



CISS Analysis on
India's Global Balancing Act in the Context of Recent
Developments

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Introduction

The nature of strategic ties between India and three great powers is undergoing transformations. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India in September, 2014. This was followed by the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to India from 10-11 December 2014. US President Barack Obama will be visiting India as a chief guest at the Republic Day in New Delhi. These visits signify the growing strategic importance of India for the three great powers.

Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is also expanding its foreign policy and security relationships in Asia. It is appropriate to cast an analytical look at these growing relationships and what it portends for regional security.

Geopolitical Drift: Its influence on India's Relations with US, Russia and China and Beyond

In the changing geopolitical environment India has pursued a balancing act in its relations with the three great powers in order to secure its vital economic and security interests. The first watershed moment for the region came with the 2005 civil nuclear agreement between India and the US. It manifested convergence of interests between both states, culminating in a strategic partnership. On the political side the strengthened relationship between India and the US overshadowed the differences between the two states on global issues including Pakistan's role in the war on terror, Iran's nuclear program, and the emerging security situation in Middle East. The India-US relationship in current global strategic environment has moved forward due to recognition by the US of the strategic significance of India and its increasingly crucial role in containing China which is considered as new long-term goal of the pivot to Asia policy of the US. India being a nuclear and a conventional military power with a strong position in this crucial region of Asia, has the potential of

CISS Insight: Quarterly News & Views

building up its economic and military prowess with US support, and thus balance China's rise. India's alignment with the US would not only serve American interests in the region but also suit India help fulfil its ambition of becoming a regional hegemon.

PM Modi's visit to the US last year and Obama's forthcoming visit to India mark significant moments in their relationship. Modi and Obama are working towards operationalizing the hitherto passive strategic partnership. During the two-terms of Congress rule in India, there was some little movement towards expanding Indo-US cooperation in various fields. The current Indian government is making progress towards implementing the agreements agreed in 2005, thus heralding a new era in the bilateral relations.

This forces India to balance its US relationship with historical ties with Russia. Russian influence in the region, and the strain in its ties with Western countries due to its annexation of Crimea constrains India. The crisis in Europe and instability in the larger region has revived historical East-West hostility and as a result has brought Russia and China closer. This undermines US policy in Asia. However, it is also unlikely that India would undercut its historical strategic partner, Russia.

In this context, India has to deal cautiously with each outside power while pursuing its own foreign policy interests in the region. In order to balance relationships with great powers, India has to identify its vital security and strategic issues vis-a-vis neighboring adversaries (China and Pakistan). China which has had its differences with the US and Pakistan which has been a close ally of the US, are two countries on whom the US Russian equation also will have a bearing. Border disputes continue to loom in India-China relations. It has prompted India to initiate building of necessary defense protective infrastructure along the border and start building alliances. The joint Indo-US Naval exercises held in 2014 were aimed at sending a signal to China.

Meanwhile, the third great power, Russia, is also expanding its relationships with China. Russian relations with China have grown in diverse fields including energy. China is a major importer of Russian oil and gas. China has also provided crucial economic and financial assistance to Russia in recent months, thus helping it avert a financial crisis. President Putin is also trying to gain

more Asian markets for supplying Russian oil and gas. Russian annexation of Crimea and Indian statement in support of its action shows the actual strength of their relationship. Prime Minister of annexed region of Crimea also accompanied President Putin to New Delhi. This shows that New Delhi considers Russian annexation of Crimea as legitimate. However, growing Russian ties with China are not appreciated by India as China's economic rise and military might is likely to disturb the balance of power in larger Asian security order.

Revival of Chinese and Russian relationship shows the role of both states in global strategy. Russia's economic relationship with China and its strategic relationship with India represent geopolitical challenges for the Indo-US partnership.

At another level, throughout the year 2014, the Modi government in India remained busy in multilateral summits and bilateral diplomacy to step up India's engagement with its East and Southeast Asian partners. In 2014 at the ASEAN Summit, Prime Minister Modi highlighted his vision of transforming India's long-standing 'Look East Policy' to 'Act East' which is more than just rebranding of the old policy and signifies India's objective to play a more prominent role in the region.

