

India Maintains Pragmatic International Posture, but US Demands Stronger Alignment

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It is undeniable that in recent years India has been striving to establish solid relations with the US, forming an important alliance to deal with the Chinese issue. For Washington, ties to New Delhi are a key step in its ambitions on the Asian continent, however it is questionable how much India is aligned with its American partner. Recent events show that Indian foreign policy is absolutely pragmatic, with not only cooperation but also friction with the US, depending on the specific situation.

On the 28th and 29th of July the twelfth edition of the Indo-Russia joint military Exercise (popularly known as “INDRA”) took place. Created in 2003, this program brings together the Russian and Indian navies in joint operations where military tactics and technologies are tested, strengthening ties of military diplomacy and bilateral cooperation. This year, the Indian Navy was represented by the stealth Frigate INS Tabar, while the Russian Federation Navy was represented by Corvettes RFS Zelyony Dol and RFS Odintsovo of the Baltic Fleet.

Several maneuvers were performed during the drills, including fleet operations, anti-aircraft fire, refueling, boarding and navigation simulations, as well as helicopter flights and naval aviation exercises. More than 4,000 soldiers participated in the operations, in addition to 54 vessels and 48 aircraft.

Although such exercises have already become a real tradition in bilateral relations between Russia and India, this year’s episode comes at a particularly delicate moment, when Washington is escalating pressure for New Delhi to decline its cooperation with Moscow, particularly on military issues. As the exercises took place on the Russian coast, American **Secretary of State Antony Blinken** once again warned the Indian government of US “concerns” regarding the purchase of Russian weapons. In 2018, India signed a contract valued at 5 billion dollars for the acquisition of Russian S-400 anti-missile systems, to be received by New Delhi at the end of 2021. As the supply date of the S-400 approaches, Washington intensifies its pressure for the deal to be reversed.

The S-400 (SA-21 Growler in the NATO classification) is a very powerful Russian weapon, capable of shooting down stealth-technology aerial machines, cruise missiles, tactical and tactical-operational ballistic missiles. With a range of up to 400 kilometers, the Russian system can hit targets at very high heights, being much more efficient than the current weapons used by the Indian armed forces. The strategic value of this system reveals the good and stable relations between Russia and India, considering that commercial relations of military products are limited by diplomatic interactions. And these good relations with Russia are precisely Washington's main concern for India.

Washington's plan is to make India an absolute ally. Rivalries with China have brought both countries closer and closer, especially in the context of military relations within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The problem that the American government is not knowing how to deal with is that these relations are restricted to the Chinese issue. India has no reason to expand its rivalry with China to Russia, as these are absolutely different cases. The problems between India and China are due to historical territorial disputes, which obviously do not exist between India and Russia, so any rivalry between New Delhi and Moscow must be immediately rejected.

But US warnings cannot be ignored. India is right to maintain a pragmatic stance, but it must be prepared to face the consequences. It is difficult for any country to maintain stable relations with Russia and the US at the same time without suffering consequences. Washington imposed serious sanctions on Germany (its biggest ally in Europe) for a long time due to purely economic cooperation with Moscow, so it is naive to think that India will be immune from sanctions by cooperating militarily with Russia.

What India must do to maintain a sovereign and pragmatic posture is to deal autonomously with its territorial problems with China, avoiding involving US interests in the region. India must focus on finding a peaceful solution to regional problems – or, worst-case-scenario, forming alliances with other Asian countries, without adhering to Washington-led international schemes. This is the only way for India not to have its interests affected by the US in exchange of American military favors.

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