

US-NATO war threats against Russia heighten geopolitical crisis in South Asia

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The geo-politics of South Asia are increasingly being roiled by the all-sided US-NATO diplomatic, economic, and military-strategic offensive against Russia.

Following the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine this week, the Biden administration has ratcheted up pressure on India, which Washington has successfully harnessed to its drive to strategically isolate and encircle China, to line up full-square behind its war drive against Moscow.

India's Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and the Indian bourgeoisie view New Delhi's burgeoning ties with Washington as their most important strategic partnership, and pivotal to realizing their great-power ambitions. However, India also has a much longer and in some important respects, including military ties, closer relationship with Russia.

As the confrontation between the US, its NATO allies and Russia has intensified in recent months, the Modi government has tried to maintain a precarious balancing act. To the chagrin and increasing anger of Washington, New Delhi has thus far resisted US demands it condemn Russia's actions, including at the UN Security Council where India currently holds one of the rotating seats.

At the press conference Thursday where US President Joe Biden announced stringent sanctions against Russia, he was asked whether India was fully in sync with the US stance against Moscow. Biden responded, "We're in consultation with India today. We haven't resolved that completely."

According to a US State Department statement, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with his Indian counterpart, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, on the same day to stress "the importance of a strong collective response to condemn Russia's invasion and call for an immediate withdrawal and ceasefire."

The US pressed India to support a resolution, presented to a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting Friday, condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But New Delhi abstained, whilst Russia exercised its veto.

In a clear warning that the US would not be satisfied with anything other than India fully lining up with it against Russia, Biden added at his Thursday press briefing, "Any nation that countenances Russia's naked aggression against Ukraine will be stained by association." A State Department spokesperson added, "We are continuing to consult with our Indian counterparts on a collective response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine."

Washington calculates that bringing India to heel over Russia

will further weaken and isolate Moscow economically, politically and strategically. Breaking India's decades-long close ties with Russia will also further reduce New Delhi to little more than a US client state, and effectively drive the nail into the casket of its much-vaunted "strategic autonomy."

At an earlier UNSC debate on Tuesday, India did not join the US, UK, Germany and other members in denouncing Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to recognize the "independence" declarations of the "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk—two pro-Russian, separatist-held areas in the Donbas region of Ukraine. At the same time, India refrained from offering any endorsement of Putin's actions. Without specifically mentioning who has been involved in the "escalation of tensions," India's UN representative, T.S. Tirumurti, called for "all sides ... to ensure ... a mutually amicable solution ... at the earliest."

Knowing full well that India will be compelled to take sides if the war tensions being whipped up by the US and its NATO allies lead to a military conflict between the US and Russia, New Delhi is desperately hoping to avoid such a situation.

As part of India's efforts to prevent an open military conflict involving the US and Russia, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi phoned Russian President Vladimir Putin Thursday to call for "a dialogue and ceasefire." His External Affairs Minister, Jaishankar, also said he had spoken to his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, to "underline that dialogue and diplomacy are the best way forward."

Irrespective of India's hopes for "a mutually amicable solution," US imperialism will be satisfied with nothing short of the complete subjugation of Russia under its dominance. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy three decades ago, Washington has been working systematically towards bringing the entire Eurasian region under its hegemony by aggressively expanding its military might into Eastern Europe. A key part of this strategy involves the carve-up of Russia into a series of smaller statelets that will prove easier to subjugate.

The US has increased its pressure on India to line up with it against Russia over recent years, as India has been transformed into a veritable frontline state in the US military-strategic offensive against China. Building on the "Indo-US global strategic partnership" forged by the Congress Party-led government that preceded it, the Modi regime has developed an ever-expanding web of bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral military-security ties

with the US, and its closest Asia Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. This includes the “Quad,” an informal US-led anti-China military-security bloc.

Prior to the current crisis, US pressure on India to downgrade its ties with Russia focused on its purchase of Russia’s S-400 missile defence system. Despite US protests and threats that India could face US sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), India has recently received and deployed the first of several Russian-made S-400 batteries.

