



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

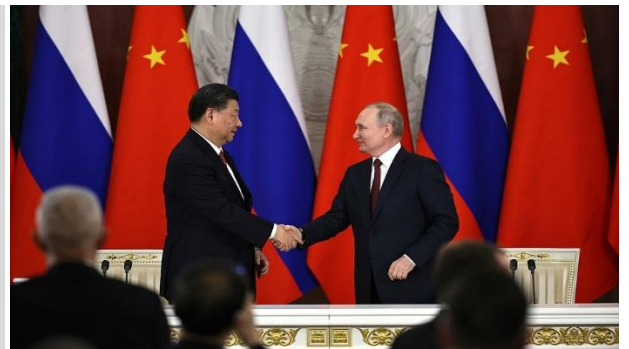


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ABOUT US

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Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

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Cover Image:

Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping made statements for the media following the Russian-Chinese talks on March 21, 2023. Source: Kremlin.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida meet ahead of their bilateral meeting at the Prime Minister's Office in Tokyo on March 16, 2023. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan.

External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar presiding over the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting held on March 1-2, 2023. Source: G20

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Global Horizons

by

Nalin Surie

The moves and counter moves over the Ukraine war have gathered pace, and brought the world closer to greater uncertainty and the danger of mistakes and miscalculations leading to undesirable and even more vicious conflict. The Ides of March have come and gone. The question is whether the principal protagonists on opposite sides have fully understood the danger of the Ukraine conflict turning into an existential battle. It appears that the warnings of consequences have not been really listened to or led to caution. Instead, there has been a flurry of activity in March among the US led allies on the one hand and the China-Russia alliance on the other, doubling down to gain advantage.

The situation appears akin to how the Cold War had emerged, soon after the Second World War. But there are objective differences today on account of the inter-dependencies and partnerships, economic, technological and others, that have developed particularly since the end of the Cold War between the present principal protagonists. These dependencies are now sought to be reduced, but this process cannot be rushed and hence a new form of struggle seems to be underway. It is difficult to predict how this phase will end, but the international community, much of which has no role to play in the matter, will pay the price. The US-led alliance is now engaged in a power play with the China-Russia alliance to determine whether the US led "rules based" western order will prevail, or the Chinese-Russian axis can create an international order based on "recognized principles and norms of international law" and which "has the nature of non-alignment, non-confrontation and non-targeting of third countries". The latter order would, of course, continue to preserve the permanent membership rights (on the UNSC) of both Russia and China.

President Xi Jinping of China made a triumphant visit to Russia from March 20-22, 2023. He did so after having successfully consolidated not only his position in the CPC but also ensuring that henceforth the Chinese government would function virtually within the complete oversight of the party. This happened at the National People's Congress in early March, when it also became clear that the party state in China would be even more in control than ever before on matters pertaining to security, economy, technology, and people's welfare.

There had been some expectations that President Xi Jinping would be able to suggest some way out of the Ukraine war. However, it became clear that the intention of his visit to Moscow was to further strengthen the China-Russia partnership across the board, while at the same time paying lip service to the need for finding a diplomatic and peaceful settlement to the Ukraine war that took into account the legitimate security interests of all parties. The principles of the alternative world order that these two countries represent were clearly spelled out. The partnership was described as “tenacious” and “not affected by external influences”. Xi and Putin made explicit that “Russia needs a prosperous and stable China and China needs a strong and successful Russia”. This should not have come as a surprise, because at the NPC, Xi had himself spelt out that the US aims to contain China and circumscribe its development. Thus, both China under Xi and Russia under Putin believe that the US-led West seeks to contain their nations and undermine their development and destinies.

China’s successful brokering of the revival of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in mid-March would also have added to the confidence with which Xi Jinping went to Russia. Similarly, buoyed by the outcome of the Xi visit, President Putin announced on March 31 Russia’s New Foreign Policy Concept, a defiant policy statement based on “Russia’s special position as a unique country-civilisation and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power”. The Concept made it clear that “in response to unfriendly actions of the West, Russia intends to defend its right to existence and freedom of development using all available means”. While the Concept bundles India and China together, it does so with a sharp difference in focus. With China it identifies, inter alia, “provision of mutual assistance, and enhancing coordination in the international arena to ensure security, stability and sustainable development at the global and regional levels both in Eurasia and in other parts of the world.” In the case of India, the emphasis, apart from trade, investment and technology ties, is on “ensuring their resistance to destructive actions of unfriendly states and their alliances”.

