

India's moment

Deeper, nuanced diplomacy is called for to capitalise on global attention Delhi is receiving



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INDIA HAS WITNESSED a flurry of diplomatic activity during the past week with a long line of ministers, senior military officers and diplomats from a number of countries visiting Delhi and engaging with their Indian counterparts. The annual Raisina Dialogue provided the ostensible reason for these visits, but public interactions were no doubt accompanied by more private and candid conversations.

The European presence was prominent. China and Russia were absent from among official delegates, which is a pity. The senior-most official and inaugural speaker was Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. It was odd that though Prime Minister Narendra Modi was present at the inauguration, he chose not to speak. He could have used the occasion to spell out India's perspective on the dramatically-transformed global geopolitical landscape, which has followed in the train of the ongoing Ukraine war. In the absence of such a broad sweep presentation, the focus narrowed down to the Ukraine war and, more specifically, India's posture on Russia's increasingly brutal assault on the hapless people of Ukraine.

It fell to the external affairs minister to deflect the expectations of India on this score. But this is tactical. Reminding the West of its culpability in leaving a mess in Asia, which countries like India have had to deal with, may win some kudos. This does not help India deal with the far more serious challenges it will have to confront in the aftermath of a disorienting shake-up in geopolitical equations. India will need the West more than it has in the recent past, whether in building up its deterrent capabilities or accelerating its own economic and technological transformation. India's Quad partners the US, Japan, Australia, its partners in Europe and several ASEAN countries, see India as an anchor that could help stabilise the international situation. They have a stake in India emerging as an influential power and are willing to contribute to that end. This is an opportunity that ought to be leveraged as part of a broader strategy. The temptation to indulge in mutual knuckle-rapping should be avoided.

This does not mean that India must downgrade its ties with Russia. There are valid legacy reasons for maintaining positive ties with Russia just as some European countries have

Europe will likely emerge as a more coherent and cohesive entity, anchored in German power, and playing a role more independent of the US than hitherto. All the more reason why India must deepen its all-round partnership with Europe, build a shared vision of an altered geopolitical landscape and encourage Europe to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. Prime Minister Modi's forthcoming visit to Germany is a significant opportunity to undertake this exercise. This is far more important than deflecting what is being seen as unreasonable pressure on India on the Ukraine issue. Once the larger picture is put in place this preoccupation with being seen as telling the Europeans where they get off would appear pedestrian.

had to do. The reality is that India-Russia relations are not a continuation of the old Indo-Soviet ties. That strategic partnership that helped India cope with the Cold War and the Chinese and Pakistani threats evaporated with the end of that war and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Moscow no longer saw Beijing as its main security challenge but for India, China became a bigger challenge. India's economic and trade relationship with Russia has become increasingly marginal. Prospects of a new energy partnership were belied as for Russia, China emerged as a more proximate and attractive power. Even the defence hardware relationship has diminished progressively as India has rightly tried to diversify its sources of supply. The legacy in this respect, too, is of diminishing relevance. This trendline is more telling than what India chooses to say or not to say about Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

A key assumption in India's Russia policy has been that as a great power, Moscow would be unlikely to accept a junior partnership with China; that it is China that was increasing its presence and influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, which Russia considers its "near neighbourhood" and security perimeter. In the long run, Russian and Chinese interests would not be aligned and, therefore, India should maintain a close relationship with Moscow. This was also the reason why we argued with the US and other western partners that they needed to be more accommodative of Russian interests so that it could distance itself from Beijing. Even if the Ukraine war had not erupted, the February 4 Sino-Russian Joint Declaration should have led India to question the continuing validity of these assumptions.

The Sino-Russian commitment to dismantling the existing Western-dominated international order, their faith in a new order more aligned with their interests as major continental Eurasian powers, is of particular concern to India. India may have its issues with the existing order but what is envisaged in the Joint Declaration is not the alternative which would enhance India's interests.

In a shifting geopolitical landscape, it is in India's interest to remain engaged with Russia and China as two leading powers in the world. Such engagement is important to gauge how

these powers are themselves adjusting to the changing geopolitical equations across the world. Once the shake-up begins to settle, would China emerge as a net gainer or would it step back from an overly aggressive and assertive posture? Or as some analysts believe, will its heightened sense of vulnerability lead to even more aggressive behaviour as has happened in the past? In either case, China will remain India's major adversary and security challenge. Russia is already a seriously weakened power in a European order now even more unfavourable than that which led it into the Ukraine misadventure. It will, for example, not be able to prevent Finland and Sweden from joining NATO. The US has shaken off the taint of its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan but its domestic politics is unpredictable and this calls for caution. Europe will likely emerge as a more coherent and cohesive entity, anchored in German power, and playing a role more independent of the US than hitherto. All the more reason why India must deepen its all-round partnership with Europe, build a shared vision of an altered geopolitical landscape and encourage Europe to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. Prime Minister Modi's forthcoming visit to Germany is a significant opportunity to undertake this exercise. This is far more important than deflecting what is being seen as unreasonable pressure on India on the Ukraine issue. Once the larger picture is put in place this preoccupation with being seen as telling the Europeans where they get off would appear pedestrian.

The attention being paid to India is substantive. This reflects not what India is but rather what India could become as one of the key architects of a new international order. It would be easy to bask in this international prominence and forget that this may soon evaporate if India fails to make the right choices at this time. It is time to think strategically about India's place in a world which is in the midst of a historic transformation. A rare but perishable opportunity has presented itself to significantly advance India's long-term prospects. It must be grasped with single-minded tenacity.

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