



India's Neutral Stand on Russia-Ukraine War and India-Russia relations in the Contemporary time

Dr. Kamal

Kamala Nehru College, DU.
Email - kamalghar8@gmail.com

Abstract: The neutral stand of India on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not new; it is on the same trajectory India pursued in the Cold War and later. India did not criticise Russia for attacking Ukraine like the US and other western countries. When the UN brought the resolution to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India abstained from the UN meeting and didn't vote against Russia. Although India did not support Russia's action asked for a dialogue between the two warring parties to resolve their differences. So, what can we make out of this India's policy?

Since India's independence, India used to import most of its weapons from Russia during Cold Wartime. Still, India imports 60 per cent of its weapons from Russia. (Kumar, 2022: 157-160) Russia's help to India to build its infrastructure and its veto power to save India on the Kashmir issue impelled India towards Russia, and India developed good relations with Russia. Since then, India and Russia have been all-weather friends of each other. But, in the recent past, we have observed some differences between the two countries. Because on the one side, in the last two decades, the closeness between India and US has strengthened, but on the other side, the differences between US and Russia have increased due to many factors. And these differences are impacting India-Russia relations.

This war would considerably impact the dynamics of India's foreign policy and the foreign policy of other countries. The world would be more on a nationalist trajectory, including India, which is already on this path after the pandemic. (Kamal, 2022: 28-31)

This article will focus on India-Russia relations in contemporary times and which direction is heading under the existing global structure. But before discussing recent times and future direction, we will first provide a broad overview of India-Russia relations.

1. India-Russia relations during the Cold War

As we know, India's Foreign Policy was the brainchild of Jawaharlal Nehru. Since his visit to Brussels in Belgium in 1927, Nehru became very impressed with Socialist ideology. And as we see India's relationships with other countries, India's relations with the Soviet Union also took shape under Nehru.

Nehru also got impressed with Soviet Union's five-year planning system, and as we know, India embraced the five-year planning system after its independence. But we would not say that India's imminent closure to the Soviet Union was planned. As we know, India embraced non-alignment. It meant India would pursue an independent foreign policy and not join any block. And when India declared its non-alignment policy, India received flak from both the superpowers, the US and USSR. Soviet leaders were more critical of Nehru and India's non-alignment policy. Joseph Stalin more severely criticised Nehru and India's non-alignment policy. He said that Jawaharlal Nehru created an illusion of non-alignment, but he was with imperialist powers. But when India recognised China and signed a Panchsheel agreement with it. The Soviet Leaders admired it. After the death of Stalin, we see a positive turn in Indo-Soviet relations. Under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, there was a significant improvement between the two countries. Both countries shared a vision on global issues like nuclear disarmament, multilateralism under the UN, anti-colonialism, anti-apartheid, anti-racism, and Palestinians' right to their homeland. Since India was following the policy of socialism, that was also the liking point for the Soviet Union. (Dubey, 2012: 2-6)



In fact, after India's independence, India always approached the US first for help. Like after independence, India gave attention to developing its infrastructure sector and primary industries, and for this, India needed colossal investment. India always sought US help first to build its industries and infrastructure sector. Still, the US always refused and was more interested in small and consumer items projects because, in infrastructure projects, huge investment was required, and the US was not ready for this. Then India approached the Soviet Union to provide financial and technological help to finance its primary industries, and the Soviet Union agreed. This helped create a solid base for a close relationship between India and the Soviet Union. (Rekha, 2017: 26-32)

Similarly, on the issue of Kashmir, the Soviet Union always supported India and used Veto power to protect India's interests in the security council. Otherwise, the US and other western nations favoured Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. During the 1980s, the Soviet Union emerged as its biggest trading partner of India in the world. As far as the military sector is concerned, India was dependent on the Soviet Union for 70 to 80 per cent of its need; of late, India started buying weapons from other countries also, but still, on average, 75 per cent of the Indian armed forces are equipped with military hardware for Soviet/Russian origin. (Ibid)

The Soviet Union financed both Bhilai and Bokaro steel plants. Similarly, many such projects were financially helped by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union also funded many energy and space projects. (Mohan, 2015: 862-864)

Not only was the finance provided by the Soviet Union, but this finance was also provided at manageable interest rates (2.5) and the period of repayment was also long. (Ibid)

Another feature of financial help was also very significant in that this help was provided not only to build one individual unit but for the entire complex. One more important feature of Soviet economic assistance was that it used to be a packaged deal from the project's blueprint to execution, implementation and training of the people etc. The one very significant feature was that India could repay the aid and financial help through Indian exports. This feature was not only for general trade but also for military supplies. The Soviet Union was India's largest trading partner from 1980 to 1985. Similarly, the Soviet Union was the most prominent destination for India's export. (Dubey, 2016: 62-69)

