

# Issue

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# Brief

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# Diverging US and Indian Approaches to Europe: The Problem of Ukraine

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## **Abstract**

The US-India strategic partnership is rooted in the Indo-Pacific region. Nonetheless, developments in Europe, such as the war in Ukraine, have implications for US-India cooperation. The Ukraine conflict could distract the US, diverting its attention to Europe, and impeding its efforts to build Indian strategic capacity. Differing responses to the war can also create tensions between the two countries, as the US seeks to punish Russia, and India remains neutral. India and the US must reconcile their approaches to strategic developments in Europe. Failure to do so will not undo their strategic partnership but could create unnecessary obstacles to cooperation.

The US-India strategic partnership—driven by the need to offset rising Chinese power and ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains free and open—is rooted firmly in Asia.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the US, as a global power, has interests elsewhere around the world. This is particularly true of Europe, which was the US’s focus during the Cold War, and remains an area of central strategic concern. But India, as a South Asian regional power, is necessarily more concerned with its own neighbourhood, and the Indo-Pacific is the locus of the Chinese threat, which both countries recognise as their most pressing strategic challenge.<sup>2</sup> This is especially the case for India, as a revisionist China actively seeks to redraw the Sino-Indian border.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the US-India partnership is, in the first instance, regional.

This seems to suggest that, despite Europe’s importance, US-India relations should be relatively insulated from events there, including even a major development like the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Ukraine war is of neither India nor the US’s making, and neither country is directly involved in the fighting. The conflict is occurring far from the two countries’ shared locus of concern in the Indo-Pacific.

The reality, however, is more complicated as the Ukraine conflict has potentially significant implications for the Indo-Pacific and US-India cooperation. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, at root, denies the principle of sovereignty that underlies the nation-state system, ensuring territorial integrity and protecting weak states from aggression. This has implications well beyond Europe. If Russia succeeds in defeating Ukraine, China may be emboldened similarly to vindicate its revisionist claims against states in the Indo-Pacific region. This would create significant challenges for the US and India, which seek to maintain the regional status quo.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the war in Ukraine could impede US-India strategic cooperation. To address the crisis, the US might direct attention and resources away from the Indo-Pacific towards Europe. Commentators have pointed out that such a turn could undermine its position in Asia and have especially harmful consequences for the defence of Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> It would also damage US-India strategic efforts. The two countries’ partnership requires the US to remain actively engaged in the Indo-Pacific, as India cannot meet the challenge of rising Chinese power alone. If the US is distracted by conflict in Europe, the two countries will be less able to work together to build Indian strategic capacity, offset rising Chinese power, and keep the Indo-Pacific free and open.

# Differing Responses to the Ukraine Conflict

The US and India have responded to the problems stemming from the Ukraine conflict differently, and this has created tensions in their relationship. The US has vociferously condemned Russia's aggression.<sup>6</sup> It has, together with other likeminded states, levied an extensive array of sanctions against Russia, helping to cut it off from the global economic system.<sup>7</sup> Although it has not become a combatant, the US has supplied Ukraine with weaponry that it is using to resist the Russian invasion. This has contributed to significant losses on the part of Russian forces.<sup>8</sup>

India's reaction to the Russian invasion, by contrast, has been extremely circumspect. Not only has India avoided any substantive action against Russia, in response—at the rhetorical level—it has remained largely silent. Indian leaders have encouraged peaceful resolution of the crisis and sent Ukraine humanitarian aid. But India has not directly criticised the Russian attack, abstaining from resolutions condemning Russia in both the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly.<sup>9</sup>

India's silence is grounded in longstanding strategic logic. During the Cold War, India enjoyed close security relations with the erstwhile Soviet Union, on which it relied for most of its military equipment. That reliance continues to the present day, and Russian equipment currently accounts for approximately 70 percent of India's inventory. This includes the S-400 air defence system, of which India will be taking delivery through early 2023. If Indian criticism led Russia to cut off its military supplies, India could be significantly harmed. This would be particularly perilous given India's ongoing confrontation with China along the disputed Sino-Indian border.<sup>10</sup>

Also, India is a regional power most concerned with strategic developments in its immediate vicinity. It is hesitant to insert itself into distant disputes to which it is not a party. This is particularly true when it is faced with urgent security challenges, such as the border dispute with China, at home.

These differences between the two countries' approach to conflict in Europe have created tensions in the US-India relationship. India's refusal to condemn Russia's aggressive behaviour, even after concerted US efforts to persuade it to do so, has frustrated the US, and led to criticism from President Joe Biden and lawmakers.<sup>11</sup> In the US view, India's unwillingness to speak against the invasion affords Russia de facto support, reducing its diplomatic isolation, and

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facilitating its bad behaviour. It also undercuts India's appeal as a partner, with a shared liberal vision for the Indo-Pacific and for the larger international system.<sup>12</sup> None of this will undo the logic of US-India cooperation, particularly in the executive branch, which is generally more sympathetic to India's position than is the US Congress. Nonetheless, it can create unhelpful headwinds in the American system, potentially slowing US-India cooperation at a time when further progress is essential.<sup>13</sup>

India has not complained about the strong American pressure to condemn Russia. Rather, it appears to be betting that, given the importance of their relationship, tensions with the US will eventually blow over.<sup>14</sup> But prominent Indian commentators have noted the US pressure, while emphasising India's strong interest in maintaining close relations with Russia, as well as Russian concerns about an expanding North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which they believe underlay the Ukraine invasion.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the US and its partners' deployment of the global economic system to punish Russia will have ripple effects that can negatively impact India's economy, and Indians fear that this tactic could be used against them in the event of a future disagreement with the US and Europe.<sup>16</sup> If the US response to Russian aggression becomes too coercive and costly, it can alienate India—which prizes its strategic autonomy—and undermine the trust that is crucial to the their relationship.<sup>17</sup>

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# Reconciling US and Indian Approaches

India and the US, therefore, must reconcile their approaches to the ongoing strategic developments in Europe. If they fail to do so, their partnership could face unwelcome obstacles at a crucial time. What steps can the two countries take to achieve this goal?

