



“What Is in Our Interest”: India and the Ukraine War

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India’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been distinctive among the major democracies and among U.S. strategic partners. Despite its discomfort with Moscow’s war, New Delhi has adopted a studied public neutrality toward Russia. It has abstained from successive votes in the UN [Security Council](#), [General Assembly](#), and [Human Rights Council](#) that condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine and thus far has refused to openly call out Russia as the instigator of the crisis. For many in the United States, including in President Joe Biden’s administration, India’s neutrality has been disappointing because it signaled a sharp divergence between Washington and New Delhi on a fundamental issue of global order, namely, the legitimacy of using force to change borders and occupy another nation’s territory through a blatant war of conquest. Whatever their views on the genesis and the precipitants of the Ukraine war, most Indian strategic elites would admit that their country’s diplomatic neutrality ultimately signifies what one Indian scholar has called “a [subtle pro-Moscow position](#).” This seems particularly incongruous today because India stands shoulder-to-

shoulder with the United States in opposing Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific while at the same time appearing tolerant of the vastly more egregious Russian belligerence in Europe.

The oddity of this Indian position is explained by New Delhi’s perceptions of its interests. These interests have led India to avoid condemning Russia publicly, even though its declared positions were intended to convey—perhaps a tad more subtly than is justified—its dismay with Russian actions. Thus, India urged “[respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states](#),” called “for the immediate cessation of violence and hostilities,” regretted “that the path of diplomacy was given up” and urged the concerned states to “return to it,” and reiterated that “dialogue is the only answer to settling differences and disputes, however daunting that may appear at this moment.” India’s Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar reinforced these themes during his intervention in the parliamentary debate on Ukraine when, in a coded critique of Russian actions, he reiterated [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.”

Through such words, New Delhi chose to convey its dismay about Moscow’s breach of international norms, but it focused disproportionately on the humanitarian catastrophe produced by the crisis while consistently avoiding the larger issue of adjudicating the aggression, which would have required it to either identify Russia as the perpetrator of the tragedy or, even worse, exculpate Russia as a victim of NATO’s previous expansion (as China had). To the degree that India sought to signal its discomfort with Moscow’s decisions, it did so only indirectly—by revealing sotto voce that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had difficult discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, even as Modi also engaged in conversations with Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Zelenskyy, both to seek his help in repatriating the thousands of Indian students stranded in Ukraine and to offer humanitarian assistance to Kyiv. While India thus sought to convey its consternation with Russian actions, it still refused to condemn Moscow transparently.

India’s tightrope walk on the Ukraine war has been described as “strategic ambivalence.” Far from it—it actually reflects New Delhi’s deliberate choice, even if a constrained one. This decision to steer clear of publicly condemning Russia is shaped not by abstract concerns about the integrity of the world order but by purposeful Indian calculations about how alienating Russia might undermine its security.

In the first instance, India’s public neutrality toward the Russian invasion is driven fundamentally by its concerns vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. New Delhi sees both of these states as immediate and enduring threats, and it believes that preserving its friendship with Moscow will help to prevent deepening Russian ties with China and

to limit Russian temptations to build new strategic ties with Pakistan. Both China and Pakistan desire closer ties with Russia than India feels comfortable with. Consequently, New Delhi aims to minimize Moscow’s proximity to both of its rivals. Toward that end, it has concluded that studiously avoiding any open criticism of Russia offers it a chance to arrest the tightening Sino-Russian embrace while preventing a new dalliance between Moscow and Islamabad, both of which undermine India’s core interests.

Other considerations combine to reinforce this primary geopolitical calculation. Russia is viewed as having been a sturdy friend of India’s going back to 1955, when Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev publicly declared Moscow’s support for Indian claims over Jammu and Kashmir (when the West was either ambivalent or opposed in comparison). And the Soviet Union wielded vetoes in the UN Security Council on India’s behalf on six occasions (and Russia could be called upon to do so again in future crises). Keeping Russia on side through its veto-wielding prerogatives thus remains an important consideration that reinforces India’s reticence to criticize Russia, even when its behaviors are judged to be deplorable and on occasion undermining India’s vital interests. On this count, India’s posture today remains fundamentally consistent with its past forbearance in the face of previous Russian aggression, for example, in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Afghanistan in 1979. Despite this last crisis having subverted India’s regional environment for forty years and counting, New Delhi has been excessively charitable when calling out Russian misdemeanors, a courtesy that historically has never been equally extended to the United States.

