

WAR IN UKRAINE: THE GEO-STRATEGIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Dr. Shivali Aggarwal

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Daulat Ram College

INTRODUCTION

President Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine's 2013 stance against an association agreement with the European Union was the spark that ignited tensions between the Ukrainian people and Russian political pressure (Higgins, 2014). Protests against the government, culminating in the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, were spurred by the strong resolve of Ukrainian residents and political parties favouring a nationalist approach in opposition to Russian influence (Conant, 2014). The incident sparked open hostilities between Ukrainians with a heightened feeling of national pride and a counter-anti-revolution and pro-Russian movement in the border regions. A crucial flashpoint for the war was the peninsula of Crimea. Pro-Russian soldiers invaded Ukrainian territory, sparking an effective armed battle and shutting off all communication and transportation with the rest of the country (Bebler, 2015). Crimea became the battlefield as the conflict progressed, revealing a strong counterattack led by an underappreciated Ukrainian military. The earlier uprising against the pro-Russian leader stoked an already strong feeling of independence and identity, which explains the intensity of the response (Sherr, 2020). Referendum, heavily slanted towards the promotion of demonization of the Ukrainian authorities and the control of the voting process, formalised Russia's annexation of Crimea (Bebler, 2015).

Donbass, a buffer zone between eastern and southern Ukraine, saw an escalation of fighting. The results of the 2010 Ukrainian election revealed a deeply divided nation, with a majority of supporters for Yanukovich clustered in the southeast, close to the Russian border (Conant, 2014). After Russia annexed Crimea, separatist groups arose across the Donbass areas. Violent riots, occupations of public institutions, and demands for segregation unfolded in Donetsk and Luhansk first, then spread to most of the neighbouring districts like a chain reaction (Mitrokhin, 2015). The conflict in Ukraine, which appeared at first glance to be a civil war between separatist rebel forces and the Ukrainian military, was supported by the Russian Federation and its forces in a "hybrid warfare" (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015) to undermine Ukrainian legitimacy without running the risk of being accused and persecuted by international organisations. Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the independence-seeking areas of Donbass have been engaged in a long process of peace-making since September 2014, when the first of several shaky ceasefires was established as part of the Minsk accord (Mitrokhin, 2015). While progress was made toward a peace deal at a summit in Paris, the military conflict was not ceased; instead, it entered a permanent state of "frozen conflict" (BBC, 2019). Despite the Minsk Agreements being negotiated in 2014/2015, which called for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of all foreign armed groups, and constitutional reform recognising the special status of Donetsk and Luhansk, fighting between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian government forces has continued in the Donbas for the last eight years.

Military action against Ukraine was initiated by Russia on 24 February 2022, with troops entering from Belarus in the north, Russia in the east, and Crimea in the south. Defending the people of the Donbas and "demilitarising and denazifying Ukraine" were stated as goals of the "special

military operation" that President Putin declared. Russia has no intention of occupying Ukrainian land or "imposing anything on anybody by force," he said. Yet for the last year, Russian soldiers have been attacking on all fronts. Even though Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia are not completely under Russian control, Moscow signed annexation treaties recognising them as part of the Russian Federation in early October 2022. Ukraine has been undertaking a significant counteroffensive and gaining territory with the help of Western military aid. Both sides are planning new spring offensives. Russia illegally seized Ukrainian land in 2014, but Ukraine has promised to reclaim every inch of its sovereignty. The Kremlin has declared that the occupied territories would remain a part of Russia indefinitely. Thus, unless both parties can be convinced to return to the negotiation table, it seems like a protracted confrontation is the most probable conclusion.

This study aims to examine India's strategic stance towards the Russian-Ukrainian War of 2022 and its potential effects on Indian foreign policy. The study examines India's strategic neutrality and its connection with Russia and China, focusing on India's lean towards Moscow throughout the conflict, against the expectations of Western nations. The study also delves into how the West sees India's foreign policy and what it means for ties between India and the West.

INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND EUROPE

India's diplomatic efforts over the last several days have required it to strike a delicate balance between its connections to Moscow and the West on the issue of Ukraine. In its initial statement to the UN Security Council (UNSC), Delhi expressed sorrow that world demands to give diplomacy and dialogue a chance had been disregarded. Nevertheless, it did not specifically mention any country. Nonetheless, it refrained from outright condemning Moscow. Russia, the United States, and Ukraine urged Delhi "to do the right thing" before the UN Security Council voted on a draught resolution condemning the incursion. Ukraine and Russia both publicly urged Delhi to take a stance. India decided not to vote, but its statement implies it went further by tacitly asking Russia to uphold international law. India emphasised the necessity for all members to respect "the UN Charter, international law, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations" to move ahead constructively. Delhi stuck to its policy by voting to abstain when the UN General Assembly decided to urge an immediate halt to the invasion of Ukraine. Senior officials in Washington urged India to "take a firm stand" after a third abstention. Concerns have been voiced, especially in the West, over whether or not the world's biggest democracy should have taken a stronger stance in light of India's approach (Pandey, 2022).

India is looking for diplomatic equilibrium in its relations with Ukraine for a number of different reasons. Most significantly, India's defence and diplomatic relations with Russia have stood the test of time. India has consciously decided to diversify its portfolio and increase local defence manufacture, resulting in Russia's stake in the Indian weapons market decreasing to 49% from 70%. India moved through with the purchase despite imminent US penalties because Russia is delivering weapons like the S-400 missile defense system, which provides India with a critical strategic deterrent against China and Pakistan.

Also, Delhi can't ignore the decades-long diplomatic cooperation with Moscow on various topics. Russia has previously used its veto on United Nations Security Council resolutions related to disputed Kashmir to aid India in keeping the matter bilateral. India looks to be using its well-known non-alignment policy and emphasis on diplomacy in this situation. Furthermore, India had the difficult responsibility of evacuating 20,000 people, most of whom were students from

Ukraine. The Ukrainian and Russian governments have helped India evacuate its residents, particularly from the devastated city of Kharkiv. With positive ties with the United States and Russia, India is in a rare situation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India has contacted Russian President Vladimir Putin, while Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has met with his counterparts in Washington. President Modi of India has met with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky. India may struggle to maintain its commercial ties with Moscow if the United States and its European allies maintain harsh sanctions against Russia. Now, the United States seems to appreciate India's perspective, but this may not always be the case. Sanctions related to the S-400 acquisition remain a potential problem. Specifically aimed against Russia, Iran, and North Korea, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (Caatsa) was launched in 2017. The treaty also makes it illegal for any government to enter military pacts with the countries listed. Even before Russia invaded Ukraine, Washington had not granted any waiver, and some analysts think it may become a negotiating tool between India and the United States. If Moscow detects a shift in Delhi's stance, it may respond with its pressure points, such as bolstering relations with India's arch-rival Pakistan. Moscow has tolerated India's closer connections to the United States over the last two decades, but it would not want India to cross a "red line" in Ukraine.

The European Union was taken aback by India's efforts to appease Russia and the West during the Ukrainian crisis. Before a historic vote at the UN General Assembly, EU envoys and Ukraine's envoy to New Delhi met with top Indian foreign ministry officials and pushed India to take a firmer stand. Modi also spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron about the situation. Macron has been aggressive in his efforts to de-escalate the problem by conducting frequent conversations with EU leaders and world leaders while France holds the chair of the Council of the EU. The French embassy in India published a statement after Macron's phone talk with Modi, saying the two presidents had committed to "guarantee unfettered humanitarian access" to Ukraine and work on handling the problem at the UN Security Council. India has been increasing its cooperation with the European Union to counteract Chinese influence in recent years. European Union foreign ministers and Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar recently met at the Indo-Pacific Forum and made plans to strengthen security ties via increased cyber cooperation and coordinated marine presence in the Indian Ocean.

As a result of New Delhi's cautious stance on the Ukrainian issue, India was left off of a list of "unfriendly nations" compiled by Moscow in response to sanctions imposed by the European Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, India's position towards Russia in the Ukrainian conflict is not new. India remained politically neutral at the United Nations even after Russia took Crimea in 2014. Between 2016 and 2020, Russia, India's primary strategic partner, shipped weaponry worth \$6.6 billion. The value of bilateral commerce between India and Russia was \$8.1 billion between April 2020 and March 2021, much lower than the \$68.5 billion trade between India and the European Union during the same period.

