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DELHI'S HIGH STAKES DIPLOMATIC PLAY

The war in Ukraine illustrates the extent to which the deterioration of the international environment and the fast-rising geopolitical risks and uncertainties are making the work of Indian diplomats more and more difficult. They are challenging Delhi's ability to continue steering a balanced and sustainable course in its relationship with the US and Europe on the one hand and Russia on the other hand. And this, while at the same time continuing to deal with the tense situation on the India-China front.

To some extent, the paradox is that Russian invasion of Ukraine is confronting Prime Minister Modi and President Xi with basically the same dilemma: Both are put in a really awkward position by Mr. Putin's actions as these go against the grain of the principles of territorial integrity of countries and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries. However, neither of them can publicly condemn, or voice open reprobation against an ally and an important partner in the case of India – or a strategic partner in the case of China.

Hence, the not so frequent situation seen on 25th March during the UN Security

Council meeting when both the Indian and Chinese representative abstained in the vote on the resolution demanding that Moscow stop immediately its attack on Ukraine and withdraw all troops – and abstained again on 2nd March on the vote of the UN General Assembly resolution criticizing Russia's actions in Ukraine.

The Indian votes and position as explained by Delhi's diplomats comes as no surprise as there is no ignoring the depth of the Indo-Russian relationship, with Russia still India's number one arm supplier, providing 49% of the country's military equipment imports with crucial elements such as the S-400 missile defence system - a strategic deterrence tool against the Chinese and Pakistani capabilities.

Beyond the defense aspect which cannot be underestimated – as Delhi accepted the risk of enduring American sanctions as a result of the missile defense system deal – another very important factor is the longevity, solidity, and closeness of the diplomatic linkages between Russia and India. These linkages have endured and have even strengthened through the strategic rapprochement that Delhi undertook with the United States.

Nobody in Delhi has forgotten the support that Moscow has provided to the Indian position on the Kashmir issue. It was only three months ago – on 4 December 2021 – that Prime Minister Modi and President Putin held a summit meeting – one of the only two travels abroad for Mr. Putin since the start of the pandemic – which provided the opportunity for the signing of a new agreement to extend the two countries' military technology and energy cooperation for the next ten years.

However, as the war in Ukraine intensifies and the international condemnations and sanctions against Putin's Russia keep piling up, it is not sure that India's restraint in the conflict will continue to be understood – especially in the US and Europe. Delhi's position puts it as the odd one out vis à vis its American, Japanese and Australian partners in the QUAD – a strategic dialog/alliance assuming even greater importance for Delhi which now see China as the source of its most crucial security risk. And the

delivery of the top of the line J-10C Chinese fighter aircrafts to Pakistan, as a response to the acquisition of the Rafale by Delhi can only reinforce this assumption.

There is the perception in some Indian circles that the Western countries should have considered the repeated concerns expressed by Vladimir Putin about the continuous expansion of NATO at Russia's doors since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and this comes out in the Indian position that "all parties" should get back to dialog so stop the war. However, the increasing brutality of the conflict is leading to a "with us or against us" polarization of attitudes – especially in the US and Europe – that might make Delhi's position more difficult to sustain. Depending on the evolution of hostilities in the coming days it would not be unthinkable to see some voices in the US Congress referring to India's position to demand that the Biden administration enacts sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) against Delhi for having bought the S-400 missile defence system.

In the last twenty years successive Indian governments have invested a lot in the improvement of the India-US relationship which has never been so close in the



economic, technological, defense domains. But the stand taken by Delhi in the Ukraine war shows that the Modi government is not ready to sacrifice the Russian relationship on the altar of the India-US one.

First, whatever President Biden's assertions about restoring American leadership in the world, many structural trends - at the US domestic as well as at the global geopolitical levels - are mounting a challenge of the US absolute prominence on the international scene and its ability to shape almost singlehandedly global events, as this is recognized by a number of American experts. In addition to that, there have been some doubts in many countries over the last few years, even before the onset of the Trump administration, about the rollout of US commitments.

The second consideration has to do with respect to China, and with the Russian-Chinese relationship. The dramatic developments in the last period are increasingly transforming what was until now a tactical alliance into a strategic one between the two countries- despite the fact

that the Chinese leadership is very uneasy with the Russian invasion of Ukraine - if it is not even disapproving it while not being able to prevent it. Such a transformation of the links between Moscow and Beijing, if the present trend were to continue and to be accelerated by the international isolation of Russia, could quite possibly have an impact on the India-Russia relationship. It could even quite possibly weaken Delhi's position towards Beijing. In this context, preserving some kind of closeness between Putin's Russia and India would in itself be an objective worth aiming at.

In dealing with these considerations Delhi's decision-makers are also certainly aware that the gravity and even traumatic nature of the present events, the radical changes they will certainly trigger on the geopolitical scene, will have a long-lasting impact on perceptions in different capitals about who stood for what, and in what way. It might not be an exaggeration to say that rarely before the stakes have been so high in terms of India's future diplomatic and defense posture.

Claude Smadja



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Before creating Smadja & Smadja, Claude Smadja has been involved with the World Economic Forum altogether for 14 years first as a member of the Executive Board and then as the Managing Director of the organization from 1995 to 2001.

EDITOR'S TAKE

Indian alignment with the US and NATO on the Russian transgression of Ukraine could cost India its long-time friend and trusted ally. The aggression India faces from China in the east, is continuing and advancing. In wake of this, was the meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Vladimir Putin for India's defense and security policy in December last year. Add to this the deployment of the much desired Russian S-400 missile defense systems along the border with China and Pakistan. Russia has been a tested friend of India's and as they say a country cannot change its address. Loss of a trusted ally and the increasing alignment between Russia and China, would leave India in a precarious position.

China's design on Taiwan is not that dissimilar from what Putin wants from Ukraine. Soon

after the visit of the Russian President to Beijing, Russia gave recognition to Taiwan being an inalienable part of China. "Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions." Chapter 7 of the UN Charter has been assiduously invoked on the chess board drawn by Putin. President Putin officially recognised the breakaway "people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk" in eastern Ukraine. The transgression is therefore termed as "special operation" as opposed to a war. Use of Chapter 7 in this form is not new and not the last. India faces Chinese aggression on its borders. Losing a friend and strengthening an enemy would not be in India's interest. Can Indian diplomacy in the context of Ukraine invasion keep its relationship with the US intact and abate the threat of possible sanctions?





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