

The Ukraine Crisis: What it means for India?

Esha Banerji

Russia-Ukraine: The Historical Background

Ukraine, a descendant of Ancient Rus¹, a part of the Russian empire for centuries and later, the USSR, was the second-most powerful Soviet republic after Russia, and was crucial strategically, economically and culturally.² Russian President, Vladimir Putin, noted that Russians and Ukrainians were one people - a single whole.³

Following the disintegration of USSR in 1991, Ukraine gained independence and has worked towards shedding all its Russian legacy and forged close ties with the West⁴ whereas Russia has sought to keep it's newly formed neighbor within its sphere of influence.⁵

Tensions between the two countries escalated during the Euromaidan movement, a protest in the capital city of Ukraine, Kiev in November 2013 against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to reject a deal for greater economic integration with the European Union.⁶

Russian President Vladimir Putin cited the need to protect the rights of Russian citizens and Russian speakers in Crimea and southeast Ukraine and took control of Ukraine's Crimean region in March 2014, which was followed by a formal annexation after a disputed local referendum voted to join the Russian Federation.⁷ Since 2015, France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine have attempted termination of violence through the Minsk Accords⁸ and while it has helped end large-scale conflicts, scuffles have continued with repeated news of ceasefire violations.⁹

NATO, over the years, has remarkably advanced and expanded its foothold in Eastern Europe, an area Russia considers its sphere of influence.¹⁰ According to John J. Mearsheimer, United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the prevailing situation in the region. The root cause, according to him, is NATO enlargement, which is the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West¹¹. Much to Russia's displeasure, NATO has deployed battalions in Eastern Europe, followed by sale of anti-tank weapons to

Ukraine, and its participation in a series of large-scale air exercises in western Ukraine along with other NATO members and USA.¹²

Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly held Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO as a 'red line', and expressed apprehension about plans of setting up military training centres in Ukraine.¹³ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has warned that Moscow has the right to choose ways to ensure its legitimate security interests if the US and its NATO allies do not change course in Ukraine.¹⁴

Current Developments

In the beginning of 2021, Russia began building up troops near Ukraine in response to what it described as threats from NATO as Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, reiterated that NATO membership was a strategic national goal of Kyiv¹⁵.

Analysts observe that Russia's military buildup is larger than before and there are fears of escalation of war in eastern Ukraine and a possible full-scale invasion in the near future.¹⁶

In late 2021, satellite pictures revealed Russian arms -- including self-propelled guns, battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles -- being positioned at a training ground merely 300 km from the Ukraine border.¹⁷

US intelligence findings in December estimated that Russia could begin a military offensive in Ukraine "as soon as early 2022". Ukrainian Defense Ministry's intelligence assessment says Russia has deployed more than 127,000 troops near Ukraine.¹⁸

Russia's Defense Ministry brushed off the accusations saying it is conducting regular winter military drills in its southern region, parts of which happen to border Ukraine¹⁹. It denies it has any plans to invade Ukraine and accuses the West of aggravating the situation.²⁰ At the same time, a list of legal security guarantees was released by Russia's foreign ministry in December 2021 demanding a ban on Ukraine entering NATO and a limit to the deployment of troops and weapons to pre-1997 level.²¹

¹ Archana, Angelin. 2022. "Russia in 2021: Expanding Boundaries." Globalpolitics.In. 2022. https://globalpolitics.in/pdf_file/articles/2022-Annual-Russia.pdf.

² <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/why-russia-ukraine-border-tension-may-lead-to-broader-conflict-7659613/>

³ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/71>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/five-things-to-know-about-russia-ukraine-tensions>

⁵ Popescu, Nicu, Andrew Wilson, and Central and Eastern European Online Library. 2009. (014) the Limits of Enlargement-Lite, European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood.

⁶ <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

⁹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/explained-whats-behind-the-conflict-in-eastern-ukraine/articleshow/82101803.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636419808429378?src=recsys>

¹¹ <https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Why-the-Ukraine-Crisis-Is.pdf>

¹² <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/five-things-to-know-about-russia-ukraine-tensions>

¹⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/20/europe/ukraine-russia-tensions-explainer-cmd-intl/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-as-aggressor-nato-as-objective-ukraines-new-national-security-strategy/>

¹⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/27/russia-ukraine-border-crisis-explained-why-now-what-s-the-history-what-are-putin-s-motivat>

¹⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/20/europe/ukraine-russia-tensions-explainer-cmd-intl/index.html>

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/five-things-to-know-about-russia-ukraine-tensions>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>

As the possibility of a full-blown war seems increasingly plausible, the world is carefully watching the developments made by the key countries involved in the Ukraine crisis, especially USA and Russia.