Some US officials previously hinted that India could get an exemption from CAATSA sanctions over the S-400 deal, because of the staunch support it is lending to US efforts to counter China, including by working with Washington to counter Beijing’s influence in South Asia and beyond. But that now is all in question. Indeed, American officials have begun to raise the possibility of sanctioning India over the S-400 as a way of punishing it for its refusal to do Washington’s bidding in the conflict over Ukraine.

The Indian ruling elite sees its close ties with Russia as vital to maintaining its military capabilities. While India has been promised access to US-made high-tech military equipment with its designation as a “major defence partner” of Washington, it still largely depends on military supplies from Russia. Moreover, Moscow has a proven record of jointly developing and sharing high-tech weaponry with India. According to a study by the Stimson Center, Russia remains the origin of around 86 percent of India’s military equipment. India’s civil nuclear program also relies heavily on supplies of technology from Russia.

Fearing that sanctions by the US and its allies could disrupt crucial fertilizer imports from Russia, Indian officials are reportedly exploring the establishment of a rupee payment mechanism to maintain trade with Russia.

Some sections of the Indian ruling elite, although still a minority, argue that India must more directly take the side of the US against Russia so as to better advance its geopolitical interests.

C. Raja Mohan, a leading Indian commentator on geopolitical issues, wrote in the *Indian Express* on Tuesday, “As diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the crisis in Ukraine continue, the time has come for Delhi to devote greater attention to Central Europe, which is at the heart of the contestation between Russia and the West. Delhi can’t forever view this critical region through the prism of Russia’s conflict with the West. It must come to terms with its growing strategic significance.”

In an earlier opinion article published in *The Print* on February 7, Rajesh Rajagopalan stated, “The argument that India’s strategic autonomy requires high level of defence relations with Russia is stupid. It’s time to reduce arms dependence [on Russia].” Insisting that India must coordinate its policies more closely with Washington, he added, “Indian policy has to be based on what the US is likely to do, not what it would like them to do.”

India’s archrival in South Asia, Pakistan, is also desperately trying to avoid openly taking sides in the growing conflict between US and Russia. While still maintaining its military-intelligence ties with the US, Pakistan, partially as a response to the India-US alliance, is increasingly turning towards Moscow. For its part, Russia justifies its closer ties with Pakistan, despite India’s

objections, by citing India’s alliance with US imperialism.

Beijing, which has a decades-long “all weather partnership” with Islamabad and is increasingly working with Russia to counter the common threat they face from the US, has helped facilitate the recent Russo-Pakistani rapprochement.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan arrived in Moscow on Wednesday for a two-day visit, the first such trip by a Pakistani premier in two decades. Although the visit had been planned well in advance of the Russia-Ukraine war, it assumed special significance in light of the conflict.

On the eve of the visit, Khan dismissed the current crisis over Ukraine. He said in an interview given to Zee News, “This doesn’t concern us, we have a bilateral relation with Russia and we really want to strengthen it.” In another interview with Russia’s state-owned RT television network, he said, “I am hoping that this Ukrainian crisis is resolved peacefully.”

On Thursday, Khan had his first-ever summit with Putin, and “discussed the main aspects of bilateral cooperation and exchanged views on current regional topics, including developments in South Asia,” according to a statement issued by Moscow.

A Pakistani government statement on the visit noted that Khan “regretted” the latest situation between Russia and Ukraine. “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. He underlined Pakistan’s belief that disputes should be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy,” the statement continued.

While India and Pakistan are attempting to avoid taking sides as the threat of war mounts between the US-NATO and Russia, US imperialism’s reckless drive to war threatens to drag the entire globe, including South Asia, into a military conflagration fought with nuclear weapons.

Positioned adjacent to China, South Asia is a crucial region for Washington in its drive to diplomatically, economically and militarily isolate Beijing. American imperialist pre-eminence in South Asia would give Washington the ability to control critical sea lanes in the Indian Ocean that serve as lifelines for Chinese imports from, and exports to, the world market. Its proximity to Russia also makes the region a well-placed vantage point from which to dominate the entire Eurasian landmass.



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