

## **CHANGING GEO-POLITICAL ALIGNMENTS**

By Maj Gen Harsha Kakar (Retd)

**Lord Palmerston had rightly stated, 'There are no eternal allies nor perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests, it is our duty to follow'. This is clearly coming to fore within our neighbourhood. For India it is an indicator that we need to monitor our region carefully as changing geo-political alignments would have major negative security implications. This is also a signal that our foreign policy and shifting international camps would impact support when and where it truly matters.**

**Till recently, India and Russia were close, with Russia being our major weapon supplier and steadfast supporter in all international forums. It stood by India even as the US and the west were seeking to sanction India, backing Pakistan. As India began moving steadily into the US camp, our attempts at keeping Indo-Russian ties on an even keel began fading.**

**The present government opined that we could keep Russia on our side by enhancing defence procurements, thus boosting their dwindling economy, impacted by western sanctions over Ukraine. The drift was visible when Putin last visited India, but we were unwilling to accept and projected a brave front. Though there are numerous bilateral meetings and agreements, somehow, Russia and India have been slowly drifting.**

**Russia was Pak's sworn enemy, especially since Pak raised and supported the Taliban against the Russians in Afghanistan. It was Pak's backing to the Taliban, with financial and equipment support from the US which compelled the Russians to withdraw from Afghanistan in disgrace. India had always**

**exploited this chasm to own advantage. With India moving to the US camp, Russia and the US drifting apart, Afghanistan becoming more unstable, the rise of the IS and the growing power of the Taliban, which Pak is known to officially support, relations have begun to change.**

**Russia is moving closer to Pak, conducting military exercises with it, providing it military hardware and officially signalling the rebirth of their relationship. The first group of four to handle the Afghan crises included Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran. Even Afghanistan was out. It was only after India raised its concerns, did Russia bring it both on second thought. While Russia has not openly supported Pak, it has neither chastised it. Clearly a sign of changing geo-political alignments.**

**The proximity of Russia to Pak would impact us in multiple ways. It could imply Russia maintaining a neutral stance in international forums when we need their backing to even delayingsupply of critical spares of Russian origin equipment when Indo-Pak tensions riseor providing Pak with military equipment impacting India's conventional military power.**

**Nepal had always been a strong partner of India. The Madhesi agitation, with possible Indian backing, impacted Indo-Nepal relations, despite all Indian assistance over the years. With Oli as their Prime Minister, India may lose its control over Nepal, despite controlling the tap of imports to the nation. China would gain by his election and with Nepal joining the BRI, it would soon be part of those nations indebted to China. The recent visit by the Pak PM to Nepal and the warm reception accorded, possibly done at China's behest, would only add to geo-political alignments unfavourable to India. Nepal was a conduit**

**for anti-India activities by the ISI and could again become one.**

**Maldives has clearly moved away from Indian control. Its debt to China would ensure that India remains distant and unable to directly influence the Island nation. India's proximity to Sri Lanka, post the arrival of the present government is likely to be short lived as recent bye elections have shown the revival of Mahinda Rajapakshe, the erstwhile anti-India President. There is likely to be a reversal, which if it occurs would push India further away.**

**Our proximity to the US has truly not gained us any benefit in the regional context. The US, despite all its tall claims is unwilling to challenge Pak beyond a level. It needs Pak's support in multiple ways, whether it be the use of Karachi, their air space or even pushing the Taliban to join peace talks. Our relations with the US, especially since Trump has assumed power is more linked to economy and the business which India can provide to their defence manufacturing industry, than true proximity. On many occasions, the US is known to shift its international goals as its national focus shifts. Claims of a strong strategic alliance and terming the region as Indo-Pacific including signing of the LEMOA has in no way shifted US goals in India's favour.**

**On the contrary India is moving closer to ASEAN nations with whom China continues to have multiple disputes. Most of these nations have signed security pacts with India. Thus, India is stepping into Chinese turf, again shifting geo-political alignments, challenging China. Similar has been the status of India's relations with countries of West Asia, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who were staunch supporters of Pakistan. This would reduce support to Pak, which was always taken for granted.**

**In simple terms as a nation's power develops, it changes its geo-political alignments to suit its growing interests. In South Asia, nations which we considered close to us and took their support for granted have begun drifting away, Nepal and Maldives for now, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh would depend on which party is in power.**

**The biggest damage to our relationship has been the slow distancing of Russia from being our closest ally to a distant partner. Russia too is changing its own geo-political alignments based on its own changing interests. The Russia-China nexus to Russia-China-Pak nexus should be of concern to us, which we seem to be glossing over. Pak provides Russia a greater role in Afghanistan, which remains the US's Achilles heel.**

**We may claim to be balancing relations, but that is only when the other nation is weak or seeks our support, Iran and Palestine being examples. It would never be the case with Russia, which clearly states, either with us or not. International groupings and camps are such that balancing may sound logical but is not a reality.**

**Geo-political alignments change with interests and goals of nations, but the distancing of a reliable partner may not be an ideal status for India, especially as China enhances its role in our immediate neighbourhood. The defence minister is scheduled to visit Russia shortly. Unless there is intense homework done, mending fences including weaning Russia away from Pakistan may not happen. This would then be detrimental to Indian interests.**

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