**Rebuilding relations**

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As geopolitical realities continue to take a more tangible shape, the US-China rivalry is becoming a pronounced feature of the existing international order. For all practical purposes, the current state of bilateral relations between Beijing and Washington is serving as the strategic pivot on which either new alignments are being formed or the existing ones are getting deepened.

The critical Putin-Xi summit meeting last Friday (Feb 4) ahead of the Winter Olympics 2022 has warned the US-led Nato alliance against its eastward expansion. The boycott of the Winter Olympics by several Western countries – especially the US and the UK – has further vitiated the atmosphere and driven a wedge in relations between China and the US.

The greater convergence of political, economic and strategic interests between Beijing and Moscow has been incentivised by the Western bloc’s relentless opposition to both China and Russia, as the latter look for options to protect its vital interests in the Eurasian region.

Complicating the situation between the rival superpowers is a deepening divide over the Ukrainian crisis, which is becoming graver by the day. In a strange turn of events, New Delhi abstained from voting on a US-led motion to convene an official session of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to discuss the crisis.

The 15-member UNSC requires nine positive votes for the approval of a motion, and India’s act of abstaining is tantamount to a rejection of the US proposal. For an Indo-US strategic partnership that has been described as a bulwark against rising China, the development indicates the Indian tilt towards Moscow, an event which has gone unnoticed in Pakistan’s politics-obsessed news cycle.

With the India-US bonhomie touching a high, expressed in political terms (PM Modi’s attending a rally together with former President Trump) and a geostrategic framework (the American Indo-Pacific policy and the establishment of the Quad), Washington analysts were overwhelmed by the feeling of euphoria and could not resist the temptation of writing off New Delhi’s oldest partnership with Moscow.

This is not to suggest that bilateral relations between Russia and India did not have their share of problems. Moscow was clearly incensed at New Delhi’s cozying up to Washington. Sergey Lavrov, the foreign minister of Russia, has been blunt in his views on the Indo-Pacific policy and Quad grouping. At a meeting of the Russian International Affairs Council in 2020, he minced no words when he said that “India is currently an object of the Western countries’ persistent, aggressive and devious policy as they are trying to engage it in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies, the so-called ‘Quad’ while at the same time the West is attempting to undermine our close partnership and privileged relations with India.”

For a bilateral relationship characterised as a ‘special and privileged partnership’, which faced serious irritants over the last two years, President Putin’s state visit to India in the first week of December 2021 was called an attempt to repair the damage and put Moscow-New Delhi relations back on solid footing. This was the 21st annual India-Russia summit between Indian and Russian leaders, which led to the 99-point joint statement covering enhanced cooperation in several key areas such as civil nuclear technology, space, defence, and regional connectivity.

The two sides also held their inaugural session of a 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue between foreign and defence ministers of both the countries. Besides, a meeting of an inter-governmental commission on military and military-technical cooperation, an institutional arrangement that oversees cooperation in the military field, was also a highlight of the visit.

The Indian decision to go ahead with the Russian S-400 missile defence system in a clear defiance of the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) has added a new layer of depth to Indo-Russian relations. The acquisition of the latest missile defence technology by India has posed serious implications to the security of Pakistan and China, and it also has the potential to disturb the regional balance of power.

The 28 MoUs signed during President Putin’s visit to India included an agreement for a joint production of AK-203 assault rifles as well as the extension of a military pact for ten years from 2021 to 2031.

Despite the fact that India continues to diversify its defence partners – a process that started some time back – Russia remains its largest defence supplier with the former meeting 49 percent of its defence needs, which is a comedown from 70 percent during the cold war era. India is currently the second largest importer of arms and weaponry in the world, which, according to the defence think-tank Sipri, accounts for 10 percent of international arms trade.

Complementing the multisectoral cooperation between Russia and India is the fact that India remains part of various regional alliances in which Moscow is a principal. These multilateral arrangements include BRICS (Brazil, China and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – of which China and Pakistan are members – and the RIC (Russia, India and China). These multilateral groupings provide opportunities to member countries for a multi-pronged engagement.

While Indo-Russian trade has not gone beyond $11 billion as per the available data, both countries have now vowed to increase the trade volume to $30 billion by 2025. The plan includes diversifying the economic portfolio with the incorporation of cybersecurity, railways, agriculture, education and clean energy, while cooperation in the area of defence is likely to dominate bilateral relations.

Analysts, lobbyists and policy commentators, the usual cast of characters doing the rounds in Washington’s power circles who promoted India as a partner to checkmate China, are in for a shock here. Their approach of looking at the world with a cold war-prone mindset has increasingly exposed the dangers inherent in their one-dimensional strategic thinking.

President Biden who has invested his political capital in the building of American alliances with the allies and partners is confronted with a question on how to deal with Indian defiance. Whether his administration should invoke the CAATSA to punish the Modi regime or exempt India from the application of the law is the latest dilemma.

Developments on the global stage with the precarious nature of the consensus underpinning the international order with the UN at its core highlight the vulnerabilities caused by the pursuit of hawkish policies. It is here that Prime Minister Imran Khan’s offer of mediating dialogue between China and the US makes eminent sense.

The policy of courting a Hindutva-inspired regime that is trampling upon the basic human rights of its citizens, especially those from minority communities, for establishing neo-primacy and international dominance has reached a point of diminishing returns.

With the induction of the S-400 missile defence system, India has got a strategic leverage over Pakistan. After a strategically important visit to China that saw both sides further strengthening their multifaceted relationship, Prime Minister Khan will soon be heading to Moscow to hold an important dialogue with the Russian leadership in an effort to strengthen bilateral cooperation that has been on an upward trajectory during the last few years.

After China’s visit, the official trip to Moscow could not be better timed for an in-depth conversation on the state of the world in general and the security and economic landscape of South Asia in particular.

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