

Balancing Russia and the United States: India's Foreign Policy Challenges

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Introduction

Since its independence, India has formulated a foreign policy that has been flexible as per the dynamic nature of international relations. The foreign policy has been responsive in promoting India's national interests through a sustained focus on economic growth, and a proactive role in international relations, regional stability and peace. As the largest democratic country and a responsible nuclear power, India's rise in international relations largely depends on a stable global order. As a responsible global actor, India, on its part, has ensured that the crucial anchor of its foreign policy stands for peaceful coexistence, cooperation and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of other nations.

The fundamental focus of India's grand strategy is growth and development without compromising its strategic autonomy and self- preservation. Like all other nations, India too has placed its national interests as the key determinant of its international behaviour, for instance, the adoption of non-alignment as India's foreign policy during the Cold War period. Former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's 17 years' tenure assisted India to carve out a position as one of the key members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the emerging newly independent states of Asia and Africa during the Cold War period.¹ Today, keeping pace with the changing trends in international relations, India is an active member of the G20, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and G77, without undermining NAM.

The end of the Cold War brought new geopolitical realities to India as it had to acclimatise to the new world dichotomies. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the failure of Russia to maintain the Soviet era level relations with its traditional partners compelled India to step beyond its familiar contours and venture into developing new ties, especially with the United States. India's economic globalisation in the 1990s gradually led to the strengthening of ties with the Washington Administration.

As a growing player in international relations, India is aware of its limitations and its partnerships with Russia and the US are fundamental in its bid to address some of its domestic and international needs such as reinforcing its military strength, its economic progress, countering unfriendly overtures by hostile neighbours (Pakistan and China), and its aspiration to emerge as an influential global player, and for this, India's bilateral relations with Russia and the US respectively, need due attention. The bilateral interaction between India and Russia in this direction has transformed into a broader engagement as potential global players in the post Cold War era.

In the past decade and a half, the most prominent development in India's foreign policy relations comprises its efforts to align with all major global powers. India's progress as a

political, economic, defence and strategic actor in the 21st century international relations has drawn the attention of many global players. In today's context, India has carefully managed to proximate its realignment with two most important countries— Russia and the US. However, given the pro-Pakistan policy adopted by the US and the pro-Soviet policy adopted by India during the Cold War period, the onerous task for both India and the US was to develop sustainable relations that triumphed over the historical baggage. Consequently, while developing ties with the US, balanced distribution of interests with Russia is another challenge for India. In other words, India's national interests and its global vision to progress in international affairs also required Russia and the US to share India's vision and interests respectively.

Interestingly, both the US and Russia have acknowledged India's growth in international relations and have likewise shown keen interest in strengthening ties with it. India's partnership with Russia and the US today spans the fields of politics, defence, economics, science and technology, nuclear, energy security and strategic engagements. India's huge market potential in the defence sector, for instance, has resulted in competition between Russia and the US in a bid to gain top priority in India's defence procurement interests. While Russia and the US are focussing on establishing a more prominent role in the country, India's grand strategy includes the conscious embracing of a multi-alignment approach in its attempt to balance these two major players to achieve its national goals and maximise its strategic payoffs.

It is important to understand as to what extent India's multi-alignment policy has been effective in the context of its partnerships with Russia and the US. And, what would be the possible grand strategy of both Russia and the US for India in the larger context? The two main sections of this article will focus on India-Russia relations and India-US relations followed by the scope, issues and challenges in the partnerships respectively.

The first section of the paper will assess the status of Russia-India relations in the current context and the factors that have given way to uncertainties in the partnership. But, at the same time, the efforts by both countries to take forward the overall policy interests continue. This section will also address whether Russia is threatened or unfazed by India's growing proximity with the US as part of its diversified foreign policy interests.

The second section of the paper will throw light on the emerging contours between India and the US. It is important to analyse the long-term prospects and challenges in the strategic partnership between India and the US. As mentioned earlier, in response to the changing nature of international geopolitics, India has consciously adopted a policy of multi-alignment to avoid overly depending on a single partner. Despite this policy of broad engagement, it appears that the US is fast becoming India's preeminent partner, threatening to undermine its outward policy of multi-alignment. Therefore, it is important to understand how the India-US strategic partnership fits into India's multi-alignment strategy of protecting its autonomy in international affairs. These are some of the aspects that the second section will address.

Relevance of Russia in India's Foreign Policy Interests

The year 2017 marked 70 years of diplomatic relations between Russia and India. Throughout these 70 years, the bilateral partnership between the two achieved greater heights, but in recent times, it has also been a litmus test as it has given way to uncertainties in the bilateral ties. The evolution of Indo-Russian relations has nevertheless laid the foundation of mutual trust and understanding that continues to be the bedrock of the partnership.

NAM was a major step by India to keep itself away from the superpower bipolar politics during the Cold War period. Bowing down to the pressures and joining a particular bloc, and being drawn into ideological clashes would have undermined the very essence of the self-determination process of the country as it would be bound by many restrictions.² However, India's ordeal with its unfriendly neighbourhood, Pakistan and China, and the Cold War politics, had threatened its national security. It was during this crucial time that the Soviet Union extended a helping hand to the struggling India, especially in the defence and security sphere. Given the flexible nature of India's foreign policy, without undermining the relevance of NAM during this period, India began to develop ties with the Soviet Union. The 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation reaffirmed a long lasting partnership between the two countries. Thus, given the circumstances of India's national interests, the foreign policy tended to move towards dependence on the Soviets.

