

Raja Mandala: A rediscovery of non-alignment

Why is a low-key meeting between officials from four nations — India, US, Japan and Australia — taking place after a gap of 10 years drawing so much attention? After all, India has joined so many mini-lateral forums since the end of the Cold War. That America is a big part of the quad provides a partial answer.

Although Indian officials have been sitting down with their American and Japanese counterparts for some years now, the quad comes amidst the growing Chinese unilateralism in Asia. India did much the same when it sought to hedge against America's unipolar moment by forming a political triad with Russia and China that later became the BRICS to include Brazil and South Africa.

If the explicit purpose of the triad was to promote a "multipolar world", the quad has the big task of preventing the emergence of a "unipolar Asia" dominated by China. But compared to the BRICS, which convenes annual summits and makes such big moves as creating new international financial institutions, the quad has a long way to go. It is also useful to remember the quad was formed a decade ago and disbanded soon after.

BRICS issues long joint statements on all contemporary issues. After their meeting in Manila, the quad officials did not put out a collective version of the deliberations. They issued separate national statements. If you are a foreign policy geek, you might find a nuanced variation in the emphases.

All the renewed quad did this week was to identify their shared interests on promoting connectivity, countering terrorism, addressing proliferation of nuclear weapons, and encourage respect for international law. It will be a while before they move towards effective actions on the ground. Meanwhile, the foreign ministers of India, China and Russia are gathering in Delhi next month. That should rule out much of the apprehensions of the quad as an "alliance to contain China". None of the four countries are interested in containment. In fact, the US, Japan and Australia have much deeper economic and political ties with China than India.

That India is open to both the quad and triad suggests not the construction of new alliances, but Delhi's return to the original conception of non-alignment. The persistent Indian anxieties on the quad are not about the high principle of strategic autonomy. They reflect the entrenched political distrust of America that expresses itself on any issue involving partnership with the US — whether it was the multilateral nuclear initiative, mini-lateral regional coordination through the quad, or the bilateral defence framework.

Contrary to the popular view, distrust of America was not written into independent India's DNA. India's founding fathers did not define non-alignment as "anti-Americanism". That distortion was a product of the 1970s. As US-India relations deteriorated and domestic politics drifted towards left-wing populism, a new dogma emerged. It decreed that working with Soviet Russia was "progressive" and cooperation with America meant "surrendering national sovereignty". In utter perversity, "non-alignment" was interpreted as "aligning" with Soviet Russia.

But this framework could not have survived without some correspondence with the new balance of power system that emerged around India. It was based on the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations after the 1962 war, breakdown of the socialist solidarity between Soviet Union and China, Sino-American rapprochement, and the Indo-Soviet entente. If America and China drew closer to Pakistan, Delhi tied up with Moscow.

This system began to slowly unravel after the Cold War ended. In the new era, conflict among the

major powers ebbed. India opened up its economy to globalisation and Western capital and technology. Restoration of cooperation with America became central to the recalibration of India's foreign policy since the 1990s.

If America has become more empathetic since then to India's concerns on terrorism, Kashmir and global nuclear order, a rising China has turned hostile. To make matters worse, tensions on the disputed Sino-Indian border have become more frequent and intense. Moscow, which once helped India balance China, is now in a tight embrace with Beijing.

The proposition that India must tilt to one side, towards Russia and China, and keep distance from America is a legacy from the 1970s. It does not square with contemporary reality. Russia and China, which are both eager to cut separate deals with America, can't demand a veto over Delhi's ties to Washington.

The original conception of non-alignment was about building strong ties with all the major powers and making independent judgements about international affairs. In what was described as "suckling from two cows", Delhi benefited immensely from simultaneous cooperation with Washington and Moscow in the 1950s and 1960s.

Discarding the ambiguities inherited from the 1970s, Delhi now appears ready to expand cooperation with the West or East on the basis of enlightened self-interest. If the quad helps India improve its ability to defeat terrorism, improve regional connectivity and extend its naval reach, Delhi is not going to thumb its nose. If China is ready to cooperate on terrorism and stop blocking India's rise, Delhi will be happy explore the multiple possibilities with Beijing. If this is not non-alignment we really don't know what is.

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