

India attempts precarious balancing act in Ukraine crisis

By Deepal Jayasekera and Keith Jones
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US and German imperialisms' strategic thrust against Russia—which was spearheaded by last month's fascist-led coup against Ukraine's elected president and has been followed by aggressive NATO military maneuvers on Russia's borders, the imposition of sanctions, and bellicose threats—has roiled India's diplomatic and geo-political strategy.

Over the past decade, New Delhi has tilted toward Washington, forging a “global strategic partnership” with the US. At the same time it has clutched to a measure of “strategic autonomy,” by maintaining close relations with Russia, for decades India's “all weather friend,” and by seeking to improve relations with China, a close ally of its arch-rival, Pakistan, and with which it has a longstanding border dispute.

With Russia and the US now pitted against each other in the most serious crisis in Europe since the end of the Second World War, New Delhi is groping for a stance that will enable it to avoid seriously damaging its relations with either Moscow or Washington.

For almost two weeks, India's government said nothing about the Feb. 22 putsch that deposed Ukraine's elected president, Viktor Yanukovich, and the ensuing rapid escalation of tensions between Russia and the US and its European Union allies.

Albeit timidly and in statements and actions fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity, New Delhi has since somewhat distanced itself from Washington.

Yesterday, India joined China and more than fifty other countries in abstaining on a non-binding UN General Assembly resolution got up by the US and its allies so as to isolate Russia and provide international “legitimacy” for further aggressive diplomatic and military moves against Moscow. The resolution declared that the March 16 Crimean referendum, which saw a massive vote in favour of joining Russia, did not constitute a legal basis for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea's secession from Ukraine and its incorporation into the Russia Federation.

Earlier this week, India joined the other four BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa) in authoring a resolution that deplored the sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and its allies and the escalation of global tensions. The BRICS countries also forthrightly opposed the Australian prime minister's suggestion that Russia be excluded from the

next G20 leaders' summit, which is to be held in Brisbane, Australia in November.

India has by no means condemned the fascist-spearheaded coup against Yanukovich, let alone the role that the US and Germany played in instigating and organizing it. In its first and only communique on the issue, India's Ministry of External Affairs referred to a “change of government” in Ukraine and the importance of establishing a “legitimate democratic process” so as to arrive at a solution “that meets the aspirations of all sections of Ukraine's population.”

But New Delhi has also emphasized that Russia has “legitimate interests” in Ukraine—a contention that provoked a vehement denunciation from Ukraine's putsch-installed government—and it has not criticized Russia's incorporation of Crimea.

Speaking to a joint session of Russia's parliament March 22, the same day Crimea was formally admitted into the Russia Federation, Russian President Vladimir Putin singled out China and India for praise. “We are grateful,” said Putin to all those who understood our actions in Crimea. ... We highly appreciate India's restraint and objectivity.”

On the evening of March 22, Putin telephoned Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to personally thank him for India's “support.” The Indian government statement on their 20-minute conversation said that Singh had thanked Putin for explaining Russia's position and “emphasized the consistent position India had on the issues of unity and territorial integrity of countries.”

Like China, India fears Russia's invocation of the “right to self-determination” to justify its incorporation of Crimea could ultimately redound against its interests. India confronts several longstanding ethno-nationalist separatist insurgencies in its north-eastern states and long ago repudiated its consent to the UN holding a referendum in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, to determine its future.

The Indian government statement was otherwise noteworthy for its positive and amicable tone. At a time when western leaders were lining up to demonize Putin as an “aggressor,” even a new Hitler, Singh thanked the Russian president “for his personal leadership in further deepening and strengthening the India-Russia strategic partnership.” The statement also said

Putin and Singh had “reaffirmed the importance that both countries attach to their special and privileged strategic partnership.”

India’s ruling elite views the strategic partnership it has forged with Washington over the past decade as pivotal to its ambitions to make India a regional and world power. Manmohan Singh has repeatedly hailed the 2008 Indo-US nuclear accord, which was meant to cement the Indo-US partnership, as his proudest achievement of his ten years as prime minister.