INDIA'S DEPENDENCE ON RUSSIAN OIL AND GAS

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has adversely impacted the global economy. Because they relied on energy imports, nations that buy oil and natural gas are on the receiving end. Import restrictions and western sanctions against Russia have burdened India's energy infrastructure. ONGC, a huge state-owned firm with interests in Russian oil and gas reserves, has been

struggling with the logistics of moving and selling the equity oil it has acquired. The high oil and natural gas cost has dampened the prospects for economic expansion. The Russia-Ukraine conflict set back the Indian economy, which had begun to recover from the COVID-19 shocks. India, which has a severe oil and natural gas shortage, is finding it more challenging to meet the growing costs of living. Sanctions and other limitations disrupt the global value chain for oil and gas. Each week brings its own set of geopolitical calculations, forcing countries to make tough decisions. Many people in the West aren't happy with India's decision to buy crude oil from Russia for strategic reasons. India's position has been very clear in several instances: domestic interests must be prioritised in all foreign policy and commercial choices. In order to effectively argue against India's crude oil purchasing strategy, other countries must first understand India's unique limits and national interests (Kar, 2022).

To achieve its energy needs, Europe has traditionally relied heavily on Russia. BP's Statistical Review reported that almost 40% of Europe's total crude imports of 148 million tonnes that year came from Russia. Similarly, Europe relies largely on Russia for natural gas imports. Similar to India, Europe faces a precarious balancing act when it comes to its energy import needs. Despite all the sanctions and restrictive policies, Europe will still rely heavily on Russia for its energy needs. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine likely provides Europe another justification to accelerate the shift to renewable energy sources. Once, at least in terms of energy supply security, Europe's closeness to Russia was a source of strategic benefits. Europe is in a jam because it is too reliant on Russia for its energy needs. Can Europe figure out how to handle the looming problems with energy supply? This question requires decisive action instead of being answered with a simple yes or no.

Importers are concerned about the availability and cost of oil. Several factors limit the accessibility of boats and trade lanes. On February 18th, 2022, just before Russia and Ukraine declared war, the OPEC Basket crude oil price was \$92.5 per barrel. The OPEC basket oil price was \$107.6 per barrel as of Wednesday, April 22, 2022.² This is nearly \$15 more than before the conflict. In the following months, crude oil prices are forecast to remain at or over \$100 per barrel. However, the anticipated economic slowdown and lockdown in China may have a chilling effect on oil price increases.

It's common knowledge that India and Russia conduct business together. India's entire commerce with Russia is worth almost USD 10 billion, or 1.3% of the country's GDP. The Indian economy has been hit since it relies on Russian exports of semi-valuable and valuable stones, mineral oil, boilers, nuclear reactors, and composts.

Due to the current geopolitical scenario and subsequent increase in crude price, Indian oil marketing corporations were forced to progressively raise gasoline prices to mitigate potential losses. Inflationary pressures are exerted on consumers. India's trade deficit and import costs would worsen even under the high-price environment. For \$100 per barrel, India's crude oil import bill for 2022–23 will be between \$150 and \$175 billion. The budgetary plans of the government will be hampered as a result. In 2021-22, India bought crude oil worth over \$116 billion, which amounted to over 210 million tonnes imported. Reducing India's crude oil imports remains a challenging issue. When the economy recovers after COVID-19, rising oil and gas prices will drive up import costs. India's worries about its energy supply are particularly pressing in light of the present international climate.

Inflation, economic growth, and the expansion of markets will all be negatively impacted by the

rising costs of crude oil and natural gas. Although high natural gas prices will make it harder to incorporate natural gas into the energy grid, they may make it easier for producers to profit. Producers have ample incentives to increase domestic output due to high crude oil and natural gas prices. Conversely, local consumers will be expected to shoulder a larger share of the high manufacturing expenses. For instance, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited reported pump prices of Rs 105.41 and Rs 96.67 for petrol and diesel, respectively in Delhi as of the updated price as of 16 April 2022. For these two items, the wholesale cost was Rs56.52 and Rs58.16 (without including dealer commission or VAT).

