



Why India Abstained from UN Votes on Ukraine

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On February 25, 2022, the United Nations Security Council (“Security Council”) voted on a draft resolution recognizing Russia’s act of invading Ukraine as a violation of Chapter 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter, demanding that Russia immediately cease its use of force and withdraw its troops. After Russia vetoed the resolution, the Security Council voted to call for an emergency session of the UN General Assembly. The emergency session was held on March 2, at which time a draft resolution demanding Russia’s immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal was passed by 141 of the total 191 UN member states.

India, a non-permanent member of the Security Council since 2021, abstained from all three of these resolutions alongside China. In recent years, India has engaged with the U.S., Japan and Australia not only bilaterally but also via the quadrilateral cooperation between Japan, Australia, India, and the U.S (Quad). Why, then, did India abstain from the resolutions despite U.S. persuasion to vote in favor?¹

India’s Position on the Invasion of Ukraine

India’s vote was not necessarily meant to defend the invasion of Ukraine. In an explanation to the Security Council, Permanent Representative of India to the UN Tirumurti articulated the Indian government’s position on Ukraine, summarized by the following four points:

1. India is deeply disturbed by the recent turn of developments in Ukraine, and urges all parties concerned to make all efforts for the immediate cessation of violence and hostilities. No solution can ever be arrived at, at the cost of human lives.
2. India is also deeply concerned about the welfare and security of the Indian community in Ukraine.²
3. The contemporary global order has been built on the UN Charter, international law, and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and all member states need to commit to honoring these principles.
4. Dialogue is the only answer to settling differences and disputes, and we must return to the path of diplomacy.

The phrases “no solution [...] at the cost of human lives” as well as “built on the UN Charter [...] and respect for sovereignty” imply utmost criticism of Russia and a demand for restraint, but India was not able to go further an vote in favor of a resolution aimed at Russia.

India-Pakistan Conflict and the Soviet Veto

India needs Russia’s support to keep the balance of power on the Indian subcontinent in its favor. Discussion here

¹ The U.S. Secretary of State is thought to have approached India’s External Affairs Minister. Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar,” February 24, 2022.

² 18,000 Indians, most of whom are medical students, were stranded in Ukraine, and the Indian government has conducted large-scale evacuation efforts to ensure their safe return.

is confined to the subcontinent to place focus on India's geopolitics as a continental state and stress that Russia's diplomatic and military support is essential to counter both the direct threats emanating from its border with Pakistan, and the more overall long-term threat of China. As a maritime state, India shares a great deal of interest and values with the U.S., Japan, as well as France, but these maritime partners have not and will not provide India as much military and diplomatic support as the Soviet Union and Russia have since India's conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir or the Sino-Indian border dispute. In a joint statement issued by President Putin and Prime Minister Modi during the former's visit to India in December 2021, India-Russia relations were described as "long standing and time-tested."³ The phrasing here holds two meanings: one, that India and Russia have coordinated their respective positions in international conflicts; and two, that Russia has been supplying weapons to India.

What India values most has been the Soviet Union and Russia's use of its veto power at the UN Security Council. Between 1948 and 1965, the Security Council passed 15 resolutions on the "India-Pakistan Question" but the Soviet Union exercised its veto twice in 1957 and 1962. This had the effect of deterring the submission of resolutions unacceptable to India after 1965.⁴

The Soviet veto and its military support were of great aid to India's war efforts during the India-Pakistani War of 1971 (the Bangladesh Liberation War), which was linked to the rapprochement between China and the U.S. In July 1971, when it was announced that Henry Kissinger, then National Security Advisor, had arrived in Beijing as special envoy to President Nixon, the Soviet Union and India rushed to sign the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation.⁵ For India, the treaty was a precautionary measure to prevent China from intervening in the coming war with Pakistan. Foreign Secretary Kaul, who negotiated the treaty, had stated that the Soviet Union could be expected to "tie up [the] bulk of the Chinese troops along Sinkiang, Mongolia, and their far-eastern borders with China" in the event of war.⁶ The Soviet side was also in full support of India to prevent China from extending its influence into South Asia with newfound U.S. endorsement. On December 4, the day after a Pakistani airstrike brought India into an official state of war, the Security Council convened in an emergency session where nine countries, including the U.S., the U.K., Japan, and Argentina, submitted a resolution calling for a halt to the use of force, but the Soviet Union cast its veto. Two more draft resolutions submitted on December 5 and 13 also failed to pass at the hand of the Soviet veto, during which time Pakistan was forced to surrender. It can thus be said that Soviet diplomacy at the UN during the India-Pakistan War played a role in deflecting the pressure on India to cease fire and tilting both the war and ceasefire negotiations in India's favor.

