



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

The West's Strategic Overreach and India's Options

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Volume VII, Issue 18

March 25, 2022



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www.delhipolicygroup.org



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Cover Photographs:

President Joe Biden speaks about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the East Room of the White House, Washington DC, February 24, 2022. Source: Associated Press.

Heads of State and Government of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member countries meet for the Extraordinary NATO Summit at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, March 24, 2022. Source: NATO's Official Website.

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The West's Strategic Overreach and India's Options

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Foreword

The conflict over Ukraine has a complex history, going back to the aftermath of the Cold War and collapse of the former Soviet Union. The confrontation between the West¹ and Russia over a balanced European security architecture has persisted for three decades, and current developments mark a revival of hostilities that have been simmering since 2014. This "Made in Europe" crisis could and should have been avoided through a constructive dialogue on arrangements for mutual and equal security. The complete isolation and possible subjugation of Russia as a pariah state through scorched earth sanctions is likely to leave Europe scarred for decades. This paper is not intended to assess the merits of divergent claims and perspectives of the protagonists - the West and Russia. It also does not seek to elaborate on India's calibrated stance of nuanced concern, which has been clearly articulated in official statements, while outlining implications and policy options for India. For the present, the world will be best served by avoidance of conflict escalation, the cessation of hostilities, and efforts to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.

I. Assessing Western Pressures

When the urbane leader of Japan, a friendly nation with which India enjoys a "special strategic and global partnership", visits Delhi for a long delayed bilateral summit with a strident message on Ukraine, ignoring the host country's clearly articulated stance of nuanced concern, we know that India's strategic autonomy is facing an unprecedented challenge from Western² pressures.

India, of course, was not swayed, but this strenuous lobbying should lead us towards deeper reflection on the Cold War mentality that is again coming to prevail in the West: "you are for us or against us."

In the matter of a few weeks, a reunited and reprised West has seemingly shifted its goals from deterring Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to forcing regime change in Russia through unprecedented financial and trade sanctions, and lately to re-establishing the global dominance of the West based on its alliances

¹ The US and its Allies, i.e., NATO countries, Japan and Australia.

² Ibid.

and financial power. Western thinkers have redefined this new objective in the following terms:

“Mr. Putin must pay – and be seen to pay – such a heavy price for his miscalculation that leaders around the world will think twice before taking on the U.S. and its global alliance system.”³

Others are making the case for going forward with the global domination of the West leveraging economic, financial and technological power.⁴

And yet more strident commentators are calling for the removal of Russian President Vladimir Putin from power and the “unconditional surrender” of Russia. With no meaningful diplomatic push for a cease fire, there appears to be a cynical interest in prolonging the war. As Niall Ferguson has argued, “the Biden administration is making a colossal mistake in thinking that it can protract the war in Ukraine, bleed Russia dry, topple Putin and signal to China to keep its hands off Taiwan.”⁵

However, let us be clear that what is being described as democratic countries uniting against unscrupulous authoritarians in defence of a righteous cause, is really the West signalling the primacy of its interests over all others.

It is now well recognised that the West’s presumption of an “end of history” in 1991 proved to be misplaced: geopolitics still rules. Saner voices are pointing out that the realities of today are far more complex, and power dispersal far more widespread, than was the case during the Cold War. There is no doubt increasing concern about expansionist authoritarians, but equally a growing distrust of the US as an unpredictable and unreliable superpower.⁶

Nonetheless, signs are emerging that the West could be miscalculating again, from conflating the “international community” with the West, to defining “responsible leadership” as aligning with the West, and declaring anything else “unacceptable”. From Ukraine to North Korea, hotspots are readily designated of “global concern” only when Western interests are involved. Ukraine’s

³ Walter Russell Mead, “Putin’s Failure Is Biden’s Opportunity”, The Wall Street Journal, March 17, 2022

⁴ Greg Ip, “How the West Can Win a Global Power Struggle”, The Wall Street Journal, March 18, 2022

⁵ Niall Ferguson, “Putin Misunderstands History. So, Unfortunately, Does the U.S.”, Bloomberg, March 22, 2022

⁶ Pankaj Mishra, Bloomberg, “Why so many countries want to sit out the new Cold War”, Japan Times, March 16, 2022

sovereign right to seek NATO and EU membership is vigorously championed, but other nations are denied any option other than siding with the West.

Is the West really misreading the tea leaves and overestimating its power to shape and subordinate the rest of the world?⁷ Put another way, is this a pivotal strengthening moment for the West that will help impose its unipolar rule over the rest of the world, or is this the start of the isolation of the West? That is a question for the West to ponder.