The epoch-breaking event was the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War that established trust and friendship in the bilateral relations when the Soviet Union assisted India's fight against the trilateral Pakistan-China-US nexus. The Soviet Union reaffirmed India's confidence as a reliable partner post signing of the treaty as its Article IX called for immediate consultation and effective measures in case of any military aggression on either of the parties.³

The Soviet Union also gave exceptional privileges to India, a non-Warsaw Pact member, as seen in the defence cooperation such as licensed production, rupee-rouble arrangement, etc. Post India's nuclear tests in 1974, Russia continued to maintain normal relations with India while the rest of the world called for its isolation. Nuclear cooperation with India also constitutes one of the strong pillars of the Indo-Russian strategic partnership. Adding further details on the issue of India's isolation in civil nuclear engagement, the real challenge emerged post India's first nuclear bomb explosion in 1974. As India was not a party to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the test declared India as a nuclear weapons capable state and the country was excluded from international trading on nuclear commodities, and nuclear technology and assistance by the Western countries, thus, immensely affecting its nuclear programme.

India's refusal to sign the NPT resulted in stiff opposition and criticism from various countries, and some member states of the NPT regime, but the Soviet Union, unlike the major Western powers, did not put any pressure on India to sign, realising that it was facing a threat from a nuclear-weapon state – China. The Soviet Union also intervened in India's favour by deploying ships armed with nuclear missiles along with nuclear submarines to the Bay of Bengal to ward off the American threat.⁴ Science and technology and defence cooperation emerged as the major planks in the bilateral engagement between the two countries throughout the Soviet era. The negotiations for building nuclear reactors had started during the Soviet era in 1988. The collapse of the Soviet Union had a major impact

on its allies, especially on India, which, for almost two decades, had pursued a Soviet-centric foreign policy. Russia was not in a position to maintain the magnitude of Soviet assistance for India as it struggled with its own domestic crises as a result of the decline in economic growth, a national security threat, and corruption, including the crippling of its Defence Industrial Complex (DIC). Moreover, the new leadership in Russia shifted from the Soviet style foreign policy towards India. During President Boris Yeltsin's visit to India in 1993, the renewal of the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty underwent a major change as it now stated that Russia would not make any defence commitment in case of an external threat to India.⁵

Bilateral Relations since 2000: Special and Privileged

The late 1990s gave a new lease of life to Indo-Russian relations as India's progress in international relations caught the attention of the Russian political elites. Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, in a refocus on the foreign policy, called for a trilateral arrangement among Russia-India-China (RIC). Although this arrangement failed to take shape for many years, the key development was that India succeeded in making its way into Russia's foreign policy interests once again.

Russia began to liberate itself from its domestic crises, especially its crippling economic conditions beginning from 2000, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Russia's energy diplomacy helped the Putin administration to revive some of the key revenue generating sectors such as the defence industrial complex which was in a dismal condition post the Soviet collapse. With its new-found confidence, Russia began to strengthen its ties with its traditional partners such as India. In fact, the period beginning from 2000 was a crucial phase in India-Russia relations as the strategic partnership was elevated to a 'special and privileged' partnership.⁶ Some of the key spheres of cooperation included defence, military technological cooperation, nuclear, economic, space and technology alongside support for India's permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and participation in multilateral fora such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS). economic relations with Russia have always been the weak link in the partnership and are yet to be fully tapped, but the growing energy demand of India will be the next thrust area as both countries are trying to diversify their energy focus. Aware of India's energy demand to meet the growing expectations of its increasing population and industrial and infrastructural development, Russia is a steady partner in India's peaceful exploration of nuclear energy. Russia has always been viewed as a more reliable partner with the first reactor at the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) being online, unit 2 also operational, and agreements for the third and fourth reactors having been signed along with several other nuclear agreements.⁷ Russia agreed to construct 12 more nuclear plants in India in 2014 during the 15th Annual Summit held in India. Russia also unconditionally endorsed India's candidature in many regional organisations including permanent membership in the UN Security Council, SCO and also Asia-Pacific economic Cooperation (APEC).⁸ viewing India as a unique combination of democracy, demography and demand, Prime Minister (PM) Modi launched the 'Make in India' initiative to augment India's manufacturing sector. Indigenisation will not only have a major impact on the defence procurement pattern of India in the Russian defence markets but also on US markets.⁹ However, with the expansion of Indian defence markets, there will be opportunities for both US and Russian defence industries to enter into mutually

beneficial partnerships with their Indian counterparts.¹⁰ It can be concluded that the upward trend in Indo-US relations may have caused anxiety for Russia, but India's relations with the US and Russia should not be viewed through the prism of US-Russia rivalry but rather through a pragmatic political spectrum of both India's and Russia's national interests and priorities as the global affairs have changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

India-Russia bilateral relations have no doubt witnessed a transition. In fact, despite the revival of the bilateral relations since 2000, today, India and Russia, in their individual capacities, are pursuing multi-aligned foreign policies. The Soviet disintegration was a reality check for India as its overdependence on Soviet assistance impacted its national and global interests. This also meant that India had to ensure that it did not put all its eggs in one basket, having learnt from its past experience.

