

Synopsis

Shifting Geopolitical Sands: Options for India

Webinar Summary Report

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The webinar **Shifting Geopolitical Sands: Options for India** was held on 17 April 2022 at 5pm IST. It was organised by the Current and Strategic Affairs Forum (CASA). We would like to thank our Moderator and Panellists for their comprehensive analysis and for their candidly expressed views:

Panellists:

Dr Happymon Jacob, Professor, SIS, JNU.

Mr Jayanta Ghosal, Consulting Editor, India Today.

Mr Anil Trigunayat, IFS & ex-Ambassador to Jordan, Libya & Malta

Moderator: Lt Gen Satish Dua, PVSM, UYSM, SM, VSM (retd)

We would like to thank the many other distinguished attendees including many senior veterans, business leaders, professors, think tank researchers, contributors, analysts and others who took out time to participate as well as share their inputs, relevant Q&A and comments during the course of the webinar. We would like to thank Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), former DG Ordnance Services and the Founder of CASA and Lt Gen PR Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) Co Founder CASA and

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Introduction

Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd) founder of CASA Forum began the 25th webinar (4th this year) by extending a warm welcome to all participants. He introduced the eminent panellists with a brief bio of each dwelling on their vast experience and knowledge of the day's topic. He invited them to share it with the participants and briefly stated the context in which the webinar was being held. He referred to the just concluded 2+2 dialogue between our RM and EAM with their counterparts in Washington and India's nuanced stance that stopped short of outright condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The General emphasised that whenever and however the war ended it would have great implications for India's relations with both Russia and China and also with the wider Western world that includes the US and its allies. He thereafter handed over the proceedings to the moderator Lt Gen Satish Dua, PVSM, UYSM, SM, VSM (Retd).

Gen Satish Dua in turn welcomed everyone to the webinar and extended his warm greetings on the occasion of Easter Sunday and a host of New Year celebrations across different states and cultures of India. His opening remarks dwelt on the unexpectedness of the Russian-Ukraine war and how although it was localised to one corner of the world its outcome would significantly contribute to the creation of a new world order that would be very different to the one set up by the victors during WW II. Remarking on the flurry of diplomatic activity in New Delhi and a procession of visits by high level dignitaries he opined that this alone signified the enhanced status of India in the emerging new world order. Uniquely the visitors were from both the opposing camps and included the Foreign Ministers of China and Russia. He hoped to find answers to questions being asked as to why has India become so important to the major world powers. He then set out the ground rules for the panellists and invited Dr Happymon Jacob to take the floor first.

Prof Happymon Jacob

The Prof began his presentation with the qualification that as the webinar is being held even as the war is in progress it would not be prudent to predict outcomes and a time frame for it to end since there are so many variables to be considered with very little authentic information from both sides. However, some short, medium and long term implications of the war for India could be identified. In the short term India has adopted a neutral stance with a discernible tilt towards Russia. This has been dictated by its long standing and trustworthy partnership with the USSR/Russia since independence in 1947. Nevertheless, India has also strengthened its relations with those perceived to be against Russia including the US, UK, France, Germany and other European countries. He pointed out that hence if at all there has been a tilt

it is a qualified tilt. The Prof while agreeing with the short term stance of India was also apprehensive as to for how long this qualified tilt could be maintained.

Turning to the implications for India, Prof Happymon stated that the most important and most obvious implication for India was that it would be faced with a stronger China regardless of how and when the war would end.

Secondly, China itself would realise that no matter how weak the US and its allies may appear, they would not let irredentist powers like Russia and China bully smaller nations to acquiesce to their depredations.

Thirdly China appears to be using the opportunity of the US distraction with the Ukraine war to fill the great power vacuum in Afghanistan and take steps to keep the only challenger to its hegemony in Asia, India, confined to South Asia. The recent tour of the Chinese Foreign Minister to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal with a cursory stopover in India alludes to that.

Fourthly, China like India has not given all out support to Russia. It too is following a policy of a tilt without going all the way as it feels that doing so would pressure the Americans to ally more closely with India and also re-enter the region in a bigger way to counter China.

Fifthly India must remain alert to the possibility of the US turning to China to broker a deal between it and its allies with Russia to end the war in Ukraine in a manner that would be acceptable to all parties. If this succeeds, the US may go easy against China in the Indo-Pacific which would be detrimental to our present dominant position in the Indian Ocean Region that is afforded by our peninsular land mass cleaving the ocean into two halves.

Sixthly, the drawdown of the US focus in the Indo-Pacific could relegate the present conflicts and turmoil in our backyard- Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan

to the figurative back burner. India cannot compete with the Chinese check book diplomacy on its own.

