

Changing Dynamics of South Asia in the Perspective of Ukraine War

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Abstract

The world has fundamentally changed just over a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the decision to launch “a special military operation” into Ukraine on February 24, more than four million Ukrainians have left for neighboring countries while at least 1,100 civilians have been killed. Beyond its immediate costs, the invasion has put into question the viability of a rules-based international order and sharpened great-power competition along the lines of democracy and authoritarianism. South Asia has also experienced the implications of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Russia has a significant presence in South Asia as a top defense supplier for India and Bangladesh, a burgeoning economic partner for Pakistan, and a key player in international engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The crisis in Ukraine will significantly shift South Asia’s security landscape and create new political precedents for the region.

Keywords: South Asia, Ukraine War, Russian invasion, crisis in Ukraine

Introduction

South Asia stands fourth in nominal Gross Domestic Product with \$ 6,472.28 billion after EU (18,183.95), China (24,127.84) and the US (27,659.16) in the world economy race. India ranks fourth after China, Russia and the US and Pakistan ninth in the Military Strength Ranking as per the globalfirepower.com. 3.5 percent of the world’s land surface area, 11.71percent of the Asian continent and 5.2 million square kilo meters with one fourth of world’s population (1.891 billion) is covered by South Asia. The most populous and most densely populated geographical region in the world accounts for approximately 34.49 percent of Asia’s population and over 24 percent of the world’s population.

When the world is being wedged by COVID-19 the war now has added to the predicament. A third of global wheat and barley, over half of world’s sunflower seed oil is produced in Russia and Ukraine. 36 countries count on them for more than half of their wheat exports. One fifth of world’s fertilizers is exported by Belarus and Russia when Russia is the world’s second largest exporter of crude oil after Saudi Arabia. The supply chain has been disrupted surging food and energy costs which 41 countries in Africa, 38 in the Asia Pacific and 28 in Latin America and the Caribbean are witnessing with spiraling fuel prices, surging food costs and syndrome of financial disorder.

The war in Europe did not come as a surprise. The strategic surroundings in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union is perceived through one, expansion of NATO, two, rising of the US inspiration in the sphere of interests of Russia, three, European nations inclinations to Russia for energy, four, US European policy during Donald Trump’s presidency and finally an extension of the cold war. Also known as the first European war of the 21st century, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 was when Russia launched a full-scale land, air and sea invasion of Georgia including its undisputed territory on 8th August referring to it as a “peace enforcement operation”. Russia accused Georgia of an aggression against South Ossetia.

The 22-23 February 2014 Crimea peninsula annexation from Ukraine was the first part of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in March passed a non-binding resolution with 100 in favor, 11 against and 58 abstentions in the 193-nation assembly that declared Crimea’s Moscow backed referendum invalid with a range of international reactions to the annexation. The US government-imposed sanctions against persons they consider to have dishonoured or abetted in the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, an act supported by the Lithuanian President.

The declaration of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states before the launching of the aggression was another indication.

Divided South Asia in the United Nation General Assembly Resolution

In UNGA on 2nd March 141 countries of 193 members including Nepal voted in favor of the UN resolution 2623 to condemn and reprimand Russia for invading Ukraine and demanding that Moscow stop fighting and withdraw its military forces an action that aims to diplomatically detach Russia at the world body. 35 countries including China and India both Nepal's immediate neighbors abstained from the resolution are not siding with Russia except five Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea, Russia and Syria that rejected the resolution.

The UNGA Ukraine Resolution has a question of the relevance of the United National particularly in South Asia of the eight members of South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) four abstained and four supported. Small states landlocked countries Nepal, Afghanistan, Bhutan and an island small nation Maldives supported the resolution while Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka abstained but none objected. This elucidates how big nations and smaller nations in South Asia contradict.

The purchase of arms from Russia by India is 46 percent, Bangladesh 9.2 percent and Pakistan 5.6 percent whereas South Asian Nations together spend \$63,606,086,665 fifth after UK who spends \$68,000,000,000.