The underlying reason for this asymmetrical treatment is that India now has a durable view of Russia as a “dependable partner.” The evidence often trotted out in justification is that Moscow, for example, did not ally with or arm Pakistan against India; it

supported New Delhi against U.S. pressure during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war; and it has never criticized developments in Indian domestic politics, unlike the United States, which has done so on many occasions. The evidence undermining this unfair comparison with Washington—the substantial U.S. assistance (including food aid) to India early in its postindependence history, Washington’s military and political support to New Delhi during the darkest moments of the 1962 Sino-Indian war (when the Soviet Union was either ambivalent or supported China), and the more recent, precedent-breaking U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear cooperation agreement—unfortunately does not seem to count for much, in contrast. Consequently, between the nostalgia about Russia being “a very reliable [and] long term partner” and the suspicion that the United States could prove to be “a fickle and uncertain strategic partner,” the threshold that must be crossed to provoke any Indian public criticism of Moscow is extremely high.

India’s continuing dependence on Russia for military equipment only deepens its reluctance to alienate Moscow in any way. This aspect has received widespread attention since the beginning of the Ukraine war, but it is ultimately secondary to the larger calculations that center on preserving strong ties with Russia as part of India’s efforts to both balance China while constraining Pakistan and realize a multipolar system where it cannot be hemmed in by any *excessively powerful states*. All the same, New Delhi’s current dependence on Moscow for the spares and support necessary to maintain its large inventory of Russian-origin military equipment is real.

Although India has begun to diversify its arms purchases away from Russia during the last two decades, Russia still remains a critical—and, in fact, a *highly desirable*—source of weapons for India. This is because Russian weapons are usually *cheaper* in comparison to their Western counterparts, at least as far as their initial costs go, and they are often just as good, or at least

good enough, for India’s operational needs. Moreover, Russia alone, again in contrast to the West, is often willing to provide India with the high-leverage strategic technologies that others will not, has pursued the *codevelopment and coproduction* of advanced weapons systems to include their manufacturing in India, and does not burden India with excessive end-user constraints, thus making India’s defense relationship with Moscow even more valuable for New Delhi. The bottom line, therefore, is that India would be unwilling to jettison the defense supply links with Russia, even if it could procure comparable weapons from alternative Western sources, because the tie with Moscow offers it important technological and political benefits.

Having said all this, Indian policymakers are aware of the risks accompanying their current public neutrality toward Russia. Neutrality positions India as allied to the despotic Russian state personified by Putin rather than to Russia the country. It exposes the inconsistency in India’s commitment to protecting the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific over that in Europe, at a time when its biggest international partners—economic and strategic—are both united in their determination to penalize Russia and at odds with India’s posture on Ukraine. It also leaves India in the company of strange bedfellows such as China and Pakistan, which happen to be India’s adversaries and have behaved toward India as Russia has toward Ukraine.

Most importantly, however, it remains unclear whether India’s current efforts at befriending Russia by refusing to condemn its invasion of Ukraine will actually arrest the continuing drift toward stronger Sino-Russian ties, even if the efforts further weaken what are already feeble Russian incentives to deepen ties with Pakistan. Above all, there is no assurance that India’s current strategy of mollifying Russia by eschewing public criticism of the Kremlin’s war, if successful in the near term, would pay off in the end—especially if Moscow is enervated as a result of cumulative Western sanctions and as a consequence



is unable to support India in the manner that New Delhi hopes for. This outcome would be particularly problematic if the “no limits” Sino-Russian ties gave Beijing undue influence over Russia’s future cooperation with India or if Russia proves unable to support India’s military forces and their future modernization because of its own deteriorating industrial base at a time when India could also lose Ukraine as a **critical supplier** of components for the weapons that are now in the Indian military inventory.

