

India's Positive Neutralism in the wake of current Russia-Ukraine Crisis

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Introduction

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine did not develop in a vacuum. Its history dates back to 1700s when most of the Ukrainian territory was a part of the Russian empire under the rule of Catherine the Great.¹ Fast forward to 1991, towards the disintegration of Soviet Union, Ukraine declared its independence after 70 years of being under Moscow's control. After a decade later, Russian President Vladimir Putin took power. Since then, he has been trying to reclaim Ukraine, assertively claiming it to be a part of Russia.² Ukraine throughout its history has gone through dramatic events, the consequences of which mostly began appearing when the country underwent the Revolution of Dignity, i.e., commonly known as the Euromaidan Revolution.³ The revolution was later on followed by the invasion of Crimea. In 2014, Putin began sending unidentified armed men to take over Crimean airports in order to claim Ukraine as part for Russia.⁴ His tactics triumphed due to the presence of pro-Russian elements in Ukraine.

Since the invasion of Crimea, the Russian and the Western political situation has been trapped in a confrontation that according to some observers is a beginning of a *new* Cold War. Apparently, it was the West's continued social engineering in Ukraine that led to the invasion of Crimea. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis that has seemingly revealed the geopolitics of big nations in the twenty-first century, can be seen in concurrence of the afore-mentioned. The escalation of the current crisis was the result of Ukraine's tilt towards the West and its aspirations to join NATO, which Russia apparently perceived as Western encroachment into its sphere of influence.⁵ In any case, the Russian aggression against Ukraine was opposed and deemed unacceptable by several countries. During an *emergency* UN General Assembly vote, to condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine, the draft of the resolution won support from 141 countries including three of the UNSC members, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. The draft was vetoed by five countries including Belarus, Syria, and predictably, the Russian Federation, and was abstained by thirty five countries including China, Iran, Pakistan, and India.⁶

Among the aforementioned, India notably stands out as the country that constitutes a greater role in balancing the pendulum of its relations with the West and Russia all at once. On one hand, India wants to stay intact with its historically Russia, but on the contrary, it does not want to lose its symbiotic relation with the West, which is its most effective pawn in counterbalancing China. Thus, India's choice of abstaining and adopting a posture of non-alignment is a strategic one because eventually, abstaining does not offend either of the sides. This paper discusses India's non-alignment policy in the context of Russia-Ukraine Crisis and also sheds light on how India continues to struggle to strike a balance in its relations *vis a vis* Russia and the United States.

India's Strategic Autonomy

India adopted non-alignment policy in 1947 after its independence from the British Raj. After fighting the colonial rule for almost two centuries, Indian nationalists were reluctant to cede their independence again to the champions of global politics. Thus, instead of indulging into the great geopolitics of communist and capitalist blocs, India decided to opt for non-alignment. The policy of Non-alignment has hence, always remained close to the Indian policy-makers as an attempt to drive India's foreign and strategic policy. The policy itself is based on three important features, i.e., to mark the opportunities that India could avail in the international sphere, to identify the incoming challenges and threats and, to identify the approaches that would further enhance its strategic autonomy in years to come.⁷

Previously, India's non-alignment in the Cold War era was more inclined towards securing its strategic autonomy in the world politics but with the shifting world dynamics, non-alignment 2.0 took the centre stage. It defined the dynamics of India's internal and external growth through an interlinked lens. In short, non-alignment 2.0 made it evident that India's external alliances and its internal growth were mutually inclusive. It is noteworthy that this terminological alteration did not really entail a redefinition of the dedicated Indian goal, i.e., its international policy of strategy autonomy. However, it did consequentially enhance India's direction in accordance to the requisites of the twenty-first century. As

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of today, India's position is projected as a rising economy, which gives it an advantage of a great player in navigating diplomacy around crises.

Similarly, in the ongoing Russian-Ukraine crisis, India's cautious posturing visibly defines its policy of strategic autonomy. Unlike during the Russian invasion of Crimea, India refrained from expressing any allegiances with either side during the recent episode of Russia-Ukraine crisis. In 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea, India refused to condemn the aggression, rather it recognised Russia's interest in Ukraine as legitimate.⁸ In recent times, it has adopted a more balanced and a nuanced approach. On one side, it won Putin's interest by abstaining to vote in the UN against Russia and on the other hand, it called for "Cessation of Violence" in a conversation with Volodymyr Zelensky and thanked him for his facilitation to safely evacuate 20,000 Indian students.⁹ This strategic balancing of India's relations along with its overly cautious posture has revealed two things. One, India's foreign policy goals are aimed at securing its strategic autonomy. Second, India can and will never choose to compromise its deep-rooted ties and vested interests in Russia.

