

## India's Stakes in Cold War 2.0 – No Easy Choices

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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. Ideology 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, Russia and others).

The prevailing state of flux in global order is being described by many terms, one of them being the new Cold War or Cold War 2.0. The 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. 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 strategic competition phase. A *third* meaning of the Cold War 2.0 could be Russia and China working together to disrupt the US led global order. However, while there is some truth to this, 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 Russia's military actions in Ukraine. It is to be seen how Russia would protect its own strategic autonomy amidst growing dependence on China.

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 would want that the geopolitical focus is not shifted to Russia and China should not be able to take an advantage of such developments. The three scenarios and their implications for India are explained below.

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. 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. 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 new 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 would suffer.

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 its relations with the US.

The last new Cold War scenario is an alliance 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. India would want to avoid any such possibility 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. 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 would shift the American focus to Europe while its Indo-Pacific policy would 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. 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.

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