Economic impact a hindrance to prosperity and stability

South Asian countries recovery from economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is once again thumped by the war. Balance of payment crisis in Sri Lanka, political crisis as well as energy subsidies in Pakistan and the humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan, reduction of the inflow of tourists, weakened demand in Europe will hit Bangladesh's exports and the upsurge in prices both in food and energy, adverse effect on people's tangible income preceding high inflation in the other nations including Nepal. "The negative impact of the war in Ukraine on FY2022.23 growth is expected to be moderate, so growth will begin to taper off in the second half of 2022" a UNDP report said. As per the South Asia Economic Focus the 6.6 percent growth in 2022 and by 6.3 percent in 2023 can be revised downwards by 1.0 percent.

When these circumstances are comprehended Nepal's, government sacked the governor of the central bank though re-instated by the court and stopped imports. When it is time for the governments to formulate monetary and fiscal policies to counter peripheral alarms and shield the vulnerability. Arranging the groundwork for green, resilient and inclusive growth should prevail.

Irrespective of what powerful political leaders say or do not say, the tragedy that has engulfed the Ukrainian people over the past week is all too visible on our television screens for each one of us to see. The horrible realities of war, no matter the reasoning, motivation or historical justifications that surround any analysis of such aggression, have been stark and hard hitting. Like the rest of the world, the vast majority of South Asians have been moved deeply by the tragedy that has hit Ukraine, and they empathize closely with Ukrainians who have overnight had to abandon their settled lives, their homes, and most importantly their menfolk, to fight in a war in which they are vastly outnumbered and can lean on little other than their outrage and their courage to take on the powerful, marauding Russian army. Although the political leadership across South Asia has been similarly affected by the horrors unfolding in Ukraine and has called for an immediate end to the violence, unlike the people they govern the leadership has also had other more challenging existential strategic imperatives to consider. These challenges were considered grave enough by most South Asian governments for them to adopt somewhat nuanced positions on the Ukrainian crisis. How the evolving strategic alignments of these countries will play out as a consequence and, indeed, how history will view the stands taken by them, only time will tell.

Before looking more closely at how the South Asian governments responded, some critical aspects that the Ukrainian crisis has thrown up merit mention. EFSAS, in the context of Myanmar as in the case of Belarus and Hong Kong, has consistently been calling upon the international community to wake up to gross and flagrant violations of the rules-based order that it had put in place three quarters of a century ago. It had been argued repeatedly that the international community has come across as divided, toothless, and lacking in conviction, and that unless this situation was corrected quickly the world may be forced to contend with a new world order in which democratic values had little place. It took Russia's invasion of Ukraine to galvanize and unite most of the democratic world in ways and to degrees that President Vladimir Putin would never have imagined to be possible at the time that he plotted the march beyond the Donbas. Almost all of Russia's European friends have withered away in the process, and even Germany, which Putin must have banked on greatly due to its overwhelming dependence on Russian gas, has opted to choose coal and nuclear power over this blood-stained gas. Even as the war in Ukraine is intensifying and the end result remains unclear, one positive that has already emerged is the confidence and the security that the less powerful and geographically smaller members of the international community would take from the demonstration of unity and power of the more powerful countries. That they are capable of, and willing to, rise above their narrow self interests and divisions on issues of critical importance would have come as a big relief, and lent hope for the future.

Another question that the world's most powerful country and its allies would need to confront is the harsh reality of whether Donald Trump or a leader like him should remain electable after the immense damage that his single term as President did to the international order. The harm that choosing flawed, narcissistic, ill-informed and dangerous individuals for high offices can do is illustrated by the fact that it was Trump's obsession with sowing and furthering divisiveness and chaos, which many of his critics believe happened at Putin's nudge, that encouraged Putin's invasion at a time when he assessed the international community to be disunited, distracted and confused enough to be incapable of a firm response. After all, the community had let transgression after serious transgression of the international rules based order go unpunished. Whether Putin would have deemed it safe to invade Ukraine had Trump not debased and weakened the carefully and painstakingly crafted international architecture and critical bilateral and multilateral relationships is moot.

