

New Cold War In Eurasia: Stakes for India

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Abstract

Great power rivalry has been a hallmark of international politics irrespective of any time period. At the global level, the assertive rise of China and Russia's disruptive behaviour including the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has put both these countries at odds with the US and its allies. Ideological contestation is also back but this time; the old 'Capitalism v/s Communism' war cry has been rephrased as a battle between democracy (the US and its allies) and authoritarianism (China and Russia).

Introduction

The prevailing state of flux in global order in general and Eurasia in particular is being described by many terms, one of them being the New Cold War. The term 'New Cold War' could be understood in more ways than one which points towards its conceptual fluidity. *First*, New Cold War may be seen as return of the erstwhile Cold War as the US and its European allies on one hand and Russia on the other hand continue to play the dangerous game of strategic brinkmanship over Ukraine and the security architecture in Europe.¹

In the *second* sense, the New Cold War could also be seen as the current state of the US-China relationship as it has entered the phase of serious strategic competition.² A *third* meaning of the term New Cold War hints that Russia and China are working together to disrupt the US led global order.³ However, while it is true, Russia-China alliance against the US-led Western countries still looks a distant reality as the two Eurasian neighbours have their own share of problems to deal with. But, their cooperation is likely to increase as Russia would be much more dependent on China following severe Western economic sanctions due to Moscow's military action in Ukraine. It is to be seen how Russia would protect its own strategic autonomy amidst growing dependence on China. It is clear from these pointers that the strategic relations

between the big power triad – the US, Russia and China have global implications. Also, the West would continue its push against both Russia and China in coming years which would bring foreign and security policy challenges for India.

India and the New Cold War

During the bipolar world order of the Cold War, India became one of the pioneers of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), a kind of third way which did not align with either the US or the Soviet Union. However, in the security sphere, India had a close relationship with the former Soviet Union in order to deal with the challenges arising out of the US-China-Pakistan strategic nexus. In Eurasia, the massive geographical presence of the former Soviet Union was helpful for India in dealing with its two main rivals, Pakistan and China. However, after the end of the Cold War, there has been realignment in the global balance of power. The US and China are no more together now as they are competing with one another while Russia is contesting the Western unity through its military action in Ukraine. According to India's Minister of External Affairs, Dr S Jaishankar, the current world order is uncertain, unpredictable, volatile and turbulent while international situation is fluid.⁴

As middle and rising power which has been seeking to protect its national security against threats of China and Pakistan, India has high stakes in the New Cold War. India wants that the geopolitical focus is not shifted to Russia allowing China to take an advantage of such developments. In one such effort, Jaishankar had sought to distinguish between the Ukraine and Taiwan issues, saying that the Ukraine crisis was a result of post-Soviet politics, expansion of NATO and the dynamics between the West and Russia. He further argued that the Taiwan problem is a result of what happened in China's history and the way the Cold War and other developments played out in Asia.⁵ In general, the New Cold War is ushering in Non-Alignment 2.0 in which developing countries are not subscribing to the polarising views espoused by the West v/s Russia debate.⁶ The Global South has not endorsed Western sanctions against Russia and continues to do business with Moscow.

India has been one of the prominent voices from the Global South on the Ukraine issue. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the Voice of Global South Summit in January 2023 said: "Most of the global challenges have not been created by the Global South. But they affect us more. We have seen this in the impacts of COVID pandemic, climate change, terrorism and even the Ukraine conflict. The search for solutions

also does not factor in our role or our voice.”⁷Speaking at the Foreign Ministers session in the same summit, Jaishankar expressed the need for a Global South-centric model of globalisation.⁸One of the binding principles for Global South countries is their quest for multi-polarity at the global level which seeks to reduce ‘unipolar hegemony’ of the West.⁹India hosted the G20 summit in 2023 and is positioning itself as the bridge between Global North and South. Needless to say, there have been many voices around the world saying India is well placed to mediate between Russia and Ukraine to bring the war to an end.¹⁰The three different meanings of New Cold War and their implications for India are explained below.

US-Russia Tussle

Tensions between the US and Russia is not a new challenge for India and it is a familiar sight for foreign policy makers in the country who have by now adjusted to this perennial rivalry. Given the nature and importance of these two powers for India, New Delhi is equally invested in its ties with Washington and Moscow. The relationship with the US has been elevated to the level of a ‘Global Strategic Partnership’ while with Russia; the ties have been designated as ‘Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership’. However, India-US ties have become wide and comprehensive in recent years while India-Russia ties have struggled to expand their scope. What tilts the balance in Russia’s favour is the fact that almost 85 percent of major weapon systems used by Indian military are of Russian origin.¹¹ This figure exceeds the common figure of 60 to 70 percent often cited in media reports. On the US-Russia rivalry, there seems to be a general consensus in India’s strategic circles that the US has not treated Russia as an equal partner ever since the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991. Apart from the geopolitical considerations, the Ukraine crisis is also a result of US-EU’s denial to accommodate Russia in the European security architecture. Gorbachev had talked about a ‘Common European Home’ for Russia in 1980s but that never became a reality. India, on its part; has been treading a fine line between the US and Russia but the challenge is not easy. This will be further complicated if Russia’s dependence on China continues to grow in future. The US has been warning of sanctions like Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) if India buys costly weapons from Russia like the S-400 missile defence system. Russia-Ukraine conflict has further put pressure on India’s military modernisation as Russia will find it difficult to sustain military supplies to New Delhi due to Western sanctions. On the other hand, the US too is likely to further pressurise India to side with its efforts to isolate

Russia. New voices may emerge in the US to warn India of sanctions like CAATSA if India does not curtail arms purchases from Russia. This would, unfortunately, benefit China as India's military capability against it could suffer.