Shared Vision to Diversified Interests

India and Russia share a common vision with regards to Eurasia as the region is complex but too important to be ignored. Some of the vital interests and concerns between India and Russia include regional economic integration and connectivity, establishment of a polycentric world system, combatting the rise of Islamist terrorism, multilateral engagements, combatting nuclear proliferation, nuclear terrorism, cyber security, and other non-traditional threats. The interests and concerns have moved further towards more 'shared diversified' ones.

Russia's shift of focus from a euro-Atlantic foreign policy to a more Asian friendly policy post the announcement of the 'pivot to Asia' strategy in 2014, has assisted the two traditional partners to rekindle their mutual interests and concerns. However, the mutual interests and concerns of both India and Russia no longer correspond to the ones that the two countries shared during the Cold War period. For instance, during the Cold War period, the 'common threat' revolved around the trilateral nexus among the US, Pakistan and China. In recent times, however, the mutual concern between the time-tested allies has undergone a major transition as common adversaries are no longer 'common', given Russia's revamped relations with China and Pakistan, and India's growing proximity with the US.

The negative response of the international community to Russia's engagement in the Ukraine crisis and Crimean accession in 2014 had a huge impact on Russia, especially on its economy. The imposition of economic sanctions on Russia resulted in the fall of oil prices and value of the rouble currency as well as isolation of Russia by the Western countries. In order to revive and sustain its economic growth and global status, the same year (2014), Russia announced its 'pivot to Asia strategy' to reenforce its relations with the Asian countries. Russia's presence in Asian regional geopolitics cannot go unnoticed. In recent times, it has emerged as one of the potential stakeholders in the region. The diversification of Russia's interests in the region has been seen favourably by countries like Pakistan that are part of Russia's revived interests in Asian geopolitics such as the stability of Afghanistan. While the bilateral partnership between India and Russia is one of maturity and pragmatism, Russia's renewed relations with Pakistan and China cannot be overlooked by the Indian political elites.

Reinforcing India's concern towards this has been the fact that it is surrounded by unfriendly nuclear states, Pakistan and China. The nexus between Pakistan and China has been the biggest hurdle in preserving India's national interests and security. Adding to this discomfort is the transition that is taking place in the South Asian region's geopolitics, with Russia moving towards revamping ties with Pakistan and China. With newly gained confidence, Russia has refocussed on strengthening relations with other Asian countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia (mainly through defence cooperation), and the biggest strategic move of its comprehensive Asian policy is the mending of its relations with Pakistan. The inclusion of Pakistan by Russia in counter-terrorism and regional stability efforts in Afghanistan through joint military exercises and the decision to sell four Mi-35 helicopters, as well as advanced weapons technology such as the S-400 air defence missile defence system to China, have drawn India's attention.

Today, both Russia and Pakistan are making efforts to discard the historical baggage. The revamping of defence cooperation between Russia and Pakistan is likely to remain limited in scope but the political signalling of Russia's engagement with Pakistan is seen as an outcome of the new synergies in the face of India's shift towards the US, especially in the defence sphere. Moreover, China will be the key defence supplier nation for Pakistan. The second inference is Russia's refocus on using military diplomacy.¹¹ Russia's weapons display during the Syrian crisis and the anti-Islamic State (IS) campaign has attracted some of the key non-North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies of the US such as Pakistan and Bahrain to buy Russian weapons. The move also aims to strengthen Russia's 'pivot to Asia strategy' in which Pakistan fits well in the grand strategy of Russia and China, and this can be possible only by keeping Pakistan away from the US policy interests. As for Pakistan, it too seems to have made up its mind by aligning with China and Russia because America today for Pakistan is "a declining world power".¹²

The biggest beneficiary of the thaw in the bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan is China. On the one hand, it has its all weather friend, Pakistan, and, on the other, it has Russia with which today it enjoys the best phase of a bilateral strategic partnership as this strengthens its position in promoting its interests, especially in the South and Central Asian regions.

Russia-Pakistan relations may have improved since 2014; however, the pace has been rather unhurried and limited in scope. The main factor behind the reluctance in strengthening of ties between the two countries is the historical baggage of suspicion and hostility. Russia's interests do not align with Pakistan's own national interests as Pakistan wants to play an influential role in the regional geopolitics of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) but Russia has so far managed to insulate the region from Pakistan's reach. Russia has been vocal in criticising Pakistan's anti-India sentiments and its sponsoring of terrorist activities that has threatened India's national security. Another example of Russia favouring India's interests and concerns over Pakistan was seen in the case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project and the 9th BRICS Summit held in Xiamen, China, in 2017.

