

NEGOTIATING THE FORKS IN THE ROAD OF DIPLOMACY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: G20

Seldom in the recent past has the impact of one month meant more in [Indian foreign policy](#) than the present one. And rarely have meetings on the sidelines around one summit carried as much import on India's future policies as the [G-20 summit in Osaka](#) (June 28-29), where Prime Minister Narendra Modi will hold bilateral meetings with at least eight world leaders (most notably U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin), and participate in two parallel trilaterals, the Russia-India-China (RIC) and Japan-U.S.-India (JAI). Two weeks ago, in June, he also held a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Bishkek.

In a few months, he will meet the three world leaders again for more substantive meetings: with a visit to Vladivostok (the Eastern Economic Forum in September), a possible dash to Washington during the UN General Assembly, again in September, and the Wuhan return-visit by Mr. Xi to India in October. Between these two sets of meetings, Mr. Modi has his work cut out on a number of issues, each of which represents a fork in the road, depending on India's decision on them: a fork where the U.S. holds one prong and the Russia-China axis holds the other.

On trade, the tussle is evident. Many in India had rejoiced when the U.S. first declared a trade war on China, given India's long-standing concerns about China's unfair trade practices. However, as Mr. Trump trained his guns on India next, the joy evaporated, and choices for the Modi government changed. At Osaka, Mr. Modi will meet Mr. Trump in an effort to give trade issues another try, but he also plans to attend the RIC trilateral as well as a meeting with leaders of BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa), both of which will focus on countering the U.S.'s "unilateralism" on trade. In the months ahead, New Delhi must make another choice, on whether to sign up for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a trade grouping that has taken centre stage after the U.S. walked out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. If trade issues with the U.S., India's largest trading partner, remain intractable, it is not hard to see that the RCEP bloc, with China in it, will become more prominent in India's trade book.

The choice on energy, and in particular on Iran, comes next. When the Trump administration pulled out of the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#) nuclear agreement in May 2018, but granted India and a few other countries a waiver to continue oil imports (as well as one for Chabahar trade), the government had assumed it could muddle through the Iran-U.S. confrontation. Instead, it has lost on both principle and profit. After accepting U.S. sanctions on oil imports, India's intake of cheaper, better Iranian crude will dip from about 23.5 million tonnes in 2018-19 to zero in 2019-20. The waiver for Chabahar turned out to be a red herring as banks, shipping and insurance companies have declined to support India-Afghan trade through the Iranian port for fear of sanctions affecting their other businesses. What follows now will be more difficult for New Delhi, as the U.S. has sanctioned the top rungs of Iran's government and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Having meekly submitted to U.S. sanctions, will India now also abjure contact with the Iranian leadership or reject the U.S.'s demand? And where will India's investments and its dreams of larger connectivity via Chabahar and the Russian-led International North-South Transport Corridor go, in the event of a full-scale confrontation between the U.S. and Iran? Willy-nilly, the forks in the road are presenting themselves and choices must be made.

Another choice New Delhi will be forced to make in the next few months is on telecommunications and building its 5G network, for which trials are due to begin in September. The U.S. has made it clear that it expects the Modi government to exclude the Chinese telecom company, Huawei, over security concerns, and threatens to withhold intelligence and security cooperation if India allows this company to control its 5G networks. China has made it equally clear that India must make an “unbiased” choice and will oppose any move to cut Huawei out of the trials. On the Russian S-400 missile system deal too, it's a black-or-white decision for the government to make as the U.S. makes it clear that going ahead with the deal won't just invoke sanctions but will close the door to American high-tech and advanced aircraft deals.

The next contestations will come from the maritime sphere. The U.S. and China are pitted against each other in the South China Sea, which is now spilling over into South Asia through the Indo-Pacific. While India has focussed on China's encroachment in subcontinental waters, it is clear that the U.S. too is seeking a role here. The signing of an updated Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) which was put off, along with a cancellation of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Colombo at the last minute this week, will be one of many such military and security upgradation plans for the U.S. in the region. Having strenuously objected to one, will India continue to be complacent about the other's military build-up in South Asia?

The tussle between the U.S. and Russia-China is not new and India has negotiated these in the past few decades with considerable success. However, there are several reasons why this does not hold in the present, and why New Delhi will need more than nimble footwork to navigate the choices that their contestations present. To begin with, the Russia-China bond today is firmer than it has been at any point since the 1950s, cemented by the Xi-Putin friendship. The Trump administration has crystallised that bond by marking out “revisionist” Russia and China as the U.S.'s “central challenge” in its National Defense Strategy published in 2018. As a result, both sides are imposing an “either/or” choice on countries that are not already strategically or economically riveted to one side or the other. In a world where the rhetoric is increasingly about interoperability and there is a ‘buffet’ of options, a la carte choices that New Delhi had hoped it could make may no longer be on the menu. India's pivot within this period, away from “non-alignment” to “multi-alignment” or “issue-based alignment”, therefore, is unsustainable.

India needs a substantive, more clearly defined account of its own objectives to steer its strategic course in these stormy times.

It is necessary to stay rooted in India's own geographical moorings within Asia and within South Asia in particular. An India that carries its neighbourhood is a formidable force at any international forum, compared to one mired in sub-regional conflicts. Second, India needs its own list of “asks” from its relationships with big powers. The recent success with listing Masood Azhar as a globally designated terrorist is an example of how focussed persistence and quiet diplomacy pays off. However, India needs to move beyond asking for punitive measures against Pakistan or its constant demand for more visas for Indians to live and work abroad and think in terms of long-term strategic needs instead. Third, India needs to re-embrace non-alignment as it was envisioned, not as the Non-Aligned Movement grouping, which is now in disarray. Former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao wrote in 1989 that “Standing on our own feet and not being a plaything of others was the essence of the policy of non-alignment... a means of safeguarding India's own national self-interests, that also constituted an earnest attempt to democratise international relations.”

In order to do this, it is necessary to reject the “tactical transactionalism” that has currency today for a more idealistic view of the world that India wishes to shape in the future. It would be a mistake, as Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said recently, if we become “nothing more than the sum of our deals”. It would be a greater misfortune, however, to be trapped in the ‘zero

sum' of our deals.

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