On the other end of the scale from Trump is Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Many who knew little or nothing about him till just very recently have seen the emergence of a truly courageous leader who has rallied the world to Ukraine's side in a way no one could have imagined. As Keith Nobles and Jimmy Sengenberger pointed out in an editorial in *Newsweek*, *"Zelensky and the Ukrainians have shamed the world into collectively doing what is right. Such widespread, cross-cultural responses weren't on the table a week ago. Expelling certain Russian banks from the SWIFT international financial network was previously thought impossible. It's happening. The US has targeted sanctions against Russia's central bank. In a break from decades-long policy post-World War II, Germany—heavily reliant on Russian energy — is sending lethal weapons to the embattled country. Turkey is implementing a pact limiting Russian warships to the Black Sea. South Korea has joined international sanctions"*. Zelensky has come to represent the bravery of every single Ukrainian who is defending the country despite not to date understanding why exactly they had come under attack.

The *Newsweek* editorial underlined the impact that the tremendous courage shown by the Ukrainians, as well as the display of unity and immense power by the international community, was likely to have in other conflicts involving authoritarian leaders. It said, *"Observers widely recognized that Chinese President Xi Jinping viewed Russia's absorption of Ukraine as analogous to China's stance toward Taiwan. The CCP is certainly willing to take some pain to absorb Taiwan. However, the Zelensky Model enhances the probability of prolonged and bloody resistance by the Taiwanese should Xi eventually invade — and shows the mettle that could be brought by Taiwan's Western defenders. A firm rebuke of China by both the Taiwanese people, the United States (US) and their allies would undermine Xi's ultimate objectives. Unquestionably, Zelensky's Ukraine has changed the strategic situation in a way neither Putin nor Xi expected. The world is rallying to defend underdog Ukraine with extraordinary measures. For now, it is*

unclear if Zelensky can save his country, but it is entirely possible he has saved Taiwan — and indelibly changed the global dynamic”.

Coming back to South Asia’s response to the Ukraine crisis, Pakistan was the first country that was required to respond to the invasion as its Prime Minister, Imran Khan, was on his maiden visit to Moscow when it began on 24 February. Khan said he was excited to be in Moscow, and that his country had nothing to do with what was happening in Ukraine, a country from which Pakistan imports about 40% of its wheat and a wide range of military equipment, among other things. A Pakistani statement said that the *“Prime Minister regretted the latest situation between Russia and Ukraine and said that Pakistan had hoped diplomacy could avert a military conflict. The Prime Minister stressed that conflict was not in anyone’s interest, and that the developing countries were always hit the hardest economically in case of conflict”*. Khan’s visit to Russia had been projected by his government as a *“prelude to a greater relationship”*, despite Russia accounting for less than 1% of both Pakistan’s imports and exports.

Pakistan subsequently abstained from voting on the resolution in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) deploring the invasion and calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine, and in so doing put all its eggs in the China-Russia basket. The Pakistani daily *Dawn* quoted a diplomatic source as saying that *“Pakistan has decided not to take sides on this issue. Islamabad supports a peaceful and negotiated settlement”*. When the Ambassadors of 22 countries, including European Union (EU) member States, had jointly called on Pakistan to support the UN resolution, the country’s human rights minister Shireen Mazari responded by calling the joint initiative *“ironic”*, adding that Pakistan did not support military force, and that the EU should not adhere to the UN Charter *“selectively”* as has been done *“for decades”*.

Pakistan’s tacit support for Russia over Ukraine is in line with Islamabad’s strong desire to strengthen its relationship with Moscow. Pakistan-Russia relations have indeed grown in recent years. Pakistan believes that the close ties that the US has promoted and evolved with India in recent years has given it the opening it needs to get into Russia’s good books. However, Michael Kugelman of the Wilson Center in Washington cautioned in a recent article that *“Islamabad’s balancing act is less intricate than New Delhi’s: Its relationship with the United States is tenuous, and it has long sought to leverage its alliance with China to work more closely with Russia, especially in Afghanistan and Central Asia. But Islamabad must be careful not to edge too close to Moscow, given its commercial relationships with Europe and its desire to play a greater role on the global stage”*.

Pakistan has used its own geo-political reasoning to side with Russia in the Ukraine conflict. It would not have had much of a choice in any case given that China, whose advice Islamabad can ill afford to ignore on account of its deep dependence on Beijing in several strategically and economically critical sectors, would have told it unambiguously which side it should be on.

