

## The US Election's Impact on South Asia Seminar Transcript

*Ronak Desai, Research Associate at the Mittal Institute, will moderate a discussion between **Nirupama Rao**, Former Foreign Secretary of India, and **Vipin Narang**, Associate Professor of Political Science at MIT, as they explore how the potential outcomes of the US presidential election may impact the region of South Asia.*

### Moderator

- **Ronak Desai**, Associate, The Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute

### Speakers

- **Nirupama Rao**, Former Foreign Secretary, India
- **Vipin Narang**, Associate Professor of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

### **BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION:**

**Chelsea Ferrell:** Hello and welcome to today's seminar on the 'US Election's Impact on South Asia.' I'm Chelsea Ferrell, the Assistant Director at the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University.

The mission of the institute is to engage through interdisciplinary research to advance and deepen the understanding of critical issues relevant to South Asia and its relationship with the world. Before we get started, we have a couple of housekeeping items for today. During the question and answer session, you can submit questions directly to the moderator via the Q&A function on Zoom. There'll be a short survey automatically sent to you at the end of the session, we would ask that you kindly fill this out. Finally, today's session will be recorded.

Without further ado, I'd like to introduce the moderator of today's session, Ronak Desai. Ronak is an Associate at the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute. A recognized practitioner in the fields of law and foreign policy, his work focuses on US-India relations, diaspora politics, anti corruption, Congress, and global governance.

An attorney at private practice, Ronak currently leads the India practice at a prominent international law firm, and also advises clients in a broad range of complex, investigative, regulatory, and public policy matters. From 2014 to 2016, he served as Democratic counsel to a prominent Select Committee in the United States Congress. He routinely advises members of Congress on legal and foreign policy issues, particularly pertaining to South Asia. Ronak teaches a popular course on US foreign policy towards South Asia at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He's a regular contributor to leading publications of both the United States and the Asia Pacific, including Forbes and Bloomberg.

He earned joint public policy and law degrees from the Harvard Kennedy School at Harvard Law School for where he graduated magna cum laude. Thank you for being with us Ronak.

**Ronak Desai:** Thank you so much Chelsea for that very generous introduction. And you can all hear me properly, I hope. So I'm absolutely delighted that we are having this event, it is so timely and so topical, you know, we're less than a week away from the election. And I know there's just so much interest. We're very fortunate to have convened a very distinguished panel for us today. Ambassador Rao, Vipin and I are in three different time zones. I'm in the West Coast, Vipin's out East, and Ambassador Rao is joining us all the way from Bangalore, where it's close to midnight so special thanks to her for joining us today.

So, here's what I'd like to do over the next hour or so, more or less. I'm going to introduce both of our distinguished speakers here in a second, just so the audience is familiar with them and their backgrounds. I'm going to just provide a couple of minutes of brief observations on what's happening right now in South Asia while we are here in the US and hopefully just set the stage for the conversation that we're going to be having during this session, I'll turn at that point over to Ambassador Rao and Vipin will each give and provide their own set of remarks on what we will be discussing today, and then I'll add in my own thoughts and at that point I'm hoping we can have what'll be a very robust conversation. I know all of us are incredibly eager to hear from the audience, we want to make this as interactive as possible. We're hoping to make this as informal as

possible as well. We're fortunate that we all know each other and for that reason alone I'm looking forward to this event.

So, without further ado, let me first introduce Ambassador Nirupama Rap, again, joining us from Bangalore and Ambassador Rao, for those of us who know you know what a distinguished career you've had in India's foreign service. She served as India's Foreign Secretary from 2009 to 2011, she was formerly the spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs at one point and Ambassador Rao's really held some of the most important diplomatic posts in India. She served as High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, she served as India's Ambassador to China, and most recently, she served as India's Ambassador to the United States over in Washington for a few years. She's in retirement now, but has stayed very active, they say there's no time as busy as retirement. Since retirement, she's been a fellow at a whole host of different places around the world.

Just to name a few here in the US, at Brown University, at Columbia. She's been a fellow over at UC San Diego, just really has spanned both coasts and everything in between since that time. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the fact that she was a fellow at the Center for International Affairs, now the Weatherhead Center here at Harvard in the past. She's also a founding trustee along with her husband Sudhakar of the South Asian Symphony Foundation and has established the South Asian Symphony Orchestra.

And this is a project that is aimed at greater people to people kind of activity and South Asian, and among the South Asian diaspora. It brings musicians from all over the subcontinent, and they've just performed these unprecedented and kind of historic concerts and symphonies in India and other places around the world. The last thing I should add, and again, otherwise we'd be here for the next half an hour at least, but I want to add also that Ambassador Rao is in the final stages of completing a book on India's China relationship called 'Telling it on the Mountain: India and China 1949-1962' to be published by Penguin Random House next year. Of course, this book draws upon Ambassador Rao's expertise in her time serving as the top Indian diplomat in China.

Let me next introduce Dr Vipin Narang. Vipin is an Associate Professor of Political Science at MIT. He's a member of MIT Security Studies Program. He's been a fellow at Harvard University's Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, was a pre-doc fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center, and he was a Stanton Junior Faculty Fellow at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation. His research interests, again, if you know his work, nuclear proliferation and strategy, North Korea's nuclear weapons, South Asian security, and general security studies. His first book 'Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era,' which was published in 2014 focused on the deterrent strategies of regional nuclear powers and that book won the 2015 ISA, International Security Studies section's best book award.

He is currently working on his second book 'Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation,' which explores how states pursue nuclear weapons. His work has appeared in a variety of outlets, including international security, foreign affairs, The Washington Post, The New York Times, I think I just saw him quoted in the Los Angeles Times, not too long ago. He was the recipient this year of the ISS Emerging Scholar Award, which is awarded to the scholar who has made the most significant contribution to the field of security studies.

Vipin has earned his PhD from Harvard University. He's a Marshall scholar and he did his engineering degrees, both his bachelor's and his masters from Stanford University as well. You can sometimes catch Vipin on the news, there will be 15 talking heads yelling at each other and you'll see Vipin very quietly waiting and patiently watching all this before he provides some very good insights.

So, Ambassador Rao, Vipin, we're so delighted you're here. We are absolutely thrilled that we can make this happen again so close to the election. I know this has generated a lot of interest and that, from what I can tell, we've got participants from literally all over the world. So let's just jump right in and you know one thing we were talking about just briefly before we went live is that South Asia is a part of the world where things happen very quickly. It's a part of the world where we have developments taking place at a very rapid rate. And I know the election's six days away, I know folks in South Asia, whether it's governments or their people are watching with a lot of interest with respect to what's going to happen here in the US. But as I was just thinking about what's been going on in that part of the world, here's what came to mind immediately, just these past couple of days, the US and India held a two plus two dialogue, we had the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Defense Secretary, Mr Esper meet their counterparts in India, External Affairs Minister Jay Shankar and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh.

They just signed an important agreement on geospatial satellite imagery sharing and intelligence. At the same time, earlier this month, we saw the Taliban endorse President Trump and make very clear, for example, that they very much prefer a second Trump administration and actually said they were concerned when the

President got Covid and we're glad to see him recovered. I should note the Trump administration very expressly rejected that endorsement.

