

Opinion **The FT View**

India's disappointing silence over Ukraine

New Delhi's decision not to speak out against Russia could imperil US relations

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



Narendra Modi welcomes Russia's Vladimir Putin during their meeting at Hyderabad House, New Delhi, in 2018 © Yuri Kadobnov/POOL/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock

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India has a history of remaining circumspect when Moscow embarks on a military offensive. When the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956, or Czechoslovakia in 1968, or Afghanistan in 1979, or when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, [India](#) did not condemn the aggressor, preferring to maintain its interests with both sides, and its ability to mediate. It is nevertheless disappointing — and no longer in India's own interest — that New Delhi has taken such a passive stance on [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#).

India abstained from voting against [Russia](#) when the UN general assembly debated the invasion, saying merely that it was “deeply disturbed”, and that dialogue is the only answer. “India is on the side of peace,” said prime minister [Narendra Modi](#), but has close connections to both sides. As a practical matter, however, this stance helps [Vladimir Putin](#) of Russia by diminishing his isolation, while offering little to [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) of Ukraine as his nation fights for its existence.

Modi's position should not be mistaken for active support to Russia nor as a manifestation of the prime minister's own nationalistic tendencies. In its own way, India has made clear its disapproval of Russia's actions: New Delhi has demanded

“respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states”, an implied criticism of the invasion. Modi’s predecessor, Manmohan Singh, was at least as hands-off and helpful to Putin, if not more so, during the Crimean crisis of 2014.

But even if New Delhi’s stance is entirely in keeping with past practice, such careful neutrality is no longer in India’s best interest, for both strategic and economic reasons. Modi could and should put more pressure on Moscow to make peace.

India’s acquiescence in Russian actions partly reflects a longstanding military and diplomatic partnership. It was Soviet armaments and Soviet diplomatic vetoes at the UN that helped India to prevail in its 1971 war with Pakistan. Even today, India relies heavily on Russian weapons — a complicating factor in its calculations about Ukraine. But if India’s greatest strategic concern for the century ahead is the rising power of China, it cannot expect Russia to be a reliable or effective ally.

The economic impact of the Russian invasion will clearly be bad news for India. As a large importer of oil, in particular, but also many other commodities, India will suffer from the prolonged disruption to global markets. Consumers in Mumbai and Kolkata will feel the pain from rising prices for food and petrol. Then there is the impact on India’s own citizens in a more globalised world. Hundreds of Indian students were stranded in the Ukrainian city of Sumi as it came under bombardment from Russian forces.

Over the past decade, India has been getting much closer to the US strategically, and Delhi seems to have believed that it could get closer to Washington while maintaining its strong ties to Russia. For example, it procured the S-400 missile system from Moscow, despite US warnings that would be incompatible with a deeper defence partnership. In its dealings with Moscow and Washington, India has hoped to run with the hare and hunt with the hound.

In the new, post-invasion world, such an approach no longer looks viable. A choice not to criticise Russia is also a choice that could reverberate in the future and put strains on New Delhi’s relations with Washington — the one ally that could make a difference in any future dealings with China. To best secure India’s interests, Modi ought to apply all the pressure he can on Putin to end his disastrous war.

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