

War in Ukraine — Why India Won't Take Sides

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When it comes to the war in Ukraine, New Delhi is sticking to diplomatic neutrality.

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Photo (not reproduced here). Placard "Down with American Russian Imperialism: Activists of Socialist Unity Center of India (Communist) during a protest against Russian invasion on Ukraine, in Ahmedabad, India, on 26 February 2022. On the day before, India refrained from voting at the United Nations General Assembly that would have meant altering its ties with Russia spanning over seven decades.

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS

India's neutral stance vis-à-vis the Russian aggression in Ukraine has puzzled many in the West. India was taken aback by the Russian invasion, but both in the Security Council as well as the United Nations General Assembly, India repeatedly abstained from voting on resolutions that condemned Russia for its military incursion.

The narrative offered by Indian officials expresses concern for Russia's "legitimate security interests" regarding NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe. This position was further underlined when India's Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar [\[1\]](#), affirmed that the country respected territorial integrity, national sovereignty, international law, a cessation of hostilities, and a return to diplomacy — but would continue to abstain from taking a position on the conflict, guided as it was by its own national interests.

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The Benefits of Neutrality

India's diplomatic neutrality is the product of cold calculations. India sources about 60 percent of its defence needs from Russia, a relationship that has remained more or less uninterrupted since the 1960s. This includes technology transfers, collaborations on defence production, and export of military hardware to other countries in the Global South. Notwithstanding the US sanctions on India's nuclear power programme, Russia has collaborated with and supported India in the construction of nuclear power plants since the 1990s.

Following pressure from the US, India diversified its defence imports portfolio, which may now be affected by the latest sanctions on Russia. Currently, India is using its purchasing capacity from the West to circumvent US legislation like the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CATSA). India would most likely seek exemptions from sanctions in return for material benefits from the Western arms industry. However, the full range of implications and alternatives available is still under examination, and it is quite likely that Russia will continue to dominate this sector in the near future.

As an energy-needy country, India seeks to keep the option of buying hydrocarbons from Russia at competitive rates open. Arguing that oil and gas were exempt from the sanctions, India continued to buy oil at discounted prices from Russia even after the war began. Moreover, India procures its fertilizer supplies from Russia without sanctions.

Although Russian hydrocarbon exports constitute not more than 1 percent of India's energy needs, and the country remains highly dependent on global energy supply chains from OPEC countries (52 percent), Africa, or the US (14 percent), India's consortium of state and private gas companies have invested a significant 10 billion US dollars in Siberian and other oil fields. These oil imports are likely to increase in the near future. Additionally, a direct maritime route between Vladivostok in the Russian Far East and Chennai on India's eastern seaboard is in the offing. A memorandum of intent has been signed seeking cooperation on not only energy but also forestry, agriculture, and manpower resources.

A significant conversation over the last few years has been around the revival of the rupee-rouble trade. Used during the Cold War, this system helped India to deal with its dollar reserves issue and at the same time alleviated Russia's isolation from the dollar zone. The rupee-rouble trade collapsed with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and it took several years for the two countries to work out a mutually favourable rate of exchange so that the roubles held by India could be utilized.

In the past few years, proposals have been examined and trials made on increasing the rupee-rouble route for payments in order to eliminate dependency on the US dollar. For example, in 2018 India inked a deal with Russia to purchase their S-400 missiles, which will become the backbone of India's air defence system, in rupees. The delivery of these will begin in 2023. This also cements the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India China, South Africa) mechanisms and the proposal put forward by its New Development Bank that 50 percent of trade between BRICS countries should be based on local currencies.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which India, China, Russia, and several Central Asian states are members, has issued a similar proposal concerning the use of local currencies. Although India's use of the rupee-rouble route has been questioned by the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his undersecretary Victoria Nuland, it appears that India will try to keep its dollar reserves high while working on the rouble and alternate currency exchange routes.

Geopolitically, Russia has positioned itself as India's reliable partner, especially relating to India's strategy around the unresolved border disputes with neighbouring countries China and Pakistan. In situations of border tension and incursions into India by the two neighbours, Russia has always supported India by providing military hardware, mediation support, and even offering diplomatic pressure on China. The US, on the other hand, is seen as an ally of Pakistan.

India has suffered multiple terror attacks in the last few decades. Most of these acts of terrorism have been linked with the Kashmiri separatist movement, with Pakistan seen as providing shelter to terrorist groups. Many of these terror groups have their base in Pakistan and claimed responsibility for these attacks. The general perception in India is that the Pakistani army sheltered and provided

material support to fundamentalist terror groups. The US alliance with Pakistan, especially during its “War on Terror”, is resented in public opinion and in policy circles, where many believe that the US failed to put sufficient pressure on fundamentalist and terrorist forces in Pakistan.

Such perceptions account for the consensus behind Indian foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia and the US: the Indian Left opposes US hegemony, while the Right opposes its support for Pakistan. There are no such conflicts of interests in the case of Russia for either side.

Shifting Geopolitical Tides

Although India began prioritize relations with the US over the last two decades, especially following the adoption of neoliberal policies, so far these have not been at the cost of strategic relations with Russia. The moves have primarily been by India to maintain its strategic autonomy through increased defence capabilities, even while an increase in trade and import of defence equipment from the West is taking place.