US-China Rivalry

In its other form, the New Cold War could also mean intensified US-China competition as the US tries to thwart Xi's aim to achieve the China Dream by 2049. America's China policy has turned from strategic optimism to strategic competition in last two and a half decades. Democrats under Bill Clinton's administration dreamed of having a strategic partnership with China in 1998 which later inspired phrases like G-2 or *Chimerica* signifying close cooperation between the US and China to deal with global issues. However, those thoughts have disappeared now and there is a domestic consensus in the US to compete with China. Russia openly siding with China in this competition increases American burden and hence, the US could have tried to find some strategic equilibrium with Russia so that it could have largely focused on China. New Delhi's relations with Beijing have also entered troubled waters especially after the Galwan Valley incident in June 2020. India has shed some its traditional reticence and cultivated a close partnership with the US by signing all the four foundational agreements. The Quad has been elevated to the level of leaders while the recent India-Philippines deal on sale of Brahmos missile shows India's desire to take the fight against China to its neighbourhood. Russia has been part of this effort as India-Philippines deal could not have materialised without Moscow's approval since Brahmos is a joint venture between India and Russia. New Cold War between the US and China suits India's security interests and provides New Delhi enough room to manoeuvre in its relations with the US.

Russia-China Joint Contest against the West

The last New Cold War scenario is close cooperation between Russia and China to jointly take on the West. History of Russia-China relations shows that any alliance between them has not lasted long and hence, there may be some level of cooperation between them but an alliance so far is unlikely. Here, it becomes difficult for India to reconcile its strategic and economic interests.¹² The West and Russia play an important role in India's balancing efforts against China while in economic terms, India's biggest trade partners are the US and China. India would want to avoid any alliance between Russia and China and

hence, would remain committed to wean away Russia from China. This is also evident from India's diplomatic stand on the Ukraine crisis. This would suit the interests of the US as well; however, Washington has not been able to grasp the China angle in India-Russia relations. It has ignored Russia's geography and capabilities while formulating its version of Indo-Pacific policy. Being a Eurasian power, Russia can complicate India's efforts to balance China through its policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indo-Pacific policy of the US focuses only on the maritime domain while the continental (land) dimension remains neglected. A close India-Russia partnership in the continental domain is necessary to dilute China's power in Eurasia. This partnership would also make sure that Russia's economic dependence on China reduces through initiatives like the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Complications with Russia could shift the American focus to Europe while its Indo-Pacific policy could suffer. Russia plays an important part in India's efforts to balance China and the US should recognise this aspect. India has a critical role in preventing a deep strategic cooperation between Russia and China. The US should see the merit in the argument and not use archaic methods like sanctions to hurt its partners. Middle powers like India and Japan would not want Russia to be dependent on China and they should also highlight that the American policy of sanctions on countries like Russia, Iran and Myanmar does more harm than good, in fact it benefits and advances China's interests.¹³ In case India-China relations further deteriorate, New Delhi would not want Moscow to side with Beijing just as India has not sided with the West against Russia during the ongoing Ukraine crisis.

Conclusion

One of the indicators from the New Cold War is that the great power conflicts have made a comeback. Apart from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, the other potential flashpoints for a future war in Eurasia could be Taiwan, South China Sea and East China Sea and India's ongoing border tussle with China in the high Himalayas. National security imperatives are shaping globalisation now which would mean that bigger powers would be tempted to take unilateral actions and up the ante against their rivals. Moving forward, India needs to be self-dependent in areas that are critical to protect core national interest as dependence on any foreign country would be counter-productive. Russia-Ukraine conflict has galvanised the Trans-Atlantic security alliance (NATO) and could pave the way for Russia's long-term isolation from the West. Russia could potentially be a weaker power due to

Western sanctions but its collapse is unlikely. Russia does not share a border with India and has never been a threat to New Delhi. On the other hand, China shares a disputed border with India and is a long term adversary for India. Due to geographic, historic and strategic realities, India would continue making efforts to keep Russia away from China. There is a view in Europe which accepts that since Russia has a strong relationship with India, it is because of this that Russia does not have an alliance with China.¹⁴ Another view comes from the US, which argues that Central Asia is the region in which things could go awry between Russia and China. The US has to show sensitivity to India's proximity to Russia which could act as a spoiler in Russia-China ties in future.¹⁵ Needless to say, India's relationship with Russia works to the benefit of Western countries. Until there is acceptance of this reality in the West, India will have to exercise nimble footed diplomacy to deal with the current flux in great power relations so as to deftly handle its national security challenges. As Shyam Saran has rightly pointed out, India would face a nightmare if the US decides to have a strategic accommodation with China (G-2) citing Russia as a bigger threat. It is clear that there are no easy choices for India in the New Cold War and it would want to avoid a scenario where China has the last laugh.¹⁶

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