to COVID-19, it has been relatively able to do well. The gap between India and China is not only what the headline figures of the IMF's World Economic Outlook shows, but also what the output gap differences show. And for the world, China is an opportunity that they would like to ring fence and bring into the play in various ways.

SRIKANTH KONDAPALLI

James Steinbeck who included those words in the joint statement between Obama and Hu Jintao, the Chinese President mentioned about South Asian security considerations under their purview. So, compared to those previous experiences, the early calls and phone calls suggest that they have crossed the Rubicon in the US-India relations.

On the other hand, President Xi Jinping speaking at the Davos meeting, alluded to the emergence of a new Cold War between China and the US. He also mentioned about the various other threats that may emerge for the globalization and other aspects. And the next level leader, Yang Jiechi warned his US counterpart not to go ahead with issues related to Hong Kong from where thousands of people have been applying for visas to immigrate to UK. The new security law had completely overhauled the Hong Kong related situation. Yang Jiechi's comment was slightly different from his deputy, Le Yucheng, the vice foreign minister who incidentally served in New Delhi as Chinese Ambassador. Le Yucheng suggested to a step-by-step process where the Biden administration would kind of reformulate policies vis-à-vis China. However, Yang Jiechi's comments suggested the emergence of a new Cold War between China and the US.

So, between US-India and US-China, there is going to be a substantial change in the strategic landscape in the coming years under Biden administration. Whether he follows Trump's policies or not, the tension is actually brewing. That is partly because the Chinese want to occupy the centre stage, as they suggested in the 19th Party Congress. And this is the basic structural problem between China and the US.

When seen from the perspective of China-US relations, this is a major strategic opportunity that India has, especially when due to the China-US tensions be it in the bilateral trade tariff war, or in terms of the overarching relations in the global commons between China and the US, or on the emerging problems on Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, South China Sea or on Senkaku Islands. India has a host of issues to discuss with the US. Unlike the previous administrations, this provides India with opportunities to reframe our policies, possibly, and work with the US on a number of issues of concern.

GULSHAN SACHDEVA

On how Europe is going to affect India-US relations looking at what Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission said, Europe stands ready to reconnect with an old and trusted partner.

The US, Europe and China are economic heavyweights. Within that, if you look at US and EU together, they are one-third of global trade, one-third of global GDP and 60 per cent of the global FDI and also

putting together major development partners. The EU has come out with EU-US agenda for global change with a focus on green leadership. Europe is delighted that the US has re-joined Paris Agreement. There is also the COVID-19 response and global health wherein the first vaccine Pfizer is mentioned as a transatlantic project - a joint venture between German and US company. Then there are issues concerning trade technology, global action and security.

After four years of Europe bashing by Trump, most Europeans are happy with Joe Biden's victory in the US Presidential polls. But these four years have also given them a reality check. They may be comfortable with Biden, but they have less faith now in the US political system. Although they would like the US to return as a global leader, there are doubts whether Biden would be able to repair the damage which has been done in the last four years. Now, Europe's attitude towards the US has also changed significantly in the last four years. Now, they are asking whether they can fully rely on the US for security needs. Some recent surveys in Europe show that more than 60 per cent Europeans now believe that within 10 years, China will be more powerful than the US. These perceptions have affected policymakers.

So, Europe doesn't want to be on the wrong side of a rising power. This is clear from the recent EU-China investment deal that Europe doesn't want to take sides in the US-China Cold War. Rather, they would like to take geopolitical advantage, and when China is under pressure, they have taken some of the advantage they have through this deal. So, while there is a reasonable chance of normalisation of transatlantic relations, the US cannot take Europe for granted. Now, many in Europe are considering the French idea of strategic autonomy. The foreign policy team of Biden is monitoring Europe very closely. They would also like some containment of Russia by the US and stabilization in the European neighbourhood.

SACHIN CHATURVEDI

While Katherine Tai, the incoming US Trade Representative, had opined that the WTO had “disappointed expectations”, the world is seeing President Joe Biden giving more importance to reviving multilateralism, and bringing the US back on track. It needs to be seen how effective that would be, what kind of priority agenda they have, the issues which are on table in terms of setting the agenda for the next WTO ministerial.

RAJEEV KHER

On WTO, it is high time that India recognizes that if it has to move forward, it has to see how the first moves are made. The WTO Director General’s position will be the indication of that. Then there are WTO reforms and the issues before the WTO starting with the Dispute Settlement Mechanism and the appellate body restructuring. It is there that India must make its move forward. India and US on many issues in that context, have an alliance, they have an agreement on the way they look at the issue and it is necessary for India to make those moves.

MANJEEV PURI

Here are the difficult areas. Given the number of people who voted for Trump, around 70 million, the fact of the matter is Trumpism isn’t out. This was also clear from what happened in the impeachment hearings.

However, the next four years is going to be about the Democrat Party, particularly during the first two years when they happen to have a majority in both the Senate as well as the House. There are opportunities for them to do something domestically, not particularly easy, but things which they possibly will be able to do.