Being the third biggest crude importer in the world after China and the United States, India has been buying up cheap Russian oil as a kind of punishment for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Even in January of 2023, India's demand for crude oil from Russia reached unprecedented heights. The average daily purchase of Russian oil by India in December 2022 was 1.2 million barrels. Further penalties from the G-7 and European Union, including a \$60 per barrel price restriction, may explain the dramatic surge in December.

More than 85 percent of India's oil consumption is met by imports, making the country very susceptible to price fluctuations. Since May, when they were ordered not to, state-owned refiners have increasingly chosen cheaper Russian imports over domestic production because of the price freeze on diesel and gasoline. Similarly, last month saw an uptick in shipments from India's other two major suppliers. According to Vortexa, oil imports from Iraq rose by 7% to roughly 886,000 barrels per day, while oil imports from Saudi Arabia rose by 12% to about 748,000 daily. According to the Ministry of Commerce's statistics, Russia overtook China to become India's fifth biggest trade partner from April to December 2022. Russia rose from 25th to 14th place on India's list of key commercial partners, mostly due to increased oil imports. Even while exports increased by 17% over the first half of the year, China and Russia were the only two of India's top five trade partners to whom they declined.

Oil firms in India have been permitted to increase their purchases of petroleum from Russia, which became the country's primary supply of crude in October despite US and international demands to halt such shipments after the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine in February.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has claimed that the purchase of Russian petroleum has helped control inflation, while Foreign Minister S Jaishankar and Oil Minister Hardeep Puri have insisted that India would prioritize top safeguarding its interests.

India must increase its energy security via local production enhancements, international energy diplomacy, and import substitution policies. Without reliable access to electricity, even a self-sufficient nation like Aatmanirbhar (Independent India) would struggle to succeed. Manufacturing expansion and societal progress depend on a reliable and cost-effective modern energy supply. India's goal is to explore and efficiently use its indigenous resources, therefore the country plans to take the lead in an energy transition that would usher in the contemporary energy revolution. The Indian government needs to increase domestic oil and natural gas output via market-oriented policies and strategies and attractive production-linked incentive programmes to benefit everyone involved.

India's domestic crude oil output has dropped from 35.9 MMT in 2014-15 to an estimated 29.1 MMT in 2020-21. Over this period, there was a far larger drop in net natural gas output, with a loss of 4.9 billion cubic metres in 2020-21 compared to a loss of 1.1 billion cubic metres in 2014-15. Unfortunately, the oil and gas output numbers don't align with the ambitious goal of cutting

down on imports. Although the government is committed to finding solutions, the challenges seem more intricate than most people realise.

The Indian government is well aware of the difficulties now encountered by the petroleum value chain. As a result, the government is always working to break down obstacles and free up resources so that more local manufacturing may be made. The petroleum and natural gas ministry has been driving ahead with the plan to digitise basin data to improve data accessibility, analysis, and the possibility of exploration and production.

The upstream sector actively seeks favorable tax treatment and a more streamlined field allocation system. Field allocation policy, taxes, royalties, and return on investment are some of the things that have been plaguing businesses. The domestic exploration and production operations are below the expectation despite the increasing measures under OALP and Hydrocarbon exploration and licencing policy.

Producing from greenfields has a unique set of problems. Pre-NELP assets contribute significantly to domestic oil and gas production but are having trouble keeping up with demand. When the age of the field, they begin to produce less. Thus, it is essential for the industry that increased oil recovery methods be used. Due to the favourable market circumstances from the high oil prices, corporations should have no trouble investing in increased oil recovery.

