

India Faces Dilemma in Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Delhi has tried to stay politically neutral during the conflict but may not be able to do so for much longer

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Today, the dangers of military escalation are beyond description.

*What is now happening in Ukraine has serious geopolitical implications. **It could lead us into a World War III scenario.***

It is important that a peace process be initiated with a view to preventing escalation.

Global Research condemns Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

A Bilateral Peace Agreement is required.

“I stand with Russia.”

“I stand with Putin”

After Europe and the United States expressed dissatisfaction with India’s “neutral” attitude in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, netizens from India quickly put those two tags on the top of the Indian list.

For many Indian netizens, Russia is the “biggest ally” of India while Indians should support their old friend Putin, who is rebelling against the West, and maintain diplomatic and defense relations with Russia.

But for the Modi government, supporting Russia is not an easy decision.

Detachment to dilemma

As a frequent non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, India is also an important partner that the US and Russia have been competing for over the years. Its attitude is extremely critical to both parties. Although India's attitude remained generally neutral, there were some changes before and after the Ukraine conflict.

Specifically, before the conflict, India's attitude was relatively detached, and it tried its best to avoid discussions on relevant issues.

On January 19, US **Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman** called Indian **Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla** to discuss the Russia-Ukraine issue and tried to coordinate with the Indian side. But India abstained from voting on the UN Security Council resolution on the Ukraine-Russia issue on January 29.



File photo shows an earlier confab:: Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla held consultations with US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman on October 7, 2021. Image: @DeputySecState/Twitter

India's permanent ambassador to the UN Security Council, **TS Tirumurti**, stressed at the meeting on Ukraine that, taking into account the legitimate security interests of all countries, it is best for all parties to avoid any actions that would increase tensions and jointly ensure long-term peace and stability in the region.

At the following QUAD foreign ministers' meeting, India also became the only member state that did not criticize Russia's position. There was no statement concerning the Russia-Ukraine issue in the joint statement of the meeting.

All these words and deeds showed that India was trying to stay neutral on the issue and avoid provoking Russia and the US. However, India's position avoided the relevant issues on Russia. At that time, Tanvi Madan, director of the India Project at the Brookings Institution, said India would be trapped in diplomatic passivity if Moscow started taking military action against Ukraine:

First, China and Russia would form a closer tie, threatening the situation around India. Second, the intensified conflict between the US and Russia would create huge pressure on India-Russia relations and make it difficult for India to maintain a balance. The third would be the weakening of the anti-China alliance. The US and the West would seek to improve their relations with China amid their worsening relationship with Russia. Such a trend would weaken India's ability to seek international allies against China.

After Russia started its military action against Ukraine, India still tried to stay neutral but more subtly. On the one hand, the US and Ukraine repeatedly demanded support from India. On February 24, Ukraine's ambassador to India, Igor Polikha, "demanded and earnestly requested" India's support. US President Joe Biden also said the US and India were still discussing an alignment on the Ukraine-Russia crisis.

However, India remained neutral. On February 26, it abstained for the second time in a vote at the United Nations on a US-sponsored resolution condemning Russia. On February 27, it abstained for the third time when the United Nations Security Council voted on a resolution calling for a rare emergency special session to discuss Russia's "aggression" in Ukraine. These abstentions have fully demonstrated India's neutral attitude between the US and Russia.

On the other hand, shortly after learning that Putin approved the march on Ukraine on February 24, Indian **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** called Putin on the phone and called on Russia to immediately stop the violence. Modi emphasized that only through honest and sincere dialogue could the differences between Russia and NATO be resolved. At the same time, India also began to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

According to Indian media reports, on March 2 Foreign Secretary Shringla said at a press conference about the "Operation Ganges" evacuation from Ukraine that India had sent two batches of humanitarian relief supplies to Ukraine through Poland to help it overcome its difficulty. The two tons of supplies reportedly included medicine, blankets, tents, tarpaulins, goggles, water storage tanks, sleeping pads, and surgical gloves. Polikha thanked India for providing aid to Ukraine.

But since then, India has faced a dilemma in its relations with both the US and Russia.

Strategic considerations

India's neutral stance in the United Nations has drawn criticism from the US and Ukraine. Ukrainian **President Volodymyr Zelensky** "urged" India to give political support in the UN Security Council. At a press conference, US State Department spokesman **Ned Price** reiterated that the Biden administration "requested" all countries to constructively exert influence on Russia.

Before the Security Council vote, India had been repeatedly lobbied by the US and Ukraine and warned of some serious consequences. The US government was reportedly considering whether to impose sanctions on India under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) because India had previously purchased the S-400 missile air defense system from Russia.

However, India still stood firm, sticking to its neutrality while offering help to Ukraine.

There are three considerations here:

The first is the practical consideration of India's balanced diplomacy.

