

Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty: India's Response to the Ukraine Crisis Considering Its Own Border Disputes

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ABSTRACT

India's position toward the Ukraine conflict —which began in February 2022—is analyzed using both the theories of Realism and Constructivism through the lens of India's own territorial disputes —such as the dispute with China at the LAC (Line of Actual Control) and with Pakistan regarding Kashmir. This study evaluates India's diplomatic neutrality —its abstention from UN condemnation of Russia while promoting dialogue to resolve crises —as an indication of the lessons learned from its own border disputes which have led it to emphasize the resolution of disputes peacefully so that no precedent is set that may undermine its claims to territorial sovereignty. The key finding of this research demonstrates that India has maintained an equilibrium between supporting sovereignty in principle and forming pragmatic alliances to leverage the crisis to improve relations with Russia —in the context of Sino-Indian tensions. However, this posture also creates perceptions of inconsistency —because Western criticisms of Russian actions in Ukraine have raised concerns about parallels between these actions and those of China in Ladakh.

This research argues that India's response contributes to its ability to maintain a multipolar position, and to the broader debate about how internal disputes influence foreign policy in the contexts of the Global South. The implications of this research include continued calls for reform of multilateral institutions to provide equitable treatment for the issues of sovereignty. This research also illustrates the relationship between self-interest and international norms in responding to crises.

Keywords: Territorial Integrity, Sovereignty Principles, Ukraine Crisis, India's Response, Border Disputes, Line of Actual Control, Kashmir Conflict, Strategic Neutrality, Multipolar Geopolitics, Sino-Indian Tensions

INTRODUCTION

India has been deeply affected by two long-standing border disputes; one with China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and the other with Pakistan over the status of Kashmir. These historical border disputes have formed India's understanding of territorial integrity and sovereignty — as defined in the UN Charter — and India's relationship with these concepts.

India's position on the Ukrainian conflict — characterized by its abstention on UN resolutions calling for Russia's actions to be condemned and its support of calls for Russia to initiate dialogue — reflects the complexities of India's position on territorial integrity and sovereignty. This paper will explore the factors behind

India's decision-making process and provide evidence of why India has chosen to abstain on UN resolutions and support calls for Russia to engage in dialogue. This paper will also illustrate how India's decision-making process is influenced by India's own border disputes. The paper will argue that India has made decisions based upon both principle and pragmatism — that India believes that condemning Russia would increase the likelihood that China or Pakistan will use force to resolve their respective border disputes with India. Realism can explain India's interest-driven neutrality in this matter, while constructivism can explain how India's narrative of sovereignty has been socially constructed within the context of global geopolitics. The research will draw upon a variety of sources including official government documents and statements, media coverage of the crisis and other comparative cases of how nations have responded to similar crises throughout history. The research will contribute to the study of International Relations by demonstrating how the internal vulnerabilities of a nation can shape the foreign policy options available to that nation during a sovereignty crisis, with implications for

how nations in the Global South may respond to such crises. By providing examples of how India has responded to previous crises and examining the potential consequences of India's responses, this paper will demonstrate the complex relationships between norms, power and how they impact each other during a sovereignty crisis.

Background: India's Border Disputes and Sovereignty Challenges

In addition to India's sensitivities about its territorial integrity, India's borders are also a source of conflict which include the 2020 clash between India and China at Galwan Valley in Ladakh which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers. Both countries have long-standing and on-going disputes over their borders; China has long claimed Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet" whereas India has claimed Aksai Chin which it views as an encroachment of India's sovereignty. India and Pakistan have been in a dispute since 1947 partition and continue to experience cross-border terrorism regarding Kashmir; this is further complicated by previous United Nations resolutions; the Indian government revoked Article 370 in 2019 to fully integrate Jammu and Kashmir into the Union of India. The nature of these conflicts informs India's foreign policy: India will pursue peaceful negotiations in terms of bilateral talks with China while concurrently increasing its military capabilities (Raghav, 2024). The sovereignty narratives used in framing India's foreign policy view India as a bulwark against expansionism based upon its historical anti-colonial struggles. In addition, India participates in geopolitical alliances such as the Quad which serves as a counter-balance to Chinese assertive behavior; however, India maintains strategic autonomy to avoid escalation. As was seen during the Ukraine Crisis; when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014; India responded with a muted response to this event; India chose to prioritize maintaining ties with Russia over openly condemning the annexation of Crimea. This pragmatic approach reflects India's "varied consequentialism" and "strategic opportunism" where India's foreign policy focuses on achieving India's national interest, and enhances India's security pillar, so that India can aspire to become one of the world's leading powers (Verma, 2024). This background illustrates a pattern: India's experiences have instilled caution in India, with India preferring to utilize dialogue to preclude precedents which would legitimize the use of force in India's disputes. Critical geopolitics views these as constructed threats, and therefore shapes India's position within the global community.