As of now, Russia is staying away from the CPEC initiative as part of One Belt One Road (OBOR) despite its consent for China's ambitious project. This is mainly a conscious effort by Russia to not antagonise its most reliable and trusted partner, India, as the trade route of

the CPEC traverses through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). During the 8th BRICS Summit held in Goa, India was highly disappointed when Russia preferred to be silent over its grievance about Pakistan sponsored terrorist activities. However, during the 9th BRICS Summit, the key takeaway was the inclusion of Pakistanbased terror outfits, namely, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-eMohammad (JeM), Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and Hizb-e-Mohammed in the BRICS

Joint Declaration. In fact, it was reported that Russia' advice to China not to shield its all weather friend, Pakistan, especially in the fight against terrorism, apparently played the most decisive role in the inclusion of these Pakistan terror outfits in the Joint Declaration. This development has also reinforced India's faith that BRICS cannot be used as a forum by China to act against Indian interests.¹³

Defence cooperation between Russia and Pakistan is likely remain limited in scope in the coming years. As mentioned earlier, Russia is refocussing on military diplomacy which has emerged as a key factor in revamping its global status. In this direction, India is a bigger commercial defence market compared to Pakistan, and Russia would not want to overlook it. Moreover, China will continue to be Pakistan's key defence supplier nation.

A great shift has been witnessed in Russia-China strategic relations lately, from 2014 to be precise. The diplomatic and economic isolation of Russia post the Crimea accession by the Western allies, led Russia to strengthen its relations with China. Given the fact that China is a fast emerging economic power with a huge market potential, Russia's partnership with China is a 'rebound' to revive its economy. The Russia (military capabilities) and China (economic strength) strategic partnership's aim is to also to challenge the US influence in global politics.

Some of the key developments in the partnership since 2014 have been the announcement of the Russia-China partnership in the \$400 billion gas pipeline deal, with ready cash to start building the pipelines. Russia seem to have overcome its reluctance to sell advanced weapons technology to China as it has agreed to sell 24 Su-35 fighter aircraft followed by the S-400 air defence missiles to it. The two countries have also agreed to merge economic interests through the eurasian economic Union (eeU) and OBOR initiatives. The biggest strategic development in the partnership is the growing trilateral engagement among Russia, Pakistan and China. Within a short span of time, Russia and China seem to have achieved some of their mutual geopolitical interests, especially in keeping the US influence out of their 'common sphere of interests' such as the Central Asian region. In fact, an article in Japan Times¹⁴ has stated that the post Cold War movement led by the US is being challenged by the current developments in the strategic partnership between Russia and China.

One of the key shared defence 'visions' between Russia and China is to play a proactive role where the absence or minimalisation of US influence has impacted the 'security blanket' that it has provided to its sphere of interests or allies. Afghanistan's security and stability, for instance, has emerged as the top priority for both Russia and China post the US drawdown since 2014. If the reports are to be believed, China is set to fully fund a new military base in Badakhshan, Afghanistan, covering all material and technical expenses, including both lethal and non-lethal weaponry and equipment.¹⁵ Through large scale joint

military exercises and supply of defence equipment, the two also aim to supplant the defence shortages of long-term US allies such as Pakistan and Turkey. Joint military exercises in contested regions such as the South China Sea and China's inroads in the Indian Ocean region spur China's power projection in the IndoPacific region. Unlike Russia, whose well executed military diplomacy has worked in Syria, China has hesitated in venturing into large scale military diplomacy. In other words, China is yet to prove its mettle in military diplomacy and, therefore, needs Russia's military wherewithal to enable it to preserve its national interests and security. The amalgamation of Russia's rising military diplomacy and effective weapons display during the Syrian crisis have, therefore, made China more desirous of strengthening its defence relations with Russia.

Unfortunately, for Russia's traditional partners such as India, its revived defence cooperation with China is a major concern as it amplifies the combat capability of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In addition, the sale of S-400 missiles to both India and China and Mi-35 attack helicopters to Pakistan runs counter to Russia's reservations about selling advanced weapons capabilities to China, including developing defence ties with Pakistan.

Summation

Given Pakistan's reputation as a terrorist harbouring nation and an all-weather friend of China, Russia will be cautious in furthering its ties and balancing the nexus between the two all weather friends. Additionally, despite the US' military and economic aid, Pakistan has failed to comply with US interests on several occasions including efforts to combat terrorist activities emanating from its territory. Hence, it will be interesting to see if Pakistan will be committed in executing Russian interests. Compared to India, there is absence of mutual interests, understanding and trust between Russia and Pakistan. More importantly, Russia, in its quest to achieve short-term goals, through its partnership with Pakistan, cannot overlook its special and privileged partnership with India. Hence, taking all these arguments into consideration, Russia's current partnership with Pakistan is seen as a 'strategic gamble' with its long-term national interests.

With regards to Russia-China relations, there is a growing debate on the 'role reversal' surrounding the strategic partnership in which Russia, sooner or later, will be a 'junior' partner, with China rising as the 'big brother'. Russia is well aware of China's potential to override the influence of Russia both as a regional and international player. Similar to the post Soviet collapse when the US disregarded Russia's gestures for an equal partnership. Russia will, thus, ensure that there is no repeat of such a scenario, especially in the context of its strategic partnership with China. Hence, Russia will formulate its counter balance measures to check China's rise as the 'big brother'.

