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India's Response to the Russian Invasion: One Year On

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SYNOPSIS

*Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India found itself in challenging circumstances. It had to balance between two key partners, Russia and the United States, who were engaged in an open confrontation. A year on, India proves to have managed walking the tightrope quite successfully. **NISHANT RAJEEV** analyses how India adapted to this predicament, the approach it has taken, and the potential challenges and pitfalls moving forward.*

COMMENTARY

President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine almost a year ago posed several challenges for India. Russia was a key defence partner to India, supplying an estimated [60 to 80 per cent](#) of India's defence equipment. Russia also supported India in developing and deploying new technologies, particularly in the nuclear and space sectors. While maintaining ties with Russia as a defence partner, India began courting the West, especially the United States, in its efforts to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. The United States had always been uneasy about India's close relationship with Russia. But the United States accommodated India and focused on improving their bilateral relationship as India's ties with Russia did not directly impinge on its core interests. As a result, the India-US bilateral relationship had been steadily advancing on solid footing.

This changed with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States has since been rallying support for the condemnation of Russia's actions. While this endeavour was relatively straightforward in Western Europe, the United States failed to win over India

who had been unwilling to follow suit, potentially setting up both parties for serious disagreements.

Nevertheless, India has managed to walk the tightrope quite successfully a year on. It has maintained a working relationship with Russia while deepening its relationship with the United States and Europe. This essay will analyse how India adapted to this predicament and the approach it has taken. It then studies the challenges in this approach and the pitfalls thereof.

India Adapts to a New Reality

India's deteriorating relationship with China and the simultaneously growing power asymmetry remain primary concerns. The Galwan Valley clash in June 2020, which led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers, changed the trajectory of India's approach to China. It became apparent that accommodating China was not possible for the foreseeable future. Given the disparity in military capabilities, Russia's position as a key defence partner to India was critical. Shortly after the border clashes, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh [travelled](#) to Russia to ensure that the supply of key defence equipment would not be hindered. Thus, when President Putin invaded Ukraine, India found it difficult to oppose the Russian invasion due to military dependence.

India managed to mitigate the negative fallout over its stance on the Russian invasion with the West and had diplomatically trod the middle ground in the initial stages of the war. However, with the prolonged war, India's position has shifted to become a key middle power between the West and Global South. On matters of defence, India has accelerated efforts to diversify its sources of defence equipment through indigenous production and partnerships with the West.

India has steadfastly refused to vote to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the United Nations. In the initial stages of the war, India had been criticised for its stance. It was likely that India did not want to jeopardise Russian supply of arms while engaged in a border standoff with China. Instead, India's position had been to [call](#) for a cessation of hostilities and a diplomatic solution to the crisis. However, as the war stalled and Putin's position became more precarious, India found more room to manoeuvre. The relationship was not as one-sided as it appeared. Prime Minister Narendra Modi [publicly](#) pushed back against the war in a press conference with Putin. However, India was able to further establish its diplomatic position during the G20 Bali summit. Disagreements between the Western and Asian countries over condemning Russia's invasion threatened to derail negotiations, but India was able to [advocate](#) a middle ground between member states to produce a joint statement. Presiding over the 2023 G20 summit, India further [cemented](#) its position as an arbitrator between Western and Global South interests.

Parallel to its diplomatic efforts, India is diversifying its defence partnerships to reduce dependence on Russian arms. Prime Minister Modi launched the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative (Self-Reliant India) to build domestic capacity in the manufacturing sector, including defence. Thus, several defence items that had been procured internationally can now be produced domestically. This has hit Russian defence exports the most. In the wake of Russia's invasion, India is reported to have cancelled arms deals involving

10 [Ka-31](#) airborne early warning helicopters and 48 [Mi-17](#) V5 helicopters. There is also [speculation](#) that India is reviewing orders of other equipment like fighter jets from Russia. In all, 107 new items were [placed](#) on an import ban list and are to be domestically produced in India.



The Kamov Ka-31 helicopter was part of India's cancelled arms deal with Russia in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. India is attempting to reduce its dependence on Russian arms by developing domestic alternatives and increasing defence trade with the West. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

In addition to developing domestic alternatives, India has been increasing defence trade with the West. The United States, France, and Israel are emerging as clear alternatives to Russian sources. India has concluded several deals including procurement of Rafale fighter jets, Apache attack helicopters for the army and the air force, and Sikorsky MH-60 Romeo anti-submarine warfare helicopters for the navy. Tata Enterprises and Airbus are also [co-producing](#) the C295 tactical military transport aircraft. India is also moving towards joint development of defence equipment with the United States under the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET). The initiative fosters cooperation in the development of jet engines, munitions, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities among other issues. As noted by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, iCET is meant to bolster Indian domestic capacity. He [stated](#): “This is another big foundational piece of an overall strategy to put the entire democratic world in the Indo-Pacific in a position of strength.” Essentially, the United States is supporting Indian domestic industry, underpinned by its ability to share technological expertise, to help wean India off Russian arms.

Looking Ahead

While India pursues a rather audacious attempt to reduce its dependency on Russia, there are a myriad of challenges ahead. Past efforts to co-produce and co-develop defence technology with the West yielded mixed results. Although the emphasis on private defence enterprises is new, the Indian defence industry in general has a poor track record of developing new defence equipment.

iCET is not the first attempt by India and the United States to co-produce and co-develop defence platforms. Launched in 2012, the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) was a similar attempt focused on developing jet engines, aircraft carrier technology, next-generation Raven Mini UAVs, and mobile electric hybrid power source systems among others. To date, only the cooperation in aircraft carrier technologies has yielded [results](#) while other initiatives have withered. In fact, India's desire to acquire jet engine technology from the United States through iCET dates back to the 1980s. The United States' reluctance to transfer sensitive technologies that India seeks is in part driven by a desire to protect domestic defence industries from competition. This is true for other Western nations as well.

The second key challenge is the wherewithal of the domestic industry to fill gaps that will arise if India distances itself from Russian suppliers. Transfer of Technology (ToT) is usually a key requirement for defence imports in India and has been the focus of several iterations of defence production policy pronouncements. India believes ToT will eventually lead to the transfer of capabilities into the Indian sector. However, ToT usually involves the transfer of manufacturing and production capabilities rather than intellectual property, and although India's defence industrial base has manufactured arms for decades, the Defence Public Sector Enterprises have a poor record of delivering new equipment.

While the entry of the private sector is promising, it is unlikely to herald major changes in the near future. Indian private entities have also focused on manufacturing through joint ventures with foreign partners. This model is similar to one followed by public sector enterprises. Joint ventures with domestic factories have the advantage of increasing employment in India, which is key to the government. Yet, they rarely foster the kind of R&D required to take the lead in truly being "self-reliant".

While India's diplomatic approach has managed to create space to manoeuvre, its defence industry lacks the capabilities to follow through on its strategy for the foreseeable future. The areas where India has become self-reliant, namely space and missile technology, were dependent on Russia's [support](#). Developing IP and R&D capabilities will require a different approach and one that is unlikely to yield results anytime soon. Until then, India will mostly remain reliant on external powers, including Russia.

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