

# Beijing's move, India's turn

If this moment provides for a reset of India's ties with China, it will alter New Delhi's relationship with the U.S.



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Looking at the long list of diplomats, officials, and ministers from across the globe rushing to New Delhi in the last few weeks, one would assume that India was playing an active role in resolving the crisis in Europe. Despite his ambitions to be hailed as a global statesman, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has scrupulously avoided engaging with the crisis. India has refused to condemn Russia's military invasion, continues to trade with Russia, and has abstained from voting on United Nations resolutions.

## An unmistakable signal

India is the centrepiece of the Joe Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. Indian Foreign and Defence Ministers recently held the '2+2' meeting with their American counterparts. The Japanese Prime Minister was in New Delhi last month. The Australian Prime Minister held a virtual summit with Mr. Modi days before the two countries signed an interim trade deal. He had to then explain that he had not betrayed Ukraine by signing the deal with India.

Even as India's Quad partners (U.S., Japan, Australia) impose trade sanctions on Russia, condemn Russian President Vladimir Putin and provide military aid to Ukraine, India recently welcomed the Russian Foreign Minister to New Delhi. The signalling was unmistakable: he was the only visiting foreign official among the many in New Delhi to get a personal meeting with Mr. Modi.

A shift is nevertheless discernible: India has chosen to increase, rather than reduce, import of its meagre crude oil supplies from Russia, being offered at a discount. Despite a warning by the U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser Daleep Singh in New Delhi that there will be "consequences to countries that actively attempt to circumvent or backfill the sanctions," India and Russia are exploring ways of conducting bilateral trade by bypassing the dollar-based financial system.

India's Quad partners have been exceptionally sympathetic towards New Delhi's case so far, but the underlying stress in their ties with India



will come to the surface as the crisis drags on. These tensions have been noted in Beijing, which has praised India for pursuing an independent foreign policy. In recent years, Chinese officials had looked at Indian moves in the region through the prism of their U.S. policy, but India's stance on Ukraine has triggered a rethink in Beijing. Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to New Delhi in March was driven either by the need to wean India away from the Quad or as an exploratory step towards a larger strategic reset with New Delhi.

It would be erroneous to focus on the minimal outcome of the visit to deem it a failure. That the visit took place is itself a big success given that some 90,000 soldiers from both armies have been deployed in Ladakh for nearly two years now, after Chinese troops moved in to occupy certain territories that were hitherto in Indian control. Despite 15 rounds of negotiations between senior military commanders, China continues to occupy at least three such areas. From other such areas, both the armies have disengaged i.e., moved their soldiers a couple of miles behind, but there has been no de-escalation i.e., they have not moved the troops to their bases.

In his meetings with Mr. Wang, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar did not demand the restoration of status quo ante of April 2020 in Ladakh; disengagement from remaining "friction points" was the only precondition for return to normalcy in China-India ties. In a rush to declare the crisis as resolved, India made further concessions to China by seeking disengagement only from Patrolling Point 15, suggesting that the other two areas – Depsang and Demchok – are "legacy issues". This is in keeping with Mr. Modi's stance since June 2020, when he first denied Chinese occupation of Indian territory in Ladakh and has since kept silent on the matter. Questions

on the border crisis have been denied in Parliament. No official media briefings have taken place in two years. The government has thus successfully kept the truth of Chinese ingress hidden from the Indian public.

Mr. Modi's desire to downplay Chinese bellicosity was confirmed by former U.S. Ambassador to India Kenneth Juster, when he said that the Indian government had instructed U.S. officials to neither mention the Chinese aggression in any joint statement nor raise it in a strong manner otherwise. While New Delhi is being excessively accommodative of Beijing, China is unconcerned about Indian sensitivities. Before coming to India, Mr. Wang signed a provocative statement on Kashmir in Islamabad with the Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation countries and asserted China's strong ties with Pakistan. While it has allowed South Korean and Pakistani students to return to China, China has not extended the same courtesy to over 23,000 Indian students. If China is extending a handshake to India, it is only on its own terms.

Despite the border crisis, India's trade with China reached a record high of \$125 billion in 2021. India remains the biggest recipient of loans disbursed by the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank. The Modi government did not criticise China's clampdown in Hong Kong and has never raised the issue of mistreatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, although it may have been driven by a defensiveness about the criticism of its own strong-arm policies in Kashmir. The activities of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community in India have been calibrated to remain within limits that do not provoke Beijing.

## Changing relationships

China is the glue that binds the Quad together. While Indian and American policies are at variance in countries such as Myanmar, Iran and Afghanis-

tan, China is the one interest that aligns the two countries together. That basic premise of a collaborative partnership with India will be tested by these recent moves from Beijing towards New Delhi. Questions have always been raised in whispered tones in Washington about the relative power gap between the two Asian powers (China's economy is nearly six times India's size). This notwithstanding, it has been an article of faith in Washington in the past couple of years that having suffered from Chinese military aggression in 2020, India realises that it needs the U.S. to counter the threat from Beijing. This was the thrust of Mr. Singh's blunt counsel in New Delhi.

During Mr. Wang's visit, China offered to create a virtual G-2 in Asia by protecting India's traditional role and collaborating on developmental projects as 'China-India Plus' in South Asia. Once India's limited preconditions for declaring the border crisis resolved are met, the offer will seem more alluring and real than it does today. When Mr. Modi as Chief Minister of Gujarat was denied a visa to travel to the U.S. owing to his association with the 2002 Gujarat riots, he made regular visits to China. His comfort level with Beijing goes far deeper than any tactical realignment at play due to current geopolitical churning. If this moment provides for a reset of India's ties with China, it will alter New Delhi's relationship with the U.S. and raise questions about the effectiveness of Quad.

While the Biden administration continues to harp on "shared values" with the Modi government, the truth is that New Delhi's commitment to democratic values, basic freedoms, constitutional rights, and treatment of religious minorities has been alarmingly poor. Mr. Modi's critics allege that his idea of democracy is closer to that of Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and Mr. Putin than that of the current U.S. administration.

Misgivings already in place have been brought into a sharp contrast by the Ukraine crisis. The geopolitical churning has placed the choices made by Mr. Modi as Prime Minister under a harsh glare. New Delhi's decisions have not been to the liking of the U.S. As India is put under greater pressure, the outcomes could spring another surprise for Washington.

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