

Indian elite welcome Trump's election

By Deepal Jayasekera and Keith Jones
19 November 2016

India's ruling elite has enthusiastically welcomed the election of Donald Trump as US president, calculating that his aggressive anti-China and anti-Pakistan positions will boost New Delhi's geo-political interests against its principal Asian rivals.

While there are apprehensions about the lack of previous interaction between the Indian government and likely key figures in the Trump administration, the Indian media has been full of reports touting the president-elect's praise of India and its Hindu supremacist prime minister, Narendra Modi, in his campaign speeches. Said Trump of the "Hindu strongman" who presided over the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom and whose two year-old Indian government has incited communalism and suppressed dissent, "I look forward to working with Prime Minister Modi who has been very energetic in reforming the economy and bureaucracy. Great man. I applaud him."

Modi, for his part, has voiced confidence that New Delhi's "global strategic partnership" with Washington will continue to expand.

Under Modi's BJP government, India has effectively become a "frontline state" in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China. It has opened its military bases to routine use by US warplanes and battleships; parroted Washington's provocative stance on the South China Sea dispute; and dramatically increased bilateral and trilateral military-security cooperation with Japan and Australia, US imperialism's principal Asia-Pacific allies.

Modi, according to a *Times of India* report, boasted at a private dinner for Indian political leaders this week about his "good relations" with Trump and said that "there was no reason" to fear "any dramatic change in bilateral relations."

Modi dispatched India's highest-ranking diplomat, Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar, to the US this week to meet with Trump transition team leaders and press them for a Trump-Modi meeting soon after the billionaire demagogue assumes the presidency in mid-January.

A *Firstpost* opinion piece by Sevanand Gaddala, titled "What does Trump's election mean for India?" argues "India could stand to gain more" from a Trump-led

administration than a Democratic one, because of Trump's "harsh stance on China and Pakistan." Gaddala points to Trump's labeling of Pakistan as "the most dangerous country in the world" and his calls for India to act "as a check to Pakistan." He adds he expects Trump's administration to "be keen on cutting aid to Pakistan," because it will be dominated by those in Washington's military-security establishment who argue that Islamabad has not borne enough of the burden of the US war in Afghanistan. This faction, notes Gaddala, contends Islamabad "has been collecting US aid" while only "pretending" to fight the Taliban.

Seeking to leverage its enhanced partnership with Washington, India under Modi has mounted a campaign of threats, bullying and military pressure aimed at compelling Islamabad to forego any logistical support for anti-Indian Islamist militants in disputed Kashmir. In late September, this reached a qualitatively new level when the Modi government abandoned New Delhi's purported policy of "strategic restraint" vis-a-vis Pakistan and proclaimed that it had carried out cross-border raids inside Pakistan, inflicting heavy casualties on "terrorists" and their Pakistani "protectors".

The Obama administration at first tacitly and then explicitly endorsed India's patently illegal and highly provocative attack on Pakistan. New Delhi is now hoping that the incoming Trump administration will give India even greater latitude in pursuing confrontation with its nuclear-armed archrival.

Writing in the *Times of India*, Arun Kumar Singh, who was India's US ambassador until last August, emphasized the strong bipartisan support for Washington's policy of using India as a strategic counterweight to China. Singh said his interactions with senior Republicans and Trump campaign officials at the Republican convention in July "reinforced my conviction that a Trump administration would continue the presently articulated US policy of embracing the rise of India, seeing India as a positive net security provider, and looking at the US-India relationship as a defining partnership of the 21st century"

Indian strategist C. Raja Mohan, a strong advocate of India

forging ever closer ties with Washington to “balance”—that is, counter—China, is arguing that Trump’s call for traditional US allies to assume more of the financial and military costs of upholding the US-led world capitalist order can be used by India to advance its own ambitions to become a major Asian and Indian power. “On the geopolitical front,” wrote Mohan in his regular *Indian Express* column, “Trump’s reconsideration of US military burdens on the Eurasian landmass provides a rare opportunity for Delhi to expand its own contributions to regional security. Rather than act as a ‘lynchpin’ of the US pivot to Asia, India can become the leading element in the regional balance of power system. If the U.S. under Trump views itself as a distant power that will help support rather than direct regional systems, India will have greater space and agency to construct a strong Eurasian coalition.”

The BJP’s Hindu right allies in the shadowy RSS have effusively praised Trump, not least because of his anti-Muslim bigotry. “Trump has a soft corner for Bharat (India) and Hindus,” exclaimed the cover story in the RSS’s *Organiser*. Reprising the false and reactionary “war on terror” narrative, the article continued, “Bharat will be a major beneficiary of Trump’s election since both the countries are prime targets of Islamic terrorism.” It concluded by calling for a “Bharat-US-Russian partnership” to prevent “Chinese domination of the world economy.”

The Indian elite, as a whole, is pleased by Trump’s hostility to China. But there is also considerable concern that India could be sideswiped by his America First protectionist program. At his election rallies, and as part of his chauvinist denunciation of foreign countries for “ripping off” US jobs, Trump repeatedly said he would take steps to limit H1-B visas, which allow US companies to hire foreign professionals. Large numbers of Indians are currently employed in the US under H1-B visas, especially in the IT sector. H1-B workers supply significant remittances to India. However, the biggest concern for India’s elite is that a reduction in the H1-B quota, to say nothing of the scrapping of the program, would disrupt the operations of Indian-based IT companies in the US.

There are also concerns that Trump’s aggressive stance against Iran—he has threatened to scrap the Iran nuclear deal—could cut across a surge in Indo-Iranian economic and strategic ties. The Iranian port of Chabahar is the pivot of Indian plans to build an economic corridor to Central Asia, where it is competing with China for strategic influence and access to energy resources.

While in India the political and corporate elite have responded to Trump’s election with enthusiasm, in Pakistan it has been met with trepidation.

As in India, it is widely anticipated in Islamabad that a

Trump administration will further downgrade US ties with Pakistan, while strengthening the Indo-US alliance.

Islamabad has repeatedly warned, and in ever shriller tones, that Washington’s strategic embrace of New Delhi has upset the balance of power in the region. With Washington ignoring these warnings, Pakistan has moved to enhance its longstanding alliance with Beijing, a development that has only caused US-Pakistani ties to fray further.

Formally, however, Pakistan remains a “major non-NATO ally of the US” and the logistical linchpin of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

“America will not abandon Pakistan,” wrote Lahore-based foreign policy analyst, Hasan Askari Rizi. “But definitely, Trump will be a tougher President than Hillary Clinton for Pakistan. ... I think India will have a better and smoother interaction compared to Pakistan.”

Writing in the *Dawn*, PPP leader and former Pakistani Ambassador to the U.S., Sherry Rehman, warned of a “rough road ahead.” “While Trump,” she said, “may not openly question” the US-Pakistani alliance “or lock Pakistan out as China’s key ally, Pakistan’s interests will need vigilance to say the least. Worst-case scenarios like sanctions can be staved off, but not without urgency and agency applied to foreign policy.”

Within the Pakistani elite there is widespread resentment of the US, which is viewed as having repeatedly “used” Pakistan as a pawn in its geopolitical power plays only later to “abandon” it. Nonetheless, the Pakistani bourgeoisie is desperate to maintain its alliance with Washington, as US imperialism has been a pivotal bulwark of its rule.

In a gesture that speaks both to the Pakistani government’s eagerness to ingratiate itself with Trump and its fears about the heightening war crisis with India, Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman Nafees Zakarai appealed last week for Trump to “mediate” the seven decades-old Kashmir dispute.

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