

Most of the comments and the analysis published by international media and think tanks tended to agree on two points: that the new US President Donald Trump was too inexperienced and too arrogant to elaborate and implement a rational foreign policy, and that, as a direct consequence, the relations among United States and the rest of the world would have soon entered a new phase of broad and destabilising uncertainty.

India has not officially released any negative statement on the new President. On the contrary, Narendra Modi has been one of the first leaders to congratulate Trump for his prestigious achievement. In that occasion, Modi also made himself available to arrange “a frank discussion with the new President covering the major problems affecting South Asia”. Despite these friendly remarks, it is impossible to deny how concerned India is for the way in which India-US relationship may evolve during the Trump era. New Delhi seems fearing that important agreements such as the one on the civilian nuclear program and the various business partnerships recently approved to relaunch the Indian economy may be revisited. Also, it is impossible to exclude those new adjustments in the Pakistan-China-United States triangle may end up having a strong impact on South Asian stability.

There are basically three issues at stake:

- 1) The civilian nuclear program and US commitment to build new nuclear plants in India. Without the US-India agreement on the Indian civilian nuclear program, New Delhi could have not even considered the option of relying on nuclear power to cover its internal energy needs. This collaboration, however, has not yet been completely finalized, and the risk of seeing Washington making a step backward seems very high now. If this happens, New Delhi would be in serious troubles from two different perspectives. First, it would be hard to secure the regular supply of nuclear technologies from the United States. Second, American move may induce other Indian nuclear partners such as Canada, France, Australia and Germany to follow Trump and review their original positions and commitments. Another risk that India is running is to see President Trump using “the Indian precedent” to grant a waiver on civilian nuclear to Pakistan. Islamabad has been denouncing for years the preferential treatment on civilian nuclear granted to India as illegitimate, and the country will certainly take advantage of the leadership change in America to secure the same “privilege”. If that were the case, two different scenarios could follow. First, Trump might decide not to change the current status quo (with the nuclear waiver confirmed for India and not offered to Pakistan). Second, the US President could agree to add Pakistan to the list of countries allowed to use nuclear energy for civilian purposes. However, by doing this Trump will also increase the pressure on other Indian nuclear partners, putting them in the difficult position of deciding whether to align themselves to the US or not.
- 2) Kashmir. In light of the tensions that are currently inflaming the region, it is highly likely that Islamabad would ask Washington to help them in settling the dispute or that Trump decides independently to get involved in that. Foreseeing what Trump has in mind is impossible. By supporting the hypothesis of organizing a referendum administered by the United Nations, Trump would definitely take the side of Pakistan, forcing India to intervene to preserve their sovereignty in this region.
- 3) China. The escalation of tensions between China and the United States triggered by Trump could end up crushing India as well. From a strategic perspective, the situation could either improve as a result of a hypothetical withdrawal of American forces from the theatre, or get worse, because China could take advantage of this “vacuum” to strengthen its position in the region. From an economic perspective, the imposition of new tariffs on Chinese exports would

definitely compromise the relations between China and United States. On the contrary, the dismissal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Washington possible entry in the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) may help them to improve. India is becoming more and more concerned about the consequences of these provocative acts (direct threats of reciprocal trade retaliation, strong positions on the South China Sea status, recognition of the One China Policy, etc.). Unfortunately, it is impossible to exclude that this escalation of tensions becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for a conflict outburst in Asia, from which India has a lot to lose. On top of that, all these provocations are feeding a dangerous climate of mistrust in the region, thus making it increasingly difficult to promote regional cooperation. Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia also had destabilizing intentions and effects on the region, forcing many traditionally neutral countries like India to decide whether they should align either to China or the United States. However, the American strategy in the Obama era was predictable. With Trump, this predictability does not exist anymore, and the current uncertainty could generate new frictions and exacerbate the existing ones.

There are a few other issues that are worth mentioning. First, the United States should be keen to maintain good relations with India, especially in order not to lose the advantage gained as their major suppliers of weapons and military equipment. Washington could pressure New Delhi to open its market to foreign investments. At the same time, it is not yet clear whether Trump will confirm the protectionist turn announced during the electoral campaign. If this happens, India will lose lots of trade opportunities. Even the possibility that US companies will move out of the Indian market to relocate in the US would not be welcomed by Modi's government. Last but not least, the deterioration in the relationship the United States and Iran is expected to damage India for several reasons. First, India is importing most of its oil from Iran. Second, a worsening in US-Iran relationship may temporary stop the completion of the Chabahar port project, a new infrastructure designed to offer Kabul a new route to reach the sea and to India a new hub to counterbalance the Sino-Pakistani axis that is controlling the port of Gwadar, in Pakistan.

To frame even better the reasons behind Indian concerns regarding the Trump presidency it is important to stress one more detail. In early December, the phone call between Donald Trump and the Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has been broadly discussed (and criticized) on international media. The reason why this call caught so much attention is very easy to understand: the United States officially recognize the "One China Policy", which is the official stance confirming that there is only one China and that the "renegade province" of Taiwan is part of it. Although it is not yet clear who called whom (according to the Hong Kong press, the Taiwanese president called Trump, who then could not avoid responding to the Asian leader), this unusual and unexpected conversation confirms that Trump will be an unpredictable President and his erratic behaviour may create new frictions in Asia. Last but not least, it is not yet clear how far Trump ideas will gain the upper hand on the point of view of his advisors.

The destabilizing potential of this direct contact between Washington and Taiwan and the strong Chinese reaction against it made another problematic phone call go unnoticed. In late November, Donald Trump received a call from the Pakistani President Muhammad Nawaz Sharif. During their conversation, the US leader congratulated Sharif for the way in which he is running his country, and praised the huge opportunities this can offer to America.

Narendra Modi's cautious reaction to this conversation has confirmed once his rational long-term outlook. Modi has certainly noticed that Trump is not eager to get in touch with him. The social networks-friendly US President has not even responded to the official congratulation and birthday wishes Modi sent him by Twitter. What could Trump have in mind? Is he considering realignment between Pakistan and the United States, underestimating Islamabad's ambiguity on anti-terrorism? Is he keen to offer Pakistan a waiver on a brand new civilian nuclear program? Is it realistic to

imagine he is underestimating the urgency to safeguard the already precarious status quo in South Asia and behave in a way that may create an escalation of tensions in the region? Is it possible to argue that he is not aware of the importance of nuances in Asia and that, as it happened already with some of his predecessors, the Pakistani leader may interpret the endorsement he received on the phone in late November as the proof that he will always be able to count on US political and military support?

Modi's behaviour seems suggesting that these are all questions that are impossible to answer now. Although one cannot exclude that India-US relations may deteriorate during the Trump era, pessimism will not take India anywhere. On the contrary, it would be wiser and more useful to keep the window for a constructive dialogue open, to remain cautious and flexible, and to try discouraging any strong popular reaction to Trump's future provocations. At this stage, the most important thing to do would be trying to untangle US priorities in the Trump era. Once these are disclosed, it will be possible to have a productive discussion on how the relationship between Washington and New Delhi is expected to evolve over the next four years.