

The Russia-Ukraine War: The Indian Dilemma

Saume Saptaparna Nath

Editorial Team

Delwar Hossain
Aynul Islam
Sheikh Shams Morsalin
Shariful Islam
Ali Siddiquee
Saiful Islam

About the Contributor

Saume Saptaparna Nath is working as a Research Associate at the Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA), Dhaka, Bangladesh. Formerly, she was a Project Coordinator of 'Revive Project', a joint venture of UNDP and ICE, University of Dhaka. She also worked as an Intern at Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh.

India's ambivalence toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine expressed two dichotomies. As a frequent non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, India is also a crucial partner that the US and Russia have been competing for over the years. Its attitude is extremely critical to both parties. India also has strategic interests with both of the major powers in order to counter Chinese dominance in South Asia. However, in recent Ukraine Crisis, India's role has been questioned by its western allies. Except for India, all other Quad nations had taken a position against Russia. The US, Australia and Japan have either imposed or are in the process of imposing strict economic sanctions on Russia. Other Quad nations may join hands with the US in any kind of military operation as well. When the Ukraine Crisis occurred, India tried to play the role of a mediator in the conflict. It even abstained from voting in the United Nations General Assembly against the proposal of condemning Russia. However, India's reluctance reveals its strategic dilemma regarding the Ukraine war. Its policy towards Russia is softer than other Quad members. It seems, it does not want to disappoint its biggest defense weapon supplier and strategic partner. Several hours after the February 25

Security Council meeting, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and asked for India's support after briefing Modi on the situation. According to local media, Modi called for an immediate cessation of violence, as he did during earlier phone talks with Putin. India is now under immense pressure from United States to abdicate its neutrality and bandwagon to their policy. In order to understand India's ambivalence, it is important to look at the historical background of its relationship with both Russia and USA. Besides, their foreign policy goal is significant to understand their current behavior regarding Ukraine Crisis.

There is also a historical background to India's equivocation. History can be traced back to cold war period. For a while, India and China cooperated as leaders of nonaligned nations due to the personal relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, and Zhou Enlai, the first premier of communist China. However, during 1962 border war between the two countries dampened relations. As China moved closer to Pakistan, India signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971. Although it did not abandon its official policy of nonalignment, India agreed with the Soviet Union to hold talks if either party comes under attack or is threatened by other countries, effectively making them allies. Since, India and Russia share a time-tested relationship. On the flip side, Indian strategic partnership with the US has grown over the years. The Indo-US strategic relations have a global dimension with convergence on several issues, like in the Indo-Pacific.

Balancing: As an Option?

While the whole world is talking against the Russian invasion in Ukraine, India has maintained a cautious silence. One of the foreign policy objects of India is to counter the dominance of China in South Asia. A new formed China-Russian

alliance over Ukraine war can put immense pressure on India. Pakistan might join them later as China- Pakistan defense ties continue to deepen. It will encircle India from various sides which are not good for its strategic position. Besides, United States capacity of supporting its allies amid recent crises has made India dubious regarding their relationship. Many Indian strategists noticed that it was Russia not the United States who came to help India during Covid 19 surge last year.

There are other issues that India is also taking into consideration. India depends on Russia for 60% to 70% of its weapons. It this explains New Delhi's reluctance to criticize Russian aggression. India is an important ally of both — the US and Russia. Similarly, India-Russia strategic partnership has a unique history. One of the success stories includes supersonic cruise missile BrahMos. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a clear violation of sovereignty that should have prompted India, the self-appointed champion of the nonalignment movement to denounce the act. However, India continually abstained from voting on U.N. resolutions to condemn the invasion because of its desire to cooperate with the Soviet Union. India's stance toward Russian aggression contradicts its own security strategy. While increasing its involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, a security framework comprising Japan, the U.S., Australia and India - India has also expanded military cooperation with Russia. In their meeting in December 2021, Modi and Putin agreed to jointly develop and produce military technologies and weapons over the next decade.

India's move to strengthens defense ties with Russia while remaining a Quad member made strategic sense within the context of the rivalry between the U.S. and China, which Washington views as "the only competitor" capable of mounting a challenge to a stable and open

international system. However, Russia's invasion has completely changed the dynamic. The Ukrainian crisis is forcing India to choose between upholding universal values and pursuing national interests. India's choice could have a large impact on Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. On the other hand, India's neutrality can possibly reduce its importance to the West which may result in economic sanctions imposed by Biden administration. Hence, the full scale extended war could be the worst scenario for India's strategic objects as it will strengthen Beijing and shifts the focus of United States from South Asia to Europe. India is trying to maintain a balance between Russia and United States. If the conflict escalates, the balancing approach of India will come under risks due to the pressure from Washington and China-Russia-Pakistan nexus in South Asia. India's distance with United States will provide Russia access to the Indian Ocean through China which makes Chinese military presence more rampant. This can possibly counter India's dominance in Indian Ocean region.

India's Minister for External Affairs S Jaishankar pointed out that the conflict over Ukraine "derives from the post-Soviet politics, the expansion of NATO, the dynamics between Russia and Europe, and Russia and the West broadly." Therefore, India as a rational actor is shaping its policies according to its national interest. It understands that bandwagon with Western power won't serve its geopolitical interests. Russia also contributes in the multi-polar world order which power dispersed beyond Washington and Beijing. The more things escalate, the more India will face challenges as it is playing a see-saw game with both countries.

In fact, India tries to maintain good relations with both the US and Russia as it wants to use the two powers to balance China. But as it continues to stay neutral on the Ukraine issue, it may eventually lose both powers as Russia may further lean toward China while the US will turn its focus toward Europe and away from the Indo-Pacific region. It will be a dilemma India if the war escalates or United States imposes more sanctions on Russia.



CONTACT US



The Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA)
House 12, Road 4, Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka-1209, Bangladesh



cbgaffairs@gmail.com, info.cbga@gmail.com



+8801841 900816, +8801630 869696



www.cbgabd.org/



CBGA-The Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs
fb.com/cbgaffairs



CBGA-The Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs
linkedin.com/company/cbgaffairs/



@cbgaffairs
instagram.com/cbgaffairs/



The Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs



@cbgaffairs
<https://twitter.com/cbgaffairs>