

## ***The Ukraine Crisis and Indo-Pacific Geopolitics***

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Even before Russia unleashed a full-scale attack on Ukraine, there were several murmurings about the emergence of a Cold War 2.0. The only difference between the earlier version of the Cold War and the new envisaged one was that China was being the challenger to the international system based on liberal values as opposed to the Soviet Union. Russia, which never gave up on its great power aspirations, shocked the world as it attacked Ukraine while calling out what it sees as Western aggression in the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). On February 4 this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. The declaration that followed was that China- Russian friendship had “no limits”.<sup>1</sup> The meeting between Putin and Xi was the first face-to-face meeting between the two since 2019. Xi did not travel for meetings with any foreign leader since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. The statements post the meeting between Putin and Xi, available on the websites of the respective foreign ministries of Russia and China outline the kind of world order that the two envisage and a host of commonalities can be found between the two.

For example, both mention the terms “cooperation”, “coordination”, “COVID-19”, “interests”, “multilateralism” and “democracy” multiple times. The question here emerges is what the political signalling through the common usage of terms could be. While the two statements available on the websites vary in length - the Russian statement runs into 5000 words,<sup>2</sup> while the Chinese statement is crisper and is about 1200 words.<sup>3</sup> Another difference between the two statements on the websites posts about the Putin-Xi meeting is that Russia calls out countries by names for being disruptors of peace in the international system, while China without mentioning countries’ names, talks

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about disruptors to peace in the international system.

In essence, China uses subtle signalling, while Russia takes a step forward and does what the Chinese want to but could not owing to the myriad ways in which they are tied to the West. For example, Russia states how the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the US and the UK (AUKUS) is a concerning development in international relations, how Japan's plans on the destroyed Fukushima nuclear plant are deeply concerning, how the U.S. plans in the Asia-Pacific and in the European regions are "risks to international and regional security", how Russia and China through the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) grouping, aim at deepened strategic partnerships and how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) aims at enhancing a "polycentric world order". All these points are to be found in the Chinese statement as well, without the mention of the names of the countries. While Russian diplomacy as seen in this case is more direct, China crouches its diplomatic postures in ambiguity, which of course can augur well for China if it would want to mend fences with the West.

What also remains interesting about the Russian statement is that it echoes all of China's recent foreign policy statements, be it on the COVID-19, or the centrality of regional organisations like BRICS and SCO in today's world, the politicisation of the issue of terrorism, and even the usage of the term "Asia Pacific" instead of the term "Indo-Pacific", which often has been criticised by China.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in 2018, China even mocked Australia over the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Speaking at an annual media conference in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi termed the Australian and the US preference of describing the region as the "Indo-Pacific" instead of "Asia-Pacific" as an attention-grabbing idea, which would "dissipate like ocean foam".<sup>5</sup> Russia in its 4 February statement, terms the region as "Asia-Pacific" as is preferred by Beijing.

Russia, in its February 4 statement also mentions the intention of the two sides to develop cooperation within the Russia-India-China format. While this was before Russia invaded Ukraine, the fact was that China had already attacked and infiltrated into Indian borders during the Galwan clash of 2020, and even after 15 rounds of military corps commander talks between India and China as of March 2022, the situation on the border between India and China was far from being resolved. India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar had even spoken about how Chinese military aggression at the borders has adversely impacted India-China relations.<sup>6</sup> However, the crisis in Ukraine and India's abstentions at the level of the UN in condemning Russia have led to an increasingly common view among Western scholars that India and China are

going to collaborate in ushering in an alternate world order while collaborating all the time with Russia. This idea has been mooted on several occasions by both Russia and China, both of which have suggested that India shares their view of the current crisis in Ukraine and the overall world order.

This idea is far from the truth as India and China have completely different geopolitical aspirations and realities. An example of how India and China differ lies in the differing diplomatic responses, when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for Russia to be suspended from the Human Rights Council. In the April voting at the General Assembly, China voted against the resolution while India abstained. The resolution received a two-thirds majority of those voting, minus abstentions. It had ninety-three countries voted in favour, while 24 voted against it. Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran and Vietnam voted against the resolution, while abstentions included India, Brazil, South Africa and Mexico among others.<sup>7</sup> To understand how India and China cannot be bracketed in the same group amidst the current unfurling crisis in Ukraine, it becomes pertinent to study key developments between Russia and China on one hand, and between Russia and India on the other.

