

SPOTLIGHT ON THE TRIANGLE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Open Embrace: India-US Ties in a Divided World, Varghese K. George, Penguin Random House, 399

The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened divisions within and among countries. Nationalism continues to stir India, with the [re-election of Narendra Modi in 2019](#), and the U.S., despite the [defeat of Donald Trump](#) in 2020. The pandemic and the expansionism of China have led India and the U.S. to put their relationship in the spotlight, writes the author in a revised edition of Open Embrace: India-US Ties in a Divided World. An excerpt:

While the pandemic turned out to be yet another occasion for China to claim superiority of its economic and political model, it also exposed the weaknesses of the American political and economic system. COVID-19 triggered a fresh round of debate on liberalism. As for India, 2020 was a year of reckoning in its relations with China. In a first in 45 years, both sides lost soldiers in a border clash. At least [20 Indian soldiers](#) and an unknown number of Chinese died in Ladakh in June 2020 leading to massive mobilisation of forces by both sides.

The aftermath of the pandemic fuelled more nationalism in politics in many parts of the world, certainly in China, India and the U.S. Even in his defeat, Donald Trump so sharply put the spotlight on China as the key challenger of the U.S. in the 21st century that Joe Biden and the Democrats have agreed to broadly follow that line. The Chinese action of occupying disputed territories so damaged the bilateral relationship that it is now at its 'most difficult phase' in the last 34 years, according to S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister.

The Chinese action remained inexplicable. China gave India 'five differing explanations' and 'literally brought tens of thousands of soldiers in full military preparation mode right to the LAC in Ladakh'. Ashley Tellis has linked the Chinese action to India's decision in August 2019 to carve out Ladakh as a federally administered territory, along with the ending of the special constitutional status of the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

In the last seven decades of America's strategy in South Asia, there has been one constant, and that is Pakistan and its military — as a partner in propping up jihadis, then fighting them and now being found out as playing both sides. Also noteworthy is the fact that the U.S.'s entanglement with Pakistan and China is inseparable from one another. Pakistan had aided U.S.-China ties in the 1970s; and today, Pakistan does not fight shy of its loyalty and admiration for China. In January 2021, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said the Chinese model of development was something that his country would want to emulate. 'I think Pakistan is going to help us out to extricate ourselves (from Afghanistan),' Trump said in July 2019. In January 2018, he had said, 'They have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools.' Trump's contradictory, strident remarks are unusual for a president, but these are instructive. General Lloyd Austin, appointed Defense Secretary by Biden, said during his confirmation hearing that Pakistan had taken 'constructive steps' in the Afghanistan peace process. For all the strategic clarity that the U.S. is supposed to possess, it cannot decide for sure whether Pakistan is an ally or an enemy. Much in the same manner as ties with China, the U.S. relationship with Pakistan remains an unsettled question.

Pakistan's constant refrain has been that the route to 'peace in Afghanistan is through Kashmir', the argument being that unless America forces India to make concessions in Kashmir, no

progress was possible in Afghanistan — making both Kashmir and Afghanistan part of the same continuum of transnational Islamist politics. American presidents until Barack Obama were sympathetic to this position, though nobody stated it in obvious terms. India's resistance to the American view of seeing Kashmir and Afghanistan as components of the same puzzle predates Modi's Hindutva doctrine. While opposing any link between Kashmir and Afghanistan, the Prime Ministers before Modi were willing to separately engage with Kashmiri separatists and Pakistan on the issue. Since 2014, the country's position has become more strident and combative.

The BJP and the PDP had a common minimum programme that left negotiations with the separatists solely with the PDP and in Srinagar, and the Central government showed little interest in addressing insurgency in the State other than by military force. In late 2017, the Modi government appointed Dineshwar Sharma as interlocutor for Kashmir, whose failure was foretold. In June 2018, the BJP ended its alliance with the PDP, and in August 2019, the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir was rescinded.

While Pakistan has been pleading with America to be more interventionist in Kashmir, India has resisted all such moves.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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