

Russia Ukraine Conflict & India's Stand on the Issue

Arshi

Abstract: *India's stand on Russia- Ukraine conflict India has long maintained a cautious silence on the Russia-Ukraine conflict issue. But recently India has spoken in the matter and called for peaceful resolution of the issue through sustained diplomatic efforts for long-time peace and stability.*

Keywords: Cold War, Soviet Union, NATO, Russia-Ukraine Crises, India, European Union

1. Introduction

Ukraine was a cornerstone of the Soviet Union, the archrival of the United States during the Cold War. Behind only Russia, it was the second-most populous and powerful of the fifteen Soviet republics, home to much of the union's agricultural production, defense industries, and military, including the Black Sea Fleet and some of the nuclear arsenal.

Contestation about post-Cold War central European territoriality and resurrecting a burnished Russian past is at the core of the Ukraine crisis.

2. Historical Background

Ukraine and Russia share hundreds of years of cultural, linguistic and familial links.

For many in Russia and in the ethnically Russian parts of Ukraine, the shared heritage of the countries is an emotional issue that has been exploited for electoral and military purposes.

As part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was the second-most powerful Soviet republic after Russia, and was crucial strategically, economically and culturally.

The balance of power in the region, Ukraine being a crucial buffer between Russia and the West, Ukraine's bid for NATO membership and Russian interests in the Black Sea accompanied by the protests in the Ukraine are the major causes of the ongoing conflict.

Ukraine was so vital to the union that its decision to sever ties in 1991 proved to be a coup de grâce for the ailing superpower.

In its nearly three decades of independence, Ukraine has sought to forge its own path as a sovereign state while looking to align more closely with Western institutions, including the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, Kyiv has struggled to balance its foreign relations and to bridge deep internal divisions.

A more nationalist, Ukrainian-speaking population in western parts of the country has generally supported greater

integration with Europe, while a mostly Russian-speaking community in the east has favored closer ties with Russia.

Ukraine became a battleground in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and began arming and abetting separatists in the Donbas region in the country's southeast.

Russia's seizure of Crimea was the first time since World War II that a European state annexed the territory of another. More than fourteen thousand people have died in the conflict, the bloodiest in Europe since the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

Crises of 2013-14

Ukraine's ties with the European Union that brought tensions to a head with Russia. In late 2013, President Yanukovich, acting under pressure from his supporters in Moscow, scrapped plans to formalize a closer economic relationship with the EU. Russia had at the same time been pressing Ukraine to join the not-yet-formed Eurasian Economic Union. Many Ukrainians perceived Yanukovich's decision as a betrayal by a deeply corrupt and incompetent government, and it ignited countrywide protests known as Euromaidan.

Putin framed the ensuing tumult of Euromaidan, which forced Yanukovich from power, as a Western-backed "fascist coup" that endangered the ethnic Russian majority in Crimea. (Western leaders dismissed this as baseless propaganda reminiscent of the Soviet era.) In response, Putin ordered a covert invasion of Crimea that he later justified as a rescue operation. "There is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line," Putin said in a March 2014 address formalizing the annexation.

Putin employed a similar narrative to justify his support for separatists in southeastern Ukraine, another region home to large numbers of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. He famously referred to the area as Novorossiia (New Russia), a term dating back to eighteenth-century imperial Russia. Armed Russian provocateurs, including some agents of Russian security services, are believed to have played a central role in stirring the anti-Euromaidan secessionist movements in the region into a rebellion. However, unlike Crimea, Russia continues to officially deny its involvement in the Donbas conflict.

Conflict in 2022

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With the invasion of Ukraine, agreements like the Minsk Protocols of 2014, and the Russia-NATO Act of 1997 stand all but voided.

The G7 nations strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Sanctions have been imposed by the U. S., the European Union (EU), the UK, Australia, Canada and Japan.

China rejected calling Russia's moves on Ukraine an "invasion" and urged all sides to exercise restraint.

India did not join the Western powers' condemnation of Russia's intervention in Crimea and kept a low profile on the issue.

More recently, India abstained on a US-sponsored UNSC resolution that "deplores in the strongest terms" Russia's "aggression" against Ukraine, with New Delhi saying dialogue is the only answer to settling differences and disputes and voicing "regret" that the path of diplomacy was given up.

