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India's Strategic Calculus: Reconciling Strategic Autonomy vis-à-vis Engagement with Great Powers

Shri PS Raghavan, IFS (Retd)@

Abstract

We live in a world in which a post-cold war order is still in the making, as the sole super power shares the global stage with multiple state actors of varying weights, jostling for space to assert their national aspirations.

In this complex environment, India's foreign policy seeks to maximise India's political and economic space to further its global ambitions. This includes sustaining the vibrant India-US strategic partnership, forged since the early 2000's, even while preserving the traditionally strong relationship with Russia from the decades of the Cold War. A comprehensive partnership has also been developed with China, though recent differences have somewhat dimmed its intensity. India needs a combination of domestic capacity building and external partnerships to reconcile the contradictory pulls of strategic cooperation and competition with China. Relations with the US, Russia, Japan and Europe are also elements of this effort. India's multilateral activism in G-20, BRICS and SCO serve to enhance its room for manoeuvre in the dynamics of the US, Russia, China triangle. India's strategy in the India-Pacific seeks to promote bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral partnerships in search for a cooperative and sustainable architecture in the region that promotes objective of a multi-polar order.

It has been suggested that in today's global environment, which is not conducive to alliances,

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@**Shri PS Raghavan, IFS (Retd)** is Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board.

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the template for relations with great powers should resemble that of a joint venture, in which partners cooperate for mutual benefit in areas of their convergence, but are free to form other partnerships to pursue other interests, as long as they do not impact on the core interests of the joint venture partners. This could be the basis of sustainable relations with both the US and Russia.

Just a few days ago, a distinguished diplomat and a perceptive strategic analyst, who is also our External Affairs Minister (EAM), brought out the complexities of the global environment in a masterly exposition of India's foreign policy perspectives. I will draw freely from the insights that he provided in that lecture. I have to put in a standard disclaimer. The National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) is an advisory body outside the government. Hence, all that I say should not be taken as government policy.

An example of how India is dealing with the complexities of international relations was in two virtually back-to-back meetings that Prime Minister Modi had on the margins of the G20 summit in November 2018. One was with the leaders of Japan and the US. The other was a Russia-India-China (RIC) meeting. Each of India's interlocutors in one trilateral has difficult relations with each of its interlocutors in the other. The US-Russia standoff is arguably worse than even during the Cold War. The US and China are in the midst of a trade war and a technology war. Japan has a long-standing border dispute with Russia over a Pacific Ocean island chain. The China-Japan regional rivalry is of even longer standing. The fact that India's participation in one trilateral did not prejudice the successful outcome of the other indicates the value that each participant in the two summits attaches to its relationship with India and the shared objectives within its trilateral.

These seemingly contradictory alignments are manifestations of a post-Cold War world order still in the making, as the sole superpower shares the global stage with multiple state actors of varying weights, jostling for space to assert their national aspirations. This environment, as the EAM said in his speech, forces us to look beyond the dogmas of the past and adjust to the realities of the present.

The decade after the Cold War has been described as a unipolar moment. The Soviet Union disintegrated and Russia was

in political, economic and social disarray. Europe was coming to terms with the addition of Eastern and Central European countries to the democratic fold. China was going through its economic liberalization and recovering from the external impact of its handling of the Tiananmen Square protests. India was facing economic difficulties, domestic political uncertainties and a reset of its external engagement.

We did three things right during this period. We launched (though probably a decade later than we should have) an economic liberalization programme, riding the crest of the ICT revolution. We signalled a stronger defence posture by declaring our nuclear weapons status. And we energetically set about widening our network of international relations, while preserving our traditional relationships.

The most remarkable transformation of India's external engagement was in the India-US partnership, emerging from the frictions of the Cold War years and the more recent shadow of US-led sanctions after our nuclear tests of 1998. In 2000, the US saw in India a large market and a major arms importer, whose ambitious nuclear power expansion plans were of interest to the US nuclear power industry. On its part, India grasped the opportunity of partnership with the sole superpower in trade, investment, technologies, education and culture. The US desire to enter India's lucrative arms market matched India's desire to diversify its defence acquisitions from a Russian near-monopoly, and to access a wider range of sophisticated military technologies.