India’s government and ruling elite have chosen to tilt toward Washington knowing full well that the US, under George W. Bush and now Barack Obama, is courting India because it calculates India can serve as a strategic counterweight to China, serving to anchor its plans to isolate and if necessary militarily thwart China.

They have enthused over the burgeoning of Indo-US military ties and US support for India building a blue-water navy and playing a leading role in “policing” the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, New Delhi has been alarmed by US imperialism’s repeated provocations, threats of wars, and wars in Eurasia, Africa and the Middle East—because of their incendiary impact and because of Washington’s trashing of international law and arrogation of the right to violate national sovereignty at will.

India has repeatedly fallen into line with US pressure for it to support Washington’s bullying against Iran—casting votes at the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) in support of Washington’s campaign against Iran over the nuclear issue and scuttling plans to build a pipeline to import natural gas from Iran via Pakistan. Earlier this month, at an Indo-US energy summit, Washington demanded India cut backs its oil imports from Iran so as not to surpass their embargo-reduced 2013 levels and New Delhi quickly signaled it would comply.

Nevertheless the US’s relentless push for India to adhere to its predatory strategic objectives has caused increasing resentment in the Indian government and elite.

In the Ukraine crisis, the US is moving aggressively against a power India values as one of its staunchest allies, upon which it remains highly dependent for the arming of its military, and which is playing an important role in the development of its nuclear energy program.

In recent years, India has sought to diversify its military suppliers as it undertakes a major modernization of its armed forces. Nevertheless, more than three-quarters of India’s military imports over the past five years have come from Russia. Moreover, India has almost \$40 billion in outstanding military orders from Russia. According to the website of India’s Russian embassy, “India-Russia military technical cooperation has evolved from a simple buyer-seller framework to one involving joint research, development and production of advanced defence technologies and systems. BrahMos Missile System, joint development of the Fifth Generation Fighter

Aircraft and the Multi-Transport Aircraft, as well as the licensed production in India of SU-30 aircraft and T-90 tanks, are examples of such flagship cooperation.”

India’s elite is acutely conscious that Russia and before that the Soviet Union stood by New Delhi when it was isolated by the US and most other world powers, including in response to its nuclear weapons tests in 1974 and again in 1998.

During much of the Cold War, when the US was closely allied with Pakistan, the Soviet Union provided India crucial support against both China and Pakistan. Soviet support was critical to India’s victory in the 1971 war with Pakistan, ensuring that the US did not carry through on threats to intervene. In the run-up to that war, New Delhi and Moscow had signed an “Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty” that committed the two countries to come to each other’s defence in the event of an attack.

India was one of the few countries that supported the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan after the Red Army intervened in late 1979 to prop it up. Later the two countries jointly supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban and they continue to closely coordinate their Afghan policies.

Given the depth and scope of the Indo-Russian ties what is noteworthy is not so much that New Delhi has been compelled to distance itself from Washington’s drive to subjugate Ukraine to US-German domination, but how limited and muted has been India’s support for Russia.

Moreover, New Delhi—eager to maintain and strengthen its partnership with the Washington—is not doubt already calculating how it can placate the US by supporting or increasing its support for US strategic interests elsewhere.

As for Washington, up to this point it has said nothing publicly about India’s stand on the Ukraine crisis. But there is no question that it will seek its pound of flesh. Even before the US-Russian confrontation over the Ukraine, there was a mounting din of complaints from the US political elite and military-strategic apparatus that India was not sufficiently compliant with US interests and too wedded to its “strategic autonomy.”

While tilting toward Washington, India has sought in recent years to straddle the ever-widening fault lines in world geopolitics. The Ukraine crisis has demonstrated that US imperialism’s drive to assert its global hegemony is making this an increasingly precarious, if not impossible, balancing act.

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