Companies working in exploration and production will see a boost in output after adopting digitalization. That's why it's official policy to push the digitization of field data. The government should intervene to hasten exploration and commercial production in the unknown basins so that more of the country's resources may be put into output. It's likely that under a high oil and gas price situation, local and foreign investors would boost efforts to assist the country in cutting its oil and gas imports. The key to realising the promise lies in carefully monitoring the project and the time it is allowed to run its course. Government efforts to untie the oil and gas industries from the mining industry would boost exploration and production operations, allowing for quicker approval. Both difficulties and prospects have presented themselves to the energy sector due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

INDIA'S STANCE TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS LIKE UN AND NATO

Compared to the responses of other major democracies and other U.S. strategic allies, India's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine stands out. New Delhi has chosen a public stance of neutrality towards Russia that belies its unhappiness with Moscow's conflict. Iran has refused to publicly name Russia as the initiator of the crisis and has abstained from votes in the UN Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council, all condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine. Many Americans, including members of Vice President Joe Biden's administration, were dismayed by India's neutral stance because it revealed a chasm between Washington and New Delhi on a central issue of global order: the morality of using military force to alter international borders and occupy the territory of another country. Indian strategic intellectuals agree that their country's diplomatic neutrality eventually indicates what one Indian expert has dubbed "a subliminal pro-Moscow attitude," regardless of where they stand on the causes and origins of the conflict in Ukraine. This is especially perplexing in light of recent events, in which India has joined the United States in opposing Chinese ambition in the Indo-Pacific while at the same time looking tolerant of the much more flagrant Russian belligerence in Europe (Tellis, 2022).

The peculiar Indian stance may be explained by how New Delhi sees its interests, however. India's stated attitudes were meant to indicate — maybe a little more quietly than is deserved — its dismay with Russian activities, but it has refrained from making any public condemnations of Russia due to its self-interests. To that end, India has been advocating for "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states," "for the immediate cessation of violence and hostilities," "regret[ting] that the path of diplomacy was given up," and "urging the concerned states to return to it," while also stressing that "dialogue is the only answer to settling differences and disputes, however daunting that may appear at this time." In a coded critique of Russian actions, India's Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar reaffirmed India's position "that the global order is anchored on international law, [the] UN Charter, and respect for [the] territorial integrity and sovereignty of states" during his intervention in the parliamentary debate on Ukraine.

New Delhi chose these words to express its dismay over Moscow's violation of international norms, but it has consistently avoided the larger issue of adjudicating the aggression, which would have required it to either blame Russia as the perpetrator of the tragedy or, even worse, exonerate Russia as a victim of NATO's previous expansion (as China had). While Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke with Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Zelenskyy to ask for assistance in repatriating the thousands of Indian students stranded in Ukraine, he also revealed sotto voce that he had difficult discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov. Thus, India tried to communicate its alarm at Russia's activities without really condemning the country.

Since 1955, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev openly announced Moscow's support for Indian claims to Jammu and Kashmir, Russia has been seen as a reliable ally of India (when the West was either ambivalent or opposed in comparison). The Soviet Union used its veto power in the UN Security Council six times to protect India's interests (and Russia could be called upon to do so again in future crises). India's reluctance to criticise Russia, despite its actions being viewed as terrible and on occasion hurting India's essential interests, is reinforced by the need of keeping Russia on side via its veto-wielding prerogatives. India's stance now is consistent with its historical tolerance of Soviet aggression, such as in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979. New Delhi has been too kind when calling out Russian misdeeds, a courtesy that has traditionally never been afforded to the United States to the same extent. This is even though this latest crisis has undermined India's regional environment for forty years and counting.

India is now forced to make some tough strategic decisions due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a result, Indian authorities consider not publicly criticising Russia to be the best of the terrible options confronting New Delhi. The United States had hoped that India, with its democratic credentials and its concerns about protecting the rules-based order, would publicly oppose Russian actions; however, doing so now would only anger Russia at a time when India is still not confident in the United States as a sturdy or substitute partner. India arrives at the same conclusion via more cynical means: "an aggressive Russia is a problem for the United States and the West, not for India," as one Indian researcher, Happymon Jacob, put it. Russia, not India, should be concerned about the development of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When solving the "China crisis," India needs help from the United States/Western world and Russia. New Delhi believes that the United States will help India balance China out of pure self-

