

# India Won't be Bullied in Multipolar Setting

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*The sombre mood at the Council for Foreign Affairs in New York during **External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's talk on Tuesday** was only to be expected against the backdrop of the India-Canada diplomatic spat over the killing of a Sikh secessionist in Vancouver in June, which, reportedly, was "coordinated" on the Canadian side with Washington based on intelligence inputs from the Five Eyes.*

However, the event's main thrust took an overtly geopolitical overtone with the CFR hosts calling out the Indian minister to weigh in on India's growing assertiveness on the global stage and its perspectives on the international situation involving Russia and China, and the "limits" to the US-Indian relationship.

It is no secret that the Canadian-Indian spat into which Washington has inserted itself has a deeper geopolitical agenda. The Financial Times, the western daily perceived as closest to the Biden administration, in fact, carried a report last week entitled *The west's Modi problem* with a blurb that neatly caught its main theme — "The US and its allies are cultivating India as an economic and diplomatic partner. But its prime minister's authoritarian streak is becoming harder to ignore."

The article held out a warning:

"India is becoming one of America's most important foreign partners as a bulwark against China. The US has invested heavily in bolstering relations with New Delhi as part of its broader strategy of enhancing relationships in the Indo-Pacific region. The push has accelerated this year... When and if evidence emerges that might support Canada's claim, Washington will face a balancing act between its closest neighbour and a significant rising ally."

Evidently, Jaishankar, whose experience and expertise in navigating the US-Indian relationship through choppy waters as well as balmy autumn alike is second to none in the Indian establishment, has been tasked by Modi to contain the fallout of the spat with

Canada on India's relations with the US. But the difference today is that his mission to Washington goes far beyond a diplomatic tango aimed at damage control or to swing something extra in the transactional relationship, since the West's discontent about "Modi's India" is at its core about the country's independent foreign policies and resistance to becoming an ally in a traditional sense and accordingly tailor its performance on the global stage in accordance with the "rules based order" buttressing the US hegemony in world politics.

The US would have, in normal course, worked for a tradeoff with India but the times have changed and it is itself locked in an all-or-nothing contestation for global supremacy with China (and increasingly in the shadow of a Sino-Russian axis) which is of course a high stakes game where Washington would assign a role for India and have expectations out of Modi's leadership.

On the whole, Jaishankar opted for a hybrid approach. On the one hand, he maintained that India will have an independent foreign policy attuned to a multipolar world order. But on the other hand, his main thesis was that Washington would be exceedingly foolish to risk the partnership with India.

## **Bloc Mentality Is Obsolete**

Conceivably, Jaishankar's mission is like an iceberg with only a tip that is visible — at least, as of now. Nonetheless, his statements at the CFR in New York provides some reasonable clues. Basically, Jaishankar assembled his thoughts in three interlinked clusters — the emerging world order and US-Indian relations; Russia's place in the scheme of things; and, the challenge of China's rise. It presents a rare peep into the architecture of India's current world view and can be summarised as follows:

1. The world order is changing and the US is also "fundamentally readjusting to the world." This is partly to be seen as the "long-term consequences" of the defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it principally stems out of the reality that the US' dominance in the world and its relative power vis-s-vis other powers, has changed through the last decade.

Clearly, "the world has become in a way more democratic, and if opportunities are available more universally," it is only natural that other centres of production and consumption would come about and there would be a re-distribution of power — "and that has happened."

Realising this change, Washington has already begun "adjusting" to a multipolar world order without saying so, and is "actively seeking to shape what would be the poles and what would be the weight of the poles" in a manner that would benefit it.

Put differently, the US is looking at a world where it is no longer possible for it to work solely with its allies. The QUAD is a vivid demonstration of this new phenomenon and the US policymakers deserve to be complimented for their "imagination and forward-planning."

Succinctly put, the US is already getting into a world order that has "much more fluid, much more dispersed centres of power" — very often much more regional, sometimes with different issues and different theatres producing their own combinations. That would mean that it is no longer realistic to seek clear-cut, black-and-white, solutions to problems.