Secretaries Pompeo and Esper are heading to Sri Lanka. I think now they are in Colombo, they are headed to the Maldives, they're meeting their counterparts there as well. This comes against a background of course of tensions between India and China and a fairly violent and bloody conflict that erupted back in August. This also comes at a time of increasing tensions between the US and China itself. Internally, in Sri Lanka, we saw the Rajapaksa government pass a number of constitutional, what they're building are reforms, but are ultimately ways to garner more power and it looks like that governments consolidating power in that country. And in Bangladesh, we're seeing an increased focus on that country and that nation play a greater role in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy. I could go on and on and on, but this is all that's happened in the last 10 to 12 days or so. And I just wanted to highlight this a little bit again to talk about the fact that we're talking about a part of the world that really matters to the United States, but a part of the world that really does deeply care what happens with our elections here as well. And the simple and inevitable fact that what happens here affects folks there, and vice versa.

So, let me pause there. I just wanted to throw some stuff out there that potentially unpack, and Ambassador Rao, if I can turn it over to you to talk about any of these things are really anything that you'd like to talk about, again, the virtual floor is yours.

**Nirupama Rao:** Thank you. Thank you Ronak, and thank you to the Mittal Institute for this opportunity to participate in this webinar and with Ronak. And it's good to be back on a platform at Harvard. I have such great nostalgic memories of times spent there, it was really my introduction to the United States. When I first landed in Boston and Cambridge in the fall of 1983, in fact quite a long time back. Well, I've been, we're here to talk about the impact of the US election on South Asia and coming from where I am situated at the moment, in Bangalore, which is the Silicon Valley of India, right in the heart of the peninsula, quite far away from the Himalayas. We are in, what we call in our part of the world, South India. So, the perspective from here is very ocean oriented and very outward oriented. We are people, in fact, I come from the coastal state of Kerala, which has interacted so closely with the rest of the world, including with the rest of the subcontinent. So what is the impact of the US election on South Asia, at this moment, of course, with just a few days away from the end of the campaign and we hopefully will know the results in the course of the next week or so and it's too early to say what the impact is going to be, because we don't know who is going to win the election, whether it's going to be President Trump or Vice President Biden.

There was some impression that the perception was that Delhi had a preference for President Trump, but I think that is a bit far fetched because I don't believe the government is really, you know, going to state that kind of preference. Nevermind what happened at the 'Howdy Modi' event, also the 'Namaste Trump' events. But the Trump years have been, I would say, good for the relationship. I think in the main, because the foundational precept or the principle that guides this relationship has been a continuum, a continuum that has been established from the early 2000s, at least, if not going back before that, with the nuclear deal, with the next steps in strategic partnership with the Defense Cooperation initiative and all the subsequent understandings that have been reached in the administrations of different presidents, be it a Republican or Democrat. But during the Trump years, yes, what has marked the relationship is the very good chemistry between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi. They're both, you know, they have the populist popular base in each of their countries, a very solid base and their voice seems to resonate among the people at least those who believe in their mandate and in their mission.

But be that as it may, where the India-US relationship is concerned, there's been an elevation of ties. Defense Secretary Esper, in recent days, called it a most consequential relationship, which I think it is because it is a strategic partnership that is vital, a comprehensive global strategic partnership, as it's called, which is vital to security and stability in our region and the world. A relationship between two great democracies, and that's not just using well-worn cliches, I think we relate to each other because of the plurality and the diversity and the multi dimensional nature of life as it were within our political systems and our societies.

Today that relationship, yes, some say is very defense and security oriented, perhaps there's a great deal of emphasis on that, which seems to overshadow cooperation in other areas, but the fact is that with the rise of China and the difficulties that India is facing in its relationship with China, as also the tensions, the atmosphere of confrontation between China and the United States today, India and the US have drawn much closer to each other. And there is a stress on regional security and prosperity based and rules based international order. So, if you look at the two plus two meeting that just concluded in Delhi yesterday, by two plus two, I mean the meeting of the defense and foreign ministers of India and the United States. So you had secretary Pompeo and Secretary Esper in Delhi meeting with Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, and they spoke of a shared vision for the Indo-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific is a geopolitical term that has really

gained ascendancy in the Trump years and so today, that region which earlier was blanketed under the Asia-Pacific, with India out of it because the Indian Ocean was not part of it, has now become really a confluence of the two oceans, India and the Pacific.

So yesterday, in Delhi during the two plus two meeting, they articulated, once again I would say, a shared vision for an Indo-Pacific and global leadership mission that all countries in this region have a shared approach to. So, the ministers, the US and the Indian ministers, talked about a commitment to a free, open, inclusive peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific and I noticed in the discussions that the United States has been having with Bangladesh, they add secure to it, a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific. And again, they are talking of ASEAN sensuality, because we are next door to the Southeast Asian region where we are situated, and so we always talk of the centrality of Southeast Asia, of the ASEAN countries in this vision of the Indo-Pacific rule of law, sustainable and transparent infrastructure investment, which is not exactly what the Chinese are doing with their development partners in the region.

We stress freedom of navigation and mutual respect for sovereignty, and I think this is really a code word for the kind of aggression and then muscularity that the Chinese have been displaying in the region where you have territorial disputes and India herself has seen how this works out when you have a dispute with a neighboring country. In our case, China, we have a 2200 approximately mile-long border that we share with China, and it's a disputed border because there are disputes along this border, which have not been settled and the situation really flared up, we can talk about it perhaps in the discussion that follows. But what I want to stress is that during the Trump years, we've seen this contiguity and this closeness and this very entrenched compatibility of views and vision and approach between India and the United States when it comes to our region. The revival of the quadrilateral security dialogue after it had died of premature death in 2007, so now it's been reincarnated as it were, we Hindus believe in reincarnation, and we have a quadrilateral dialogue.

A well-known journalist in India recently called it in Hindi '*a cheen peedit*' dialogue that means a dialogue among people who are troubled by China, though we don't say it, and it's perhaps not diplomatic to put it in such words. But in Tokyo, there was a meeting of the quad, earlier this month, and India, for the first time, also participated in The Five Eyes intelligent grouping meeting, to talk about, and this includes the United States, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand to discuss law enforcement and encryption policies of companies like Apple and Facebook.

So, we've announced the expansion of the annual Malabar naval exercise to include Australia. Australia had been knocking on the door for some time, it had participated at one stage many years ago, and then dropped out because at that time I think the equation between Australia and China was very, very different. But anyway, Australia is back now and these exercises will be held in the Bay of Bengal, I believe next month. So, there is really an expansion of shared goals. Now, will this quickening diplomatic dance, as it's called, how will it pan out if there is a change of administration? And if Vice President Biden is the winner of the presidential election, my view is that this relationship between India, the United States, particularly is rock steady, it's a stable relationship. And if Mr. Biden becomes president, I expect a continuation of the very strong alignment of interests that you see between India and the US, both in the region and globally.

Of course, Mr. Biden is expected to put his own stamp, his own style and on this relationship and he's spoken at length during the campaign about how he views the relationship with India, and how he's going to approach issues, like trade and immigration and, of course, to take the relationship between our two democracies, the emphasis on democracy and alliance of democracies. We don't use the word alliance very much in our diplomatic jargon here in India, we use terms like alignment, we speak of strategic autonomy, but there is virtually I think a much closer diplomatic dance between India and the United States.