### **China-Russia Relationship in 2022**

The year 2021 marked the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the treaty of good neighbourliness and friendship between China and Russia. In 2021, there were virtually no signs of the kind of attack Russia would unleash on Ukraine. However, problems started brewing from 2014 onwards as Russia annexed Crimea. China, even in 2014 had abstained from the UN resolutions condemning the annexation. The diplomatic response that China had given in 2014 was very similar to that in 2022. Then Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei gave a carefully noncommittal statement in 2014, “China always respects all countries’ sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. The Crimean issue should be resolved politically under a framework of law and order. All parties should exercise restraint and refrain from raising the tension”.<sup>8</sup> Similar to 2022, wherein before Russia militarily attacked Kiev, there was a meeting between the heads of states of the two sides, back in 2013, a few months before Russia’s annexation of Crimea, there was a meeting between Xi and Putin. On the eve of the 2013 state visit of Xi to Moscow, he remarked that the two sides were forging a “special relationship”. In 2013 it was a “special relationship”, in 2022, it became a friendship with “no limits”. Attacks on Ukrainian territories followed after both these meetings.

From 2014 to 2022, relations between Russia and China despite the declaration of a special relationship were nothing special, particularly in the economic realm. Trade progressed slowly, while there was a flurry of announcements made on energy cooperation between the two sides. For example, Gazprom inked a USD 400 billion deal with China in May 2014 and there were talks of a functional Siberian gas pipeline that would access Chinese markets and make Russia less reliant on European consumers. However, both gas deals have been slow to advance due to a lack of financing and enthusiasm from Beijing. Li Keqiang in his Moscow visit in November 2014 had promised a pipeline linking the western Altai to Xinjiang. Progress on that pipeline has been negligent as well.

Trade turnover dropped between 2013 and 2014 and had been slow to pick up. Trade turnover between China and Russia dropped by 27.8 percent to USD 64.2 billion in 2015, and the total value of Russia's exports to China declined in 2015 by 19.1 percent to USD 31.4 billion.<sup>9</sup> However, as compared to the slow progress in the economic realm, military transfers between the two sides increased sharply from 2015 onwards. Landmark contracts were signed in 2015 for the sale of Su-35 combat aircraft and S-400 air defense systems worth USD 5 billion.<sup>10</sup> There have also been a series of transactions involving the transfer of helicopters, submarine technology and aircraft engines. Joint technology projects also started signalling an expansion into newer arenas such as those of missile defense. As such, from 2014 onwards, there has been a greater military convergence between the two sides, culminating in greater opposition to the West, and finally the friendship with "no limits" as announced on February 4 this year. The year 2022 has been eventful for the Sino-Russia relations, particularly after the February 4 announcement. As much as China has tried to maintain a diplomatic ambiguity on its stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the flurry of developments between China and Russia reveals the increasing bonhomie between the two sides.

China-Russia relations have become closer in 2022 and there has been a flurry of agreements signed between the two. While a significant component of the relationship forged in 2022 is that of economics, the military component is seen in the Chinese and Russian frigates entering the contiguous zone of the Senkaku Islands. Also, Xi's support to Putin on issues of sovereignty cannot be ignored. While the military aspect of the friendship with no limits has been a worrisome issue, another worrying issue, as stated previously has been that of a possibility of a triangle between India, China and Russia to usher in a new world order. India and China have been locked in a military conflict since 2020, as China attacked India and martyred twenty of its soldiers,

showing utter disrespect for signed agreements on border management. In assessing whether India will ever join a China-Russia camp against the West, a few important facts need consideration.

The conflict between India and China started much before the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, even though Russian aggression against Ukraine has caught the whole world's attention while China's aggression against India failed to get similar attention from the West. While the conflict between India and China is a reality, a fact also is that there has been a seeming greater economic activity between India and Russia in 2022. Another important fact is that the US is an important partner for India, particularly in managing emerging challenges in the Indo-Pacific. As such India also finds itself in a difficult spot vis-a-vis the crisis in Ukraine. However, India's choices in the current context are dictated by its geopolitical realities. To understand whether India wants an alternate world order as opposed to the current liberal democratic world order, it becomes pertinent to look at India's relations with Russia this year to find out whether the views of the two are in complete unison.

