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Book Review

INDIA'S BALANCING ACT: ARTICULATING INDIA'S POSITION IN THE RUSSIA- UKRAINE CONFLICT

ROHITH SAI NARAYAN STAMBAMKADI

By end of August 2022, the Russia-Ukraine war marks 190 days since Putin's announcement of a 'special military operation' to 'demilitarise' and 'denazify' the Ukrainian territory.¹ While many countries have chosen to take a strong stance against the Russian invasion by joining international sanctions, and some countries support Ukraine militarily, India has adopted a 'neutral position', which has been distinctive among major democracies, especially among the West's partners. Despite its discomfort with Moscow's actions, New Delhi has abstained from successive votes in the UN Security Council, Human Rights Council and the General Assembly condemning Russian actions in Ukraine. India has thus far refused to identify Russia as an instigator of the crisis, leading to disappointment in the West.² India's

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1. "Russia's Putin announces military operation in Ukraine", *The Hindu*, February 24, 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/russias-putin-announces-military-operation-in-ukraine/article65079578.ece>. Accessed on July 31, 2022.
2. Priyanka Shankar, "What India's position on Russia-Ukraine war means for its EU ties", *Al Jazeera*, March 9, 2022, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/what-india-position-russia-ukraine-war-means-european-union-ties>. Accessed on July 30, 2022.

position has been called to question and the country's diplomatic position has been called incongruous to the current geopolitics, and many leaders, strategists and media identified India's position as 'shaky', 'ambivalent', 'odd' and 'fence sitting'.³

This paper articulates India's position in the Russia-Ukraine war and highlights the considerations and factors that influenced it, and the misconceptions and mischaracterisations surrounding it. Further, it suggests how India can effectively use its 'strategic communication' to better articulate its position, and substantiate its doctrine of 'strategic autonomy' in the current conflict.

INDIA'S STANCE IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

India's position of neutrality and abstention at the UN cannot be misconstrued as refraining to take a position. Rather, India has been steadfast and consistent in its position, which emphasises on "urgent cessation of violence, end to all the hostilities, and return to the path of diplomacy".⁴ Since the war began, India's singular emphasis has been to bring the concerned parties to the table for diplomatic talks. However, as peace talks cannot go hand-in-hand with an armed conflict, New Delhi has called for an urgent ceasefire to enable possible dialogue between the parties.⁵ India's PM Narendra Modi has reached out to the Presidents of both Russia and Ukraine

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3. Ashley J. Tellis, "'What is in our Interest': India and the Ukraine War", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 25, 2022, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/25/what-is-in-our-interest-india-and-ukraine-war-pub-86961>. Accessed on July 31, 2022. Also see, Wajahat S. Khan, "India's fence-sitting on Ukraine hurts its chances of becoming global leader", Gzero, February 25, 2022, at <https://www.gzeromedia.com/indias-fence-sitting-on-ukraine-hurts-its-chances-of-becoming-global-leader>. Accessed on August 1, 2022. Also see, Dipanjay Roy Chaudhary, "India 'shaky' in dealing with Russia: Joe Biden", *The Economic Times*, March 23, 2022, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/india-shaky-in-dealing-with-russia-joe-biden/articleshow/90383420.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on August 4, 2022.
 4. "Parliament proceedings | India called upon Russia, Ukrainian sides to return to path of diplomacy, dialogue: Govt.", *The Hindu*, July 22, 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/parliament-proceedings-india-called-upon-russian-ukrainian-sides-to-return-to-path-of-diplomacy-dialogue-govt/article65668139.ece>. Accessed on August 8, 2022.
 5. Permanent Mission of India to UN New York, "General Assembly (Year Wise 2000 to 2017)—Statements", at <https://www.pminewyork.gov.in/IndiaatUNGA?id=NDUyNA>. Accessed on August 8, 2022.

appealing to them to directly engage with each other.⁶ Further, on various occasions, India has expressed its willingness to contribute in any way possible for peace efforts and mediation in the conflict.⁷

If India's position was to be conceived as 'non-alignment', it does not necessarily mean non-interference. Besides expressing its willingness to mediate in the conflict, India has expressed its commitment, and continues to act as an agency of diplomacy to respond to the consequences, especially the economic impact on poor countries arising out of the war.⁸ India's regular engagement with multiple partners across regions that are partly or wholly affected by the war—irrespective of their position in the conflict—illustrates India's leadership role to address concerns emerging out of the current conflict.⁹ These include India's humanitarian assistance to address food security, partnerships to strengthen supply chain crisis, and diplomatic channels and mechanisms for humanitarian and disaster management. In this context, India's 'non-alignment' is not 'non-interference'. Rather, its position reflects a 'multidirectional' foreign policy that seeks to engage multiple partners and address concerns emanating out of the current war.