There is little doubt, therefore, that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has confronted India with difficult strategic choices. Consequently, its decision to avoid all public criticism of Moscow is, in the estimation of Indian policymakers, the best of the bad choices facing New Delhi. Any public opposition to Russian actions—as the United States had earlier hoped that India would mount, both because of its democratic credentials and its concerns about protecting the rules-based order—would end up angering Russia at a time when India is still not confident of the United States as a sturdy or substitute partner. A more cynical calculation takes India toward the same outcome: as one Indian scholar, Happymon Jacob, **summarized** it, “an aggressive Russia is a problem for the United States and the West, not for India. [The] North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion is Russia’s problem, not India’s. India’s problem is China, and it needs both the United States/the West and Russia to deal with the ‘China problem.’” Because New Delhi has concluded that the United States will assist India to balance China out of sheer self-interest, it has sought to ensure Russia’s support for this aim by refraining from any public denunciations that might frustrate this objective.

Obviously, the Indian ambition to recruit Russia in its efforts to checkmate China may yet fail. That New Delhi persists, however, in placating Moscow can therefore only be read as reflecting an unstated confidence that Russia will not only survive its current

confrontation with the West in reasonably good shape (irrespective of whether Putin himself ends up becoming a casualty) but that the Kremlin will also manage to avert a choking embrace by China over the long term that limits its choices where India is concerned. If both these outcomes were to materialize, the Indian gamble of tacitly supporting Russia could potentially pay off insofar as it would permit the current (or future) Russian leadership to repay India for its aloof public posture on Ukraine at a time when the larger international community, including India’s partners in the **Global South**, was transparently opposed to Russian aggression. A further unspoken presumption underlying India’s current posture on Ukraine is that, when all is said and done, the West will ultimately be far more forgiving of India’s choices than Russia would be if the circumstances were reversed. At the very least, the Indian government now seems confident, especially after the recent bilateral 2+2 meeting, that it has been able to persuade the United States to accept its political constraints vis-à-vis Russia without harming the larger U.S.-Indian relationship.

In any event, India’s struggle to find a pathway that avoids criticizing Russia despite its blatant aggression in Ukraine highlights a larger underlying reality: the unyielding importance accorded by New Delhi to protecting India’s interests in its international decisionmaking. India’s enduring goal remains ascending to the international stage as a great power but without committing to any entangling alliances along the way. This ascent is best assured under conditions of peace in the presence of multiple, competing power centers that can be **leveraged** by India to derive benefits for itself amid their mutual rivalries. Given this aim, neither unipolarity nor any bipolarity that involves a strong Indian antagonism toward one of the poles serves India’s interests: the former creates few incentives for the dominant power to assist India’s rise, and while the latter may induce one great power, such as the United States, to support India in its competition with a close

rival such as China (which is also opposed to India), New Delhi fears that Washington's asking price may be too high and may involve forms of entrapment that India seeks to avoid to the extent possible. To be sure, India will partner with the United States in balancing China because Beijing currently represents the most significant threat to Indian interests, but New Delhi neither seeks an alliance with Washington toward that end nor is comfortable with the idea of the United States being its sole partner in realizing that objective.

Consequently, India prefers a multipolar international order that would allow it to maneuver between several and diverse poles, exploiting their differences depending on the issue areas, to secure gains for itself while avoiding permanent alignments with any. To the degree that the current Ukraine crisis fosters a deeper Sino-Russian partnership, it eliminates Russia as an independent pole and increases China's influence at just the time when Sino-Indian relations are terribly uneasy. The importance of preventing Russia from treating China as its only reliable partner has thus driven New Delhi to implicitly support Moscow in the hope that this gambit will eventually pay off in ways that benefit India. Not even the benefits of the evolving U.S.-Indian partnership suffice to induce India to abandon Russia given its judgments about Moscow's significance for New Delhi's interests, especially at a time when many Indian strategic elites disturbingly believe that the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however distasteful, is an understandable response to the West's "predatory geopolitics."

None of this implies that India does not value the liberal international order. It does—but largely instrumentally, given its substantive ambivalence about many components of that regime. Even if the fact that the liberal order is fundamentally a Western creation is overlooked because of India's own historical experience of colonialism, many aspects of liberal internationalism still provoke *disquiet* in India. The cardinal principle of

liberalism that the individual enjoys inalienable rights sits uneasily with India's postcolonial obsession with the sacrosanct character of state sovereignty, and while India values democracy for itself, it has invariably been skittish about democracy promotion and, more recently, has tended to exalt representative democracy over its liberal incarnation. Similarly, the idea that a peaceful international order is advanced by free and open trade is often at odds with New Delhi's desire to protect its economy from the diverse forms of physical and virtual penetration that could both limit its state power and undermine the prosperity of some segments of its population. And even on the necessity of preserving access in the maritime commons—a critical strategic problem in the Indo-Pacific—the formal Indian *position* on the freedom of navigation is uncomfortably similar to that of China's, with the only exception being that Beijing's assertiveness has pushed New Delhi into functional solidarity with Washington because of the threat that China currently poses to India.

