

Legacy of Biden-Modi partnership for India-US ties: What new factsheet tells us

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Sep 23, 2024 06:37 AM IST

Under Biden, America appeared to finally understand what India wanted – the trifecta of technological-industrial-military manufacturing base.

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Delaware/New York: When PM Narendra Modi met President Joe Biden at the latter's personal lake house in Wilmington on Saturday, Modi told Biden, according to foreign secretary Vikram Misri, that he had opened the doors of his home after having opened his heart to India. It was a special moment, a farewell of sorts, and Modi profusely thanked Biden.



President Joe Biden talks with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he leaves the Quad leaders summit at Archmere Academy in Claymont, Del., Saturday. (AP)

But it wasn't just Biden who had opened his heart and doors. Modi, too, had come all the way, at the very end of Biden's term, to the President's hometown, when the political returns from such a visit are limited, and swapped the opportunity to host the Quad summit with the US because Biden had made a request.

The reason why Modi had done this was because Biden – notwithstanding the ways in which parts of Indian social media mock the 81-year-old veteran for his increasingly visible age-related deficits – has been a transformative president for India-US ties, the most transformative since George W Bush invested his political capital to push through the civil nuclear deal. Modi's own base has trouble understanding this at times, but India's top political and bureaucratic leadership is aware of the reality.

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Biden understood India's real dream of becoming an industrial and military manufacturing power. And he opened not just his heart and home, but the doors of the closed US national security and technology establishment (partly, not wholly, of course) to help India and Modi meet this dream. This largely happened under the framework of the initiative on critical and emerging technology (iCET), a framework driven by Biden's closest aide and NSA Jake

But go back a little to the beginning of Biden's term. Dispelling any doubts about the new administration's commitment to the Indo-Pacific, an adversarial approach to China, and attitude to India, Biden elevated the Quad to the level of leaders within two months of taking oath. During the second wave of the pandemic that devastated India, the US was a bit late in responding but respond it did with resources and inputs to save lives and help India overcome the challenge. In September 2021, Biden hosted Modi in the White House with an in-person Quad summit that laid out a radically ambitious agenda, especially on emerging technologies. But the real game-changer was in the summer of 2022 when Biden and Modi decided to get their national security secretariats to begin working on iCET, which then was formally launched in January 2023.

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Here was the fundamental hypothesis behind the framework. India recognised that it needed jobs for growth and to manage social stability. Jobs required manufacturing. Manufacturing required capital. And the US remained a major source of capital. India recognised that the new frontier of geopolitical competition lay in technology and it needed the US to move from the technology-denial regime and technology-sharing ambivalence to actively supporting India's technological aspirations. And India recognised that if it wanted to be a great power, it could not become so without developing its own military-industrial base, which, once again, required coproduction and co-development at home. India's size, location, talent, scale, and strategic importance needed to be leveraged for this trifecta of military-industrial-tech dream. And Delhi was aware that no power since the second World War, be it in Western Europe or East Asia or China itself, had risen without the US playing this role in enabling their boom.

But for his part, Biden was the one who invested the weight of the White House to develop synergies with this Indian aspiration. The pandemic had made the US and the rest of the world realise the perils of dependence on a single geography, China, and had brought home the need to diversify supply chains — India was a natural destination. The rise of new technologies had made the US realise that retaining its edge required collaboration with players such as India which brought talent, scale, data, and an entirely new perspective because of its own history to the table. And managing America's relative decline while shaping what came next required burden-sharing militarily. But merely selling weapons the old way wasn't going to work, and therefore there was a need to allow American capital to go

And he did not allow divergences over Russia, or the different ideological beliefs of Democrats and the BJP, or even controversies such as the alleged plot to assassinate a terrorist who happens to be a US national come in the way of this cooperation. Instead, he stepped in to help India when it mattered to Delhi, including during India's G20 presidency by displaying flexibility so that the Indian presidency succeeded.

This is the true bond between Biden and Modi. They understood what the other wanted to do for his country and respected it and were willing to help each other achieve that aim. And that three-fold frame of defence-tech-manufacturing is what is most visible in the bilateral factsheet that was released on Saturday.

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From US military supporting Indian startups to produce chips that will be used by America and its allies to Ford returning to manufacture in India; from both countries working to develop an alternative supply chain for clean energy to space collaboration; from a deeper knowledge partnership in science and technology through additional resources to shaping new regimes on AI and research on quantum; from deeper strategic collaboration through a defence industrial cooperation roadmap to getting American and Indian private sector and academia to work together in defence innovation; from collaborating in third countries through American financing for Indian private sector on infrastructure to working together on mineral security; from US recognising the power of India's digital public infrastructure to both countries working together for the reform of multilateral development banks, the list really touches the core issues that matter most to India and America. And that is why Biden called Modi his friend and Modi went to thank Biden. History will recall the Biden presidency as a remarkable chapter in bilateral ties.

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