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“On visas, expect Biden administration to be less restrictive than Trump”



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Arun K. Singh joined the Trading India chatroom on Refinitiv Messenger on the 11th of Nov 2020 to discuss how a Biden presidency would affect India. Below is his conversation with **Savio Shetty, Editor of Trading India**. To join the community and know more about Refinitiv Messenger please email Savio.Shetty@tr.com

Q: Where do you expect the next big breakthrough to happen in India-US relations? Is it going to be defence, trade and/or investment?

A: I think we should focus not so much on the next breakthrough as such but sustaining the current trend of the relationship. A lot of progress has happened in defence and security co-operation, that should be taken to the next level. New areas of co-operation should be explored in the economic domain, particularly in new technology areas such as AI, quantum computing, cyber security, digital and in enhancing the complementarity in IT and pharmaceuticals.

Q: Trade remains a big area of dispute between the two countries. How will that play out in the Biden administration?

A: It will be more helpful to go beyond the existing patterns of production. That tends to bog us down in market access based on present capacity, where there are existing competing interests on both sides. It would be better for the government and industry on both sides to get involved in a deep dive discussion on building new complementarities in emerging technology areas that I have referred to above. This would create new opportunity, new synergies in the economic relationship, and give a firmer Geo-economic basis to the significantly consolidating geo-strategic partnership.

Q: A quick follow-up -- In terms of investments, does India need to open further to U.S. companies?

A: From the comments that one sees from the current Indian leadership, it is clear that they would like to invite even more FDI. On Nov 5, the PM held a global investor meet. We will need significant resources to meet our economic challenges, including those precipitated by COVID-19. FDI inflow will also be critical to this and our leaders have also signalled that they want India to become a part of a trusted, resilient, re-ordered and secured supply chain. For this also FDI and external financial flows are crucial.

Q: Do you expect the visa policies to be back to Obama days? considering the efforts Trump has put on restricting H1Bs, will there be some relaxations?

A: On H1B visas, the Trump administration has been far more restrictive in terms of salary levels required, criteria for processing and giving time bars on clearances. At the same time even during the Obama administration, there had been restrictions on H1B visas particularly through increase in visa fees for certain categories.

There are pressures on the U.S. leaders when unemployment levels in the U.S. increased. At the same time, U.S. administration and industries recognized this that skilled H1B visa holders from India contribute to the U.S. maintaining its global lead in tech and innovation, particularly the IT sector.

U.S. will work its way through these contradictory pulls. I would anticipate that a Biden administration would be less restrictive than the Trump administration on this.

Q: When do you expect the current Presidential standoff to get resolved?

A: I had closely followed 2 Presidential transitions, in 2008 and in 2016 when I was present in the U.S. On both those occasions, the results were understood on the election night itself and the process of transition to the new administration, getting official office space in Washington D.C, its nominees getting access to briefings materials started soon thereafter. This normally begins when the losing candidates concedes, even though the official results are formally declared much later (by December). On election night itself the result is called by the media, not through an official process but is widely accepted, since it is based on professional analysis and the official counting declared till then. On this occasion, the losing candidate has not conceded. As incumbent President, he has not allowed the transition process to begin. The stand-off could continue till the electoral college itself votes based on results in each state or if the matter ends up going to the Supreme Court which rules in any particular way as such. In 2000 during Gore vs Bush the SC decided it 36 days after the election.

Q: Is India on its way to becoming an ally of the U. S. like Japan, Australia as it confronts an aggressive China?

A: India's position has always been that it does not want a formal military alliance with any country. It also supports multi-polarity in international relations because that gives India more space to pursue its own interests. It works with different countries and groupings based on convergence of interest. Aside from advantages in strengthening bilateral relations with the U.S., Japan and Australia, there is also a convergence of interests with these countries in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in dealing with the consequences of an economically, technologically and militarily strengthened China. The 4 countries have therefore now met frequently including at the Foreign Minister level, in the framework of the Quad.

Q: Do you expect the Democratic administration to speak up about domestic issues in India such as the far-reaching changes in Kashmir, citizenship laws and fears of minorities?

A: We must understand that politicians in each country base their position in terms of the politics of that country. Among Democrats in the US there's some salience on human rights issues, as there is on environmental issues. The people in the Biden campaign have commented that any differences with India would be resolved through dialogue, as among friends. US has its own issues on human rights, including systemic racism, voter suppression etc. President-elect Joe Biden and Vice-president elect Kamala Harris issued a special message on India's independence (15th Aug 2020) where they said that they would be fully supportive of India on issues such as cross-border terrorism and other challenges on our border. The election of an Indian origin person first time ever to the high office of the VP is a matter of pride for Indian Americans and to the people of India.

Q: Any parting thoughts for us, Sir?

A: Thank you everyone. I enjoyed the discussion. The questions were quite insightful. This is a very critical relationship for India.

