



The Putin Visit: *Balancing Russia and the United States*

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China's assertive and aggressive stance under the leadership of President Xi Jinping has required India to strengthen its links with a range of countries. Even as India seeks to engage China through such forums as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) group, it has also put into play other groups both to engage and deter China. India has a Eurasian trilateral with Russia and China (RIC) and an Indo-Pacific trilateral with the United States of America and Japan (JAI). India is also a member along with US, Japan and Australia of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

India's main security and strategic challenge emanates from China and the China-Pakistan alliance. In dealing with this challenge and seeking to balance China, India has pursued different strategies with Russia and the US. While Russia has a cooperative relationship with China,

the US has moved from a cooperative relationship to an adversarial one.

Given India's geographical location, economic capabilities, defence and energy requirements and the long-term goal of ensuring sustained economic development, India is required to

maintain good relations with both the US and Russia. However, given poor US-Russia relations India is often in a quandary in comprehensively addressing her national security challenges. What India therefore needs is a trilateral dialogue with the US and Russia (RAI).



Engaging trilaterals and quadrilaterals like RIC, JAI and Quad maybe easier than securing a trilateral like RAI, given US-Russia animosity. However, it is an idea whose time has come. India needs enduring strategic ties with both the US and Russia, given her geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Stability in South Asia, in the post-Taliban situation, and resolution of India's border problems with China and Pakistan are

obvious security challenges. India also requires stable access to energy and strategic technologies from both the US and Russia to be able to deter China.

If Prime Minister Narendra Modi can manage to establish RAI, persuading Russia's Vladimir Putin and America's Joe Biden, he would make the world a little more secure for India, exerting some behavioural pressure on China's Xi Jinping.

While Russia remains a dominant source of defence equipment and strategic technologies for India, the profile of the US has gone up ever since the Manmohan Singh government signed up to the 'New Framework for US-India Defence Relationship' in June 2005 and the 'US-India Civil Nuclear Energy Agreement' in 2008. India has sought to maintain a balance in its defence relationship between the two great powers. While Russia's share in Indian defence equipment imports has gone down from 70 percent in 2011-15 to 49 percent in 2016-20, US share has gone up from virtual nil in 2005 to close to 20 percent by 2019.

Apart from armaments imports, India has also sought to access energy resources from both powers. India has invested in oil and gas exploration in Russia and hopes to increase its oil and gas imports from the country. Equally, over the past decade, India has started importing oil and gas from the United States, with the US becoming the fourth biggest source of oil imports. India's dependence on imported oil and gas has sharply increased over the past decade and is likely to remain high, requiring a diversification of sources.

By imposing sanctions on Iran and restricting Indian energy imports from there, the US has constrained India's energy security options. By imposing sanctions on defence imports from Russia, as in the case of S-400 missiles the US imposes a similar constraint on India. In both cases, Indian diplomacy has been engaged in securing some leeway in the actual implementation of these sanctions.

The S-400 missile issue has become a test case for Indian diplomacy's ability to balance both the US and Russia while addressing her own defence requirements, just as the pursuit of strategic projects in Iran, like Chabahar port, had become. It is no secret that the one factor that has both required and enabled India to pursue her S-400 deal with Russia is China. If Russia seeks to balance her relationship with China and India by selling these missiles to both, the US can exert pressure on China by looking the other way and not imposing sanctions on India for purchasing these missiles.

Both the US and Russia have, understandably, been exerting diplomatic pressure on India, seeking to protect their commercial interests in the armaments and energy business. Given the strategic importance of both defence and energy sectors, any commercial relationship in these fields is bound to have national security implications. India, therefore, requires a diplomatic framework within which it can balance its relationship between the US and Russia. The establishment of a trilateral RAI dialogue can, therefore, serve India's geopolitical and geo-economic interests.

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