

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Lessons for India

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The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has entered 10th month with no near term end in sight. Nations around the world would draw different lessons from this crisis based on their economic needs, foreign policy and national security priorities. Impact of this conflict is being felt around the world; India being no exception. India is not a direct party to this conflict but has enough chestnuts in the fire to protect. At the same time, as a rising and responsible power which would be G20 president in 2023, India would be willing to make efforts which could potentially contribute to end this conflict. The important lessons that India could draw from this conflict are explained below.

- **National Security:** In terms of India's national security, following issues merit attention from policymakers.
 - **Self-reliance in Defence:** This conflict has made it amply clear that to win a major war, a nation should be self-dependent to fulfil military needs of its armed forces. India's overwhelming dependence on any country including Russia for military hardware does not auger well for its national security. In all likelihood, Moscow's economy would be hit by Western sanctions while its military industrial complex could be fulfilling needs of its own military first which may delay arms supplies to India. New Delhi has to be careful not to create other such dependencies in defence sector (like buying more weapons from the US, France or Israel) and should give a push to its Make-in-India campaign in defence sector. At the same time, India should also assess the performance of Russian arms and weapon systems in Ukraine conflict (as New Delhi also uses the same platforms) and examine their effectiveness in context of India's strategic challenges.
 - **Impact of Technology on War:** India's military modernisation has to be based on latest technologies that are suited to Indian context and conditions. Technology is a great leveller and acts as an equaliser in situations where the military gap is big between two adversaries. China's Assassin's Mace program is [designed](#) to reduce America's military superiority and give China a realistic chance to take down the US military in a potential conflict. By effectively using drones supplied by the Western countries, Ukrainian armed forces dealt a severe blow to Russian tanks. They [did not](#) even have an official drone unit before this crisis began but were able to use technology to their advantage. At a time when India faces a threat of Two-Front war, developing and getting access to critical military technologies to deal with this problem would be very important. A Great Game over technology is currently underway between major world powers and India has to understand this [Great Tech Game](#) and learn the right lessons as it also has implications for its military modernisation.

- **Information Warfare:** Efficient perception management and information warfare have allowed Ukraine to have an upper hand in the battle of hearts and minds against Russia. This allowed Ukraine **advantages** in three areas – in boosting the morale of its own citizens, facilitating military support from other countries and receiving support from people within Russia who sympathise with Ukrainians. Indian policy makers need to study and analyse how Ukraine managed it against Russia's superior information and hybrid warfare capabilities that would offer takeaways for India. Wars are won on the basis of timely intelligence and battlefield awareness. Intelligence shared by the Western countries created much better battle awareness among the Ukrainian defence forces which could have neutralised Russia's numerical strength. To really win the war, it is equally important to win the narrative as well. Else, there can be a situation when one can win the war but lose the narrative. At the same time, India has to be careful about the other aspects of information warfare. India does not have even a single media correspondent based in Moscow. Information from Western sources is widely available in India on Russia-Ukraine crisis while there is lack of a balanced view in the public domain. Strategic autonomy begins in the minds of individuals and that aspect could be subjected to information warfare between great powers. They could use media in India to further their own agenda which could shape public opinion in the country according to their own interests.

- **Strategic Communication between Foreign and National Security Policies:** There is an urgent need to enhance strategic communication between India's foreign policy and national security to achieve our national interest. The two should not operate in different silos. There has been a lot of pressure on India to scale down its relations with Russia but we would be better prepared to deal with this by having greater degree of strategic communication between our foreign policy and national security. India's 2+2 dialogues with countries like the US, Japan, Australia and Russia are steps in the right direction.

- **Nature of Future Wars:** Before this conflict began, it was assumed that future wars would be short and swift. However, this crisis has stretched into months demonstrating the fact that wars could be longer even in contemporary times. To fight such a prolonged war, defence indigenisation remains best option for any country. In this conflict, Ukraine may have been used as a **proxy** by the US to bleed Russia. Pakistan has been using Kashmir to do same to India. China has been using Pakistan as a '*borrowed weapon*' to continuously thwart India's regional and global ambitions. In future, India has to be **careful** that China is not able to use Nepal or Bhutan as proxies against India.

- **Diplomacy and Foreign Policy:** India faces turbulence in following areas of diplomacy and foreign policy due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis.

