

OUTCOMES VERSUS PROMISES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin's whirlwind visit to Delhi earlier this month, lasting less than 24 hours, came just a month after the visits, in September, of U.S. Secretary of State Mike R. Pompeo and Defence Secretary James N. Mattis to participate in the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue with their Indian counterparts, Sushma Swaraj and Nirmala Sitharaman.

The summit between the Indian Prime Minister and the Russian President is now an annual event, the protocol having been agreed upon by Mr. Putin and Manmohan Singh in 2005. Summits have often led to spectacular breakthroughs — in the 2009 meeting between Dmitry Medvedev and Mr. Singh the log-jam in the long pending sale to India of the Russian aircraft carrier, Gorshkov (since renamed Vikramaditya) could be resolved and, in the latest instance, the inking of the \$5.4 billion S-400 Triumf missile defence system. The recent 2+2 Dialogue between India and the U.S., on the other hand, is a new concept, and while it has been hailed as a path-breaking event paving the way for an avalanche of state-of-the-art defence equipment from the U.S., the outcomes from this initial meet were clearly dwarfed by what took place during Mr. Putin's visit.

The 2+2 Dialogue — a format the U.S. employs with some of its closest allies including Japan and Australia — has given the impression that India has come within the U.S. orbit of influence, detaching itself further from Russia. This impression is further heightened by India signing on to the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) recently. Lost in translation, however, is that India still fancies a close relationship with Russia, one of its and most dependable allies.

A comparison of the Putin-Modi summit outcome with the promises made during the 2+2 Dialogue can hardly be a true index of what lies in the future. It may, nevertheless, be worth undertaking. The summit's mega missile defence deal clearly took the shine off any promises made at the 2+2 Dialogue regarding future defence acquisitions from the U.S. Russia's S-400 Triumf, possibly the best missile defence system in the world, comes with no strings attached. There is no Russian equivalent of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in place. The S-400 Triumf can be deployed against all enemies, irrespective of any other defence choices that India might have.

There were several other concrete outcomes from the Putin-Modi summit. India and Russia signed on to a document to expand civil nuclear energy cooperation and agreed on a second site for Russian nuclear reactors. They signed a memorandum of understanding on a joint programme in the field of human space-flight, enabling Indian astronauts to be trained in Russia. They also agreed on the virtues of a regional security architecture to provide security to all countries in Asia and in the regions of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This seemed to demonstrate a clear 'mutuality of interests'.

The 2+2 Dialogue, for its part, marks a paradigmatic change in the nature of India-U.S. relations. It hence needs to be viewed, more appropriately, as the culmination of a long-standing attempt by the U.S. to woo India, something that has been in the works for some time. As a prelude to this, the U.S. had renamed the Asia-Pacific as the Indo-Pacific. It had blocked more than \$1.5 billion in U.S. security aid to Pakistan, allotting a mere \$150 million in 2019. U.S.-India economic cooperation was stated to have grown exponentially within two decades, with the total goods and services trade between India and U.S. increasing from \$11.2 billion in 1995 to \$126.2 billion in 2017. U.S. foreign direct investment into India substantially increased during this period. The

most important bait was India being accorded the status of a 'major defence partner'.

The underlying theme of the 2+2 Dialogue, notwithstanding all this, seems however, aimed at forging a possible containment of China strategy, with India partnering the U.S. in this effort. The U.S., at present, perceives China as posing a major challenge to its supremacy, and 'the most significant threat to U.S. interest from a counter-intelligence perspective'. Whether China was specifically discussed or not in the course of the 2+2 Dialogue, it was obviously the 400-pound gorilla in the room.

The U.S. has obviously been preparing for this for some time, unleashing a spate of allegations against China. These include an implicit reference to the threat China posed to other nations in the region, including India, given that China had the second largest defence budget in the world, the largest standing army, the third largest air force, and was rapidly expanding its navy. Specific mention was also made by the U.S. to the Chinese navy's 'anti-access' capabilities and its 'area denial tactics', possibly intended to warn countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) like India of the growing menace posed by the Chinese navy.

Differences in the outcomes of the Putin-Modi summit and the promises made in 2+2 dialogue are thus quite apparent. Russia was essentially seeking to cement a relationship with India that has existed for several years. It was not insisting on any exclusivity as far as relationships go. The U.S. wanted India to view foreign policy perspectives largely through a U.S. prism, and thereafter make a choice. For India to steer between this Scylla of Russia and the Charybdis of the U.S., however, is not going to be easy. Russia has already given a hint that it has the option of other choices, which might not exclude Pakistan. The U.S., meanwhile, tends to behave like a 'jealous mistress' and is insistent on India making the right choice.

The situation is greatly complicated by the fact that the world today faces a post-Cold War situation. The rise of China's economic power and its growing military might, and the re-emergence of Russia are significant pointers to this situation. The U.S., hence, no longer holds all the cards. Additionally, many existing precepts are undergoing changes. For example, the threat to the rules-based international order today comes as much from within existing democracies.

At such a time, the 2+2 Dialogue and the Putin visit within a few weeks of each have left India with more questions than answers on what options to follow. India can hardly alienate Russia as it re-emerges as a key presence in Asia and Eurasia. Appearing to reject U.S. overtures, while the latter is seen making every effort to provide India with state-of-the-art defence equipment, and acting in tandem with it in groupings such as the Quadrilateral, could prove short-sighted. Mature strategic judgment is called for in these circumstances.

Undoubtedly, India and China have differences on several issues, including problems at several points along the border between the two countries. Many points of divergence with regard to the current world situation also exist. There is also a subliminal struggle between them for the leadership of Asia. Nevertheless, neither India nor China appears ready for an open conflict as it would cost both countries dearly. India is also not unaware of a U.S. lack of resolve to actively resist China's territorial expansion in the South China Sea, and in preventing China from expanding its naval activities in the IOR. The abortive U.S. "pivot to Asia" is a stark reminder of the limitation of U.S. capabilities today.

India needs to ponder deeply on what is in its best interests. It should not allow itself to be easily persuaded in the belief that democracies, by and large, offer better choices. It should not reject, without due consideration, what is in its best interest. Its decision needs to be dictated by the cold logic of circumstances. Strategic ambivalence is not an answer to the situation that India

faces today. Strategic integrity and autonomy, and mature strategic judgment are required in a world where disruption is the order of the day.

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