So it's really a very consequential relationship. And it's also a poll-proof relationship as the international affairs, global affairs specialist Raja Mohan put it in an op-ed in the Indian Express just yesterday. So all this is happening against the background of a crisis with China. It's also happening against the background of a very strong presence that China is asserting in our region, and when we look at South Asia, which is essentially meant to be an integer. It's meant to be far more integrated, India, and it's seven neighbors, we're eight countries in South Asia and the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation has not fulfilled its potential, it's a case of promise denied in many ways. And we need much more integration, much more infrastructural connectivity, much more trade activity, much more people to people linkages and that's really what is the vision for an integrated South Asia that I constantly stress and in the work I do also outside the field of diplomacy.

But China has become the dragon in the room as far as South Asia is concerned, it's much more of a visible presence and it's making its impact felt economically, developmentally, people call this the age of implementation and essentially China has proved itself to be extremely adept, as far as making a difference in terms of its presence in the region, and that goes for Nepal, that goes for Bangladesh, that goes for Sri Lanka,

that goes for Pakistan, and that goes for the Maldives, not for Bhutan. Bhutan is a country that does not have diplomatic relations or linkages with China, it has an outstanding boundary dispute as you know with China, just as India has, and you're all aware of what happened on the Doklam plateau in 2017. China and Pakistan are extremely close, they are the iron brothers, as they call themselves.

Now, is a basic change of administration as a result of the US election going to make a difference in South Asia? Here again, I believe the approach and the determinant, basically the determinant is essentially the China factor, and you've seen that with Secretary Pompeo going to Sri Lanka and traveling to the Maldives, and then going to Indonesia, the US and you had Deputy Secretary of State Biegun here in the region, just a few days ago. There is a lot of work that the United States suddenly, you know, activated itself in terms of reaching out to these countries as a defense cooperation agreement now with the Maldives, which India has also welcomed. With Sri Lanka, you're trying to do more on the Millennium Change Cooperation Initiative and in terms of trying to get the message across to the region that diplomacy is not all about running up debts with China, which is what has happened with a lot of these countries. And that for development to take place, you also have to look at transparency, you have to look at freeing yourself from too much of a debt burden, you have to function like a rule-based international order is expected to function. I think these countries do understand but it's also a complicated situation. Take a country like Nepal, it has to achieve a balance, a geopolitical balance between China to the north, between India to the south and if the United States were to come in, it's a classic three body problem I think that all these countries are going to face.

With Pakistan, the Trump administration, after a very rocky start, I think because of the problems in Afghanistan and the need to come to a "so called" settlement of the Afghan problem has certainly felt the need for a greater role by Pakistan. I think I'm exceeding my 10 minutes at the moment. But let me say that the situation in Afghanistan is going to demand the attention of any new administration that is coming in. It's going to perhaps be the primary topic as far as South Asia is concerned in the next few months, and we'll have to see what the outcomes are going to be.

So in short, the situation is complex, there is the China factor, there is a United States that sees, as it looks forward, a period of continued confrontation with China and the impact of that is going to be felt all across our region. But the India-US relationship is in a good place and will continue to be in a good place. It is essentially a poll-proof relationship. Thank you.

**Ronak Desai:** Thank you so much, Ambassador. Masterful survey as always in such a short amount of time, you took us through the region and there's just so much to unpack there. Vipin, if I can turn it over to you and one of the themes I was able to tease out from what Ambassador Rao just said is that, look, ultimately, at least with respect to India, irrespective of who wins next week, assuming we know the winner next week, we can expect continuity, right. That basically, since at least the end of the Clinton years up until now, here in the US, we call it the so-called bipartisan consensus around the US-India relationship. Doesn't matter who occupies the White House, doesn't matter who occupies the Prime Minister's residence or which party is at their structural reasons why this relationship will continue to be on an upward trajectory. You have a convergence of values, a convergence of interests, and for that reason alone, it's foolproof. It's immune from the other vagaries externally that one can expect in other cases with other countries when you have a change in power.

If you can just start off by addressing that first, if you don't mind, especially kind of taking the US side of this and then go from there, that would be great.

**Vipin Narang:** Right. Thanks, Ronak, thanks to the Mittal Institute for hosting this. It's a real pleasure and honor to be back. I started my graduate career when the South Asia Institute was a South Asia Initiative, so it's great to see it flourishing. It's really not fair to have me follow Ambassador Rao, who I have long admired as not only an architect of the US-India relationship but the Indian foreign policy really over the last several decades.

And she'll remember this, but she first appeared on graduate students' radars in, I think must have been in 2002, when she was the MEA spokesperson, and she deadpanned in response to a series of Pakistan missile tests, "we are not impressed" and everybody who studied security in South Asia said this was, you know, an impressive answer. And so, we've known Ambassador Rao for a long time in the strategic community and it's an honor to follow her here.

So, I agree with everything that she said in the outline of her remarks. So, let me take a step back and talk a little bit about the structural features of this relationship that make it bipartisan, that make it long standing. There's a tendency to look at the two plus two and say, this is really something new, something that's unprecedented. But really, the US-India relationship picked up in 2000 after the nadir of India's nuclear tests in 1998. I think US-India relations were essentially at a rock bottom in 1998, the Clinton administration

sanctioned India but it only took two years for President Clinton to make a historic state visit to India and every president since has gone to India and the bipartisan consensus rests really on four major pillars and I call them The Four Ds.

You'll have to forgive me, I had to squeeze some of the terms into the Ds, but there's democracy, right. So, the shared values and democracy defense, right, the fact that both are elevating the security partnership for a long time. It was because of the centrality of India in the Indo-Pacific region because of its geopolitical position and it wasn't aimed at any one country, the US had relations with, a relationship with Pakistan, particularly after 9/11, and India had a relationship with China, but there was a natural defense relations security partnership between the two. There's the pillar of dollars, right, trade the trade relationship has improved, I think, India and the US are now, including services, each other's largest trading partners, and that's a huge improvement over the last several decades.

And the last pillar is diaspora, Ronak, people like you and me, Indian Americans. Both the immigrants stream and then first generation immigrants that have a natural tie to India that have elevated the partnership. And these are somewhat, these are immutable, these are structural conditions that have made the partnership, a bipartisan and bilateral long-standing, set to two on a long standing trajectory since 2000. And the highlight was probably, is often held up as the Indo-US nuclear deal a signature achievement of the George W. Bush administration really, that after the nuclear tests when India was on the outside of the nuclear weapons community, the Indo-US nuclear deal brought India into the mainstream nuclear fold, and de facto recognized India as legitimate nuclear weapons powers unprecedented what the United States was able to achieve with India in the Indo-US nuclear deal. But often, what's forgotten is a lot of the details that aren't as sexy as the Indo-US nuclear deal.

So much is happening on the trade side, on the people to people side, on the defense side that doesn't necessarily make headlines, but which is integral to the elevation of the partnership and that has been, that has continued since the Clinton administration, the W Bush administration, the Obama administration, the Trump administration and whoever wins next week as well. And you see some of the fruits of that labor, the signing of the Beca agreement, one of the so called foundational agreements, yesterday now allow India and US militaries to exchange geospatial intelligence, navigational data, and helps improve the exercises that have long been going on between India and the US, both in the Navy, the Air Force and the Army tri-service exercises have started becoming more frequent, the Malabar exercises Ambassador Rao mentioned our long standing, there's the inclusion of Australia this time, after many years.