As though in reciprocity, India has also opposed or abstained from UN resolutions condemning the Soviet Union and Russia. From the Cold War through to the present day, India's voting record has coincided with the Soviet Union/Russia more than with the U.S.⁷ In March 2014, India also abstained from a draft resolution at the UN General Assembly declaring the annexation of Crimea invalid.⁸

³ "India- Russia Joint Statement following the visit of the President of the Russian Federation," December 6, 2021.

⁴ Hereinafter, details on Security Council resolutions are sourced from the following link:

<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions>

⁵ Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation, August 9, 1971.

⁶ Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 127.

⁷ In 2020, India's voting record at the UN coincided with the U.S. 39% of the time and with Russia 80% of the time. Department of State, Report to Congress on Voting Practices in the United Nations for 2020 Section 406 of Public Law 101-246 (22 U.S.C. §2414a).

⁸ "Territorial integrity of Ukraine," Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 March 2014, 68/262. 100 voted in favor, 11 against, 58 abstained (incl. China and India), and 24 were absent.

The Soviet Union/Russia – India’s Arms Dealer

India’s full-fledged import of arms from the Soviet Union began in 1962 when the Sino-Indian War broke out. The Soviet Union also provided India with an emergency supply of arms in late October 1971 as India was stepping up its military intervention in East Pakistan’s civil war. This arms transfer was preceded by the “mutual consultations” immediately entered into when “either party [is] subject to an attack” as stipulated in Article 9 of the India-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation.⁹

Russia’s share of arms imports by India has been on the decline over the past 20 years, but still accounted for 50% of its procurement in 2020. Moreover, India relies on Russia for its major weapons’ systems, so its dependence on Russia is expected to continue in the medium term. Taking a look at the Army, 60% of its main battle tanks are T-72s and 30% are T-90s.¹⁰ In November 2019, India signed a contract to license-build 464 additional T-90s domestically.¹¹ The Indian Army has placed confidence in the T-90, highlighted by an Indian commander’s comment stating that China’s light tanks “won’t survive against our T-90s” given how suited they are for operations in mountainous terrain and extreme cold weather conditions.¹² As for the Air Force, the Su-30MKI is its main fighter making up 11 squadrons. India also has no intention of abandoning its acquisition of S-400 missile defense systems a contract was reached for in 2018 despite possible sanctions from the U.S.

Some analysts suggest that Russia and India are not necessarily in a one-sided relationship of dependency given that India has been able to elicit favorable terms from Russia in regard to pricing and technological disclosures.¹³ It can thus be said that the long-term, continued transfer of arms from Russia to India has generated a stable relationship of interdependency between the two countries.

The U.S.-China-Russia Triangle and India’s Perception of Balance

Given that India could potentially diversify its supply of arms by procuring from the U.S. and/or France in the medium- to long-term, it seems puzzling why India would hesitate to take the same stance as the U.S. and the West. After all, they represent a potential source of arms, and India shares the same values of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. India’s response to the conflict in Ukraine is deeply rooted in its perception of balance and its peculiar view on international politics.

Let us take a look at former diplomats’ comments on the balance between India, the U.S., and Russia. Former Ambassador to Russia Raghavan has said that the friction between India-Russia relations and India-U.S. relations began in 2014, and that India has made efforts to “keep our two relationships separate.” Former Ambassador N. Parthasarathi has also stated that India has to “balance its reaction” in its response to the issue in Ukraine “so that you do not displease any of them and maintain their trust.”¹⁴ In other words, India believes that it can and should “decouple” India-U.S. relations from India-Russia relations. As External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has affirmed, “India cannot give any other nation a veto on its policy options,”¹⁵ and thus will not readily follow the majority or

⁹ Raghavan, 1971, p. 226.