China too abstained, along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Ukraine issue has reached a critical point, with Russia following up its recognition of rebel areas in eastern Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk) with a full-fledged invasion to "demilitarise" and "denazify" Ukraine.

This move by Moscow represents a rejection of the inviolability of European national borders as agreed to in the Helsinki agreement in 1975, as well as a major challenge to the global order.

While Russia is India's biggest and time-tested supplier of military hardware, the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom are all vital partners that India cannot afford to antagonize. Given India's strategic interests, the balanced approach that India has taken thus far is a pragmatic way forward.

The Ukraine crisis is based on a contest about the post-Cold War central European territoriality and the resurrecting of a burnished Russian past.

Ukraine and Russia have had cultural, linguistic, and familial ties for hundreds of years.

For many in Russia and ethnically Russian regions of Ukraine, the countries' shared heritage is an emotional issue that has been used for electoral and military purposes.

Ukraine was the 2nd-most powerful Soviet republic after Russia as part of the Soviet Union, and it was significant strategically, economically, and culturally.

The major causes of the ongoing conflict are the region's balance of power, Ukraine's role as a crucial buffer between Russia and the West, Ukraine's bid for NATO membership, and Russian interests in the Black Sea, all of which are accompanied by protests in Ukraine.

What is the present situation?

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Russia's objectives in Ukraine

Putin's Russia has been described as a revanchist power, keen to regain its former power and prestige. "It was always Putin's goal to restore Russia to the status of a great power in northern Eurasia," writes Gerard Toal, an international affairs professor at Virginia Tech, in his book *Near Abroad*. "The end goal was not to re-create the Soviet Union but to make Russia great again."

By seizing Crimea, Russia has solidified its control of a critical foothold on the Black Sea. With a larger and more sophisticated military presence there, Russia can project power deeper into the Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa, where it has traditionally had limited influence.

Russia's strategic gains in the Donbas are more fragile. Supporting the separatists have, at least temporarily, increased Russia's bargaining power vis-à-vis Ukraine, but the region's future is highly uncertain. Fostering political instability there may be Russia's aim until other factors shift in its favor.

Putin has made clear that he will never allow Ukraine to become “anti-Russian” and will continue to push back against the expansion of Western influence in Ukraine. In July 2021, he penned an article explaining his views of the two countries’ shared history, describing Russians and Ukrainians as “one people” who effectively occupy the same historical and spiritual space.

Conflict impact India

The Russia-Ukraine crisis will drive up the cost of cooking gas, petrol, and other fuels for Indian households and businesses. Higher oil prices raise freight and transportation costs.

Depending on how long global oil prices continue high, the tensions may call the RBI's credibility in making inflation projections into question, as well as upset the government's budget calculations, particularly the fiscal deficit.

The rise in crude oil prices will boost India's oil import bills, and gold imports may rise again, putting pressure on the rupee.

India's petroleum product imports from Russia are only a fraction of its total oil import bill and are hence replaceable.

Alternative sources of fertilizer and sunflower oil, on the other hand, may not be as easy.

Exports to Russia account for less than 1% of overall Indian exports, but pharmaceutical and tea exports, as well as shipments to CIS countries, could face challenges. Increases in freight rates could also make overall exports less competitive.

The Russia-Ukraine crisis will send cooking gas, petrol and other fuel bills soaring for Indian households and businesses. Higher oil prices add to freight/transportation costs.

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The surge in crude oil prices will lead to an increase in India's oil import bills, and gold imports could jump back up, keeping the rupee under pressure.

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However, getting alternative sources for fertilisers and sunflower oil may not be as easy.

Exports to Russia account for less than 1% of India's total exports, but exports of pharmaceuticals and tea could face some challenges, as will shipments to CIS countries. Freight rate hikes could make overall exports less competitive, too.

India made its first statement on the crisis articulated by Ministry of External Affairs' official spokesperson Arindam Bagchi.

With key strategic partners on both sides, India can't afford any hasty moves hurting its vital stakes. While there is concern about Russia's “muscle-flexing”, New Delhi does not want to jeopardise its close military ties with Moscow, particularly amid the stand-off with China on the eastern border.