But the foundational agreements, there's a myth that these will all of a sudden allow Indian and the United States to fight together. That's not entirely accurate. I mean, these are enabling agreements, and a lot of the contours have to be worked out. There's still agency as to what is shared but the fundamental point is that the Indian and US militaries have been working on interoperability for a long time and militaries that can operate together can fight together. And that's a really important elevation from, in 2016 India was designated a major defense partner, which is kind of a bespoke term for India in the United States. It's not a NATO ally, it's not a Japan or South Korea, but it's a designated major defense partner, and it is a recognition of the unique place that India holds, outside of the formal alliance structure that the United States has, as a major strategic partner.

The phrase that defines the relationship now is, I think, comprehensive global strategic partnership, which is a mouthful, but a rose by any other name would smell as sweet and it really reflects these major pillars on which the relationship rests. And that's not to say that there aren't points of friction, and I think it's important to, the reason why the United States and India are not formal allies is because each have interests that don't necessarily overlap and that's important to recognize. And India has an approach that was previously characterized as strategic autonomy, and that may have slowed down some of the developments over the last decade, such as the signing of these foundational agreements, I think skeptics will say, well, it took 10 years to sign, Beca. The optimist says, well, you still got there. Right. And these points of friction, sometimes it's over immigration, it's over Harley Davidson, it's over climate change, exist and there's no need to obscure those. I think friends don't often always agree about everything, but it's important not to forget the major and enduring features over which India and the United States do agree and dollars, defense, diaspora, and democracy are the four major pillars of that relationship. But it is important to note, and this is something that I want to focus on and Ambassador Rao mentioned, there has been an accelerant lately right, a catalyst for I think a lot of the things that India, in particular, may have been hesitant about previously have sort of been left by the wayside because of China.

So, I think some hesitations on the Indian side where because India did not want to overtly be seen as entering into a deeper military partnership with the United States because it wanted to at least engage China in some ways to borrow a phrase from somebody I just plagiarized from I can't remember who said it. But China is India's neighbor and in terms of vertical supply chain ingredients and dependencies for pharmaceuticals,

electronics, China's an unavoidable partner and it's perfectly understandable from a realist perspective why India would want to at least maintain a vibrant trading and political relationship with China. But the fact is, after Doklam, China's become more aggressive and this year has, whether we want to overtly admit it or not taking bites out of claimed Indian territory, and it may be that one can exploit the ambiguity around the line of actual control and what is precisely happened, we don't understand the ground situation precisely. But the fact is that China has taken pieces of territory that it did not occupy before that India believe it was its own, and this has I think clarified for India, and was already clarifying for the United States that maybe a deeper security partnership with the United States was something that China was going to assume anyway so why not just dispense with the facade and some of the niceties and accelerate what was going to happen anyway.

And I think China has, Chinese behavior, particularly towards Indian Ladakh and along the LOC has accelerated some of these developments in ways that have clarified, both for India, but also the United States that this partnership can be deepened in ways that are beneficial and in both countries' interests. That said, structurally regardless of who wins next week, there are still limits as to what India can do on a number of dimensions, 1) China is still India's neighbor, and is still a large trading partner and India is still dependent on active pharmaceutical ingredients, API's into a lot of India's own pharmaceutical industry, electronics, broader trade and it still has to deal with the fact that China's a neighbor in a neighborhood and an Asian actor, and so there are limits as to what India may be willing to do and the US has to at least appreciate or accept that. But there's also this other actor in the room, which is Russia and on the defense side, at least, which is the area that I study most closely, it is an inescapable fact that the Indian military is a Russian military. All of the frontline equipment, from the Sukhoi and the MiGs in the Air Force to the T90 series in the Army, the tanks to the naval reactors with the Indian Navy our Russian provenance, if not outright Russian. And the Indian Military cannot turn on a dime.

And it needs maintenance and spares and it needs operations and it needs further replacements from Russia for all of that equipment and it's not going to happen overnight, which means India is inescapably dependent on Russia and that creates some problems for the defense relationship. India is going ahead with the purchase of the S 400 air missile defense system. And there is this issue about the congressional legislation in Russia for parties that purchase significant Russian equipment and the S 400 is significant because the United States does not necessarily want its main line equipment, F 16s, F18s operating in the same space as S 400 because it can give the Russians data on US equipment.

And interoperability, India has this problem already about operating a military with so many different suppliers. The reality is that its primary supplier is Russia and that limits how much maneuvering room India has on the defense side with the United States. There's certain equipment than the US may be reluctant to provide, there may be certain data that the US is reluctant to provide so long as India is, and it inescapably is for the next several decades primarily Russian military.

Now, that doesn't mean that there can't be a very significant and deep cooperation with India on the defense side. I mean the United States has operated with Russian military, Russians applied militaries in the past, such as Egypt but that does impose upper limits and a ceiling on the relationship. The other big structural impediment which will have, I think, big implications for who wins next week is India's economy. Right. So, one of the attractiveness of India for the United States since 2000 has been liberalization, India's rising economy. Well, the pandemic has put a dent in India's economic rise and this year is going to be very, very bleak for India's economic growth numbers and recovering that economy is going to be India's largest challenge because a weakened India as Ashley Tellis has said, is a less attractive India, for the United States as a partner in the defense relationship.

So, an India that can't buy ships, can't operate and exercise and improve cooperation with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. And so, if India's economy continues to decline, it's possible that a Trump Administration won't care, will overlook what the Democrats have focused on in the past, a little bit more, which is the perceived decline in liberalism in India, right, the democratic pillar. The Trump administration has overlooked that for the most part, has been very quiet about it. It is not clear to me and it's not a foregone conclusion that a Biden administration would. And there are elements within the Democratic Party, for example, that are very concerned about human rights, the domestic legislation in Kashmir, the detention of legitimate opposition leaders and that was raised by people who will populate a Biden administration when they are in Congress.

And Ashley Tellis has also said that this may be an increasing point of friction if India's economy opens a space for a Democratic administration to focus more, which focuses more on human rights and values, to potentially raise red flags about that if that continues in India. And so there may be this variation, if India's structural position and it's declining economy persists, where a Biden administration may focus more on the democracy pillar than a Trump administration would. And so, there may be an impact, depending on who wins the election. But I think that's variation on the theme, I think the broad theme will persist. India is a valuable partner of the

United States, the four pillars persist. It's not as if the United States is in a position, especially now to talk about declining liberalism in any country, so those in glass houses sometimes shouldn't throw stones, but there are that these enduring features that have led to an elevated partnership I think will persist, regardless of who wins, and there may be some variation on the theme.

I will say that I think the real indicator, we're still in the phase where a two plus two meeting, ministerial meeting is treated, sort of like Diwali. It's an exciting and headline raising event, I think, a real indicator for when the relationship has made it is when those are so routine that they aren't on the front page of the newspaper. And I think that's what will be a really strong indicator that the partnership has moved beyond theatrics into something that is so routinized and so deep that we don't even think about it anymore, like we do with Japan or South Korea. When a Japanese or South Korean minister visits the United States or vice versa, it's so routine that it doesn't make the front the headlines or front page news. And I think that's where the relationship is headed and I look forward to the day, that's sort of what the relationship looks like. So I'll stop there and turn over to you Ronak and to questions and answers from the audience. Thank you.