For example, the US and India recently signed agreements on geo-spatial cooperation under the Narendra Modi-led BJP government. These agreements had been pending for nearly a decade-and-a-half under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, where the Left parties of India who were part of the coalition played a strong role in opposing close ties with the US.

In general, there has been minimal outright public condemnation of the war on Ukraine by Indian political parties. Even two of the Indian Left parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, support neutrality, as is evident from their public statements. They view Russian aggression as a consequence of NATO expansion and a proxy war in which Ukraine is a victim.

The Indian Left has critiqued India’s growing relationship with the US over the past two decades, even as they acknowledge that Russia and China are steeped in globalized capitalism. In effect, the Indian Left is supporting the current right-wing government, welcoming neutrality as a step back from the tilt towards the US and NATO camp. Yet another Indian Left party, the CPI (Marxist-Leninist), has taken a stronger position of supporting the Ukrainian resistance.

In the case of Indian military strategists, only a handful hold a similar view as that of the Left parties, namely that the war is a “proxy war” between the US and Russia, fearing that once Russia is tied up in a long and debilitating war in Ukraine, the US will seek to target China in an escalating competition between the great powers. In light of this, the overwhelming majority of the Indian political class and elite is in favour of maintaining neutrality.

India is caught between a rock and a hard place. Ties with China have deteriorated in the past few years, especially now that China’s territorial claims in India’s northeastern territory have led to skirmishes along the border and tensions in the Indian Ocean. China also sees India joining the Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) with the US, Australia, and Japan as a hostile act. The recent deepening of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership and China taking a strong stance against the resolutions in the UN General Assembly, thus implying Russia’s dependence on China, may create a situation in which Russia chooses to prioritize China over India.

It is this fear that the US is now exploiting to push India to abandon neutrality. It would appear, however, that India wants to resolve its border issues with Pakistan and China without the use of force and without becoming part of any military alliance. In the same vein, India views China independently from the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia has repeatedly assured India that its

ties with China would not go against Indian interests.

A complete geostrategic shift by India appears unlikely, especially given the political consensus behind Indian positions. As a former colonized country, India — unlike Eastern European countries — does not see Russia as a colonizer or a threat to its freedom. In fact, India has historically gained from its position of non-alignment, which allowed it to navigate between both sides of the Cold War.

Currently, India believes that it can have harmonious relations with the US, EU, and Russia, and thereby can act as a bridge between these powers. India remains committed to constructing a multipolar world — a unipolar world with US primacy, or even a bipolar world with great power competition between the US on one side and Russia and China on the other, does not suit India's emerging power ambitions. To this end, India will deepen relations with the US, Russia, the EU, and others. At the same time, India does not want to see Russia diminished.

India is part of several regional and plurilateral groupings, for which they need strategic autonomy. Neutrality is in keeping with these engagements and in line with a return to diplomacy. Recently, India has articulated that neutrality does not justify Russian actions, and its message for ending this war has been communicated to President Putin.

Can India Be a Mediator?

Much of the Global South has adopted a position of neutrality for similar reasons as India. The majority of developing countries have condemned the Russian invasion, called for peace and diplomacy, and spoken of the need for inclusive security while also opposing sanctions. Many of these countries have witnessed US interventions or sanctions in their own regions, along with the discrepancies between narratives and consequences for the protagonists. Public memory of US interventions in Asia remain vivid.

The countries of the Global South would like to balance between the US, Europe, China, and Russia, and not engage in any great power rivalry nor join military blocs and alliances. These countries see a transition happening in the global system and the beginning of a period of de-globalization. They see the importance and benefits of regionalism.

India is in a comparatively good position to be a mediator in the war between Russia and Ukraine because it has the confidence of several of the major powers involved: Russia, the US, and the EU. Unlike China, which does not share “harmonious” relations with the US, the US does not see India as a competitor for global hegemony.

Of the number of high-profile Western leaders who have met with the Indian prime minister since the war began, all of whom asked India to take a firm position against the war, the clearest position was enunciated by Denmark's prime minister, who asked India to use its “influence on Russia” to end the war. There is, however, a difference between “influence” and “mediation”. Mediation in this complex and multi-layered war can only be done with massive political will of all parties involved.

India's neutrality leads it to conclude that, on the one hand, there are parties who are arming this war, of which some have openly stated that Russia must be weakened by it. On the other hand, Russia has gone too far to withdraw without some security guarantees. India can only call for immediate ceasefire and diplomacy, but will not be able to mediate since it cannot secure guarantees for any side.

In effect, India's neutrality in the war in Ukraine bases itself on a realist foreign policy in which a

cost-benefit analysis shows that India needs both partnership with Russia as well as a growing strategic relationship with the US, EU, and others. India will probably retain this position during this period of international transition, de-globalization, and uncertainty.

Mediation will thus have to come from a collective institutional body — whether the UN, the OSCE, or some special group of which India can also be part of. However, so far there has been no such effort, while several attempts at influencing Russia by states like Turkey and Israel have proven unsuccessful. Motivated by a combination of historical experience, current security, development challenges, and regime stability, India has yet to make such an effort on its own.

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P.S.

- Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung. :
<https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/46494/why-india-wont-take-sides?fbclid=IwAR2KsxO26t8edXX18ES4sb0I4gZxu5dljL3K52QdWoO-BcmNatjClce7g2U>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/less-than-1-of-indias-oil-imports-is-from-russia-foreign-minister-s-jaishankar-amid-ukraine-war-2840421>