

Recalibrating ties? PM sends US message via Putin meet

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The India-Russia 'informal' summit was more than welcome as it came at a time when the relations between the two countries have not been at their best. In the backdrop of a changing global scenario, which includes the fallout of the Iran nuclear deal as well as the changing dynamics in the Korean peninsula, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin had many issues of common concern, which needed ironing out.

For Delhi, Moscow's drift away towards Islamabad and talk of an emerging Russia-China-Pakistan trilateral was of great concern. The trilateral was also seen as a reaction to India joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) last year, with the US, Japan and Australia being the other members of this grouping. Moscow perceived the formation of the QUAD as India's 'tilt' towards the US and its allies and a shift away from its earlier

position of 'balance' between Russia and the US. Moscow is also against the fruition of the QUAD as it hampers its larger interests in the Indo-Pacific.

India clearly doesn't want a situation to arrive where it has to choose between either Washington or Moscow, because choosing any of the two would hamper its self interests, and Sochi was an ideal platform on which to recalibrate its ties with Russia. The emphasis from the Indian side was to press home the fact that strong India-Russia ties are mutually beneficial for both the countries, while Russia was eager to ensure that India remains its largest defence and strategic partner. Already, pressure from the US and Israel has ensured that India buy military supplies from them. In fact, just as Prime Minister Modi finished his summit meeting with President Putin, reports came in of India considering a \$2-billion proposal to procure multi-role helicopters for the Indian Navy through a direct government purchase from the US. Moscow is well aware now that it faces strong competi-



President Vladimir Putin (L) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi

tion from other countries when it comes to selling defence equipment to India.

Apart from bilateral ties, the main issue of concern for both the countries is the fallout of the Iran nuclear deal, which the US has withdrawn from. This is where the interests of both India and Russia converge. While Russia is looking to increase its influence in the region and side with Iran, as opposed to the US, India is looking to se-

ecure some guarantees for its projects like the Chabahar port and the INSTC (International North-South Trade Corridor) where it has invested a lot of money. So, hammering out a common strategy on the nuclear deal — should US-Iran relations worsen — as is most likely the case, is something that would be on the minds of both countries.

But to preserve the deal, peace in West Asia needs to be ensured. The Iran-Israel

face-off, post the nuclear deal — where the two countries fired missiles against one another — has aggravated the situation in the region. India's energy interests could be jeopardised if tensions escalate between Iran and Israel, supported by the US and its allies in West Asia. Similarly, Russia wants a peaceful Middle East, where Putin is subtly working on member countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran and Turkey. Putin is doing this in a bid to reassert Russian prestige and provide a possible counterweight to Nato in the future. He is also keen to prop up Iran as both countries have common interests in Syria.

Apart from finding a common ground, the timing of this informal visit is very important. The US would note with great interest that the meeting between the Indian Prime Minister and the Russian President comes just after a meeting with China at Wuhan last month where a 'reset' of relations was announced. The Americans would also note that a formal visit by President Putin to India is scheduled to take

place later this year.

This suggests to the Americans that they cannot afford to take their relationship with India for granted. Already, some tough words have come forth from Washington with Tina Kaidanow, the US principal deputy assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, warning New Delhi not to encourage Russia's "malign behaviour" and "to evaluate any potential large defense purchase from Russia seriously". India has not responded officially, but the PM's visit to meet Putin, and that too in Russia, speaks volumes.

India knows that Russia is a reliable partner and a major power in the international system — one that it cannot afford to lose as an ally. The mercurial nature of President Donald Trump has suggested to New Delhi that it cannot afford to put all of its eggs in the US basket. Wuhan and Sochi shows that the PM is not doing so.

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