India’s Calibrated Policy Preserves the Balance and Security in Eurasia

For many decades now, one of the pillars of India’s foreign policy has been its commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement proclaimed in 1961. At that time the US and the USSR were engaged in a Cold War, with both superpowers trying to win over as many allies as possible, and the Non-Aligned Movement gave many countries an opportunity to withdraw from the struggle and maintain normal relations, both with Moscow and Washington. India, the most important US partner in the Indo-Pacific region and at the same time one of Russia’s main partners, has also succeeded in it.

Thus, back in the Soviet era, there was a strong military and technical cooperation between India and Russia, which continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2007, India became the top buyer of Russian arms, and in 2010, the Russian Federation accounted for about two-thirds of the Indian arms market.

In 2014, when Crimea joined Russia, the Russian Federation’s relations with the West deteriorated drastically. The US and its allies have hit Russia with a hail of sanctions, especially on Russian defense-related industries. The threat of sanctions has also extended to countries and companies cooperating with Russia, including US partners such as India.

For instance, in June 2019 Washington, under the threat of sanctions, demanded that New Delhi refuse to purchase Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. Speaking to the US Congress on the issue, Alice Wells, a senior US...
State Department official, said that US sanctions policy does not provide for exceptions to such an issue as the purchase of S-400. Noting that about 70% of India’s military hardware comes from Russia, Wells said India must make strategic choices and decide with whom to develop cooperation. Otherwise, according to the US official, the process of increasing interoperability between the US and Indian Forces may be put on hold. This is important for both sides, as the main ground for India-US cooperation is to jointly counter China’s growing influence.

In recent decades, India has felt rather uncomfortable around an economically, politically and militarily increasingly powerful China. India’s geographical position contributes to the fact that should the Chinese Navy achieve dominance in the Indian Ocean, the country could find itself in partial isolation, surrounded on land by China or pro-Chinese states. It should be noted that the Chinese naval presence is gradually growing throughout the Indo-Pacific region and therefore India, despite the Non-Aligned Movement, is developing defense cooperation with the US and its biggest regional allies, Japan and Australia, with whom it is in a “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” (QUAD).

However, despite the importance of engagement with Washington, India has not made concessions on the S-400 issue, and even under the threat of US sanctions has not cancelled the deal with Russia. Perhaps it played a role that New Delhi knows how much the US loves to fight with other people’s hands and that in the Indo-Pacific standoff with China, America needs India just as much as India needs America, and therefore the Americans are unlikely to seriously complicate relations. At the end of 2021, Russia started supplying S-400s purchased by India to Indian territory.

In February 2022, Russia recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR), after which a special operation by Russian forces in Ukraine began. The West has once again slapped numerous sanctions on Russia, and demanded the same from all countries associated with it. The same pressure was put on India. However, India was the only country participating in QUAD that did not condemn Russia’s actions.

On March 2, 2022, the UN General Assembly met in New York to vote in favor of a resolution requiring the Russian Federation to withdraw its troops and reverse its decision to recognize the DNR and LNR. India was among the 35 states that abstained from voting.

On March 19, 2022, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met in New Delhi. Kishida said Japan demanded a clear response from India to the Russian actions, which the Japanese leader said had shaken “the foundations of the international order.” At the same time, Kishida said Japan plans to invest $42 billion in India’s economy over five years. Naturally, India and Japan have a long and varied economic relationship, but in this context it looked like an undisguised attempt at financial pressure on India, which is not very much in the Japanese tradition of etiquette and respect for partners. It is much more reminiscent of US behavior, which leads one to suspect that Tokyo is acting under pressure from Washington.

Narendra Modi, while supporting his Japanese counterpart that a military solution is the worst case scenario and that all issues should be pursued through diplomacy, did not give the answer that Fumio Kishida and his US partners had hoped for. As of late March 2022, India had neither condemned Russia nor imposed any economic sanctions against it. Russian-Indian cooperation remains in full swing. This is not surprising: unlike the US and Australia across the ocean, and unlike Japan, protected by the US military, India is located on the Eurasian continent, and its prosperity and security depend directly on the developments there.

Apart from the fact that India receives oil and arms from Russia, it should be remembered that the anti-Russian sanctions are imposed to weaken Russia as much as possible. Whether they are effective or not, India has no interest in weakening Russia because if they do, the strongest country in Eurasia will immediately become China, with which India does not have the best relations. And the US, Japan and Australia, as mentioned above, are far away from India, have their own relations with the PRC, and India cannot fully rely on their support.

It should also not be forgotten that in the summer of 2021 the US finally withdrew its troops from Afghanistan, after which the radical Taliban (banned in the Russian Federation), which many states still consider terrorist, seized power in that long-suffering country. The Taliban also operate inside Pakistan and have links with the Pakistani government. And Pakistan is a neighboring country to India, with which it has an openly unfriendly relationship. Thus, with the departure of the US military from Afghanistan, the perennial threat to India from Pakistan has increased markedly as the Taliban now feel completely free to give their Pakistani counterparts full support in their anti-India struggle. How the US can help India in this situation is quite unclear. America fought in Afghanistan for 20 years, lost thousands of soldiers, and a second invasion of this extremely dangerous country will certainly not be understood by American voters. Thus, the only sufficiently strong partner in the region that can help India maintain security on its northwestern borders remains the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO includes...
Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan, and the organization’s most militarily advanced state is Russia. This is another reason why India is interested in a strong Russia. Thus, the best option for India is to continue the line it has wisely pursued for decades: non-alignment with military blocs and a balanced foreign policy that maintains harmonious relations with all major powers and maintains a reasonable balance of power in a multipolar world.

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