India should publicly indicate disapproval of Russia's behaviour in Ukraine. This need not be a full-throated condemnation; even forthrightly referring to the Russian attack on Ukraine as an invasion would be a step in the right direction.<sup>18</sup> This will displease Russia, but it is unlikely to break the Indo-Russian relationship. India is one of the few major states that still maintain good relations with Russia. The Russians will not want to lose Indian diplomatic support and lucrative defence sales by cutting its ties with India.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, India must diversify its defence acquisitions. Overreliance on Russia gives Moscow excessive leverage over Indian foreign policy. India has recognised this need for some time, and defence imports from Russia fell 53 percent from 2011-15 to 2016-20.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, India remains highly dependent on Russian arms sales, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future; Russia enjoys a number of advantages, including low-cost equipment, willingness to share technology, and the longstanding familiarity of the Indian armed services with Russian systems.<sup>21</sup> Further diversification, which will require India to manage its relationship with Russia, wean its military away from Russian systems, and find new suppliers, will take time.

Europe, Israel, and the US can help to fill the gap. India's defence relationships with all three partners are on the upswing. India acquired its new Rafale fighter plane from France, and is currently retrofitting it with India-specific enhancements.<sup>22</sup> Israel was India's third largest arms supplier between 2016 and 2020, and the two countries recently agreed to form a task force to identify new areas of defence cooperation over the coming decade, ensuring that the relationship will grow in the years ahead.<sup>23</sup> The US-India defence trade has blossomed in recent years, expanding from zero in 2005 to over US\$20 billion today. This includes the Indian acquisition of several sophisticated aircraft such as the P-8, and co-development of systems such as air-launched drones, which take the relationship beyond that of just the buyer and seller. Also, the signature of the so-called foundational agreements has facilitated geospatial information-sharing and logistical cooperation.<sup>24</sup> Further expansion

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of the US-India defence trade will require India to trust the US, which it sees as a fickle partner, sometimes balking at Indian requests for sophisticated weapons systems. As explained below, this problem can be ameliorated through continued liberalisation of the rules governing US technology transfer.

The US, for its part, must ensure that its expectations of India are realistic. India can gently express disapproval of Russian aggression in Ukraine. But it is unlikely to openly condemn Russia, nor will it end the Indo-Russian relationship, or even significantly reduce it in a short period of time. Change will have to be gradual.

Also, the US can encourage its European allies to do more to provide for their own defence. If the Europeans build their military capabilities and generate deterrence, future Russian or other aggression in the region will become less likely. This will reduce the likelihood of major crises in Europe, and better enable the US and India to focus their attention on the Indo-Pacific. Europe is already beginning to prioritise defence in response to the Ukraine conflict. Germany, for example, has announced that, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, it will exceed the NATO goal of devoting 2 percent of its gross domestic product to defence.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the US should continue to build trust with India regarding defence acquisitions. Technology sharing can help. Several past US administrations took important steps in this direction, including the Obama administration's Defense Technology and Trade Initiative and the designation of India as a Major Defense Partner. During the Trump administration, the US eased high-technology export controls by granting India Strategic Trade Authorization-1 status.<sup>26</sup>

Competing priorities within the US foreign policy bureaucracy, such as technology control and the promotion of strategic balance in South Asia, have at times impeded cooperation with India on important systems, including aircraft and air defence. This has contributed to Indian distrust of America, and hesitance to become reliant on it. Senior US leadership should ensure that national strategic goals supersede bureaucratic interests, and that the US continues to liberalise rules regarding the export of dual-use technology to India. Such technology sharing will build Indian strategic capacity, help wean India off of Russian armaments, and provide evidence of US reliability.<sup>27</sup>

# Addressing the Problem of Third-Party Relationships

The above measures can help the US and India to reconcile their policies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific during the Ukraine crisis and into the future. But even if they do so, the Ukraine conflict will have highlighted the need to resolve a longstanding question in their partnership: What can the two countries expect of one another regarding their third-party relationships?

India and the US will inevitably have close relations with countries that the other does not like, such as Russia and Iran for India, and Pakistan for the US. The other partner must accept this reality and recognise that it does not undermine the strategic logic of US-India cooperation. The relationship, despite its closeness, will thus be open and autonomous, and not exclusive.<sup>28</sup>

But how open and autonomous should the relationship be? Are there red lines—particularly naked acts of coercion or aggression, egregious violations of human rights—that call for unity in rejecting a state that crosses them? This has been an ongoing problem in the US-India partnership, and Ukraine brings it to the fore. The two countries should take advantage of this inflection point in their relationship and discuss candidly their expectations on this front. Doing so can help them to avoid misunderstandings in the future.

Ultimately, the US and India's shared strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific are too strong for their relationship to be derailed by developments in Europe. Nonetheless, disagreements can create headwinds, slowing the progress of their cooperation even as the China challenge grows. India and the US, therefore, must not waste time. They should reconcile their current policies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific and should frankly discuss their expectations regarding third-party relationships in the future. [ORF](#)

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