

COMMENT

A self-reliant foreign policy

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In a multipolar world order, this means having variable combinations with like-minded partners



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Self-reliance is the theme of India's 74th Independence Day. This concept is commonly associated with the economy and production of key goods and services within the country in light of the **global 'supply shock'** caused by the pandemic. But it also has a parallel dimension in the domain of foreign policy. If the domestic goal is to reduce dependence on imports for critical commodities, the foreign policy corollary is to recalibrate the time-tested axiom of 'strategic autonomy'.

India has historically prided itself as an independent developing country which does not take orders from or succumb to pressure from great powers. Whether the world order was bipolar (1947 to 1991), unipolar (1991 to 2008, when the U.S. entered a long cycle of economic crises and China caught up with it in overall power), or multipolar (present times), the need for autonomy in making foreign policy choices has remained constant.

Showing flexibility

Yet, strategic autonomy has often been adjusted in India's history as per the changing milieu. In moments of crisis, India has reinterpreted freedom and shown flexibility for survival. During the 1962 war with China, the high priest of non-alignment, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, had to appeal to the U.S. for emergency military aid to stave off the Chinese from "taking over the whole of Eastern India." In the build-up to the 1971 war with Pakistan, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had to enter a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union to ward off both China and the U.S. And in Kargil in 1999, India welcomed a direct intervention by the U.S. to force Pakistan to back down. In all the above examples, India did not become any less autonomous when geopolitical circumstances compelled it to enter into *de facto* alliance-like cooperation with major powers. Rather, India secured its freedom, sovereignty and territorial integrity by manoeuvring the great power equations and playing the realpolitik game.

Today, although there is no prospect of an outright war with China in the wake of its incursions across the Line of Actual Control, India is at an inflection point with regard to strategic autonomy. Non-alignment 2.0 with China and the U.S., as they slide into a new Cold War, makes little sense when India's security and sovereignty are being challenged primarily by the former rather than the latter. Fears in some quarters that proximity to the U.S. will lead to loss of India's strategic autonomy are overblown because independent India has never been subordinated to a foreign hegemon.

The essence of self-reliance

In the threat environment marked by a pushy China, which the U.S. is now beginning to confront frontally, India should aim to have the proverbial cake of American support and also eat the cake i.e., stay as an independent power centre by means of intensified cooperation with middle powers in Asia and around the world.

For India, which values freedom, placing all its eggs in the U.S. basket to counterbalance China would be an error, as that can constrict India's options in other theatres of national interest such as its ties with Iran and Russia and efforts to speed up indigenous defence

Diversification is the essence of self-reliance. A wide basket of strategic partners, including the U.S., with a sharper focus on constraining China, is the only viable diplomatic way forward in the current emerging multipolar world order.

It is no longer a question of picking one out of two titans or oscillating between them. In an era of dense networks, India must reconfigure autonomy to mean what the American scholar Joseph Nye calls 'power with others' to accomplish joint goals.

We are free and self-reliant not through isolation or alliance with one great power, but only in variable combinations with several like-minded partners. India is familiar with the phrase 'multi-vector' foreign policy. It is time to maximise its potential.

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