

NOT TAKING SIDES: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA AND THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

With a convincing majority of 141 of 193 countries, the UN General Assembly voted on Wednesday for a resolution that deplored in the “strongest terms” Russia’s attack on Ukraine and demanded an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops. The resolution, which was discussed in a rare special emergency session and under the rubric of the “Uniting for Peace” resolution invoked after decades, came as a result of an aborted resolution at the UN Security Council, which Russia, as a permanent member, had vetoed. While the UNGA resolution carries little teeth, it does represent a common stand taken by the international public commons, with 96 countries signing up as co-sponsors of the resolution. Russia rejected the outcome as a political vote that came of severe “pressure” from the U.S. and European countries that were the drivers of the resolution, but it seemed clear that it was isolated on the global stage. Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria voted against the motion, and 35, including India, abstained. While the resolution also decried the Russian decision to recognise Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states, representatives of member states made it clear that it was the relentless bombing of Ukrainian cities that they could not turn a blind eye to.

India’s abstention, not a surprise, disappointed many western countries that have been lobbying for a shift in the Indian position. In the past week, India has abstained from three votes (including two procedural ones) at the UNSC where it is an elected member, one at the UN Human Rights Council, and another at the IAEA on resolutions critical of Russia. In an explanation of vote (EOV), India’s UN representative said that India is calling for dialogue, while officials say that India’s abstention has given it room to play a role in diplomacy with Russia and Ukraine. In a sign of some discomfort with Russian actions, the EOV also dropped the earlier references to the “legitimate security interests”, and included language on respecting the “territorial sovereignty” of members. India has also sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine although its vote of abstention indicates the Modi government still has many reasons not to vote against Russia, a strategic and defence partner that has stood by India. As the conflict continues, and the global community expresses its disapproval, however, India’s desire to remain an “abstentionist” power is being called into question. The Government has also said that it needs to remain on good terms with both sides as its primary focus remains the safe exit of Indians from the conflict zone. While evacuating Indians is an important priority, it cannot be India’s only focus in this crisis, given its aspirations for global leadership and the oft quoted motto of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”. It may become necessary for India to engage more deeply with the conflict in Europe, which is now a global concern.

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