For its part, while focusing on ensuring that Ukraine continues to get adequate military and other resources to sustain its campaign against Russia and that its Western allies do not waiver in their commitment to support Ukraine’s complete territorial integrity, the US did not ease off the pressure on China. This was manifest in many ways, including the FBI Director’s assessment (in end February) that the origins of the Covid 19 pandemic was most likely a lab accident in China, the successful holding of the AUKUS summit on March 12, 2023, the ICC indictment in mid-March of President Putin on the abduction of Ukrainian children and earlier the meeting of Quad Foreign Ministers in New Delhi on March 3, 2023.

US allies in East Asia also made important moves. The ROK-Japan summit on March 16, 2023, held after a gap of almost 12 years, was a step towards overcoming longstanding differences over wartime labour, resuming economic and technological partnership, and improving security coordination in East Asia, including vis a vis China.

Japan PM Kishida's visit to India on March 20, 2023, and his enunciation of Japan's updated Indo-Pacific policy in New Delhi (including a so-called Indo-Pacific way of doing things), would not have been missed in Beijing. Importantly, Kishida proceeded from Delhi to Kiev to offer support and solidarity to Ukraine. He was the last G7 leader to do so, but that circle is now complete.

Netherlands and Japan joined the US in imposing restrictions on the export of semi-conductor manufacturing equipment to China.

The Summit for Democracy 2023, convened virtually by the US on March 29, 2023, in which India participated [but had reservations on preambular para 3 of the Declaration (on Ukraine)], would also have raised hackles in Moscow and Beijing.

So far, there is no daylight visible in the positions of Russia and Ukraine that may offer the path towards an acceptable compromise and return to peace in Ukraine. The US, at least in public signaling so far, is not backing off from support for the full restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity. Nor is the EU, with the EU Council's pronouncement of March 23, 2023, being the latest manifestation. NATO stands steadfast behind Ukraine. This may change depending on the outcome of a possible Ukrainian spring offensive, but conflict in Europe may well be set for a long haul which will seriously further impact the rest of the world. The Ukraine war has already upended the post-Cold War order, multilateralism, and established institutions of international development and governance. Now with the ideological and other battle lines drawn between the US-led West and China-Russia, the world is increasingly on edge. Strategic stability in Europe has been seriously undermined. Russia is deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus and may also move in heavier nuclear weaponry. Arms continue to flow into Ukraine from NATO countries which are located just across the borders of Ukraine and Russia.

In the midst of a raging conflict, countries in Europe are trying to find ways of continuing to do business with both Russia and China. EC President Von der Leyen's speech of March 30 on China, while sharp in parts, signalled the search for pragmatic solutions. Both she and President Macron of France will be in China in early April, 2023.

China, which readily espouses principles so long as these do not apply to itself, not only wishes to retain privileges acquired over the years through a variety of means, but is also now laying down a world view as unilaterally defined by Xi's Global Development, Global Security and Global Civilisation Initiatives.

Russia underrated the ability of the U.S. to capitalise on its mistake in invading Ukraine, which may significantly diminish its long term power.

For the vast majority of the developing world, the stand-off in and over the Ukraine war, and more broadly the evolution of a new phase of contention for power between the West and China-Russia, is hampering efforts at development and overcoming the problems of poverty, climate change, energy and food security. It also inhibits the secular movement of economic and technological capacities to the developing world.

On issues of global economic governance, the G20 is getting sidelined by the G7. (Japan's FM did not attend the G20 FMs' meeting in Delhi on March 1-2, but attended the QUAD FMs' meeting in Delhi on March 3). India as current G20 chair is determined to make progress on critical economic issues. The question is, to what extent will it be allowed to succeed.

India's PM Modi has been invited to the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan from May 19-21, 2023 and Japan's PM to the G20 summit in New Delhi on September 9-10, 2023.

India is presently also chair of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and hosted a meeting of SCO Energy Ministers March 14 and the 18th meeting of SCO National Security Advisors on March 29. Perhaps progress in the SCO context maybe more feasible than in G20, but in any event Indian diplomacy and statecraft have their hands full.

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