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India's Embrace of Strategic Hedging

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This article is based on **“India's Embrace of Strategic Hedging”** that appeared in The Hindustan Times on 09/09/2019. It talks about the importance of strategic hedging for India's foreign policy in dealing with great powers.

Recently, Indian PM attended three summit-level meetings with France, United States and Russian President, within a **time period of two weeks**. Further, in the month of October 2019, China's President Xi Jinping will visit India.

The simultaneous engagements with Russia, the US and China point towards the significance of **remarkable strategic hedging** in India's foreign policy. Despite the differences between these countries, India strategically maintains sound relationships with great powers in global politics.

The present-day geopolitical and geostrategic circumstances present a multifaceted challenge to India's foreign policy. Therefore, India's cold war narrative of strategic neutrality is being gradually replaced by strategic hedging.

Strategic Hedging

- Strategic hedging means a state spreads its risk by **pursuing two opposite policies towards another state i.e. balancing and engagement**.
- A state **prepares for the worst** by balancing: maintaining a strong military, building and strengthening alliances.
- Also, the state **prepares for the best** through engagement: building trade networks, increasing diplomatic links, and creating binding multilateral frameworks
- In short, strategic hedging would mean a calculated **combination of soft and hard power**.

Strategic Hedging in India's Foreign Policy

- In international relations, there are **no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests**. This makes strategic hedging a must for India which can be observed from its relations with the following nations:
- **India-France relations:**
 - India and France have together launched the International solar alliance.
 - India is procuring Rafale Fighter jet from France.
 - The latest joint statement has laid a roadmap for cybersecurity and digital technology, quantum computing and artificial intelligence.
 - India and France are implementing a joint-strategic vision for cooperation in the Indian Ocean.
 - France has stood rock solid by India vis a vis Indian government revoking article 370 in the state of J&K.
- **India- US relations:**
 - India's foreign policy will meet its **most stringent test** for it needs to pursue excellent ties with the US, while maintaining strong relations with China and Russia.
 - India **is worried about US-Pakistan rapprochement, given US plan to exit from Afghanistan.**
 - Pakistan sought to leverage this by engaging the US against India's action of revoking Article 370.
 - However, in a big diplomatic victory, recently **the US has held that Kashmir issue is a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan.**
 - India has participated more frequently in issues of international concern as far as the South China Sea is concerned. Apart from it India is also a member of an **informal grouping called Quad** (in order to balance China).
 - However, at present **trade is the biggest irritant** in the India-US relations and both countries are trying to resolve issues.
- **India-Russia relations**
 - India's relationship with Russia is a **time-tested friendship**.
 - In this context India's recent participation in the Eastern Economic Forum is symbolic.
 - India has announced \$1 billion credit for the development of the Russian Far East. The engagement is also marked by the launch of **India's Act Far East policy**.
 - Moreover, on account of the S-400 deal, India has taken a position of principle in the national interest that it will not sacrifice its ties with Russia, despite pressure from the US.

- **Sino-India relations:**

- India's ties with China are one of the **most- challenging at this time**.
- Issues like **China's axis with Pakistan** aimed at India, its persistent thwarting of India's great power ambitions, the **balance of trade** (favouring China), China's deliberate policy aimed at **diminishing India's strategic space in the neighbourhood**, all pose a threat to India's interests.
- However, the **Wuhan summit** with China has opened new possibilities for the transformation of Sino-India relations.

Way Forward

- India **should end ambiguity** in its foreign policy, especially one that sways between the pulls of its **erstwhile non-aligned stance and the need for realpolitik** in current times.
- India should learn from China on account of strategic hedging
 - China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has proven exemplary in current times to have clandestinely mixed elements of hard power with soft, leading to what some have labelled '**sharp power**'.
 - However, India's economic status doesn't allow it to pursue India's version of BRI but India can act as a **fast power** in taking decisions impacting global politics.

Strategic hedging dilutes binaries in foreign relations, particularly between friend and foe nations, and creates navigable yet cautious space to take the relationships forward. How India adapts to strategic hedging will mould its course to becoming a stable Asian pivot, going into the future.

Drishti Mains Question

Bilateral relations play a fundamental role in India's foreign policy in a multipolar world. Discuss.

Sources:

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