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Russia Ukraine War: The Indian Stance

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Abstract: - On the 1st anniversary of the war between 2 European Nations Russia and Ukraine New Delhi has still maintained the **stance of neutrality** and wants others also to focus on other pressing issues and stick to pragmatic neutrality and push for practical solution to the crisis. This stance of India comes from its unquestioned faith in its **time tested partnership with Russia** and its ability to manage and keep good relations with USA which can be defined as **“Estranged Democracies of the Cold War era into Comprehensive Global Strategic Partners of today.”** Also in the world order where international relations are dominated by realist approach and the only thing that matters for every country existing in this world are its **sole national interest** and their responsibility to protect the national sovereignty and integrity of the country.

The escalation: -

It was on the 24th of February that in the United Nations Security Council meeting to prevent Russia from attacking Ukraine, Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of a fully fledged land, sea, and air invasion of Ukrainian territory targeting Ukrainian military assets and cities across the country.

In Sep 2022 – Russia has annexed 4 provinces of Russia, namely Donetsk, Luhansk in the East and Zaporizhzhia and Kherson in the south by holding deeply controversial referendums in these regions. According to the reports the citizens of Ukraine were forced to vote for plebiscite by Russian troops. In total, Russia is claiming an estimated 15%- 20% of the country.

However, till now the forces of Russian do not have full control over the Ukrainian territory. They control most of Luhansk provinces and a large part of the Donetsk region. Russia holds around 70% of Zaporizhzhia and the important city of Kherson.

Background: -

Euro-maidan protests, November 2013: The protests began after an internal Ukrainian crisis escalated in November 2013, when President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign a deal for greater integration with the European Union and rather signed a bail-out package with Russia, sparking mass protests ultimately toppling the government and forcing the President to flee. Russian government was supporting Yanukovich in the crisis, while the US and Europe were supporting the protesters.

Annexation of Crimea, March 2014: It, trying to salvage its lost influence in Ukraine, invaded and annexed Crimea.

Reasons for annexation of Crimea: -

Importance of Crimea: Sevastopol Port: It is a warm water port, natural harbor, home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet. While it is that Russia's current lease of Sevastopol port is till 2042 and because of the crisis that are going on Russia has become highly precarious about its future access to the port that might be compromised.

The importance of working from Sevastopol port, the Black Sea Fleet enhances Russia's ability to project power in and around the Black Sea, while also serving as a potent symbol of Russian power.

By taking control over Crimea, Putin was presenting western integration with Ukraine as unfruitful. They thought that West will not be interested in incorporating Ukraine in NATO while it is involved in a territorial dispute with Russia over Crimea. These were also the elements of the past strategies that Putin tried to use in Georgia and other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States to counter efforts at NATO

and EU expansion.

Rich in Hydrocarbon resources: Crimea amounted to 80 per cent of Ukraine's oil and natural gas reserves. Crimea has been part of the Russian territory for two centuries before getting transferred to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1954 by the President Khrushchev.

Minsk Accords, February 2015: Russia's annexation of Crimea triggered the rebels in Ukraine's east. Fighting happened between the rebels and the Ukrainian military. Russia got militarily involved. Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine attempted to begin negotiations and thought of putting an end to violence through the Minsk Accords. These accords were done mainly for cease fire and called for withdrawal of heavy weapons and the Ukrainian control over the territories captured by Russia. However, efforts to reach a diplomatic settlement didn't bear fruit and satisfactory resolution of the dispute didn't happen. This all summed the relationship between Russia and the West to its lowest point since the end of Cold War. The Russian economy is on the verge of recession due to the sanctions. Putin is being imperialist in his approach towards Ukraine and is seeing it as part of the greater Russia and playing the victim card of western hostilities trying to hamper territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Reason for Russia's Special military operations on Ukraine:

Ukraine is critical to guard the North European plains of Russia: Thus, it seeks a pro-Russian government in Kyiv to serve as buffer to the plains. Even a neutral Ukraine which promises the Russian government that it will not join the EU or NATO and will uphold Russian lease on the warm water port at Sevastopol in Crimea is acceptable to Putin and Russia. However, Ukrainian membership of NATO is a red line for Russia.