**Ronak Desai:** Thanks so much, Vipin. and again just so insightful as always. And you brought up a number of topics that I want to explore. I'm very mindful of the fact that so far most of our discussion has focused on India, I want to make that discussion, a bit more panoramic and before I do that though, there were a few points that you and Ambassador Rao both hit on substantively and both thematically. What I find striking, right, this idea that there will likely be continuity, there is this bipartisan consensus, and ultimately, we can expect a lot of the same to move forward given you have these structural, the four Ds, as you call them and these other factors embedded within the relationship.

I mean, I think one of the areas that sets Trump apart, which is why I'm focused on differences here for a second, is that Trump comes in and just like a lot of his predecessors, he spent the first couple of years trying to strike a deal with China, trying to have a friendly orientation to China. If you remember, during the early Obama years, they talked about a G2, which provoked a lot of outrage in Delhi and this seems to be a very familiar pattern right, where the US will try to engage Chinese leadership, they try to strike all sorts of bargains and pronouncements, and that ultimately fails. And I think Trump went in with a similar expectation, but learned very quickly that wasn't going to work.

What I feel sets him apart from his predecessors, and what may set him apart from a potential Biden administration, which has profound implications for folks in South Asia is he's made the US position on China very clear, any ambiguity that existed with respect to how they view China, what their posture toward China is, I think, has been clarified to a hilt. And if you even look at Secretary Pompeo's remarks in Delhi, in Sri Lanka, what he is likely to say in the Maldives, the Chinese Communist Party, followed by a litany of accusations. And we've talked about the two plus two, Vipin and Ambassador Rao both talked about, you know, on the one hand, the quad is going through this resurgence. It also seems as if China has become the dragon in the room that folks are willing to talk more openly about, have the Chinese, inadvertently or not, pushed the Indians perhaps more closely to the Americans, but what I found striking yesterday is if you compare what Secretary Pompeo was saying about China versus what Minister Jaishankar was saying it was quite the contrast.

Jaishankar, I think, was very careful with, he didn't mention China expressly. I thought his comments in that regard are almost a little bit more bland right. He very clearly wanted to make sure he was not going to say something that was going to box India in and they're not willing at this point for what it looks like to really go much further, at least in terms of the rhetoric that would somehow foreclose the possibility of a resolution, a settlement of some kind, even in the short to medium term.

And the reason I bring that up is if Trump has taken this posture and again, it might in off the record conversations in capitals around South Asia be welcome. If a Biden administration comes in this question, I think, will resurface again. And will you see the Biden folks try to engage China constructively? Will there be elements of both competition and cooperation, how should countries in that region prepare for that, for example, right, if that is in fact the case. If Trump is quite clear on where he is, I think the Biden folks will bring in a degree of nuance, perhaps, that isn't as expressive as what we've seen over the past two and a half years. That's one.

And I'll have you both comment on that here in a second. The second thing I wanted to also just discuss is, I was waiting to see how long it took for Kashmir to be brought up. And I think if this conversation had taken place six months ago, or eight months ago it would have been brought up much more quickly and at the forefront. What's been very interesting to me, I think the Chinese did a great service to India, with respect to the Kashmir issue in terms of international forum, where the US is willing to manage a lot of the domestic



issues in India, willing to perhaps overlook it, willing to perhaps approach it with the degree, again of nuance that otherwise wouldn't have existed because the China question has once again emerged at the forefront.

And, you know, if we talk to Ashley Tellis, he will tell you, look, ultimately, China and the rise of China, the unknown nature of the rise of China was one of the reasons that brought these two countries together. It's why the Bush administration took such a heavy strategic bet on India, and what greater reminder than to see 20 Indian soldiers murdered on the border with clubs and with nails and so on and so forth. So even in Sri Lanka, for example, right, this debate is taking place there in a different way, has the US been more willing to overlook the D component, the democracy component in a country like Sri Lanka, but there might be some backsliding based on what's happening in the country internally. Or human rights issues with respect to the civil war that were at the forefront of that relationship even six or seven years ago don't seem to be as important, right, has the China factor is the results ultimately overtaken other considerations that are weighed to be relatively less important in the security defense and other ones that we're seeing right now. And Ambassador Rao if you can start off, that'd be great.

**Nirupama Rao:** Okay, let me try and tackle the issues that you raised.

**Ronak Desai:** Yes

**Nirupama Rao:** Well, I think, you know, if you're talking about how a Biden administration is going to deal with the China factor, I think the term that used about Con-gagement, I think would definitely apply. I believe, yes, if you look at the Obama-Biden years and the manner in which China was engaged with, you would perhaps assume that some of that would continue to guide a Biden administration if that would be the outcome of the elections next week, but I'm not sure that if it's going to be exactly like that because you know when you talk of bipartisan consensus regarding India, there is of course a very, very now entrenched bipartisan consensus within the United States and across the popular spectrum about China, about the threat from China, about the way China has short-changed the United States, and about the death of engagement with China. So, even Mr. Biden has used rather negative terms, like calling China a thug, for instance, in one of one of the debates. So, I don't believe that the approach to China will be vanilla anymore. I think it may not be as strident and as in your face, as how Secretary Pompeo refers to China, and the Chinese Communist Party, and he insists on calling President Xi Jinping General Secretary Xi Jinping. So, it's become very ideological. I'm not so sure to what extent the ideological factor will define the approach to China, but it will be defined a lot by the outcomes that we are now able to perceive with the benefit of hindsight.

About the steps that the United States took in regard to bringing China into the global fold and how really how that had failed, I mean, there is a failure at the heart of all that happened vis-a-vis China because ultimately China did not play by the rule book by and large, and China has an approach to the global order that is essentially very different from the kind of structures that we built in the post war period and which essentially all the world has subscribed to these years. And especially, after the fall of the Soviet Union and we assume that that would be the end of history, but that has not happened. So, the whole Chinese approach to building a world order that is more conducive and compatible to their own image of how stability is to be defined and how governance has to be defined and how diversity is to be dealt with all that is essentially conflictual when it comes to the principles that we define as composing the world order today.

So, I don't believe it will be easy for Mr. Biden if he becomes becomes the president to approach China in a way that is tangentially different from how the Trump years have defined the approach to China. And I think you have to give Mr. Trump that credit when he really tore the veils of China, and was able to expose it for what it is and I think most of the world sees that threat today. There's a complete diminution of trust, the trust factor when it comes to China. So, I believe that a Biden administration for all its emphasis on dealing with China and trying to be able to persuade and convince China to play by the rules, I don't think that's really going to work.

So you're going to see difficult times between China and the United States and that has an impact on the rest of the world and on all of us who are also seeing this very forbidding and also negative face of China today. As far as the Kashmir issue is concerned, I again, when I taught, think of the United States-India relationship, like Vipin and spoke of the four Ds, I would speak of the four C's. There's continuity, there's consensus, there's cooperation and there's compatibility, and I believe that when it comes to the US and China even US and India, even under a Bible administration, these factors will kind of undergird the relationship.

So, if it's an issue of human rights or if it's an issue of liberal democratic society and the way the rules should apply to society, such as our. And maybe, there will be private discussions, face to face, one to one or within an official network, perhaps views will be exchanged on such issues, some members of Congress may speak against what is happening there, but I believe, by and large, the overarching interests of this relationship and

the strategic outlook towards the Indo-Pacific, all these factors and the fact that India is a large democracy, it is a large burgeoning economy with great potential, there's a lot of business that the United States can do with India, especially after the China relationship seems to be self destructing, the whole question of building up closer economic ties and building up India's strengths in the region, I think will be a priority of the United States and therefore issues like Kashmir, I don't believe will be deal breakers or very, very deep irritants in the relationship.

