

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-invasion-of-ukraine-strains-u-s-s-strategic-ties-with-india-11646427835>

WORLD | ASIA | INDIA

# Russian Invasion of Ukraine Strains U.S.'s Strategic Ties With India

New Delhi has long resisted a full-scale shift away from Moscow, a longtime arms supplier



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, with President Biden during a Quad summit at the White House in September.

PHOTO: EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Sabrina Siddiqui](#) [Follow](#) and [Alex Leary](#) [Follow](#) in Washington and [Rajesh Roy](#) [Follow](#) in New Delhi

Updated March 4, 2022 7:36 pm ET

WASHINGTON—As it seeks to counter China’s global influence and respond to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the Biden administration is confronting strains in its relationship with India, one of its most vital Asian partnerships.

Tension has surfaced since India, despite U.S. pressure, declined this week to support a United Nations resolution condemning Russia’s assault on Ukraine. President Biden later called out India among a handful of countries that abstained from the vote, and U.S. lawmakers criticized India’s decision during a hearing this week on U.S.-India relations.

“Many of my colleagues and I are puzzled by India’s equivocation in the face of the biggest threat to democracy since World War II,” Sen. Chris Murphy (D., Conn.) said during the hearing Wednesday.

India’s U.N. Ambassador, T. S. Tirumurti, said that India’s first priority was securing safe passage from Ukraine for Indian nationals. About 2,000 Indians remain stranded in eastern Ukraine, including in Kharkiv, the country’s second-largest city where some of the most intense fighting has occurred.



A meeting of the United Nations Security Council on Monday in New York. India abstained from a U.N. resolution condemning Russia’s assault on Ukraine.

PHOTO: JOHN MINCHILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

India’s abstention comes at a pivotal moment in its partnership with the U.S. The Biden administration is weighing whether to cultivate even closer ties by waiving sanctions that are called for under U.S. law in response to India’s \$5.5 billion purchase of a Russian missile-defense system. But India has resisted a full-scale shift away from Moscow, largely because Russia supplies the Indian military with more than half of its imported arms, including jet fighters, helicopters and submarines.

India was also among 13 countries that abstained from voting on a resolution approved Friday by the U.N. Human Rights Council calling for the “swift and verifiable” withdrawal of Russian and Russian-backed forces from all of Ukraine.

Faced with China’s growing economic and military clout, the U.S. has sought to deepen its alliance with India in recent years. The Biden administration, which

from the outset identified competition with Beijing as its top foreign-policy objective, has heavily promoted the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a partnership between the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, whose stated objective is to preserve a “free and open Indo-Pacific.”

As it moves deeper into the U.S. orbit, India has engaged in a diplomatic high-wire act. Tensions between India and China have risen since a deadly border clash in 2020, and Delhi has been eager to counter Beijing’s assertiveness in its own backyard.

Yet India’s relationship with Russia is longstanding, and the two sides have enjoyed enduring defense cooperation.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, and Russian President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi in December agreed to extend the countries’ military technical cooperation.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/ZUMA PRESS

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed in December to extend military technical cooperation for another decade and said they would proceed with the delivery of the S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia to India.

“India sees a sovereign right to have lots of friends, even friends who are in opposing camps,” said Irfan Nooruddin, senior director of the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council. “For a large part of India’s bureaucracy and really its citizenry, Russia is the steadfast partner of the last five decades and America is a new partner.”

Mr. Nooruddin noted that India also abstained from a vote to convene an emergency session of the U.N. General Assembly in response to [the Russian invasion](#). “It suggests that they were really uneasy about anything that might upset the Russians and endanger the weapons system,” he said.

In recent years, New Delhi has tried to diversify its sources of military supplies, purchasing more from Israel and France, but it still uses Moscow to maintain its old equipment. “Our national security and sovereignty can’t be compromised,” said a senior Indian government official.

The Biden administration has discouraged India from pursuing the Russian missile-system deal. But so far it has declined to say the U.S. would impose sanctions under a 2017 U.S. law targeting Russia’s defense industry and those who engage in significant transactions involving the country’s defense and intelligence sectors.

