



INDIA'S CHALLENGES IN 'BALANCING' ITS TWO MAJOR BILATERAL PARTNERS - RUSSIA AND THE US



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The 19th annual bilateral summit between India and Russia held on 04-05 October 2018 took place at an opportune time as the partnership was put to test once again. India signed a \$5 billion deal to purchase S-400 Triumf air defence system from Russia during the summit despite strong objections from the United States. By signing the deal, India demonstrated its strategic autonomy yet again though it was cautioned by the US of a possible imposition of Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions for continuing defence ties with Russia.

In this context, New Delhi aspires to stay engaged with the continental as well as maritime powers with the objective of improving its own weight in the world order. India's multi-alignment foreign policy therefore needs critical assessment as it seeks to 'balance' its relations with all major countries, especially with Russia and the US. Given the hostile relations between US-Russia and US-Iran, the imposition of unilateral sanctions by the US have caused anxiety to its strategic partners such as India as it tacitly expects India too to isolate and declare Russia and Iran as a 'mutual' threat to global interests. Amidst the debate regarding the impact of possible sanctions against India, New Delhi will seek a non-combative approach to get sanctions waiver under the US National Defence Authorisation Act 2019 (NDAA). The National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 allows for waivers on a case-by-case basis for its partners and is seen as a potential alternative to gain 'exceptionalism' from US' punitive sanctions if India agrees to reduce its purchase of Russian defence equipment within a stipulated period.

In response to the signing of the deal between India and Russia, US President Donald Trump during an interaction with reporters in the Oval Office, stated that “India will soon find out” its chances of securing the CAATSA sanctions waiver. Also, recent reports suggest that the US is trying to ‘hawk’ F16 aircraft to India in exchange for non-imposition of ‘sanctions’ against India under the CAATSA. India, on the other hand, has been reluctant on buying F16, the aircraft which has been in the possession of Pakistan for more than three decades. India has conveyed to the Washington administration on many occasions that its foreign policy decisions are based on its national interests and the growing security challenges are real, especially from China and Pakistan. The US’ unilateral actions have put India in a diplomatic dilemma as India prefers to continue to have bilateral engagement with both Russia and Iran as both the countries are crucial given the historical and strategic relevance and also mainly due to its dependence for military assistance and energy cooperation on both these countries.

India’s predictable resistance to US’ demands over India’s defence purchases from Russia in particular is due to three core factors — a) its strategic autonomy is being challenged, b) Russia’s renaissance as a military power in recent times is conducive to India’s interests and domestic initiatives such as the Make in India initiative, and c) the historical record of US’ strong regulations about transfer of technology does not encourage India to choose the US as an alternative defence supplier to Russia whose generosity in sharing defence technology with India in the past has already been demonstrated several times. The successful development of BrahMos supersonic cruise missile is a case in point.

The US in November 2018 agreed to grant waiver to India from Iran sanctions until March 2019 in exchange for India willing to cut down its oil imports from Iran. However, should the US be persistent in imposing sanctions on India for continuing defence cooperation with Russia, the impact of such an action is set to be two-pronged thus affecting not only India but the US’ interests itself. India is the centerpiece of US’ South Asian and larger Indo-Pacific strategies and has emerged as a potential ally in carrying forward US interests, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. More importantly, in order to contain the rise of an assertive China in the region, US cannot afford to have an India that is affected by lack of military upgradation should it reduce its defence cooperation with Russia (as per US’ demands for sanctions under the CAATSA and its subsequent waiver under the NDAA 2019).

Given the broader Indo-Pacific space and the relevance of strategic partnership with India, diluting of a well-established partnership over the years is likely to lead to identifiable possible scenarios, such as: a) the Indo-US partnership will impact the much established ‘mutual trust’; b) failure to collaborate on ‘mutual interests’ of its partners such as India may have implications on India playing

an active role in the partnership, and finally c) the US continuing to treat India as a 'junior' partner despite its growing stature in international relations may impact long term strategic partnership between the two, since Russia has been more accommodating in treating India as a co-equal partner. Also, the US continues to see India through the prism of its national interests while failing to note that India's interests not only identifies India as a key player in the Indo-Pacific region but that it (India) is also a well-established Eurasian power. On many global platforms India has spoken about Eurasian integrity in which its partnership with both Russia and Iran is crucial. There is, therefore, a large lacuna in Washington administration's interpretation and acknowledgement of India's interests that goes beyond its potential role in the Indo-Pacific region.

India's pivot in both Eurasia and Indo-Pacific region will rest on the strength of its bilateral relations with external actors, especially with the US, Russia and China. India has a special and privileged partnership with Russia that it cannot attenuate due to external pressures. While countering the growing Chinese threat to India in the Indo-Pacific is a reality, we should also bear in mind that China too is part of India's multi-alignment foreign policy approach. Moreover, India will maintain minimal confrontational relationship with China while continuing to maintain engagement with the latter at bilateral and multi-lateral forums such as BRICS and SCO.

What we are experiencing today is that India's multi-alignment foreign policy is India's outreach to 'balance' all three major players (Russia, China and the US) as seen through informal meetings with Russian President Putin and successful execution of annual bilateral summits, the Wuhan Summit with China and the 2+2 talks with the US.

In conclusion, the US has emerged as a key partner for India over the years. However, unilateral actions and approach of the US towards India may undermine US' own larger objective of working with New Delhi in the Indo-Pacific region and global affairs. India's evident progress in global affairs in recent times, its huge market potential – both in terms of economic and defence sector – has been a key aspect for strengthening the Indo-US strategic partnership. Hence, the US may consider revisiting its approach towards India to continue to invest in the transformed US-India relationship that has taken shape over the years given the importance of strategic collaboration in the Indo-Pacific space – the new focus area of the partnership.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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