While it has stagnated in some areas and atrophied in others, the strongest pillar is defence. Although New Delhi has consciously diversified its new purchases from other countries, the bulk of its defence equipment are from Russia: Estimates say 60-70 % of its supplies are from there.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has held informal summits with the heads of only two countries - Putin and China's Xi Jinping. Now Russia has emerged as a key diplomatic player amid the tension between India and China.

India's foreign and defence ministers have negotiated with their Chinese counterparts in Russia in the last year and half. Russia is also key to India's engagements in Afghanistan, after Kabul fell to the Taliban.

The US and Europe are both important partners from India's strategic calculus. Many American platforms have been used for reconnaissance and surveillance along the India-China border. Winter clothing for 50, 000 troops has been sourced from these Western partners.

The West's approach towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought Moscow much closer to China. India has always felt that it was the West that enabled this with the anti-Chinese rhetoric from Washington and the collapse of oil prices, making Russia increasingly dependent on Chinese consumption. Western analysts see this as a “friendship of convenience” between two countries led by strongmen.

Beijing and Moscow, however, do not always see eye to eye with each other. China does not recognise Crimea as part of Russia, and Moscow, formally speaking, takes a neutral stance on Beijing's claims in the South China Sea.

Concerns for India

There is an Indian community in Ukraine, mostly students in medical colleges. The Indian Embassy in capital Kyiv has started collating information on them, as part of preparations for possible hostilities. As per government estimates, 18, 000 Indian students were in Ukraine in 2020, but the numbers may have dipped due to Covid lockdowns and classes moving online

When Russia had annexed Crimea, India had expressed “concern” but also qualified it by talking of “legitimate Russian interests”. Putin had thanked India for taking a “restrained and objective” stand, and called up the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to express his gratitude.

Keeping in mind its ties with Russia, sources said, India hasn't issued any condemnatory statements as is being done by the Western powers. For now, New Delhi is hoping that the situation will be resolved by skilled negotiators on both

sides. CIA chief William Burns has handled several such tough talks in his previous diplomatic roles; while on the other side is Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Major concerns for India

World War scenario: Any conflict-where the U. S. and its European allies are ranged against Russia will impact the whole world-economically and in terms of security, and India, as a partner to both Moscow and Washington will either have to take sides, or be prepared to deal with unhappiness from both sides.

S-400 delivery and US waiver: The crisis comes precisely as India's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system is under way-and New Delhi hopes for a waiver of U. S. sanctions on this. Conflict will complicate both the delivery of the system, and the possibility of a presidential waiver.

Moves focus from China: Just as U. S. and Europe had grown more focused on their Indo-Pacific strategy that puts India centre-stage, and India grapples with Chinese aggression and land-grab at the Line of Actual Control, and 100, 000 troops along the boundary on both sides, the world's attention is diverted from China to Russia.

Brings Russia China closer: The Crisis will make Moscow more dependent on friends like China, and build a regional bloc of sorts that India is not a part of. In Beijing this week, the future seems evident-as India has announced a diplomatic and political boycott of the Olympic games-while Putin, Central Asian Presidents, and Pakistan PM Imran Khan are all in Beijing to stand in solidarity with Xi Jinping.

Energy crisis: In any conflict-Europe worries Russia will turn down gas and oil supplies-driving energy prices up. Already tensions have pushed oil prices up 14% in a month past \$90 and analyst say they could hit \$125 a barrel if the situation is not resolved.

3. Conclusion

India's stand on Russia-Ukraine conflict

India has long maintained a cautious silence on the Russia-Ukraine conflict issue. But recently India has spoken in the matter and called for peaceful resolution of the issue through sustained diplomatic efforts for long-time peace and stability. India has risked US sanctions under Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) by the buying S-400 missile defence system from Russia. India also needs the support of the US and EU in balancing its strategic calculus.

It is also worthwhile to note that India had abstained from voting in a United Nations resolution upholding Ukraine's territorial integrity following Russia's Crimean annexation in 2014.

India is maintaining a patient approach by hoping that the situation will be handled peacefully by skilful negotiators.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is threatening the delicate balance the world is in right now and escalation can have manifold impacts on a global scale. There is a strong case for de-escalation, as a peaceful culmination of severed relations is for the good of everyone in the region and the world over. The US can play a central role in the management of the Russia-Ukraine conflict with support from the other European allies like the UK, Germany, and France. Negotiations and strategic investments should be aimed at creating sustainable resolution of the conflict.

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