

Decoding the Geo-Political and Economic Dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Navigating the Road Ahead

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Decades ago, one could not imagine the Soviet Empire without Ukraine, this is how deep-seated the historical and civilisational connection is. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict which started in February this year has had so any reverberations that the impact has been multifold. Russia's narrative was that the invasion was an act of self-defence against the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's eastward expansion and a pre-emptive rebuff to it. The article attempts to explore the various dimensions of conflict. Besides the all-consuming energy crisis, many parts of the globe have been grappling with food insecurity. The oil embargo and the resultant energy crisis have prompted the search for alternatives. The international order itself is in a state of flux and institutional arrangements are in disarray. Will the future see the emergence of an alternative rule-based rights order? The world cannot always be shaped by the big powers and their power projections alone. Is it time for the middle powers to step in and break the status quo. In the midst of the geo-political shifts, an attempt is made to navigate the road ahead, and explore whether India can be a driving force for the international system and whether it can contribute towards shaping the contours of changing world order.

Keywords: Conflict, Challenges, Geo-strategic, Navigate, Middle power, World order.

Just as Xi Jinping talks about the "Chinese Dream" (Zhomgguo meng) premised on the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, (Economy, 2018, p.12) reviving the past glory of the former Soviet Union has been uppermost in the mind of President Putin. Grievances between the West and Russia run deep, an important reason being the humiliation faced by Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and hence the vision of creating a 'greater Russia.' This was evident with the seizure of Crimea by Russia. In fact, for the last several years, President Putin has been trying to bring the former Soviet states into the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Community. Russia has become belligerent with its neighbours and across the region, seeking to exercise influence and control in Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltics. (Davis & Slobodchikoff, 2018). This has prompted many small and weak states to vie for NATO's membership.

A question that is often asked is, whether there was a need for a collective security alliance (NATO) in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union? Besides, was there a threat that desired its eastward expansion? Russia's problems with the US and Western Europe go back to more than twenty years. In 1997 and 2004, the

North Atlantic Treaty Organisations expanded to include former Communist countries despite Russian objections (Pandey, 2022). Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been a manifestation of the frustration between Moscow and Washington over their visions of the world order occurring in the background of geopolitics, rather than ideology.

Trajectory

February 2014 saw the Russian invasion and occupation of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, where Sevastopol, the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet is situated (Hookway, & Trofimov, 2022). That Russia has been opposed to the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is no secret.

An issue on which Russia has had serious reservations has been the US policy of support for regime change, the so-called colour revolutions. After the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich was replaced by anti-Russian Yushchenko, who wanted closer ties with the European Union. Tensions were aggravated in the beginning of 2021, when Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President expressed the desire to the US President, that Ukraine be a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Hookway, & Trofimov, 2022). Russia lost no time in sending soldiers near the Ukrainian border for training exercises in the spring of last year, which prompted the US to threaten Russia with heavy sanctions if Russia attacked Ukraine. The attack on Ukraine reflects Russia's firm resolve to prevent the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's eastward expansion and to thwart Ukraine's inclination to join it. Besides, Putin's strategic aim was to liberate the Donbas region and create a corridor which could join it with Crimea.

In fact, there was a long lead up to the war, when President Putin in February had signed a decree to officially recognise the independence of two separatist regions of eastern Ukraine, Luhansk and Doneysk. This provoked the US and the EU to announce financial sanctions against the two regions (Krishnakutty, 2022). Civilians were evacuated because Russia claimed that Ukraine was shelling the Republics and it had deployed its troops in eastern Ukraine as a peace-keeping measure. The build-up of military infrastructure, as well as the supply of military equipment from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's countries to Ukraine added further fuel to the fire. On the 24th of February, 2022 the invasion started with launching direct military strikes in Ukraine and air and missile assaults on Ukrainian military targets. (Tanishka, 2022). Russia wanted to neutralise security threats to it that were being posed from western-supplied military installations in that country and from 'right-wing, anti Russian and American-sponsored groups'(Gaur, 2022). The Russian military action became a cause for worry and attracted worldwide condemnation.