Climate change is one such issue that is particularly relevant to India. It united the progressives and the moderates, to which President Biden also belongs, in the Democrat Party. But there are a number of forces that play in the US, including the energy politics of the country, the hydrocarbons industry, and the fact that the majority for the Democrats in both the Senate and the House is wafer thin. Also, the role and the abilities of the hydrocarbon companies, the oil companies, should never be underestimated.

This means, the US will be very active on the issue of climate change, but much more active internationally than perhaps what they will be able to deliver domestically. The cue can be taken from the UN Secretary General, who within days after it became clear that President Biden had won the election, joined the bandwagon of GHGs emissions neutrality by 2050, making this the key goal of the UN. Had Trump won the election, this would not have been such a salient issue as it is now.

In this salience, while in Paris, India did something remarkable becoming strong advocates of climate change and of taking mitigation action, promoting for renewables. When the Chinese are also announcing that they are on the same side, India needs to become much more strategic in going forward. In terms of the global play of things, this perhaps could be one of the most important things that India would have to deal with. It is not just about climate change that is important. If India wants to claw its way to any higher place in the global table, the UN security council reform will have to be made central to that strategy.

For India to play a major role in the global arena, multilateralism has got to be the vehicle. This includes India's ambitions to join the UN Security Council as a permanent member, or the way India uses the WTO.

If the US returns to multilateral institutions, the process of multilateralism would go forward in a big way. Otherwise, the dead-end multilateral institutions leave you at the mercy of bilateralism, something in which India is not particularly well-placed at the present time and in the present way of doing things.

SREERAM CHAULIA

One of the signature initiatives that Biden has been talking about throughout the campaign, and even now his administration is planning, is the so-called 'summit of democracies'. This is what they want to happen this year, they say it is going to be like a big diplomatic highlight event. To an extent the G7 invitation to South Korea, India, and Australia makes it a so called D10, all democratic countries, it is likely to be Biden's big coming out party on the international stage, because domestic priorities are going to really consume him for the next few months. But later towards the summer of this year, there will be heightened activity around this whole idea of the club of democracies and how they can come together. This is not, of course, a new idea to an extent in our region. In the Indo-Pacific, Shinzo Abe of Japan had been speaking about this alliance of democracies and the Quad in a way, that is a kind of small-scale alliance of democracies.

So, what does it mean? When the coup happened in Myanmar, already, the talk was about how Biden would look to rope in key democratic partners in Asia, to try and reverse this unfortunate development. The US will not be as interventionist as they were in the past, and that whole era, it seems to have receded. Whether one wants to thank or curse Trump, the fact is that he has taken them away from interventionism. The liberals this time have been chastened. They are not the kind of interventionist liberals as in the past, but nonetheless, they will want to subtly make a point about democracy and promotion of democracy.

Practically speaking, the Biden administration is going to give importance to democracy and will likely challenge lots of authoritarian regimes, especially the ones which do not serve American strategic interests. There is a puzzle here. Ideally, India, from a geostrategic point of view, would welcome a coming together of democracies. There's a lot of focus among the liberals in the US about Hong Kong, about Xinjiang, about Tibet, and generally about human rights defenders being persecuted within mainland China, and also the export of authoritarian model around the world that China has been doing, especially in Africa and elsewhere through surveillance and monitoring and through supporting extremely repressive regimes.

In the US, there is an obvious ideological shift from right to left of centre. And that needs to be understood in all its ramifications. The Biden team, even before they came in, in just the last few weeks, they have been keeping a low profile, quiet traditional style, the old way. It has not generated enough news. It's been rather low profile because there are lots of domestic problems. But one thing is quite obvious. The idea that America should, as Biden says, should lead by the power of its example, not by the example of its power. And what they are talking about, and quite obviously, is trying to bring back into the discourse is the notion that democracy as a form of rule, or, as a regime type, is desirable, is morally and ethically desirable.

The liberals in the US have broken bread with many authoritarian countries for broader strategic reasons and they still have many hard-line authoritarian regimes who they count as their allies. But nonetheless, there is this, value distinction that is likely to emerge now in the American discourse. And to some extent, at least selectively in some regions of the world, they're going to use this as an important entry point for them.

India has important traditional strategic partners such as Russia and countries like Vietnam, for example, which are very important for India in this region. So, while we are all on board in terms of a coalition of democracies, we have to deal with all types of regimes for strategic reasons, just as the US also does.

On multilateralism, there is a thinking of five, ten or 20 democracies coming together to achieve certain objectives, but can also be just three. This is something India needs to explore and push more in its own region. For example, there is a real threat of a kind of a return of Chinese hegemony in Sri Lanka and in Nepal. Nepal, arguably already has been there and is trying to extricate itself from Chinese hegemony. But these are the two test cases where India can look at trilateral partnership with the US and do programmes together that will help build civil society and improve the chances of moderate forces in these countries.

So, in that context, India has been inviting the US more in the last four or five years into South Asia. Earlier, India was possessive about South Asia. Under Prime Minister Modi, India is in many ways facilitating the US in this region, with Bangladesh, with Maldives, India's trilateral dialogue with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and bringing in Mauritius and Seychelles on the Indian Ocean issues. So, India wants the US to be involved because it does not see the US as hegemonic like it used to in the past. So, there is a need to maximize this two-plus-one format of India-US partnership.

