

The China Factor in India's Approaches to the Russia-Ukraine War

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This is the issue:

Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine War, India has tried to balance its relationships with Russia, the US and its allies. It has continued to engage with Russia on defense, economic and diplomatic fronts; in fact, its energy imports from Russia have increased substantially since February 2022. At the same time, it has opposed the war, called for an independent inquiry in the Butcha killings in March 2022. It has advocated both sides to engage in dialogue and asked for restraint on the potential nuclear escalation. However, India has so far refrained from openly criticizing Russia for its invasion of the independent, sovereign and non-nuclear state of Ukraine.

India's foreign policy strategy of "multi-alignment" explains India's approach to the Ukraine conflict. This strategy emphasizes working simultaneously with different partners both in bilateral and multilateral contexts. Although the terminology of multi-alignment has been popularized at the highest levels of the government during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure since 2014, the fundamental components of this approach have already been in the making since the early 2000s.

While the long-term strategic direction and India's adherence to a rule-based international order provide broader perspectives to understand India's policy towards the Ukraine War, there are contingent strategic imperatives which impinge on India's relations

with Russia, and shape India's response to the fallouts of the war. India's policies towards the Russia-Ukraine War are shaped both by its long-term foreign policy strategy and principles, the main issue is to be identified as India's contentious relations with China. A rising China with enhanced economic and military capabilities as well as aggressive military and security postures looms large in India's strategic calculations over how it has navigated a tough choice over the Ukraine War. As a matter of fact, the China factor plays a critical role in India's approaches to the Ukraine War.

Some facts and major problems:

- India works with Russia and China, along with other Asian, African and Latin American partners through multilateral forums namely, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), Russia, India and China (RIC) on the one hand. On the other, it engages with the US, Europe, Japan, Australia, South Korea, etc.. India is a founding member of the Quad along with the US, Japan and Australia. However, at the same time. It has continued increasing engagement with Russia and China. In brief, the fundamental strategic sense behind the emerging strategy is to balance different partners with conflicting interests and in competition with each other. The Russia-Ukraine war has put this strategy

to test; however so far, the strategy has worked fairly well.

- India and China have engaged in a military standoff in the western sector of their border in Ladakh since April 2020. So far, sixteen rounds of military to military talks have achieved modest results while complete disengagement of troops is still far away; the seventeenth round of talks is scheduled in November 2022. Both sides have also kept diplomatic channels open. In the meantime, the consensus between the two countries reached over a series of mutual agreements on managing tensions on the border signed in 1993, 1996, 2005, 2012, and 2013, stands broken. Both sides have frequently expressed their allegiance to these agreements and blamed each other for non-compliance, which shows that existing agreements and Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) have so far been insufficient to restore trust and peace. As a result, both neighbors find themselves in a new terrain of uncertainty, higher level of mistrust, and a strategic impasse.
- The standoff has also broken up an unstated consensus that both countries can have sound economic ties, people-to-people contacts, and overall 'normal relations' while they engage in a negotiated settlement of the border issue. Despite the inability to achieve this goal, India-China relations, since the late 1980s after then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit in 1988, remained on a balanced keel until the recent standoff in Ladakh began with an unprecedented outbreak of violence in its initial clashes; the India-China border saw the first death of soldiers since 1975.
- Although the Ladakh standoff is a major trigger for the recent downturn in relations and growing mistrust, the conflictual relationship has been in the making over a period of time. After a lull in serious crises after the Sumdongrchu incident in the eastern sector of the India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh in 1986 lasting for 86 days, serious standoffs between both sides only reoccurred in the 2010s. This is despite the fact that China continued to cross the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control. However, this has changed in recent years. In Depsang (2013), it took only 20 days for both sides to resolve the standoff while the Doklam standoff in 2017 lasted for 75 days, and the ongoing Ladakh standoff is still unresolved.
- The gap in economic and military capabilities has widened with China at advantage. This is a big factor shaping the overall India-China relationship, but it does not lead to mistrust in itself. However, China's engagement in India's neighborhood mainly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has raised security concerns in India. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor are two important pillars of the BRI in South Asia. While India is wary of China's geopolitical intentions in South Asia in general, the fact that the CPEC runs through Gilgit-Baltistan, which India claims as its sovereign territory, has stoked India's security concerns; it also stokes real fears about China's long-term positions on the Kashmir Issue. These concerns have been aggravated by China criticizing the abrogation of Article 370 in India's constitution and attempting to forward a resolution against India in the United Nations' Security Council (UNSC). By doing so, China has, from the Indian perspective, interfered in India's internal affairs.
- The fact that the BRI does not have transparent governance structures and rules, intensifies India's security dilemma. In contrast, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), of which India is a member and has been a recipient of loans

