

# TIME FOR INDIA TO REDEFINE ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

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

Prime Minister Narendra Modi embraces Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. | Photo Credit: AP

Russia's war on Ukraine has decisively shaped international opinion. Indian foreign policy is also going to be affected in a profound manner. The most important question facing Indian diplomacy is how to navigate India's great power relations in the future. While there has always remained a pro-Russian popular sentiment in India, rooted in Moscow's support during the Cold War era, particularly against the pro-Pakistani diplomatic activism by powerful Western countries in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), a majority of Indians today seem taken aback by [Russia's misadventure against a sovereign country](#).

That Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, is moving closer to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the hope of membership may be a sufficient reason for Russia to be infuriated, but it is still an insufficient condition for Ukraine to be attacked in violation of all norms of international law. However, India has not directly criticised Moscow's action. Memories of the historic Indo-Soviet partnership still seem to tip the scales when it comes to India's vote at the UNSC. Western countries have criticised India's repeated abstentions at the UNSC on the issue of the Russian invasion, while the Kremlin has praised India for taking an "independent and balanced" position. While India has not cared much about Western criticism of its "independent" approach to foreign policy, it is the Russian angle this time which has come to restrain India's strategic autonomy.

President Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine has put New Delhi in a foreign policy conundrum that will not disappear soon because Russia's action has changed the global order. The Western world has imposed unprecedented sanctions against Russia and banned energy imports. New Delhi is concerned about the impact of these sanctions on global finance, energy supplies, and transportation, amid growing signs that they will constrain India's ability to import Russian oil.

The image of the Russian military might be tarnished now as Russian forces have under-performed in their Ukrainian campaign. Ukraine has been able to hold the Russian forces back for a long time, which can be seen as a moral victory for a weaker nation. Mr. Putin is neither a crafty strategist nor a charismatic hero who has risen from the ashes of the Soviet defeat to lead Russia into a new period of resurgence. His reputation has been severely bruised because a comedian-turned-politician next door has exposed the hollowness of Russia's military tactics and operational planning.

China's blatant attempts to project its rising power as well as Russia's threats against its "near abroad" will continue to test India's strategic choices. Nevertheless, what must worry India is the fact that Russia will now become increasingly dependent on Chinese support to defend its policies. Mr. Putin may not know what he eventually wants in Ukraine, but he is aware of the ruble collapsing, the punishing sanctions being imposed, and the dire state of the Russian economy. This will push him further into China's military and economic orbit.

India's real strategic challenge is surfacing in the Indo-Pacific with the rise of China, as Beijing has consistently sought to expand its zone of military, economic and political influence through

the Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, instead of smoothing the ruffled edges of India's insecurities, which are rooted in an undefined boundary, China has only aggravated them further. Though India would like the U.S. to continue to focus on China, it is not possible for Washington to ignore Russia's aggression along NATO's periphery.

Since the end of the Cold War, Indians have been debating the contours of strategic autonomy. For some, the notion is a re-branding of India's non-aligned posture during the Cold War. Others say that the doctrine of 'multi-alignment' is the 21st century avatar of strategic autonomy as India has been expanding its engagement with all the major powers.

Reality has many dimensions. And in this case, history is relevant. Indian nationalists of various shades still fondly remember which countries were India's allies during the Cold War and which were not. Former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's advocacy of neutrality in the bloc politics was justified in the pursuit of an independent post-colonial foreign policy. The Soviet Union was seen as a trustworthy partner against Western hegemony. Following the disintegration of the USSR, India joined Russia and China against the unipolarity of the U.S. The purpose of this trilateral initiative was to promote a multi-polar world to constrain the U.S.'s unbridled power and ambition. India was also uncomfortable with the arrogance that defined Western attitudes towards Russia in the immediate post-Cold War period. For some time, this common concern about unipolarity put the three countries on the same path towards mutual cooperation and understanding. Later, Brazil and South Africa were also brought into this coalition. However, it soon became clear that India and China did not see eye to eye. Moreover, India was determined to maintain its partnership with Russia, an important arms supplier. Its ties with the U.S. have also improved significantly since the end of the Cold War. But continuing dependence on Russian weaponry has become India's strategic headache.

Nostalgia cannot be allowed to trump reality. Mr. Putin seems too frozen in old-fashioned grievances against the West to appreciate the value of India's friendship. Much of New Delhi's disillusionment stems from a failure to understand not only Mr. Putin's political thinking, but also Russia's place in the emerging global order. If it was a nuclear-armed superpower yesterday, Russia seems to be behaving like a nuclear-armed bully today. Under Mr. Putin, Russia is in a state of transition, swinging wildly from one crisis to another. Therefore, it is too risky for India to pursue vague aims vis-à-vis Russia in these uncertain times.

Those in India echoing Russian resentment against the eastward expansion of NATO are reminded by Western analysts that a NATO-Russia Council was formed specifically to alleviate Russia's concerns, and that Russia was recognised as one of the world's leading industrial powers through a formal admission into the elite G-7 not on the basis of its industrial might, but to soften its bruised superpower ego. Truth lies somewhere in between, which perhaps explains India's stance at the UNSC.

Everyone in and around government must think seriously about India's relations with Russia as the unfolding Ukrainian tragedy has introduced a new era in international relations. Though Moscow has drifted much closer to Beijing, and is sharply critical of India's engagement with the U.S. and the Quad, India finds it difficult to extend support to Ukraine. Prime Minister Narendra Modi may still personally like Mr. Putin, but he understands that in the halls of global diplomacy, nations have interests which are not determined by personalities alone. It goes without saying that the U.S. is the country most likely to bolster India's future as a great power.

It is not going to be easy for New Delhi to maintain its balancing act in the future as Washington hardens its position further. It is inevitable that during this time of diplomatic and strategic uncertainty, New Delhi needs to be ready to radically redefine its relationship with Moscow.

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