

Indo-US Proximity: An Apprehension

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The US has now overtly declared China a major challenge and threat to its interests in Asia through its National Security Strategy document of 2017 and in the US Innovation and Competition Act, 2021. In this evolving theatre of rivalry between China and the US, India is acting smart. Despite fitting well in the US policy of China containment, it is still preserving its strategic autonomy. The US treatment of India is not only exceptional but also based on concessions and pacification when it comes to India's deviations from many of its critical stances. Keeping that in view, this piece is aimed at analysing the recent developments which can question India's reliability as an ally or a partner in the US policy against China.

Proximity: Reality Check

The ancient proverb 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' can best describe the vacillating geopolitics of the Asian continent. One of the factors for choosing India as a counterbalance to China by the US was India's threat perception and animosity toward its largest neighbour China. The complex relations between China and India, however, cannot be narrowed to enmity or rivalry. Their relations are characterized by political mistrust and strategic competition but they are also enjoying robust economic cooperation.

Following the territorial dispute between India and China across the Line of Actual Control, the US has eyed to exploit the

rivalry to have a reliable partner in the Asian region to contain China. While the US may be intending to exercise its hegemonic influence over India, India is projecting itself as a major power. During the Covid-19 pandemic, India, despite being far from self-sufficiency, provided aid to many countries in the form, inter alia, of medicines such as paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine to depict an image of being part of major power politics.

The main derivatives of Indian foreign policy, according to leading expert on India-China relations Swaran Singh, are containment of China and formulation of autonomous and assertive foreign policy.¹ The interests of both India and the US converge on China because both see China as a threat to regional and global power pyramids. The US has been criticized internationally at various forums for its exceptional treatment of India. The United States has always turned a blind eye towards India's fascist acts against the Muslims under the Hindutva ideology of RSS.

Building India as a counterweight to China was a project that was launched by blessing India with the nuclear deal on 18 July 2005 as well as collaboration on nuclear energy and outer space. Through this deal, the US not only promised India a nuclear reactor for producing electricity from nuclear energy but also facilitated India to become a member of the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG). Under this

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agreement, the US supported the Indian strategic fuel reserve build-up and Indian access to the international fuel market. This deal increased India's ability to produce nuclear weapons and the proliferation of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles.² The US biases and insecurities from China led it to violate International law and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to make India stand stronger against their common rival.

Exploitation of Exceptionalism

Despite getting exceptional treatment from the US, India did not reciprocate with the same spirit. India, after being aligned with the US, has to follow the mutual interest of both countries but in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India kept its strategic interest at the top of its foreign policy and remained formally neutral. The Russia-Ukraine conflict was a diverging point between India and the United States. On the other hand, the Chinese and Indians had the same stance on the conflicts. Both the neighbours agreed that Russia was a victim of NATO's expansion. India abstained from successive votes in the UN Security Council, General Assembly, and the Human Rights Council. An Indian scholar termed the Indian stance as "a subtle pro-Moscow position"³ for not criticizing the Russian blatant war of conquest internationally. The US has a similar standing with India when the subject is the Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. In contrast, when it is about the Russian belligerence in Europe, India has a very dubious narrative of "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states."⁴ Indian formal neutrality is a buzzing alarm for the US to reconsider its strategic alliance with India. The

US compensated for India's behaviour in the case of its neutrality on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Conversely, the US staunchly criticized other countries which maintained a similarly neutral stance.

India is now a strategic partner of the US, but it is equally benefiting from its longstanding relations with Russia. In March 2022, India signed a deal worth \$5.5 billion for the procurement of S-400 missile system from Russia despite the US threat to sanction the countries buying military equipment from Russia. Besides, India has been firm on the formal neutral stance on Ukraine and justified its standing with the reason of having strategic connections with Russia. Indian vice Air Chief Marshal Sandeep Singh stated, "We know the geopolitical situation is difficult (currently). Our relations with Russia will continue."⁵