It is of particular importance how this recent trend towards reviving the global pre-eminence of the West will be perceived in Asia, which lies at the heart of global power rebalancing and increasing multipolarity. As far as the dispersal of economic power goes, measured through IMF figures, Asia already comprises 38.7% of world GDP, North America 28.2% and Europe 24.8%. Asia's major and emerging economies, led by China and India, contribute the largest share of incremental annual global economic growth.

From India's perspective, Asia does not need either a liberal imperium with neo-colonial overtones, or an authoritarian one.

The US has shown that it can leverage power in the Euro-Atlantic, but will need to credibly uphold a similar commitment as a Indo-Pacific power. It must not recede into the background as an offshore balancer in Asia.

Over the past year, it has also become customary in the US to project the resurgence of geopolitics as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism. This obscures the fact that the real driver of great power competition is the struggle for primacy, both regional and global. Governance systems, which are in any case an attribute of sovereignty, have little to do with statecraft; what matters most is self-interest.

From a well-established realist perspective, it is in the very nature of great powers to try and shape world order in their image, aggrandise their influence and interests, pursue power politics, resort to unilateralism and coercion whenever expedient, and seek domination through alliances and spheres of influence. US-China and US-Russia equations are no different. The outlook of the West, or of China and Russia, is no different. This is not a global contest of virtue; it is a power struggle for domination.

Another staple of Western discourse today is the pretence to global leadership on "values". It is simply wrong to assume that the West is the sole custodian of

⁷ Ibid.

democracy or has a monopoly over civilisational values; Asia is home to its own ancient wisdom and civilisations. The historical record of the last 30 years clearly indicates that attempts at imposing Western values across the globe have invariably failed and ended in disaster for the countries where the West has intervened. And the West's own record of living by its values is not great, as evidenced by its opportunistic dalliance with authoritarian states, including Communist China, over the past half century.

So where does this leave world order? First, the intensity of geopolitical contestation has escalated to unprecedented levels, and the tendency to use unrestrained power to achieve national objectives has been re-established in both Europe and Asia. Europe is headed for a prolonged period of hostility, instability and insecurity, not to talk of the risk of conflict escalation. There is confused and incoherent thinking about long term consequences. Second, in terms of geo-economics, it is clear that most of the world will be a loser from the conflict, and there is growing concern about the impact of unprecedented Western sanctions on the world economy. A perfect economic storm is in the offing, with the growing possibility of stagflation in developed economies and significant markdowns in world GDP. The severity of sanctions imposed on Russia will also serve as a wake up call for nations to find alternative avenues for ensuring national economic security, including by moving away from the US dollar and Western-led financial frameworks.

This is a good moment to assess where India's interests as an independent power with an autonomous strategic capability really lie. India has been steadfast in its commitment to upholding multipolar stability and an equitable order, in Asia and globally, based on openness and cooperation, not dominance. The cornerstones of India's engagement with other nations are mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest. Self-serving and unilateralist demands from the West that India should forgo its own vital interests run counter to these well-considered principles.

II. The Stakes in Europe

The emerging scenarios in the European conflict theatre need to be carefully gleaned from the rampant propaganda and disinformation campaigns that are accompanying the fog of war.

As Ukraine continues to be ravaged by incessant Russian military attacks and missile strikes, this conflict is rapidly evolving into a proxy contest between the Euro-Atlantic allies and Russia.

Every effort is being made by the US and NATO to pump in materiel and supplies into Ukraine, strengthen alliance members in Eastern Europe, and keep the fires burning to ensure that any settlement can only be based on terms acceptable to the West. This, for the NATO allies, essentially means a militarily chastened and economically degraded Russia which is too weak and internally dislocated to pose any credible threat.

For Russia, opposition to the eastward expansion of NATO and insistence on Ukrainian neutrality are clearly defined red lines, for which it is willing to use massive force.

In the prevailing military confrontation, what is of uppermost concern, apart from the need for an early end to the conflict, is the end state which the two protagonists are seeking.

For the US and its allies, a debilitated Russia with seriously diminished military power would imply victory in restraining Russian aspirations in the medium term. In such a scenario, leveraging economic sanctions to undermine Russia's capability is an imperative.

The second scenario revolves around Ukraine's acceptance of terms largely defined by Russia, which could include giving up its NATO ambitions and reaching some accommodation on the future of the Donbas region and Crimea, in return for a cessation of hostilities and pullback of Russian military forces.

The third, and most perilous, scenario is the escalation of the conflict owing to growing NATO assertions through weapon supplies to Ukraine and a military build-up in the NATO States on its periphery, which Russia may deem unacceptable and may result in a massive counter response.

The main outcome of any of these probable scenarios will be America's long-term entrapment in the European conflict, necessitating a continued focus on Europe to the detriment of efforts to counter China's attempts to dominate Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

A second outcome could be the complete marginalisation and isolation of Russia, leaving the US and China as the prevailing great powers.

