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India, Russia and the Ukraine Crisis

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Indian Prime Minister Modi in conversation with Russian President Putin. *The appearance of Government of India visual information does not imply or constitute Government of India endorsement.*

SYNOPSIS

India's overly cautious position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed the perils of its defence partnership with Russia. The lack of a decisive and principled position undermines its aspirations to be a leading power.

COMMENTARY

On 26 February, Russia conveyed its appreciation of India's "independent and balanced" position after India (along with China and the United Arab Emirates) abstained from the UN Security Council vote deploring Russian aggression in Ukraine. Amid widespread global condemnation of Russia's attack on Ukraine, India had issued an anodyne response calling for "immediate cessation of violence" and "diplomatic negotiations and dialogue".

India's reluctance to deplore Russia's actions in Ukraine brings a sense of *déjà vu*. Back in 2014, following Russia's intervention in Crimea, National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon raised eyebrows by saying that "there are legitimate Russian and other interests involved and we hope they are discussed and resolved" as India abstained from a UN General Assembly vote condemning the annexation of Crimea. Subsequently, President Pranab Mukherjee made a slight course correction in a media briefing, saying "we do not like the interference of a third country in the internal matters of any country" but India remained largely acquiescent to Russia's move. India's current guarded response and its call for "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states" reflects a similar pattern.

India's Feeble Response

India's hushed response shows an inability to acknowledge that the current escalation is a logical culmination of Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and military incursions and support to trigger the secession of Donetsk and Lugansk from Ukraine. How long can India walk the tightrope, saddled with the baggage of its goodwill obligations to Russia/the Soviet Union for political support on Kashmir and the nuclear issue, and by its dependence on Moscow for the purchase of arms and nuclear materials?

The lack of decisiveness is counterproductive and undermines India's claim to be a "leading power". First, it not only shows Indian policy as lacking in initiative but enables Moscow to instrumentalise Indo-Russian friendship for its own gains amid rising global consternation at Russia's actions.

Second, India's cautious posturing, without showing any concrete initiative in mediating the conflict, renders it inconsequential in Europe. It thus seriously undermines India's burgeoning relationships and reputation with major European powers, notably France, Germany and the United Kingdom, which have begun to increasingly support Indian geopolitical interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Third, India's approach elicits doubts in Washington about India's credibility as a strategic partner, given that it cannot even speak up against an attack on a sovereign state in violation of prior guarantees. And finally, it raises fundamental questions about the principles underlying India's policy as well as the tangible benefits delivered by its solidarity with Russia. To what extent is its resolve to stand by its time-honoured friendship compatible with a Russia that is now threatening to generate a nuclear crisis in pursuit of its expansion?

Indian dependence on Russia's goodwill and defence cooperation is overstated. True, Russia is a major supplier of weapons for India. In 2021, the two countries signed a 10-year defence cooperation pact, which includes the sale of S-400 surface-to-air

missile systems worth US\$5.43 billion and a deal to manufacture more than 600,000 Russian AK-203 assault rifles in India for bolstering its defence capabilities against China. In addition, Russia is helping India with its ambitious nuclear energy expansion: the two nations signed a far-reaching agreement on nuclear cooperation in 2017.

Loosening A Stifling Embrace

Notwithstanding the compelling reasons that India has to affirm its solidarity with Russia, India's response to the current war needs to be independent of its past obligations and be more forward looking. Russia's nibbling away at neighbouring regions — Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, Crimea in 2014 and now Ukraine — has not only produced profound anxieties in Central Europe but also among states in Central Asia, where India is seeking to turn the goodwill that it enjoys into a substantive partnership. In light of Russia's rapid isolation from the world, India's solidarity with it will undermine its global credibility.

India is not as dependent on Russian goodwill as it might appear to be. First, while Russia has historically been an important source of arms for India, with half of its weapons coming from this single source, the dependence is mutual. Moscow cannot afford to hold back on weapons transfers to India, which accounted for some 23% of Russian arms sales between 2016 and 2020, especially considering the steady decline in Russian weapons exports since 2017. Besides, Washington may be more tolerant of Indian purchases from Russia, which invite potential sanctions under its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, if it sees India as critical of Russian policy rather than as being deferential to it.

Second, Russia is vital to India's growing nuclear energy market, but India also offers a potentially huge market that Moscow cannot afford to undermine. Russia is currently building a 6,000-MW plant at Kudankulam, which will have six nuclear reactors, and may build over a dozen more reactors over the next 20 years. India and Russia have also agreed to expand nuclear cooperation in third countries, which gives India additional leverage.

Third, Russia needs India as a counterpoise to what is increasingly turning into an asymmetric strategic partnership with China. While China has so far maintained a "pro-Russian" neutrality, an increasingly isolated Russia, weakened by sanctions, cannot afford to be too dependent on China.

Finally, Russian political support has been useful in the past but is not vital today. True, some components of the US government have been critical of India, but the top levels of government in Washington have never shown signs of arm-twisting India on Kashmir and human rights. India is too important a strategic partner for its friends on either side of the Atlantic to squeeze it on such contentious domestic issues. If anything, identification with the new Eurasian axis — Russia, China, and possibly Pakistan — may actually invite such pressures.

What Can India Do?

New Delhi has some room for manoeuvre. First, it can be more forthright in its criticism of Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine on "sovereignty" grounds (as it was in 2014), take a principled stance against Russia's war, and be supportive of UN resolutions that are critical of violations of a member state's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Such a stance will be more meaningful and in sync with New Delhi's stand on China's violation of Indian sovereignty on their border.

Second, as a country that enjoys the confidence of the United States and solidarity with Russia, India could work to mitigate the crisis caused by Russia's actions and explore the possibility of working towards a resolution either through direct back-room involvement or by joining with selected third countries in continuing negotiations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been hinting at such a possibility, but he would be more credible if his government was not widely viewed as overly soft on Russia.

Third, India should consider some steps that fall short of sanctions but signal its unhappiness in a concrete way, such as deferring meetings or reviewing specific projects.

Finally, India needs to reconsider its long-standing policy of "strategic autonomy" and the extent to which it can be sustained if strategic partners go against its fundamental interests as a leading power committed to a stable global order. Russia may be important to its multi-aligned strategy, but it need not be considered indispensable if it crosses an unacceptable threshold.

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