The most evident geopolitical success of Russia-China relations has been (confined to) in the CARs mainly through the SCO. Aware that the SCO is a China-centric organisation, Russia's enthusiastic support for India's permanent membership in the organisation is to balance/minimise the China-Pakistan proximity in the SCO. Similarly, Russia gave its consent to merge the eeU and OBOR initiatives but it is also clear about its position on some of China's interests such as the CPEC project. Russia's reluctance to join the CPEC is a conscious

effort not to antagonise India which has reservations about the project, thus, deviating from promoting Chinese interests.

In fact, Russia sees India as a potent counter-balancer to China's growing rise that could conflict with its national and strategic interests. Apart from cajoling India into the SCO, the Far east is another region where Russia wants India to play a key role. India plans to make significant inroads in the region through investments and active participation in development projects. It is comfortable in participating in projects that are Russia initiated, given the confidence and trust that exists in the partnership.

India is progressing towards strengthening its foothold in the Asia-Pacific region through a strategic partnership with the US but the economic engagement with Russia in the region will further enhance its geoeconomic interests in the region and the Far East. In this context, Russia has been making the right moves to check China's rise in the region by bringing players such as India into the fold. The 'yellow threat' or 'Sinification' of the region would be a time bomb if Russia loses its leverage in the Far east in the coming years. Thus, India's active participation in the Far east is Russia's move to counter China's looming presence in the region.

Another area of clash of interests between Russia and China is the defence sector wherein they are competitors in the global arms market. Russia in recent times has made significant efforts to revamp its DIC for which it needs a continuous flow of funds to support its state armament programmes. Russia has diversified its defence cooperation with Asian countries such as Pakistan, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. In the current status, these Southeast Asian countries are defence partners that help sustain the functioning of Russia's DIC. The fact that Russia is arming some of these Southeast Asian countries is a sign of its insensitivity towards, and a weakening of, China's foreign policy interests in the region. Though Russia and China enjoy good defence relations; China has made great strides in the indigenisation process of its DIC. Consequently, the two countries are de facto competitors in the global arms market.

Based on the above mentioned arguments, it can be stated that Russia is indeed concerned about China emerging as the 'big brother' in the partnership. Russia is also aware that despite their mutual interests and common concerns, China's extension of support to Russia is limited to economic engagements and exercising of the veto power as diplomatic signalling to counter the US and its allies. China will insulate its self-interests rather than promote Russia's foreign policy interests that mainly aim to challenge the US' containment policy. Despite the asymmetries in the partnership, Russia cannot completely escape from the Chinese clutches mainly due to its own frail economic growth. As of now, the strategic partnership between Russia and China is one which addresses each other's inadequacies to move ahead in international relations. As it is permanent interests that drive a country's foreign policy behaviour, the competition and clash of interests are bound to eclipse the strategic partnership between China and Russia in the coming years.

One of the questions intriguing scholars is: how far India will maintain ties with Russia independent of the US? The multi-alignment foreign policy adopted by India is also claimed to avoid diplomatic awkwardness in case of a confrontation between Russia and the US. This

section will address, analyse and evaluate the scope and prospects of Indo-US relations and the objectives that the two countries will base their strengths and interests on.

India-US Relations

During the Cold War period, India chose to moderate its foreign policy between the superpower blocs (the US and Soviet Union) by following a policy of non-alignment. Interestingly, this factor that brought several of the developing countries close to each other, and the adoption of a common foreign policy doctrine like non-alignment was neither due to military unity nor political and economic solidarity but as resistance against the influence of the big powers during the bipolar world era, which threatened their political independence, and included efforts to remove political and economic colonialism, and support for liberation-seeking and anti-colonialist movements.¹⁶ Perhaps, one can say that for Third World countries such as India, the reason for joining NAM was to maintain complete independence over their respective foreign policies and negate the domination of the power blocs and bipolar politics.

Regarding the interactions between India and the US during this period, the relations faced obstacles when India declared adherence to NAM as its foreign policy. While Washington was disappointed with India's tilt towards the Soviet bloc (in the late 1960s) despite its call for non-alignment, India, on the other hand, was suspicious of the US' military and financial aid to Pakistan and later aligning with China and Pakistan against India in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Pakistan's interest in these pacts stemmed from its desire to develop its military and defence capabilities, which were substantially weaker than those of India. During these years, the US and UK supplied arms to Pakistan.¹⁷

The modernisation of Pakistan's defence sphere and the backing of the US posed a potential threat to India's national security. India also continued to show concern about the US naval presence in the Indian Ocean region, including the setting up of military base facilities at Diego Garcia. However, Washington had its share of grievances towards India. Apart from India being one of the proponents of the NAM movement, Washington was unhappy when India provided assistance to the Soviet deployment from Vladivostok to Vietnam into the Indian Ocean, the so-called 'Arc of Crisis'. Furthermore, India's reluctance to denounce the Soviet move into Afghanistan in 1979 was seen as further grounds of difference between the two states.¹⁸

Restoration of Relations between India and the US in the Post-Cold War Era

India had to regenerate and alter its foreign policy approach to adapt to the changes in international relations post the Soviet disintegration. As for the US, it was an onerous task to develop a robust partnership with India which was yet to reconcile with the reality of the Soviet collapse. The US was also sceptical of India's reliability and affiliation towards Washington, as, during the Cold War period, India's relations with the Soviet bloc comprised a potent threat to the US aspirations, especially in the geopolitics of the South Asian region.

