

ENGAGE WITH U.S. PROGRESSIVES

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It is tempting to surmise the shift in the U.S.'s approach on providing COVID-19-related aid to India as well as on the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver on COVID-19 vaccines, drugs, therapeutics, and related technologies as being driven by the Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership with New Delhi. But it is more than just that. The development was a result of the determined push by some sections of the political and business class, civil society, and Indian Americans. Besides them, the progressives in the Democratic Party made a big difference.

President Joe Biden called Prime Minister Narendra Modi in late April expressing the U.S.'s determination to be with India in its most difficult hour. To reduce the negative perception over Vice President Kamala Harris' tepid response to the crisis in India, the administration arranged for her to address a diaspora event where she brought up her Indian roots and lamented over the deteriorating situation in the country.

The responses by these top leaders to assuage the Indians and Indian Americans came at a time when a section was seeking to underscore New Delhi's past folly of banking on Washington in times of need.

Among the progressives who urged the President to act soon were Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, Chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, and Congressman Rohit 'Ro' Khanna, the Democratic vice chair of the Congressional India Caucus.

Incidentally, while Ms. Jayapal's comments on human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir annoyed New Delhi earlier, Mr. Khanna urged the Indian government to maintain democratic norms and allow peaceful protests by farmers, at a meeting of the leadership of the India Caucus with Indian Ambassador to the U.S., Taranjit Singh Sandhu. Irrespective of these positions, the progressives saw the aid and TRIPS waiver through a different prism.

To contextualise the role of progressives, days ahead of the May 5 decision of the Biden administration on the TRIPS waiver, 110 members of the U.S. Congress wrote to President Biden urging him to support the waiver. The signatories included Ms. Jayapal, Mr. Khanna, and Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi who represents Illinois. At the same time, Senator Bernie Sanders and nine other Senators made a similar plea to the White House. Thus, the Biden administration's decision on the waiver and the vaccines, characterised as courageous by many, was a result of the push by the progressives.

Joining in this effort, the co-chair of the Congressional India Caucus, Brad Sherman, and over 50 colleagues wrote last week to President Biden seeking supply of specific items amid concern that as long the virus persists in India "there is the potential for additional variants that could pose a threat to a vaccinated America". The overall approach is to work with India in its battle against the second wave and prepare for subsequent ones.

The outreach by Mr. Sandhu and his South African counterpart to members of the U.S. Congress on the waiver notwithstanding, it is evident that the progressives have a grip on policymaking. Its members' pronouncements on other issues that India finds unpalatable could happen again. But India will have to remain engaged with this section instead of offering a cold shoulder as it did in the recent past. As the adage goes, all politics is local.

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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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