NATO's expansion as a politico-military alliance, even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact: 5 rounds of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion took place between 1997 and 2020 bringing within its ambit former Soviet states like Baltic States, etc. Any further enhancement in terms of membership of the US-led alliance would bring it very close to the Russian heartland which will hamper the territorial sovereignty of Moscow. The NATO troops are today deployed within 100 miles of Saint Petersburg, Russian city. Throughout the Russian history, except for the brief disturbances with Japan and China in the Far East, the main threat to Russia's security and sovereignty has emerged from the heart of Europe. Therefore, creating a periphery zone of states friendly to Russia, or at the very least not aligned against it, has therefore always attracted its leaders as a safeguard against external meddling and aggression. As a solution to the war Moscow wants West to assure it that Ukraine will never be joining NATO because presently Kyiv is partner country of NATO which implies that it will join the military alliance in future. The Ukraine crisis was justified by the Russian President on the grounds of security interests and the rights of ethnic Russians in former Soviet Republics.

Reaction of the world: -

- The G7 nations strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The countries said that the referendum conducted at gunpoint is sham and it was with hidden motives of Russia to annex Ukraine.
- The European Union has also condemned the annexation while the UK and the US released a fresh batch of sanctions on Russia.
- US President Joe Biden struck a stronger note. "Make no mistake: these actions have no legitimacy," he said.
- UN- These acts are a violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and inconsistent with the principles of the United Nations Charter.
- Also economic sanctions have been imposed on Russia by many European powers like USA, EU, UK & Canada. Australia and Japan have also imposed sanctions.
- It was US and Albania who sponsored the UNSC resolution that "deplores in the strongest terms" Russia's aggression against Ukraine.
- China rejected calling Russia's moves on Ukraine an "invasion" and urged all sides to exercise restraint.

GOI reaction to the conflict: -

India has not joined the Western powers stance and has not condemned Russia's intervention in Ukraine and has kept a neutral stand and fairly low profile on the issue.

More recently, India has abstained on all UN resolutions with New Delhi saying dialogue is the only answer to settling differences and disputes. Also, it has provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Delhi for now has stuck to a path of strategic ambivalence on the Ukraine crisis. It has expressed displeasure (short of condemning) and called for diplomacy. This stance of India is highly pragmatic and it also reflects the realities and complexities of the realist world order.

Reasons:

Both Russia and West are important partners in general.

Russia is India's biggest and time-tested ally & supplier of military equipments.

It was during the Chinese aggression in Ladakh that our defense minister reached Moscow to ensure that supply of weapons is unabated this was because of the mutual trust between the long time partner of India. It was after this that India's defense capabilities were given a boost by Russia against China by selling the S-400 air defense system to India. Russia has also been a trusted ally in the UN Security Council.

It is Moscow which has ensured that Delhi is not left out from the discussions on Afghanistan and Central Asia while also providing some leverage with the US.

At the same time, the western countries like the US, the European Union, and UK are all important partners of India, and India's relations with each of them, and the Western world in general, is built after many lows and fairly a good amount of diplomacy.

In the UNSC, India has always counted on France's uncalled backing on many occasions.

India has always trusted the west and has relied on its support to deal with the eastern neighbor of India i.e. an aggressive China on the Line of Actual Control.

India needs both the U.S & the West and Russia to deal with the "China problem":

New Delhi needs Moscow's assistance for continental balancing of China while for its maritime balancing of China. India is not in a position to address the China challenge in the maritime space without the active support of American and western navies and the Quad. This unavoidable dualism requires India to balance the two sides i.e. USA and Russia.

Analysis of GoI response:

India's response to the crisis comes from the geopolitical vulnerabilities of India because India is surrounded by hostile neighborhood from both eastern and western sides i.e. China and Pakistan resp. so India is trying to make the best balance of the terrible situation that India finds itself in.