The strategic underpinning to this burgeoning relationship was a complementary understanding of the evolving situation in our region. As it recognized the challenge to its global supremacy from a rising China, the US saw merit in strengthening relations with a strong, democratic country in the region. It was this strategic perspective that led the high priest of the global non-proliferation regime to literally steamroll the Nuclear Suppliers' Group to open up civil nuclear cooperation with India. Senior Bush Administration officials openly stated this at the time. Though (like the US) careful not to project the partnership in terms of "balancing" China, India shared the premise on which US said it would support enhancement of India's military power in its region. It is important to keep this long-term strategic picture in mind, even as we argue about GSP, tariffs, H1B and Afghanistan in the immediate-term.

Indian diplomacy ensured that this rapid advance in India-US relations did not undermine long-standing relations with Russia, which flowed from traditional Indo-Soviet relations. A new strategic partnership was declared, after President Putin assumed office in 2000. A shared desire for multipolarity created convergences of political outlook. Defence cooperation expanded in range and depth, with Indian acquisitions of major weapons platforms and joint work on developing others. The India-Russia joint venture Brahmos, set up to manufacture anti-ship missiles designed in Russia, has since developed missiles for the Army, Navy and Air Force. Russian collaboration on the Kudankulam nuclear power plant commenced in 2002, even when India was under sanctions for its 1998 nuclear tests, by resurrecting a 1988 Indo-Soviet agreement.

Side by side with the strategic partnerships with the US and Russia, new strides were made, in the early 2000s, in India-China relations. The agreements of the 1990s, on maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas, reflected an understanding that bilateral relations could develop on a separate track from efforts to resolve differences over the boundary. Both these tracks were advanced during Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003. The leaders of the two countries appointed Special Representatives to bring a political perspective to resolution of differences on the boundary. This initiative produced some immediate results: in 2005, the Special Representatives reached an agreement on the political parameters for a boundary settlement, which included an important provision that the two sides "shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas". The reference was obviously to Arunachal Pradesh, though the Chinese chose to understand it differently a few years later. This period saw rapid growth in trade, investment, cultural and educational cooperation between the two countries. China rapidly rose to becoming India's largest trade partner, as its consumer and industrial products flooded the Indian market.

At the turn of this century, Europe also sought to emerge from the shadow of the US to find an independent space in a multipolar post-Cold War order. Strange as it may seem in the context of Brexit, UK joined France and Germany to promote European integration and to support the European agenda adopted in Lisbon in 2000, which sought to transform EU into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world"

by 2010. They endorsed a robust Common Security and Defence policy, envisaging military integration and a military force to promote European interests even beyond Europe. Taken together, these initiatives constituted a manifesto for European unity and autonomy. These perspectives were discussed in great detail in the strategic dialogues that first France (already in 1998, barely months after our nuclear tests) and then Germany and UK, established with India.

This delicate equilibrium of India's engagement with the US, Russia, China and Europe, was disturbed by changes in the global landscape after 2008.

The Russia-US relationship deteriorated progressively, with developments in Ukraine leading to the "annexation" of Crimea by Russia (or its reunification with Russia, if you accept the Russian version) in 2014. Western efforts to isolate Russia included its exclusion from the G8 and virtually all dialogue mechanisms with the US and its allies. Economic sanctions against Russia progressively expanded in scope and bite, as allegations of Russian transgressions of international law covered other areas and geographies, culminating in the charge of meddling in the 2016 US Presidential elections. We saw US-Russia military confrontation, through their proxies, in the civil war in Syria, and mutual recriminations on Afghanistan.

Worsening US-Russia relations propelled Russia and China to a closer partnership. Their engagement had surged after the settlement of their long-standing boundary disputes in the early 2000s, and in response to their complementary interests: China's demand for Russian natural resources and modern military equipment, and Russia's demand for attractively-priced Chinese consumer products. But alienation from the West pushed Russia into a tighter embrace of China than their history of strategic rivalry should have permitted. Russian transfers of sophisticated military technologies to China increased and hydrocarbons links were strengthened. Massive joint military exercises have been organized, to develop interoperability protocols under war conditions. China occupied some of the economic space created in Russia by Western sanctions.

The 2003 Iraq war divided Europe politically even before the European Union enlargement in 2004. The enlargement itself, and

the Eurozone crisis, created new economic and cultural fault lines. The ambitious Lisbon Agenda was replaced in 2010 by a more modest "Europe 2020" strategy for growth and employment. The EU's security and defence policy was re-integrated into the NATO framework. The EU's multipolar moment was, in a sense, put on hold, while it engaged with its internal divisions, of which the Brexit vote was a symptom. This led to what the EAM delicately described as Europe's "political agnosticism" towards the global geopolitical flux.

