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# India to profit from the war in Ukraine and the Russia-China Joint Statement

By Claude Rakisits | 23 June 2022

## Key Issues

- The China-Russia Joint Statement of 4 February 2022 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have confirmed that Beijing and Moscow are determined to tear up the 75 year-old existing international liberal order.
- The United States and its allies have been eager to pull India deeper into the Western camp and peel it away from Russia with which it has a long-standing strategic relationship.
- The Joint Statement and the Russian invasion have reaffirmed the importance of the Quad partnership in countering China's increasing aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific.
- While India's membership of the Quad gives it significant geo-strategic ballast, New Delhi's "strategic autonomy" does put a question mark on India's long-term reliability and commitment to a possible collective Quad action in the future.

On 4 February 2022, China and Russia signed a landmark [joint statement](#) confirming that the friendship between the two countries had "no limits" and that there were no "forbidden" areas of cooperation. Twenty days later, Russia launched a massive, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, causing enormous damage to the country and killing thousands of civilians. This conflict is on-going. These two events have confirmed that Moscow and Beijing are determined to tear up the post-Cold War international liberal order, which has brought order, stability and prosperity, and "jointly build international relations of a new type." The neutrality of some important countries of the Global South - such as Algeria, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Vietnam - on Russia's invasion of Ukraine is facilitating these two revisionists' goal of reshaping

the international system. Importantly, the joint statement and the war have had a major international impact, not only in Europe but also in India.

### India, the critical player

Given the importance of India as a leader of the Global South and its critical geo-strategic position in the Indo-Pacific, the United States and its allies have been eager to pull New Delhi deeper into the Western camp and peel it away from Russia with which it has had a long-standing relationship. So while India's 'neutral' position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not well received, at least initially, by Western leaders including by US President Biden, they also understood why India—which depends on Russia for about 50 per cent of its military hardware—was not going to criticize Moscow.

It is a relationship the Indians value considerably, especially Moscow's support for India's position on Kashmir. For similar reasons, India also refused to condemn the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the then Soviet Union. It is, however, a moot point whether foreign exchange-hungry Russia would have punished India, had it criticized it directly, by no longer selling it defence materiel. However, the more pertinent reason Western capitals have refused to openly criticize Prime Minister Narendra Modi's position on Ukraine is that, while events in eastern Europe are shockingly appalling and President Putin's behaviour unacceptable, the long-term global geo-strategic threat remains China, and neighbouring India has a critical role to play in countering it.

Accordingly, and despite India's refusal to call Russia's invasion by name, abstaining on a UN Security Council Resolution condemning the Russian invasion as well as a UN Human Rights Council resolution suspending Russia's membership, importing Russian oil at a discount, and refusing to apply the EU and US sanctions against Russia, the Americans and the Europeans have gone out of their way to accommodate India's position. Since the beginning of the war, a succession of European leaders has travelled to New Delhi to try to convince Prime Minister Modi to take a tougher position on Russia, but to no avail. The beeline of leaders included President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and the foreign ministers of Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and the UK.

As part of the US-India 2 + 2 Ministerial Dialogue, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Llyod Austin also travelled to India in April. The US is considering a \$500 million military aid package to try to wean India off its heavy dependence on Russian military hardware for its defence force. This is in addition to the \$4 billion in arms sales in the last decade (compared to Russia's \$25 billion), the signing of four "foundational agreements" enabling military cooperation, making India a "Major Defence Partner" in 2016, and awarding India "Strategic Trade Authorisation" in 2018. Significantly, Washington is so keen to deepen its growing strategic relationship with India—one that really started with the civilian

nuclear deal in 2005 - that it has been prevaricating on whether to impose sanctions against India, as required by the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), for buying the sophisticated S-400 missile air defence from Russia. Given the broad geo-strategic picture, it is most unlikely that President Biden will impose sanctions against India. Significantly, NATO-member Turkey has been slapped with CAATSA sanctions for acquiring the same air defence system from Moscow. However, I suspect it will take more than a few European visitors, some military contracts and American wooing to get India to jettison completely its close relationship with Russia and abandon its long-held "strategic autonomy" – the present name for its non-alignment position during the Cold War, at least for the moment.

Prime Minister Modi has also been busy making calls on European leaders. In early May, he called on German Chancellor Scholz, French President Macron and Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen. As president of the rotating presidency of the G7, Chancellor Scholz has invited Modi to attend the Summit which will be held in Bavaria at the end of June. So, all in all, and rather paradoxically given India's 'neutral' stance vis-à-vis Russia, the events in Ukraine have turned out to bring a significant foreign policy win for New Delhi. And while there are some serious question marks about the Modi government's [human rights record](#) with regard to its treatment of the Muslim minority and Kashmiris, and reportedly these are regularly raised by the US State Department, the broader geo-strategic objectives take precedence over India's poor domestic record.

### **The Quad, the solution?**

A critical security grouping which the US and its allies will use to try to anchor India more deeply into the Western camp is the 15-year-old Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the Quad composed of Australia, India, Japan, and the US – four democracies of the Indo-Pacific. The events in Ukraine and the China-Russia Joint Statement have confirmed in stark terms that Beijing and Moscow are determined to destroy the existing international liberal order, which includes opposing a free and open Indo-Pacific, and replacing it with an "equitable, open and inclusive security system

in the Asia-Pacific region". Accordingly, just like Russia's invasion of Ukraine has given NATO and the EU powerful unifying boosts, the invasion and the Joint Statement will have reaffirmed in the eyes of the four Quad members the importance of this partnership. This is why the Quad Leaders' summit meeting in Tokyo on 24 May—the first since Russia's invasion, was so important not only psychologically, but also practically to deepen further their habit of cooperation at the leaders' level. This was only the second meeting in person of all four leaders. Without naming China, the Leaders [reaffirmed](#) their resolve to uphold the international rules-based order.

