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Need for Strategic Balancing by India

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This article is based on editorial **“Negotiating the forks in the road of diplomacy”** which appeared in The Hindu on 27th June 2019. It describes the geopolitical tussle going between US and Russia-China. It also prescribes direction Indian foreign policy needs to follow.

Global geopolitics today represents the case of a tug of war and India finds itself in the middle of it. This has made difficult for India to carve a middle path for **balancing its strategic interests between the U.S and the Russia-China axis.**

G-20 summit in Osaka (June 28-29) depicts the perfect setting of this tug of war, where Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will hold bilateral meetings with U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Along with that India will participate in two parallel tri-laterals i.e the Russia-India-China (RIC) and Japan-U.S.-India (JAI). Also, in June, Indian PM held a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** summit in Bishkek.

What are the outstanding issues that pose the challenge to India's foreign policy?

This tug of war can broadly be divided into **trade concerns, energy, communications & connectivity and transformed geopolitical alignment.**

- **Trade concerns**

- The US' trade war with China was favourable for India, considering its long-standing concerns about China's unfair trade practices. On the other hand, the withdrawal of GSP benefits posed a fresh set of challenges for it.
- India's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations is another issue of contention for India as the trade grouping that has taken centre stage after the U.S. walked out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.
- Further, at G-20 summit, PM Modi seeks to attend the RIC trilateral meet and leaders of BRICS meet, both of which will focus on countering the U.S.'s “unilateralism” on trade under America's first policy.

- All these issues stage India against the U.S which is India's largest trading partner.
- **Energy & Connectivity**
 - US pulling out of the **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** nuclear agreement in May 2018 and subsequent imposition of sanctions under **CAATSA** hurt India's intake of cheaper, better Iranian crude. Though the USA has granted a waiver for Chabahar, banks, shipping and insurance companies have declined to support India-Afghan trade through the Iranian port for fear of sanctions affecting their other businesses, creating a major roadblock for India's connectivity issues.
 - It can hurt India's investments and its plans of larger connectivity via Chabahar and the Russian-led International North-South Transport Corridor, which may get even worse in the event of a full-scale confrontation between the U.S. and Iran.
- **Communications**
 - India is set to launch the 5G network. The U.S. however, expects India to exclude the Chinese telecom company, Huawei (over security concerns) from the 5G communications control. If not done the U.S. has threatened to withhold intelligence and security cooperation with India.
 - The U.S. has also threatened to invoke sanctions and close its high-tech and advanced aircraft deals with India over India-Russia S-400 missile system deal.
- **Connectivity**
 - The maritime dispute between the U.S. and China in the South China Sea has further intensified in South Asia through the Indo-Pacific.
 - India has always strongly expressed its disapproval of China's encroachment in the Indian ocean. Though the signing of an updated Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the US and Sri Lanka has been put off, it might make India apprehensive of other's military build-up in South Asia including the USA.

What is the Status of forces agreement (SOFA)

- A **status of forces agreement (SOFA)** is an agreement between a host country and a foreign nation stationing military forces in that country.
- SOFAs are often included, along with other types of military agreements, as part of a comprehensive security arrangement.
- It establishes the rights and privileges of foreign personnel present in a host country in support of the larger security arrangement.

Transformed Geopolitical Alignment

- The tussle between the U.S. and Russia-China is not new and India has negotiated these in the past few decades with considerable success. However, the present geopolitical condition is different.

- USA's National Defense Strategy 2018 had marked out revisionist Russia and China as its central challenge and the growing convergence of strategic interest between Russia and China today makes the strategic balancing difficult for India.
- In this scenario, India's foreign policy of Multi-alignment or issue-based alignment (Transformed from Non-alignment) has become unsustainable.

What should be the course of action for Indian foreign policy?

India needs a three-pronged strategy to sail its course in this geopolitical storm:

- India must take lead in integrating the South Asian region as it has become a formidable force at any international forum.
- India needs a clear set of framework and expectations in the context of big powers.
 - The recent success with listing Masood Azhar as a globally designated terrorist is an example of how focussed persistence and quiet diplomacy pays off.
 - India needs to move beyond Pakistan-centric foreign policy at international forums or constant demand for more visas for Indians and focus on projecting its long-term strategic needs
- India needs to re-embrace the policy of non-alignment as it was envisioned, in order to maintain a balance between these geopolitical power centres.

Though Tactical transactionalism that has become the currency of international politics, but for a more idealistic view of the world that India wishes to shape in the future, India's foreign policy must have not to be based on a zero-sum game.

Drishti input

The contemporary global scenario represents a tug of war between the US and the Russia-China axis, steering Indian foreign policy will be a challenging task in this geopolitical storm. Comment