International Response to the War

Vladimir Putin had called the attack a "special military operation" to protect civilians in eastern Ukraine from 'genocide.' This claim was strongly contested by the US, as being absurd and an excuse for invading Ukraine. (India Today. Associated Press, Moscow). Putin justified the invasion to the Russian public by stating his goal was to "demilitarise and de-Nazify Ukraine", to protect people subjected to what he called eight years of bullying and genocide by Ukraine's government and to ensure Ukraine's neutral status (kremlin.ru). International response to the war has been

broad based, knitting together a coalition comprising the US, European Union and the G-7 countries to impose not only tough sanctions but extend military support as well. There has also been sharing of intelligence between the west and Ukraine to target Russian positions. Besides, a series of war crimes and human rights abuses by the Russian army in places like Bucha and Kherson in Ukraine have led to investigation by International criminal court and legal proceedings in the International Court of Justice (Kinetz,2022). The United General Assembly has comprehensively condemned Russia's actions.

Imposition of Sanctions: Sanctions have been targeted at the Russian economy as well as those involved in Russia's war against Ukraine. The Russian economy has been on the decline and its foreign exchange reserves currently stand at 606.5 - billion-dollars, as valued by the Bank of Russia. How long they will be able to sustain Russia is difficult to say. As the war gained momentum, the West went ahead and froze the Central Bank's overseas assets. The Russian energy exporters were instructed to sell 80 per cent of their foreign currency revenues and buy roubles (Hannon, 2022). With Russia's foreign exchange reserves mostly frozen, repayment in dollars has been difficult (Wearden, 2022). The West has managed to cut Russia off from global financial markets. Besides, stern measures have been adopted against Russian banks. The country's largest bank, Sberbank has been knocked off the Swift financial transactions network. Three of Russia's largest broadcasters have been banned from operating in the EU (Norman, 2022). Of late, the EU has approved a sixth sanctions package against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. This involves an oil embargo which would impact 90 per cent of oil purchases before the year comes to a close. This would definitely hurt Russia's income and it would be difficult for Russia to find new partners to sell oil and that too at a price which Russia wants.

Military Support to Ukraine: Ukraine has the manpower but it's military equipment cannot match up to Russia. The Russian invasion has been instrumental in the West's expansive military support to Ukraine. The US has pumped in close to 54 billion dollars in Ukraine (Asthana, 2022). The transfer of weapons especially M777 155 mm howitzers, light anti-tank and anti- aircraft weaponry has helped the Ukraine army. Ukraine has been persistent that the Western allies expedite the sending of the long range missiles, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Sytems (HIMARS) and air -defence shields, to meet the challenge posed by Russian artillery. The US has assisted through drones and surveillance devices and the US defence department has recently announced a new security assistance package worth 400 million dollar package of defence equipment and ammunition to Ukraine.

Britain too has provided anti-ship missiles and armoured vehicles and would also supply sophisticated medium- range rocket systems to Ukraine in a move coordinated with the US. In addition, the UK would send M270 launchers, which can be precision guided rockets up to 80 Kms. The obvious question then is, can these modern weapons change the course of war? (Joshi, 2022). Russia's strategy has been one of adhering to the Gerasimov doctrine (Galeotti, 2020) , wherein its military actions have strategically incorporated information warfare, cyber-attacks, and psychological warfare into its war effort, called *hybrid warfare* in the West and *nonlinear war* within Russia.

The Impact of Inflation and Price-Rise

The escalating conflict has led to the rise in international crude oil prices, putting a strain on the global economy. Besides, commodity prices have gone up worldwide triggering inflation. However, India's position is better than many countries of South Asia. Sri Lanka is in the throes of a major crisis with fuel and food supply having run out. The debt trap created by China and commercial borrowing has triggered the turmoil in Sri Lanka. It has exhausted its foreign exchange reserves and is unable to pay back its loans. The economy of Nepal is also impacted since inflation has crossed seven percent. Unemployment and inflation are a direct corollary of this crisis and in some cases this has destabilised the governments in the region. Russia has stopped gas flow to Bulgaria and Poland leading to a fresh escalation in the economic conflict with the west. It has also asked countries like Finland to pay up for energy supplies in roubles. (Boffey, 2022) The first week of May saw the price of oil and gas rise phenomenally, coupled with inflation which has already shot up in several parts of the world. (Norman, 2022).

