

STEAMING BACK INTO THE INDO-PACIFIC

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Russia

An exchange in 1964 between U.S. diplomat Chester Bowles and Triloki Nath Kaul, India's then Ambassador to Moscow, offers a fascinating insight into contemporary geopolitics. While discussing South East Asia, Bowles said, "it would be a good thing if India could try to bring the Soviet and American points of view closer... India's friendship with both could act as a sort of bridge between them." He "hoped that it would be possible for [the] USA and USSR, with the help of India, to come to some kind of understanding about preventing Chinese expansionism and infiltration in South East Asia." Kaul replied, "India would be glad to bring the U.S. and Soviet points of view closer as far as lay within our ability. In fact this was our present policy." This response reflected India's then geostrategy to position itself as an area of agreement between the superpowers.

As Kaul's cable in September 1965 to Indira Gandhi subsequently explained: "the interests of America, USSR and India, have a common feature of being aimed at the prevention of Chinese expansion in this area. This provides an opportunity for India to reap the maximum possible advantage from both sides and strengthen herself for the future."

History, however, followed a different course. As the 1960s unfolded, the Sino-Soviet ideological struggle culminated in an ugly spat in the Communist world. Ironically, both New Delhi and Washington perceived that trend differently and with contrasting ends in mind.

For Anglo-American policymakers, a long cherished dream of isolating Russia and pulling China back into their orbit became a reality. For India, the spectre of an unfriendly China being checked through a shared understanding with Washington and Moscow fell by the way side, and New Delhi was compelled to imagine new approaches to safeguard its interests and security. By 1969, the bipolar system had cracked open into a multipolar world. The U.S. and China were on the cusp of a rapprochement while New Delhi and Moscow had established strategic understanding at the highest level to respond to this disconcerting global re-alignment. December 1971 reaffirmed the new multipolar world with the Soviet Navy entering the Indian Ocean to stymie the Anglo-American attempt to disrupt India's military operations during the liberation of Bangladesh. That seminal period laid the foundation, as External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar alluded to in Moscow last week, for a four-decade relationship that withstood further disruptions in international politics, including the end of the first Cold War in 1989 and the disappearance of the Soviet Union in 1991.

If we fast forward to recent years, historical patterns continue to have a robust afterlife. The U.S.-Russia-China triangle still contains complex and counter-intuitive dynamics that often get obscured or distorted in India's strategic debates.

Despite the Donald Trump administration's posturing on China and its attempt to redefine the terms of that relationship, we do not yet see a credible and sustainable strategy to respond to China's rise. And growing Sino-Russian relations have not led to any fundamental reassessment in the U.S.'s thinking. In recent years, whether on the U.S.'s attempts to pressure North Korea or security in Northeast Asia or conflicts in the Middle East we have abundant evidence of Moscow and Beijing providing psychological and diplomatic support to each other. Even potentially contentious issues such as their Eurasian integration visions, that is, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road initiative, have been projected in a spirit of co-existence and mutual respect, often disguising deeper questions of power and ambition. It is not that Moscow is oblivious to Beijing potentially squeezing Russian influence from parts of Eurasia

but that Moscow's calculus is also shaped by the strategic necessity of a mutually beneficial partnership with Beijing in order to counter-balance a rigid and unfriendly West.

The Russia-China relationship is presently guided by, as Dmitri Trenin suggests, the principle of "never being against each other, but not necessarily always with each other". This formula "puts a premium on a solid partnership between Moscow and Beijing where their interests meet, eschews conflicts where they don't, and allows a lot of flexibility where interests overlap only partially". For instance, we saw this nimbleness at the UN Security Council when Russia and China were on opposite sides in reacting to India's new Kashmir policy.

When mainstream American policymakers look at the big power triangle of the U.S.-China-Russia, their unconcealed prejudice and geostrategic preferences are apparent to all. The door is still very much open to China whom the West would like to wean away from Russia to arrest America's deteriorating global position. New Delhi, of course, like in the 1960s, would prefer the opposite outcome: to wean Russia away from China or more realistically provide Russia with more options in its Asia pivot. Mr. Jaishankar's remarks at the prestigious Valdai Club in Moscow made such a case for the next chapter in India-Russia ties. In essence, he asserted that Asia's multipolar age has arrived; that the Indo-Pacific is not restricted to one conception: he distinguished India's independent approach that includes stable ties with Beijing from the U.S. concept that some interpret as "Chinese containment on the cheap"; and most importantly, Russia being a Pacific power with interests in the Indian Ocean should join the debate.

In substance and without ruffling Beijing's feathers, Russia is already shaping the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. It has managed the rare feat of deep cooperation with rival parties in the South China Sea disputes. As Alexander Korolev, a scholar at the University of New South Wales, notes, the "Russia-Vietnam partnership should not be underestimated, because it has been growing despite and independently of Russia-China relations". Indeed, once Russia's advanced military and naval modernisation assistance towards Indo-Pacific states such as India, Vietnam and Indonesia, along with Russia's own underrated Pacific Fleet whose area of responsibility extends to the Persian Gulf is accounted for, Moscow is already a player in Eurasia's Rimland areas.

Having been reassured that India is not bandwagoning with the U.S. and genuinely believes in open and inclusive security and order building ideas, Russia could now begin the process of imagining a role in the Indo-Pacific that brings its vast diplomatic experience and strategic heft into the open.

Zorawar Daulet Singh is a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and author of Power and Diplomacy: India's Foreign Policies During the Cold War

Support quality journalism - [Subscribe to The Hindu Digital](#)

Please enter a valid email address.

How an idea for a 'perfect Mumbai feature story' failed to materialise

Support Quality Journalism

Subscribe to our new online experience with zero ads.

Support The Hindu's new online experience with zero ads.

Already a user? [Sign In](#)

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com