

Our 2+2 talks may focus on Indo-Pacific security after the Ukraine war but India's neutrality on it shouldn't get in the way of a partnership that includes mutual concerns of the space age

As India resumes its 2+2 dialogue on strategic cooperation with the US, Indo-Pacific security is expected to top the agenda in today's revised context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To Washington's open dismay, New Delhi has struck a neutral stance on this war, having abstained from 11 votes on the issue at the United Nations, a Quad outlier in doing so. On their part, Indian makers of foreign policy have reason to be uneasy about a subtle shift in US emphasis away from the Quad to its newish club Aukus, which includes Australia and the UK, in its calculus of China as a threat to the extant world order. More pertinently, Indians have wondered aloud what America has in mind to help relieve a Cold War legacy of Russian armoury that may have guided India's recent decisions. If the US can waive some of its full-ally-only rules on weaponry, India-US ties could easily get warmer. As joint responses do count for much in matters of common interest, we could also explore the scope for tie-ups in civilian sectors like space.

The record shows that India has been a responsible actor in space. Even a weapon that we tested on 27 March 2019, when a defunct Indian satellite was blown to bits by a space strike to notch up a capability only three other countries had, was not as scandalous as global analysts alleged. According to a report on orbital debris by a tracker that works under America's space agency Nasa, of the 25,182 pieces of junk larger than 10cm flying about in lower orbits around the earth, as of 4 February 2022, only 114 were from Indian space assets. This is not just a tiny fraction, the count is roughly the same as it was in 2018. In other words, Mission Shakti's avowal of not leaving a big mess in space wasn't empty. Nasa's data would appear to validate what India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) claimed: India had aimed at an orbiter at an altitude of just 300km so that it would leave very little debris. Within 45 days, DRDO had averred, much of the wreckage would disintegrate and some bits would drop safely to the planet's surface. While reports did surface of the target's debris spotted months later, the country can hardly be accused today of raising the risk of accidental crashes in space.

We have worse catastrophes to watch out for. As nobody's security would be enhanced should space get militarized, all stakeholders must work out a global treaty to scotch this likelihood. India and the US ought to discuss not just that, but also the potential of a closer space partnership. After US-Russia tensions flared up, Moscow's agency Roscosmos had threatened to snap space relations with Nasa; it said it would deprive the US of its RD-180 rocket engines and rides to space on its Soyuz spacecraft, advising America to use broomsticks instead. In immediate jeopardy was US access to the International Space Station (ISS). Though it's operated jointly by the US, EU, Canada, Japan and Russia, Roscosmos has the propulsion controls that keep it in orbit. And while Russia hasn't quit carrying US astronauts back to earth from the ISS, America may still need to reassess its space plans post-Ukraine. Indian and US expertise may not form too impressive a jigsaw fit right now, but there must be plenty that could be explored together that's of longer term value to both. On climate security, for example, space-age ideas to stop global warming could be given a look-in.

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