The International Response

It is said that while Ukrainian leaders are urging for calm in their nation, they're preparing for the worst.²²

U.S. President Joe Biden expects Russia to invade Ukraine and warns Moscow of possible cutoff from the global banking system if it does.²³ It has also put 8,500 US troops on standby for an Eastern European deployment.²⁴

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has accused Moscow of trying to destabilize Ukraine and has announced a loan up to \$120 million to Ukraine to help bolster its economy during the crisis. In addition to financial support, Canada has sent rotations of Canadian Armed Forces members to help train Ukrainian security forces under Operation UNIFIER.^{25,26}

UK foreign office has accused the Russian government of planning to install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv.²⁷ However, it has not substantiated this claim with any reports or facts as of now. Both USA and U.K. are also withdrawing their embassy staff and their families from Kyiv.²⁸

US and UK have supplied weapons to Ukraine while Germany will be sending a field medical facility.²⁹ Germany's lackadaisical reaction can be explained by the developments happening around Nord Stream 2 pipeline, an energy arrangement between Germany and Russia.

The world is divided into camps at the UNSC session held on 31 January 2022 on Russia's troop buildup on Ukrainian border. Russia was backed by its biggest ally, China, and has opposed any discussion on the geopolitical crisis while 10 out of 15 nations have voted in favor of a discussion.

What this means for India?

India maintained a diplomatic silence on the issue in the initial period and gave an official statement calling for a peaceful resolution of the situation through sustained diplomatic efforts for long-term peace and stability in the region and beyond.³⁰ It is one of the 3 countries that has abstained from voting on the discussion regarding Russian troop buildup on Ukrainian border at UNSC, highlighting the severity of the conundrum.

India is also aware of the prevailing security situation, and thus, has requested Indian nationals in Ukraine to register with

the Indian embassy in Kyiv for any assistance that might be required.³¹

As a nation that has deep, favorable and strategic relations with, both, USA and Russia, India unfortunately finds itself at the heart of this conundrum. The recent events take India back to the Cold War Era, where it was expected to pick a side.³² However, given India's growing stature in international affairs and the dynamics it shares with the two countries; it is going to be difficult for India to maintain the same amount of diplomatic neutrality as it did last time without facing backlash. This is highlighted further by the United States' statement that it would "welcome India's role in de-escalating the situation between the countries"³³

Analysts believe that any military action between Russia and Ukraine, which is likely to also involve the US, will have adverse impacts for India.³⁴ India's geopolitical experts are not in consensus vis-à-vis India's approach towards this crisis. Former foreign secretary, Kanwal Sibal says "India shouldn't be seen as taking sides as the conflict has a long history"³⁵ whereas noted scholar and author, Tanvi Madan puts forwards a series of reasons as to why maintenance of silence could make things worse. According to her, "If India pulls off its post-Russian annexation of Crimea posture of not criticizing Russia openly but also not endorsing Russian actions, it would be seen as an endorsement and Russia will most likely sell it as an endorsement." Further, maintaining silence on a Russian invasion of Ukraine will weaken India's calls for maintenance of a rules-based order and pave way for China to undertake similar activities as Beijing makes same argument about Indian territory as does Russia about Ukraine (historical rights and ethnic homogeneity).³⁶

Russia's deteriorating relations with the United States poses a great challenge for India as closer ties with either will ensure deteriorating of relations with the other. Furthermore, China has emerged as Russia's biggest ally over the years. If Russia's rivalry with the West intensifies further, the trajectory of Russia-China relationship will head further in a direction that would be more disadvantageous for India as it constrains India's strategic choices.^{37,38}

While the formation of a Russia-China-India axis in the present scenario is next to impossible, jumping on the Washington wagon has its own set of ill-consequences for India vis-a-vis Moscow.

²² <https://globalnews.ca/news/8536644/ukraine-russia-crisis-explainer/>

²³ Ibid

²⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/five-things-to-know-about-russia-ukraine-tensions>

²⁵ <https://globalnews.ca/news/8536644/ukraine-russia-crisis-explainer/>

²⁶ Rice J., von Hlatky S. (2018) Trudeau the Reluctant Warrior? Canada and International Military Operations. In: Hillmer N., Lagassé P. (eds) Justin Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy. Canada and International Affairs. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73860-4_15

²⁷ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/27/russia-ukraine-border-crisis-explained-why-now-what-s-the-history-what-are-putin-s-motivats>

²⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-ukraine-border-what-to-know-11638874853>

²⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/25/five-things-to-know-about-russia-ukraine-tensions>

³⁰ <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-breaks-its-silence-on-russia-ukraine-crisis-calls-for-peaceful-resolution/815423/>

³¹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/amid-tensions-over-ukraine-india-tries-to-appear-neutral/articleshow/89202696.cms>

³² Singh, Zorawar Dault. 2019. Power and Diplomacy: India's Foreign Policies during the Cold War. Oxford, England: OUP.