India maintains an important partnership with the US to compete with China in the Asia-Pacific region, but it also has a traditional strategic relationship with Russia. India sources 60% of its defense equipment from Russia, and it also has many areas of high-tech cooperation with Russia, including nuclear energy, space and the joint production of certain weapons systems, such as [BrahMos missiles](#).

Hence, India has always sought to keep good relations with both the US and Russia without having to take sides, even though the developments in Ukraine have made it more complicated for India to continue navigating between the two powers.

In addition, the Russia-Ukraine conflict will probably put the US in a difficult position in Europe in the context of the long-standing hostility in Sino-Indian relations. This would force the US to shift its focus from the Indo-Pacific region to Europe and hurt India's security interests in the long run. Therefore, India must take a more nuanced stance on the crisis by supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity while emphasizing and supporting Russia's security concerns.

The second consideration is India's relative confidence in its economic importance.

Some Indian elites believe that the West must rely on India in many ways due to the country's huge population, broad market prospects and advantageous geographical location. Global businesses want to sell their products and services in India, and the US military-industrial complex also wants to tap into such a huge market as India.

For the western countries that treat China as a long-term and strategic partner, India is also an irreplaceable strategic partner. The Modi government wants Washington's elites to understand the calculations and the trade-offs that India faces. As the struggle between great powers intensifies and the international political environment becomes more volatile, the US needs to increase its attention to Europe and further strengthen its cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, the Modi government believes that it will not have to pay a real price for its wait-and-see approach to Russia.

The third consideration is India's urgent need to evacuate its citizens from Ukraine. Since some time ago, the evacuation of overseas Indians has become a very important "show" for the Modi government's diplomatic work.



Indians being evacuated from Ukraine. Photo: News18

From the evacuation of Indian nationals from Yemen in 2015 to the “Vande Bharat” operation during the pandemic in 2020, the so-called largest evacuation in history, the Modi government has paid more and more attention to demonstrating to the Indian people its concern for their overseas compatriots, as well as the execution capability and responsibility of its administration and army.

The Modi government cannot afford to lose any ground in the important elections in Uttar Pradesh between February 10 and March 7. It will not pass up any opportunity to show its achievements, and the opposition parties will not let pass any mistakes that might weaken the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

There are 20,000 Indians in Ukraine, including more than 18,000 students. After the conflict broke out, Modi asked Putin to ensure the safety of international students in Ukraine, held special meetings for three consecutive days to deploy rescue matters and sent four senior minister-level officials to the front to take charge of related work.

On March 1, India’s Ministry of External Affairs confirmed that an Indian citizen was killed in a military conflict in Ukraine. Modi immediately held a high-level meeting and expressed condolences to the victim’s family. The Indian National Congress, the opposition party, still slammed the Modi government for failing to evacuate the Indian students stranded in Ukraine in time. Therefore, staying “neutral” but providing humanitarian supplies to Ukraine has remained the best choice for India to carry out its evacuation work.

Has China won?

Regardless of these considerations, Indian officials still hope to play a “neutral” role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. But at the same time, some Indian strategists have been aware that it is increasingly difficult to maintain a “balance” between the US and Russia. Some Indian experts have started thinking about India’s future prospects. Interestingly, no matter how hard they try, these Indian experts have not changed their old mindset but continue to treat

China as India's main competitor.

Many Indian experts are worried that China will become the biggest winner while India will face a more difficult situation after the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

According to some Indian experts, the conflict has further increased tensions between Russia and Europe, and the United States. Such tensions are unlikely to ease in the short term and have forced Russia to turn to China to offset the West's sanctions. Undoubtedly, the new market in Russia will also help China resolve its overcapacity problems. This is especially important for China in its ongoing trade war with the US, its largest trading partner.

Due to these two factors, Russia may lean toward China in Sino-India disputes, reducing India's bargaining chips. In the context of the unresolved Sino-Indian border issue, Russia's choice between China and India is inevitably worrying the Indian experts.

Some Indian experts have also realized that long-term tension with Russia is not conducive to the stability and peace of Europe – while breaking up with China and Russia simultaneously also does not fulfill EU countries' interests. Thus, Europe's break-up with Russia has given China a window of opportunity to draw closer to Europe.

It is obvious that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has forced the US to focus on Eastern Europe, reduce its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region and even use the QUAD, a tailor-made anti-China platform, to criticize Russia. All these developments not only favor China but also expose India to a very dangerous situation.

Although India can consider many different diplomatic options in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it will feel insecure if it still has a mindset of confronting China. With such anxiety, India is worried that it won't be able to enjoy anymore the support needed from both the US and Russia to balance China.

This kind of mentality of “wanting both” may be the real underlying logic of India's neutrality on the issue of Russia and Ukraine. However, as the US-Russia conflict has escalated, it is worthwhile for India to think about whether, by staying neutral, it will win both – or lose both.

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