The financial crisis of 2008 set the stage for a larger Chinese presence on the global economic scene, with corresponding political clout. Its assertiveness in its region was manifested in unilateral enforcement of its territorial claims in the South China Sea, and aggressive actions against countries that it deemed to have hurt its national interests. Mongolia, Japan and South Korea have (among others) borne the brunt of such actions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is (in addition to its domestic economic drivers) an expression of China's ambition to expand its economic and geopolitical footprint, beyond its region to South, Southeast and Central Asia and further to Europe. Its maritime leg is meant to extend China's economic (and potentially naval) reach across the Indian Ocean, from Thailand and Myanmar to Djibouti and Kenya on the African coast. This has obvious strategic implications for India, which I will shortly discuss.

This period saw a dilution of the quality of our dialogue with China. The Special Representatives' meetings ceased to make substantive progress on the boundary and, as I have mentioned, there was some regression. The articulation of the Chinese claim to Arunachal Pradesh increased in stridency and, from about 2011, China started issuing stapled visas to visitors from that state. It had earlier (around 2009) already started the practice of issuing stapled visas to residents of J&K. China's inclusion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in BRI became a major bilateral irritant. The three month-long standoff between Indian and Chinese troops near the India-Bhutan-China trijunction in 2017, marked a low point in recent relations.

The External Affairs Minister has said that during this period, "the American trumpet sounded increasingly uncertain". Put more explicitly, China's assertive actions, as well as the global ambition signalled by the BRI, went largely unchallenged, beyond symbolic statements and gestures, by a US Administration more engrossed

in the challenges in Afghanistan and the new quagmire in Syria. Our dialogue with the US also flagged somewhat. The consular issue that unnecessarily muddied bilateral waters in 2013 was a symptom of this.

The advent of the Trump Administration brought a new vigour to the relationship. Among its highlights was the reassertion of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic priority for the US. This brought the India-US relationship back to one of its major premises established in the early 2000s.

The Indo-Pacific is a region of overlapping, intersecting or competing great power interests, which are intimately intertwined with India's economic and security interests. I will deal first with the Indo-Pacific as defined by ASEAN and the West – from the east coast of India to the US Pacific seaboard. The security and strategic issues in the western Indo Pacific are different and require different approaches from an Indian perspective.

The Indo-Pacific has rightly replaced the Cold War construct of the Asia Pacific, which defined a region from ASEAN, Northeast and East Asia to the US west coast. That was a geopolitical construct, involving a US security umbrella over its allies in the region, against a Soviet communist threat. China, after its rapprochement with the US in 1972, was more or less neutral. This framework is obviously unsustainable today for many reasons. The economic and military rise of China is one. The Russia-China strategic partnership is another. Further, political and economic interlinkages between countries of the region have blurred the divides of the Cold War. So, just tweaking this obsolete architecture will not achieve much; we need a new, multipolar security architecture.

Even after the Cold War, India was excluded from dialogue forums of the region. APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), which was created in 1989, still does not include India. India was admitted to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) only in 2006, ten years after its inception.

This exclusion of India had no objective justification. It is Asia's second largest country, with a population of 1.3 billion and an economy of $2.6 trillion. It is strategically located on the region's maritime corridor, which carries the bulk of global trade to and

from the so-called Asia Pacific. India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands chain reaches the mouth of the Malacca Straits. India's exclusion from the region's economic and security deliberations, therefore, distorted the balance in those deliberations. The Indo-Pacific concept corrects this anomaly.

Our immediate concern of course is the protection of our 7500 km coastline. The Indian Ocean carries about 90 percent of our foreign trade, including most of our energy supplies. Foreign trade constitutes over 40 percent of India's GDP. The marine resources of the ocean make an important contribution to the economies of the littoral states. Arms, narcotics and human trafficking need counter measures. Let us also not forget that the worst terrorist attack on India came from the sea (Mumbai, 26/11). Strengthening of the Indian Navy is, therefore, primarily justified by its responsibility for India's defence of its maritime domain.

Looking beyond this, our larger economic and security interests dictate against domination of this region by any country. China's unilateral assertion of its territorial claims in the South China Sea, its coercive actions against countries for bilateral grievances and the geopolitical implications of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have aroused concerns on this score, which India has publicly articulated on various occasions. They drive India's efforts for a sustainable security architecture in the region that establishes an equilibrium of interests and aspirations.

