

United States-Russia Military Confrontation 2018 & its Implications for Indian Foreign Policy

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United States and Russia are in a state of edgy military confrontation which has all the potential of a flare-up and military showdown. Inherent in this are serious implications for India and its foreign policy would be severely tested.

Geopolitically, strange is the emerging reality that the United States has chosen the Middle East for a showdown with Russia where the strategic challenges to United States are much lower in scale than in Indo Pacific Asia where China has already thrown the military gauntlet in the South China Sea against the United States. Here perceptually, the United States has shied away from a military showdown with China and where United States for safeguarding its Superpower image in Asian capitals should have challenged China.

Starting with high voltage threats by the United States to Russia and Russia following suit in its responses following the attack on a Russian double agent in UK, military brinkmanship now stands extended to the Middle East by the United States, France and British strikes on alleged chemical warfare strikes in Syria.

Conceding that these air strikes were a 'managed show' as media speculates, what has to be borne in mind is that in such a surcharged and explosive environment even an insignificant spark can ignite a larger military conflagration. In any case India does need for some quick thinking and contingency planning in such an uncertain emerging situation.

In tandem and but earlier to the above was Israeli air strikes in Syria on locations where Israel claimed that Iranian military personnel were

present. Russia has warned Israel about any future strikes against Syria.

All of the above raises pertinent questions as to which is the intended target of the United States & West and Israel, in this conflict escalation in the Middle East?

Analytically, it can be asserted that the real target of the United States & West accompanied by Israel is Iran and its nuclear weapons capability. Syria is only a pretext for signalling to Iran that United States and West with Israel in tow could launch strikes against Iran also.

Geopolitically, Russia and Iran have managed to establish their influence and presence in the entire Northern Tier of the Middle East. This is strategically intolerable for the United States & West and Israel. Russia and Iran with Iranian Shia militias in tow in US perceptions sits menacingly over the Middle East.

Russian President had asserted that if military strikes are launched on Syria, then Russia too would be forced to retaliate with military strikes. At the time of writing the Middle East situation is pregnant with uncertainty about the nature and extent of Russian responses to United States military provocations.

Whatever be the geopolitical and military contours that ultimately emerge from this conflictual confrontation, India's foreign policy would be faced with serious challenges either way.

India would have to face two sets of foreign policy challenges to its existing planning templates. The first and higher plane challenging India would be India's policy stances on the possible military showdown between the United States and Russia. The second challenge would be in relation to India's responses to further attacks on Syria and more significantly India's stances in a Middle East conflagration where India has managed to have good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In terms of the United States-Russia context the picture in 2018 is that India has emerged as a virtual natural ally of the United States. There is now a predominant strategic and military convergence between USA and India. But this is in relation to China and the China Threat to Indo Pacific Asia. Russia does not figure as a threat in India's military threat perceptions.

Russia has not taken kindly to India moving away from its orbit and hence it's geopolitical signalling to India by pivoting to Pakistan and sidelining India in Afghanistan in conjunction with China and Pakistan.

Where will India stand if United States and Russia get locked in a military confrontation in the Middle East with spill over effects in contiguous regions including India?

Any United States military showdown between USA and Russia in Middle East will bring into play the need for transit, military refuelling and

logistics backup from Indo Pacific countries. With India now tied to USA via various Logistics Memorandums, would India oblige the United States? Can India adopt a neutral stand in the conflict with all the negative implications for the future of the US-India Strategic Partnership?

In the Middle East, India has legitimate security interests besides economic ones. To this end, PM Modi has adroitly managed and furthered India's relationships with the rival contending regional powers, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In the event of a military showdown between the United States and Russia ultimately centred on Iran and in which US traditional allies in the Middle East like Saudi Arabia & UAE join in military actions against Iran, India would be in a very difficult position in terms of foreign policy choices.