Lastly the stronger the Chinese influence becomes in South Asia the more restricted becomes India's space for growing its influence in the region. To counter this possibility India would perforce have to get closer to the US which would cause it to lose some of its autonomy for independent decision making so necessary for it to safeguard its national interests.

Jayanta Ghosal

Continuing from where Prof Happymon Jacob had left off, Mr Ghosal at the outset itself emphasised the need for India to preserve and further its sovereign national interest in a changing world. He likened it to a tight rope walk by India while balancing the tugs and pulls of the US and its allies on the one hand and maintaining our deep rooted and long standing ties with Russia.

He highlighted the fact that in diplomacy sometimes the grey areas were more important than the cut and dry black/white propositions when dealing with issues.

He also noted the growth of India's importance in the emerging world order by pointing out that as a journalist with over 40 years standing it used to be jokingly said that foreign visitors usually came to India in the winter months to escape the gruelling summer heat- just like migratory birds do. However in the past few months despite the growing heat a whole series of high level visits have taken place from Australia, Japan, China, the US, Europe etc. All these visits were strictly business like and there was no hint of the Taj Mahal visits, etc. There could be no greater proof of our growing clout in the world of geopolitics and geoeconomics.

Dwelling on the US acceptance of India's qualified neutral stance in the ongoing conflict, Mr Ghosal was of the opinion that the US

was displaying “strategic patience” and India must remain conscious of the threats of sanctions under CATSA for our purchase of the S400 SAM systems from Russia. Our financial system is also deeply entwined with the dollar dominated international banking system controlled by the US and our attempts to engineer bilateral Rupee-Rouble or a Rupee-Yuan financial system must be graded in a manner that it does not abruptly bring down the wrath of the US on us, especially since our economy is only just showing signs of recovering from the deleterious effects of the pandemic. He ended his initial intervention by fully endorsing the cautious, pragmatic and realistic approach adopted by India towards the Russian-Ukraine war.

Mr Anil Trigunayat

The retired diplomat and ex Ambassador began his presentation with a turgid observation that we have never seen a super or major power win a war after WW-II barring the UK in the Falklands in 1982 or earlier India in 1971.

Commenting on the ongoing war he cited the Russian Foreign Minister having said that the war was meant to check the global domination of the US. It is to be noted that the US flaunts international rules based order etc while blithely ignoring them when it suits her interests. Though she quotes chapter & verse from the UNCLOS to justify her intrusions into the territorial waters of China, India, etc disguised as Freedom of Navigation operations she has not ratified the treaty itself. Similar has been the US position on a host of other international pacts including on Human Rights.

The Ambassador dwelt on the need to examine other “manufactured” wars like those waged in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, etc before taking a position on the ongoing war in the Ukraine.

The task is made more complicated by sophisticated information war waged over social media, TV etc that has the effect of information overload and herds viewers in a direction desired by the concerned nation.

India has always taken a holistic and consistent view right from the days of Jawaharlal Nehru when India was not so strong both militarily and economically. There is a discernible continuum in our foreign policies from those days through the times of Indira Gandhi and now Modi. Ours has always been a considered view in the context of the ever evolving world order.

India has always stood by its own national interest. In the present times India must take note of the considerable shift away from pacifism imposed on Japan and Germany by the victors of WW-II. We must also take note of the rise of ultra nationalism right wing ideologies in the once uniformly liberal Europe. These developments have great import for the emerging new world order.

In the context of China-Russia relations the Ambassador pointed out how in the long run China could force Russia to choose between itself and India. He agreed with the other panellists that closer China-Russia ties could drive India closer to the US and its allies. Lastly, he wanted India to use its leverage with Russia to raise its profile in Afghanistan vis a vis China.

The moderator then began the Q&A segment by asking of Mr Ghosal if he thought that India should continue to sit on the fence or follow the US in the context of the war in Ukraine. Should it be that if we decide to go with the West how could that be leveraged to assist us in our confrontation with Pakistan.

Mr Ghosal spoke of the need to align our foreign policy objectives being matched with ground realities. There can be no 'one size fits all' kind of approach in diplomacy. Each stance has to be

formulated on a case to case basis. He cited our use of Russia to engage with the Taliban who have chosen Indian wheat supplies over Pakistani wheat. Our present foreign policy replicates our ideas from the Non Aligned Movement and in many ways we could say that we are witness to NAM 2.0. He was of the opinion that the recent removal of Imran Khan from power gives India an opportunity to improve ties with that country. Mr Ghosal vouchsafed for consistency in our foreign policy and to deal with the pressure tactics of the West just as how we remained engaged with Iran despite sanctions on the latter.