Given the significant military and political developments in Europe in the last three months

issues in Kashmir—most of its own doing, New Delhi is among like-minded countries. Membership of SCO also potentially gives India indirect access to Afghanistan where it had a significant presence prior to the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

India's membership of these regional groupings which include Russia and China, in addition to its continued adherence to "strategic autonomy", do put a question mark on New Delhi's long-term reliability and commitment to a possible collective Quad action in the future. However, it is important to note the nuances in India's approach to security and foreign affairs which are informed by the country's geography, history, and economy. For example, although New Delhi continues to refuse to call President Putin's military operation

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and their potential, long-term consequences in the Indo-Pacific, India's membership of the Quad gives this security grouping significant geo-strategic ballast. India is the only Quad member which has a border with China, potentially complicating Beijing's planning were it to engage militarily with one or more of the members of the Quad in the future. However, the 3500-kilometre border with China also heavily influences New Delhi's stance on security issues in the region. After all, India lost a brief war with China sixty years ago and clashed with it briefly in Ladakh two years ago, losing some territory in the process. But, while India is in principle committed to the Quad's objectives, New Delhi continues to put some of its strategic eggs in other regional security groupings as well. These are RIC (Russia, India and China), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), and SCO (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). Of the three, only SCO brings any sort of concrete benefit to India as it is principally focused on pursuing counter-terrorism activities in Central Asia. And given India's on-going militant activity

an invasion, it has nevertheless been critical; condemning unequivocally the violence and calling for the resolution of the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. While this indirect Indian criticism of Russia has been somewhat lost in the media and diplomatic noise following the invasion, respect for countries' sovereignty is a principle New Delhi values highly given its own unresolved territorial disputes with China.

There are three other important differences India has with its Quad colleagues which have an impact on New Delhi's approach to security in the Indo-Pacific and, ultimately, on the cohesion of the Quad. First, India's focus is solidly on the Indian Ocean side of the equation, as opposed to the other Quad members' attention directed more to the Pacific Ocean, in particular the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Second, Australia and Japan have had long-standing bilateral military arrangements with the US, including the basing of American military

personnel in their respective countries. While New Delhi's strategic relationship with Washington is deepening, it is nowhere as close as those Tokyo and Canberra have with Washington. Third, while India is the largest democracy in the world, the present government's domestic policies increasingly favour the Hindu majority and discriminate minorities, particularly Muslims. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi's heavy-handed approach to Kashmir, which has been criticized by the [UN High Commission for Human Rights](#), has not gone unnoticed by the other members. All in all, India's somewhat wobbly democratic standards do put into question the Quad's trumpeted "shared values".

Still even with its weaknesses, the Quad—which is relatively new in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific having been dormant for 10 years, got the attention of Chinese President Xi. And given China's military activities and ambitions in the region, the presence of the Quad is a serious irritant to President Xi's long-term plans. Not only does he mischaracterize it as an "Asian NATO", but it gets a mention as a "closed bloc structure" in the Russia-China Joint Statement, as does the newly-formed AUKUS—an Australian, US and UK security arrangement. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi even paid a visit to New Delhi a month after the Ukraine invasion, presumably to try to reassure the Indians that China and Russia wish "to build an equitable, open and inclusive security system in the Asia-Pacific Region". However, it will take more than a ministerial visit to woo India away from the Quad, especially while China continues to occupy part of India's Ladakh. Already New Delhi has rejected joining the China-dominated Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and has joined instead Washington's newly formed [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#) (IPEF).

## Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Russia-

China Joint Statement have hardened the global strategic fault lines that had already been emerging over the last few years. They have also confirmed that developments in Europe have consequences elsewhere in the world, notably in South Asia. A lesson that the [EU](#) and [NATO](#) will have learned from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the Russia-China Joint Statement is the importance of standing up to Russia and China. And this will include intensifying their engagement with the Indo-Pacific, especially with India. This would align with the EU's "[Strategic Compass](#)", the "[EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#)" and NATO's "[Strategic Concept](#)" which will be officially released at the 2022 Madrid Summit. The EU is under no illusion about the task ahead of countering China's aggressive behaviour in the economic, diplomatic, and military spheres. The [EU-China Summit](#) in April confirmed the poor state of EU-China bilateral relations.

We can expect military tension with China to continue to rise in the Indo-Pacific. In that context, the Quad will increasingly play an important role in countering Beijing in the months and years to come. And even though India is the weakest member of the Quad, its role will nevertheless become increasingly important. Accordingly, it will be critical to put in place measures to wean India off Russia, including selling more military hardware, increasing trade access to the US and European markets, and including it where possible at the high table of international decision-making. In any case, regardless as to how the war in Ukraine ends, Russia has been diminished strategically due to its failure to reach its military goals and the aggrandizement of NATO. This means Moscow will depend more heavily on China for strategic support. Such dependency will likely constrain the type of weapon systems Moscow can sell India. Accordingly, India will increasingly need to turn to non-Russian sources for military hardware. This would be good news for the Quad in particular and peace and security in the Indo-Pacific in general.

