

Is India in a bind over its relations with Russia?

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Comment

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A destroyed Russian tank in Kyiv. | Photo Credit: AFP

On October 1, when [India abstained from voting](#) at the United Nations Security Council on a draft resolution against Russia for conducting referendums and [annexing four regions of Ukraine](#), it was a reminder of New Delhi's precarious tightrope walk on ties with Moscow. In the backdrop of the [war in Ukraine](#) and in the face of Western sanctions against Russia, India has continued to carry on oil and defence trade with Russia, even as it remains committed to deepening its relations with the West, including the U.S. In a discussion moderated by **Kallol Bhattacharjee**, **Anuradha Chenoy** and **Ashok Kantha** discuss India's choices and actions in a changing geopolitical landscape, especially with regard to China. Edited excerpts:

The war in Ukraine has brought Russia and China closer than before. In this context, how can India safeguard its interests?

Anuradha Chenoy: It's not that the Ukraine war has suddenly brought them together. The proximity has been going on since the end of the Cold War and it has gradually reached a peak now. It is linked to a combination of factors, such as Russia's export of defence equipment, of energy, the two countries' understanding of a multi-polar world, etc. — and also, from the rise of American paranoia about, and phobia towards, China. So, this closeness is not new, but it has increased. I think it is pretty irreversible.

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Ashok Kantha: I witnessed linkages between China and Russia being upgraded following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Russians came under great pressure from the West. I was India's Ambassador to China then, and saw first-hand how Russia's attitude in working with China in certain sensitive sectors changed — for instance, in the supply of sophisticated defence systems such as S-400 or Sukhoi Su-35 aircraft, or in accommodating the Belt and Road Initiative, or in accepting a greater role for China in Central Asia. All these developments took place at least partly because Russia needed China more then.

This trend has continued. The joint statement of February 4, 2022 between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin predated Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It talked about a partnership “without limits”. There is no doubt that after Russia's “special military operation” against Ukraine, strategic collaboration between Russia and China has increased. If Russia is more dependent on China today, that is because it has been subjected to intense sanctions and other measures by the West. And China, while it has not quite endorsed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has professed to take a position of neutrality, has been supportive of Russian action in many ways, including by accepting the Russian narrative on the U.S. and the West being the primary cause for what's happening in Europe today, through various actions like the eastward expansion of NATO. I think that narrative is being promoted by China, both externally and internally. So, on the whole, the Chinese have been supportive of Russia. And this has led to greater Russian dependence on China, which, of course, has implications for us.

Both Russia and China have opposed the Quad. So, did the Quad also play a role in bringing Russia and China closer?

Anuradha Chenoy: India has invested in the Quad, but the Quad is not a military alliance. It focuses on technology, trade, maritime security. But India has been careful to make sure that it's not part of any military alliance with Russia, China or the U.S. And I think Russia has understood that India will engage with other countries of the West. In fact, China also tried to have close relations with the West, but the West did not respond favourably to this. So, both Russia and China are looking to the Global South, of which India is important. I think the small but significant bilateral withdrawal from one point in Galwan recently might have something to do with this. China seems to be recognising that India is capable of being neutral. Of course, it has a very long way to go. But I don't think China can afford to alienate India any longer, given the kind of polarisation in world politics.

Ashok Kantha: On Ukraine, we have taken a balanced and nuanced position. I don't see any fundamental shift in China's position. It would like to utilise the Ukraine issue. It would like to drive a wedge between India and the U.S. But it's not willing to accommodate in any substantive manner fundamental concerns such as the situation along the India-China border. So, I don't really see any fundamental shift in China's position in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.

India is going ahead with all the multilateral arrangements that it has with China and Russia, such as BRICS and the SCO (Shanghai Corporation Organisation), while also going ahead with the G20, Quad, etc. Does it help India to maintain such a mixed position?

Ashok Kantha: We have differentiated between our bilateral and multilateral engagements with China. We have made it clear that unless there is restoration of peace and tranquility in broad areas, we cannot return to a normal track in our dealings with China. We don't see China showing any desire to return to the status quo ante. But we have maintained our engagement with China and Russia in settings like the SCO.

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To what extent has India benefited from multilateral engagements with Russia and China in BRICS and the SCO in comparison to broader multilateral groupings like the G20?

Anuradha Chenoy: It's a function of a sophisticated foreign policy to be able to distinguish between bilateral engagements and multilateral engagements. India is a good model for this. The SCO and BRICS, especially the SCO, are regional organisations focusing on energy trade, linkages, etc. These are opportunities for leaders to discuss multiple non-traditional security issues. BRICS came up because major multilateral organisations like the WTO [World Trade Organization] and the IMF [International Monetary Fund] have not given the space that they should to emerging countries or to the Global South. And India has tried consistently to not make any platform either for or anti-West. It is able to operate and even become a bridge between these formations.

Is India hinting at a growing impatience with Russia's war?

Ashok Kantha: There is a discomfort with both Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the fallout of Russian actions, which have hurt our interests in many ways. For instance, the economic fallout, high fuel prices, difficulties in accessing fertilizers and disruptions of global supply chains. There are practical aspects like the procurement of arms and spare parts from Russia for the Indian armed forces that indicate at a legacy aspect to our relationship with Russia. So, this is not something we are going to jettison in a hurry. But

at the same time, the fact remains that as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there have been changes in the geopolitical situation which are not very favourable for us, such as the closer alignment between China and Russia.

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Anuradha Chenoy: I agree broadly that there is clearly discomfort and there has been fairly astute balancing and also small gains, with Russia providing larger amounts of energy at discounted rates. India would be happy to help if there could be a negotiated solution. But (Ukrainian President Volodymyr) Zelenskyy has said he is not willing to talk to Mr. Putin. India also understands the quagmire, what NATO is doing, and because we have direct contacts with the Russian leadership, we have to watch (how the situation unfolds). But so far, the stance has been fairly good.

What lies ahead for Russia, China and India?

Anuradha Chenoy: I think there will be no Russia-India-China kind of trilateral. Russia can still put pressure regarding the border issue on behalf of India, as it has done earlier. In short, I don't see anything negative as far as Russia and India are concerned with China. We have to keep putting pressure to resolve the border issues.

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Ashok Kantha: The assessment in the West, that Russia has become a client state or a vassal state of China, is a little exaggerated. Russia is a country with a sense of history and destiny. So it will continue to insist on its agency in international affairs. At the same time, the fact remains that because of several circumstances coming together, including pressure from the West, Russia's role in Europe is no longer acceptable to the U.S. and European countries. I think Russia will become increasingly dependent on China in practical ways — for instance, as Europe continues to reduce its dependency on oil and gas supplies from Russia.

Anuradha Chenoy is Adjunct Professor at the Jindal Global University and former Dean, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Ashok Kantha, a former Ambassador of India to China, is Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Chinese Studies and Distinguished Fellow with Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi

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