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Is Strategic Autonomy working for India?



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Prime Minister Modi has returned from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin to domestic congratulations, notably from India's nationalistic media, for the summit's clear symbolism that India will not be pushed around by the United States – it has options, the fruits of its “strategic autonomy”, the 21st century version of its 20th century “non-alignment”.

The timing of this summit was fortuitous for Modi's government, so recently, dramatically and unexpectedly put under huge pressure by Washington. Tianjin broadcast to the world the message that underpinned the SCO's establishment in 2001: that a multipolar world order was coming fast, bringing an end to the post-WW II order shaped by American superpower.

It is worth remembering that India joined the SCO in 2005, only becoming a full member in 2017. During that time India's relationship with the United States, long characterised last century by scepticism on both sides, had blossomed. But India's SCO and BRICS memberships were about keeping Indian options open, as the country's development accelerated, making it optimistic about having a place at the highest geostrategic tables in the years ahead. Modi's Viksit Bharat 2047 vision has India destined to be a “developed country” by the centenary of its independence.

A series of extraordinary events shaped the background to Modi's Tianjin camaraderie with the leaders of China, Russia and Iran among others. First, President Trump's two elections to the US Presidency. His arrival at the White House, notably the second time, diluted the joint India-US focus on democratic values, but sharpened that on the US-China tussle for global supremacy. Given Trump's and Modi's shared tendency to see personal relationships between powerful leaders as significant for international relations, their closely aligned political inclinations and tactics, and a shared interest in moderating China's growing influence, the warming bilateral relationship seemed primed for ever stronger *rapprochement*.

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Meanwhile, President Putin, leader of India's most reliable partner and key source of defence equipment and energy, invaded Ukraine. Perhaps more significantly for India, on the eve of his invasion, Putin and Chinese Premier Xi had signed up to "a partnership without limits" in a joint statement that set out a world vision which could easily have been written in New Delhi. That partnership, re-affirmed this week by Putin's attendance at the Beijing victory parade to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of WW II, is just what Delhi must have discreetly prayed against for the past sixty years: India's trusted partner allying with India's most threatening, and mighty, neighbour – a neighbour who, for good measure, offers overt support to India's arch-enemy, Pakistan.

These geostrategic developments, largely beyond India's control, left Delhi with little option but to double down on "strategic autonomy". With the world's fifth largest economy and its largest population, India could see itself as well-positioned to keep relations steady with Russia, maintain the *rapprochement* with the United States and test the waters to assess how best to manage Beijing.

Trump's tariffs and their purported purpose put the brakes firmly on a central element of that approach. It is too early to determine what primarily drove Trump to make this move. We can speculate that, like many of India's partners, the President will have chafed at the challenges of doing business with India. But the ferocity of the sanctions imposed last month, greatly amplified by his apparent belief that India's purchase of Russian oil and gas was complicating his diplomacy, took everyone, and in particular Modi's administration, by surprise. To add insult to injury, Trump then appears to have decided to reinforce relations with the current Pakistani disposition – some say out of personal pique at Delhi's refusal to acknowledge what he sees as his determining role in bringing the recent Indo-Pak conflict to a speedy end, for which Islamabad was quick to give him credit.

The Tianjin Summit, in the margins of which a Modi-Xi bilateral declared a resumption of direct flights, an easing of visa-processing and a vaguer commitment to being partners in development rather than adversaries, certainly offered an opportunity to showcase the benefits of India's strategic autonomy and counterbalance the drama in US-India relations. Such bilateral progress would probably have been unthinkable in "normal circumstances" given China's alleged direct support to Pakistan in the recent conflict with India. Photo ops of Modi, Xi and Putin in discussion have sent a clear message about India having options and not being in thrall to Washington.

Modi's unequivocal commitment to continued purchase of Russian oil was less complicated

Many in the Indian foreign policy establishment will be comfortable reverting to their longstanding scepticism about the United States, originally developed in the Cold War's bruising tensions but reinforced by US positioning at the time of India's repeated conflicts with Pakistan. Modi's nationalist base, previously in large part enamoured of Trumpism and Trump-Modi togetherness, will now recoil from any suggestion that India should bend in the face of US pressure – Modi's immediate reaction was to shift the focus onto Indian self-sufficiency.

But the Indian administration will be very sensitive to the economic damage Trump's tariffs could do and, notably, has not retaliated thus far, leaving the door open for negotiation. Furthermore,

India is to host a “summit” of the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) later this year. This forum comprising India, the United States, Japan and Australia is largely designed to challenge Chinese ambition in the region. Although it is reported that Trump will not attend, it will nonetheless represent a balancing event to Tianjin.

Also worthy of mention are some of India’s other major relationships. Modi made a point of visiting Japan on his way to Tianjin, nurturing India’s warmest bilateral relationship across Asia. The recent UK-India Free Trade Agreement was an unusual signal of India’s enhanced pragmatism in developing its economic relations with western Europe. India’s commercial relations with France have been on a roll for some time.

That said, the UK and the EU may both feel a certain stiffening of Indian political positioning in reaction to US (read Western) pressure and India’s wish to reinforce its positions in both the SCO and, more importantly, the BRICS grouping. (India is due to host a BRICS Summit next year. Modi made a point of extending a formal invitation to Xi and others in Tianjin).

The coming months will be important for India’s strategic autonomy policy. It is economically and politically essential for India to nurture its non-US options. But the main pre-occupation will be whether, within that parameter, relations with the United States can be steadied and put back on track. That may not prove susceptible to Indian rational pragmatism!

A post-script on the potential domestic impact of all the above: as mentioned Modi has returned from Tianjin to public enthusiasm. But he knows this will be transitory and that he will need to find a way to protect the electorate, in particular farmers, from the impact of American tariffs, if the latter continue at the current level. He does not have much fiscal headroom. After more than a decade as party leader, his political headroom is shrinking, too. Indian political commentators have for some time speculated about Modi’s succession. Such speculation may well be fueled by these latest Trump-inflicted travails, and there will be some discomfort with what can seem a premature *rapprochement* with China. The times are always “interesting” in Indian politics.

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