

Report on Role of the US Congress in India-US Relations

Amb Sujan R Chinoy welcomed MR. KV Prasad and gave his opening remarks

Amb Sujan R Chinoy: When we look at India-US relations, we generally look at what the state department, pentagon and what the coccus says about the different says but the inner functioning of the Congress is not very well established for the Indian readers. Over the past few years, we have seen how the Indo-US relations have undergone a huge change. Today there appears to be broad consensus across the American political spectrum on strengthening the India-US strategic partnership. India considers US as an indispensable partner in every sector of India's transformation and progress. The ongoing engagement with the Biden administration has a particular importance as we look at Afghanistan and an unfolding chaos and instability there. India's ability to engage them in the matter of evacuation of Indian citizens and others from Afghanistan is also a pointer to the robust India-US partnership that exists and the prospects for a stronger partnership in the future. As the largest and the oldest democracies, each pursue independent foreign policies but both the countries have other shared global objectives.

There is a growing convergence of use on the Indo-pacific as a free open and inclusive concept with ASEAN centrality at the core defined by a common rules-based order. Today we have more than 50 bilateral mechanisms at the G2G level and umpteen other at the non-governmental level. India also conducts its largest number of defence exercises with the US. The Counterterrorism cooperation has acquired a new qualitative edge and purpose, India is also engaged in dialogue in regard to the financial action task force. The US has also been helpful towards India in the UN security council in the designation of Masood Azhar and Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi as global terrorist. These essentially define the new contours of India-US relationship which now considers intelligence sharing as one of the key planks. The bilateral trade and investment partnership is also strengthening particularly in regard to energy where the US has emerged one of the biggest suppliers to India. There are a few spoilers for India like H1B1 visas, tariffs, removal of India from the generalized system preferences (GSP) are the issues on which India needs to engage the Biden administration and US Congress even more. Lastly, US activism on human rights and civil liberties issues have riled public opinion in India. It must be clarified with the US for India no interference in its internal affairs. India is mindful of the fact that US itself has its numerous problems on these issues like human rights and civil liberties in the US.

Mr. KV Prasad gave an overview of the House of Representative, Senate, President and the Vice President. There four Indian-Americans in the current 117th Congress, all four of them are Democrats. Mr. Prasad also gave a brief historical perspective and a comparative analysis of Indian PM at Congress and US President/ VP in Parliament. Today, there is an India Caucus on both House side and the Senate side. For the first time the caucus created the post of Vice Chairs. Rohit Khanna and Michael Waltz are in these Positions. The Caucus is 107 members with a strong majority of Democrats – 81 and the rest 26 are from Grand old Party (Republicans). The Caucus is specific and promotes relations between the two countries across sectors like combatting terrorism, promoting democracy, human rights, scientific research and natural disaster relief. This is broad understanding in which the caucus would like to work. Mr. Prasad Pointed out that during the initial visit of McDermott was urged by the US Ambassador to India to take a look as India was opening up. The US Congress at that time was more in

embrace of Pakistan and there was little interest in India. On the business side, the impression on The Hill was that it was difficult to do business with India, where one needs to get permit for very small things also. Around that time several events aided the change of landscape, the Berlin wall came down and the Soviet Union split. India engaged the attention of the US Congress in the post-liberalization phase. The current Ambassador Taranjit Sandhu is very active in reaching out to both Members of Congress and those in State Legislatures too. Some of the state legislatures are equally important because in many states the Indian-Americans are a sizable in number demonstrative and carry political weight in their conversations with the local politics as many of them are engaged with county level politics. This is a very significant development while the discussion is on US Congress but the engagement runs way down up to the counties where Indian-Americans are showing a lot more zeal enthusiasm and working together with the system.

Mr. Prasad Pointed out policy issues in the US Congress which may have had impact on India, for instance – F16 to Pakistan, President Clinton provided a one-time waiver to Larry Pressler Amendment preventing arms sale to India. In the post 1998 Pokhran nuclear tests was one area where the US Congress was agitated. The House Resolution by Gary Ackerman who asked the government to instruct international lending organization not to grant loans to Pakistan except for humanitarian assistance. This was a significant step because the funding to Pakistan from the IMP and World Bank was halted which led to the economic issues and trying to pressure on Pakistan, the kind off pressures Pakistan faced at that time forced Nawaz Shareef to go to Washington and then the Kargil Withdrawal started happening. India-US Civil Nuclear Deal in pursuance of the 123 agreement Strong resistance from the non-NPT lobby. These deep engagements were very important to shape the understanding of US Congress on this whole issue.