The implosion of the USSR actually brought a brief US unipolar movement. Decline in the relationship with Russia in the post-Cold War era meant that India was potentially left more isolated in the international system. However, the Clinton Administration was optimistic about moving closer to India.¹⁹ Some of the reasons that can be identified for the

development are: (a) India's liberalisation of its economic system; and, more importantly, (b) the decline of Russian interests towards India which created a vacuum in New Delhi's foreign policy approach.

Though the development in relations between the two countries was initially at a snail's pace, there was an upward trend in the bilateral ties as the US acknowledged the ascendancy of India in international relations as a result of its economic growth. Prime Minister (PM) Atal Bihari Vajpayee vouched for stronger Indian-US relations in September 1998 which was reciprocated by the US which by then, began to make efforts to revive its relations with India. In his speech, "India, USA and the World" to the Asia Society, PM Vajpayee stated that they were "estranged democracies", in which the US preference for relations with Pakistan and China had blinded it to the role that India could have played in Washington's foreign policy interests. The agenda of New Delhi post the Soviet collapse was to find its due place in the prevailing international order. In this direction, it had to alter its vision in which the US was expected to play a major role in furthering India's regional and global aspirations. However, the turning point in the bilateral ties took place when the Indian government, under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, pressed for nuclear testing: Pokhran II, in 1998. This sparked ill will in the relations as the US viewed the tests to be unacceptable, threatening the security balance of the region. Hence, relations between the two countries deteriorated when India tested its nuclear bombs. As a display of its displeasure, the US imposed sanctions against India that included an end to the economic assistance, and military financing provided by the US.²⁰

One also has to bear in mind that in 1968, India had refused to sign the NPT, claiming it was biased. When India released its nuclear doctrine after the 1998 Pokhran II nuclear tests in 1999, the US warned India against moving in the direction of developing a nuclear deterrent due to the potential "action-reaction cycle" in the South Asian region.²¹ Besides this development, another important angle was the sharp contrast between America's and Russia's approach towards India's nuclear programme. The nuclear status of India can also be stated as the one of the centre-pieces in understanding the US posture towards India and its role in the international community. Russia's approach in this regard was a motivating factor as Moscow did not impose sanctions on India, unlike the US. Despite the US pressure, Moscow moved ahead with the Soviet-era deal to build two light water 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactors at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu. This boosted Moscow's position in the Indian perception as a reliable friend and crucial source of sophisticated military hardware.²² The difference in the American and Russian approaches towards India's nuclear status and needs remained so until 2005.

The US finally came to terms with a 'nuclear' India, beginning with Bill Clinton's visit in 2000. There was rapprochement in the relations between India and the US as New Delhi implicitly conveyed the message that India endorsed the principles of democracy and freedom, market driven reforms and strengthening of the strategic economic partnership. This paved the way for revamping of relations between the two countries. It is widely accepted that the signing of the first long-term strategic agreement in the field of foreign policy and global partnership on cooperation in civil nuclear energy, the "IndiaUS Agreement for Cooperation concerning Peaceful Uses of Nuclear energy," based on the US Atomic energy Act for nuclear cooperation²³, led to a breakthrough in the partnership. In fact, the end of the

nuclear logjam paved the way for many other foreign players to also penetrate the huge nuclear market in India. Based on this agreement, over the next few decades, India was guaranteed a supply of nuclear fuel for its civilian reactors, mainly to be built by American companies.

According to Raja Mohan, one of the main reasons for the Bush Administration to revamp the bilateral ties was the high anticipation within India and the global community that the rise of India as a great power was inevitable and consequential. In addition, the US establishment had realised the potential growth of the country in international affairs, and, hence, partnership with India would be a force multiplier to carry forward Washington's global aspirations. The decision to include India in the nuclear club was mainly based on this premise,²⁴ to gain New Delhi's confidence towards the US intentions and, thus, develop strong bilateral relations. The nuclear programme was seen by many political pundits as a step towards increasing cooperation with the US in many fields, including space flight, satellite technology, and missile defence. A ten-year Defence Framework Agreement was signed in July 2005.²⁵ Nevertheless, the agreement granted India the 'exceptionalism' status as the international trading ban was lifted by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), opening the door for foreign countries that wished to trade in nuclear equipment and fuel with India, fenced for civilian (non-weaponry) purposes. The deal with the US was swiftly followed by those with Canada, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Argentina, Namibia, South Korea and the UK. ²⁶ Foreign nuclear corporations were, thus, given a green signal to build reactors in India.

India has diversified its foreign policy and has developed closer cooperation with the US, while Washington views its partnership with India not only as a strategic asset in the South Asian region but also regards India as a strong ally in global affairs. In the context of the Indo-US strategic partnership, it can be stated that the inking of the IndoUS Defence Framework of 2005, followed by the 123 Agreement of 2007, squarely put India and the US within the framework of their foreign policy interests,²⁷ thus, resulting in an upward trend in their foreign policy approach.

