

INDIA'S STANCE ON RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE AND THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY INDIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India has officially taken a neutral position. On the one hand, New Delhi does not openly support Russian aggression, and calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities and resolution of the conflict through diplomatic means. On the other hand, it avoids open criticism of the Russian leadership and refuses to join Western sanctions or impose unilateral ones. India's neutrality is manifested in calls for direct negotiations between the presidents of Ukraine and the Russian Federation, respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all UN member states, as well as international law, preservation of rules-based order and unacceptability of changing the regional or global balance of power by weapons. At the same time, India rejects any criticism of its position, stressing that neutrality is the sovereign right of any country.

The political position of the Indian authorities regarding the war between Russia and Ukraine is formed by **four main components**:

1. a well-established perception of Russia as a “good old friend” with nostalgic memories of the “Hindi rusi bhai bhai” and Indo-Soviet friendship;
2. negative perception of Western/American policies and growing anti-Western sentiments among a large part of the society as opposed to Russia, which is not associated with imperialism, colonialism, criticism for human rights violations, etc. and even interference in the internal affairs of a country (elites wonder why the U.S. has the right to intervene in political and security issues (Iraq), while Russia does not?);
3. dominance of a conservative and realistic view of world politics and international processes;

4. low geostrategic value of Ukraine for India, unclear and incomprehensible image of Ukraine for the Indian society and elites, due to the absence of a strategy of political positioning and little information presence in the Indian media space, which has created a mostly negative image of Ukraine as a pro-American vassal used in the proxy war against Russia.

The war in Ukraine has polarized the world and put India, like many other states of the Global South, in a situation of political and ideological choices that are more disadvantageous and dangerous compared to neutrality and balancing. In India's case, the political leadership has several reasons why New Delhi is unwilling to narrow its foreign policy to a choice of sides.

First, **the lack of full trust in the West**. Indian political elites tend towards a right-conservative, pragmatic and realistic political course, which is seen as a counterbalance to the value-oriented policies of the U.S. and the EU, which, in the opinion of Indian politicians, actually veil realpolitik.

India is also unwilling to join the Western sanctions against Russia for political and ideological reasons, as it is assumed that this step will destroy the policy of "strategic autonomy". Besides, India and many Asian countries are skeptical about the West's sanctions, since they do not rule out the possibility that at any moment they may turn into rivals in the eyes of the United States, which will want to punish them in the same way. Moreover, the U.S. has already criticized India for human rights violations in disputed Kashmir and right-wing nationalist rhetoric.

Secondly, the positioning of the state as **one of the regional centers of power in the post-American multipolar world**, which leads to the unwillingness to follow the U.S. as a "junior partner" and the desire to take a separate, self-sufficient position in international affairs, adhering to "strategic autonomy".

Thirdly, **the desire to avoid an outbreak of conflict with China** due to political and ideological polarization and deepening of the split between the West and the East. The United States, which considers China to be its main geostrategic rival for the next decades, is trying to put pressure on its allies against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, mobilizing them to fight not only Russia, but also China. India is ready to defend its sovereign right to build an autonomous policy towards both Russia and strategic confrontation with China. The West is a partner in this, but not a curator. For New Delhi, supporting the position of Western states and the sanctions policy against Russia carries the risk of escalating tensions with China, which does not meet Indian interests, given the asymmetry in the balance of power between India and China in favor of Beijing. As a center of power claiming a zone of influence, India has consistently upheld the idea of a polycentric multipolar world order.

In this context, New Delhi's main goal is not the total defeat of the PRC (which is a rival), but Beijing's recognition of India as one of the poles of power in Asia, that is, New Delhi's own sphere of interests in the Indian Ocean and South and Southeast Asia.

India cannot unequivocally support the West, because it would definitely lead to a diplomatic confrontation with China, which in turn would create a risk of armed escalation in the disputed border areas of Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. This is something that New Delhi cannot allow, as India is not ready for a head-on collision with China because of the obvious asymmetry in military potential, as well as due to the substantial role of the nuclear factor. In addition, in case of a confrontation with China on the Line of Actual Control, we cannot exclude the possibility that Pakistan may take advantage of the destabilization and try to escalate the situation in Kashmir, which is likely to take the form of terrorist attacks and sabotage, rather than a full-fledged armed conflict. In this case, India will have to keep the focus on several hot spots at once, hardly with much success. New Delhi does not hope for backing from the United States, especially after the withdrawal of the contingent from Afghanistan last summer, which seriously undermined the image of the United States as a reliable guarantor of security.