These include strengthening of internal economic, technological and defence capacities, but also bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral initiatives to achieve mutual understanding on the elements of an open, inclusive, rules-based order. Other countries in the region also have to develop the requisite military and economic capacities to promote this equilibrium. It is a reality of geopolitics that extreme asymmetries of strength are destabilizing, however well-intentioned the stronger sides are. This is the fundamental principle in the search for a multipolar world order; it is equally applicable in the search for a multipolar Indo-Pacific order.

India's efforts are reflected in its "Act East" policy, strengthening partnerships in the region. Bonds are being strengthened with ASEAN, Japan, Korea, Australia and others, based on convergent perspectives. The unique presence of the

heads of all 10 ASEAN countries in New Delhi, celebrating India's Republic Day and 25 years of India-ASEAN dialogue (2018), showed the importance they attach to India's presence in the region. Fresh momentum has recently been imparted to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (including Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand) to strengthen cooperation for connectivity and maritime security in this enclave of the Indo-Pacific, which stretches from the Malacca straits to India's east coast. There are regular capacity-building joint exercises with other navies, including the India-US-Japan "Malabar" exercise.

The most high-profile plurilateral dialogue is undoubtedly the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of India, US, Japan and Australia (Quad), which was recently upgraded from the level of officials to that of Ministers. Amidst the hype, it is important to recognize what the Quad is and what it is not. The Quad is not a strategy; it is a search for a strategy, based on some shared interests. It is not a closed club or a starting point of an arc of democracy encircling China. Even less is it an alliance. The broad objectives of its participants are political equilibrium and a sustainable security architecture, but there are differing perspectives about the definition of these terms and the paths to achieve them. The American definition of a Free and Open Indo Pacific is articulated in the US Administration's strategy documents: promote respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations, large and small; peaceful resolution of disputes; free, fair, and reciprocal trade and investment … adherence to international rules and norms, including freedom of navigation and overflight. Prime Minister Modi spelt out his vision for the Indo-Pacific in almost identical terms [reciprocal] in his Shangri La address in Singapore in June 2018. The PM's approach was welcomed as statesman-like, while the American formulation has been received with some trepidation, even by some of its allies, because it was framed in the context of a "geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions" and promised a lethal, resilient, agile and combat-effective Indo-Pacific force posture. In short, therefore, the Quad and other multilateral initiatives in the region have to reconcile the nuances of individual interests and constraints of countries in the region.

The effort to draw Russia into a dialogue on the Indo Pacific was furthered during Prime Minister Modi's Vladivostok visit in

September. Russia has regarded the Indo-Pacific construct as an American ploy to draw India into an alliance. Our high-level dialogue seeks to correct this misconception. As a Pacific naval power, Russia could be an active, independent participant in the effort for an Indo-Pacific security architecture. It ties in with President Putin's vision for a Greater Eurasia, which an influential Russian think tank describes as a community of nations in "a web of ties, institutions and balances", without hegemony of any one power.

India's engagement with China on the Indo Pacific has to factor in the reality of strong trade and investment relations and shared perspectives in the RIC, BRICS and G20 on issues ranging from democratization of the global economic architecture to sovereignty and strategic autonomy. An intimate political and economic engagement with China also characterises the situation of most other countries in the region. This, together with China's military and economic dominance of the region, means that the search for an Indo-Pacific security architecture should not seek to contain or confront China. This explains the cautious response by countries of the region to the US discourse on a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The situation, therefore, is that discussions on the Indo Pacific are work in progress. The achievement so far is the acceptance of the term, as a geographical expression, by nearly all countries of the region. The difficult part is to broaden the canvas of concrete cooperation initiatives, based on shared interests and concerns. This was the spirit of Prime Minister Modi's Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative, which he unveiled at the recent East Asia Summit, and which has not received the public attention it merits. It suggests collaborative work to safeguard the oceans; enhance maritime security; preserve marine resources; share resources fairly; reduce disaster risk; enhance S&T cooperation; and promote mutually beneficial trade and maritime transport. He suggested that one or two countries could take the lead in coordinating cooperation in each of these verticals.

In the longer-term, conditions have to be created to draw China into meaningful discussions for an open and inclusive security architecture. For this to happen, the present turbulence in the US-Russia-China equations has to give way to a level of pragmatic accommodation between them.

Looking westwards, India's economic, energy and consular interests in West Asia are well-known. One of the less-acknowledged foreign policy achievements of the Modi government is the cementing of links in the region, across its religious, sectarian and political divides. High-level political exchanges with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Qatar and Israel illustrate this point, with Israel becoming an important defence partner. It has effectively demolished the Pakistani myth of the region being a natural extension of its Islamic constituency. There is a much better understanding today of the nature and sources of terrorism that India encounters. Security and defence cooperation have been established. Economic links are acquiring new dimensions.