Further, India's position cannot be interpreted as 'acceptance' of Russian actions or mere 'silence' in the face of the conflict.¹⁰ When images of mass graves and bodies in Ukraine's Bucha erupted on the internet in April 2022, India "unequivocally condemned" the killings and supported calls for an independent investigation of the event.¹¹ In fact, in the BRICS Foreign Ministers meet in May 2022, in

6. "Russia-Ukraine war: 'Hold direct talk with Zelensky', PM Modi to Putin over call," *Mint*, March 7, 2022, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/russiaukraine-war-hold-direct-talk-with-zelensky-pm-modi-to-putin-over-call-11646646508120.html>. Accessed on July 23, 2022.

7. "India at UNSC assures support to all diplomatic efforts to end Ukraine war", *Business Standard*, July 16, 2022, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-at-uns-c-assures-support-to-all-diplomatic-efforts-to-end-ukraine-war-122071600105_1.html. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

8. n. 5.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Ramachandra Guha, "India's Shame: New Delhi's silence on Ukraine is unacceptable", *The Telegraph*, July 30, 2022, at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/indias-shame-new-delhis-silence-on-ukraine-is-unacceptable/cid/1877237>. Accessed on August 8, 2022.

11. Sriram Lakshman, "at UNSC meeting, India condemns atrocities in Bucha, calls for independent inquiry", *The Hindu*, April 5, 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/>

a thinly veiled reference to Russia and China, India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) Jaishankar noted that there were two countries in the framework that had violated the foundational principles of BRICS (i.e., respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of states).¹² Hence, India has not been silent on Russian actions as some have suggested,¹³ but stood against possible violence and violation of human rights in the ongoing war. While India's vote at the UN is an 'abstention', its statement alongside the vote is a condemnation of Russia's actions. If one could read the text alongside the vote, there is a difference between the moot vs the act. While the 'act' of voting is prompted by India's history and relationship with Russia, the 'moot' is prompted by the view of "totality of the evolving situation".¹⁴

INDIA AS A MEDIATOR?

Despite its leadership in response to global issues, India has been criticised for not taking any action at the UNSC and its willingness to mediate has not materialised. Nevertheless, India's plans must be complemented by support of all players at UNSC, and currently, bringing everyone on the same page seems to be a distant possibility. As EAM Jaishankar stated, "We have a Plan. But we need other people to have a plan which is similar to our plan."¹⁵ In other words, India's role as a mediator is unfeasible if conditions favourable for mediation are absent. Recently, the President of European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen stated that the sanctions imposed against Russia were designed for the long term and meant to act as a "leverage" for lasting

national/at-unscc-meeting-india-condemns-atrocities-in-bucha-calls-for-independent-un-inquiry/article65294101.ece. Accessed on July 30, 2022.

12. Yesli Seli, "Jaishankar reaffirms respects for territorial integrity in BRICS FM meet", *The Indian Express*, May 20, 2022, at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/may/20/external-affairs-minister-dr-s-jaishankar-while-highlighting-the-key-points-during-the-brics-forei-2455806.html>. Accessed on July 24, 2022.
13. Alex Sietz-Wald and Sahil Kapoor, "As the world rallies to condemn Russia, India remains silent on sidelines", NBC News, March 5, 2022, at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/world-rallies-condemn-russia-india-remains-silent-sidelines-rcna18653>. Accessed on July 30, 2022.
14. n. 5.
15. "Chasing the Monsoon life @75", YouTube video, 46:40, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), April 27, 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2dXqVwbuJc>. Accessed on July 31, 2022.

peace.¹⁶ Further, NATO continues to fund Ukrainian defences and the US has recently proposed \$33 billion funds for Ukraine, of which \$20 billion is for weaponry.¹⁷ These developments demonstrate that there is little inclination for EU and the US to create favourable conditions to bring the warring parties to the table. A possible mediation becomes futile if there is a sense that one side wants to ride the other into the sunset. At the same time, though Russia has indicated that it is open to mediation led by India,¹⁸ there is little evidence to suggest that Moscow is serious to negotiate a ceasefire or compromise on its stated objectives.

GEOPOLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the inception of India's foreign policy, India has not engaged in the bipolar power competition or great-power rivalries. This policy has been consistent since India's conception of non-alignment where it has chosen not to formally be aligned with or against any major power bloc. New Delhi's stance in the Ukraine crisis is also based on this consistent policy besides its current geopolitical calculations. India has chosen not to adjudicate Russia's actions against Ukraine; it has neither identified Russia as the perpetrator of the war, nor exculpated Russia as a victim of NATO's expansionism towards the east.¹⁹ Adopting any of these positions would vitally affect India's interests given its relationship with both the West and Russia. Further, India and Russia share a robust strategic partnership since decades. Bilateral ties with Russia have been a key pillar of India's security policy. India also sees Russia as a long-standing, time-tested partner which played a critical role in its economic and security

16. Europe Commission, "Press Corner—Speech by the President at the Raisina Dialogue", at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_2647. Accessed on August 8, 2022.

17. "Biden proposes \$33 bn to help Ukraine in war", BBC, April 28, 2022, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61260511>. Accessed on July 23, 2022.

18. "Open to India mediating in the Ukraine crisis: Russian Foreign minister", *Business Standard*, April 1, 2022, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/open-to-india-mediating-in-ukraine-crisis-russian-foreign-minister-122040100942_1.html. Accessed on August 19, 2022.

19. "Ukraine: Russia praises India for not judging war in 'one-sided way'", BBC, April 1, 2022, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60953426>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

policy.²⁰ The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed between India and the former Soviet Union in 1971 became a robust counterweight to the intimidating US-China-Pakistan axis of that time.²¹ The treaty was crucial to India's vital geopolitical interests that safeguarded its sovereignty and territorial integrity. It would also be important to reflect on the Russian role in support of India in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. The Russians have intervened by deploying two cruisers and destroyers, along with submarines armed with nuclear warheads in response to the menacing presence of US Navy's Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal at the height of the conflict.²² After the visit of former President Dmitry Medvedev to India in December 2010, the Indo-Russia relations were elevated to the level of 'special and privileged strategic partnership' after which the military and technical cooperation between the countries progressed from a simple buyer-seller framework to one that involves joint research, development and production.²³ The BrahMos missile systems, joint development of fifth-generation fighter aircraft, licensed production in India of T-9 tanks and Su-30 aircraft are some of the examples of the robust partnership.

India has traditionally been dependent on Russian arms imports between 2016-20, India's defence imports from Russia amounted to 49.4 per cent of its total defence imports. The defence deals between Russia and India are worth as much as \$15 billion, parts of which are still in the pipeline.²⁴ The sanctions imposed by the West might affect these transactions, particularly the import of S-400 Triumf missile systems worth \$5.4 billion. The S-400 is a vital strategic defence asset for India which can engage anything from an unmanned

20. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, "India-Russia Relations", at https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Russia_-DEC_2012.pdf. Accessed on August 30, 2022.

21. "Russia's defining moment in the Ind-Pak War 1971", *The Economic Times*, December 8, 2021, at <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/governance/opinion-russias-defining-moment-in-the-ind-pak-war-1971/88160555>. Accessed on August 30, 2022.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *n. 21.*

24. Kartik Bommakanti and Sameer Patil, "Explained: India's arms imports from Russia", Observer Research Foundation, May 17, 2022, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-arms-imports-from-russia/>. Accessed on July 27, 2022.

aerial vehicle, intruding aircraft, to ballistic missiles. The missile has “surfaced as an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) asset designed to protect military, political, and economic assets from aerial attacks”.²⁵ India has also engaged Russia in import of AK-203 assault rifles with an effective range of more than 300 metres, the average size of a football ground, to enhance its operational effectiveness in counter-insurgency and counterterrorism operations.²⁶ Further, India’s joint venture with Russia, the BrahMos is the world’s fastest anti-ship cruise missile, currently a part of the arsenal of all three arms of Indian Armed forces.²⁷

Explicitly siding with Ukraine (and by extension, NATO) could result in the termination of such critical defence deals that India has in place with Russia, thereby impacting India’s immediate security needs. On the other hand, siding with Russia could create a gap between India and its Western partners (especially the US), which are becoming vital to India’s engagement and security posture in the Indo-Pacific. The US’s recent approval of sanction waiver on S-400 would not have been considered if India had sided with Russia in the war.²⁸ Hence, contrary to what some highlight, India’s position is not one of ‘strategic ambivalence’ but stems from deliberate ‘strategic calculation’.²⁹

25. Shaza Arif, “India’s acquisition of the S-400 Air Defence System: Implications and options for Pakistan”, August 21, 2021, at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2743750/indias-acquisition-of-the-s-400-air-defense-system-implications-and-options-for/>. Accessed on August 8, 2022.