As a consequence, India has been vigorously pursuing closer engagement with the Asia-Pacific countries and has established significant economic, institutional and defense ties with these countries. India has engaged with Japan bilaterally in defense production sector. Growing India-Japan strategic cooperation exemplifies that India's 'Act East' policy has become operational. Both countries are now committed to the joint manufacturing of a large, four-engine amphibious aircraft, the Shin Maywa-US-2 in India. For Japan, the sale of these aircrafts would mark the first major sale of military hardware overseas since the end of the Second World War. Joint production of these aircraft will also diversify and boost India's defense industry, and add significantly to maritime domain awareness and response capacity.

India and Russia are in a state of complex interdependence. During President Vladimir Putin's annual summit visit to New Delhi has given Moscow assurances that it does not support sanctions imposed on Russia. In return,

India has got guarantees from Russia for sale of military hardware and prompt transfer of technology. India does not want Moscow to step back from its traditional role of maintaining balance of power in Eurasia. However, India will need to offer more than just diplomatic support on Crimea if it wants to prevent Russia from becoming excessively dependent on China at a moment when Moscow wants to re-orient itself away from the Western markets. However, Russia and China have common enemy the US on their respective fronts and New Delhi stands at the crossroads of both.

The Modi doctrine sees China as a crucial factor in India's strategic thinking. Emerging Chinese economic clout, its military capabilities, growing ties with other countries of the region reflect Chinese growing interests beyond the region. Beijing's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region in the backdrop of its Maritime Silk Road initiative will be undermining Indian strategic interests in that region in the future.

New Delhi is becoming increasingly conscious of the need to play a major role in building regional security architecture and Modi's doctrine appears to be shaping this discourse. Russia has limited options at its disposal when it comes to balancing the US commitments to India. In the coming weeks it would be interesting to see how President Obama's visit enhances Indian position in the Asian security order as growing China-Russia ties can undermine the US pivot to Asia strategy.

Future Trajectories

As Putin and Obama accelerate their efforts towards enhancing their influence in India for the preservation of their strategic and economic interests, there are potential game changers or spoilers that could impede the progress on India's relations with US and Russia.

First is India's domestic challenge i.e. the influential "strategic autonomy" school of thought within its foreign policy establishment, calls for preserving strategic independence and not joining the orbit of global powers, which would force India to continuously balance its relationships with other great powers. The Modi government is inclined towards transforming its strategic relationship with major powers despite domestic voices calling for a cautious

approach towards relations with the US. Russia will try to take advantage of this debate and may use potential leverages by its soft offers to capture Indian markets as it is evident by Joint statement of recent visit of President Putin to India.

The second challenge is a limited border conflict between India and Pakistan across LOC or a similar situation between India and China which might escalate inadvertently with negative results like flight of foreign capital and closure of joint project ventures from India.

The third challenge is China. Bilateral trade between India and China currently stands at \$65 billion. It is expected to reach \$100 billion in next five years. Meanwhile, China has also concluded multi-billion dollars crucial energy deals with Russia recently, which will supply natural gas to China. But as economic-centric developments accelerate, the geopolitics is also pacing up.

The US vision for South Asia is pivoted around India and its larger rebalancing to Asia-Pacific policy is fundamentally at odds with both Russian and Chinese interests. As India under Modi seeks more close partnership with US and removes the domestic obstacles towards this partnership, China and perhaps even Russia might balance New Delhi in the region by markedly improving their relations with other states in the region.

Conclusion

Two future scenarios can be drawn regarding India's relations with both Russia and the United States.

First is a traditional balancing act by India towards its relationship with both Russia and the United States. In this scenario, India can extract maximum benefits by balancing three powers and perhaps some time threaten to tilt more towards a certain power in order to get a better deal. India will enjoy the benefits of offers provided by both Russia and US but will refrain from certain high profile maneuvers that can upset the balancing act. India will also utilize such balancing relations to pressurize and somewhat neutralize its regional rivals particularly Pakistan.

Second scenario can be termed as hedging approach where India completely tilts towards the US at least as long as Modi government remains in power. India will remain in an advantageous position with US strategic support and investments in high tech civil and defense industry. In essence both countries will move forward from what was agreed in Modi-Obama summit in September, 2014, at an accelerated pace. As a consequence, India will have to work harder to counterbalance pressures from China and possibly Russia through Pakistan and other countries in the region.

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