India would also have to factor-in in such a conflictual eventuality the strategic choices and policy stances that China adopts? China cannot follow its habitual policy in the United States of "Abstaining" when Russia or the United States use their vetoes in Security Council. If China does not side with Russia in the event of a military showdown with the United States, China might as well write off the Russia –China Special Strategic Nexus.

If China decidedly backs Russia in the military showdown with United States then China would be obliged to reduce US & West military pressures on Russia by creating military tensions on its Indo Pacific peripheries. That would seriously impact India.

Russia has warned that US strikes on Syria would not go 'unpunished'. Russia has to decide whether its responses in support of Syria should be geographically be limited to Syria only or widen the conflict into the European Theatre from its predominance in Ukraine and Crimea? It is European nations which have clamoured most for strikes on Syria with exception of Germany which refused to join in US-led strikes on Syria.

Russia could militarily make things very difficult for the 2,000 US Troops aiding rebels in Syria. It could go in for a vigorous drive to restore Syrian rebel's strongholds to Syrian control. It could support the Kurds to make things difficult for Turkey supporting US strikes for its own reasons notwithstanding its strained relations with the US.

Russia along with Iran which is the real intended target of United States and Israel could create military turbulence on Israeli borders through the various Shia militias. Both Russia and Iran have sizeable Cyber Warfare capabilities and these can be brought into play against United States and Allies in a big way.

Above all the United States should not forget that if Iran or its influence in the Northern tier of the Middle East is the target then Iran has a call on the Shia majorities in all the Gulf States monarchies setting The Gulf ablaze. Shias embrace martyrdom willingly as opposed to Sunni Muslims. Iran therefore has considerable leverage in the Region through sizeable Shia demographic predominance.

No wonder that the United States, France and UK after the strikes have made it known publicly that neither Syria was the target, nor were the strikes an attempt for a regime change in Syria. The strikes were aimed to deter Syria from alleged farther chemical strikes.

So what are India's range of options available to the Indian foreign policy establishment should the ongoing military confrontation /strikes spiral out of controlled escalation into an armed conflict between United States & West and Russia with China as an active or a sleeping partner aiding Russia in multiple ways?

Non-Alignment:2 is decidedly not an option for India in 2018. India was never ever neutral in the hey-day of the Non Alignment years. India's current responses of advising restraint on both sides not to go in for further escalation is only a meek response to a challenging situation not befitting a regional power aspiring to be a leading global player. Nor is India well placed geopolitically with strategic weight to play the role of a mediator.

India's foreign policy challenge is to work out matching responses and contingency planning for each upward notch in the escalatory ladder of conflict that United States and Russia climb, since for either side blinking is unlikely.

In this process of contingency planning in India's Foreign Ministry the assessments and perspectives of its military hierarchy is an inescapable imperative. Foreign policy is not an exclusive political domain of diplomats. In 2018 and beyond foreign policy has emerged as an integrated politico-military game.

Should the current military escalation between the United States & West with Russia or with China added spiral out of control into a World War III conflagration, then the Indian foreign policy establishment may have to revise and reset the very premises of its current foreign policy templates.

India may have to dispense with its membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS grouping. India has yet not reached the stage of standing strategically alone and strong. Therefore, it cannot be a member of any decidedly anti-American groupings.

Yet another dimension which Indian Foreign Ministry has to assess and factor-in into its formulations is Pakistan's stance in such an eventuality? Would Pakistan cling to the China-Pakistan Axis and the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral? Or, would Pakistan display its propensity to 'swing' to the more powerful side? Meaning, that it re-throws its lot with the United States.

In the event of the former the Indian security establishment would have a serious challenge of military tensions resembling a 'Two-Front War' scenario.

Concluding, what comes to the fore is that the challenges for the Indian foreign policy establishment are many and serious, the imponderables restricting space for predictive templates too little with no foreign policy manoeuvrable space. In the ultimate scenario, India would be confronted with a strategic cross-roads scenario where it has to firmly decide as to which side its geopolitical weight has to be added.

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