

Is India in a unique position amid changing global order?

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India's independent stance on the Russia-Ukraine war - which many would dub as non-Alignment 2.0 - has drawn global attention, and even praise from unexpected quarters.

Reported By:

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| Edited By: [Tridivesh Singh Maini](#) | Source: DNA webdesk

| Updated: Mar 06, 2023, 06:00 AM IST



Indian PM Narendra Modi at the G20 handover ceremony 2022 | Photo: Reuters)

India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war - where it has refused to criticise Russia outright and purchased oil at discounted prices - has drawn global attention, and even praise from unexpected quarters.

Many commentators had dismissed the relevance of non-Alignment in recent years, especially with India moving much closer to the West in general and the US in particular over the past two decades. Like many other countries – especially Middle Powers close to the US, India has taken an independent stance – which many would dub as non-Alignment 2.0 -- not toeing the line of the West but pushing for an end to the war. Publicly, the US stated that it understood India's decision to purchase oil from Russia.

There is no doubt, that India is working closely with the US on platforms like Quad (US, Japan, Australia and India) and I2U2 (US, UAE, Israel and India) but its stand on the Russia-Ukraine war and a host of other global issues is distinct from the West.

Many analysts have repeatedly argued, that in a changing global geopolitical order and with its increasing economic clout and strategic heft, India has the option of 'multiple-alignment' as opposed to 'Non-Alignment' and rather than being a mere balancer it is a decisive voice on key economic and strategic issues. New Delhi's strong links with the west and its understanding of key concerns of the developing countries puts it in a unique position.

A clear reiteration of the above point is the G20 Summit held in November 2022 in Indonesia. India had played a key role in the joint declaration and had been an intermediary between the west and Russia. PM Narendra Modi has repeatedly stated, that 'today's era is not one of war'. New Delhi has been playing a key role in drawing attention to the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on issues like global supply chains of fertilisers and food.

India, Global South and G20

It is not just the issue of India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war but also some of the questions regarding the failure of multilateralism which have put it in a unique position to be the voice of the 'Global South' – a concept which many had thought had outlived its utility in an increasingly globalized world where many developing countries were keen to break the barriers with the west.

After taking over as G20 Chair, India had emphatically asserted, that it would seek to put forward the aspirations of the Global South, on important economic issues, which often get relegated to the side-lines. In January 2023, PM Modi announced that India would be setting up a Global South Centre of Excellence.

While addressing the Foreign Ministers meeting of the G20 recently, Indian PM sought to highlight the key economic challenges faced by developing countries and the relevance of India's G20 Presidency. PM Modi said, "Many developing countries are struggling with unsustainable debt while trying to ensure food and energy security for their people. They are also the ones most affected by global warming caused by richer countries. This is why India's G20 presidency tried to give a voice to the Global South. No group can claim global leadership without listening to those most affected by its decisions."

It would of course be important to point out that while taking a balanced stance on certain issues and not allowing its bilateral ties with Russia to get impacted, India is a key player in the Quad. While the Foreign Ministers of G20 were unable to come up with a joint statement due to divergences over the Russia-Ukraine war, a statement issued by Foreign Ministers of Quad, during their meeting on the side lines of G20 on March 2, 2023, pitched for an end to the war without directly criticising Russia.

In their joint statement, Foreign Ministers were however unequivocal in their criticism of China for its increasingly aggressive posturing on the South China Sea and its growing clout in the region. A working group on counter terrorism was also announced during the meeting.

In conclusion, with further economic progress and strategic importance in a changing global order, India's clout is bound to grow and it will be in a position to make tough choices – though there may be some challenges. The degree which India can leverage its relevance will depend not only on its own path forward but the geopolitical landscape. In recent months it has certainly emerged as an important bridge between the West and the developing world and between the West and Russia.

The author is a New Delhi-based policy analyst associated with the OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat

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