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Thursday, March 24th 2022

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UKRAINE CRISIS

Why India should support Ukraine: Marrying realism and morality

The world’s largest democracy taking a pro-Ukrainian stance will serve its own national interests.

Oleksandr Svitych

Yesterday · 09:00 am





Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the sidelines of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference, in this photograph from November. | [Embassy of India in Kyiv, Ukraine.](#)

India's "[silence and abstention](#)" stance on the Russian war against Ukraine has been [much talked about](#). Broadly speaking, there are two diametrically opposing views. Proponents of realpolitik legitimise India's position, while advocates of moral-driven internationalism advocate for solidarity with Ukraine.

I argue that Indian foreign policy-makers can and should adopt a more pragmatic approach. Realism may not be necessarily antagonistic toward liberalism. India can use the latter as a means toward its strategic ends. National interests and cost-benefit calculations need not be juxtaposed against internationally shared norms. Ultimately, India's condemnation of the Russian aggression is its litmus test of [global power aspirations](#).



Existing narratives offer several explanations why India has consistently abstained from the United Nations voting on the Ukraine crisis. One is that the lives of Indian citizens have been at stake. As the Russian invasion unfolded, tens of thousands of [Indian students](#) got [stuck in the Ukrainian cities](#) of [Kharkiv](#), [Sumy](#) and [Kyiv](#).

Another common explanation is geopolitical: India has traditionally maintained a strategic alliance with Russia. The latter has been a key supplier of [military equipment](#), which is especially pertinent due to the perceived security threat from China. Moreover, India was unhappy with Ukraine trading its military



equipment to Pakistan, as well as standing against India's nuclear tests.

Geography has been named as a third factor: the claim that India's strategic interests lie in the Indo-Pacific region rather than in distant Europe. Last but not least, the West and its media have allegedly [focused too much](#) on the Ukrainian tragedy while [overlooking war injustices](#) caused by the United States-led international order in the Global South.

However plausible on the surface, these propositions are not tenable. Let me briefly debunk them one by one.


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The Indian government has already [evacuated all of its citizens](#) through Operation Ganga. It is hard to imagine how [defence supplies](#) can continue smoothly from a sanction-hit and increasingly isolated Russia. More importantly, from a realist, rational perspective, it is unclear why India would put its international reputation at stake for allying with a [pariah state](#).

Bearing a historical grudge against Ukraine in the Pakistan case is dubious moral

behaviour for a government that seeks to elevate its nation to a [global status](#). The “not in my backyard” argument is easily refuted by the inter-dependent nature of India’s security and [economy](#) with the rest of the world. Finally, assessing which war is worth more attention overlooks the scale, intensity, brutality, and propagandistic fervour of Putin’s aggression against Ukraine.

Interestingly, few analysts bother to point to another reason behind India’s balancing act. It is located at the more intimate personal level. Simply put, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin are buddies. There is [psychological affinity](#) between their leadership styles and the [political ideologies](#) they espouse. Both are authoritarian populist politicians. Both highlight the issues of law and order and the “macho style” of fixing things. Both embody religious nationalism, be it in the form of [Hindutva](#) or Orthodox imperialism.





Prime Minister Narendra Modi embraces Russian President Vladimir in this photograph from 2018.
Credit: AFP

With the above in mind, India can and should recalibrate its stance and condemn Russia's war against Ukraine. It is unlikely that the current government would do that from a moral outlook perspective mentioned in the beginning. Yet, this need not be the imperative. If Indian foreign policy is guided by cost-benefit calculations, these should not be abandoned overnight.

From a utilitarian perspective, a pro-Ukraine shift will make India better off and thus continue to serve its national interest. It will signal the country's respect for international law and security, it will make it a visible partner in crisis resolution, and it will help India project its global influence. All these outcomes embody and promote, rather than contradict, the realpolitik principles cited by India's diplomats and foreign affairs experts. From such a utility perspective, then, India's support of Ukraine is politically necessary, strategically desirable, and diplomatically feasible.

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