Search for Alternatives

No doubt the oil embargo is a part of the west's strategy to get the better of Russia, but one can't forget that Russia supplies oil and gas to many countries of the world. Europe imports nearly forty percent of its natural gas and thirty percent of oil consumption from Russia. This is because Russia lies at the doorstep of the EU and is a major global supplier of energy. In the midst of these circumstances, the larger question is, can Europe see an energy future beyond Russia? At this juncture there is a dire need for Europe to diversify its energy. Germany gets one-third of its energy supplies from Russia. The leaders of 27 EU states agreed to stop all import of Russian oil and petroleum products, except oil delivered through pipelines by the end of the year. This partial ban was keeping in mind the interests of Hungary and the several neighbouring land locked EU member states. 70 per cent of oil imports from Russia is coming from means other than pipelines. This would require the EU to diversify its energy dependence away from Russia. Even if Europe is in unison with other countries, can it think of an energy future by surpassing Russia and does it have the wherewithal in terms of renewables, be it solar energy, wind energy for a greener future? This raises important questions and leaves the door open for leaders, policy makers, and clean energy supporters to put on their thinking caps. Germany is the economic powerhouse of Europe but it is dependent on Russia for one-third of its energy supplies. Its economic and energy minister, Robert Habeck, The Green Politician had a harrowing tale to tell, "If we flip a switch immediately, there will be supply shortages and blackouts, wherein people will not be able to heat their homes and will run out of petrol causing unemployment"(Wearden, 2022). In the wake of sanctions against Russia, countries are now looking towards other sources of oil and moving away from fossil fuels of Russia. Cases in sight are Africa, Algeria, Mozambique, Morocco, UAE. Before the Ukraine war, Russia used to export 5 million barrels of crude per day, making it the second largest exporter after the UAE (Wearden, 2022). The war has changed everything; a global rush cannot be ruled out and this might impact the climate scenario. The world is already witnessing climate catastrophes and a global problem of this magnitude does require global cooperation. No doubt tough sanctions against Russia are a part of the West's strategy to hit where it hurts the hardest, but what about the countries which are facing immense hardship because of the sanctions?

The Importance of the Arctic

The current impasse has directly impacted the energy security systems of the world, more so, when two - third of all energy resources are controlled by very few countries. Hence, the energy storage in the Arctic region becomes an area of debate and discussion. “The Arctic presents the world’s new “El Dorado” of still attainable natural resources, with an estimated 90 billion barrels of oil (16 percent of global total), 1,669 trillion cubic feet of gas (30 percent), and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids (38 percent)” (Nesheiwat, 2021). The boycott of Russian oil and gas by the West and Europe will lead to a global scramble for energy sources, minerals and natural resources creating intense competition between Arctic powers and near-Arctic powers, to have access to these resources. Russia has the largest proven natural gas reserves in the world. By 2050, the deposits in the Arctic shelf are expected to provide one - third of Russia’s total oil production (Kumar, 2022). Russia knows it can play the energy card and the major powers of the world know the Arctic has great potential. In all probability, this will give vent to power ambitions in the near future. The disappearance of sea ice and the melting of the Greenland ice sheet has made the Arctic more accessible and subject to global warming. Further, the Arctic is also an unmatched asset because it is a new energy frontier, for clean energy. Climate change being a major challenge, the international community will have to do more and invest its time and energy to make progress on clean energy technology. India has released its Arctic Policy titled ‘India and the Arctic: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development’ on 17th of March this year (Kumar, 2022).

