



BULLETIN

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India on the Ukraine Crisis: Wait and See

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Although India has taken a restrained position and is not taking sides in the Ukraine crisis, it is clearly drifting towards the Russian narrative. India's position on Ukraine is driven not only by its close relationship with Russia but also by ideological and strategic differences with the West. To woo India to its side, the U.S. and EU should be more receptive to India's concerns, engage in a stronger dialogue, and patiently explain why Russia's action endangers India's own interests and security.

India's Two-Faced Stance. Ukraine is a low priority in India's foreign policy agenda despite traditionally warm and close relations. India has no strategic interests in the region and bilateral trade was only \$3 billion in 2012 (with imports from Ukraine at \$2.5 billion). Relations got a boost after a state visit by then-President Viktor Yanukovich to Delhi in December 2012, when the states formed a "comprehensive partnership." However, India remained indifferent to the unfolding crisis in Ukraine, calling for peaceful and inclusive solutions. After the situation deteriorated in mid-February of this year, India did not openly take sides in the standoff of the West against Russia. However, one can feel a discreet sympathy and understanding in Indian strategic circles for Russia.

Official declarations from India on Ukraine are scarce and ambiguous, leaving a lot of space for interpretation. In the only press release on the issue, dated 6 March, the Ministry of External Affairs expressed concerns about an "escalation of tensions," said it supported solutions through a "free and fair election" and "constructive dialogue" between Ukraine and its neighbours. National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon was more frank when commenting that there are "legitimate Russian and other interests" in Ukraine that should be dealt with. India does not support sanctions on Russia, as it is against any "unilateral imposition of sanctions on any country." Consequently, it abstained from voting in the UN General Assembly on a resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity on 27 March.

Unofficially, one can hear in Delhi that the EU and the U.S. bear prime responsibility for the unfolding crisis in Ukraine, claiming it was a mistake to present Ukraine a difficult choice between closer integration with the EU or with Russia, ignore deep internal divisions in Ukrainian society, and discount Russia's strategic interests in Ukraine. The argument that the annexation of Crimea was based on the fact that the region was part of Russia until 1954 and part of the USSR until 1991, thus it is an historical reunification, sounds reasonable to many in India. Not surprisingly, India, along with China, was mentioned in a positive tone in Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech on 18 March in which he said he appreciated "India's reserve and objectivity."

Walking a Tightrope. There are strategic and ideological reasons for India's appreciation of Russia's stance on Ukraine. Despite recent re-engagement with the West, Russia is an old ally and all-weather friend since the Cold War era. Russia was usually the only partner on which India could rely when it wanted to block adverse decisions in the UN Security Council, including on crucial Kashmir issue. Russia was also the only major power that did not impose sanctions on India following its nuclear tests in 1998. It is also a strategic supplier of defence equipment and nuclear technology. Both countries cooperate on military technology, including the Brahmos supersonic missile and fighter jets. Energy-rich Russia is also seen as a potential provider of fuel for an energy-thirsty India. Moreover, as Western troops are due to depart Afghanistan after 2014, Russia may again emerge as the only strategic partner to India to contain terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan and to counterbalance Pakistani and Chinese influence there.

Still, India's affinity for Russia is counterbalanced by the country's growing ties with the West and certain internal risks that could spill out from Russia's actions in Ukraine. First, India is struggling with separatist movements in several regions, from Kashmir and Jammu to Assam to the northeast states. By accepting the rights of the Russian-speaking

inhabitants of Crimea to hold a referendum, it could give an argument for Kashmiri people fighting for independence to take up the right of self-determination or to join Pakistan. A plebiscite on the future status of Kashmir was suggested by the UN as early as 1949, but has not taken place due to India's objections. Also, by accepting Russian claims to Crimea on the basis of historical links, India could be opening another Pandora's box. Similar reasoning could spur some ideas in UK, France or Portugal to reclaim parts of India that used to be ruled as part of European colonial empires for hundreds of years, even as late as 1961. Another pitfall may be that India has always been a staunch supporter of the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, thus any open support for Russia would put in jeopardy its own credibility. Finally, as a victim of violence perpetrated by non-state actors trained in Pakistan, India cannot accept actions in Ukraine taken by armed "volunteers" supported from Russia.