³³ https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/would-welcome-india-s-role-in-russia-ukraine-conflict-says-us-122012700021_1.html

³⁴ <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-breaks-its-silence-on-russia-ukraine-crisis-calls-for-peaceful-resolution/815423/>

³⁵ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/amid-tensions-over-ukraine-india-tries-to-appear-neutral/articleshow/89202696.cms>

³⁶ https://twitter.com/tanvi_madan/status/1465718762540343306?s=20

³⁷ <https://www.firstpost.com/india/ukraine-crisis-not-some-distant-trouble-in-faraway-land-it-will-present-india-with-toxic-choices-and-deep-seated-consequences-10283481.html>

³⁸ <https://www.orfonline.org/research/how-us-russia-ties-affect-india-51281/>

Apart from being special and privileged strategic partner, Moscow happens to be India's major defence partner with 86% of the equipment, weapons and platforms currently in military service in India traces its origin to Russia.³⁹ Due to this humongous dependency, analysts believe that, if India's relations with Russia go south, the latter could cripple India's military services by withholding replacements and spares.⁴⁰

It has been made clear by Biden that any military conflict will lead to sanctions against Russia.⁴¹ India could face secondary sanctions like CAATSA as India has signed deals relating to S-400 missiles and AK-203 assault rifles with Moscow. India, however, has reiterated that it pursues an independent foreign policy that also applies to its defence acquisitions and supplies which are guided by its national security interest.⁴²

There is a possibility that Moscow could cut gas supplies which would increase oil prices in Europe as the latter is highly dependent on Russia for its energy needs.^{43,44} Analysts believe that an oil shock could prove to be devastating for India as it could derail India's plans to power fertilizer plants with LNG as Europe buying from the open market (if Russia faces sanctions) would drive up LNG prices globally.⁴⁵ This will put pressure on Indian governments to review taxes leading to speculations of supply disruptions. Not only will it impact inflation, but will also increase the amount of LPG and kerosene subsidy the government is required to pay.⁴⁶ It would put a huge financial burden on a developing country which is recovering from a global pandemic.

Washington's entire attention in Europe would be detrimental for India's security fears as it distracts America from the Indo-Pacific and the challenge posed by an aggressively rising China.⁴⁷

A Russian invasion of Ukraine will not only have economic and security consequences for India but would also affect its diaspora. India is concerned about the safety of its citizens in Ukraine. Ukraine is considered to be an attractive educational destination for Indian students and there are approximately 20,000 students in studying in Ukraine, currently.⁴⁸ Worsening of the situation will put the lives of these Indian students at risk and hamper their education and career prospects.

India's signing of RELOS, at a time when China's footprints in Arctic is growing, is extremely crucial. The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS) would give India

access to Russian Arctic naval ports and military bases. This agreement is extremely important for India to counter the rising Chinese threat. India, thus, should hope for a speedy de-escalation of the Ukraine crisis as worsening of the situation could impact the signing of RELOS, especially since India already has a military logistics agreement with USA, LEMOA. Any further fallout between the two nations could lead to unwarranted problems for India.

India's wheat producers could possibly stand to gain from this crisis. Russia and Ukraine together supply approximately 25% of the world's wheat exports.⁴⁹ By 2022, the region is projected to supply 30% of the world's wheat exports. Russia's wheat exports alone are projected to match those of the USA.⁵⁰ If Ukraine is unable to supply due to threats of invasion or sanctions are imposed on Russia, Indian farmers would have the opportunity to fill the demand gap.⁵¹

Conclusion

The Ukraine crisis is an event that enormously affects India. Both Ukraine and Russia are crucial to global supply chains and are significant trading partners for India. It not only has an impact on sectors like automobile, energy where due to increased global demand and supply shortage, the prices are expected to exponentially rise and put financial burden on India's economy. But, it also has far reaching implications on our strategic and security domain. As India moves towards a new and turbulent era of Sino-India relations, a closer relation between Russia and China sparks national security concern within New Delhi. There is fear of secondary sanctions from USA which could jeopardize India's defence aspirations. India's breakthrough into the Arctic theatre could also be affected with possibility of the Military Logistics Agreement with Russia being put on hold.

While the war may be limited to the European theatre, its effects will be felt way beyond Europe. It is in India's interest that the Ukraine Crisis de-escalates at the earliest and rules-based global order is restored. This warrants prompt action by all countries as any further deterioration of relations would only obfuscate the hope for cooperation.

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