Food Security at Stake

At the end of the day, it is just not money, big business or finance that is impacted, food security is at stake, as a result of the crisis. Besides, Russia and Ukraine are the third largest exporters of wheat after India and China and the second largest exporter of maize in the world. They also produce eighty percent of the world’s sunflower oil. Russia has blocked the Black Sea Ports and this has led to exacerbating the global rise in food prices causing food insecurity in various parts of the world (Singh & Bikhchandani, 2022). Grain and oil seeds have become weapons of war and countries like Africa have become indirect victims of war. Together, Moscow and Beijing have also implemented export bans on fertiliser or components used to manufacture them. The inability to fertilize will lower crop yields. This conflict is not just about Russia attacking Ukraine, it has had a vast expanse and reach, critically affecting global food security. It has affected Europe, America, Africa and parts of Asia as well.

David Beasley, Executive Director of the UN Food security programme did not mince words when he said that four years back there were close to 80 million facing starvation, now the numbers have spiralled to 276 million and 49 million people in 43 countries are at the brink of famine. “The world has witnessed a crisis on top of a crisis, the devastating pandemic followed by the Ukraine conflict” (The Economic Times, 2022).

Friends or Foes: Choices Governed by Compulsions

A question that automatically comes up is, which are the countries standing by Russia? At this juncture, the former superpower has more foes than friends-141 of the 193 countries of the UN voted to condemn Russia’s invasion of its neighbour. 5 countries voted against the resolution including Syria and North Korea. 35 countries

abstained, including China, UAE and India. Further, eleven of the UN Security Council's 15 members voted for the motion to condemn Russia's 'aggression' against Ukraine, but Russia's veto blocks the measure (Tanishka, 2022). On March 2, for the third time in less than a week, India abstained from voting against Russia at the United Nations to denounce Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine (Mohan, 2022). The Ukraine conflict is also reflective of a divided world and thoroughly entangled global alliances. Examples of Turkey, Israel and the Middle East are cases in sight. In order to refurbish troop deployment to Ukraine, Russia has redeployed its troops and several regions have become easy targets for outside intervention. (Chulov, 2022) Taking advantage, several actors have moved into these regions where Russians are reducing their presence. Countries like Israel and Turkey have become more aggressive in Syria and the Middle east.

Russia also expects diplomatic support from countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE at the UN and also wants that energy producers in the gulf, Saudi Arabia and Qatar don't heed to the requests of the US and the Europeans to harm Russia in the event of surmounting hostilities and sanctions against Russia. This could also lead to Russia losing access to some of its key markets. Some of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's countries like Turkey have already expressed their reservations in imposing sanctions. They are also treading a cautious path and not provoking Russia. Similarly, Israel too which has close ties with the US is certainly not in favour of sanctions. It believes in being neutral and promoting dialogue. Besides Turkey and Israel, Hungary's nationalist government is friendly to Moscow and does not support any sanctions that target Russian energy exports as this would weigh heavily on its economic conditions and destroy its "stable energy supply." Hungary has emerged as one of the stumbling blocks to unanimous support required from the bloc's 27 member nations. Besides, the other EU states- Slovakia and the Czech Republic are also not in favour of rolling out the oil embargo in one go and want a few years to phase out the Russian oil (The Indian Express, 2022). As the war escalates, countries are also being pushed to spell out their choices. Some see the conflict as the beginning of the cold war. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, global alliances indeed have become complicated and unpredictable.

Emerging Concerns

The Russia- Ukraine crisis has raised major questions and there are no easy answers. The following need to be pondered about is the Ukraine invasion, the end of the road or Does Putin have ambitions beyond Ukraine? Is Putin thinking of building the Russian empire and thereby redefining the status quo within Europe in line with his own vision? If Putin has his military setbacks in Ukraine, the next target could be Moldova, which is not a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and has already come under Russian threat. Considering the escalation of military might and support for Ukraine, if Russia's existence is threatened, would it exercise the nuclear deterrent in the near future and challenge the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This would mean mutually assured destruction for the whole world. The best option would be bringing the conflicting parties to the negotiating table

The scale and magnitude and the global impact of the Russia- Ukraine conflict, brings to light the role of international institutions like the United Nations. None can deny the humanitarian efforts made by the UN agencies in this crisis, however,

resolution of the conflict is proving to be difficult. Since, any decision requires the consent of all the P-5 these countries can veto any substantive resolution. The United Nations does need reform. The membership of the Council needs to be expanded (permanent & non permanent seats) to make it a more representative and legitimate body, to better deal with ever growing complex challenges of the contemporary world. The G-4 nations of India, Brazil, Germany and Japan have reaffirmed the same (The Hindu, 2021).