The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, signed in August 1971, reflects the high peak in Indo-Soviet relations. This treaty became an essential safeguard for India's security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. (Rekha, 2017: 26-32)

The one significant point was that the Soviet Union never interfered in India's foreign and domestic policy. That is why India established excellent relations with the Soviet Union despite being a non-aligned country. India always asserted that India was a non-alignment country and pursued an independent foreign policy. India always raised its voice on international issues by following an independent foreign policy. In many matters, it showed its displeasure with the Soviets if it was not agreed with the country. For example, Indira Gandhi, the then-Indian Premier, rejected the Brezhnev Doctrine on an Asian Security arrangement under the Soviet leadership twice during the 1970s. In 1979 when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, India did not join the Western countries for bitter criticism but warned the Soviet leaders about the dangerous consequence of this action. (Rekha, 2017: 26-32)

2. The disintegration of Russia and India-Russia Relations

As we know, the Soviet Union impacted world politics for a more extended period. It provided the alternative to the western capitalist model and was eulogised to establish societal equality and justice. The Soviet Union was not collapsed due to its inherent problem but due to its rigidities, excesses and resistance to change required to adjust to the changing environment. (Dubey, 2016: 264-268)

A big turnaround happened between the two countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The successor state of the Soviet Union was not ready to honour the old relationship's treaties, terms, and equations. When the Indian prime minister (P.V. Narsimha Rao) visited Russia in 1994, he realised that an old kind of relationship could not be expected. In the mid and late 1980s, the Russian economy was weak before the collapse. Russia itself was looking to European countries for help and specifically the US. The economy was in poor shape for an extended period, but it still competed with the US and other western countries during the Cold War period. This competition further pushed the Russian economy to its worst condition. Indo-Russian trade got impacted seriously during the initial period of the post-cold war



period. Military supply also got seriously affected. Russia decided to move on the path of privatisation without having a developed private sector, which further impacted the Russian economy and Indo-Russia relations. (Ibid)

Things started looking up after President Yeltsin visited India from 27 to 29 January 1993. All the issues, including military equipment and spare parts, were discussed during the Yeltsin visit. He assured India about these issues. He also confirmed the supply of cryogenic engines to India because the US opposed cryogenic engine supplies to India, and Russia was also coming under pressure from the US. But during his visit, he dispelled this doubt. Although there was a break of a few years, in September 1998, the first cryogenic engine was supplied to India and others were also provided after some time. (Ibid)

Russia provided some relief to India as far as its' debt to the Soviet Union was concerned. Still, there was no question of returning to the old terms and conditions of the India-Soviet Union relationship. There was going to be no rupee payment for imports from Russia. There was no question of Russia making credit available for India's industrialisation to be paid back through exports. There would also be no military or other strategic supplies on credit to be delivered through exports. All purchases in this regard had to be made in foreign exchange. Yeltsin agreed to upgrade the relationship to a strategic level but not a special relationship of the past. (Ibid)

3. Vladimir Putin and India-Russia relations

There was a sign of turnaround of the Russian economy under the leadership of Vladimir Putin at the beginning of the 21st century when the economy again started growing around 5 to 6 per cent per annum. The size of the economy increased from \$ 200 billion in 1998 to \$1.4 trillion in 2008. In 2007, foreign investment crossed \$100 billion. During the decade before 2008, per capita income increased by 20 per cent and some 30 million persons were lifted out of poverty. This became possible partly because of the rise in global oil prices but mainly due to a nationally designed development strategy. (Rekha, 2017: 26-32) (also in Dubey, 2016: 266-267) Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, the relations between the two countries grew more robust. India and Russia strengthened their bilateral relationship to the level of Strategic Partnership in the Declaration issued during President Putin's visit to India in October 2000 and decided to hold Annual Summit meetings to provide guidelines and perspective for developing this partnership. This relationship was upgraded to a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership during President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to India in December 2010. (Dubey, 2016: 270-271)

A significant weakness of the Russian economy is that more than 60 per cent of the federal budget revenue comes from oil and gas taxes, and extractive industries contribute two-thirds of the value of exports and a quarter of the GDP. However, although these structural weaknesses Russian economy was making steady progress till 2008; it was being said at this time that the Russian economy would reach its old glory and Russia would emerge as an economic power. But before this dream could become, there was a recession in the world economy, and the Russian economy could not escape from this and came into recession. However, the following year Russian economy registered a growth of 4.5 per cent. But since then, there has been a continuous decline in Russia's economy, and it is struggling for change. Another factor was the decline in oil prices and the tightening of sanctions by western countries. (Dubey, 2016: 268-272)

But we should not underestimate Russia's ability to get over this slump and regain its glorious old position. Russia has excellent natural resources and suitable reservoirs of oil and gas. Russia also possessed a highly skilled workforce. There was some degradation in high technology, but Russia is superior in this, and fundamental science is still considered one of the best. Moreover, Russia remains the second largest military power in the world, a position it is likely to retain in the foreseeable future. (Ibid)