26. Meenakshi Ray, “Range over 3 football fields, lightweight: All about A-203 assault rifles”, *The Hindustan Times*, December 6, 2021, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/range-over-3-football-fields-lightweight-all-about-ak-203-assault-rifles-101638776229412.html>. Accessed on July 3, 2022.

27. Sushant Kulkarni, “Explained: The BrahMos missile, and significance of the ongoing series of tests by Armed forces”, *The Indian Express*, December 3, 2020, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/brahmos-missile-and-significance-of-ongoing-series-of-tests-by-armed-forces-7070213/>. Accessed on July 28, 2022.

28. Geeta Mohan, “US House passes Ro Khanna’s historic amendment on sanctions waiver to India”, *India Today*, July 15, 2022, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/us-house-approves-sanctions-waiver-to-india-after-s-400-missiles-deal-with-russia-1975894-2022-07-15>. Accessed on July 27, 2022.

29. “Ukraine conflict: Can India balance ties between Russia and the West?”, DW, March 1, 2022, at <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-conflict-can-india-balance-ties-between-russia-and-the-west/a-60961294>. Accessed on July 29, 2022.

ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS AND MISCHARACTERISATIONS

The China Factor

One of the primary criticisms against India's position is that if India is strongly vociferous about China concerning violations of international law and rules-based order at its disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) border, does its abstention at the UN mean that India believes that different principles must apply at different places of the world? Further, as India counts on international support against possible Chinese incursions in its border, it becomes less likely to be trusted given its current position in the conflict. However, the assumptions underlying these criticisms inherently mischaracterise India's position. For one, the situation in the Transatlantic is not analogous to the Indo-Pacific; Russia is not China, and Taiwan, South China Sea or India's own border is not equivalent to the current dynamics of Ukraine. If there exists a strong connection between these regions, Europe would have collectively taken sharp positions on the many challenges that Asia has faced for years. Europe has conventionally been silent on many issues that previously arose in Asia and its adherence to international principles was not practised for long beyond its own region. This is because principles and interests are often balanced in any foreign policy and geopolitical considerations and interests determine positions that states adopt. In one of his recent talks, EAM Jaishankar stated that with geopolitical changes and actions occurring beyond Ukraine, the world could no longer be as eurocentric as it was before. He added, "Europe has to get out the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems; but the world's problems are not the Europe's problems."³⁰ The articulative, firm, and constructive responses of the EAM have become viral across social media and grabbed attention in both India and abroad. This represents India's policy of maintaining a balance between its values and interests, and its commitment and conviction towards its position. Further, India's concerns with China pre-date

30 "EAM at GLOBESEC—Taking Friendship to the Next Level: Allies in the Indo-Pacific", YouTube video, 28:30, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), June 3, 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KwXJ-jlY44&t=1443s>. Accessed on July 30, 2022.

the current Russia-Ukraine war. The Chinese do not need a precedent such as Ukraine to determine its foreign policy against India. India's relationship with any nation cannot be expected to be 'transactional' in its nature; in other words, India cannot be expected to engage in the Russia-Ukraine conflict simply because it expects the West to cooperate in the event of a possible conflict with China in the future. The analogy between the Ukrainian conflict and India's relations with China is distorted, as the nature of the conflicts are notably different from each other.

BLOC POLITICS AND THE QUESTION OF WHICH SIDE?

