

POSITING INDIA'S STAND ON THE UKRAINE WAR

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At the U.N. General Assembly, in February | Photo Credit: AP

On February 23, 2023, on the eve of the first anniversary of [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), the [United Nations General Assembly \(UNGA\) adopted a resolution](#), calling for an end to the war. The resolution was favoured by 141 members and opposed by seven, while 32 states abstained. Unsurprisingly, India was one among the 32. This is in line with the position India has been taking on the Ukraine crisis from the beginning. India has refused to condemn Russia for the invasion; it has refused to join the West's sanctions; has stepped up buying Russian fuel at a discounted price, and has consistently abstained from UN votes on the war.

India's position has triggered sharp responses in the West. Before the war, there was much debate among the global strategic commentariat about India's irreversible shift towards the West. However, after the war began, many wondered why the world's largest democracy did not condemn Russia. For some others, India was "financing" Vladimir Putin's war by buying Russian oil. Why did India take a different line from that of its partners in the West? To understand India's position, one has to look at how India sees the war.

For U.S. President Joe Biden, as Simon Tisdall argued in The Guardian ("Outdated and out of time ...", February 26), this is a global crusade for democracy. He called the Russian invasion "a test for the ages". For the Atlanticists in general, the war by an authoritarian Russia on a "democratic" Ukraine is an affront to global democracy. According to this narrative, anything less than a complete Russian defeat would mean "the end of the international order". So, to save global democracy, the rules-based order and international law, all democratic and law-adhering states should take a position against Russia and join the western coalition.

Is this a battle between democracies and autocracies? Granted, an overwhelming majority of nations have supported UNGA resolutions calling for the war to be brought to an end. But beyond the UN votes, the U.S. has hardly managed to mobilise democracies outside its traditional western alliance system against Russia. India and South Africa, large democracies from Asia and Africa, have consistently abstained from votes at the UN and refused to join the sanctions — because the sanctions were unilateral, imposed by specific countries or blocs, without UN approval. Brazil, the largest democracy in South America, has not joined the sanctions; so have many smaller democracies (and non-democracies) across geographies. Even some countries that are part of the western alliance system, say Israel and Turkey, are reluctant to join Mr. Biden's crusade. Most of these countries see the war as a European

problem between two former Soviet countries with its roots going back to the end of the Cold War. For them, it is less about global democracy than the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe.

Even if this is not a war between democracies and autocracies, there is still the question about morality. There is no doubt here that Russia has violated the sovereignty of Ukraine. And Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories is a clear violation of international laws. So, how can countries such as India ignore this fact and move on? India has repeatedly stated in the UN that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected. But a key dilemma before any country in international relations is that when it comes to specific actions in the event of a clash between moral positions and national interests, it is about which path they should take.

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For the U.S. and much of Europe, there is a convergence of their moral positions and foreign policy objectives in the case of the Ukraine war. The U.S. wants to "weaken" Russia, as U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said, and Europe wants to make Russia's invasion costly so that they believe Moscow would be deterred in the future. So, the moral line they take serves their strategic purpose. However, this position has hardly been consistent especially when there are clashes between values and interests.

In 2003, the U.S. launched its illegal invasion of Iraq, violating the country's sovereignty. In 2011, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) turned a UN Security Council resolution to establish a no-fly zone in Libya into a full-scale invasion. Right now, the U.S. has illegally placed its troops in Syria. Or, take the case of Israel, which has illegally annexed East Jerusalem and Syria's Golan Heights and keeps building illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank. The U.S. has recognised Israel's annexation of Golan and moved its embassy to Jerusalem. While Russia is being pounded with sanctions, Israel is getting billions worth of military aid every year from the U.S.

Another case is that of Turkey, a NATO member, which has illegally seized Syrian territories but faces no international ire.

In other words, when there was a divergence between national interests and moral concepts, the West, without qualms, embraced the first. Then why should not emerging countries such as India put their national interest at the core of their policy making? But it does not mean that India should completely side-step the moral question. In 2003, when India came under considerable pressure from the George W. Bush administration to send "peacekeeping troops" to an American-occupied Iraq, it was an emphatic no from the then government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Likewise, India, by no means should help Russia militarily in the Ukraine war.

So, what are India's national interests here? Ties with Russia, a historical partner, are important for India in many ways. One is energy — discounted fuel coming in from Russia is a relief for India, the world's fifth largest economy, that meets over 80% of its fuel needs through imports. But the energy ties are largely opportunistic — even if supplies from Russia are disrupted, India could find alternatives for a higher price. Defence supplies, however, tell a different tale — Russia has fulfilled over 46% of India's defence needs in the last five years. There is a sound argument that India should diversify its source of defence imports, but such a change would take time.

Third, at a time when Russia is deepening its ties with China, which is India's main competitor,

India should ask itself whether it should retain its leverage over Russia through existing ties or lose it completely by joining the western coalition over moral commitments.

Furthermore, to manage its continental interests and tackle its continental security concerns, India has to work with powers in the Eurasian landmass where the U.S. is practically absent, especially after its disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. Russia plays a key role in India's continental foreign policy.

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Lastly, what is India's preferred outcome in the Ukraine war? Neither the weakening of Russia nor the destruction and splintering of Ukraine is in its interests. What India wants is an immediate end to the war and a new security equilibrium between great powers so that the global economy could be stabilised and the world could focus on more pressing problems — from climate change to UN reforms. So, if it wants peace and a resolution to the conflict, as Jawaharlal Nehru stated in 1957 in the wake of the Soviet intervention in Hungary, "it doesn't help calling names and condemning" any power. Instead, India should stick to its pragmatic neutrality, rooted in realism, and continue to push for a practical solution to the Ukraine crisis.

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