### **India-Russia Relations in 2022**

The umbrella under which the bilateral relationship between India and Russia operates is termed as the "special privileged strategic partnership". In 2021, India and Russia, during Putin's visit to New Delhi for the India-Russia Annual Summit, reaffirmed the special and privileged partnership.<sup>29</sup> The two sides signed twenty-eight agreements, and the first 2+2 dialogue was also held between the two.<sup>30</sup>

The broad relations operate under the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of 1971 that was signed between India and the then Soviet Union. The treaty emphasises mutual trust, respect for each other's core national interests and similarity of positions on various international and regional issues.<sup>31</sup> The Indo-Russian strategic partnership is built on the components of politics, defence, civil nuclear energy, anti-terrorism cooperation, space and bilateral trade.<sup>32</sup> The two sides seek to reach a bilateral trade volume of USD 30 billion by 2025 from about USD 9.4 billion in 2017.<sup>33</sup> The two sides have also broached the idea of a free trade agreement.<sup>34</sup>

In 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, India abstained in the United Nations on a vote calling out Russian aggression. The Ministry of External Affairs of India had issued a comment expressing concerns for the fate of

“more than 5000 Indian nationals” in Ukraine and called for “sincere and sustained diplomatic efforts to ensure that issues between Ukraine and its neighbouring countries are resolved through constructive dialogue”.<sup>35</sup> As such there is not much divergence between India’s response in 2014 and 2022; neither is there much divergence between India’s and China’s responses in 2014. Putin had stated that Russia is grateful to all those who understood Russian actions in Crimea, and he mentioned both India and China by name and thanked the two countries.<sup>36</sup>

After 2014, India-Russia relations continued progressing at the same pace as they had been even before 2014. There was no special friendship announced the way it was in the case of China-Russia relations and the focus of India-Russia ties continued on the six elements of cooperation mentioned previously.

The economic component of the relationship has been an important one. As such several institutionalised mechanisms have been put in place for developing closer economic ties between the two sides. Examples include the India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific & Cultural Cooperation (IRIGC-TEC) and the India-Russia Strategic Economic Dialogue (IRSED), which have been established for cooperation in the field of development of economic policy and to encourage regular interactions and cooperation between the two countries. As compared to China, India has not made statements on Western hegemony, not in 2022, not before 2022. A united front against what is perceived as Western hegemony is a common thread between China and Russia, which is not the case in India-Russia relations. Even in multilateral groupings such as the BRICS, there is a common posture between China and Russia in calling out what they see as Western hegemony. As stated by Kugelman (2022), China appears keen to position BRICS as a counterweight to the U.S.-led institutions and could use the group as a platform for anti-U.S. propaganda.<sup>37</sup> For India, which is an important member of the group, this is not a welcome development, as it goes against New Delhi’s strategic autonomy policy, and New Delhi also seeks to avoid being seen as part of an anti-U.S. bloc.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond economic ties, India-Russia relations are also solidly grounded in defence ties. Since the 1970s, India has been importing important weapon systems from the Soviet Union, and now from Russia. Moscow has been India’s largest source of defence imports for decades and it has provided some of the most sensitive and important weapon platforms including nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, tanks, guns, fighter jets and missiles. As per a research report from the Stimson Center, about 85 percent of India’s major

weapons are overwhelmingly of Russian origin.<sup>39</sup>

Stockholm-based SIPRI's research nevertheless shows that Russia's share of arms exports to India fell from 69 percent in 2012-17 to 46 percent in 2017-21.<sup>40</sup> India's arms import from France increased more than tenfold, making it India's second largest arms supplier in 2017-21.<sup>41</sup> The same report adds that there have been substantial increases in Russia's arms exports to China, which stands at 60 percent. This is a divergence between the kind of defence reliance India and China respectively have on Russia.<sup>42</sup>

The bilateral relationship between India and Russia in 2022 has been hinging on trade and the economic element of the partnership. Due to the evolving geo-economics around energy availability and prices, India has stepped up imports from Russia, which nevertheless remain far lower than what Europe still imports from Russia. There is no agreement which has been signed between the two sides in 2022, and despite India's abstentions at the level of the United Nations during votes condemning Russia, India has constantly emphasised the need for dialogue and diplomacy. In understanding the divergences between China's relations with Russia vis-à-vis India's relations with Russia, particularly in the backdrop of the crisis in Ukraine, the following points stand out.