In his explanation against the resolution to vote at the UN, India's permanent representative to UN, Ambassador TS Tirumurti said, "If India has chosen a side, it is the side of peace."³¹ For Europe, whose status quo for many years has been significantly free from any serious conventional security threats, the war came as a bitter blow that will have consequential effects on its interests for a significant future. As the war started, this changing status quo spiralled Europe back into the Cold-War era's bloc politics. The West continued to portray the current war in terms of 'Authoritarianism vs Democracy' calling for India to take a pro-Ukraine stance by pointing out that it is the largest democracy in the world with strong democratic values.³² India has also been asked if and when the choice comes in the future for India, in terms of support, would it back the US or China? In the West, there is an understanding of a so-called 'globally accepted and understood fact' that there exist two axes—one, that is the West, led by the US, and the second, China, as the next potential axis.³³ The question is where does India fit into this picture? If India were to take a greater position in the world stage, can non-alignment be plausible and can it be sitting on the fence? The presumptions underlying these questions illustrate that there is a construct being imposed on India. While characterising the current conflict as authoritarianism vs democracy,

31. Permanent Mission of India to UN New York, "Security Council (Year Wise 2000 to 2021)—Statements", at <https://www.pminewyork.gov.in/IndiaatUNSC?id=NDUxNA>. Accessed on August 8, 2022.

32. n. 24.

33. n. 30.

the West argues that Putin invaded Ukraine primarily because it is a democracy.³⁴ Since badgering India on its position may prove counter-productive, the West pointed out that the current conflict sets a dangerous precedent, which could be used as a 'strategic playbook' by India's neighbour to justify further incursions. Though it is true that China is closely observing the current state of affairs amid the conflict, the Chinese do not see the current war as a moment of great reflection to reset their policies and priorities. Indeed, the Russian actions might have been emboldened by the Chinese actions in the past and the collective failure of international community to respond to it. Clearly, China does not need a precedent to determine its foreign policy against India, South China Sea or Taiwan. Further, India does not necessarily agree with the bipolar bloc construct as many nations across geographies started to actively engage in global politics and have new capabilities to offer to the changing world. The era of multipolarity is palpable and choosing one of the sides that is constructively imposed on the world makes many nations and interests go unrepresented. India does not have to take either of these sides and if it is not standing for one side, it does not necessarily mean it stands for the other. At the same time, if it chooses to not stand on either side, it does not necessarily mean it is out of the mainstream. In response to a question on similar lines, EAM Jaishankar said that "Just because India does not agree with the west, it doesn't mean it is sitting on the fence. It means India is sitting on its ground."³⁵ Indeed, India is not sitting on the fence, India is reaching out to both sides of the fence. The minister further stated, "A country with one-fifth of the world population is entitled to have its own side, weigh its own choices and make its own decisions."

India's position in the conflict at its fullest expression can be termed as 'strategic autonomy', a posture that relies on making independent foreign policy decisions based on considerable assessment of the situation and a balance of values and interests. Hence, India has chosen to rely on its own diplomatic activism

34. "Autocracies vs Democracies: Democracies Don't Deliver to Others", YouTube video, 1:06:48, Observer Research Foundation, June 6, 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCvuTmq0hy0&t=1217s>. Accessed on July 31, 2022.

35. n. 17.

and interests over bloc politics. Nevertheless, in absence of India's current diplomatic responses to the conflict, India's position only serves as an excuse and not a reason. Hence, it must continue to engage partners, address consequences of the current conflict and take an opportunity wherever possible to address issues surrounding Ukraine.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IN THE WEST

Despite clear attempts, India's strategic communication in the face of the current conflict has been ineffective both in terms of making policymakers in the West understand it in context and spirit, and in shaping public perceptions in the West. This could primarily be for two reasons. One, India has by far been defensive in its position and not proactive. Though India has called out Western hypocrisy in several instances, it has largely only responded to Western narratives and claims against India, but did not take any preparatory and anticipatory exercises to shape the right perception of its position. Second, the Western media, academia, think tanks have comprehended India's position in distorted and, often, in defective terms where an average reader or observer in the West, misunderstood India's position in the current war.

India will have to walk a tightrope in the near future, and the legitimacy of its 'balancing act' will be tested on the basis of how it responds to the consequences arising out of the current conflict. Though India might have been able to clear matters over its position in terms of justification, it is yet to do so in terms of 'clarity' and 'precision'. To project its position precisely, India needs to not only communicate where it stands but also where it is likely to be headed in the near future, and be articulate and demonstrative through various channels of communication on how it stands to address various issues arising out of the conflict. A broader campaign on how India is engaging with different players, addressing their current concerns arising out of the war, and condemning Russian actions more openly despite its position of neutrality, can be possible solutions for an effective strategic communication to shape India's diplomacy centred around the current conflict.