In addition to this, a fierce battle over oil is brewing in India, one of the biggest crude oil importers. Russian oil is \$19 cheaper per barrel as compared to the rest of the world market, which paved way for the expansion of Russian oil on Indian soil.⁶ Washington gave no response to the oil deal between India and Russia, the invader of Ukrainian sovereignty. The only reaction that has been recorded was from the White House Press Secretary, MS Psaki, who said that she did not believe this deal would be a violation of the sanctions that had been imposed.⁷ But India must think about where it wants to stand while history is being written at this moment. Firm support for Russia is firm support for the invasion that is having devastating impacts. Indian-American Congressman Ami Bera also showed disappointment and disregarded the actions in



the following words, “With this deal, India will be choosing to side with Putin while all other nations will be standing united against Russian’s deadly invasion.”⁸ US exceptionalism has been sparing India since it has been seeing China as a threat to its hegemony but India is exploiting the exceptionalism and availing the chance to be part of great power politics. India is not a reliable partner because its behaviour is opportunistic. While addressing the question regarding the US-China balance Jagannath Panda in a webinar at the Institute of Regional Studies stated, “India does not want to be caught in the middle of US-China Rivalry. The US is supporting India because India is the fulcrum of Indo-Pacific and USA does not want to lose India as a partner.”⁹ Despite having many foreign policy differences, Washington does not want to let India down. For instance, India has a different stance on North Korea. Similarly, India does not support the US sanctions on Iran because of the latter’s nuclear programme. Likewise, the US follows a China containment policy while India has an engaging and managing policy with regard to China, he added.¹⁰

Complexity in Indo-China Relations

India and China have very complex bilateral relations. Comparing their economic relations on the one hand and their competition in the Indo-Pacific on the other, we cannot say that there exists any interdependence. Rather, both sides are exercising autonomy and pursuing their interests. The paradox of cooperation and backstabbing makes their bilateral relations complex. The bilateral trade between the Asian giants rose to \$125 billion. Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar in a policy speech on “India’s Vision of Indo-Pacific” in

Bangkok answered a question saying, “Asian century will be difficult if India and China do not come together.”¹¹ The Chinese side on the other hand also showed a positive response recently by saying that there are far more common interests than differences. A total of 16 rounds of corps commander meetings have been held on the Actual Line of Control. Internationally, for the “Asian Century” paradigm both the countries are diverting to harness their mandate at the regional and global levels. Mr. Swaran Singh in his article in the *Global Times* on 23 August 2022 stated, “The increasing intercourse of India and China at the regional and global level outweighs their historical and bilateral irritants and this must be put in perspective; rather than blown out of the proportion which can make them miss this historic opportunity to shape Asian Century as the New Axis of Post American World Order. This means staying alert to losers of such reformation spoiling the froth by their ulterior motives to put India and China against each other.”¹²

Chinese think tanks believe that the US is creating the Asian version of NATO using the Quad. Indo-US mutual interest is just their perceived threat from China, leading them to advance their military and strategic alliances. India cannot be in a subordinate role in the US-led alliance because it aims to be an assertive major power. This is why there is little likelihood of India joining NATO. India has a self-assured and non-aligned foreign policy. It did not join the US, UK, and Australia—all of them Quad members—to issue statements against China’s military exercises in response to Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan and, hence, respects the One China Principle. Long Xingchun, *President of the*



*Chengdu Institute of World Affairs, in his article in the Global Times wrote, From the perspective of global peace and stability, NATO should have been dissolved after the Cold War. Currently, NATO's eastward expansion has led to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It can be said that wherever this military bloc goes, the region will witness intensified division and confrontation and come into a security dilemma. For regional countries in Asia, they do not want to end up being used as a chess piece by the US to serve its strategic goal of dividing and ruling Asia."*¹³

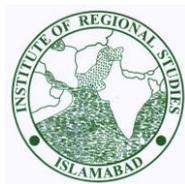
Conclusion

India is a developing major power that has to go a long way to compete with China. The US intends to shorten that time. The aim of the US involvement in the Asian region is to counter China which is perceived as a threat to the

current leaders of the world while China's slogan is 'Development with Peace'. China throughout its history has not intervened in the internal matters of states nor exercised its influence on other countries. India, on the other hand, has not been part of bloc politics and exercises autonomy and wants to be the net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. India is taking advantage of the US's strategic dependence and 'minilateralism' because of the growing importance of strategic alliances over global cooperation. India might get non-aligned again after fulfilling the dream of its presence on the big boss table because Indo-US proximity is effective but not the sole determinant of the Indian foreign policy. While India is exercising maximum autonomy, one may wonder: isn't it time for the US to rethink its extra concessions and exceptional treatment of India?

Notes and References

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