interest, thus it has worked to assure Russia's cooperation by not publicly denouncing China. The current Indian strategy of refusing to publicly condemn Russian actions could be undermined by several outcomes, including the decline of Russian power or the consolidation of a close Sino-Russian relationship, both of which would deny India the beneficial partnership that it has sought to preserve with Moscow, or highly punitive actions by the United States against India, which would make the immediate costs of New Delhi's neutrality far more painful than the benefits that India could hope to reap from its stance. Policymakers in India are now more worried about the former issue than the latter. They have concluded that the US will be far more lenient with India's public neutrality towards Russia, even though it may periodically chide New Delhi over the same, since Washington desires New Delhi's support in dealing with the danger presented by China in the Indo-Pacific. Indian authorities have calculated that Washington will give them a pass as long as India continues to work with the United States to curb Chinese aggressiveness since India means more to the United States in the Indo-Pacific than it ever could in Europe. New Delhi seems to have taken not just a self-interested but a really successful gamble since it has ended up "in a sweet place, courted by the Quad [and by] China and Russia" concurrently. In this light, it seems that India's decision to put its values on the line was worth it when weighed against the potential losses it faced by putting its interests first. It was this calculation that was referred to by Jaishankar when he said, "we monitor what's occurring in the globe, as every nation does, and we take our judgements and appraise it. We know what's best for us and how to defend and develop it, so have faith. So, I believe that one of the changes is that we now have more alternatives than in the past.

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

India has always taken great pride in its non-aligned or neutral foreign policy. The 2022 Russian-Ukrainian War, however, has thrown the world's attention squarely on India's strategic autonomy policy. Although many in the West, especially in Europe and the United States, expected India to lean towards Russia throughout the conflict, New Delhi has taken a far more pro-Russian stance than many had anticipated, given India's strategic independence. With New Delhi's rising role in the Quad grouping of key Indo-Pacific democratic nations in recent years, Western policymakers had anticipated that India would have positioned itself with Ukraine and against Russia. India, however, did not. In its place, it adopted a strategy that looked to the side of Moscow. India remained neutral during the early stages of the conflict when the United Nations overwhelmingly voted to censure Russia for its conduct in Ukraine. Even as the West worked to limit Russia's access to international markets, China nonetheless prioritised maintaining a steady flow of commerce with the country. Despite Western attempts to limit overseas imports of Russian oil, India authorised its refiners to do so in the middle of March. And at the same time, New Delhi and Moscow started discussing de-dollarizing (i.e., not using) U.S. currencies in their commerce so that Russia could more easily sidestep Western economic sanctions. (Chang, 2022).

Russia

India would have had a tough time abruptly severing relations with Russia. Several have pointed out that Russia's role as India's primary supplier of military hardware is a major factor in New Delhi's pivot towards Moscow. Russia supplied India with almost all of its military hardware; the country bought 97% of its main battle tanks, 100% of its armoured combat vehicles, 67% of its submarines, 68% of its anti-ship cruise missiles for its guided-missile destroyers and frigates, and 97% of its fighter aircraft (or its predecessor, the Soviet Union). The BrahMos, India's most

effective home-grown anti-ship cruise missile, was developed in collaboration with Russia. There has been little difficulty in establishing new business relations between India and Russia, which is more evidence of India's dependence on Russia in the economic sphere. Due to its lack of domestic oil and gas resources, India has long relied on imports to meet well over 80% and over 50% of its respective needs. Because of the Western economic sanctions that followed the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, oil prices surged to nearly \$100 per barrel, putting tremendous inflationary pressure on India. Thus, India gladly accepted Russia's offer of oil for \$20-\$35 a barrel in March 2022. In only one month, Indian refiners bought 13 million barrels and pledged to purchase another 15 million barrels, almost double the amount they imported from Russia in 2021. During the same month, India also increased its imports of coking coal and sunflower oil from Russia. Assuming that New Delhi's seeming lack of strategic autonomy is due to its dependence on Russian armaments and commodities is a fallacy. It would imply, rather, that India is strategically reliant on Russia.

Nonetheless, this does not imply that such reliance is irrational. Past Indian leaders did choose alignment with the Soviet Union for much of the Cold War to reap comparable monetary gains. Indian politicians may believe that maintaining a neutral stance towards China and Russia is in their nation's best interest.

