

Walking a Tightrope on Ukraine: How India Is Balancing Ties to Russia & United States

Tuesday 11 October 2022, by [GOODMAN Amy](#), [KRISHNAN Kavita](#), [SHAIKH Nermeen](#) (Date first published: 6 October 2022).

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during a phone call on Tuesday that he will help peace efforts with Russia, just days after India abstained from a United Nations vote condemning the Russian annexation of four regions in Ukraine. We speak to the prominent Indian activist Kavita Krishnan about the different stances of India's political parties toward the war in Ukraine and the interrelated struggles against authoritarianism in countries such as Iran and India. India's foreign policy is currently like "walking a tightrope," says Krishnan. "It would like to have a relationship with Russia. At the same time, it wants to build a bridge with America."

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, with Nermeen Shaikh, as we turn now to look at Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with a focus on India's response.

On Tuesday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke by phone with the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky. Modi's office released a statement saying, quote, "He expressed his firm conviction that there can be no military solution to the conflict and conveyed India's readiness to contribute to any peace efforts," unquote. This came just days after India joined China, Gabon and Brazil in abstaining from a vote at the U.N. Security Council condemning Moscow's annexation of four regions in Ukraine. Last month, Modi told Russia President Vladimir Putin that today's era is not one for war. Modi's remarks at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Uzbekistan were widely interpreted as criticism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But despite Modi's comments, India has seen its economic ties to Russia grow since the February invasion. India now imports about 750,000 barrels of oil from Russia per day. That's up from about 20,000 barrels a day a year ago.

Joining us is Kavita Krishnan. She is a prominent feminist activist, recently stepped down from her leadership position of the Communist Party of India in opposition to the party's stance on the war in Ukraine.

Why don't we begin right there, Kavita? And welcome back to Democracy Now! It's great to have you with us. Talk about why you stepped down and what India's position is and what the Communist Party's position is. You're a longtime Marxist-Leninist feminist.

KAVITA KRISHNAN: That's right. I think that across various ideological spectrums in India, there is a lot of misinformation about the war, about Russia's invasion, and therefore, a lot of sympathy for Russia rather than for Ukraine. The vast majority of Indians and Indian political formations do not see Ukraine, do not acknowledge Ukraine as such. They have an old relationship with the Soviet Union, and they see Ukraine as sort of — vaguely some sort of satellite of Russia. So, I think that that is a more general problem.

But on the left, I think the problem is much more acute. In India, you have a far right which is

ideologically aligned with Putin's project. You have posters put up in support of Russia's invasion by Hindu supremacists in the center of Delhi, saying that, you know, Putin will achieve a reorganization of the Soviet Union; you know, he will put together the Russian empire again, the way that we want to put together an Indian empire, an undivided India, which includes India and all its neighbors as part of India. That's the far-right position. But the left position — the party I left was the CPIML. CPI and CPIM, these are parties which have a much more openly pro-Putin position. They are openly pro-Putin. They openly look forward to a relationship growing between Russia and China. CPIML officially says that it is in solidarity with Ukraine. But having said that, it undermines a whole lot of that by contributing to spreading many elements of Putin propaganda — namely, referring to the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine as a U.S.-backed coup, referring to — you know, exaggerating the presence of neo-Nazis and Nazis in Ukraine, not acknowledging the extent of danger that Russia's fascist and imperialist project presents to the world.

And I think, above all, the main problem there lies in the sentence that I can quote from a recent write-up by the general secretary of the CPIML. It says, "Regardless of the internal character of competing global powers, a multipolar world is certainly more advantageous to progressive forces and movements," and so on. Now, the idea — that means that, you know, the idea that you must support those poles in the world that are seen as a challenge to America, which is the only country recognized as imperialist, and that all other poles, even if they comprise fascists and authoritarians, like Putin or Modi or Bolsonaro or Xi, that, some way or the other, we have to be softer on those leaders, those regimes; we must temper our solidarity to the movements against those regimes; we must ration out our solidarities, because it is our job to somehow maintain this balance of power. So, this kind of realist rhetoric and realist ideological corruption of Marxism is, I think, what troubles me very deeply right now.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: And, Kavita, just on that question of supporting what might be or is developing into a more multilateral global frame, there have been many who have expressed hope in the economic alliance of BRICS — that is, of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

KAVITA KRISHNAN: Yeah.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: What is your response to that? I mean, together, they constitute 41% of the world population, 24% of world GDP and over 60% share in world trade.

KAVITA KRISHNAN: You see, when it comes to economic cooperation, why not? But I think that the celebration of BRICS as some sort of multipolar regionalism and so on — I saw the [interview](#) on *Democracy Now!* with Vijay Prashad, for instance — I find that deeply disturbing, because, for me, whether it's West or East, the main thing that should concern us now are the struggles against authoritarianisms inside of various countries. Whether it's America, whether it's the U.K. in the Brexit context, whether it's Trump in America, whether it's Putin in Russia, whether it's Modi in India, and so on and so forth, you have struggles for democracy against deeply authoritarian and fascist forces. And we should be talking about how to strengthen those forces.

Instead of that, if you have a sort of a blind and vulgar sort of economic framework in which you look at the world, and you start celebrating BRICS in itself or as of itself as some kind of democratic anti-imperialism, I think that is pretty dangerous, because you're not looking at the politics of China, the politics of Russia, the politics of Brazil, the politics of India. China, for instance, in the region in which — you know, India is of course and right now ruled by an openly Hindu supremacist, Islamophobic government. Likewise, China is a country which is a model of authoritarianism, from which India's regime, too, is taking notes and learning. It is openly Islamophobic in its actions towards putting Uyghur Muslims in concentration camps. It is backing, funding the Myanmar military, which is doing genocide against the Rohingya people. Surely these are things that at least

the left ought to address, ought to mention, ought to recognize.