India has been a front runner for a permanent seat in the United Nation Security Council. Countries like the US do support a modest expansion of the Council so long as this does not diminish its efficacy and does not alter or expand the veto. (The Print. 2021). Apart from supporting each other's candidature (G- 4 nations) it would do well for India to take the lead in pushing for reforms. The Russia-Ukraine crisis is also a reminder that violation of international law with impunity and the use of force has become the new norm. An important instance was the Iraq invasion when the coalition of states, USA, UK, Australia attacked Iraq when it was not even exercising self- defence (BBC NEWS, 2016). Similarly, the UK in breach of International Law, has unlawfully maintained its claim over the Chagos Islands as it is UK's main strategic asset in the Indian ocean. The judgement given by the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, is clear and unequivocal, stating Mauritius's sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago (Wintour, 2021).

Interstate invasions, annexation of territory, changing borders by force, war crimes and violation of human rights reflect double standards in international law.

The Shifting Geo-Political Landscape: India's Strategy and Role

When it all started in February this year, Russia claimed it was just a military operation in Ukraine but, it is a full-scale invasion which has left a trail of death and destruction. Whether this is the beginning of World War three, is too early to say, but there are geo-political shifts and a new world order may well be emerging. Finland and Sweden are all set to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is very much on the cards and is a bone of contention between the West and Eurasia. National interests are paramount in the international arena as this is a basic principle of international relations and so it is with India. In view of its very special ties with Moscow, criticism of Russia's actions have not been forthcoming. New Delhi has certainly resorted to skilful diplomacy. It wants a peaceful resolution of the conflict, taking into consideration the legitimate security interest of all the parties to the conflict. "India emphasises on respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and is deeply disturbed by recent turn of developments in Ukraine." This was conveyed by India's Permanent Representative to the UN, TS Tirmurti at the United Nation Security Council meeting on Ukraine (Tanishka, 2022). But at the same time, it observes a calibrated silence on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

That India's response to the conflict has been shaky, has been commented upon by many countries. The US also wants the Indian government to boycott Russian oil and military hardware. India is unlikely to become a protagonist to champion Ukraine's interests nor is it likely to adopt a tough stand against Moscow's military aggression. Security considerations and undeterred supply of critical resources in its own region requires India to balance its foreign policy and maintain the

equilibrium between the India-Russia-China axis. India has been importing oil and gas from Russia because it is available at rates, India can afford. Prior to the imposition of sanctions, Europe was importing more oil from Russia in one afternoon than India does in one month (Kumar, 2022). India's relation with Russia goes back several decades. Despite India's policy of nonalignment, Russia stood by India through thick and thin, especially in the defence sector. Energy considerations and modern defence technology, which are Russia's strengths, are enabling factors for India to sustain itself. To add to it, Russia shares a close relationship with China as was evident at the Sino-Russian joint declaration on the 4th of February, 2022, wherein both the leaders Xi Jinping and Putin stated, that their relationships has no limits (Rajagopalan, 2022).

China's growing closeness with Russia, its economic clout and belligerent designs have made India wary. Despite their growing closeness, there are underlying tensions between China and Russia. China has increased its sphere of influence and pressure tactics in Central Asia and Europe, which Russia considers as its forte. How long would Russia like to grow in China's shadow, only time will tell. India needs to leverage on this factor and incorporate this in its broader framework without forgetting that since the start of the pandemic, China's behaviour has not only been aggressive but unpredictable too. One can resort to Sun Tzu's precept of 'appear weak when you are strong, and appear strong when you are weak'(Sawyer & Tzu, 1996).