4. The future direction of India-Russia relations after this conflict.

The Russia-Ukraine war would certainly impact India and Russia relations, and India might re-strengthen its strategic ties with Russia in the transformed circumstances. We have witnessed that in the last two decades, India has gone nearer to the US, reflected through many agreements, i.e., nuclear deals, defence agreements etc. (Pant, H article). In this period, India endeavoured to balance its relations with Russia. However, still, we see that there has been some coldness between India and Russia. India's nearness to the US impacted its ties with China and created apathy between India and Russia. This war would re-establish Russia as a critical power that the US and West no longer disregard.



India, already the third-largest spender on its defence, may further expand it because it may think that if any war happens with Pakistan or China and if these two countries pose a threat to India collectively, which is also possible, then India would deal with them independently instead of relying on the US and other countries. India has learnt this lesson from this Russia-Ukraine war because Ukraine's leadership believed that its close ties with US and European countries would deter Russia from any military adventurism. But the opposite happened; neither US nor western countries intervened from Ukraine's side. In the first few weeks, neither US nor western countries even provided weapons to Ukraine. And it has been more than eight months now, but the war is still going on. ((Kamal, 2022:28-31)

Although Russia is no longer as formidable economic power as it was during the Cold War, it is under more pressure after the US and western countries-imposed sanctions on it. But, Russia will be more assertive in its foreign policy because this war confirms that it is no longer a unipolar world. In this established multipolar world, Russia is an important player. The world order may also move towards a bipolar world where the US would be on the one side and Russia and China would be on another side. This war would also enhance its image with China. In such a scenario, Russia may go closer to China, which would not be a positive development for India.

Of course, India's bilateral ties with Russia and the USA are not a zero-sum game. India's growing engagement with the USA, and indeed drawing closer in the Asia-Pacific to countries such as Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and Vietnam, must be continued, but not at the cost of its friendship with Russia. Indeed, India's unique and privileged strategic partnership with Russia should be carefully and pragmatically nurtured. Any dilution of India's cooperation with Russia would weaken a vital building block of India's foreign policy and negatively impact our security scenario by drawing Russia closer to China and providing a broader opening to Pakistan. (Gupta and Wadhwa, 2020: 279-284) As I have discussed earlier, since the advent of the world recession, the Russian economy is not doing well, and now, after this war, western countries have imposed many more sanctions on Russia.

There is the possibility that Russia's dependence on China will augment soon due to its economic dimness, which would strengthen their strategic partnership. Then, it would be difficult for Russia to balance its relations with India. As we have witnessed in the recent past, the closeness between China and Pakistan has increased. Suppose Russia aligns with the China-Pakistan alliance because Russia has started providing some weapons to Pakistan, and both countries are also doing defence exercises. In that case, it could be detrimental to India's national interests. (Kumar, 2022: 157-160)

In essence, I can say that India's neutral stand on the Russia-Ukraine war is the continuousness of its longstanding approach towards Russia because India, since its independence, has adored good relations with Russia based on Russia's liberal help to India for its infrastructural development and defending its national interests. Secondly, I assume that India would re-emphasise its relations with Russia in the changed circumstances because, in the first two decades of the 21st century, India and US have strengthened their relationship. Still, this closeness created a void between India and Russia because, in the same period, the differences between US and Russia enhanced. And these differences are impacting the bilateral equation between Russia and India. I think India would have to rebalance its relations with Russia keeping its historical legacy in mind.

REFERENCES:

1. Arvind Gupta and Anil Wadhwa., *India's Foreign Policy—Surviving in a Turbulent World*. New Delhi: Sage, 2020
2. Chandra Rekha., *India-Russia Post-Cold War Relations—A New Epoch of Cooperation*. London: Routledge, 2017
3. C. Raja Mohan., *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy Oxford*, New York: Oxford, 2015
4. Dubey, Muchkund., *India's Foreign Policy—Coping with the Changing World*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016
5. Harsh V Pant and Yogesh Joshi., Indo-US relations under Modi: the strategic logic underlying the embrace, *International Affairs*, Vol 93, No 1, 2017, pp-133-146.
6. Kamal., Russia-Ukraine War and India's Foreign Policy—In particular, reference to Indo-US Relations, *International Research Journal of Management, Sociology & Humanities*, Vol 13, N:10,2022, pp-28-31
7. Muchkund Dubey., Indo-(Soviet) Russian Relations, *Mainstream*, Vol L, No 40, September 22, 2012, pp-262-268
8. Surendra Kumar., *India's Foreign Policy in the Post-Covid World—Through the Eyes of Indian Diplomats*, New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2022