

Essay

The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and India's Foreign Policy

Arvind Gupta

President Putin's decision to launch "special military operations" in Ukraine on February 24 started an unexpected war in Europe. The war has had global repercussions that are still unfolding. India, which had nothing to do with the conflict, was caught in a difficult situation. As the war erupted, India faced the urgent task of evacuating thousands of its nationals stranded in the war zone. It needed to craft an appropriate political and diplomatic response, which would not jeopardise its strategic partnerships either with Russia or the EU and the US. It was also compelled to deal with the serious economic implications of the crisis.

The current conflict has its apparent genesis in the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia. However, the annexation was itself in response to the West-supported coup in which ultra-right nationalist elements succeeded in deposing the pro-Russian president in Ukraine. Since 2014, Russia has been supporting the separatist insurgency in Ukraine's pro-Russian Donetsk and Luhansk provinces. On the Ukrainian side, ultra-nationalist elements, backed by the West, have been fighting the pro-Russian groups in the Donbas region. A civil war has been raging in Ukraine since 2014.

For weeks prior to the war, the western intelligence and media had been warning about the imminence of a Russian invasion as it continually built up 100,000 troops on the Russian-Ukrainian border and conducted military exercises in Belarus. Several western leaders travelled to Moscow to meet Putin to avert the war. Moscow's position hardened as it got no assurances from them regarding its concerns about North Atlantic Treaty

Dr. Arvind Gupta is the Director of Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF). He served as the Deputy National Security Advisor, Government of India from 2014 to 2017 and is also the former Director of Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

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Organization's (NATO) eastward expansion. There were also no serious efforts to implement the Minsk agreement that was signed in 2015 to resolve the Ukraine crisis. The intense diplomacy in the weeks before the Russian military action came to nothing.

In hindsight, it is clear that Putin had been signalling his deep unease at NATO's eastward expansion and the role of anti-Russia elements in the Ukrainian establishment. On Feb 21, he accused NATO of moving its military infrastructure closer to the Russian border and ignoring the principle of 'equal and indivisible security' in Europe. Explaining his rationale for the special military operation, he said, "we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who has perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation". He had repeatedly stated that Russia and Ukraine are one people. Russia would not tolerate the 'genocide' of Russian speaking population in Eastern Ukraine.

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The actual decision to cross into Ukraine still came as a surprise. Most analysts, including Russians, had argued that Russia had nothing to gain from invading Ukraine. Western warnings were dismissed as propaganda. However, the situation turned out otherwise. Russia did invade Ukraine without any UN sanction, precipitating a huge geopolitical crisis.

The West was quick to condemn Russia in most categorical terms. It accused Russia of violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an independent nation. Western countries launched a major effort to supply weapons worth tens of billions of dollars to Ukraine. However, NATO stopped short of sending troops to Ukraine, as it would have meant direct conflict with Russia. The European Union galvanized its members to provide unprecedented military and economic assistance to Ukraine. Germany stepped up its defence budget several folds. The West moved swiftly to condemn and isolate Russia internationally. A wide range of sanctions aimed at crippling Russia were imposed. The powerful western media sought to highlight the plight of Ukrainian refugees and Russian attacks on civilians. The war of narratives was lost by Russia from the word go. Despite Russia's grouses against NATO's eastward expansion, Russia's invasion did not find any sympathy in the west. The smaller European countries have been clamouring for hard sanctions against Russia.

Unlike the West, India did not openly call out Russia with whom it has deep strategic ties. Similarly, it has a growing partnership with the US and several EU countries. That is why it abstained on a US-sponsored UN General Assembly resolution that condemned Russia by name. Several western countries criticized India on the ground that its abstention amounted to endorsing Russian aggression against a sovereign, independent nation.

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India's Stance

India issued a detailed explanation of its abstention at the UN. Its stand was explained by the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar in a statement to the parliament on 15th March 2022. The minister asserted that India's position was "steadfast and consistent". It had expressed "deep concern" at the worsening situation and called for an "immediate cessation of violence and end to all hostility", an "urgent ceasefire" and a "safe passage" for stranded civilians. It also extended humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to President Putin, President Zelensky and other world leaders. The Indian statement called for adherence to the rules of law and respect for the principles of the UN Charter. India was at pains to explain that its abstention did not amount to endorsing aggression and that open condemnation of Russia would not resolve the issue.

Evacuating thousands of its nationals, mostly students who were stranded in the Ukrainian war zones, was India's topmost priority. It launched a highly complex and difficult "Operation Ganga" to evacuate them. It succeeded in evacuating over 20,000 Indians and several foreign nationals from war-torn Ukraine. One Indian student was killed in the crossfire. To ensure their safe passage, it desperately needed the cooperation of both Russia and Ukraine. It could not have received that cooperation had it condemned Russia openly. Yet India was critical of the way the war was being conducted. It explicitly deplored the killing of the civilians in Bucha in military operations.

India also highlighted the adverse economic implications of the war. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has contributed to high-energy prices and food security crises in the world. Two-thirds of the developing countries are being affected by the war, directly or indirectly. Russia and Ukraine accounted for thirty percent of global wheat exports.

The disruption of wheat and fertiliser supplies from Russia and Ukraine has worsened global food security. Tens of millions of people are facing hunger due to the unaffordability of food. The fragmentation of the global payment system has impacted global trade. High shipping freight rates and container shortages have also disrupted global trade. The weaponisation of sanctions has created worldwide disruptions. Financial markets have become volatile. Global inflation is rising. There is a risk of the world slipping into recession.