The Russian-Ukrainian war and with it the escalation of the Sino-U.S. rivalry, the consolidation of NATO and the search for new allies (Japan, Australia, Republic of Korea, New Zealand), the decisive foreign policy of the United Kingdom (Global Britain strategy), pose **a threat to the integrity of India's "strategic autonomy" in foreign policy**. Preserving it is vital for the country, as this course is the foundation of India's vision of the world order and the state's place in it.

The essence of "strategic autonomy" is not neutrality or diversification of international relations per se, but prevention of monopolization of global political and economic influence by one player, including in multilateral institutions (the U.S. or China). This policy is key for India both in the regional context (prevention of overstrengthening of China, formation of a multipolar Asia, policy of balancing between the centers of power) and in the global context (creation of a multipolar world order with a fairer and more equal distribution of influence between the participants). In this environment, official New Delhi sees opportunities for steady and consistent development, as well as containment of China through partnership (but not supervision) with the West. India prefers to take a neutral position in the Russian-Ukrainian war as long as possible.

In addition to reducing the risk of escalation of tensions with China, "strategic autonomy" allows India to maintain stable relations with Russia. New Delhi has **four main interests in relation to Russia**: geopolitical, which also includes security issues; military-technical; energy; and trade.

The geopolitical interest boils down to the desire **to contain the development of Russia's relations with Pakistan**, which poses an existential threat to India, as well as to the desire to prevent the formation of a geopolitical triangle of Moscow-Islamabad-Beijing.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has created a potentially dangerous precedent for India. Proclamation of independence of separatist pseudo-republics of DPR and LPR, their recognition by the Russian Federation followed by illegal pseudo-referendums in the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk occupied by Russian troops, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine with the subsequent illegal procedure of “accession” of these territories to the Russian Federation and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24 may become a negative example for neighboring countries that have territorial disputes with India—especially for Pakistan, supported by China, which also has a number of territorial claims to India. First of all, this concerns the Kashmir issue. The majority of the population of the region (60% of which belongs to India, 30% to Pakistan, and 10% to China) are Muslims. In Kashmir itself, there are forces that actively advocate for independence or broad autonomy of the state within India or Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistan actively supports anti-Indian separatists and militants in the part of Kashmir controlled by the Indian government, which could potentially lead to an outbreak of anti-government protests in order to either gain independence or become part of Pakistan. The examples of the DPR and LPR and the Russian Federation's attempts to create what they consider to be a “more just” operational reality on the ground by force of arms potentially increases tensions in regions such as South Asia, which have many unresolved territorial and other disputes.

In addition, in recent years, there has been a rapprochement between Russia and Pakistan leading up to the joint military exercises “Friendship-2021” held last year at the Molkino training ground in the Krasnodar Territory of the Russian Federation. This event caused great concern among Indian political elites, as theoretically, the Russian Federation, which was seen as an influential regional player, should have become a support for India in its confrontation with Pakistan, given the extremely irritating support of Islamabad by China. The development of friendly relations with Russia could potentially lead to the formation of the “Pakistan-Russia-China” axis, which would pose an extremely serious threat to India's national security, aggravated by the nuclear factor, since all three states possess nuclear weapons.

Moreover, India does not benefit from **the weakening of Russia to the status of a “raw material asset” or “junior partner” of China**, as it changes the already asymmetric balance of power in the region in favor of China. It is important for India to keep Russia in focus and make sure that new threats to national security do not emerge through Russia, particularly given the unstable situation in neighboring Afghanistan.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has aggravated the confrontation between the United States and China, and intensified the trend of militarization, which has already been recorded in the Indo-Pacific region for several years in a row. Both China and American allies in Asia, especially South Korea, Australia and Japan, are rearming at a rapid pace. This trend also applies to India. In 2017-2021, India was one of the world's largest arms importers, occupying 11% of the world market, on a par with Saudi Arabia. However, much of India's military equipment is still Soviet or Russian-made. One third of Russian arms exports in 2010-2020 went to India. In 2016-2020, Russia supplied India with weapons worth a total of \$6.6 billion. As the war in Ukraine escalates global military tensions, it pushes countries to more actively rearm.

