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Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: G8

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi and United States (US) President Donald Trump took the opportunity of the latter inviting India to the planned Group of Seven plus summit to discuss the situation at the India-China border on Tuesday. The conversation raises a question of how New Delhi should use geopolitical cards when playing yet another round of shotgun poker with Beijing. Of their own volition, US officials have been vocal in calling out China during this crisis, conflating Beijing's border intrusions with its strangulation of the South China Sea and Hong Kong. This may please Indians, but an overt US role in a bilateral dispute may not necessarily make things easier for India.

New Delhi should not define strategic autonomy to be the external relations of a hermit. Statecraft is about increasing options, not reducing them. Dealing with China, a country cognizant of its much greater heft, means all possible diplomatic, economic and military means need to be brought to bear. One measure of a nation's strength is how many friends it has, and being able to say one of them is the US still counts for a lot. Beijing sees Washington as its only peer; so, bringing the US into a dispute can be useful. In a number of past cases, whether border negotiations in the 1980s or forcing China to stop stapling visas for Indian Kashmiris, India has used its proximity to the US to its advantage. In the instance of the Doklam stand-off, it worked better to keep the US at a distance.

At the same time, an India which handles such crises on its own builds capacity within its institutions and polity. Resilience based on domestic strengths, independent of the international environment, is the best means to deter troublesome neighbours. Also, disputes over a dozen kilometres of barren land are small enough; entangling them in superpower rivalry will not make resolution easier. India's interests now range from the local to the global, and, so, a part of its skillset must be to judge when to use a scalpel and when, a broadsword. An emerging power must recognise which external crises can be handled at what level. At present, Galwan Valley is best handled at the bilateral level with the US' support being used only as background noise. There are other long-term issues regarding China, in areas such as technology standards and maritime security, which can be taken up at venues like the supersized G-7 summit.

END

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