The Soaring Costs of Sanctions

Undoubtedly, the Western and Indian positions on Ukraine differ. The West has taken a high moral ground but its own record of past interventions is not inspiring. It is to the credit of Indian diplomacy that several Western leaders, who are at the forefront of imposing punishing sanctions on Russia, have shown some understanding of the Indian position. The Indian Prime Minister participated in several high-profile meetings, such as the Quad Tokyo Summit (May 2022). The joint statement issued by the Quad countries made a brief mention of the Ukraine crisis without the explicit condemnation of Russia. The Prime Minister also explained India's position at the G-7 meeting (June 2022) to which he was invited as a special guest.

India's position on Ukraine has been designed not only to safeguard its national interest but also to articulate the unease felt by many countries who are suffering collateral damage due to the war. The West has imposed harsh sanctions on Russia without giving a thought to how these have derailed the global economy and worsened the plight of vulnerable countries and populations. The Food Price Index issued by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) is at an all-time high; the high crude oil prices hovering around USD 120 per barrel have put an unbearable strain on the economies of most countries. Russia is a major exporter not only of agricultural products but also of critical materials like oil, natural gas, diamonds, gold, palladium, nickel, coal, steel and other strategic materials. The western approach to isolate Russia and throttle its economy will have unintended consequences for India and other countries. Furthermore, India has abiding and deep cooperation with Russia on the defence and security side. Any disruption in these ties will have serious security consequences for India.

India's middle path is governed by these concerns. It has taken a balanced position. It has neither condemned Russia openly nor supported it. Without taking sides, India

has called for an end to the war through diplomacy and dialogue. It has emphasized the need for all sides to adhere to the principles of the UN Charter, which includes respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries. However, weaponisation of sanction which impacts global welfare is not justified.

India also maintained its relationship with Russia. Its decision to buy Russian oil in significant quantities is governed by the compulsion of energy security. The Western criticism of India for buying Russian oil smacks of double standards, considering that the European countries, even during the war, continued to buy a billion dollar worth of oil from Russia every day. Energy prices in Europe have gone up many times and are beginning to hurt even the strong economies like Germany. The Europeans will not be able to wean themselves away from Russian oil, gas and coal for quite some time to come.

What is the worth of sanctions if tens of millions of people are pushed into poverty across the world?

The war has shown that in an interconnected world, localised conflict will inevitably have wider economic ramifications. High energy and food prices can trigger a global recession, which will impact billions of people. India is presently a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It should initiate an open debate at the UNSC on the nature and scope of sanctions and their worldwide impact. Do sanctions act as a deterrent? Or do they create more misery? Certain items which impact food, energy and health security must be exempted from sanctions. Countries that have no role in the conflict but are impacted deeply for no fault of theirs must be compensated. What is the worth of sanctions if tens of millions of people are pushed into poverty across the world? The Ukrainian conflict is a wake-up call.

Protracted War

The conflict is not over yet. In the ongoing war, Russia has made slow progress. Although NATO is not directly fighting Russia, it has had enough time to shore up the Ukrainian defences. The transatlantic alliance has found a new lease of life. At the Madrid summit in June, NATO offered membership to Sweden and Finland. This will create fresh tensions as Finland shares a border with Russia and Sweden is in its close proximity. It has also adopted a 'new strategic concept' and a 'new baseline for deterrence and defence'. It describes Russia as the "most significant direct threat" to NATO and its allies.

NATO is making an outreach to Indo-Pacific countries as well. Leaders of Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand also participated in its recent summit. This is significant. The joint declaration issued by NATO described China as a “systemic” competitor which challenges the “interests, security and values” of NATO countries. NATO favours a strategic dialogue with Asia-Pacific countries to develop “common approaches to global security”. As the global security environment changes radically, India will need to closely watch how NATO, the most powerful military alliance with global reach, conceptualises the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific. It is interesting that the NATO declaration preferred to use the word ‘Asia-Pacific’ instead of ‘Indo-Pacific’.

Questions are being asked about whether the US will be able to manage the European and Indo-Pacific fronts at the same time. The US will require enormous resources to sustain both fronts diplomatically and militarily. For the time being, the US is sustaining the Indo-Pacific front but the situation needs to be watched. China seems to be the gainer in the realignment of the forces as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war. An embattled Russia has moved closer to China. For India, the coming together of Russia and China in a “without-limit” strategic alliance is a matter of great concern.

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There is a risk that the Ukrainian crisis could trigger acute instability in global systems. Social unrest is becoming endemic in a host of countries where anti-establishment protests against rising costs of living are becoming routine. Highly indebted countries are particularly vulnerable as the economic crises in Sri Lanka and Pakistan show. India has already been called upon to help Sri Lanka. Growing instability in India’s neighbourhood will put even greater strain on India’s limited resources.

India has chosen to adopt a principled, balanced position in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and has undertaken intense engagement with world leaders. This was evident in the Prime Minister’s visit to Germany to attend the G-7 summit and his meetings with several world leaders. India has highlighted the concerns over energy, food and health security and positioned itself as a solution provider. India’s effort has been to safeguard its interests and also use the opportunities that come its way in a changing world. The Russia-Ukraine war has created enormous challenges for India, particularly

on the economic front. High oil prices will have an impact on the current account deficit, trade balance and fiscal situation. This will impact post-Covid economic recovery. India can get access to Russian oil and mineral resources, but enhanced engagement with Russia will not please its Western partners. It will need to balance its economic and security interests with the dictates of multipronged, multidimensional engagement. Great power rivalries are deepening. India will have to navigate the choppy waters of geopolitics through balanced, principled and constructive diplomacy.