West Asia also offers a potentially significant trade route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The shortest land route through Pakistan is closed, for obvious political and security reasons. The multimodal International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), through the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar to Afghanistan, Central Asia (and beyond to Russia and northern Europe) could be an economic and strategic game-changer in many ways. It offers not only India, but also the rest of Asia a shorter route to these countries than the sea route and a safer route than via Pakistan. Whereas China's BRI opens up these countries to Chinese goods and services, INSTC would open them to all of Asia. The catch, of course, is that US sanctions against Iran will make construction of the required infrastructure difficult. There are however points for negotiation with the US on this. If, as the US has been saying, its problem is not with Iran, but with its present leadership, it should see the long-term strategic advantage of opening a direct route to Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan, and to Central Asia, bypassing Russia, with the additional bonus of offering an alternative to BRI.

The corridor would further India's strategic objectives in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). SCO's relevance to India lies in geography, economics and geopolitics. Its members – Russia, China and four Central Asian countries – occupy a huge landmass adjacent to India's extended neighbourhood. With Pakistan joining the Organization and Afghanistan and Iran knocking on its doors, the logic of India's membership becomes stronger. It is in India's interest to be aware of the Russia-China dynamics in

this strategically important space. India has to carve out a political and economic space for itself in Central Asia, alongside Russia's role as net security provider and China's dominating economic presence. The Central Asian countries would welcome India breaking into this Russia-China duopoly.

India has strengthened partnerships with the littoral countries of the western Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean Rim Association, over half of whose 22 member states are in this region, offers a platform for such cooperation. In 2015, Prime Minister Modi announced a partnership programme, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), involving cooperative efforts for capacity building and security. The India-Japan initiative for an Asia Africa Growth Corridor seeks to promote connectivity, infrastructure and development in the Indian Ocean.

Returning to India-US relations beyond the Indo-Pacific, the strategic partnership has strengthened remarkably over the last decade, notwithstanding the occasional wrinkles. Trade and investment have grown significantly, though still far short of the potential. Defence cooperation has surged; American arms sales to India have risen steeply from near nothing in 2008 to US$ 18 billion in 2018. Trade tariffs, GSP, H1B are issues that will either see a breakthrough or ways will be found around them. The one potential sticking point, though, is the US legislation, CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) that envisages sanctions against any entity that enters into "significant" defence transactions with Russia. Starting out as a measure to "punish" Russia for its alleged meddling in the 2016 Presidential elections, the eventual legislation provides for punishing Russia's partners by denying them access to US markets. India's intention to acquire the air defence system S-400 has come into the crosshairs of CAATSA.

This pressure does not take into account the specificities of India's defence requirements, which have three elements. One is diversification of the sources of defence acquisition, which commenced from the early 2000s. The surge in imports from the US has been mentioned. France and Israel have also become significant defence partners.

The second is synchronizing weapons acquisitions with progressive indigenization. The fact that India is among the world's

top importers of arms is not a matter of pride. The government has clearly articulated a policy of accelerating indigenization, encouraging our industry to develop technologies and manufacture systems.

The third element is most important. To increase indigenization without degrading defence capability, India has to leverage its position as a major importer to secure the maximum possible technology sharing from its suppliers – not just licencing of production. India has not done this very well so far, but our Make in India initiative seeks to remedy this.

It is this autonomy of action that CAATSA abridges – to choose defence platforms best suited to India's defence requirements, and to secure them on the best available technology transfer terms. US officials have said at Congressional hearings that the intention of CAATSA is to wean countries away from arms dependence on Russia and to get them to buy more arms from the US instead. In the case of India, this is pushing an open door, but pushing it too suddenly and too hard. Indian diplomacy has to convey effectively that the carrot of technology transfer would work better than the stick of sanctions.

In the context of differences in expectations of the relationship in India and the US, a Task Force of the US Council for Foreign Relations on India-US relations made some interesting observations (2015). Commenting that the US has traditionally been most comfortable with alliance partners, the report suggested that the US should look at relations with India as a joint venture. As I understand it, this would be a model in which the partners secure mutual benefit from areas of their convergence, but are free to form other partnerships to pursue other interests, as long as they do not impact on the core interests of the joint venture partner.