for a variety of projects even after the Ladakh standoff is regarded more positively because of its inclusive and transparent governance structures and rules. Xi Jinping's report to the 20th Party Congress reveals a renewed emphasis on the BRI, which underscores continued if not accelerated emphasis of the BRI. Hence, BRI will continue to be a major factor in the way India perceives China's intentions in South Asia.

- The personnel changes during the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) indicate that India is likely to be a major focus in China's multi-dimensional strategic rivalry with the US and its allies. The promotion of three key officials is one indicator of such a focus. General He Weidong, who has long experience first as the deputy commander of the Western Theatre Command (WTC), and then as the commander of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Ground Forces of the WTC, has been promoted to the second-ranked Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Lieutenant General Wang Kai, the current Commander of the Tibet Military District, and General Wang Haijiang, currently serving as the Commander of the WTC, have also been fast-tracked as full members of the CCP Central Committee (CC). All three senior officials are first time members of the CC indicating a general shift of the Chinese leadership towards military and strategic issues including border issues with India. It waits to be seen how this important factor will shape the India-China border situation in coming years.

Of crucial importance is:

- For India as a democracy and follower of the rules-based order, sticking to the principles of territorial sovereignty, human rights, the sanctity of international institutions and international law is of

major importance. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has certainly violated these principles and has put India into a difficult position. India's relationship with the US and its allies as well as the European countries is closer than ever before, and it will continue to grow. At the same time, their growing tensions with Russia and China as well as the on-going Russia-Ukraine War have added to the complexity in which India has conducted its multi-aligned diplomacy and foreign policy.

- India's partnership with Russia has been under shifts prior to the Ukraine War. Yet, their long-standing cooperation in different areas has been consistent. India's policy to balance Russia and the US came under stress as a result of US pressure on India not to buy the surface to air S-400 missile defense system from Russia due to US sanctions on Russia in recent times. The missile system is crucial for India's defense, and both sides have gone ahead with the plan. Russia is also a major source of supply of other critical military equipment, and nuclear cooperation among others. Although India has looked towards other countries, namely France, Israel, Australia, and the US, to diversify its defense needs, Russia remains a critical partner for India.
- India's worries about the Ukraine War and its impact are two-fold. One, India worries that Russia's involvement might impact defense supplies at a time when India is locked in a military standoff with China. Two, Indian military planners are keenly watching the efficiency of Russian equipment, especially tanks, in the battlefield. Russian T-72 and T-90 tanks are critical in India's defense needs. These concerns have triggered efforts to promote indigenous production.
- Another factor is that the war has brought Russia closer to China. Particularly, China's increasing clout with Russia is a major

worry. For India, the question is whether or not China might eventually pressurize Russia to stop supplies of critical military equipment. Thus, a closer Russia-China relationship with a weak and isolated Russia might have a negative impact on India.

