

US Veep Joe Biden coming to India to deepen ties America's Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy is alive and kicking, says US officials

Washington: Snide barbs about U.S vice-presidents, many of them self-deprecatory, are numerous. From Daniel Webster, who said "I do not propose to be buried until I am dead" to explain why he refused the vice-presidency, to Harry Truman, who thought they were "about as useful as a cow's fifth teat," to Calvin Coolidge, who claimed that the job never interfered with his mandatory eleven hours of sleep a day, American veeps have been disparaged and disdained through history. Most famously, Thomas Marshall, America's 28th vice-president, under Woodrow Wilson, is said to have joked, "Once there were two brothers. One ran away to sea; the other was elected vice president of the United States. And nothing was heard of either of them again."

Times have changed, and starting in the 1990s, U.S vice-presidents have taken an increasingly active international role extending beyond attending funerals of international leaders (Indira Gandhi's funeral was attended by vice-president George Bush and Rajiv Gandhi's by Vice-president Dan Quayle). Al Gore generated a worldwide awareness of climate change during his eight years in office and Dick Cheney was widely regarded as the crafty Svengali behind the Bush White House.

Barack Obama's avuncular vice-president Joe Biden, who arrives in New Delhi on Monday, is credited with having both the visionary savvy of Gore and the strategic heft of Cheney. Despite his unfortunate reputation as a bloviator prone to gaffes, Biden, who became a U.S Senator in 1972 when he was 29 and served six six-year terms before being catapulted to vice-presidency, has strong foreign policy credentials. As chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he has been the architect of many American initiatives, including backing the U.S-India nuclear deal that was proposed by the Bush administration.

A close friend and teammate in the Senate of Secretary of State John Kerry for many years, Biden follows his colleague to New Delhi for what U.S officials say is a reaffirmation of Washington's rebalancing strategy in Asia-Pacific and India's centrality in this new architecture. "India is a key player in this and we have an incredibly broad range of ideas" the vice-president will discuss with his Indian interlocutors, a senior Obama administration official who briefed journalists on the trip said on Friday, signaling that the so-called U.S pivot towards Asia is very much in the works.

The official identified four areas that Biden will discuss with his Indian hosts: Bilateral trade and how to close the gap and grow it from \$ 100 million to \$ 500 million; energy cooperation including how to fructify the civilian nuclear deal; building on the already strong defense ties; and regional cooperation relating to terrorism and maritime security. "The vice-president will set up an ambitious agenda for U.S-India cooperation not just for years ahead but decades ahead," the official said.

Biden, who will be accompanied by his wife Jill Biden, will be hosted for an official dinner on July 23rd by his Indian counterpart Hamid Ansari, and he will also call on President Pranab Mukherjee, opposition leader Sushma Swaraj, and possibly Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

While the vice-president will have various engagements in New Delhi, Dr. Jill Biden, who is an accomplished educator, will make a quick trip to Agra for a health and nutrition event and a dekko at the Taj Mahal. The Bidens will be in Mumbai on 24th where they will have separate events at the Mumbai Stock Exchange, IIT, and Anjuman Islam school among other places, before emplaning for Singapore.

Although Secretary Kerry has just visited India and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will be in Washington in September, the Biden visit is clearly aimed at reaffirming U.S vision of a key Indian role in Asia-Pacific region despite New Delhi's reluctance to be overtly drawn into a confrontation with China. Ahead of the visit, Biden also told a gathering of foreign policy heavyweights at George Washington University on Thursday that the American rebalance towards Asia Pacific was not at the expense of its European allies.

"Europe remains the cornerstone of our engagement with the rest of the world. That is a fact. We're not going anywhere," Biden said, maintaining that U.S engagement in the Pacific, of which he saw India as a part, was also in Europe's interests. "This is not a zero-sum game. It's overwhelmingly in our interest that India continues to grow. It's overwhelmingly in our interest that China grows. It's overwhelmingly in our interest that the world economy grow because we believe Asia's success is fundamentally linked to ours."

The last policy-linked U.S vice-presidential visit to India -- by Richard Nixon in 1967 -- was widely considered a disaster. A whisky-drinking U.S veep, goes the scuttlebutt, was hosted by an enigmatic teetotaller counterpart (Morarji Desai), sending him to the comforting arms of the scotch-swilling Pakistani military ruler Ayub Khan. According to Dennis Kux, who has chronicled U.S-India ties extensively, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was so bored when Nixon called on her that she asked an external affairs ministry escort accompanying him, in Hindi, how much longer the session would last.

No such danger on the horizon during Biden's visit, despite his reputation for bloviation. A long-time supporter of strong U.S-India ties, he is well-liked in the Indian-American community in the Delaware region where he comes from, despite one of his familiar gaffes during an election campaign when he joked that "you can't go to a 7/11 or Dunkin Donuts unless you have a slight Indian accent."