The defence deals between India and US are an important part of the India-US relationship, efforts to grant Major non-NATO ally stalled due to concerns on S400 missile system that India is getting from Russia. The S400 missile system would be important because US Congress has sanctions in place and the moment India operationalizes the deal, it is important to note the attitude of US Congress on S400 deal when it goes through. All foreign Military Sales or G2G Arms sales to India are to be notified by the administration to the Congress.

Mr. Prasad presented a study in contrast which included the observations of CAA, Kashmir situation post change of status in 2019, Delhi violent clashes and the ongoing farmers agitation are some of the issues the Members of Congress have been taking up but the contrast is that during India's second wave of Covid19, these members urged the Biden Administration to provide relief without delay and the corporate sector too was energised to deliver aid. The concern of the US Congress was of human rights and humanitarian approach. President Biden is having his share of problems, getting his agenda across whether it was trillion-dollar package or post Afghanistan withdrawal, he is facing a lot of heat from his progressives. Pramila Jayapal is the chair of the democratic progressive caucus.

Mr. Prasad lastly suggested a way forward through greater engagement with Members of Congress, outreach of the delegations with the Members of Congress. Congressional Delegations and Staff Delegations which travel during the time when congress is not in session, the CO-DEL and staff delegations are very important vehicles of interactions, this is the time when Indian Parliamentarians can exchange information.

Mr. pointed out that there is no formal interaction between Indian Parliament and the US Congress while individual engagements are in place. In December 2019, it was decided to support both countries for a robust India-US Partnership, the Ministers look forward to the establishment of the India-US Parliamentary Exchanges to facilitate reciprocal visits by Parliamentarians of the two countries.

Indian Americans played a very important role at several crucial junctions. The Kargil Conflict, nuclear sanctions, Civil Nuclear Deal and many more. Their outreach is good because they are articulate, highly educated and many Indian-Americans are important fundraisers for the people contesting in public offices. Lastly while studying the role of US Congress in foreign policy in making, one of the book's opening lines is "Remember the US has 435 US Secretaries of State" which means every member of the House of Representatives has a say in foreign policy making, therefore it is important to build a strong foundational relationship with the members in order to strengthen India-US Relations.

Prof KP Vijayalakshmi mentioned that Bob Hathway was the first who took up challenge of Evolution of the topic of Role of US Congress in India-US relations, his work actually paved the way for a number of people to start paying attention about the influences in foreign policy formulation. The topic of Congressional dynamics or domestic dynamics of Executives and Congress, it is a very crucial chapter to understand how the presidency actually crafted the policy that India is currently dealing with and a critical element is evolving international situation. This is a clear indicator of the changing role of the Congress. The evolving international situation also impacts the way Congress charges its regular and constitutional duty. The President is forced to seek cooperation from the Congress, therefore there is constant engagement of who is stronger – the President or the Congress seems to be a futile exercise. An important point to understand US Congress is its own evolution of party politics in the United States and that is the depolarization since the 90's and a number of splits within the party themselves show a lot of challenges in terms of people who get elected. The engagement of India-US needs to have nation to nation overhang and that is the challenge. Domestic aid will not necessarily undercut India's global objectives, the synchronization that India seeks within its own policy of its regional, bilateral or global objectives that effort should also be there when India talks to the US Congress.

Prof KP Vijayalakshmi explained how President Biden said that foreign trade has to be sold to the public which means the access from the public is more direct to the Congress than to the President. Under Defence, it is important to keep track and engage with Armed Forces Committee. Congress plays a huge role, in order to understand how a particular policy will eventually percolate it is important to therefore engage with these committees, even find ways of presenting testimonies to them so that they are also in the position to understand the concerns. There are many access points and interventionist points for India as a Democracy.