---

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

---

*What steps should the Biden administration take with India? Join the conversation below.*

---

Indian officials have privately expressed confidence they will receive the U.S. defense waiver. Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu said at the Senate hearing this week that he couldn’t prejudge what the U.S. would decide on a waiver or how the Ukraine invasion would affect that decision, though he called India an important security partner.

As far as military purchases are concerned, New Delhi is “weaning itself off from Russia,” the Indian government official said.

Sens. Mark Warner (D., Va.) and John Cornyn (R., Texas), co-chairs of the Senate India Caucus, urged the Biden administration in an October letter to waive sanctions against India and allow them to move forward with the purchase as planned.

Asked on Thursday if his thinking had changed in light of the conflict in Ukraine, Mr. Warner said he continued to support a waiver. But he suggested India should have joined other countries in voting to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the U.N. Security Council and the General Assembly. Mr. Cornyn [called the move](#)

“disappointing.”

Sen. Tim Kaine (D., Va.) said he wasn't surprised by India's U.N. abstention, given its deep ties to Russia and the purchase of the missile system. “But on the other hand, the very day Russia was invading Ukraine, the Pakistani prime minister was in Russia palling around with Putin,” he said. “I would think India would look at that and say, ‘Well, hold on a second.’”

The Biden administration's reluctance to more forcefully push back against India is consistent with the delicate approach it has taken toward Mr. Modi's government, which has also faced criticism over its treatment of Muslims and other religious minorities and for cracking down on free speech and peaceful protests. Biden administration officials say they have privately raised their concerns with Indian counterparts but would rather focus on areas of cooperation than risk antagonizing a key partner in boosting competition with China.



Democratic Sen. Mark Warner and GOP Sen. John Cornyn, co-chairs of the Senate India Caucus, say they still support waiving sanctions against India over its purchase of a Russian missile-defense system.

PHOTO: TOM WILLIAMS/ZUMA PRESS

Earlier this week, the State Department issued and then recalled a diplomatic cable containing proposed talking points for engagement with Indian and Emirati counterparts, following both countries' abstention from voting on the U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Moscow's invasion. Russia vetoed the measure.

Draft language in the recalled cable said: “Continuing to call for dialogue, as you

have been doing in the Security Council, is not a stance of neutrality; it places you in Russia's camp, the aggressor in this conflict.”

A department spokeswoman said: “The language in question was never intended for clearance and the cable was released in error, which is why it was recalled.” The cable was previously reported by Axios.

On Thursday, Mr. Biden held a phone call with Quad leaders over the war in Ukraine. A White House readout made no mention of India's U.N. abstention while saying leaders agreed to “provide a channel for communication as they each address and respond to the crisis in Ukraine.”

The White House declined to comment further. Senior U.S. officials say, though, that they have pressed India as the crisis with Ukraine has unfolded.

The Quad grew out of a response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and has seen various levels of cooperation as China became more assertive in the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration took steps to strengthen the Quad and Mr. Biden's team has doubled down on it. In September, the group's leaders held an in-person summit at the White House.

Tanvi Madan, director of The India Project at the Brookings Institution, said that while India is uncomfortable with criticizing Russia, it has stood up to Moscow's criticism of the Quad. That could provide comfort to the Biden administration, she said, as it seeks to navigate new friction over India's relationship with Russia.

“They might not like it, but they understand that India does have constraints,” she said.

—*Philip Wen, Siobhan Hughes and Courtney McBride contributed to this article.*

**Write to** Sabrina Siddiqui at [Sabrina.Siddiqui@wsj.com](mailto:Sabrina.Siddiqui@wsj.com), Alex Leary at [alex.leary@wsj.com](mailto:alex.leary@wsj.com) and Rajesh Roy at [rajesh.roy@wsj.com](mailto:rajesh.roy@wsj.com)

*Appeared in the March 5, 2022, print edition as 'Invasion Strains Ties Between U.S., India.'*

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.