

A re-balancing of India's great power relations



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By attempting to play a meaningful role in resolving the Ukraine conflict, India can hope to reset the terms of its engagement with both the West and Russia

Prime Minister's Narendra Modi's participation in the sixth Quad Leaders' Summit in Wilmington, Delaware, U.S. on September 21, 2024 has raised further hopes of consolidating security cooperation among the "four leading maritime democracies in the Indo-Pacific". Nevertheless, it was India's National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval's trip to

Russia in early September for the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) NSA meeting, which included a high-profile personal meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, that needs greater analysis. Mr. Doval also held one-on-one parleys with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, which was equally significant since India is leaving no stone unturned to resolve the four-year-old military standoff with China at the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

India is currently busy bargaining with China, and protecting its interests while trying to keep the U.S. engaged in maintaining a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. The fundamental idea behind the Quad (Australia, Japan, India and the U.S.) is the creation of a strategic consortium of principles, interests and purposes that would not only strengthen each country individually but would also be capable of jointly countering the revisionist challenge to the existing global order. This is where India's relations with Russia become significant since Moscow is a bitter opponent of the Quad.

Role of peace maker

It is not easy for India's security managers and diplomats to make this complex game work in New Delhi's interest. However, Mr. Doval has a reputation for being imaginative, nimble and persuasive. The Doval-Putin meet, where Mr. Doval conveyed Mr Modi's Ukraine peace plan, may be interpreted as India's attempt to cross the psychological Rubicon in great power diplomacy.

There is little doubt about India's willingness, as an aspiring global power, to shoulder the responsibility in peace making which may include the meaningful role of a dialogue facilitator or an interlocutor, if not mediator. The Doval-Putin meet was after Mr. Modi's first-ever visit to Ukraine in August, and to Moscow in July. In particular, the Russia visit had drawn scathing criticism from Ukraine. But despite its criticism of Indian policies, Ukraine, on many occasions, has asked New India to help resolve the conflict.

Mr. Doval subsequently met French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris, on the sidelines of annual India-France Strategic Dialogue, to apprise him of India's mediatory efforts. Many factors have prompted India to insert itself into global peace-making initiatives, and India's Russia dilemma is the most important of them. While India's strategic relationship with the U.S. is relatively new, India-Russia relations have endured for over six decades, and New Delhi has no appetite to relinquish the military advantages that come with this relationship. But since the war in Ukraine has triggered Russia's total break with the West, Moscow's pivot toward China has become even more pronounced. Functioning more or less as the junior partner of China, Russia has been struggling to preserve its partnership with India since its leverage with China has steadily shrunk due to fierce military resistance by Ukraine.

From an Indian perspective, this needs correction because the Russia-China economic-military ties are getting too close to be ignored by New Delhi.

The West may have reconciled itself to India's purchase of Russian oil at discounted rates as well as New Delhi's silence on Russian aggression in Ukraine. Nevertheless, India's

demonstration of independent foreign policy comes with a normative cost. The West has come to view India as being blatantly indifferent on issues which are so consequential for the remaking of the global order after the Ukraine conflict shattered the remnants of the post-Cold War landscape. By attempting to play a meaningful role in resolving an intractable conflict of epic global proportions, India can hope to reset the terms of its engagement with the West and Russia. Even though some voices would treat it as an attempt to please Washington, others would sound equally compelling in arguing that India is merely emphasising its strategic autonomy while buttressing its position as '*Vishwa Bandhu*', or a friend to the world.

Russia's China embrace

What has been the hallmark of India's foreign policy under Mr. Modi's leadership during the last one decade is a friendly, cooperative and sometimes transactional relationship with the U.S., and a non-adversarial, non-ideological and dispassionate relationship with Russia. However, Russia's foreign policy under Mr. Putin has been primarily driven by two key objectives: a deepening Moscow-Beijing nexus and the promotion of a multi-polar world order which would counter the hegemonic dominance of the western bloc led by the U.S. Mr. Putin's anti-western strategy includes both China and India as close allies. But India is unwilling to oblige as its strategic priorities do not fully align with those of Russia or China.

Russia's apparent unwillingness to diminish its partnership with India should have been predicated on the preservation of a reasonable balance of power between India and China and the avoidance of any major conflict between them. But the Russians have failed to give the same degree of concentrated attention to India which they have given to China. The reason is not far to seek. If Moscow's pursuit of closer ties with Beijing has been driven by a shared geopolitical contest with Washington, Russia's ties with India have lacked a similar motivation.

Consequently, New Delhi is increasingly finding Moscow's usefulness largely exhausted due to Russia's deepening China connection. China has not only been engineering many of India's security difficulties on their Himalayan borders but is also trying to profit from them. The most damaging has been the active support to Pakistan in elevating terrorism as a legitimate tool of statecraft. In the Indian world view, Russia's prioritisation of China in its foreign policy has lent Russian diplomacy an exasperating character.

Russia's break in its relations with the U.S. has pushed Moscow into a tighter embrace with Beijing, at a moment when relations between India and China are yet to be normalised. Moreover, Russia's ambitions of posing a serious challenge to American primacy by asserting a leadership role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS also remain unfulfilled. With the Ukraine war, Russia's task of managing its relationship with India has become considerably more complicated. And that is what makes India concerned about it, leading to rebalancing of India's great power relations.

From past to present

This bold rebalancing does not necessarily require anything as far reaching as a full-fledged India-U.S. alliance. It requires our collective ability to turn increasingly away from the nostalgic images of Russia protecting India from the machinations of the Pakistan-U.S.-China nexus in the Bangladesh war. There is much scepticism about the merits of India's peace efforts when the war between Russia and Ukraine is showing no signs of de-escalation. The argument is that New Delhi does not really have the leverage to push either side to the negotiating table. Nor has the Indian leadership been accustomed to incur the displeasure of both parties in mediation efforts. But that should not be the justification for not trying to play the game of mediation. Symbolically as well as practically, Mr. Doval's publicly advertised and deft diplomatic interactions with Mr. Putin and Mr. Macron herald a new foreign policy dynamic in which conflict resolution efforts are viewed as a vital component of India's strategic autonomy.

In the end, the U.S.'s desire of seeing a ruined Russia is something India is not able to accept. It is also imperative for New Delhi to preserve the gains of the last two decades by fortifying its strategic partnership with the U.S. While the U.S. is undoubtedly the key player in the Quad, India too understands its underlying agenda, and accepts its fundamental features. New Delhi is aware of the structural impediments that stand in the path of any far-reaching development of India-China relations, and has no emotional commitment to their early improvement at strategically prohibitive cost.