Moreover, India, as a rising power, cannot afford to antagonise its Western partners, with whom relations have been substantially strengthened following the end of the Cold War. Today, the EU (collectively) is the largest trade partner for India, with goods exchanged in 2012 valued at €81.7 billion (or 13.2 % of India's total trade), and a major export destination, absorbing €38.6 billion, or 16.7%, of its exports. The U.S., with trade with India of \$62.7 billion (about €47 billion) in 2012, was the fourth-largest trade partner for India. The West is still a major source of foreign investment and development assistance, and recently replaced Russia as the major supplier of advanced armaments. Moreover, the EU has been a "strategic partner" of India's since 2004 and the U.S. sees India as a "natural ally" and signed a landmark nuclear deal in 2008 that *de facto* recognised India's nuclear status. Even if relations with the U.S. and EU fall short of expectations, re-engagement has given India important leverage to ascend economically and politically on the global stage. Hence, India's balancing act on Ukraine is the most pragmatic option.

Drawing India to the West. For the last two decades, India has maintained a low profile in international relations and very often has not taken sides on the most controversial global issues. Still, with a rising economy and huge demographic potential, it is a pivotal state that can influence the future balance of power, and its voice on Ukraine is important. If the West (U.S., EU mainly) would like to woo India, it will need to better understand India's larger concerns and aspirations and engage it in a more meaningful dialogue.

India's different assessment of the Ukraine crisis proves that, despite being the world's largest democracy, it still sees more in common with other emerging powers than with Western democracies. The U.S.-dominated international system is seen in Delhi as discriminatory and rather in service to the old powers. The West thus far has been reluctant to address India's concerns and claims for such issues as UNSC reform, transfer of dual-use technologies, Pakistan's support for terrorist organisations, fair trade and climate policies, and others. Thus, India has been active in forging closer links with other emerging powers (via such groupings as BRICS, IBSA, BASIC, and RIC) to balance Western domination in international relations. India's close links to Russia, which stands up to U.S. supremacy, may be seen as an important element of this strategy.

A more pragmatic and assertive India would not back EU policy on Ukraine simply because it is right (for many in India it is not) but only if it would serve its larger strategic objectives. The EU and U.S., though, have leverage over India through issues of crucial importance to the country, such as trade negotiations, stabilisation in Afghanistan, the fight against terrorism, or UN reform, with which to attract more cooperation from it on issues of concern to the West. In the end, however, it is not in India's interest to replace one power pursuing unilateralism in international affairs with another.

Conclusions. India's ambiguous stance on the Ukraine crisis is deeply rooted in the country's ideological perspective, historical distance from the West, and long-held friendship with Russia. India has no vital interests in Ukraine at stake and thus prefers to watch the crisis as a distant spectator. Its disagreements with the West over Ukraine are not the result of diverging interests there but rather a symptom of larger divisions between declining and ascending powers in the changing world order. Hence its policy on Ukraine reflects its dilemma of sustaining good relations with both Russia and the West, and it is refraining from taking any actions that can do damage to its ties with either camp.

One should not expect India to make any new decisions on this issue until at least after the general elections and assumption of power by a new government at the end of May. Still though, a radical change in India's perspective on Ukraine is unlikely in the short term. The EU and U.S. should strengthen their dialogue with India, explain their policies, and underline areas where Russia's actions may put at risks India's own security. The West should engage with India to draw red lines in Ukraine that no party should cross. In the long term, it should also be more willing to address India's larger concerns and aspirations on the world's stage in order to speak with the same voice in future Ukraine-like crises. Any current misunderstandings and misperceptions can be further ameliorated by more vibrant interactions at the diplomatic, expert and people-to-people levels.