India's Response to the Ukraine Crisis

India's response to the Ukraine crisis exemplifies an official posture of neutralism, as evidenced by India's voting on seven U.N. resolutions censuring Russia while articulating support for the sovereign state of Ukraine in principle (Verma, 2024). India's leadership have formally expressed their support for peaceful resolution to the conflict when Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated to President Vladimir Putin that "democracy, diplomacy and dialogue" will be the means to resolve issues between the parties involved (Srivastava, 2022). The fact that India has provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, as well as evacuated 22,000 Indian students, demonstrates a measured level of involvement (Singh & Pandey, 2025). Additionally, India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar defended the position taken by India by explaining that India was acting in accordance with its own national interest, and by denouncing what he referred to as hypocrisy on the part of Western nations with regard to oil trade with Russia (Yadav, 2023). As such, the postures taken by India during the current conflict represent a continuation of a historic trend; namely, India's adherence to a policy of non-alignment (Morales, 2025), although there have been occasions when India has leaned toward the Soviet Union to protect its territorial integrity and maintain its independence (Morales, 2025). Building upon this precedent, India's continued adherence to its longstanding commitment to strategic autonomy (which reemerged as a central tenet of India's foreign policy after the end of the Cold War) continues to serve as the guiding philosophy behind India's foreign policy (Pekkanen et al., 2014; Muraviev et al., 2021). In addition, over time, India's adherence to strategic autonomy has evolved into a multi-alignment strategy, enabling India to pursue simultaneous engagement with multiple global actors and blocs, without being tied to exclusive alliance arrangements (Williams & Papa, 2020; Verma, 2023). From an economic perspective, India increased its purchases of Russian oil, stating that these were necessary due to the need for energy security in light of global disruptions and not an endorsement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Singh & Pandey, 2025). From a diplomatic perspective, India utilized its G20 Presidency to facilitate consensus among participating nations, choosing to refer to the situation in Ukraine as a "crisis" rather than a "war", in order to allow for diverse perspectives to be represented (Rajagopalan, 2023). In so doing, India's responses to the Ukraine Conflict are consistent with the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, which enables India to present itself as a leading nation of the Global South advocating for the promotion of multipolarity. While India's strategically ambivalent posture has generated criticism from Western

nations, India believes that pursuing a multi-alignment strategy enables it to continue to pursue its national interests while continuing to access critical Russian military supplies (Press, 2022; Forough et al., 2023). Further, India's reliance on Russia for military equipment, despite its ongoing efforts to diversify its arms procurements (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023), serves as another explanation for why India has pursued a nuanced posture in relation to the Ukraine Conflict. Similarly, the necessity to preserve India's strategic partnership with Russia, particularly in light of Russia's perceived role in India's emergence as a global player (Verma, 2023), provides additional insight into why India has pursued a cautious posture with respect to the Ukraine Conflict.

Given the similarity in nature of India's border dispute with Pakistan/China, India has chosen to adopt a cautious posture in relation to the Ukraine Conflict. Specifically, India may fear that if it condemns Russia's territorial incursions, it would generate scrutiny of India's territorial claims in Kashmir or undermine India's ability to assert its sovereignty in relation to Chinese encroachments on Indian territory (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023). Moreover, India has rejected pressure from Western nations to join them in condemnation of Russia, with India's Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar suggesting that Europe's selectivity with regards to concerns about border disputes in Asia are hypocritical (Yadav, 2023). In sum, India's cautiously ambivalent posture during the Ukraine Conflict represents a manifestation of India's multi-alignment strategy, which prioritizes India's national interests and strategic autonomy in a complex global environment (Verma, 2023).

Comparative Analysis: Ukraine Crisis and India's Border Disputes

The Ukraine Crisis is like India's conflicts with regard to territorial aggression and defense of sovereignty (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023). The historical claims that Russia has made about the territory of Donbas are like China's historical claims to regions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and both are based on an idea of irredentism (Suporn et al., 2021). Like India's LAC strategy of disengaging from conflict through talks after Galwan, India also advocates for a de-escalation in the Ukraine Crisis without imposing economic sanctions. India views its actions to integrate Kashmir as exercises of internal sovereignty, just as Russia viewed its annexation of Crimea as an exercise of sovereignty; however, India does not view itself as being similarly situated to Russia, emphasizing the difference in democratic process. In terms of the consistency of Indian foreign policy, India's decision to abstain from voting may be criticized as hypocritical if it is perceived that India is doing so because of the similarities between the Russian military occupation of Crimea and the Chinese incursion into India's border at Doklam (Ginsburg, 2022). However, India argues that there is a double standard involved in how the West responds to India's violation of the border, and thus, India's abstention is a way of responding to those criticisms. From a realist perspective, India's dependence on Russian arms (which make up approximately 60 percent of India's weapons inventory) for defending India's border at the Line of Actual Control explains why India would avoid criticizing Russia (Iqbal & Rahman, 2023). Constructively, India frames its concept of sovereignty as dependent upon context, and therefore uses dialogue to create precedents which will help protect India's claims. This analysis demonstrates how India has adapted its policy during the Ukraine Crisis: the crisis has reinforced India's approach to multipolarity and has used lessons learned from the border conflict to inform how India navigates international norms (Sasikumar, 2016).