The third could be the prospect of regime collapse in Russia, and the eviction of Putin from power. Here, the reality is that in recent experience no nation has faced such a collapse owing to crippling Western sanctions. Iran, and even Russia since 2014, are prime examples. If at all, the reverse is true. History

indicates that during a period of extreme distress, nations tend to rally around the leader and to strengthen nationalist resolve.

Lastly, it has to be borne in mind that Russia is a credible nuclear power, with a doctrine of "escalate to de-escalate", which specifically provides for the use of nuclear weapons when justified in the face of external aggression. This has been underscored by President Putin's assertion that direct NATO involvement "will result in horrible consequences to any aggressor", in a veiled threat of resorting to the use of nuclear weapons and the breakdown of strategic deterrence. This is the main reason why the Biden administration has ruled out NATO's direct involvement over concerns that any such intervention could result in the Third World War.

Thus, apart from maintaining a continuous supply of weapons and resources to Ukraine, and imposing crippling sanctions, the West has no other viable card to shape Russian behaviour. This is the reason behind concerted efforts by the US to generate a global discourse on the importance of rules-based order, and of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, which are seen to be under threat from an authoritarian leader. How far this campaign will resonate remains to be seen.

III. The Impact on Global Order

Based on a belief that the US strategy will succeed, President Biden has claimed that "there is going to be a new world order out there, and we've got to lead it. And we've got to unite the rest of the free world in doing it."⁸

The consolidation of the US-led Euro-Atlantic power, together with the weaponisation of economic sanctions, is being perceived as a sign of the eventual pre-eminence of the West in shaping the power balance, both globally and in Asia.

The counter reality is that irrespective of the outcome in Europe, regional power rebalancing towards Asia will continue. If the war in Europe leads to a weakened Russia that is dependent on China, this will only encourage China to seek further expansion and absolute domination, from the Eurasian landmass to the Indo-Pacific maritime.

⁸ Chidanand Rajghatta, "Indian experts point to Biden's silence on Chinese aggression", The Times of India, March 23, 2022 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indian-experts-point-to-bidens-silence-on-chinese-aggression/articleshow/90385665.cms?utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=iPadapp&utm_source=email



IV. The China Factor

There are two perspectives to the China factor: strategic and economic.

With US attention once again focused on Europe, China will get a free pass as it did during the years of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, which allowed it to consolidate economic, military and technological power without facing any constraints for two decades. The result is on full display with China's expansionist and coercive assertions in Asia.

The heft of US power and influence in the Indo-Pacific remains largely based on in-theatre deployments. This raises serious concerns about the Indo-Pacific security balance, with the edifice of countervailing power and influence dictated mainly by the US military presence in East Asia and Indian military capabilities in the Indian Ocean and South Asia.

In the absence of any other major regional or global ally, China has looked upon Russia as a like-minded partner in the continental space of Eurasia, committed to countering US influence. In addition to power balancing, Russia is also a critical resource provider and strategic partner in co-developing Arctic routes, which are likely to be contested by the West sooner rather than later.

As great power rivalry intensifies, China will be concerned about its economic prospects and keeping SLOCs open for its trade in commerce. Despite coming under pressure during the recent Biden-Xi virtual meeting and the US threat of economic consequences for supporting Russia, there is little sign that China was moved by Biden's hectoring.

In the maritime domain and on SLOC security, China already enjoys the upper hand, with its non-contact AA/AD deployments on the mainland buttressed by rapidly growing naval capabilities and presence in the South China Sea.

Thus, unless there is a major US pivot towards a revitalised Indo-Pacific strategy, its ability to shape the great power narrative in Asia will be constrained. Having largely ceded influence in the Middle East, the US cannot afford a compromised posture in the Indo-Pacific.

V. The Wider Impact of Sanctions

With the threat of Western sanctions having failed to deter the invasion of Ukraine, the imposed sanctions have become vectors of economic and technological attrition of Russia. From historical precedent, there is no predicting if sanctions will work or will lead to an even wider war, as was the

case in WW I and WW II. Economic isolation has rarely caused state capitulation; in fact, target countries generally tend to adopt riskier strategies and opt for escalatory responses. This is even more true for a resource rich and nuclear armed Russia.⁹

In a world economy still struggling to recover from the devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is mounting global concern about the adverse impact of the West's unprecedented financial and trade sanctions on Russia. Far beyond the devastation in the war zone, the world is likely to see chaos in oil markets, disruption in commodity supplies, galloping inflation, supply chain constraints, critical shortages of semiconductors, shipping bottlenecks and above all the breakdown of complex global financial interconnections.