Due to the war in Ukraine, **military cooperation between India and Russia came under threat**. In particular, India expects the delivery of Russian S-400 air defense systems for further deployment along the Line of Actual Control with China. But due to logistical problems and Western sanctions, the deliveries have been suspended, which worries India, especially in the context of the above-mentioned escalation of militarization in the region. In addition, a \$3 billion deal from 2019 for the leasing of nuclear attack submarines, the third of which, Chakra III, was supposed to appear in Indian waters in 2025, is in question. The new restrictions could also affect Russia's plans to sell four Project 11356 (Talwar) class 2 frigates with long-range maritime and ocean-going guided missiles. According to the plan, two were to be built in Russia, and two in India after the transfer of technology from Russia. The Project 11356 Tamala frigate, which was under construction for the Indian Navy at the Baltic Shipyard Yantar (Kaliningrad), was scheduled to be launched in 2022. Nevertheless, the frigate Tushil is currently undergoing completion. It was planned to install supersonic anti-ship missile systems of joint production of Russia and India BrahMos on frigates 11356. BrahMos for India is a serious weapon that can, first of all, ensure control over the Indian Ocean. And, secondly, it can improve India's position in the world arms market. For example, in January this year, India signed a \$375 million contract with the Philippines to supply BrahMos. Yet now, given the new obstacles caused by the anti-Russian sanctions, Russian exports of critical components and spare parts to India may be at least delayed, at most stopped. There were also negotiations on the supply of other types of weapons to India, including 18 Su-30 fighters, 21 MiG-29 aircraft, as well as the joint production of Ka-226 light helicopters and the purchase of light tanks. The agreement signed in December 2021 for the supply of 20 thousand Kalashnikov AK-203 rifles of 7.62×39 mm caliber may also face the difficulties listed above.

The share of Russian weapons in Indian imports is considerable, and although India is really interested in reducing it, it cannot be done at once. This process will take place step by step, and for now India **will continue to cooperate with Russia in the military-technical**

sphere. Although the imposition of Western sanctions against Russian defense companies creates a number of problems for Indian buyers, New Delhi still expects that Russia will continue to sell its products, but with discounts beneficial for India. India's diminishing reliance on the Russian military-industrial complex at the expense of imports from Europe and the United States is also dictated by Russia's ever more obvious inability to offer India the technology and equipment it needs. Mainly due to the fact that the Russian military-industrial complex is lagging behind in a number of spheres. Therefore, it is quite likely that the share of Russian weapons will slowly (rather than quickly) decrease due to India's diversification of external suppliers, for example, through stepping up cooperation with the United States. The war in Ukraine and polarization in the world have increased India's value for the United States, and thus created conditions in which New Delhi got a chance to develop its own production and attract Western capital and technology. In the medium and long term, this will allow India to reduce dependence on Russia and develop its own military-industrial complex.

The war in Ukraine and Western sanctions have also affected **India's energy imports.** Until recently, the share of Russian oil in India's imports was small — only 2%-3%. The largest suppliers of oil to India were the Middle East and the United States: Iraq — 23% (\$22 billion); Saudi Arabia — 18% (\$16 billion); UAE — 11% (\$9 billion); USA — 7% (\$8 billion).

In the first weeks of the war, India, which is 80% dependent on energy imports, not only did not refuse to supply Russian energy carriers, but increased their imports. For example, in March, imports of Russian coal reached a record 1.04 million tons. When Russia started offering oil at a discount of \$20–\$30, India more than doubled its imports. In particular, on March 14, the first large deal between Indian and Russian companies since the beginning of the war in Ukraine was concluded for the supply of 3 million barrels of oil, which was taken by the largest Indian refiner Indian Oil Corp, and another large company Hindustan Petroleum booked another 2 million barrels of oil for May this year. Within 2 days, India purchased 4.5 million barrels of oil from Russia, and the costs of insurance and transportation were covered by the latter. After Japanese refineries refused to accept Russian oil in late March, India also took over some of these flows. It is estimated that in March 2022 alone, India purchased the same amount of oil from Russia as in the full year of 2021. The increase in imports concerns not only oil, but also coal (in the coal sector, an increase in imports from Russia by 50% was announced).