China aims to present its development model as an alternative to the dominant neoliberal system. America's declining power coincides with China's aggressive rise. However, this cannot be equated with power shifting to another state— It would be difficult to negate rising economic giants such as India, Australia, Indonesia and the increasing relevance of emerging economies of Southeast Asia, which is a collective forum for smaller nations. That is the reason the United States and China often reach out to the regional powers and collaborate with them on various issues pertaining to environment, terrorism, and disaster management. In the current times, India is emerging as an important player. With its indomitable parameters, be it its fast growing economic potential, its technological capabilities, its cultural power, its global voice at various forums, not to forget its ability to leverage international investment, India does not fit into the typical middle power status category. Contemporary IR literature points out that middle powers have no significant ability to project their interests on to critical geopolitical issues. They are the by-product of the liberal rules-based order, and as such, have developed managerial, bridge-building, and peacekeeping roles (Soeya, 2020).

The ongoing power game between the US and China can be explained by Gram Allison's concept of 'Thucydides Trap' while referring to the collision course and additionally looking at these small and regional powers, which either bandwagon or join alliances to maintain regional balance (Hanania, 2021; Zafar, 2022). Perhaps one needs to transgress an oversimplified explanation of Thucydides Trap to other discourses and identify actors such as Japan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India, Japan and Australia. India is one of the few to take a lead for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (QUAD), maintaining the region's equilibrium in an era defined by competitive power politics. India is an important member of the (QUAD) and although it may not be a treaty ally of the quad, but the Quad has helped India to advance its interests economically and technologically and also sent a clear

message to belligerent China. There are a broad range of issues of cooperation—including COVID-19 vaccinations, emerging technologies, support for a rules-based order, a shared vision for the free and open Indo-Pacific, and support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations unity and centrality. Alliances, by contrast, are defined by Glenn Snyder as “formal associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their own membership.” (Snyder, 1997). Prime Minister Modi attended the Quad Summit in Tokyo held between 23rd and 25th May, this year along with the leaders of America, Australia and Japan. The leaders announced the formation of the ‘Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness’ (IPMDA) and launched the “Quad Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package (Q-CHAMP) with “mitigation” and “adaptation” as its two pillars (Bhattacharjee, Kallol & Peri, Dinnakar, 2022).

India is a part of the multilateral architecture, and holds the strategic membership of, be it the SCO, RIC, BRICS, BIMSTEC and the I2U2 (The West Asia Quad), which goes to show that India can work with several countries in the region. India will also assume the presidency of G 20 from December 2022. Its aim is to foster global financial stability by involving middle- income countries. These countries include 60 percent of the world’s population and 80 percent of the global GDP. (Indian Express, 2022). Besides, India has taken several leads in global affairs, be it leadership in international solar alliance, coalition of disaster resilience, climate change, ‘vaccine maitri’ during the pandemic. India rose to the occasion and provided vaccination to countries across the globe and capacity building assistance as well. More recently, in the wake of the food crisis emanating from the Russia-Ukraine war, India has exported 1.8 million tons of wheat to needy countries to whom supplies cannot be ensured by market forces. This is despite the fact that India has an explosive population of 1.38 billion population to feed. (The Hindu, 2022). India’s skilful stance on the Russia-Ukraine war and its consistent purchase of Russian oil, at the cost of disagreeing with the west, has been an expression of its strategic autonomy. India is trying to strike a balance between self-reliance (Atma Nirbhar Bharat) and a global outlook, which the world does recognise.

Carrying the narrative forward, Russia’s political and economic future is at stake. Public opinion is divided on whether India should reduce its reliance on Russia. and shed off the ideological baggage of the past. This crisis also prompts India to rethink its military dependence on Russia, not because the United States or the West wants it to, but the very quality of Russian arms and equipment has been questionable, coupled with cost overruns and delays. The war could further delay delivery of new arms and equipment to India as well as impact or cancel projects to upgrade existing systems, leaving New Delhi vulnerable (Raghuvanshi, 2022).