**Ronak Desai:** Vipin, anything to add? Look, I think that's right on, and, my view on this is Kashmir may have been an issue months ago, even if President Biden comes into power in January of next year, it simply won't be a factor in American decision making with respect to India, at least not a major factor. And while all this may be an issue of style over substance, look, it's one thing to have President Trump in India earlier this year, violence breaks out in Delhi, which appears about a communal component, and he doesn't say a word. Right. And ultimately, says that's India's business, that's one thing. And I think what you said in terms of what you know a Biden administration be as silent on something like that as a Trump would be, perhaps not, but in terms of change the overall calculus, change your overall structure, change the overall arrangement between the two countries on so many other foundational issues, my view is most likely not, especially given other threats and other interests that have emerged, which once again have reminded the two countries of why they are so-called natural partners.

**Vipin Narang:** Now, I agree completely with that. I don't think anyone's going to hold a relationship hostage due to domestic political factors in the other country. And also, the thing that will threaten I think there are two major threats to the long term continuity in the trajectory. One is, if India's economy can't get itself together, I think that is a real concern, part of the attraction of India as a defense and trading partner is its growing potential in Asia as an economic and military heavyweight and so that is really important. I just, in terms of the contribution India can make to that partnership if its economy, if it has to focus inwardly because its economy is not able to recover at the rate that Delhi may want it to, then that can have impact on this on the structural features of the relationship.

The other thing is, and I think this is important, a lot of the threats to the relationship have been in the past I think over inflated expectations. Now, the India-US relationship performs best when things are quiet, happening behind closed doors, and there isn't hype around and overinflated expectations around the relationship. India is not going to become like Japan, India is not going to be a NATO ally and we shouldn't think of it that way. India doesn't want it. It's not necessary and the United States doesn't approach relationships like that anymore. And so when you hear, you know, I think there's a tendency in both capitals to talk about an elevation of the relationship to unrealistic levels. And I think when you set the expectations high, I mean, I'm a born pessimist, so I always say keep expectations low and beat them, don't set them high and always fall short. And so, you know...

**Ronak Desai:** You're just an Indian son Vipin and that's all.

**Vipin Narang:** Maybe, that's exactly right, my parents used to set them up here, right. So, my mom is still upset I didn't go to medical school. This is how, though there's I do think that the relationship performs best when the expectations are kept realistic and a lot of these conversations are held in private, or there isn't a lot of fanfare around it. Right. I think the relationship that is in the headlines all the time is one that is kind of at risk of failing to meet expectations and so the structural features are going to continue. And there's no reason, India will have to get it all, the entire world has to get the economies back going, but I think, you know, India may face challenges there that other countries as a developing nation don't face. So, that is a big challenge for India, but I also think being very clear headed in both capitals about what the relationship is about and what it isn't, I think is actually to the benefit of the relationship. So everything else, I think won't hold, it's not a real threat to the relationship.

**Ronak Desai:** And I think, you know...

**Nirupama Rao:** There are two points that I thought I'd add here on the issue of Kashmir. Everybody talks about the phase in the Clinton administration when Kashmir was spoken about, people I noticed in some webinars are bringing up the example of Robin Raphel. I don't believe that situation will duplicate itself, replicate itself today because the relationship between India and the United States isn't at such a different place.

And even if the Indian economy is not doing so well, and takes some time to recover, I do hope that won't be the situation. I just believe the place the relationship is in today and the way India has changed, and the way it's grown and the way you know it counts in this region as a force for stability and for partnership, for strengthening of a partnership between two countries, I think, that is going to be the governing factor, that is

going to be the do or die kind of kind of a factor. And as far as the economy is concerned, now if Mr. Biden were to be elected and you know he's going to engage in more fiscal spending and there may be a weakening of the US dollar that may actually help Indian markets and also less of an intense pressure or less intense pressure on China on the trade front, just suppose that Biden decides to lower the tariffs or try to come to some terms with China on that, that may help Indian markets as well. Although it may not really help our efforts to build more manufacturing as a replacement for China and on the whole question of the resilience of supply chains also. But let's see how things turn out, but the world is a very different place today, and I think the overriding factor is the China-US competition. Even if there is no war, I think there are very, very turbulent times ahead.

**Ronak Desai:** Yeah, I was just going to add, look, I think, the US and India, in that regard, are somewhat in the same position. As important as these bilateral ties are and as important as these relationships or even within a larger constellation of South Asia, the US is also going to be dealing with a number of formidable internal challenges, irrespective of who wins next week. And India is going through its own internal obstacles and I think that will most likely take priority and it to a certain extent, really shapes what engagement is going to look like, at least in the short term.

Just to wrap up the China conversation, we've gotten a number of questions here that more or less track the same way, and the question here is, given China's various initiatives in the region and beyond, whether it is Belt and Road, Maritime, whether it's what we call "debt trap diplomacy," what can these two countries do, the US and India, to help manage Chinese actions, in a matter, if I can just paraphrase, in a manner that won't further exacerbate tensions, right. We talked about the classic lucidity strap, are you taking actions that are making your potential adversary more insecure, which leads to an escalation.

What can and should these two countries be doing beyond what they've already done to help manage, Chinese actions or Chinese revisionist actions in the region and beyond in a matter that's responsible and still can lead to a more secure global architecture. Vipin, if you want to start us off.

**Vipin Narang:** Yeah, so I wanted to add just one thing on India's relationship. One advantage that whoever if Vice President Biden wins next week, one huge advantage, he has is, he doesn't have to do a huge repair the way that he would have to do with Europe and Asia because President Trump has so disrupted American relations with almost every other country. In fact, it is better to be outside of America's formalized structure right now because if you're Germany and continental Europe, there's a lot of repairing to be done. But President Trump, India has been one of the in terms of continuity and just in terms of foreign policy, it has been one of President Trump's bright spots, and that gives the vice president or a Trump to a huge advantage, you don't have to do a huge repair. There isn't a concern even under President Trump, the US stayed the course with India, and so that's a huge advantage, no matter who wins. And that actually, I think, is a testament, a surprising testament to the relationship. I think if you had asked me, given President Trump's own somewhat racist proclivities whether that would have happened, I don't think in 2016, it was a foregone conclusion. But it did, and that was a big bright spot.

Now on the China question, it's a very good question because in international relations theory, we have from Bob Jarvis, this deterrence versus spiral model. And the US and India, I think, want to bolster deterrence against China, but China gets a vote. And it is not clear to me that China will see anything that the US and India or the US does with anybody else, which may be intended for deterrence purposes as anything but spiral. And we may be there. I'm actually increasingly convinced that there is no deterrence model, we're always in a spiral world. And that has huge implications I think for the United States in particular, but also for America's partners in the Indo-Pacific region and there should be no illusions that these deepening partnerships are going to be viewed either instrumentally, and I think largely instrumentally by China as sort of a self encirclement myths of empire development. And they will use it, Xi Jinping may use it to rally around the flag, look at what the US is doing with all of our neighbors, they're encircling us right even if it's self encircling which it seems to be, I mean, China's, the one who took bites out of India's territory. China is the one who's behaving the way it is and the South China Sea in Hong Kong. And it is the revisionist power, but the narrative in China will easily be that you can already see it happening.