Like Pakistan, Bangladesh has also taken a neutral position on Ukraine and has not ascribed any blame. It has urged *“cessation of hostilities”* by all sides, in line with its *“friendship to all, malice toward none”* foreign policy. Bangladesh also owes a debt to Moscow because a Soviet veto in the UN Security Council had made its creation possible in 1971. Further, Bangladesh’s strong economic ties with Russia were a factor in its positioning on the Ukraine war.

India, which since the Cold War has had a special relationship with the Soviet Union and then with Russia, had the toughest decision to make owing to its burgeoning relationship with the US. India, therefore, abstained from voting both in the UN Security Council and in the UNGA. Since the conflict began, India has lamented that diplomacy was given up too quickly, emphasized the need to return to a path of dialogue and diplomacy, and reiterated the importance of adhering to the UN Charter, international law and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. It has refrained from directly attributing blame. Washington, meanwhile, has indicated some understanding of the Indian position when it said that India and Russia *“have a relationship... that we don’t have”*. It called on New Delhi to use its *“leverage”* with Moscow to help stop hostilities and search for a negotiated settlement in Ukraine.

India's dilemma stems from several reasons, including its major reliance on Russian weaponry and the fact that Moscow had used its UN veto to bail India out of some difficult situations in the past. Even as it deepens its relationship with the US, India places great importance on its historical and "strategic" ties with Moscow. In reality, India today needs both the US and Russia primarily for one critical reason – to counter the threat posed by a confrontational and expansive China. While membership of US-led groupings such as the QUAD provide India with security against China in the maritime sphere, on land if there is any country that can plausibly intervene favorably with China on India's behalf, it is Russia. Another factor that would have influenced India's decision was the presence of Imran Khan in Moscow in particular, and the recent trend of the Russian leadership being open to humoring Pakistan in general. India would not like its "strategic partnership" with Russia to be tainted by deeper Pakistani ingress.

Nepal, a tiny Himalayan State, has so far taken the strongest position against Russia among all the South Asian nations. Nepal's foreign office said in a statement that "Recognition of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions as independent entities goes contrary to the provisions of the UN Charter. Nepal opposes any use of force against a sovereign country in any circumstance and believes in peaceful resolution of disputes through diplomacy and dialogue". Nepal's positioning in geo-politics essentially boils down to its relationships with India, China, and the US. Russia does not figure much in its economic or security calculus, and this accorded Nepal the freedom to choose a stance dictated by principle rather than realpolitik.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion in Ukraine isn't just Russian and Ukrainian affair. It has the potential to fundamentally reshape the global landscape. In some ways it already has: Germany is rearming, NATO has awakened, commodities prices are through the roof, and Russia is increasingly disconnected.

The extent to which the global order changes will depend largely on how long the conflict drags out. 35 countries that abstained occupies two third population and China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India have 4 billion almost half the world's population. Bangladesh, China, India and Pakistan are almost half of world population that decided not to side with US and NATO. Add Russia - half of military strength. Add Iran, Middle East and majority of African countries - more than half of land mass; oil and other minerals. South Asia will be impacted with trade, tourism, economic growth, connectivity, energy security, food security, forex generation and military modernization policies.

The reaction of small states of South Asia is giving precedence to their national interests apparently border issues and an outcome of their geographical setting and apprehensions positioned at the core of power disputation between China and India reflecting annexation of Tibet and Sikkim. Upholding UN Charter and the rights and independence of small states is primary supposing to countenance alike encounters in the region with the reinstate the application of spheres of influence, dependence on geoeconomics for security, scenarios of neutrality, alliances and the trust on the west. Smaller economies of Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka are susceptible to peripheral dynamics and could perceive short-term growth inconsistencies than the large states Bangladesh and India.

Three issues appear protuberant for South Asians that is contending with mounting commodity prices, supply holdups and susceptibilities in financial quarters; one is to review the reliance on oil and fuel with improved energy security and the second food security with greener economy and finally for landlocked countries securing line of supply from the ocean to the mountains. The prolonged war in Ukraine will only amplify these challenges. The South Asian requires to be more strategically connected and to authenticate by lessening dependence on fuel imports and convert to a green, vigorous and inclusive growth trajectory.

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