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India's Diplomatic Dilemma over Crimea

By Harshita Kohli

Synopsis

New Delhi's acknowledgement of Russia's "legitimate interests" in Crimea and the decision not to back US and EU sanctions against Moscow could have a ripple effect on the evolving Indo-US partnership and India's own stance over the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan.

Commentary

RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION of the Crimea on 18 March 2014 has caught India on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, New Delhi's decision not to back the sanctions levied by the United States and the European Union against Russia is in line with its policy of only supporting sanctions approved by the United Nations. This stance, however, could have adverse effects on India's relations with the US and EU.

On the other hand, taking an active stance against Russia could damage relations with a longstanding ally that has been a source of diplomatic support for India in the international arena, the major arms supplier for the Indian military and a source of technology transfers for decades.

Team Putin?

When the crisis in the Ukraine unfolded, the Ukrainian ambassador to India met with senior government officials and asked India to take a decisive stand against Russia. The silence from India was deafening; India's only action was to issue an advisory to Indians in the Ukraine to register with the Indian Embassy in Kiev.

However, on 6 March, India broke its silence only to take an ambiguous stance. At a briefing for the media, India's National Security Advisor (NSA) Shivshankar Menon publicly acknowledged that Russia had "legitimate interests" in Crimea. Menon's statement was interpreted as being pro-Russia. Yet on the same day, the Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement calling for a diplomatic resolution of the Russo-Ukraine crisis.

The situation became more complicated following the 16 March referendum in Crimea in which the population voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining the Russian Federation. Russian President Vladimir Putin singled out India and China for praise in his address to the Parliament two days later. Specifically, he thanked India for its "reserve and objectivity" towards Moscow. Shortly thereafter, Putin conversed with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during which he explained Russia's point of view on the Ukraine crisis.

As the US and EU ramped up their condemnation of Russia following the referendum, India issued yet another anodyne statement which failed to condemn Russia; instead, it pointed to the "close relationship and mutually

beneficial partnership between India and Russia". Subsequently, television and other media quoted government sources stating India will "not support any unilateral measures by a country or group of countries", adding that New Delhi is also likely to abstain from voting at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) session on Crimea if the resolution tabled by Ukraine is condemnatory of Russia. At the UNGA special meeting that took place on 27 March, India did abstain from voting even as the Ukrainian resolution received overwhelming support from other countries.

Choosing between partners

Given the shared history between the India and Russia, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's lack of condemnation of Putin's actions can be interpreted as tacit support. However, should the actions of the West intensify in an effort to isolate Moscow, India may need to choose between two of its most strategically important partners – Russia and the US.

Bilateral Indo-Russian ties are extensive. Traditionally, Moscow has backed New Delhi at critical junctures. It supported India in its war against Pakistan in 1971 when support from the US was not as forthcoming. Similarly, after India's nuclear tests in 1998, when other Western countries were vehemently criticising India, Moscow continued to engage with New Delhi. India has also witnessed a referendum similar to the one organised in Crimea when the state of Sikkim merged with India in 1975 after 98% of residents in Sikkim voted favourably for a merger with India. Moscow had explicitly supported the merger.

Currently, India is the world's largest arms importer and relies on Russia for 75 percent of its arms imports. Economically too, Russo-Indian trade is rapidly rising and there is significant Indian investment in Russian businesses. India and Russia have also signed a bilateral nuclear agreement that is worth billions of dollars.

With the US taking a firm stand against Russia, India's implicit support for Russia is likely to have an adverse effect on the Indo-US partnership which is already besieged with problems. Many US policymakers have banked on India to play a critical role in the rebalance efforts of the US in Asia. Continuing bureaucratic hurdles in both states restricting trade and investment, lack of progress on the civilian nuclear energy deal and, most recently, India's strong retaliation to the arrest of the Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade have led many to question whether the strategic bet on India will pay off.

India's decision to not condemn Moscow's annexation of Crimea is raising questions about the credibility of India's strategic alliance with the US and if India will ever let go its longstanding and increasingly anachronistic grand strategy of non-alignment that is ultimately proving detrimental to Indo-US ties.

Ripple effect

India's stance on Russia's annexation of Crimea is already causing problems for the government domestically. On the heels of the Crimean Referendum, The Hurriyat Conference - a coalition of Kashmiri political, social and religious organisations that want Kashmir to become independent or join Pakistan - released a statement urging the UN to help resolve the Kashmir dispute. The spokesperson for The Hurriyat Conference questioned "why the people of Kashmir are denied the right to determine their political future" when Crimea was given the right to self-determination to decide its future.

India's support for the Crimean referendum, will inevitably lead New Delhi down a path of controversy vis-à-vis Kashmir. Despite decades of unrest calling for independence or a merger with Pakistan, New Delhi has maintained that Kashmir will always remain a part of India. The Indian government would like the world and its own citizens to see its stance as neutral and one that is focused on achieving a peaceful resolution through diplomatic efforts.

It has tried to balance out its stand in the international arena by saying that principally New Delhi does not favour referendums and will not support a referendum as the only basis for breaking up a country.

However, the lack of any criticism by New Delhi on Russia's annexation of Crimea coupled with NSA Menon's statement acknowledging Russia's legitimacy and, most recently, reports of India's decision not to back Western sanctions suggest otherwise. It appears India has taken a stand which is leaning towards its old friend Russia.

Harshita Kohli is an Associate Research Fellow with the US Studies Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. She was previously a journalist based in Mumbai, India.