India needs to work with the US without blinkers or without the prejudices of the past because for obvious reasons, India needs balance in Indo-Pacific, China has to be restrained from geopolitical expansion. India needs the US, and so it's time now to think in terms of the democracy question and the trilateral cooperation, to go forward and create interesting intersections, conjunctures and shared interests with Washington under Biden.

SRIKANTH KONDAPALLI

The recent official India-US interaction at the defence and external affairs ministry-level suggests that this is going to be a continuity on the Indo-Pacific issue, including on the Malabar Exercise. This is a welcome departure from the previous administration's interactions with India. When Trump and Obama were elected, there was a brief communication gap. During Obama's time, there was an emergence of the G2 (US and China) ruling the roost across the board.

DIPANJAN ROY CHAUDHURY



Mr Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary
Diplomatic Editor,
The Economic Times

India needs to be cautious about the US strategy on Indo-Pacific and ensure that there is no repeat of the Obama period where the right noises were made but then there were no actions. A freedom of navigation operation in South China Sea actually hardly means anything. China would like to test US in a couple of months after Taiwan in the South China Sea region. Just freedom of navigation won't really help.

The US has a long history and friendly relations in Southeast Asia in particular including the Philippines and Indonesia. The US understands this region much better than West Asia. So, it needs to focus, consult scholars and diplomats on framing a policy. The way the US treated the last military regime in Thailand was appalling and was as if it had not dealt with the military regimes in the past.

On Af-Pak, the Biden administration is raising some questions on the deal signed with Taliban. Traditionally, the US is dependent on Pakistan for the Eurasia and the Central Asia region. It really needs to be seen what the Biden administration is going to do.

William Burns is going to be a very important interlocutor. While he is the director of the CIA, but he knows India, he has handled India. While Secretary of State Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan have the balanced approach that Burns has, Burns is going to be very helpful in India-US relations because he has dealt with cross-

cutting issues not just with the security establishment but also with the External Affairs Ministry. So, India needs to work with John Kerry, Burns and Sullivan to come up with a more pragmatic strategy and not just very idealistic strategy.

On India's plan to acquire Russian S-400 air defence systems for USD 5.5 billion, it is not yet sure if the US will grant a waiver on this planned acquisition of or if it will lead to a diplomatic crisis due to sanctions that will possible be imposed on India, similar to those imposed on Turkey for purchasing that equipment.

With Iran, India has made the right moves recently as the Indian Foreign Ministry officials were in Teheran making the move in anticipation that the Biden administration will begin discussions. Iranian defence minister was in India, the first such visit in 42 years.

There is a wider Indo-Pacific collaboration, but India may not like to militarize the Quad, howsoever the US administration would like to do it, and would like to keep the Malabar exercises separate from the Quad. The Quad is still a political formation more for the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief and counterterrorism. Of course, everyone knows the larger objective, but there is a difference on India's part on that because India and the US are the two members of the Quad which have disputes with China. India's dispute is bigger than Japan's dispute with China. Through the last year, India did not come out with a formal statement on Xinjiang, on Hong Kong and Tibet. Recently, India's External Affairs Minister had suggested an eight-point formula on handling China. Geopolitics realities include setbacks as well and they cannot be ignored.

India is a non-Western democracy and it will not conduct its policy the way Australia or even some of the Western European or Eastern European countries would do. India has certain issues and, on Crimea, it will not be on the same page in the UN and elsewhere.

GULSHAN SACHDEVA

On India-US ties, there is a bipartisan kind of support in the US for better relations and to a large extent, this is also true in India. But what happens between India and the US will have immediate implications for India's ties with China, Russia, Iran, greater Central Asia, Eurasia and Afghanistan. It has to be seen whether both US and India looking at each other through the prism of China and India being a balancer to rising China for the US, Also, whether the US is important for India to manage its India's ties with China or if India-US relations are important for the sake of both the countries, or if it is due to India and

the US being strong democracies or due to their economic strength or due them having soft powers.

Geopolitics in Asia going to dominate India's ties with the US. However, the Indian economy has been under stress for some time and its approach to external liberalisation has been cautious. One needs to see whether there is too much emphasis in India, on the narrative on China particularly on the Belt and Road Initiative, on Indo-Pacific, on Quad and on geopolitics. Geopolitics is also dependent on many other variables, which are influenced by many other players as well.

MANJEEV PURI

For India, without the US strategically and in quantitative terms, going really further ahead would be very difficult. For the US, India brings a certain weight which is important for the overall structure of where they place themselves in the world. The US is a large player and, being a democracy, domestic politics outweighs everything else. The Indian diaspora is an important in that aspect. It's not so much about the H1B visa people as they do not have a vote. It is the second-generation Indian-Americans who are particularly important because they are the ones who hold the leverage to power. It is the second generation and maybe now the third generation who would be doing it as they have the voting power. So, the Harris visit to India will be important.



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