

NO OVATION FOR INDIA'S STAND ON THE WAR ON UKRAINE

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

What remains after aerial bombing in the city of Irpin, northwest of Kyiv. | Photo Credit: AFP

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has placed considerable moral responsibility on India, both as one of the world's largest countries and its most populous democracy. However, at the United Nations (UN), India has refused to condemn the violation of the rights of the Ukrainians. It has, instead, put out a homily that speaks of resolving differences through dialogue. It has moved with alacrity to save its citizens without expressing compassion for the people of Ukraine who face an onslaught from a much larger military power than them. It would be natural for observers to equate the actions of the state in a democracy with the will of the people. So, as we are a democracy, the Indian government's abstention in the UN Security Council vote on Ukraine is sure to rebound on Indians in their interaction with the rest of the world in the future, unfavourably.

Arguments justifying India's stance in the UN have emanated from the erstwhile grandees of India's diplomatic corps and current members of the national security community. The first of these is that in international affairs, a country must be guided by its national interest and not some abstract principles. What these principles could be is left unspecified, but what India's interests are have been stated with clarity. Of the latter, it is pointed out that due to the very high dependence of India on the Soviet Union for defence equipment and the likely need of support on the Pakistan issue in the Security Council, India must not offend Russia by condemning the invasion. The result is that India makes statements that convince no one, only drawing attention to its lack of commitment to principle in international affairs.

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Actually, interests and principles are not that apart. If a people's principles are their most deeply held beliefs about how the world must be ordered, then their interest lies in ensuring that their principles prevail in international relations. Thus, if India does not want to see itself to be the victim of territorial aggression in the future, it must communicate strongly on the world stage that it condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Those in charge of India's foreign policy must reflect on its choice to be on the same page as China — a habitual violator of the norm of peaceful coexistence — on an issue of unprovoked aggression against a sovereign state. At a time when India's abstention on the Russian invasion of Ukraine is being likened to its abstention in the UN on the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 it would do to recognise the difference.

In the 1950s the West was clearly unsympathetic to India, playing its card openly on the Kashmir issue at the UN as early as 1947. On the other hand, the Soviet Union, the precursor to the present-day Russian state, had rescued India several times by exercising its veto in the UN Security Council. Now, close to 75 years later, the situation has changed. Public opinion in the West does not favour unconditional support of Pakistan *vis-à-vis* India while Russia encourages Pakistan. Moreover, we know by now that some limited support at the UN matters little, as taking the Kashmir issue to the UN Security Council has not got Pakistan to withdraw from the territory it occupied. As India does not intend to expand its territory, it need not rely on any particular

country that is a permanent member of the Security Council to support its future plans.

Now on the matter of reliance on the Russians for defence equipment. It is indeed correct that India relies on the Russians for such equipment and their spare parts. At the same time there is a global market for arms. It is not evident that anything withheld by the Russians cannot be sourced from that market. We have in the past bought guns from Sweden, ships from the United Kingdom and aircraft from France. It is the unpalatable truth that there is considerable spare capacity in the production of weapons in this world, and ready money is sure to get you to the goods you seek. For India to base its public stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the assured supply of armaments is to really drag ourselves down to the bottom of the pit in terms of ethics.

A second response from India's security establishment has taken the form of a rationalisation of the decision to abstain on grounds that the Russian invasion and the West's reaction, that has not included war so far, is a conflict between the east and the west, and India should stay out of it. While the argument about our need for defence equipment has at least a Kautilyan veneer, this position is contemptible. To avert one's eyes from unprovoked aggression towards an independent country by one 10 times stronger would be to reveal a total lack of moral fibre. To say that this is just another east-west conflict from which India should stay out is tantamount to seeing the Russian invasion and the brave defence of their country by the Ukrainians as a mere marital squabble.

If there is a maxim that conveys an ancient belief of Indians, it is *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, implying that the world is a family. Families do not usually tolerate the bullying of the weak by those stronger among them. If India had allowed this principle to fall by the wayside in 1956 when it refused to condemn the Soviet invasion of Hungary, its action today is much worse. At that time, Jawaharlal Nehru was only concerned with propagating the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, christened Panchsheel. Today, empowered by its economic ascent over the decades, Narendra Modi talks of India being the '*Vishwaguru*' or World Teacher. By continuing to see herself as the world's teacher while refusing to take a stand on the invasion of Ukraine, India mocks her chosen self-image. A teacher is granted respect for speaking truth to power.

The invasion of Ukraine, rather like Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939, is a once-in-a-century event. India's foreign policy establishment seems to have missed its significance for the world. India must take a long view of how it wants to engage with it. Its actions so far leave it in the company of Russia and China. These are not democracies as understood; indeed, most of their recent actions militate against that description. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have ensured that they will have unusually long tenures as leaders of their states. Reminiscent of the fascists in Europe, they make expansionist claims based on ethnicity, persecute their own people based on religion or sexual orientation, and exude an ethnic chauvinism. Most Indians abhor these practices.

India is a democracy, even if a somewhat diminished one of late. Moreover, it has not officially discarded Panchsheel as yet. It cannot look away from the violation of widely accepted norms contained in the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine for fear of losing access to its supply of armaments or of reciprocal support in the UN on matters of concern to it. Nor does it have the option of playing the ostrich, as suggested by some, for that would fool no one else. Standing up for what you believe in brings with it the possibility of encountering hardship. But then, sticking to its principles is not just in India's national interest, it is also its own reward.

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