India also produces its own oil, but the output has been steadily declining since 2011-2012, whereas demand is growing. In particular, this year India forecasted an increase in domestic demand by 8% to 4.5 million barrels of oil per day. The war in Ukraine has raised political risks associated with India's imports of Russian oil and coal. From one side, New Delhi is under heightened pressure not to buy Russian energy, but from the other side, Western

sanctions and the risk of energy embargo forced Russia to increase energy sales to Asian markets with substantial discounts. This is of interest to India, which openly states that it will buy Russian oil as long as it is cost-effective.

The partnership between India and Russia in the energy sector has been going on for many years and is quite good. For example, Rosneft together with a consortium of Indian state energy companies is involved in the development of the Vankor oil and gas field (Vankorneft), the construction of LNG infrastructure on Sakhalin Island (Sakhalin-1) and the development of oil and gas deposits in the western part of Yakutia (Taas-Yuryakh Neftegazodobycha). The Indian state-owned oil company ONGC owns 20% of the Sakhalin-1 project, 26% of the Vankorneft project and 100% of the Imperial Energy subsidiary, which produces oil in the Tomsk region.

Import of Russian energy carriers, primarily coal, is driven by the energy crisis experienced by several Indian states. India has few electricity reserves, and since October 2021, the country has been suffering from constant blackouts due to a sharp rise in electricity demand (up to almost 200 gigawatts). In mid-April, the Indian media reported that several states are already facing power outages, including Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, affecting more than 240 million citizens, with 12 states in India facing power shortages due to high prices and coal shortages. All this is happening against the backdrop of higher global energy prices, in connection with which state monopolies in India have announced a 10% increase in fuel prices.

Trade is an essential area of bilateral relations with Russia. Indian companies get opportunities to expand their sales market in Russia due to the exit of Western companies. In particular, this pertains to the export of food products through the South Caucasus, as well as pharmaceutical companies, which currently occupy 2% of the drug market in Russia, and can further expand.

This also applies to the prospects of expanding imports of Russian diamonds. 95% of diamonds mined in the world are cut in India, the third largest exporter of diamonds in the world, which are processed in Surat, the world's diamond cutting center. India is the third largest importer of Russian diamonds. In 2020, New Delhi purchased 4.1 million carats for \$638 million. Hence, the support of sanctions, which would mean the rejection of Russian diamonds, would hit the diamond cutting industry in India itself, given the current shortage of diamonds in the world. At the same time, the import ban is imposed on rough and polished diamonds from Russia. If the Russian diamond was cut in India, its import is permitted.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, India's neutral position on the Russian-Ukrainian war is dictated by New Delhi's pragmatic desire to protect the state from the political and ideological choice between the two global powers — the United States and China — which are in geopolitical confrontation, as well as by the desire to pursue its own national interests, in particular in the sphere of energy security and military-technical cooperation, and to achieve key strategic geopolitical and security goals. In other words, New Delhi's position is not based on an explicitly friendly attitude towards Russia, although the Indian society is indeed sympathetic to Moscow. Still, the political elites act pragmatically and conservatively in shaping the foreign policy course and are guided by rational calculations rather than nostalgic memories of past friendship. It is the search for profits that motivates India's cooperation with Russia at the moment, since New Delhi can get tools from Moscow to accomplish many important tasks. Yet, this does not mean support for the actions of the Russian government.

Ukraine needs to revise its policy towards India and South Asia in general, immediately step up direct political dialogue, enhance the training of human resources on this track, review the work of the embassy, boost its media presence, develop a separate regional strategy, start establishing academic ties with universities and create joint think tanks, more actively involve specialists who know the local context and cultural and mental realities of countries like India, actively work with leaders of civil society and the media, and develop a comprehensive strategy for the future.

It is unlikely that Ukraine will be able to radically change India's position on the Russian-Ukrainian war or gain India's full support, as most of the reasons for New Delhi's current positioning have nothing to do with Ukraine, and sometimes even Russia, and Ukraine has no influence over them. In addition, the prevailing attitude towards Ukraine also affects the quality of bilateral relations. It will not be possible to change it quickly, at least without established political ties, media presence, etc. Therefore, in the short and medium term, Ukraine should focus on educational and humanitarian cooperation, building regular political dialogue and developing close academic ties between the two countries.

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