

India-US ties: Focus on the long-term

While Trump's comments are a dampener, we must consolidate multi-polar relationships



ARUN K SINGH

The change in the US administration's policy commitment to the Paris climate agreement of December 2015, announced by US President Donald Trump on June 1, was also a reflection of the continuity in the more than century-old struggle in the US between enlightened internationalism and narrow nationalism. It also showed up the fault lines between the core individualism defining the US ethos and the more social democratic orientations in Europe. It highlighted the challenge for Indian policy makers seeking convergence in interests with US, but faced at times with shifting priorities and focus.

After its late entry in World War I, US retreated from the League of Nations in the 1920s, and from significant international involvement in the inter war period. However, after the Second World War, US saw itself in the lead on behalf of Western interests. It worked to rebuild Europe and gain supporters among the newly independent and decolonised countries.

In a speech at Harvard University on 5 June 1947, then US Secretary of State George C. Marshall spoke, inter alia, of people of US being "distant from the troubled areas of the

earth and it is hard for them to comprehend the plight and consequent reactions of the long-suffering peoples"; dislocation of entire fabric of societies and economies caused by conflict needing attention along with the physical loss of life and visible destruction of infrastructure; remedy lying in breaking the vicious circle caused by disruption and restoring confidence of people in the future of their own countries; program of recovery should be drawn up and owned by the countries concerned themselves; without return of normal economic health in the world "there can be no political stability and no assured peace".

In January 1949, President Truman, in his famous "Four Points" spoke of US support for the UN, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and need to "embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas", envisaging a "program of development based on concepts of democratic fair dealing", since "commerce with other countries expands as they progress industrially and economically". Truman spoke of democracy being able to "supply the vitalising force to stir the peoples of the world into triumphant action, not only against their human oppressor, but also against their ancient enemies- hunger, misery and despair".

In May 1959, then Senator John F Kennedy said US "ought to return to the generous spirit in which the original Point Four program was conceived... we cannot be an island



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unto ourselves". He also added that "we must be willing to join with other Western nations in a serious long term program of loans, backed up by technical assistance.... To enable India to overtake the challenge of Communist China".

The new framework for the India-US relationship was launched after our nuclear tests in 1998. Several rounds of the Strobe Talbott-Jaswant Singh dialogue in the Clinton-Vajpayee era served to create a basis for future understanding and cooperation, even though they did not lead to any specific results themselves. The Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement worked out in the Bush-Manmohan Singh era, broke the shackles on high technology cooperation, and intensified coopera-

tion in other areas such as defence, even though no nuclear power plants have been initiated so far with US involvement. The Obama administration saw some convergence with India in the context of Afghanistan, its 'rebalance to Asia' and in fostering a universalised international agreement to tackle climate change issues.

The possible convergences in the Trump era remain to be defined, despite the broad bipartisan support in US for the India relationship, and Trump's own positive comments about India during the campaign. His negative references to India on June 1 about future enhanced plans for coal usage, or international funding assistance were neither factual nor warranted. His comments on US role in the world went against the grain of what Marshall, Truman and Kennedy had said earlier, and President Obama more recently.

Despite any particular short term discordance, India will need to remain focused on the longer term convergence and advantages, and work with array of stakeholders. India will also need to consolidate its multi-polar relationships to retain options. The prime minister's visit to Germany, Spain, Russia and France from May 29 to June 3 remains relevant in this context.

Germany is India's largest trading partner in Europe, and increasingly in the lead on European and global issues. With France we have a strategic partnership since 1998, and significant cooperation in defence, space and civil nuclear areas. Russia has been a long established source of political support and defence cooperation.

*Arun K Singh is a former Indian ambassador to the United States of America
The views expressed are personal*