

# УКРАЇНА НА МІЖНАРОДНІЙ АРЕНІ У ЧАСИ ГЛОБАЛЬНОЇ ТУРБУЛЕНТНОСТІ

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## THE “RUSSIA FACTOR” IN INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY

India's foreign policy under the present government since 2014 is said to have embarked on the road to multi-alignment instead of non-alignment. Such were the statements of Subramaniam Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India during 2022-2024. He responded in reply to a question about the reason why India was not condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine, while at the same time was seeking wider cooperation with the West (Transcript, MEA, 2024). However, after the occupation of Crimea, the Indian foreign ministry spokesman spoke about “Russian interests” in Ukraine, causing a lot of debate (Business Standard, 2014). Later, it was modified and rephrased.

India attempted to justify its position, stating that it maintained a neutral stand. It did not officially condemn the Russian aggression, did not vote in favor of Ukraine at the UN, rather preferred abstention. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, was marked for several unusual steps: telling Putin to his face “This is not an era of war” on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Samarkand in November 2022, demonstrating his favor for peace and diplomacy, sending hu-

manitarian aid to Ukraine (Lok Sabha, 2023). At the same time, India did not oppose Western sanctions openly and rather agreed with them wherever feasible. Suffice it to mention that the State Bank of India decided to refrain from dealings with Russian entities that were under Western sanctions.

Modi's active will to visit Kyiv in August 2024, after a children's hospital was targeted by missiles on the day of his visit to Moscow in July 2024 was appreciated by the Ukrainian government. Despite these steps, purchase of crude oil from Russia increased in record rates, making India one of the largest purchasers (Le Monde, 2024).

From here emerges the "Russia factor" in Indian foreign policy, which motivates on the one hand experts to emphasize that Russia-India friendship is historic and old, that Russia is a traditional friend in need (FPRC, 2021, 26). On the other hand, there are opinions, that contest that there has been some decoupling or de-hyphenation that has taken place between Russia and India (DW, 2024). This paper attempts to delineate the areas of decoupling and the areas where the bond has stayed strong and even became stronger.

Since independence in 1947, India's foreign policy was shaped by the traditions of seeking autonomy in decision making and maintaining equal distances from the two rival blocs during the Cold War. Indian foreign policy hinged upon the emergence of the non-alignment movement, which gained popularity and influence among many newly independent former colonies of the West. Leading members of the non-aligned movement—Egypt, Yugoslavia, Indonesia, and India—had a strong impact within the United Nations.

Along with this, suffice it to mention, Indian leadership under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was attracted towards the socialist model of the USSR from the standpoint of economic development of the poor agrarian country. The ideas of Five-year plans, nationalization of major strategic industries was inspired by the socialist transformation of the USSR model. However, the

management of this model was carefully woven into the framework of a mixed economy, which ensured the presence of a growing, competitive private sector. As a result, in many sectors the public sector companies played a key role, providing employment and development opportunities.

The political aspect of these transformations was that it did not, and could never mirror the single party Soviet model, because even before independence, India had a multi-party democratic setup, freedom of speech and movement of people. This curious mixture of using state-ruled industrialization as well as private sector in parallel, also drew on some experience of the French and European models, in the spirit of social democracy. In fine, the anti-western rhetoric of the Soviet regime aligned itself with the anti-colonial, non-alignment principles of India's foreign policy.

The initial decades of independence gave positive results of this mixed economy experiment, but it also led to stagnation in the late 1970s. The cause for this shift was largely due to the geopolitical consequences of the Bangladesh liberation war in which India and Pakistan were engaged in warfare and India signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR in 1971. Increased defense cooperation with the USSR ensued after India had to allocate more for its defense needs. Thus, what started more as an economic, development-oriented partnership, tilted towards defense cooperation.

This process was uninterrupted after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The share of defense cooperation was the largest until the year 2009, following which India started diversifying and looking for modernizing its arms hardware from other countries. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the import of arms from Russia has shrunk by nearly half from 2012 to 2021. In the past few years, India has been more focused on developing its home-grown defense industry, getting the latest technology from the West. SIPRI estimates show the share of Russian military hardware in India's defense

went down from 75 percent in 2009 to 39 percent in 2019. (the-diplomaticinsight, 2023).

Therefore, at present, the Russian factor in India's foreign policy is to be determined not solely by the latter's dependence on weapons supply, but on other civil items such as crude oil, procurement of which increased to record levels during the financial year 2023-2024. Apart from that, payment procedures are a bone of contention between the states as well as the sanctioned shadow fleet that carries the crude freight.

Additionally, the dilemma that India now has is that its participation in Quadrilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue (QUAD), AUKUS with the West is eyed with suspicion by Russia, while India's participation in BRICS, SCO and others is a concern for the West. India is also suspicious about the close relations between China and Russia as well as Russia's alignment with Pakistan and Afghanistan. (FPRC, 2021)

In the backdrop of these elements, both Russia and India exercise soft power mutually for keeping and extending the horizons of their public and cultural diplomacies. Indian soft power is successful in Russia like it is in other parts of the world, hinging on cultural studies, yoga, performing arts, and Ayurveda etc. The peculiarity of Russia's soft power in India is that it is manifested starkly in the media and social media spheres especially on issues of Ukraine and the current war. On issues of the West, Russia is unable to use manipulations in India. But it is consistent in its propaganda against Ukraine. It is in this that we can see the impact of the Russian factor in Indian foreign policy.

Aspects of this propaganda hinge upon the Soviet legacy, from which Ukraine was led astray by the West into the EU and NATO and the current war is to bring back Ukraine to its "natural home." Another aspect is that of NATO expansion, which is inhibiting the sphere of influence of Russia into East Europe and states of the former USSR.

Given the current alignment of Russia and the US under the new Trump administration, the Russia factor in India's foreign

policy will be overshadowed by the regrouping of forces between the EU/West and the US. India as a state which recently signed the free trade agreement with the EU has the herculean task of managing relations with both the strategic partners. In the event of growing pressure on China, India will feel the pressure of a powerful neighbor pitted against itself by bigger forces.

Overall, India's Ukraine policy after 2022 shows a remarkable trend of leaning more towards neutrality, where the Russia factor is still dominant, while in relation to both the US and Russia, the policy is one of "multi-alignment" and the Russia factor is not dominant. It can safely be concluded that, given the proximity of Ukraine with the EU and its integration perspectives, as well as the growing cooperation and negotiation of a free trade agreement between India and the EU (APNews, 2025), the Russia factor in India's foreign policy will be diminishing both in relation to the EU as well as Ukraine. It will, however, still play a role in relation to the US and China.

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