India's deep-rooted ties with Russia

To understand the Indian stance on Ukraine war is complex, as India and Russia have been long-locked in a strategic partnership. Their historic relationship is built on mutual trust and respect and can be traced through their deep-rooted cooperation in energy, diplomacy, and mainly military.¹⁰ As of today, India ostensibly stands as the largest democracy yet it has been reluctant in criticising Russian aggression against Ukraine. This reluctance stems from the latter's multi-billion-dollar investment in the Indian military. At present, Russia is the largest arm supplier to India.¹¹ The latter is dependent on Russia for advanced weapon systems and continues its reliance for maintenance, spare parts, and miscellaneous support for the existing weaponry. Although, during the last two decades, India had already begun diversifying its options for arms purchases but moving away from Russia completely is a critical choice because the Russian weapons are comparatively cheaper from its western counterparts which makes Russia a preferable source for purchase.¹² As per Majari Chatterjee Miller, Senior fellow for India, Pakistan and South Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR):

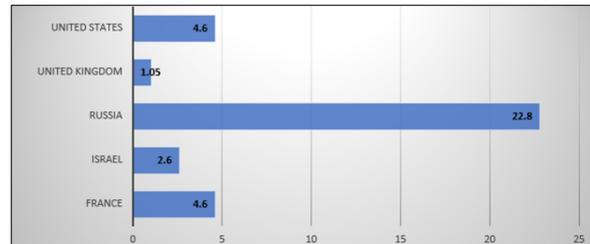
"Despite efforts of diversification, India's military hardware is still almost 70 per cent Russian."¹³

Similarly, between 2011 and 2021, India's gross imports from Russia stood at US\$5 billion which is more than what it was in the previous decade (i.e., 2001 to

2011).¹⁴ As per the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, Russia's share in India's imports is higher as compared to four other major Indian suppliers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

SIPRI Arms Transfer Database¹⁵



Nevertheless, due to increased international pressure, the Indian government is planning to reduce its dependency on Russian arms by boosting its domestic production. However, currently, it seems nearly impossible for India to achieve the materialisation of such a decision. Additionally, besides the military dependency, there are other factors as well which justify India's muted criticism on the crisis. Its growing concerns are mainly rooted in China and Pakistan, i.e., the two countries which it sees as an immediate threat. India thus, wants to minimise Moscow's growing proximity towards its arch-rivals. Similarly, its relations with the West is also at stake while it steers away from the Western stance and rather beholds an independent one—benefitting its own national interests.

Walking a Diplomatic Tightrope

Since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, Russia has been facing international pressure over its unwarranted actions in Ukraine. Most of Europe, the US and other countries including the UK, Japan, and Australia have condemned and imposed multiple sanctions on Russia in order to choke key areas of its economy.¹⁶ The United States is currently seeking support beyond Europe and NATO to its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also referred to as QUAD) partners in the Indo-Pacific to broaden its efforts against the Russian aggression. During a virtual QUAD meeting, the US, Japan, and Australia urged India to adopt a consensus in condemning Russia over its actions. In response, India presented its stance by taking a neutral position instead of public condemnation due to the perils of its interests in Russia. Despite having sent humanitarian assistance to Ukraine¹⁷ it remained firm on its viewpoint, i.e., "...the need to return to a path of dialogue and diplomacy"¹⁸ which is in fact a euphemism for 'securing India's core national interests.' India's response was further accentuated after Subrahmanyam

Jaishankar, Indian External Affairs Minister insisted that QUAD's geographical focus was Indo-Pacific and that:

"It must remain focused on its core objective of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region." India's silence on Russia's actions followed by the pressure from QUAD has made the current global political situation delicate for New Delhi. It is walking a diplomatic tightrope in balancing its strategic partnership with Washington and protecting its historic defence ties with Moscow. At present, the looming threat to India is the response from its US counterparts for its decision to purchase S-400 systems from Russia.¹⁹ Its stance might jeopardise Washington's bipartisan backing for New Delhi's growth, and could even lead to pressures to sanction India under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). However, some senior officials from the Biden administration observe and understand that India's current stance on Russia is tied to its historic relations.²⁰ Nevertheless, India's reluctance to overtly chastise Russia will make it harder for working-level Biden administration to assemble the internal support required to obtain an Indian CAATSA waiver. Thus, India has found itself in a dilemma where deepening global crises are threatening—one, its strategic relations with the West and two, its historic military ties with Russia. At present, India is playing smart using the 'duck and weave' tactic but its struggle to balance ties will come off as an increasingly difficult task and could mount differences on the either sides, especially with the United States.

Conclusion

Russian attack against Ukraine has not only sent down shockwaves around the world but has also put foreign policy of many countries in the limelight. At the moment, India's position is marked by delicacy because its response came off as distinctive among the major

democracies and especially among the major US allies. New Delhi's neutrality stemmed from its diplomatic history, based on its long-held policy of strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, India's current positioning has visibly demonstrated its multi-alignment strategy, in which it is able to retain strategic autonomy over its actions while prioritising its interests. Additionally, if the conflict continues, India's position will come under increased pressure from the US and its allies as the US views India as a strategic pawn in countering China.

In any case, it is important that New Delhi draws proper lessons from this crisis and takes necessary steps to protect its interests. In this regard, it is important to note two things. First, it is critical to maintain and protect the standards of sovereignty and territorial integrity. As the current Indian stance might harm its reputation as a democratic republic and jeopardise its relations with other liberal democracies, especially with its key ally, the United States. Thus, the need of time is to adopt a more principled/moral approach that would anchor Indian government's viewpoint to take a clearer posture with regards to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Secondly, this crisis should convince India to reduce its dependence on Russian arms. The myriad reasons include but are not limited to low quality of Russian arms and equipment,²¹ followed by severe sanctions on Russia that could leave New Delhi exposed and vulnerable. The sanctions on Russia can delay military supplies and armaments from Moscow²² and could also have an impact on the ongoing projects to upgrade the existing systems.²³ Thus, India would need to diversify its defence purchases in order to escape itself from falling into a quagmire. In any case, Russia-Ukraine crisis has put India in a critical situation where escaping is not a solution. Thus, India needs to take pragmatic steps that do not upset either of the sides and maintains the credibility of its relations with both the US and Russia.

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