That there will be additional collateral damage is certain: the global community is in effect being forced to share the burden of Western sanctions on Russia so that the West can prevail in Ukraine. There is a palpable lack of interest in bandwagoning with the West among post-colonial developing nations.¹⁰ The divides in already dysfunctional multilateral fora are hardening, apex economic governance bodies like the G-20 are being jeopardised, and leading global institutions like the IMF are being steamrolled into serving Western interests over Ukraine.

With little appetite in other parts of the world for an entirely avoidable conflict, there are increasing overtones of this trend snowballing into a "West versus the Rest" situation.¹¹ Boycotts by Western countries of the G-20 summit later this year over the demand that Putin be barred from attending it will only accentuate this possibility. So will Biden's latest call for Russia to be expelled from the G-20, failing which for Ukraine to be invited as an observer to the summit Indonesia will host this fall.

VI. India's Options

Let us now turn to the geo-strategic landscape that India faces.

To begin with, India is not an adjunct or a surrogate, leave alone an ally, of the West. All manner of promises are being made to India at this juncture to join the West, but there is no indication in the distant or recent past that India can

⁹ Erik Sand and Suzanne Freeman, "The Russian Sanctions Regime and the Risk of Catastrophic Success", Warontherocks.com, March 8, 2022
<https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-russian-sanctions-regime-and-the-risk-of-catastrophic-success/>

¹⁰ Walter Russell Mead, "Sanctions on Russia Pit the West Against the Rest of the World", The Wall Street Journal, March 21, 2022

¹¹ Ibid.

place much reliance on these promises when it comes to safeguarding core Indian interests. India must not give up the right to develop a diversity of strategic partnerships which has long been the hallmark of Indian diplomacy; foreign powers cannot dictate who our friends and adversaries will be.

India has come under pressure not just from the US but also its other Quad partners, Japan and Australia. The three allies in the Quad have repeatedly stated that the Quad is neither an alliance nor an Asian NATO – and yet India is expected to act in line with them. India has rightly resisted attempts to shift the focus of the Quad from the Indo-Pacific to the conflict in Europe.

That said, there is no question that India faces difficult choices in balancing its belief in normative order under international law, its geo-strategic interests, and its long-standing strategic autonomy. India's position in the Ukraine crisis has been to balance adherence to universal principles with India's strategic interests. This will continue.

As a still emerging major power, India needs to juggle its relationships with three great powers – the US, China and Russia. The three are also not evenly matched, and their triangular contest has in the past seen attempts at a US-China G-2, and more recently a China-Russia entente. A scenario in which the US remains embroiled in Europe, Russia fades and China gains, is obviously not in India's interest. There are further scenarios of concern in the event of a severely weakened Russia, including a revival of the US-China G-2 through accommodation of each other's regional and global interests.

India's primary interest lies in meeting the China challenge, in the backdrop of nearly two years of a border standoff and continued Chinese assertions. Thus, for India the centrality of threat mitigation in both continental and maritime domains is an imperative. It is this construct that drives the strategic convergence between India and the US in the Indo-Pacific, and with Russia in the continental domain. Growing China-Russia ties in turn drive stronger convergences between India and the US. In the case of India-Russia relations, broader issues of strategic balance are in play, not merely traditional ties or dependence on arms imports.

The critical challenge for both India and the US is to counter Chinese assertions in the Indo-Pacific, which also provides the rationale for India's commitment to the Quad. If the US takes its eyes off the Indo-Pacific, this will encourage China to seek further expansion and domination of the Indo-Pacific maritime space, as well as continued assertions along the disputed Line of Actual Control.

Thus, from the Indian perspective, the India-US strategic partnership is all about regional balancing to maintain a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. India is acutely aware that the focus of US military power is centred around the Western Pacific, in concert with its regional allies. The US lacks the military heft in terms of resources for power projection in the Indian Ocean. This makes it necessary for India as a standalone power to focus harder upon internal balancing in terms of acquiring weapons systems and platforms that provide a multiplier effect to Indian capabilities. In obtaining niche technologies and advanced weapons systems, India increasingly looks upon the US as its most consequential partner. The question is whether the US will deliver.

The external balancing comfort that India can derive in the Eurasian continental space from a weakened Russia may diminish, but the importance of the India-US strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific maritime will only increase.

Finally, the current strategic dilemma faced by India has once again highlighted that in the long term, India's policy of strategic autonomy demands freedom from arms imports by developing an indigenous defence industrial complex and speeding up research in emerging technologies. India has no option but to set up time-specific goals for capability and technology enhancement. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine provides us with a fair idea about the capabilities and shortcomings of modern weapons systems, as well as the role of asymmetric capabilities. India will also need to derive lessons on information warfare, which has played an important role in this conflict. The pursuit of Aatmanirbhar Bharat¹² in the defence field should become India's all-of-government priority.

¹² Aatmanirbhar Bharat, or "Self-reliant India", is an ongoing policy campaign of the Government of India.



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