Not surprisingly, then, one distinguished U.S. scholar of India, Sumit Ganguly, has concluded that India's support for some aspects of the liberal international order remains "limited and tentative." There is no doubt that the liberal international order provides the best framework for India's ascendancy to great power status, but only if that order is populated by a multiplicity of capable power centers that India can partner with depending on the circumstances and issues. Accordingly, India does not have an innate commitment to the liberal international order as such, since that order is dominated by more powerful states that have at times constrained its ambitions in different ways. Consequently, if the larger goal of preserving the order comes into conflict with particular Indian interests—as exemplified by the need to placate Russia despite its egregious violations of one of the order's core rules, namely, prohibiting the use of force for territorial conquest—New Delhi will pursue its own equities because the private gains to India are judged to be more



valuable than both the private losses stemming from such a choice and the larger toll exacted on the liberal order as a whole.

Given this reality, the inconsistency in India's attitude vis-à-vis Russia in comparison to China does not bother New Delhi one whit: because Beijing is a direct adversary, India will confront China resolutely, in partnership with other countries when necessary, while invoking the importance of the [rules-based international order](#) to legitimize its choices. Yet the imperatives of protecting this very order will be disregarded if they collide with New Delhi's more immediate concerns. In doing so, [Indian policymakers do not concede](#)—as U.S. leaders are wont to [argue](#)—that the struggle over the preservation of the liberal order, as it is manifested in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, pits democracies and autocracies on opposite sides. While the current standoff may reflect such differences on the broadest canvas, India's own position specifically refutes this view. In fact, New Delhi views the division between democracies and autocracies over Ukraine as largely accidental: it judges the dividing lines to be drawn on the basis of national interests rather than on the character of the regimes in question. To that degree, India behaves—and has always behaved without embarrassment—as political realists imagine states to behave in competitive international politics.

The current Indian strategy of refusing to condemn Russian actions publicly could be undermined by several outcomes: the demise of Russian power or the congealing of a tight Sino-Russian relationship, either 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 might ultimately derive from its continuing ties with Russia.

At the moment, Indian policymakers are far more concerned about the former problem than the latter. They have judged that, because Washington seeks New Delhi's cooperation in coping with the threat posed by China in the Indo-Pacific, the United States will be far more forgiving about India's public neutrality toward Russia even if it happens to occasionally chide New Delhi about the same. Because India matters more to the United States in the Indo-Pacific than it ever could in Europe, Indian leaders have also deduced that Washington will give them a pass as long as India continues to cooperate with the United States in constraining Chinese assertiveness. To that degree, New Delhi appears to have made not merely a self-interested but actually a profitable bet because it has ended up, as one Indian commentator put it, [“in a sweet spot, courted by the Quad \[as well as by\] China and Russia”](#) simultaneously. India's sacrifice of its values thus appears to have paid off in comparison to the losses that might have been threatened by forsaking its interests. Jaishankar alluded to this calculus when he [declared](#), “we watch what's happening in the world, like any country does, and we draw our conclusions and make our assessments. And believe me, we have a decent sense of what is in our interest and know how to protect it and advance it. So I think part of what has changed is [that] we have more options than we did before.”

In this context, the threats posed by weakening Russian power or by tightening Sino-Russian ties constitute far greater dangers from New Delhi's perspective, but



these are pernicious eventualities to which India has no real solutions right now beyond its consistent efforts at appearing neutral. Hence, all that India can do currently is to hope for the best, while wishing that the United States too will perceive the long-term benefit of not punishing Russia so hard that Moscow moves ever more deeply into Beijing’s embrace—something Indian policymakers believe would be unhelpful to both New Delhi and Washington simultaneously. Such yearnings, by the way, also illustrate the current limits of the oft-declared U.S.-Indian convergence on values. But the enduring primacy of interests in India’s approach to the world ensures that, despite receiving “[no ovation for \[its\] stand](#)” on the Ukraine war, its uncomfortable neutrality toward Russia is unlikely to change any time soon.

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