

# AN AUTONOMOUS FOREIGN POLICY IS BEST FOR INDIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

Geopolitical non-alignment is in India's self interest and should guide New Delhi's foreign relations. This includes defence ties, be it for Russia's S-400 or any armed interoperability

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A day ahead of his meeting with US President Joe Biden, Russian President Vladimir Putin made time for a whirlwind yet critical visit to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on Monday. Only Putin's second foreign visit post covid, it was a symbolic bookend for 2+2 format talks between the defence and foreign ministers of both countries. Discussions were held on Afghanistan and common challenges such as terrorism, drugs and organized crime. While a deal for the local manufacture of updated Kalashnikov guns was in the news, India's big policy signal was its reaffirmation of a 2018 agreement to purchase five units of Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile system. The value of this advanced weaponry had to be weighed against an American glare of caution, backed by two major implications, one less of a worry than the other. The first was the application of US sanctions under a law that Biden could waive. And the second was a likely loss of potential access to some of America's most prized arms, such as F-35 jets. That the Modi administration judged Moscow's S-400 offer worth a clinch affirms our commitment to self interest as well as to non-alignment, aptly reframed for this era as a pursuit of geo-strategic autonomy.

Even as an eastward power shift plays the grand theme of this century's world affairs, with US-China rivalry already centre-stage, the emerging matrix of influence is far from settled. Washington's ties with Moscow turned frosty after Biden's election and could worsen over Ukraine. While this may have pushed Putin closer to Beijing, whose designs India must stay wary of, the Soviet-era logic of our defence relationship with Moscow endures. Our legacy equipment is chiefly of Russian extraction and we still need spares, upgrades and other forms of service back-up, while Russia needs India's market. Even though we have diversified our supply base, it remains our biggest supplier. Modi lauded the priority it was placing on ties with us, while Putin hailed India as a "great power" and "time-tested friend", both surely aware that the US and China would be watching closely. By now, however, it should be clear to all that autonomy is our motive. Even joining groups of cooperation like the Quad is not a signal of alignment. We have not pledged forces to any combat command apart from our own, a domestic resolve that should serve us well for the broad flexibility it assures.

China is already thought to have hypersonic S-400 missiles that can be aimed at Indian targets within a 400km range. We need this platform for various purposes. The software links needed for us to operate it, though, in America's apparent view, could put future US supplies of well-wired weaponry to us at risk of Russian data espionage. We do have a pact with the US for logistical support and some sort of operational compatibility, as we do with Japan and Australia too. A logistics deal with Russia has been put off for now. Yet, it may be possible to pull off a fine balance that does not let wires get crossed and compromise either American or Russian interests. Perhaps data quarantines can do it. Overall, the point is to ensure that an Indian seal of approval never gets affixed to any accord that cramps the sovereignty of our decisions if international hostilities were to somehow break out. As long as this is so, the letter of our foreign policy should endorse the spirit of our neutrality overseas. This credibility could help make

friends and influence people.

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