2. The US shouldn't lost sight of the "enormous possibility" to work with India to enhance

each other's interests where the focus should be on technology, as the balance of power in the world is always a balance of technology. The US needs partners who can secure its interests more effectively and there are only a finite number of partners out there. Therefore, for working together, the US has to reach some kind of understanding with its partners.

From the Indian perspective, there are even more finite countries who can be partners, and the US is indeed an optimal choice for India. Therefore, there is today a compelling need for India and the US to work together where the bulk of partnership relates to technology while "a bit part of it" could be a spillover into defence and security spheres, and a third part could be politics.

Fact is, today Global South is very distrustful of the Global North and it is useful for the US to have friends who think and speak well of America. And India is one of the few countries that have the ability to bridge the polarisation in world politics — East-West, North-South.

3. Jaishankar subtly fortified the above persuasive argument with an unspoken caveat that the Biden Administration should not make unrealistic demands on India's independent policies or challenge its core interests lest it is counterproductive.

The point was driven home by calling attention to a stunning geopolitical reality that Russia is turning its back on its three-centuries old search of an European identity and is making strenuous efforts to build new relationships in the Asian continent. Russia is a part of Asia but its pivot is about carving out a strong role as an Asian power. Indeed, this is consequential.

As for India, its relations with Russia have remained "extremely steady since the 1950s." Notwithstanding the vicissitudes in world politics or current history, both sides took care to keep the relationship "very very steady." And that is because Delhi and Moscow share an understanding that there is a "structural basis" to the two countries working together, and, therefore, both take "great care to maintain the relationship and ensure that it is working."

### **'Woods are lovely, dark and deep...'**

Implicit in the above thought is a strong message that given the centrality of the Russian-Indian strategic partnership, it is well nigh impossible to isolate India. Jaishankar may have buttressed his point further by giving a lengthy account of India's standoff with China on the border (in factual terms from an Indian perspective) but, significantly enough, without attributing motives to the Chinese behaviour or even rushing into characterisations of it in picturesque terms of self-aggrandisement.

The intriguing part came when Jaishankar was open-minded enough to rationalise the Chinese Navy's presence in the Indian Ocean and point-blank refused to mix up India's QUAD membership with it.

Jaishankar rejected the hackneyed notions propagated by American analysts of a Chinese "string of pearls" around India and instead noted calmly that the steady increase in the Chinese naval presence in the past 20-25 yrs is a reflection of the sharp increase in the size of the Chinese Navy.

It is to be expected, after all, that when a country has a bigger Navy, that is going to be visible in its deployments. That said, it is only realistic for India to prepare for a far greater

Chinese presence than before.

Importantly, maritime concerns are today not between any two countries. They are by their very nature concerns that are there for countries to deal with. In retrospect, the US presence in the Indian Ocean has diminished today and that left gaps at a time when threats actually increased.

But India does not see QUAD as necessarily geared for a role to counter China, as it will be “a bit old-fashioned to point towards another country.” To be sure, there are global commons to be safeguarded, and “there are concerns there that are better approached if countries worked together.”

Besides, India is no longer sure whether the US would respond to another tsunami in Asia with the same speed and scale as before during the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004. “Times have changed, force levels have changed and capabilities have changed. And China is one of those countries whose capabilities have gone up.” But India works with countries “that it can and not with those it cannot.”

Indeed, the shift in the tone of the Indian narrative following the brief exchanges between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the margins of the recent BRICS Summit has continued.

Jaishankar’s statements made it abundantly clear that India’s relationship with Russia is non-negotiable, whilst the surprising part is that Modi government is also sequestering the troubled relationship with China from external third-party interference, taking care, presumably, to leave avenues open for normalising the ties through bilateral channels in a foreseeable future.

The bottom line is, if the US-Canadian-Five Eyes agenda was to browbeat India’s strategic autonomy, Jaishankar rejected it. Curiously, at one point, he commented sarcastically that India is neither a member of the Five Eyes nor is answerable to the FBI.

In sum, Delhi prefers to deal with the spat with Canada as a bilateral issue of terrorism in all its manifestations, including secessionism, which also has a larger context of Canberra’s lackadaisical attitude politically toward India’s legitimate security concerns and its propensity to keep butting into India’s internal affairs as a gatekeeper of the “rules-based order.”

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