China

India's strategic competition with China is among the many concerns that top Indian officials often consider. India and China have been at each other's throats over the 3,488-kilometer-long Himalayan border that separates them for the last sixty years. As early as 2020, Chinese and Indian forces clashed in the Galwan Valley, on the southern fringe of Aksai Chin, a high plateau the size of Switzerland controlled by China since the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Forty Chinese and ninety-six Indian troops were reportedly killed or injured. With the continued escalation of tensions on its border with China, it seems to sense that India would be more concerned with being on good terms with Russia. If that were to happen, India would urgently want a supply of weapons from Russia. It's also possible that Indian officials might see Russia as a potential ally in this kind of battle. With close relations with China, Russia may be able to exert some influence and mediate between the two countries. Also, Russia might push Beijing with its influence over China's energy supply or even deploy its soldiers on its border with China to deflect Chinese military power away from India. Although this may seem optimistic, Indian officials may refer to China's apparent interest in de-escalating on their border after they leaned towards Russia as evidence.

The West

Understandably, the West has sought to convince India to alter its neutral stance towards Russia. This was the goal of U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser Daleep Singh's meeting with India's foreign minister in March 2022. Singh communicated that Russia is not likely to intervene on India's behalf in a fight with China. Yet even if India were to ignore that warning, it would still have reason to distrust itself based on past events. Despite the close ties between the two countries, the Soviet Union did not aid India when war broke out in 1962 along India's border with China. (Moscow may still decide to act strategically independently if so chooses.) Finally, it was the United States that came to India's help. Many Indian leaders, though, have had doubts about the West and the United States in particular. They often mention the U.S. Navy's decision to deploy the aircraft carrier battle group Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal during the Indo-

Pakistani War of 1971. This decision, the reasoning behind which is still up for discussion, is seen by most Indians as evidence of American dependability and as having prevented a conclusive Indian triumph over their archenemy, Pakistan. To add insult to injury, America singled out Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for sanctions in 2005 for participating in the religious violence in Gujarat the year before. Strategically, India wants not to be seen as the West's junior partner.

India may achieve this partly by reminding the West that it has a second ally in Russia. India may also think that the West relies on it more than the West does on India. As a result, from New Delhi's vantage point, India may be certain of some Western backing, whichever way it swings. After all, under President George W. Bush, the United States was ready to risk considerable political capital on a contentious nuclear agreement to appease one of New Delhi's key interests, while making little demands of India in return. China-India border tensions in the late 2010s prompted India to play a more active role in the Quad. As the United States and Europe have begun to distance themselves from Russia (and, to a lesser degree, China), India may believe that the West needs it more than ever. Despite what President Joseph Biden termed India's "slightly wobbly" reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the West has resisted from creating "red lines" or exerting heavy pressure.

It seems that New Delhi's policy of neutrality, which leans towards Moscow, has been successful. Russia's decreased oil prices and increased availability of coking coal, sunflower oil, and other commodities have had a significant economic impact on India. It staked its reputation on gaining favour in Putin's Russia. Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov made it very plain on his March 2022 visit to New Delhi when he offered Moscow's thanks. However, China's fervour over their disputed border seems to have cooled due to India's move towards Russia. Yet despite Western irritation, no serious repercussions have been imposed on India. Yet what Ukraine has learned in its fight against Russia is the power of dedicated Western assistance. Ukraine could not have mounted such a successful fight without the massive and rapid Western military help and economic pressure on Russia. If India and China fight, having unwavering backing from the West might be crucial, particularly if Russia doesn't step up. Although Western backing for India is certain, the question remains whether or not the West would go the additional mile, as it did for Ukraine. India's neutral stance towards Russia may appear less like strategic independence and more like strategic isolation if the West doesn't reciprocate. Although India's decision to maintain a neutral stance towards the West despite its close ties to Russia may have paid dividends in the short term, it may be costly in the long run. This is not to suggest that India should adopt a pro-Western stance. It does imply that India should not lean so strongly towards Russia and instead follow the "middle road" that some of India's leaders claim to want to take. However, the present state of affairs has many in Western capitals worried that India is taking an unnecessary risk by moving farther away from that centre ground. This is true from Berlin to Washington. Keeping Russia as a close ally while ignoring the West might leave India vulnerable without either bloc backing in a crisis.

CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has hampered global trade, particularly for oil- and gas-importing nations like India and Europe. The conflict has set back India's economy, which had been recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. India imports a large portion of its food and energy, and the recent price hikes for both commodities from Russia have harmed its

economy. High manufacturing costs will be passed on to local consumers, causing inflation and slowing economic growth and market expansion. With the present geopolitical situation, India is concerned about its energy security.

India has been attempting to maintain positive relations with Russia and the West while responding to the situation in Ukraine. By consistently abstaining from votes condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine in the UN Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council, India has adopted a policy of public neutrality on the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Some questioned whether India could have taken a stronger stance when it abstained from a vote on a draught resolution to condemn the invasion of Ukraine in the United Nations Security Council. India has not openly condemned Russia but expressed dismay at Moscow's violation of international rules. India's policy is informed by its longstanding defence and diplomatic cooperation with Russia and its attempts to encourage communication to settle conflicts. India remains neutral because it wants to keep Russia on its side; Russia has been a reliable ally since 1955, and the Soviet Union used its veto power in the UN Security Council six times to protect India's interests. Previous Indian presidents aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War for identical reasons, therefore, India's current dependency on Russia does not undermine its strategic independence. India's neutral stance towards Russia may stem from its competition with China and its potential need for Russian armaments in a major confrontation. In addition, India does not consider Russia's aggression against Ukraine its own but rather a matter for the United States and the West. India's balancing act catches the European Union off guard, and France has asked India to take a more assertive stance on the crisis. Notwithstanding Moscow's recognition of India's cautious stance, further U.S. and European Union sanctions on Russia might make it difficult for New Delhi to maintain its current level of trade with Moscow.

The conclusion is that the war in Ukraine profoundly affects India's geopolitical and strategic interests. As an emerging global power, India must address the strain this dispute is putting on its relationships with regional heavyweights like Russia, Europe, and China. The dispute can potentially spread to neighbouring nations, putting at risk India's energy security and regional security at risk. The political ramifications of the conflict are heavily influenced by the United Nations' (UN) engagement and India's position towards NATO. India must ultimately plot a path that protects its interests while preserving its commitment to world peace and stability, a difficult task given the intricate web of ties and interests at play. To achieve this goal, it may be necessary to strike a fine balance and adopt a sophisticated strategy that accounts for all parties' interests. Yet, India must take the Ukrainian war and its repercussions seriously and create a long-term strategy to establish the country as a responsible and dependable actor on the international stage.

REFERENCES

- BBC (2019). Ukraine conflict: Can peace plan in east finally bring peace? BBC News. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49986007>.
- Bebler, A. (2015). The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict Over Crimea. *Teorija In Praksa*. Let. 52 (1-2).
- Chang, F. K. (2022). Indian Foreign Policy And The Russian-Ukrainian War – Analysis. Foreign Policy Research Institute.
- Conant, E. (2014). Behind the Headlines: History and Geography Help Explain Ukraine Crisis. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/2/140224-ukraine-protests-president-ousted-history-geography-background/>.

- Delcour, L. and Wolczuk, K. (2015). Spoiler or facilitator of democratization?: Russia's role in Georgia and Ukraine. *Democratization*, 22:3, 459-478.
- Higgins, A. (2014). A Ukraine City Spins Beyond the Government's Reach. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/world/europe/a-ukraine-city-spins-beyond-the-governments-reach.html?_r=0.
- Kar, S. K. (2022). Russia-Ukraine war: Impact on India's petroleum sector - Opinion by Sanjay Kumar Kar | ET EnergyWorld. Retrieved from: <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/energy-speak/russia-ukraine-war-impact-on-india-s-petroleum-sector/5243>.
- Mitrokhin, N. (2015). Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass. *Osteuropa* 64(8):3-16.
- Pandey, V. (2022). Ukraine: Why India is not criticising Russia over invasion - BBC News. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60552273>.
- Sherr, J. (2015). The New East-West Discord: Russian Objectives, Western Interests (pp. 21-31, Rep.). Clingendael Institute.
- Tellis, A. J. (2022). "What Is in Our Interest?": India and the Ukraine War - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/25/what-is-in-our-interest-india-and-ukraine-war-pub-86961>.