1. China declared a "no limits" friendship with Russia immediately preceding the invasion of Ukraine. India has no such declaration as of 2022.
2. Xi Jinping and Modi both spoke to Putin on February 25 over the telephone for the first time respectively, post the invasion of Ukraine. Given the friendship without limits, the expectation from the globe was that the phone call would have been sooner.
3. Xi has had two phone calls with Putin so far post the invasion, and Modi has had three phone calls with Putin so far post the invasion.
4. Xi's discussions with Putin as compared to Modi's discussions with Putin have stark differences. Xi thanked Putin for attending the Olympics and made the mention of Russian athletes winning medals. Modi reiterated India's long-standing position in favour of dialogue and diplomacy. The two sides expressed the "mutual intention for the comprehensive strengthening of the special and privileged strategic partnership between Russia and India."
5. Despite India's desire to increase economic ties with Russia manifold, there have been no reports of any development in the realm of energy pipelines, as compared to China.

6. India and Russia have had no talks on food security as compared to China and Russia.
7. India has made no criticisms of the sanctions against Russia. China has made comments on the international sanctions.
8. Russia has made statements on how China and Russia withstand the West's efforts to sow discord. No such statements can be found in the context of India.
9. Chinese and Russian warships approached the Senkaku Islands. India has not taken any such hostile steps to create imbalances in the existing international order.
10. Russia reportedly sought Chinese military equipment. There are no such reports regarding India.
11. As stated previously, at the UN General Assembly voting on Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council, in April, China voted against the resolution, while India keeping in line with all its abstentions on the Russia-Ukraine issue abstained. Abstention is different from voting against the resolution to oust Russia. Voting against the resolution, in essence, is supporting Russia.
12. In March, the international court of justice (ICJ) ordered to Russia to suspend its invasion of Ukraine, India's judge, Dalveer Bhandari voted against Russia.<sup>53</sup> The ICJ asked Moscow to suspend its military offensive in Ukraine by thirteen votes to two. These thirteen judges, including Justice Bhandari, asked Russia to immediately suspend its military operations on Ukraine. Vice-President Kirill Gevorgian of Russia and Judge Xue Hanqin of China dissented against the order.<sup>54</sup>
13. In June this year, the Bureau of Industry and Security, Department of Commerce of the U.S. amended the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding thirty-six entities under forty-one entries to the Entity List. These thirty-six entities have been determined by the U.S. Government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States. The decision was made based on the activities of the entities for providing support to Russia's military and/or defense industrial base. Specifically, these entities have previously supplied items to Russian entities of concern before February 24, 2022, and continue to contract to supply Russian entity listed and sanctioned parties after Russia's further invasion of Ukraine.<sup>55</sup> The entities come from the People's Republic of China (China), Lithuania, Pakistan, the Russian Federation



(Russia), Singapore, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.<sup>56</sup> India does not figure in this list. Zhao Lijian, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson said that China rejects the sanctions on its companies included on the blacklist for cooperating with the Russian military.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, it is clear that there are huge divergences in India's and China's responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The superficial similarities between the responses of the two include that they have abstained multiple times at the level of the UN, when there has been voting against Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, as stated earlier, this too is just a superficial similarity. India abstained when the vote to oust Russia from the Human Rights Council took place, while China voted against the resolution. Beyond this, another similarity is that both have sought to increase economic ties with Russia in the aftermath of sanctions against Russia. India's approach has been cautious, and India does not figure in the blacklist by the U.S. against companies that have been cooperating with the Russian military. India has clearly stated that it is a developing country and will buy cheap resources as and when available. That however has not been tantamount so far to bypassing sanctions against Russia. India in any case does not have a flurry of announcements or agreements with Russia in 2022 as stated previously. Another superficial similarity is that both India and China participated in the Twenty-fifth SPIEF in St. Petersburg. However, as stated previously, India seeks to shore up its economy and has been on the lookout to make resources available to its teeming billions. Also, Xi addressed the SPIEF. There was no head of state level participation from India at the SPIEF. Then, the question that arises is: Why has the idea of a unified Russia-India-China been gaining traction? The answer lies in evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