You know if India and the US deepen our partnership, this is provocative against China. So, I'm not sure if there's a way around this and that has real implications for how the relationships should be viewed and thought of, right. So, we should have no illusions that these are going to be viewed as defensive in nature. The Chinese are going to be this provocative and we should adjust accordingly.

**Nirupama Rao:** When it comes to the region, we don't want asymmetric multipolarity, we would like a more balanced multipolarity and I think that is really what I hope the United States and India set out to do when even as you build the quad and you try and enlarge the scope of its activities to look beyond defense and security

into development cooperation technology related activity, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief infrastructure connectivity and building more dialogue mechanisms with other countries in the region who all have a problem with China. They may not speak out against it so much in Southeast Asia, certainly, I think they're hedging their bets, they're trying to follow the middle way, as it were, but they have their problems with China and I think they need some reassurance on that count.

And as far as our South Asian neighbors are concerned, bar Pakistan, which of course is another subset altogether, I think they're also striving for that kind of balance, it's not what, the question is what can Washington and New Delhi do to further their interest, especially in the light of China's Maritime Silk Road and Belt and Road initiative. How do you combat Chinese influence in the IOR? Now, China is set out to become a naval power, every country in this world, which has become a global power throughout history has been a huge navy, a powerful navy for itself, and that is really what China has set out to do.

It's not yet a powerful presence in the Indian Ocean, but its reach is being extended especially, the build up of its presence in Djibouti, which is essentially a logistics facility, but I believe they built a huge jetty there which can accommodate an aircraft carrier as if it were to birth there, and what it does in Guardar, the port it has built in Pakistan at Pakistani request as history tells us. But today, of course, it's there for the Chinese, it's their outlet to the Arabian Sea. Similarly, their relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar are essentially building them that reach and that access also with Sri Lanka, the Port of Hambantota, on which they have a 99 year lease. So there is a possibility for a pivot really to take place in these areas, I mean China is taking out sort of insurance policies, as it were to build a presence for itself in the region, which it can then augment. So, we have to be alert to all this, and I believe that the partnerships that India, the United States, democracies like Japan, we didn't talk about Japan, but Japan is really going to play a key role also in building this architecture for the Indo-Pacific, which is more transparent and inclusive and rules based.

But I think the cooperation that we need to focus on must of course be defense and security, it must include interoperability, but also to look to the interests of all these countries in the region and how they perceive the China threat and how they would like more of a balanced multiple polarity.

**Vipin Narang:** It is remarkable, I must say that only 18 months removed from Pulwama and Balakot, we're not talking about Pakistan at all. And, China has done this, essentially, on its own, and I think that's for Washington, this is the conversation that it's wanted to have and the clarity from India that it's wanted and for India, I think it also provides clarity as to who its primary threat is in the region. And that's, I mean, we're only two months removed from that and the fact that, that's on the sideline is a remarkable feature.

**Ronak Desai:** Yeah, no absolutely. And we've got a few minutes left, I want to slightly shift gears a little bit, because we've gotten a number of questions on diaspora. This is something that you've both mentioned in your respective remarks. I do think that the diaspora has always been a factor in the relationship. And we can talk about being the Indian-American diaspora, we can talk about the South Asian-American diaspora. I know these taxonomies are loaded themselves, but I think especially, what we have seen in the last few months, is that the community here in the US has garnered more attention, both as a voting bloc, and both in terms of its role in growing public service that it hasn't before. Obviously, Senator Harris' you know ascension on the ticket has further amplified that. And just a couple of weeks ago. I know Devesh Kapoor and Milan and others came out with this just really great study and numbers, right, that's something we always look for, our assertions supported by hard facts and numbers where they say, look, there is a partisan dimension to the diaspora.

But one of the most striking features of that study that was published is that US-India ties actually don't rank very high terms of the set of issues that Indian American voters find important and at least anecdotally, this was a surprise to me right. I remember as a kid growing up in Southern California, we would get all these numbers from the So Cal delegation showing up at the India Day, Independence parade on August 15 and saying my wife loves wearing saris, I love samosa and will never sell F16s to Pakistan, and that was kind of it. And you would talk to folks from my parents' generation where this was the real issue of Pakistan's nefarious behavior or Chinese designs. This study says that's not the case.

We saw during the US nuclear deal, which we were all involved with in different capacities of how the diaspora in a way, on the one hand, was claimed came to maturation, right, that it was operationalized in a way to India's benefit. If you could just both give me some thoughts and I know Ambassador from the Indian side of how the diaspora seem, and I know Prime Minister Modi has really made a conscientious effort to do diaspora engagement. I mean, it was such a central feature of his early foreign policy conduct. I think that would be helpful and Vipin, if we can talk about the domestic factor here a little bit. Right. You know, this idea that has the community come to age? If you are members of the diaspora that care about the partnership, what can you do to again help be a custodian effectively and further move that partnership forward. So, Ambassador Rao, if I can find it over to you.

**Nirupama Rao:** Well Ronak, I think, from here in India, we're very proud, really, of the Indian American diaspora and just the successes that it has notched over the years, and how it has entered the mainstream of American life. I mean, I personally have always felt that while the diaspora obviously needs to focus on issues back home and they have been a great help to us. When it comes to legislation that has really affected the course of India-US relations, their role and their contribution can never be minimized and needs to be celebrated. No doubt.

But when you talk about, the study that Devesh and Milan and others have done on Indian American attitudes and when they found that the US-India relationship did not rank as high as we assumed it would do in priorities that they have when deciding for whom to vote, I mean I think in a way it's natural, because they become American, especially the second generation, the third generation. I've always felt that they've become almost hundred percent American although they are ethnically Indian, which is I think a good thing because they bring so much of their skills, their successes, their dedication, their diligence to improving American society and adding value to it.

So, I believe that is a contribution that India, in a way, sitting here, I feel we should be proud to have made. We will of course encounter different attitudes. I mean, I know the problems that occurred when the issue of Kashmir was raised by certain Democratic members of Congress and how that you know really riled the government in Delhi, that sort of thing I'm sure is not going to go away entirely, but by and large, I believe when it comes to the diaspora, I agree with Vipin, that they are one of the one of the major pillars of this relationship. And they should continue to be that way, to be more visible, now you have Kamala Harris, she's part Indian American, visible in the mainstream of American life, and because that really means that India has arrived in the United States.

**Vipin Narang:** Yeah, on the domestic side, you know, it is interesting. I do think that because there's a bipartisan consensus for a stronger Indian-US partnership, that washes out in terms of voting partners. So it's not that I don't think it's not important for a lot of Indian Americans, especially those that have naturalized, I just think, because both parties are basically in the same place, then what their party ID is sort of determined by either their pocketbook or liberal democratic values if they're Democrats, right. So, what's interesting to me, though, is actually, once the foreign policy bit washes out, the percent of Indians, I think Milan and Devesh and the UPENN Graduate Student, Sumitra Bhadra Kumar, I think, was one of the lead authors.

It's 72% of Indian Americans identified as democratic, which is the highest of any minority. And that's against their pocketbook interest in a lot of cases, which shows how much the values piece matters I think. And it raises these interesting questions, they surface this in the report, right, how much the split on the approval for Prime Minister Modi is much more even. It's not those who supported a Vice President Biden, for example, that are identified as democrats had lower approval ratings for Prime Minister Modi but it didn't affect their view of the relationship itself or where India-US relations ranked in their preference ordering. And so I think like all things, you know, identity and diaspora related it is complicated.

