**India - a Bad Bet**

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July 15, 2023

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns)

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Washington last month made headlines. The joint statement issued on June 22, which outlines a wide range of highly significant areas for bilateral cooperation, confirms that India has become a key strategic partner of the United States, mainly to counter China. This partnership began to take shape by the turn of the century. Successive US administrations progressively added depth to this relationship. Under Mr. Biden, the US National Security Strategy 2022 asserts that Beijing wants to “become the world’s leading power.” It adds that China “is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.” Hence, America’s charm offensive towards India as its strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific. The crucial question at this stage is whether India will side with the US against China in a conflict situation. There is a widely held view that India is a bad bet for the US.
Writing for Foreign Affairs, Ashley Tellis cautions that “Washington’s current expectations of India are misplaced.” He argues that the stark disparity in Chinese and Indian national power and India’s geographic proximity to China warrant that India will never engage itself in any US confrontation with China. In case Washington and Beijing clash in East Asia or the South China Sea, India would certainly want the United States to prevail. But it is unlikely to embroil itself in the conflict.
In a recent article entitled “The Folly of India’s Neutrality,” Sumit Ganguly and Dinsha Mistree draw attention to India’s professed neutrality on the conflict in Ukraine, stating that India has consistently resisted US pressure to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The article recalls, “Both Mr. Modi and his foreign minister have been praised at home for their staunch refusal to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.” Earlier this year, India failed to secure an agreement on the final declaration in a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of G20 countries in New Delhi, mainly because India refused to condemn Russia for the conflict in Ukraine. India faced diplomatic embarrassment but did not relent to condemn Russia. India faces a tough challenge at the forthcoming G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023.
The New York Times, in an editorial captioned “The India Quandary” dated June 22, 2023, observed, among others, “India has a long history of wariness toward America—most of its military equipment comes from the Soviet Union and Russia, and it would prefer to steer clear of direct involvement in the U.S.-China rivalry.”
It is clear that the United States and India have divergent interests in their strategic partnership. Washington has sought to promote a “partnership of democracies” to uphold Western values and to use this partnership to counter China. On the other hand, India’s primary and foremost interest is to acquire advanced technologies from the United States to bolster its own economic and military capabilities and thus facilitate its ambition to become a great power. India is vying for the potential shifting of American tech investments from China to India.
To justify its policy of neutrality, India advocates its traditional policy of non-alignment and what it now terms “strategic autonomy.” India is deftly playing to all sides, exploiting fully the size of its market. It is a member of SCO, an organization where China and Russia are two anchors. BRICS also brings India into a group that includes China and Russia. For the same reason, India has so far stayed away from NATO Plus. In an article entitled “A view from Russia on PM Modi’s US visit,” Aleksei Zakharov writes that the Russian experts believe “the India-US engagement has its limits and New Delhi will not agree to turn into an ally of the US.” Nonetheless, there is a sense of concern prevalent in Russian political circles about the trajectory of Indo-US relations.
The US administration cannot completely ignore a serious erosion of civil and political rights and democratic freedoms in India during Mr. Modi’s rule. The BJP government has followed “policies that target and discriminate against religious minorities, especially India’s 200 million Muslims.” US frontline media has been voicing concerns that democracy in India is in peril. During Mr. Modi’s US visit, President Obama told CNN in an interview that India may start “pulling apart” if the government does not protect the rights of its ethnic minorities. Obama added, “We have seen what happens when you start getting those kinds of large internal conflicts.”
One wonders how long the demands of India’s strategic partnership with the United States and India’s desire to retain its so-called strategic autonomy can coexist. Will India follow the script written by Washington and become a pawn in US plans for the containment of China - only time will testify. So far, India has served its interests well by playing to all sides. There are lessons to be learned to survive, grow, and compete in the transforming global order. The foremost is to strengthen national power, with a strong economy at its core.