The next question was directed at Mr Trigunayat. How did he view the loss of relevance of the UN in recent years? Will the Ukraine war force a restructuring in the UN with countries like India being given a larger role?

Mr Trigunayat was of the opinion that the world only listened if spoken to from a position of strength. Today India has arrived and demands its rightful place in the world order. Given the way the war is moving towards a stagnation there is every possibility of a new Cold War starting. This new contest will not only be in the military domain. Finance and commerce too would be important fields of contest. Developing alternate financial systems, a place in the blue economy, etc are the major challenges before us. He then listed out a few well known reasons for India being important to the world: location dominating the Indian Ocean, second largest population & set to be number one soon, one of the biggest markets, potential hub for global supply chains as alternate to China with scale and reach to match, trillions of dollars of business opportunities and above all, the world's largest democracy that has strong leadership.

Because of this heft, world leaders come to India to seek a third option distinct from the two currently on offer. Nations want to break out of the Cold War syndrome of "with us or against us".

This will naturally ensure that India will be given its due role in a reformed UN whenever that happens.

The next question was directed at Prof Happymon Jacob. What will be the outcome if India adopts an open pro-Russian tilt throughout the conflict? How can India leverage our good relations with Russia in the context of our rivalry with China?

In his reply, Prof Happymon Jacob mentioned that so far India has played its cards very well. Many foreign interlocutors have visited us and they have understood and accepted our position on the war. The US has not been very open and demonstrative of its acceptance so far. We are forced to tilt towards Russia because of our continental and maritime security dilemmas. Russia is the only power nearest to us to whom we can approach for help in any crisis. Till now they have never let us down. Why should India have another unfriendly country in Russia when we are already facing a hostile China and Pakistan. Even Iran is not exactly friendly with us but we have to depend on her for access to CAR.

The consequences of this is that India faces increased pressure from the West and faces threats like sanctions under CATSA over our S400 purchase even though the deal was signed much before CATSA was enacted. We are attempting to enter the arms market with our first sales of Brahmos missile systems to Philippines that could be jeopardised. Hence an unhappy West is not good for us. At least till the war is on, Russia will ensure that China does not heat up the LAC.

It is therefore crystal clear that India will have to fight its own battles. We must continue to take pragmatic positions both bilaterally as well as in multilateral groupings like BRICS, RIC, SCO, QUAD, etc strictly in accordance with our self interest.

General P R Shankar interjected with a question as to whether we as arising power should seek deeper alliance with a US in decline or seek to improve ties with China with whom despite our border

disputes we have trade that is increasing both by volume and value year after year?

To this Prof Happymon was of the view that despite our best efforts, China has not stopped seeing us as rivals to their ambitions of being the dominating power in Eurasia and the world. They seek to keep us confined to South Asia and not allow us to exploit the advantages given to us by geography- natural dominance over the Indian Ocean or the protection afforded to us by the Himalayan Ranges. Ambassador Anil too had similar views and did not want India to adopt a totally anti-China stance just yet. Mr Ghosal wanted India to strike a balance between the US and China.

Mr Darshan Gajjar wanted to know the effect on the global order if China emerges stronger after this war. Replying to him, Prof Happymon said that there was no doubt that China would emerge as the dominant power in Eurasia after the war. Japan and possibly Australia may join India to oppose China. The tyranny of supply chains keeps nations hooked to China despite their political opposition to its policies. Our defence cooperation with the US and the West would increase- but the result should not be that we replace Russia with another dependency ie the US. Smart diplomacy, bold thinking and atmanirbhartha are the way forward.

In the same context Gen P R Shankar sought to know what would be India's position in the new world order? Can India become the fifth pole alongside others like the US, China, Russia and the EU? In reply, Mr Trigunayat stated that he wanted India to be its own pole. We need to overcome our hesitancy in demanding our due from the world. Prof Happymon mentioned that the US woke up to the threat from China too late. It's understanding of China even

today is patchy. Ideally the US and Russia ought to have been cooperating with each other against China. On our part, smart balancing between these three is the answer to Gen Shankar's question.

Conclusion

On that note the moderator Gen Dua concluded the webinar stating that in these times of shifting geopolitical sands, Indian diplomacy must be nimble footed to take advantage of fleeting opportunities. We must also be bold in our thinking and shed our hesitancy in demanding our dues from the world inherent in the size of our growing economy and our rising military capabilities. General Gautam also in conclusion thanked all the panellists and participants for their enthusiastic interventions. He stated that we are indeed in the process of firming up a new version of NAM, a Version 2.0.