And the diaspora does a couple of things for the relationship. One, it enhances India's soft power, everybody in America has seen Mindy Kaling and Hasan Minhaj in the mainstream. They've been to Indian doctors, Indian food is mainstream, Trader Joes in the snack aisle is selling, of all things, Pumpkin Spice samosas now. I mean, this has elevated the place of Indian American culture, and that is really important, I think, right. We can't underestimate why and how it has become a pillar of the relationship. But the Indian American community, as Ambassador Rao suggested, it can get complicated, right. So that's all power is great in the successes, you know, in professional American lives, in Silicon Valley, but, you know, Representative Jayapal crossed a line as far as the Government of India was concerned. Right. It gets complicated if someone from the Indian diaspora then criticizes India.

And I think that raises all sorts of complexities and issues that are actually probably going to become more difficult going forward as more Indian Americans occupy positions of political power or advisors in a Biden or Trump administration, or both administrations, have lots of Indian Americans. Now, a lot of them don't advise and maybe this is for the better that Indian Americans don't advise on India itself. I think that that is something that, it's been complicated in the past and some, Ashley Tellis has transcended, Niraj Verma has transcended it but it is very complicated. And that's something that I think bears watching right.

So, those challenges aren't going to go away, it is complicated, but it is also a fundamental pillar of the relationship. So, the Indian American diaspora, whether they lean democrat or republican probably doesn't matter as far as the government of India is concerned, in a broader sense because it does help elevate India's broader soft power in America. And I think if you, I don't know if this has been done. I'm sure somebody has

polled on it but if you do like a thermometer feeling of India amongst the general American population, I imagine it is exceptionally high. That there are generally positive feelings towards India and a lot of that is because of the diaspora. And I think that that's really important to remember, that helps elevate the strategic partnership also, that's what makes it a bipartisan consensus, there aren't very, very strong lobby groups against better India-US relations.

**Ronak Desai:** Yeah. And look, India's in a very unique and I think advantageous position where both parties are trying to prove that they are better for the relationship than the other. I mean, there's no other country that I can think of where that's the case and even with 'Howdy Modi' and I was there backstage. I mean, the idea that that kind of event should be organized for another leader just defies one's imagination, right, that's something that's so uniquely, again favorable to the bilateral. I mean, one thing that I will say, just in closing here is, I think about the diaspora and ultimately, when I read the division in Milan's work and kind of see how the diaspora's role has changed over just the past five to seven years, I think we can draw a few conclusions, right. One, perhaps, is yes, it might be overwhelmingly for one party versus the other, but it's not a monolith.

What motivates each diaspora members' interest in attachment to India is going to be very different. There's going to be a generational divide, I think you know US Civ nuke, that experience allowed many to conclude that ultimately if you're able to galvanize the diaspora that diaspora's galvanized on its own. It was the first time that all these what I call alphabet soup letter groups came together toward a common cause. Even if they didn't quite understand the technical components of the detail of the deal. They said, look, this is good for the relationship, the conclusion folks were drawing is ultimately, engaging the diaspora in this way, it will be beneficial to India. I wonder now, if that's still the case, given that we have these generational divides, perhaps, given the fact that you have Indian American members that have arisen as some of the most vocal critics of India with respect to components of the domestic policy or whatever it may be.

That idea is going to be reexamined right, that the diaspora perhaps can play a role. They can perhaps be engaged, that can be cultivated, but there's going to be limits to just how far that goes both ways, I think ultimately as well moving down the line. And I think, ultimately, irrespective of who wins next week, you'll see more Indian Americans or South Asian Americans in positions of influence and that's happened under every administration and the way in this country that we are used to having our physician be of South Asian American descent and we're used to having our engineers, having your public servant, your member of Congress, your federal judge, your local county official, be of South Asian American heritage, that at some point will become unremarkable

And what implications that has for the conduct of foreign policy from the US to India and vice versa, I think has some interesting implications, but I'm again mindful that is a discussion for a whole other session amongst us. But I'm told that we are out of time, so I just want to give both of you two minutes to see if there's any wrap up that we want to do before we conclude. And again, just a final word from you both, if you do have one.

**Vipin Narang:** I want to give Ambassador Rao the final word. So, I will just very quickly on this point also say that, there's also, I think analysts and scholars were surprised at the Indian government's response to some of the criticism right from members of Congress. Because that criticism wasn't necessarily coming from a bad, no one was saying you want bad Indo-US relations and so I think India and the government will also, I think, improve how it accepts or deals with that criticism, maybe behind closed doors, maybe there isn't a need to dismiss or attack the people who criticize because the critics can be friends also. And I think this is a very American thing also, actually that's not true, it's a very Indian thing, everyone criticizes everybody, right. This is a universal democratic norm that criticism doesn't necessarily mean hostility and that friends can criticize each other and do so from a good place.

And, so I think you know improvements on both sides can be made in that regard, right, both how to deliver it, and how to accept it. And, I think the US foreign policy and the US tends to be more self critical on this regard and is more open to it then also right. We take criticism all the time. But you know, I think that's something that, going forward, this will be an issue also, and that friends can criticize each other and should and do. Right. That's the sign of a true friendship. And I think that that's something also that shouldn't be forgotten in the relationship. So now, I'll turn it over to Ambassador Rao.

**Nirupama Rao:** Yeah, thank you Vipin. I completely agree with you, and I agree also that between friends, we should be able to deal with criticism, you talked of self criticism, but I'm talking of criticism that one friend has to say against the other. I mean, we should be able to deal with it, we should be able to address those points of difference and to see how we can build a little more common ground. I think that is an ongoing process that we have to focus on.

And since this the Mittal Institute is about South Asia, one of the things that I have loved about seeing the way the diaspora functions in the United States is the way that friendships are made between South Asians, regardless of where they come from. And I've seen that in my personal experience, and I think that's one of the wonderful things about America and the way diasporas come together and way divides are bridged and where new identities are forged.

And I think that's really what I see my vision for South Asia as being about, leaving out China, but talking about our own region, I said at the beginning that we are meant to be an integer and maybe America shows us the way, which is the reason my South Asian Symphony Orchestra has so many Indian and South Asian Americans in it, and they've made such a difference. So I'd like to stop on that note.

**Ronak Desai:** Fantastic. Well, look, let me just once again thank you both so much for what's been a fascinating discussion. I know you could have all gone several hours longer and it still would not be enough time for all that we want to discuss and should be discussing, but perhaps we can convene sometime after the election and see how we did.

But again, I just want to thank you both for everything that you do, for your service, and just being such important voices writ large on some of these issues. So thank you to you both. Thank you to the Mittal Institute for hosting, for organizing this, and of course lastly, and perhaps most importantly, to those of you who have joined us in the middle of a day, depending on what part of the world you are to be a part of this conversation as well. I know my information and Vipin's are available publicly, reach out anytime if you have questions for the Ambassador, we can get those to her as well and we look forward to continuing the conversation on the line. Thank you to you both.

**Vipin Narang:** Thank you, Ronak.

**Nirupama Rao:** Thank you Ronak, thank you, Vipin, thank you, Chelsea.