



# Geopolitical impact of Trump presidency

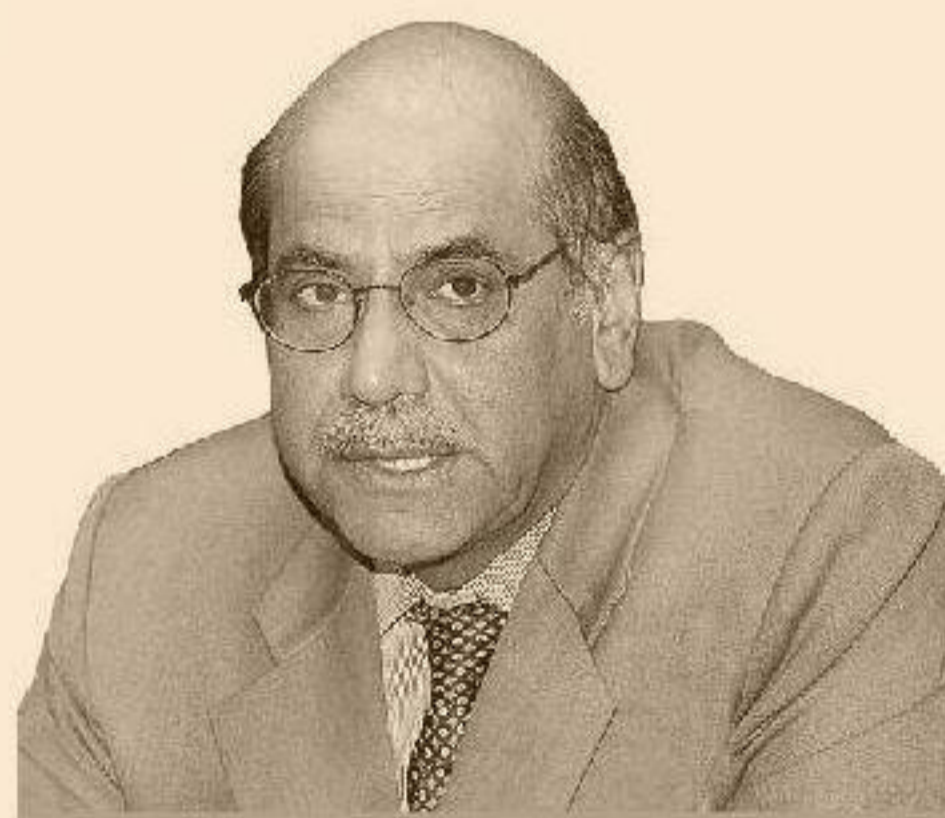
While realigning to changes in the US, India needs to consider whether the Trump administration can actually deliver

It is a nearly two months since Donald Trump became the president of the United States. There has been rising anxiety among allies, friends and adversaries, too, about what may be in store over the next several years of this administration, given the uncertainty and unpredictability which has so far marked its early days. The US, even if it is in relative decline, has a very large global footprint, both in economic and military terms. Decisions made in Washington, even if they are driven by domestic factors, have an impact on countries far and near; hence, the need to assess carefully the political drama that is being played out there. This is particularly important for India, not only because of the consequences of specific policies, such as enhanced restrictions on visas for Indian information technology (IT) professionals, but also second-order effects, for example, the recent racist attacks on Indian citizens and Indian-Americans in the general anti-immigration sentiment, sharpened by the both the rhetoric and policies adopted by Mr Trump. On a larger geopolitical canvas, the emerging picture from an Indian perspective is mixed and still somewhat fluid. Nevertheless, it may be useful to mark some of its less ambiguous features.

Mr Trump's world view has three consistent elements.

One relates to China. Each US administration since the end of the Cold War has seen China as an adversary but also a partner in addressing specific regional and global issues. The US' China strategy has

thus been a mix of confrontation and cooperation, but under Mr Trump, the confrontation aspect has gained sharper salience. This is both in the area of trade and investment relations as well as the security equation. While there may be tactical shifts, such as Mr Trump walking back from his questioning the one-China policy, we should expect heightened US-China contention.



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Two, counter-terrorism – and in Mr Trump's view, this is Islamic terrorism – will be centre stage in this administration. The persistence with the visa ban on citizens of several Muslim countries, despite legal challenges, is clearly indicative of this. One should expect increased US

pressure on countries that are seen as providing havens to terrorist groups or where threats from terrorist groups are endemic. The downside to this may well be an increase in terrorist attacks on the American homeland and this may set into motion a dynamic that confirms sentiments across the Islamic world that the US is against Islam. But for the present, a focus on counter-terrorism may introduce a degree of caution in countries such as Pakistan which have been using cross-border terrorism as an instrument of state policy.

Three, Mr Trump wants to re-set US relations with Russia and this makes sense in terms of the first two objectives. The crystallisation of a China-Russia strategic alignment is not in the interest of the US and the West in general and Russia is not a military threat to them. Russia is also a credible ally in the fight against jihadi terrorism represented by the Islamic State (IS) and Al-

Qaeda. The interests of the West have been served by Russian participation in the war against IS in Syria, though this is not fully acknowledged. Among the three items on Mr Trump's agenda, it is his Russia policy which has generated the most significant resistance, and one might even add, even subversion by the American political and security establishment. It remains to be seen if he is able to over-ride this resistance.

These three elements are positive in India's geopolitical perspective even if they prove, for the moment, to be of tactical or less than enduring significance. Any development which constrains Chinese room for manoeuvre should be welcome to India. If the recently announced increase in US military expenditures increases the robustness of US presence in Asia-Pacific, this may slow down the Chinese penetration of the Indian Ocean maritime space. We get a little more breathing space to beef up our own capabilities. The growing Chinese pressure on Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asian countries and Australia may diminish in the short term. However, China's footprint in the Asia-Pacific and beyond will continue to expand, barring an elemental crisis in that country. Thus, India and other countries in the region, who have reason to be concerned about the growth in Chinese power, should actively work together to cope with a world in which US' role on our shared region may diminish over time.

A more focused and energetic US counter-terrorism policy will similarly be of advantage to India but only as long as it does not degenerate into Islamophobia and the targeting of Muslims indiscriminately. In the latter case, a secular country like India, with a large Muslim minority, may find itself in a very uncomfortable and perhaps even an untenable situation. For the present, however, there is more scope for strengthening counter-terrorism cooperation with the US and any pressure on Pakistan on this score is welcome.

On Russia, any improvement of US-Russia relations should be welcome from India's point of view, given our own long-standing partnership with this friendly country. Our growing relations with the US have created some apprehensions in Russia, as its own relations with the US and the West in general, have deteriorated. Its closeness to China has similarly created concerns in India. This could change for the better once US-Russia relations improve. However, this is one element of the Trump strategy which seems to be coming unstuck and we need to take that into account in our calculations. This means that we need to handle our relations with Russia without the collateral benefit of improved US-Russia relations.

While seeking to leverage these elements in Mr Trump's foreign policy, we should be mindful of another likely and negative contingency. Irrespective of what these shifts may imply for India and the larger geopolitical landscape, a great deal will depend upon whether this administration finally clear the decks and settle down to be able to deliver on its agenda. Prolonged domestic political turmoil, the growing polarisation in American society and the inconsistency in policy making may have a bigger impact by making it difficult for the administration to give attention to external issues that require urgent and well-considered attention. An absent US may be more problematic for the world than an inconsistent one.

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