- **America's Europe v/s Indo-Pacific Dilemma:** This conflict seems to have taken away the limelight from Indo-Pacific making Europe the new epicentre of global politics. This does not bode well for India as New Delhi has been strengthening its strategic partnerships with like-minded countries like the US, France, Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific to balance China. India is the only country in the Quad which has not condemned Russia. India's policy of multi-alignment which depended on stable relations between great powers has been **wrecked** by Russia's actions in Ukraine. India is not comfortable with the New Cold War or the Cold War 2.0 (Russia v/s the West) as there is constant pressure on New Delhi to distance itself from Moscow. New Delhi has to exercise some deft diplomacy to ride through the stormy waters ahead. In such efforts, India's relations with other middle powers like France, Japan and Australia would become significant.
- **Possibility of G-2:** The US and the European countries have been equally pressurising China to distance itself from Russia. However, if China does so, it would extract something in return from the US and any signs of US-China rapprochement (G-2) would be a nightmare scenario for India, an eventuality that India would like to **avoid**.
- **Russia-China Proximity:** This is a reality that India has to face. However, India's former Ambassador to Russia and former Chairman, National Security Advisory Board of India, P S Raghavan highlighted three things in this context during a panel discussion at Delhi School of Transnational Affairs on April 12, 2022.
 - India should reduce dependence on Russian military hardware.
 - As long as Russia has an ambition of its own without being dependent on anyone, India would be important for Russia in sustaining this desire.
 - Reduction in tensions between the US and Russia would bring some relief for India (although this may not happen in near term).
- **Economics:** This crisis has dealt a blow to globalisation while supply chains have been disrupted. Following issues stand out.
 - **Finance as a Tool of War:** Finance has now become a full-fledged weapon of war which is as effective as missiles and bombs. Nuclear weapons will **never** be a deterrent against economic warfare and we should devise mechanisms to deal with such a situation in future.
- **Energy Security:** India is third largest energy consumer in the world and Russia-Ukraine conflict has impacted its energy security.

- **Reduce Dependence on Hydrocarbons:** Hydrocarbons have become an important tool of geopolitics and comprehensive national power for the states which possess them in abundance. On the other hand, the countries which depend on their imports have become victims of energy geopolitics. India [imports](#) almost 80 per cent of its oil and 45 per cent of its natural gas needed for consumption. The European countries were buying energy from Russia but wanted India not do so which shows their hypocrisy. The long-term and sustainable option for an energy hungry country like India is to transition to renewable sources of energy. One such area is liquid hydrogen as due to scale and size of Indian market and suitable climate conditions, India has the potential to emerge as the cheapest producer of green hydrogen. This aspect was highlighted by former NITI Aayog CEO, Amitabh Kant at the Raisina Dialogue attended by the author on April 26, 2022.

Conclusion

One of the indicators from the Russia-Ukraine crisis is that the great power conflicts have made a comeback. Apart from this ongoing conflict, the other potential flashpoints for a future war could be Taiwan, issues in South China Sea and East China Sea and India's ongoing border tussle with China in the high Himalayas. National security imperatives are shaping globalisation now which would mean that bigger powers would be tempted to take unilateral actions and up the ante against their rivals. Moving forward, India needs to be self-dependent in areas that are critical to protect core national interest as dependence on any foreign country would be counter-productive. Russia-Ukraine conflict has galvanised the Trans-Atlantic security alliance (NATO) and could pave the way for Russia's long-term isolation from the West. Russia could potentially be a weaker power due to Western sanctions but its collapse is unlikely. Russia does not share a border with India and has never been a threat to New Delhi. On the other hand, China shares a disputed border with India and is a long term adversary for India. Due to geographic, historic and strategic realities, India would continue making efforts to keep Russia away from China. There is a [view](#) in Europe which accepts that since Russia has a strong relationship with India, it is because of this that Russia does not have an alliance with China. Another [view](#) comes from the US, which argues that Central Asia is the region in which things could go awry between Russia and China. The US has to show sensitivity to India's proximity to Russia which could act as a spoiler in Russia-China ties in future. Needless to say, India's relationship with Russia works to the benefit of Western countries. Until there is acceptance of this reality in the West, India will have to exercise nimble footed diplomacy to deal with the current flux in great power relations so as to deftly handle its national security challenges.