Consequently, American assistance to India's nuclear programme in exchange for limited inspections of India's civilian nuclear facilities by the International Atomic energy Agency (IAEA) was accepted. As India is a non-signatory to the NPT, this development was lauded as a non-proliferation success by the Bush Administration.²⁸ In 2008, the NSG exempted India from the requirement adopted by the NSG in 1992 that called for boycotting nuclear cooperation with any state that had not adhered to the NPT. This 'exceptionalisation' allowed India to engage in nuclear trade with NSG members. The exceptional treatment was on the basis of India's clean past record and certain non-proliferation commitments. These commitments included separating its civilian and military nuclear facilities in a phased manner; placing civil nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards; signing and adhering to the IAEA's Additional Protocol; continuing its unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing; working with the United States for the conclusion of the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT); refraining from the transfer of enrichment and reprocessing technology to states that do not have them and supporting international efforts to limit their spread; introducing comprehensive export control legislation to secure nuclear material; and adhering to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and NSG guidelines.²⁹

In October 2013, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and US President Barack Obama had agreed for a full-fledged defence partnership between the two countries. The strategic cooperation in this vital sector began much before the inking of the Delhi Declaration on Strategic Partnership. The Russians have been observing the growing partnership between India and the US with concern as this may affect the dominance of Russia's defence market.

The United States, has followed up on its support by consistently supporting India's membership in the NSG during the Obama and Donald Trump Administrations. The US' strong criticism of Pakistan's failure to crack down on terrorist organisations in its territory is also a welcome development for New Delhi. These achievements in the bilateral relationship took place alongside India's efforts to modernise its military through diversifying its defence procurement practices. In doing so, the US emerged as a strong challenger to Russia's traditional dominance of India's defence trade. In 2016, the United States granted India the new title of "major defense partner" of the US, aimed at facilitating defence trade and technology sharing with India on par with a US ally. Towards this end, India and the US signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LeMOA) that same year, allowing both countries' militaries to access designated facilities for refuelling and replenishment.

There is also a growing geopolitical alignment between the US and Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific. China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region is seen as a common threat by both countries. China's territorial claims in South and Southeast Asia, its inroads into the Indian Ocean region, and robust economic initiatives through its Belt and Road Initiative have further led to growing proximity between the two countries. This changing geopolitical context has led India and the United States to work in tandem in the IndoPacific region by conducting trilateral and, perhaps, quadrilateral joint military exercises, along with Japan and Australia.

The five-day maiden voyage by Narendra Modi to the United States in 2016 had foreign experts eagerly watching his foreign policy ambitions. President Obama and Prime Minister Modi deliberated on a wide range of issues and interests associated with recent developments in international situations. The visit rebooted new dynamism to the Indo-US partnership as substantive talks took place to promote economic growth, bolster security cooperation and reaffirm their commitment to combat the growing threat of terrorism in the international community. Highlighting the partnership between India and the US as a natural alliance, the visit displayed a new burst of energy and vitality between New Delhi and Washington which collaborated in activities that would enhance long-term benefits to both countries.

In the run-up to the prime ministerial visits, External Affairs Minister of India, Sushma Swaraj and Secretary of State John F. Kerry and senior figures of the US Administration led their respective delegations to the fifth annual India-US Strategic Dialogue in July.

The two leaders consolidated an ambitious agenda to review efforts since November 2010 towards India's phased entry into the NSG, MTCR, Wassenaar Arrangement and Australia Group. US Secretary of State John Kerry also reiterated his country's support for India's membership in these groups and welcomed India's recent decision to ratify its Additional Protocol with the IAEA.³⁰

Raising the bar for a substantive outcome from the visit, India's business friendly premier also focussed on widening the arc of co-prosperity to create new win-win opportunities for both sides. India and the US decided to extend the Framework Agreement for defence cooperation for a further 10 years. They also welcomed the resolution to enable the civil nuclear energy cooperation to take off. Keeping in mind that the US is India's largest trading partner, the visit aimed to attract American investments and seek the participation of US capital and expertise by sending positive signals to the global investor community.³¹

Mutual cooperation between both countries is still being nurtured by shared long-term interests, mutual understanding and sincere trust. In addition, defence has been the biggest USP of the Indo-Russia partnership. For the present moment, the defence partnership between the two countries seems to be undeterred. But, Russia should realise that in the last three years, the United States has beaten it in defence procurement by India. The purchases from the US include the C130J Super Hercules aircraft, Harpoon anti-submarine missiles and the C-17 Heavy lift transport aircraft. India also signed a nearly \$3 billion deal for the purchase of 22 Apache attack helicopters and 15 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters with the US in 2015. In order to keep the momentum going, the US has also shown interest in technology transfer and joint production with India.³² Although this has shaken the faith of Russia towards India, defence ties with the US, however, are still at a nascent stage.

Conclusion

While balancing Russia and the US, despite its proximity with the US, New Delhi does not want to abandon its time-tested ally—Russia. Former US Deputy Secretary of Defence Ashton B. Carter had stated that the US was ready to offer high-end defence technology to India, and was open to co-development and co-manufacture of products that could be sold internationally. This offer by the US meant that the next-generation version of the Javelin anti-tank missile could be co-developed and co-produced with India on the lines of the India-Russia joint venture for the BrahMos cruise missile project. When it became clear that the fifth generation fighter deal was getting delayed, the US made an offer to India to join its Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) or F-35 'Lightning-II' programme. However, even with Russia delaying the schedule for the fighter, India remains firm about rejecting the US offer.³³ The very fact that India remains the number one customer nation for Russia's defence market is evidence that both countries have reiterated their mutual trust and bonhomie.

