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## WORLD

# Dealing with dictators and democrats under duress

March 5, 2022, 8:18 PM IST / Jagdish Batra in Cultural Inputs, World, TOI

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### Jagdish Batra

Dr Jagdish Batra is a senior academic, currently working as Professor of English at O.P. Jindal Global University, India. He has nearly four decades of

“From frying pan into fire” is the proverb that cynically fits in to describe mankind’s slipping into another challenging situation after the Covid19 epidemic. The ongoing Russian attack on Ukraine threatens to unleash nuclearized World War III. Whereas Covid19 was the Chinese gift to the world, the ongoing battering of Ukraine is solely Russian’s

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doing. One can say that the Russian President Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping toe similar line in many respects, even as there are some differences.

When Xi got the constitutional bar on having a third term as Secretary General of Communist Party of China removed, and thereby secured for himself as many terms as he would be able to marshal, Putin too followed suit. Both seem possessed by imaginary fears of threat to security, or so it is presented to the world, to justify their adventurous moves. Both are, therefore, intent upon expanding their areas of influence — literally as well as metaphorically. Both are bitten by the bug of megalomania and see themselves as no less than the great emperors of yore. So, Xi goes grabbing land of neighbours on all sides of China to fulfil Mao-tse Tung's vision of a greater China, and Putin sets about to geographically restore the former Soviet Union!

The issues at stake are indeed complex, being a mix of reality and fiction. Russia, being a truncated part of the earlier Soviet Union, has long viewed its territorial diminution as a result of the western conspiracy, therefore, it won't want contiguous countries to hobnob with western powers. For the western bloc, it is denial of democratic freedom to the

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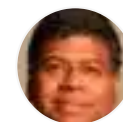
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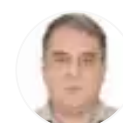
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people of Ukraine to elect their leader and to choose friends from among the comity of nations. This is not a purely ideational construct. The people of Ukraine do not have happy memories of the past as member states of the Soviet Union. Had it been otherwise, they would not have separated from it like some other states, in the first place. The discordant voices within Ukraine come from the Russian-speaking regions which Russia has capitalized upon to dismember Ukraine. When such grand dreams motivate the dictators, other reasons can be easily discovered or invented. So, Ukraine's loss of royalty from the gas pipeline or Russia's fault-finding with Ukraine for its non-adherence to the Minsk2 agreement etc. come in handy. In this situation, all talk of principles and ideals become ineffectual and the jungle rule of 'might is right' operates.

That the invasion of Ukraine will encourage Putin's buddy Xi to be adventurous is a foregone conclusion. The world has to decide how to cope with it. But will the kind of resistance that the West has put up, help to smoothen the turbulence in South China Sea or deter India's hostile neighbours from undertaking misadventure, becomes very uncertain. In this quagmire, India's neutrality is surely desirable. It just cannot offend Russia even as it won't like to upset

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the growing engagement with the US and European countries.

Russia has been a constant ally of India, barring the recent phase that showed partial bend towards Pakistan which probably happened on cue from China. Russia has been the biggest defence supplier to India and has also accepted India's terms as against western countries to share technology. It has even used its veto power to lend support to India at the UN. On the other hand, the strategic relationship with the US and the members of the newly-forged Quad cannot be given short shrift. It is logical to presume that if India expects help from the West in its troubles with China, it has to reciprocate in case of Taiwan or South China Sea, etc.

Ditto in case of Ukraine, even though Ukraine's relationship with India has not been very favourable to India despite the fact that thousands of Indian students have contributed to Ukraine's economy. It is on record having antagonized India on more than one occasion through its opposition to Indian position at the UN. It has shown proximity to India's enemies, the latest instance being the Azerbaijan-Armenia 44-day war in which Ukraine was seen siding Pakistan and Turkey. Despite all this, if India has taken a neutral



stand, it should be appreciated by all powers involved in the imbroglio.

The policy got the unanimous support from the opposition parties within India which was a matter of great satisfaction. For people at home, concerned about the safety of their children studying in Ukraine, the policy proved to be a boon, as it helped secure temporary ceasefire from Russia providing the much needed window to extricate the students. As the patience of the world grows thin and the clamour to treat Putin as a pariah grows, India will surely feel the heat. At home too, the inherent idealistic strain in Indians will demand change of course. But how to satisfy conflicting demands at a time when India is dependent upon Russia, America, Europe, etc. for trade and defence purposes is a puzzle that will require all the ingenuity of our leadership to solve. In the long run, the lesson that this situation brings out is that one has to be self-sufficient at the minimum in areas of defence, globalization or no-globalization.

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