Likewise, I find that large portions of the left do not even mention Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The [interview](#) with Vijay Prashad on *Democracy Now!*, for instance, he makes no mention of the word "invasion." So, it's as though there is some shadow war going on somewhere on some other planet between Russia and the West, you know, where there's no mention of Russia's having invaded Ukraine, and refuse to recognize it and wanting to wipe it off of the surface of the Earth. So, that is what I find deeply disturbing, and, you know, for the prospects of the left, as well as for the prospects of democracy in our world.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Kavita, could you speak specifically about what India's interests are now? I mean, obviously, as you pointed out earlier, India has a historic relationship — despite being part of the Non-Aligned Movement, they were more allied with the Soviet Union during the Cold War than with the U.S. But now we just reported earlier that OPEC, for example, OPEC Plus, have decided to cut oil production by 2 [million] barrels a day. Critics say that this will increase profits for Russia, because they are one of the oil exporters, and the less oil there is, the higher prices will remain. India is one of the main importers of Russian oil. Could you talk about some of the other links between the two?

KAVITA KRISHNAN: Well, India is one of the biggest exporters [sic] of arms from Russia. A bulk of the arms that India buys —

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Importer of arms.

KAVITA KRISHNAN: Importer, importer. Sorry, I meant importer, the biggest importer of arms from Russia. It is one of — Russia is one of its main suppliers of arms. And I think that, apart from that, you know, even when the war is going on, India recently held military exercises with Russia and China at Russia's behest. And it has — India, of course, also tries to very firmly position itself with America as part of its foreign policy position. So, it's actually walking a tightrope. It would like to enhance its relationship with Russia; at the same time, it would not like to burn its bridges with America.

So what you see India doing, that conversation you mentioned between Modi and Zelensky, and the earlier conversation between Modi and Putin, where he said, oh, you know, today is not the time for war, and so on and so forth, I think that you have to balance these words and their rather empty symbolism with India's actual actions. So, India's actions have been — on the floor of the U.N., have been to abstain from the earlier condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and now again on the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian territories.

And I think that we also have to keep in mind this ideological — you know, we should be paying much more attention here in India and in the world to the fact that the language Putin's last speech spoke, about this rise of civilizational powers, which basically should have domination in the world rather than liberal democracy and LGBTQ rights and so on, which he associates with Western countries alone and Western power, Western hegemony, I think that is a dangerous rhetoric that finds a resonance even in Hindu supremacist organizations in India, as well as, you know, even in other — you know, even in China, for instance. The idea that human rights or LGBTQ rights or feminism are basically Western ideas and they have nothing to do — that they should not dominate the world, that is something challenged, of course, by the feminist protests you see in Iran or India or so many other places in the world, right? You see that people in all these countries, in the Global South, as well, want democracy. But according to this ideology that Putin, that Hindu supremacists in India, that China's CPC — that the kind of ideology that they are presenting now is that all these ideas represent Western domination and Western concepts of democracy, to which we need not be

answerable. So, I think that that is something extremely dangerous that we need to pay attention to.

AMY GOODMAN: You have talked about Russia as really a center of the far right globally. If you could explain what you mean? That might surprise many.

KAVITA KRISHNAN: Well, I think that the relationship between Russia and the campaign for Brexit, between Russia and Donald Trump, you know, financial relationships as well as other political relationships, I think that those are pretty much well known by now. But I think that to dismiss talk of these as some kind of Russophobia, or whatever it is, would be wrong. I think that we do need to pay attention to the fact that Russia is trying to set itself up as this far-right kind of rallying center.

I think that in India, however, things are somewhat different. The Indian far right, the Indian Hindu supremacist movement, has its own kinds of resources and its own — its own world. But there's no doubt that for a very long time the Russian far right, Russian fascists like Dugin, have cultivated the far right in India. Dugin, in a 2019 article, specifically refers to Narendra Modi's election in 2019, his second election, as the rise of civilizational identity in India. This is identical with the language used by the RSS ideologue Ram Madhav in his article in The Indian Express in 2017, where he said that the genius of India lies in these civilizational values of caste and religion, and so on and so forth, and that, again, he says — he said there that the ideas of Western liberal democracy are imposed on India by Nehru, and that Modi's government is the first government in Indian history which is genuinely in touch with Indian values. So, I think that these relationships — in that article in 2019, Dugin quoted Dattopant Thengadi, who was an RSS leader, the leader of the Hindu supremacist organization to which Modi belongs. So, I see these —

AMY GOODMAN: We have 10 seconds, Kavita.

KAVITA KRISHNAN: Yes, yes. I see these ideological relations as extremely important to pay attention to. And I think that all over the world, no matter which country you live in, supporting each other's struggles for democracy against authoritarianism and fascism, these are absolutely the most important, far more important than some kind of geopolitical balancing act.

AMY GOODMAN: We have to leave it there. Kavita Krishnan, prominent feminist activist in India, stepped down from her leadership position in the Communist Party of India, speaking to us from Balai, India.

I'll be speaking at Brown University in [Providence](#) today at 4:00. All are welcome, at Pembroke Hall. I'm Amy Goodman, with Nermeen Shaikh.

Amy Goodman
Nermeen Shaikh
Kavita Krishnan

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