This is an ideal template for relations in a multipolar world. Today's global environment is not conducive to alliances. The ideological congruences and external threats (or at least the perception of them) that cemented alliances during the Cold War cannot be replicated now. Countries seeking multipolarity cannot have a congruence of interests with any one country. Perceptions of existential threats vary widely, even among strategic partners. The periodically recurring problems within NATO are evidence of this.

In the case of India-US relations, the main elements of this "joint venture" are self-evident. There are important shared interests: democratic ideals, defence and economic cooperation, and convergent perspectives on the Indo-Pacific. India's diversification of defence acquisitions will continue to benefit US companies; it can be accelerated by more emphasis on technology sharing than military sales. India needs the autonomy to shape its relations with other countries in response to the realities in its neighbourhood. This would meet the US objective of a strong, democratic India as a partner.

A similar template would apply to Russia. The diversification of India's external engagement has diluted the Cold War exclusivity of the relationship, but geo-economics and geopolitics create important convergences. We have a shared interest in a multipolar world order. In BRICS, SCO and G20, we make common cause for democratization of the global economic and financial architecture. We share some non-Western – as distinct from anti-Western – perspectives on global developments. Defence remains a major area of cooperation; after all the diversification of the past two decades, about 60-70 per cent of weapons and equipment in our Armed Forces are still of Russian or Soviet origin. It is also true that, as of now, Russia has been more forthcoming to share sophisticated military technologies with India than other countries. Energy is a major area of cooperation: from the Russian collaboration for nuclear power plants in India to the mutual investments in the hydrocarbons sector. Natural resource-rich Russia has much to offer to resource-hungry India in terms of trade and investment opportunities. The Eurasian Economic Union offers a mutually beneficial FTA opportunity that does not have the issues we found in the RCEP.

At the same time, we may not see eye to eye with Russia on some of its actions with Pakistan or Afghanistan and worry about the implications of some aspects of the Russia-China partnership. But frequent meetings between PM Modi and President Putin have ensured that core interests have been protected. An example was Russia's dissociation from the Chinese initiative for a discussion in the UNSC on India's recent decisions on Jammu and Kashmir. Russia announced publicly that its Foreign Minister had told his Pakistani counterpart that India's actions were within the framework

of the Indian constitution and Pakistan should resolve its issues with India bilaterally.

Europe has traditionally been a geopolitical "balancer" between the US and Russia. It has a strong Atlantic alliance, but also has to engage with Russia as a proximate power, a major energy source and a significant economic partner. Trans-Atlantic frictions and internal preoccupations have somewhat diluted this role in recent years. Brexit is symptomatic of forces opposing European political and economic integration (hence limiting the scope for a unified foreign policy strategy). For many of these reasons, India-EU relations slackened in recent years. But the EU has launched an initiative to re-energize it. If it can once again capture the unified energy of two decades ago, there would be many convergences of perspectives with India on international developments.

The effort to retain strategic autonomy of foreign policy involves give and take across sectors. Securing US understanding of India's defence cooperation with Russia or connectivity links through Iran may need meeting US political and economic interests elsewhere. The diversification of India's defence acquisitions away from Russia has to be compensated by broadening the base of India-Russia economic cooperation, to ensure continued strong mutual stakes in that partnership. India's Indo-Pacific strategy needs a blend of military interactions, connectivity projects, development cooperation and diplomatic initiatives – all of them in bilateral and multilateral formats. A multi-pronged approach has to be developed to protect India's developmental interests, in the face of the sharpening US-China divide on the roll-out of fifth-generation (5G) communications technologies. An effective foreign policy needs sensitivity to such cross-linkages and an all of government approach to deal with them. This, I have to say, is still work in progress.

And finally, it is often said that Indian strategic thinking is still stunted by a sentimental attachment to nonalignment. The fact is that nonalignment was a Cold War concept, in a bipolar environment, designed to retain room for manoeuvre (not equidistance) between two politico-military blocs. As a concept, therefore, it lost relevance with the end of the Cold War, though it continues to be used as a *mantra* in various forums. The successor to nonalignment in a post-Cold War situation has been given many names, but each seems to have a negative connotation for one

group or another. Strategic autonomy is one, multi-alignment is another. The External Affairs Minister said in his lecture that multi-alignment sounds vigorous, but appears opportunistic, whereas India seeks strategic convergence from its relationships, rather than tactical convenience. The bottom line is that our engagement with major powers should further our fundamental national objective of advancing national prosperity and global influence, and that is the thrust of our foreign policy.