The US and Europe have got together in taking on Russia vis-a-vis Ukraine war. Much to India’s dismay, this is also going to divert the US attention from the Indo-Pacific to the Ukraine-Russia confrontation. China stands to gain since it increases Russia’s dependence on it multi fold and gives it greater leeway in its neighbourhood. India will have to keep these twin factors in mind. In a world defined by multilateralism and multi-polarity, good relations with the West, Europe and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are extremely important for India and befitting its national interest. As far as the latter is concerned, India certainly can do better. India’s ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’ needs a greater push. Keeping the channels of

communication open, despite the political upheavals in the neighbourhood goes without saying. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is one agreement where India needs to ponder and review its policy.

Conclusion

Today, changing power dynamics is synonymous with China's rise. We see China attempting to revise the security architecture within the region, pushing the United States out of the first and second island chains and establishing its supremacy in the SCS, ECS, and across the Taiwan Straits. This obviously does not spell well for middle to small-sized states. Any Chinese led international order, if it were to be, would become a matter of grave concern for the world. The dynamic shifts, as a result of the Russia – Ukraine crisis have had an important bearing on India's strategic calculus. In his recent book *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar recognised that "India cannot give any other nation a veto on its policy options. This is particularly so in a world when all significant players are trying to be as open-ended on their own choices. Nor is there a basis to suggest that a modest Indian global profile will somehow be rewarded by polities who are intrinsically enamoured of strength" (Jaishankar,2020).

Whenever there have been instances of violation of sovereignty in the South China Sea and incremental encroachment by China on India's borders, the West's actions have been guarded. However, when a military invasion took place in Ukraine, the West started to cry foul and expected others to join the chorus. Now India's response has been a guarded one, and an expression of its skilful diplomacy. Today, the Indo Pacific is a highly contested region and a hotbed of conflict. Bringing together diverse countries by not only forging cooperation but mutually reinforcing them as well as arbitrating differences on security, politics, and economics in the background of a transparent rules based regional order is a tall order for India. The Quad too is a minilateral initiative rather than a multilateral one. As much as India needs to have the powerful West on its side, it cannot alienate Russia. The international order is in a state of flux and international institutions are on a shaky wicket. Will the future see the emergence of an alternative rule based rights order? The world cannot always be shaped by the big powers and their power projections alone. Militarily, the US is the most powerful. But the US lacks the leverage it had several decades back and China is its most powerful adversary. In the present times, with China's competition for maritime resources and growing military modernisation, it has accentuated its rivalry with the US and the world is in awe of it. (Southgate, 2019). In the given circumstances, OPEC is in no mood to compromise. With not much influence in the Middle East and no strategic footprints in Afghanistan and a divided foreign policy, with institutional arrangements in a disarray, this could well be the end of the American era. Besides, confronting two Asian powers together, (Russia & China) has certainly compounded America's problems. Close on the heels is the issue of Taiwan, where late tensions are surmounting. It happens to be central to the foreign policy of both America and China and for the latter, Taiwan certainly has been unfinished business from the yester years.

In this background dominated by narratives of conflict, inter-state competition and the changing geo-political scenario, what should be the onward path for India? Maintaining its strategic autonomy in the international sphere and choosing its foreign

policy options in accordance with its national interests is well taken. India is one of the very few to have challenged Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road initiative'. India can certainly do without the advice that keeps pouring in from the big powers whenever issues are at stake, they could be related to national security, terms of trade, the growing divide between the developed and developing world on humanitarian issues of vaccination or climate agenda for that matter. There is a lot at stake for the world in the ongoing Russia- Ukraine conflict. Politics, economics, policies, strategies, diplomatic roadblocks, all are at play. As if the pandemic were not enough, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has taken the world by storm. Challenges being multi fold, it's a crisis on top of a crisis. The coming decade will see India emerge as the third largest economy in the world. Its multilateral activism, pro-active response to regional challenges, skilful diplomacy and coalition building with likeminded actors, not to forget its liberal moorings, walking the extra mile on issues of global concern and assuming leadership roles as well, India does aspire to be a global power and take on the global stage in the short and medium term.

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