Also for New Delhi one thing that matters is National Interest for which it can also keep its principles aside. Going forward, if tensions between Russia and the West persist, balancing extremes will be and has always been a key feature of Indian diplomacy. India is perhaps already mastering the art. Consider PM Modi commenting that the '*era of war is over*' and providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine while highlighting the negative impact of sanctions on Russia on global fuel and food inflation.

Reassertion of India's strategic autonomy: New Delhi's response to the recent crisis indicates India will not be pressured by either party. In fact the recognition of the "distinct relations" between India and Russia by the US while Washington also seeking to replicate such a relation with New Delhi in the future is indicator of the growing recognition of India as a major power in the world.

What does the current annexation mean for Russia – Ukraine crisis?

Taken together with Putin's decision to call for a partial mobilization of Russian reserve troops, it means that the war is far from over.

A war of attrition is being waged.

There is no conscious effort by any side to start a dialogue: Russia says it is ready for talks but has not given any concrete proposals because what Russia is offering now can't be relied on after its act of annexation of the 4 partially controlled Ukrainian regions.

Ukraine made its stand clear by saying that it doesn't want to reach to a solution till Mr. Putin is in power and will take a breath only when all the Ukrainian territories are liberated including Crimea.

The western countries supporting Ukraine also said that they will continue their support as long as it takes.

All the sides are standing on extremes unable to reach a peaceful settlement creating more problems and taking the whole world hostage.

What does it mean for India?

At the level of diplomacy, it means that New Delhi is surrounded in a dilemma that whether it should take sides or remain neutral as it has always been and hence non-aligned which was India's approach even during the cold war. While India continues to call for dialogue and for respecting territorial integrity, Putin's annexation of Ukrainian land stands in direct contrast to India's stated stance on war.

Meanwhile, an increase in hostilities will hamper global growth prospects and will create a roadblock for the already troubled energy markets. This will also hurt India's economic growth ambitions after the pandemic.

The Growing nuclear threat:

The safety of nuclear plant in Zaporizhzhia has been of much concern for the IAEA, which is involved in brokering talks between Ukraine and Russia to enforce a nuclear protective zone around it. The plant, under Russian control, and is near the scene of fighting. The location of nuclear plant in the vicinity could have harmful consequences on health and environment.

Also it is Putin who threatened to use nuclear arsenals. Russia has put allegations on Ukraine of planning to use a dirty bomb which is not a nuclear bomb but a conventional explosive device with radioactive materials, the explosion of which could turn vast stretches of land uninhabitable for decades.

There are fears of escalation of tensions into a war between Russia and NATO forces which are fully equipped with nuclear weapons which can prove to be highly catastrophic for the entire world.

Due to the fears of the previous use of nuclear arsenal in Japan the world has treated the option of using nuclear weapons as a taboo.

It was in 1962 that USSR & USA were on the verge of a conflict but their leaders avoided the use of weaponry and mediated amicably through dialogue.

Unfortunately in the recent crisis the efforts of starting a dialogue can't be seen from the either side and nuclear option is seen to be normal by both the parties.

The option of nuclear attacks and retaliation should not be seen as a viable option and Russia, Ukraine and the West should begin talks to end the conflict. The alternative would be cataclysmic.

Conclusion: -

War has never been and won't be a good solution to solve the problem. Also in a world consisting of nuclear power countries war is detrimental for the people and sovereignty and integrity of the countries. The need of the hour is to stop the war without showing weakness. This also means that neither party is put through unnecessary humiliation and undue economic sanctions. However, the West must act as a mediator between the 2 parties and should responsibly try to solve the conflict. India which also heads G20 and SCO this year can use its leadership with utmost advantage for solving the issues between the 2 countries and trying to bring them on a table for mediation and finding amicable solutions to the conflict because aggression of any kind is not good in the present world order where every country is highly equipped with nuclear powers.

Also public pressure can press the governments of respective countries to stop the war and bring some peaceful solutions on the table because War doesn't harm the governments it is the people who are the worst sufferers.

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