Moreover, as a response to the Ukraine crisis and the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation, India's National Security Adviser (NSA) Shivshankar Menon publicly stated that Russia has "legitimate interests" in Crimea.³⁴ India also abstained from voting in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on Crimea on March 27, 2014,³⁵ thereby showing solidarity towards Russia, not isolating it. Other BRICS member states such as China, Brazil and South Africa were also on the same page as India³⁶ India, as part of the BRICS countries, declared in a joint statement that it does not believe sanctions and counter-sanctions to be the appropriate response to the Crimean issue and that a political dialogue is the best answer.³⁷

Russia-India cooperation remains highest in the defence sector as Russia has sold India weapons systems that it offers to no other foreign clients. It is important here to understand that the political cooperation between Moscow and New Delhi has been strong and Russia

has often expressed its support for India becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

India has depended on Russia for almost 70 per cent of its hardware imports. This dependence has gradually been re-inventing itself from a supplier-client relationship to one of partnership, with joint production of sophisticated weaponry ranging from equipment to the manufacturing of the indigenous BrahMos missiles. Russian-Indian collaboration in space, nuclear power, and satellite technology intertwines the Indian military and security apparatus with the Russian military industrial complexes. During the Russian transition post the Soviet collapse, India's imports from Russia helped sustain the Russian military industrial complex and nearly 800 Russian defence industries kept working on Indian (and Chinese) orders. Despite India being the largest importer of US defence products, it is important to know that the US is making efforts to replace Russia as India's largest supplier as India is one of the most lucrative arms markets in the world.³⁸ But, the defence relations between India and Russia are those of mutual dependence and confidence and, hence, Russia will remain India's strongest defence supplier for some years to come.

As mutual interests and concerns have brought both Russia and China closer, the growing strategic partnership between the two has emerged as a major threat to the US interests and security. In this direction, the US is persistent in forming the 'Quad' for strategic solidity, with Australia, Japan and India to counter-balance China's assertive rise in the Indo-Pacific region. India has, however, been reluctant to formally associate with the idea of the 'Quad' although it has been an active participant of trilateral and quadrilateral joint military exercises. Understandably, India's reluctance is mainly because it does not view its strained relations with China through the prism of the US and is aware that Russia-China defence cooperation is not anti-India. either way, India needs to carefully watch the growing defence cooperation between Russia and China and, more importantly, keep a close watch on the developments taking place in Indo-Pacific region.

Despite the clash of interests, the US has largely practised appeasement towards China compared to Russia or any other country that it sees as a threat. On India's part, despite knowing that it is viewed as critical in counter-balancing China, fears of a US-China "grand bargain" or G2 are very real, and could leave a major impact on US-India relations. Despite strong defence ties, restrictions in technology transfers continue to straitjacket the greater US-India defence trade. As a result, India should not abandon defence ties with other defence partners and Russia, in particular, given the latter's resurgence in advanced military technology and its willingness to engage in joint production and unrestricted technology transfers with India.

Unlike Russia- India relations which are based on mutual trust, the Indo-US relations continue to lack in this aspect of cooperation. If the US charts a new course of action that includes conciliation and coexistence with China, it will have a major impact on India-US relations. While the US for long has adopted the 'lead from behind' policy, the same cannot be applicable in the context of India if it wants to sustain a long-term strategic partnership with India, especially in ensuring a stable and secure South Asian region that has three major nuclear power countries.

Given the context above, it is evident that multi-alignment has allowed India to forge deeper ties with the US while simultaneously maintaining its network of global partners, including Russia, and working cooperatively in groups such as BRICS and the SCO. Given that the US may fall short in playing a proactive role in India's foreign policy goals, and India and Russia attach a lot of importance to their partnership, multialignment should continue to guide India's strategic thinking as the means of advancing its national interests and strategic autonomy.

With a tilt in its foreign policy, building regional and international alliances has become the new foreign policy mantra of India's policy formulation but, at the same time, the US-Russia relations in particular complicate India's bilateral ties. Though India's foreign policy clearly states "engaging with all, aligning with none", India needs to find common ground to reinforce and enhance what its national interests are and what India desires. India should not entangle itself in the complex relations between Russia and the US and, thus, needs to reassure both sides of its foreign policy interests and make clear to both countries that it does not desire to be an ally of either. However, if India can act as a broker of peace between the US and Russia, the triple alliance of Washington- Moscow and New Delhi can play a pivotal role in the international community.

In conclusion, the decisive factor in India's shift in foreign policy formulations comprises its national interests. In this direction, India needs to advance cautiously through the multi-alignment foreign policy that has, to a large extent, addressed India's regional and global interests. In the pursuit of its national interests and growth vision, through a multi-alignment foreign policy, India will embrace the US but will not abandon its long-term partner Russia.

Notes

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