

THE SHARP DIP IN US-CHINA TIES - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

May 07, 2020-Thursday

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In the wake of pandemic, the rift between the United States (US) and China has deepened. Washington has said it will scrap the phase one trade deal it made with Beijing in January. The Donald Trump administration is also speaking to countries such as India about the possibility of ripping out electronic and healthcare supply chains from China. As the US president blames China for Covid-19, Chinese official media mocks the bungled US response to the pandemic.

The abusive language at the highest levels of government on both sides is unusual and dangerous. Governments keep ambassadors out of the nastiest frays so that they have a path towards negotiations and reconciliation. Talk of a trade war even as the world is slipping into a recession could not be more badly timed. All is fair in trade and war, but when superpowers have only battle plans as blueprints to handle bilateral relations, the resulting scenarios range from bad to worse. That all this is happening during a global health crisis makes it even more perilous.

India leans towards the US but keeps an outstretched hand to China. This allows it to maximise benefits. New Delhi has been careful not to call out Beijing regarding its handling of the outbreak. Yet, it has worked more closely with the US on almost every other element of the pandemic. Its reward: tangible assistance and public praise from both sides. The economic gains from supply chain distribution are potentially enormous but are seriously diminished if they require India to align with a single pole. The challenge for India will be to continue its present soft balancing against China without being drawn into a US containment policy, which, it is unclear Washington has either the will or the way to impose. Fortunately, India has sufficient heft that both the US or China know they must persuade rather than coerce New Delhi. Multi-alignment is the catchphrase of Indian diplomacy today, but at its core is the belief India must avoid choosing between sides until the time it is powerful enough that the choice become irrelevant. The next six months will test whether a foreign policy hedge can grow during a geopolitical storm.

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