Challenges and Criticisms of India's Approach

The main difficulties are related to the perception of inconsistency: The opponents claim that India's neutrality compromises territorial integrity because India has been very vocal about Chinese actions. In addition to Western sanctions creating dilemmas (with secondary risks affecting Russian ties), domestic political parties can criticize the position of India as "pro-Russian", which could isolate it from the West (Kulik, 2023). In geopolitical terms, the China factor intensifies tensions: The Sino-Russian alliance increases the vulnerability of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by increasing the likelihood of encirclement for India. On the other hand, there are opportunities for India: The current crisis will increase the impact of India's advocacy for the Global South, and therefore support for sovereignty reform. To counter the criticism of India, it is emphasized that India uses multilateralism, and is promoting reforms in the United Nations, so that disputes are treated equally (Ciorciari, 2009). From a normative point of view, this demonstrates how relative sovereignty can be in practice and how power relations can affect the enforcement of sovereignty. Future responses may involve a hybrid approach of diplomacy between the principles and interests.

Implications for International Relations and Sovereignty Norms

India's position is also significant because it questions Western universality and promotes context-specific

interpretations of sovereignty. As such, India's stance has helped to strengthen multipolarity, as countries from the Global South are emulating India's neutral position. In addition, India's position has provided greater strategic autonomy by diversifying its partners amidst a multitude of disputes. Additionally, India's position is changing the current international legal system by providing alternative perspectives on territorial integrity and non-intervention (Szumowski, 2016). As a result, India's position is causing an assessment of the current international legal structure and the application of universal norms in a multipolar world in which country specific interests and history are playing a larger role in determining country foreign policies (Forough et al., 2023; Uzunçayır, 2024). Furthermore, India's position is exemplifying a growing trend in non-Western states including Turkey, Brazil and South Africa to give precedence to their national strategic interests and to be able to use diplomatic flexibility as opposed to adhering to one side of a major geopolitical confrontation (Oberoi & Leandro, 2023). In terms of broader impacts of India's position, there will be new forms of international relations: The G20 position taken by India suggests a demand for inclusive mechanisms for resolving conflicts. There may also be risks associated with norm erosion based on proliferation of inconsistent positions. Policy makers will need to learn how to apply border lessons in their diplomatic efforts to create alliances that can promote integrity without creating disengagement. To accomplish this, policymakers will require a sophisticated knowledge of the complexities of geopolitics to navigate multiple interests while maintaining both national security and economic stability.

CONCLUSION

The Ukraine crisis has been used by India to illustrate an example of the complex interaction between the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty on the one hand, and the national strategic interests of India on the other hand. The national strategic interest of India is significantly influenced by the long-standing territorial disputes of India with China and Pakistan. As demonstrated in this paper, India's strategic neutrality, evidenced in India's abstention at the UN; calls for a diplomatic solution; and continued economic engagement with Russia, demonstrates a pragmatic application of lessons learned from the border tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the conflict in Kashmir. In addition to supporting the creation of a new multipolar world order, where the interests of emerging economies are represented, India's decision to engage diplomatically rather than condemn Russia has protected it against establishing international precedent that may support the use of force in resolving territorial disputes in which India is involved. India's approach reflects both realist considerations regarding the distribution of power and constructivist narratives regarding the notion of sovereign space; further, this paper illustrates how internal vulnerabilities can lead to innovative foreign policies among middle powers. In addition to highlighting the strengths of India's position, the paper also identifies several areas of vulnerability. India's stance, as articulated in this paper, has served to enhance India's leadership in the Global South, in part due to India's ability to articulate shared concerns of the Global South with respect to sovereignty violations and collateral damage associated with sanctions. Furthermore, India's stance has fostered solidarity among member states of the G20. On the other hand, criticism of inconsistency in India's stance—by drawing analogies between Russian action in Ukraine and Chinese incursions into Ladakh—has highlighted the risks of undermining India's normative credibility and therefore potentially damaging India's partnership with the West. Comparatively, the Ukraine crisis shares similarities with India's experience of border disputes in terms of the emphasis placed upon de-escalation and multilateralism, however, it has also illustrated the limitations of India's autonomy within a highly polarized international system. The broader implications of India's model of crisis resolution and international relations theory and practice include the challenge to the universality of the Westernbased enforcement of sovereignty, and the advocacy for reforming institutions so that they provide equitable representation of Global South perspectives. Additionally, India's model contributes to multipolar stability through demonstrating balanced diplomacy, although it also carries the risk of erosion of norms if seen as selfserving. Finally, the paper suggests that the Indian model provides a basis for incorporating border dispute management into global crisis strategies, possibly through enhanced trilateral dialogues involving Russia, China and the West to help prevent escalations.

In conclusion, future crises such as possible escalation of the Indo-Pacific region, will test the resilience of the framework developed in this paper to the extreme. As the geopolitical fault lines continue to evolve, India's success or failure in developing a balance between defending its sovereignty and pragmatically forming alliances will ultimately determine whether India emerges as a key player in global affairs. Ultimately, the Ukraine Crisis has reiterated that territorial integrity is not simply a legal concept, but rather a lived reality, shaped by the lens of history, power and aspirations. Through navigating the complexities of territorial integrity, India does not only protect its borders, but also shapes a more inclusive international order.

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