

## Arresting the drift

Through the vicissitudes of the past 70 years since Independence, Russia has been a time-tested ally of India. Since the Soviet era, both countries have shared such amicable relations that the U.S. and its allies often registered their suspicions about India being a part of the Soviet camp during the Cold War, despite New Delhi's affirmations that it was a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Although India has traditionally sought to maintain a delicate balance between superpowers and refrained from groupism for its own advantage, in recent years this position appears to have shifted in favour of finding new allies, based on India's self-perception as an emerging power in the global system, and its calculations about the changing alignments of power across the world. This change has, to an extent, fuelled India's interest in joining the Quad.

In parallel to these creeping changes, India's traditional equations with Russia have shifted, and Russia's interest in getting closer to Pakistan and China has grown. Indeed Russia-Pakistan relations seem to be on an upward trajectory, with Russia signalling its support for Pakistan's candidature to the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Joint military exercises between Russia and Pakistan, of the kind held in October 2017, are another major concern for India, given the long history of India-Russia defence ties and the depth of mutual trust that it has engendered between the two militaries.

The question that the latest developments raise is this: what are the risks of allowing a historically close bilateral relationship with Moscow to become a relatively lower priority, and can India ever hope to attain the same level of trust with any another ally? The answers to both questions seem to be in the negative, namely that the risks are high and the odds of "replacing" Russian support quite low, at least for now. In line with this reasoning, the biggest fear in India's foreign policy circles is that the ongoing shift in equations with Russia could lead to Russia drifting away from India.

The immediate concern regarding this drift is that a Russia-China-Pakistan trilateral could emerge if India doesn't play its cards well. It is easy to imagine that both China and Pakistan would be eager to support such an alliance as it could arrest India's strategic momentum in the region and globally. Russia's new Ambassador to India, Nikolay Kudashev, has taken charge at this critical juncture, a tough time for bilateral ties yet a positive opportunity to broaden areas of cooperation. If people-to-people contact between the two countries is promoted more, it could help ensure deeper linkages and fortify past associations. In sum, the risks of Moscow drifting away from New Delhi's strategic sphere, into the arms of regional rivals, are high. The quickest remedy is to reengage with Russia with the specific aim of demonstrating that it is still an important friend of India.

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The India-Japan economic relationship remains underwhelming in relation to strategic ties

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