### **Conclusion**

Ahead of the G7 summit, John Kirby, the U.S. National Security Council coordinator, described India as a "key strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific Region".<sup>58</sup> China is averse to the idea of even the region being called Indo-Pacific as it shows the centrality of India in the region. Russia in its February 4 statement, following China's lead has called the region "Asia Pacific", instead of "Indo-Pacific", while nevertheless mentioning India as an important partner. Post the invasion of Ukraine, China and Russia have both suggested that India shares their view of the current crisis and the international order.<sup>59</sup> If a quick look is taken at the attempts made by the state-run *Global Times* to showcase

how India is in its and Russia's camp as opposed to being in the liberal, democratic camp led by the U.S. it is seen that in April 2022 itself there were at least seven articles and op-eds churned out arguing that India is standing up to the U.S.

The editorial on April 20, 2022, titled, "Western response to India's Russia stance: A glimpse of its future challenge", is a perfect example of how China seeks to leverage disinformation to drive a wedge between India and the U.S.-led Western alliance. The article states how Germany seeks to snub India as a G-7 guest over its Russia stance.<sup>60</sup> The article states that this is an example of the list of pressure the West has piled on India, and how the West wants to force India to pick a side and join the sanctions against Russia.<sup>61</sup> German government circles were quick to respond and termed as "wrong" a report stating that it was not considering inviting India for the G7 meeting.<sup>62</sup> India did attend the G7 meet in June this year, and Prime Minister Modi received a warm welcome as he reached Germany.<sup>63</sup>

China and Russia both are experts in the practice of deception and disinformation. Wang Yi's India visit in April 2022 was also another attempt at using deception for creating differences between India and the West over Ukraine. What is revealing to note here is that Wang visited India in April, and the flurry of editorials in the *Global Times* regarding India standing up to the West over Ukraine also took place in April. Wang's visit to India was sudden. Fourteen rounds of Sino-Indian border military talks had failed to resolve the border issue. No Chinese dignitary had visited India from 2020 onwards, when China attacked India at Galwan. This visit was unexpected and sudden and had no clear-cut motive.

The Chinese side requested the Indian side to keep the visit under wraps, and the Indian side acquiesced. This was a clear attempt to send a signal to the West that India and China have something to discuss that they did not want the West to be aware of. Against the prevailing backdrop, the only such point of discussion could be Ukraine. China understands human psychology and behaves in ways that can send psychological messages to other parties in international affairs. Needless to state it uses deception. The message that China sought to send out through Wang's visit was that it was a Russia-India-China triangle against the West. India gained nothing from Wang's visit, but the Chinese deceptive message was sent across.

While China would not want India to ever emerge as an important player in international relations, as clearly exemplified by its repeated incursions into the Indian territory, trade malpractices, dumping of Chinese goods into the

Indian market, disrespecting of Indian sovereignty by the creation of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, shielding Masood Azhar in the past from getting listed at the UN's 1267 committee as an international terrorist and so on; it wants India as a pawn to showcase to the West that a big, populous democratic country is in its corner. India's growing prowess in Asia and beyond, particularly in the Indo-Pacific is something that threatens China. The greater synergies between the Quad members, India's stances on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and growing naval exercises with the Western partners are not palatable for China.

In the Indo-Pacific strategy of the White House published in February this year, the US mentioned how Australia and India have been victims of Chinese aggression. Any closeness between partners to collectively deal with Chinese aggression is not something that is to China's liking. Therefore, widening the breach which may have been created due to differing diplomatic responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is something that Beijing actively seeks. The West led by the U.S. need to understand that India's geopolitical realities are very different from its own and cutting off reliance on cheap imports is not something that can be done overnight. That being stated, India which has always had a non-aligned stance in international politics, understands that aggression only disturbs international peace and does not fit in well with India's view of the world. Thus, in various ways, India seeks to reduce conflicts and call for peaceful resolutions of disputes. India understands that the U.S. is a valuable partner, and the Indo-Pacific is an arena, where concerted efforts are needed to deal with Chinese assertiveness and aggression. India has never sought to be in any camp and attempts to use deception to showcase India as part of an emerging Russia-India-China camp need to be actively dealt with. India needs to take relevant steps to deal with deception and the West should also be wary of falling into deception practised by the collective of China and Russia.

**Notes:**

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