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THE SHIFTING TRAJECTORY OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

New Delhi's diplomatic skills will be tested now that the country is effectively a part of the U.S.'s security architecture

The Third India U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue between the Foreign and Defense Ministers of India and the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense took place in Delhi on October 26-27. The buildup to the talks was extraordinary to say the least, with the U.S. Defense Secretary, Mark Esper, stating that "India will be the most consequential partner for the US in the Indo Pacific this Century".

THE STRATEGIC FOCUS

The outcomes were, however, on predictable lines. The thousand pound gorilla in the meeting rooms on both days was China, with the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, making an all out attack on China and the threat it posed to democratic nations. The Centre piece of the dialogue was the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for Geo-Spatial Cooperation, which marked India's entry as a full member into the select category of nations entitled to receive highly classified U.S. defense and intelligence information. The two day meeting also discussed steps to take existing bilateral cooperation, including 'military to military cooperation, secure communication systems and information sharing, defense trade and industrial issues', to a new level.



With the signing of BECA, India is now a signatory to all U.S. related foundational military agreements. India had signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), in 2016, and the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), in 2018. By appending its signature to BECA, India is in a position to specifically receive sensitive geospatial intelligence.

Welded together, the foundational military pacts effectively tie India to the wider U.S. strategic architecture in the region. This is the reality, notwithstanding what sections in the country may believe. Previous governments had resisted attempts to get India to sign these agreements on the ground that it would compromise India's security and

independence in military matters. The present dispensation argues that there are enough India specific safeguards built into the pacts, and there is no reason for concern.

AN ADVANTAGE, BUT AT A PRICE

Indisputably, access to this kind of highly classified information is an advantage. At the same time, it must be recognised that the information comes with a 'price tag' which would not be inconsiderable. Built into the agreements are provisions for a two way Exchange of information and, while India prides itself on maintaining strategic autonomy, it would be evident with the signing of these agreements, that India's claims of maintaining strategic autonomy will increasingly sound hollow. The U.S. makes little secret of the fact that the primary push for getting India to sign the foundational agreements was the threat posed by China, and by appending its signature India has signed on to becoming part of the wider anti China 'coalition of the willing'.

It is a point worth considering whether by signing on to BECA at this juncture, India has effectively jettisoned its previous policy of neutrality, and of maintaining its equidistance from power blocs. It may be argued that the new policy is essentially a pragmatic one, in keeping with the current state of global disorder. It could even be argued that an ideologically agnostic attitude is better suited to the prevailing circumstances of today. The danger is that it could equally be viewed as highly opportunistic. India's Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, in his latest book, argues that 'because global fluidity is so pervasive, India must address this challenge by forging more contemporary ties on every major account'. This may have triggered the current flurry of agreements, but it could equally push the nation into a quagmire.

IMPACT ON CHINA, REGIONAL TIES

Any number of other cases can be cited. For instance, after having distanced itself from the Quad for years, on account of its security and military connotations and anti China bias, India has more recently waived its objections, even as the Quad has become more anti China in its orientation. The invitation to Australia to participate in the Malabar Naval Exercises this year, to which the other two Quad members had already been invited, further confirms this impression.

Too close an identification with the U.S. at this juncture may not, however, be in India's interest. China India relations have never been easy. Since 1988, India has pursued, despite occasional problems, a policy which put a premium on an avoidance of conflicts

with China. Even after Doklam in 2017, India saw virtue in the Wuhan and Mamallapuram discourses, to maintain better relations. This will now become increasingly problematic as India gravitates towards the U.S. sphere of influence. Even as the U.S. makes no secret of its intentions to contain and check Chinese ambitions, India's willingness to sign foundational military agreements with the U.S., to obtain high grade intelligence and other sensitive information, would suggest that India has made its choice, which can only exacerbate already deteriorating China India relations.

It may pay India better dividends if policy planners were to pay greater attention at this time to offset its loss of influence and momentum in its immediate neighbourhood (in South Asia), and in its extended neighbourhood (in West Asia). Several of India's neighbours (Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh), normally perceived to be within India's sphere of influence, currently seem to be out of step with India's approach on many issues. At the same time, both China and the U.S. separately, seem to be making inroads and enlarging their influence here. The Maldives, for instance, has chosen to enter into a military pact with the U.S. to counter Chinese expansionism in the Indian Ocean region. Again, while India has been complacent about improved relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it needs to ensure, through deft diplomatic handling, that the latest UAE Israel linkage does not adversely impact India's interests in the region. India must also not rest content with the kind of relations it has with Israel, as Tel Aviv has its own distinct agenda in West Asia. Furthermore, India needs to devote greater attention to try and restore India Iran ties which have definitely frayed in recent years.

AFGHANISTAN AND ALSO NAM

Mean time, India must decide on how best to try and play a role in Afghanistan without getting sucked into the Afghan quagmire. India had subscribed to an anti Taliban policy and was supportive of the Northern Alliance (prior to 2001). The new policy that dictates India's imperatives today, finds India not unwilling to meet the Taliban more than half way — partly, no doubt, since even countries such as the U.S. are not unwilling to enter into negotiations with it. India must decide how a shift in policy at this time would serve India's objectives in Afghanistan, considering the tremendous investment it has made in recent decades to shore up democracy in that country.

India, again, will need to try and square the circle when it comes to its membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), considering its new relationship with the U.S. Reconciling its present fondness for the U.S., with its full membership of the SCO, which has China and Russia as its main protagonists — and was conceived as an antiNATO

Entity — will test India's diplomatic skills. Likewise, even though India currently has a detached outlook, vis-à-vis the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), and has increasingly distanced itself from the African and Latin American group in terms of policy prescriptions, matters could get aggravated, following India's new alliance patterns. It would be a rude awakening for India, if it is seen as no longer a stellar member of NAM.

THE RUSSIAN LINK

Finally, the impact of India signing on to U.S. related foundational military agreements, cannot but impact India Russia relations, which has been a staple of India's foreign policy for more than half a century. Admittedly, India Russia relations in recent years have not been as robust as in the pre2014 period, but many of the edifices that sustained the relationship at optimum levels, including annual meetings between the Russian President and the Indian Prime Minister have remained. It is difficult to see how this can be sustained, if India is seen increasingly going into the U.S. embrace. Almost certainly in the circumstances, India can hardly hope to count on Russia as a strategic ally. This, at a time, when Russia China relations have vastly expanded and a strategic congruence exists between the two countries. This is one relationship which India will need to handle with skill and dexterity, as it would be a tragedy if India Russia relations were to deteriorate at a time when the world is in a state of disorder.

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