- India has also been concerned about a possibility that China and Pakistan may collude with each other in a situation of military conflict with either of the countries. This dynamic goes back to the 1960s; at the time, China attempted to mobilize the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Eastern Sector of the India-China border during the India-Pakistan War in 1965 in an effort to pressurize India for a ceasefire. Since then, the so-called "two-front war" i.e. fighting a war with Pakistan and China at the same time, has been a constant concern recently aggravated in the context of deepening China-Pakistan relations. In the same vein, India has also been concerned about the recent warming of ties between Pakistan and Russia although Russia's relationship with Pakistan is still limited in scope. Nevertheless, India rejects the idea of a closer partnership among Russia, China and Pakistan, and hence strives for a friendlier relationship with Russia in order to prevent being negatively impacted by this constellation. India's efforts are to avoid the triangle between China, the US and Pakistan which emerged during the Cold War.
- In the long run, however, India's efforts to accelerate indigenous production of weapons and diversify the supply of military equipment form the main focus. India's "make in India" campaign is a case in point. It focuses on the transfer of technology to India and on defense production in India. In recent times, the production of Arjun-MBT tanks, light combat tanks, FRCV tanks, and transport helicopters highlights India's efforts to reduce foreign dependence on defense supplies. However, Russia also in this regard plays a big role due to the reluctance of the US and its European allies to transfer critical technology, which Russia, on the contrary, is willing to share.
- So far, Russian influence in the developing world seems less affected despite setbacks on the battlefield, sporadic opposition from Russian people against the war, its damaged reputation and lack of relationship with the US and Western European countries. The voting patterns of countries in the UN on multiple resolutions on the Ukraine War reveal that a large number of countries still do not openly criticize or support Russia by abstaining, if not voting in favor. Interestingly, China's outspoken criticism of the US has supported its positive image among developing countries. India also tries to expand its influence and partnerships with developing countries. This puts these two Asian giants into a dormant rivalry in the global South. In this context, India's diplomacy has focused on the concerns of the developing world in terms of rising inflation and economic hardships, energy prices and food crisis.
- The majority of developing countries are extremely sensitive about the principle of territorial sovereignty and interference by major powers in their internal affairs. Although many of them have a poor human rights record and weak democratic institutions, they have remained aloof from the great power game in Ukraine and rather show worries about its economic impact. Thus, India has called for dialogue and diplomacy for resolving the conflict, and demanded respect for human rights, territorial integrity, as well as restraint on nuclear escalation. Simultaneously, it has questioned 'double standards' of the US and European countries. These messages are aimed at maintaining a balance

between the US and its allies on the one hand and India's emerging rivalry with China over influence in the developing world, on the other hand. However, such contradictory messaging and subtle critique of the US and its European allies will have no impact on India's support for the Quad and its partnership with the US, Europe and its Asian partners.

- India has also engaged with Russia in projects which are critical to India's strategy to counter China in Asia. These include projects such as building transnational connectivity and cooperation in multilateral institutions, with some of them related to Afghanistan. In addition, Russia is a close partner, inter-alia, in India's claim for a seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in nuclear diplomacy, and in issues related to Kashmir.
- In recent years, India also engages in collaboration with Japan and the US to counter China's BRI in its neighborhood, in Asia and Africa. In this vein, India has also partnered with Russia on two important initiatives. The 7,200 km long North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), which was launched in 2000, connects India with Central Asia, Russia and Europe via Iran's Chabahar port through rail, road and sea routes. It is a critical element in India's efforts to expand its relations with Central Asia, where China's influence has grown rapidly and expansively since the 1990s. Similarly, the Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor launched in 2019 is another major collaborative initiative.

My assessment of the situation:

- India's interests are better served when the war against Ukraine does not last longer. Thus, India has advocated a peaceful and immediate resolution through dialogue and diplomacy. Its balanced and cautious approach has been aimed at balancing relationships with

partners with conflicting interests and geopolitical rivalry while it has advocated the principles of international law, the sanctity of the United Nations and the adherence to democratic and constitutional principles. It has expressed concerns about the violation of territorial sovereignty of Ukraine by Russia, allegations of human rights violations by Russian forces on Ukrainian citizens, and a potential nuclear escalation.

- Although it has not been easy to balance, India's pragmatic policy has generated positive results. The US, its European and Asian allies like Japan have constantly put pressure on India to criticize Russia while India has withstood their demands. In addition to its long-standing partnership with Russia, its multi-aligned foreign policy and long-standing support for the rules-based international order, its reluctance to openly criticize Russia is explained by the contingent strategic concerns, especially its troubled relationship with China. By doing so, India has been eager to balance both sides keeping in mind the challenges posed by China on its borders and the geo-economic as well as the geopolitical competition in its neighborhood and beyond.