Enhancing Strategic Autonomy

What is the issue?

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India needs to ensure its strategic integrity and autonomy in the face of many bilateral and multilateral measures around the world.

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How does India’s relationship with Russia fare?

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- India and Russia holds a regular annual summits, in accordance with the protocol having been agreed upon by both the countries in 2005.
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- Summits have often led to spectacular breakthroughs between the two countries.
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- In the 2009 summit, they resolved the log-jam in the long pending sale of the Russian aircraft carrier Gorshkov (since renamed Vikramaditya) to India.
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- In the latest summit, the contract for the delivery of S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to India was signed.
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- The S-400 Triumf can be deployed against all enemies, irrespective of any other defence choices that India might have.
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- India and Russia signed on to a document to expand civil nuclear energy cooperation and agreed on a second site for Russian nuclear reactors.
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- They signed a memorandum of understanding on a joint programme in the field of human space-flight, enabling Indian astronauts to be trained in Russia.
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- They also agreed on the virtues of a regional security architecture to provide security to all countries in Asia and in the regions of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.
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- All these proposed measures seemed to demonstrate a clear ‘mutuality of interests’.
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How does India’s relationship with US fare?

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- The 2+2 Dialogue is a format the U.S. employs with some of its closest allies including Japan and Australia.
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- The 2+2 Dialogue marks a paradigmatic change in the nature of India-U.S. relations.
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- As a prelude to this, the U.S. had renamed the Asia-Pacific as the Indo-Pacific.
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- It had blocked more than $1.5 billion in U.S. security aid to Pakistan, allotting a mere $150 million in 2019.
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- U.S.-India economic cooperation was stated to have grown exponentially within two decades, with the total goods and services trade between India and U.S. increasing from $11.2 billion in 1995 to $126.2 billion in 2017.
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- U.S. foreign direct investment into India substantially increased during this period and India was also being accorded the status of a ‘major defence partner’.
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- These have given the impression that India has come within the U.S. orbit of influence, detaching itself further from Russia.
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- This impression is further heightened by India signing on to the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) recently.
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- COMCASA allows India to procure transfer specialised equipment for encrypted communications for US origin military platforms like the C-17, C-130 and P-8Is.
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Where does India’s interests lie?

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- India fancies a close relationship with Russia as one of its most dependable allies.
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- A comparison of the India-Russia summit outcome with the promises made during the 2+2 Dialogue can hardly be a true index of what lies in the future.
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- The U.S., at present, perceives China as posing a major challenge to its supremacy, and ‘the most significant threat to U.S. interest from a counter-intelligence perspective’.
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- The U.S. has obviously been unleashing a spate of allegations against China.
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- These include an implicit reference to the threat China posed to other nations in the region, including India, given that China had the second largest defence budget in the world, the largest standing army, the third largest air force, and was rapidly expanding its navy.
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- Specific mention was also made by the U.S. to the Chinese navy’s ‘anti-access’ capabilities and its ‘area denial tactics’.
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- This was possibly intended to warn countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) like India of the growing menace posed by the Chinese navy.
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- Hence, the 2+2 Dialogue is more aimed at forging a possible containment of China strategy, with India partnering the U.S. in this effort.
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- Differences in the outcomes of the India-Russia summit and the promises made in 2+2 dialogue are thus quite apparent.
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- Russia was essentially seeking to cement a relationship with India that has existed for several years.
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- It was not insisting on any exclusivity as far as relationships go.
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- The S-400 Triumf took off between the two countries with no Russian equivalent of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in place.
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- But, the U.S. wanted India to view foreign policy perspectives largely through a U.S. prism, and thereafter make a choice.
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What should be done?

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- The situation is greatly complicated by the fact that the world today faces a post-Cold War situation.
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- The rise of China’s economic power and its growing military might and the re-emergence of Russia are significant pointers to this situation.
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- Russia has already given a hint that it has the option of other choices than India in its defence relations, which might not exclude Pakistan.
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- India can hardly alienate Russia as it re-emerges as a key presence in Asia and Eurasia.
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- India and China have differences on several issues, including border problems and a struggle for the leadership of Asia.
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- Nevertheless, neither India nor China appears ready for an open conflict as it would cost both countries dearly.
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- India is also aware of a lack of resolve from US to actively resist China’s territorial expansion in the South China Sea, and in preventing China from expanding its naval activities in the IOR.
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- The abortive U.S. “pivot to Asia” is a stark reminder of the limitation of U.S. capabilities today.
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- This shows that the threat to the rules-based international order today comes as much from within existing democracies.
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- Hence, India should not allow itself to be easily persuaded in the belief that democracies, by and large, offer better choices.
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- Strategic ambivalence is not an answer to the situation that India faces today.
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- Strategic integrity and autonomy, and mature strategic judgment are required in a world where disruption is the order of the day.
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Source: The Hindu

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