

A WAR THAT IS SHRINKING INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL OPTIONS

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

'Russia as a key strategic partner is no longer available to India for balancing purposes' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

What was initially assumed in New Delhi to be a quick confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, the war in Europe is now raging on with no end in sight, and with its long-term implications yet unknown. As for India, the initial phase of diplomatic rush is over and its geopolitical options are shrinking as the war drags on.

For several weeks during late March and April, it seemed as though the Ukraine war presented a number of geopolitical options for New Delhi to choose from. The high-profile visits to New Delhi, the entreaties of these leaders for Indian support for their positions in the ongoing war, and India's balancing act all seemed to propel the country to the centre stage of global attention.

And yet, instead of enhancing New Delhi's ability to make strategic choices in its broader region, the Ukraine war may actually limit the number of options available to New Delhi for at least three reasons: one, Russia as a key strategic partner is no longer available to India for balancing purposes. Arguably, into the third month of its Ukraine invasion, Moscow is more dependent on India today than the other way round. Two, Russia's sudden absence from the Asian balance of power equations has further enhanced Chinese influence in the region. By the time the war ends, whatever may be the shape of the global balance of power, the regional balance of power would have irretrievably shifted in Beijing's favour. Three, given that the United States and its western partners are more interested on the Ukraine theatre today, their focus on China is already taking a hit, if not yet on the Indo-Pacific. These factors, *ipso facto*, will limit India's regional geopolitical options.

India's biggest dilemma today is not whether or not to continue its engagement with Russia. That it would engage Russia in the immediate to medium term is clear. However, as a second-order fallout of the Russian misadventure, New Delhi has other dilemmas to worry about in the medium to long term.

Managing the China challenge continues to be New Delhi's biggest concern. For sure, the China challenge is not a product of the Ukraine war *per se*, but it has further complicated the China conundrum for India. While the Ukraine war has strengthened and revitalised the U.S.-led military and political coalition globally, it is bound to weaken the American influence in the Southern Asian region. While this process started even before the war, the war will quicken this process especially given how its preoccupations with the European theatre will further shrink its interest in the Southern Asian theatre. China is the biggest beneficiary of the U.S./western retrenchment from the region which gives it a free hand in it. So, for New Delhi, Moscow is no longer available for its pursuit of its regional interests, and the U.S.'s ability to produce favourable geopolitical outcomes for India in the region is shrinking as well.

For New Delhi then, the worry is no longer about how to please both sides in this war, but how to manage a China that is attempting to rapidly consolidate the region under its influence. How has it performed on that count so far? Take the recent visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to New Delhi. Reports indicated that the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, and the

National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, impressed upon Mr. Wang that the normalisation of diplomatic and political ties can only happen after the disengagement of troops from the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). But Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to attend the BRICS Summit in China could potentially take the sting out of New Delhi's stern messaging to Beijing. In other words, the harsh tone adopted by Mr. Jaishankar and Mr. Doval when responding to Mr. Wang's normalisation offer could arguably be weakened by Mr. Modi's attendance at the BRICS summit, even if virtually. But then, was it possible for New Delhi, faced with limited geopolitical choices in the region resulting from the Ukraine war, to have shrugged off the Chinese diplomatic overture?

While there is little doubt that in the longer run, a war-fatigued and weakened Russia will become a junior partner to China, India today does have an opportunity to get Moscow to nudge Beijing to stop its irredentism on the LAC. Consider this. If the Chinese side, taking advantage of the Ukraine distraction, heats up the LAC, India would have to turn to the West and the U.S. for support (political, diplomatic, intelligence, etc.). This would invariably hurt Russian interests. So it would make sense for Moscow to request Beijing not to activate the LAC while the Ukraine war is still on. Mr. Wang's visit to New Delhi and his request to India to get back to business as usual is perhaps an indication that Beijing also seeks to calm the tempers on the LAC. While China may have other reasons for seeking 'normalcy' with India (such as creating an impression that China is consolidating the South Asian region under its leadership when the West and the U.S. are busy with Ukraine), for Russia, it is important that two of its Asian friends — China and India — do not clash at least while the war is still on.

While this may be a useful way to manage the Chinese aggression on the LAC in the short term, this will depend on how China views its dynamics with Russia and that of Russia with India. Herein lies the challenge for India. If China were to stabilise the LAC at the nudging of Russia, it would also expect India to go slow on the Indo-Pacific, something India can ill-afford to do.

While, under normal circumstances, India could have utilised the many inherent contradictions between Moscow and Beijing, the Ukraine war has suspended those contradictions even if for the time being. More so, there is little India can do to enhance its geopolitical engagement with Russia until the war is over.

India's north-western continental strategy, in particular towards Afghanistan and Central Asia, too will get complicated due to the Ukraine war. On the face of it and for the time being, things seem advantageous to India. Consider this. For over a year now, the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan is calm and the violence in Kashmir has come down. The primary reason behind the current calm is because Pakistan was at first busy with consolidating its gains from the return of the Taliban, and now dealing with the unpleasant fallout from the Taliban's return to Afghanistan. More pertinently, New Delhi's presence from Afghanistan has entirely disappeared. So, to put it rather bluntly, it appears that the calm in Kashmir and along the LoC is a *quid pro quo* for the Indian withdrawal from Afghanistan. This might appear to be a good bargain; but it may not be so in the longer run. If this is a bargain New Delhi accepts, it will not only mean giving up its strategic interests in Afghanistan but also reducing its engagement in the Central Asian region as well at a time China is making feverish inroads into the region, right in the backyard of the Russian sphere of influence.

The consequences arising out of the Ukraine war will contribute to it as well. Had Moscow not been caught in the Ukraine war, it would have fended off Beijing's attempts to take over its backyard (in one sense, China is doing to Russia using economic means what the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been doing to Russia using military means). During the December summit, India and Russia had decided on a number of initiatives focusing on Central Asia and Afghanistan. They are unlikely to be revived anytime soon, ceding further ground to China and

Pakistan.

The combined geopolitical impact of the ill-timed U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's Ukraine war, and the rapid expansion of Chinese influence goes to show how New Delhi's geopolitical choices have suddenly shrunk due to the Ukraine war.

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