¹⁰ IISS, *The Military Balance* 2021.

¹¹ *The Diplomat*, November 12, 2019.

¹² *Times of India*, October 3, 2020.

¹³ Congressional Research Service, “Russian Arms Sales and Defense Industry,” *CRS Report*, R46937, October 14, 2021.

¹⁴ *Indian Express*, February 25, 2022.

¹⁵ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, HarperCollins, 2020.

submit to U.S. persuasion. This sort of “cautious” and “nuanced” policy taking “balance” into consideration has even been accepted by the opposition parties.¹⁶

There are two factors that lie behind India’s unique perception of balance. One is its sympathy toward Russia’s perceived sphere of influence. At least right up until the invasion of Ukraine, India had publicly expressed understanding of Russia’s position vis-a-vis NATO’s eastward expansion. In the midst of referendum on Crimea’s status in March 2014, National Security Advisor Menon said India hopes that “whatever internal issues there are in Ukraine are settled peacefully” and that “the broader issues reconciling various interests involved” are resolved, explicitly mentioning that these “various interests” include “legitimate Russian and other interests.”¹⁷ That NATO’s eastward expansion violates Russia’s “legitimate security interests” seems to have been a shared notion among Indian diplomats. At a meeting held by a French think-tank on February 22 2022, just before the invasion, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar also said that “the situation in Ukraine is the result of a complex chain of circumstances over the last 30 years,” including NATO’s expansion following the Cold War and the dynamics of Russia-Europe relations.¹⁸

India’s sympathy toward Russia’s perceived sphere of influence is guided by its own experience confronting Pakistan, a U.S. ally. When Pakistan signed a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with the U.S. in 1954, Prime Minister Nehru expressed concern over “additional forces” being thrust from outside in Pakistan saying that “American Observers can no longer be treated as neutrals.”¹⁹ India remained cautious of U.S. policies toward its allies that would “alter the military balance in Asia” throughout the Cold War.

The second factor underpinning India’s perception of balance is its geopolitical worldview that links the triangular U.S.-China-Russia relationship to the triangular Russia-China-India relationship. The assumption is that the U.S.-China-Russia triangle will define whether or not China will take hostile action toward India. That is why India is seeking to manipulate the smaller Russia-China-India triangle to shape the larger U.S.-China-Russia triangle and thereby control China’s behavior.

This geometric thinking can be used to explain India’s response to the war in Ukraine. Its concern is that if India were to take a clear position condemning Russia alongside the U.S. and Europe, it would strengthen China-Russia relations in the larger triangle and have a likely impact on the smaller triangle. The negative implications that a China-Russia alignment would have on India in the subcontinent are obvious, particularly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar. On the other hand, if India were to make its support for Russia clear, the U.S. would woo China to solicit its support leading to closer U.S.-China relations, a worst-case scenario for India. Former Foreign Secretary Saran has voiced strong concern over India confronting China without the support of either the U.S. or Russia²⁰

Having learned from the third India-Pakistan war and the U.S.-China rapprochement that neither values nor ideology determine the triangular U.S.-China-Russia relations, India is unlikely to take a political position that is based solely on values. Still, the debate over Ukraine demonstrates India’s keen awareness of long-term antagonism and rivalry with China, and has left room for it to quietly swing to the U.S., Europe, or the Quad’s side.

¹⁶ *The Hindu*, March 3, 2022.

¹⁷ *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2014.

¹⁸ *Tribune*, February 22, 2022.

¹⁹ Ravinder Kumar and H.Y. Sharada Prasad, eds., *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, 25, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1999, p. 343.

²⁰ Shyam Saran, “Three is a crowd: US did a China on Soviet Union in 1972; Now, China is Doing a Russia on America,” *Tribune*, February 25, 2022.

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