

India refuses to condemn Russia over Ukraine invasion at special Quad summit

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine at a leadership summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) last Thursday. The meeting of the US-led quasi-military alliance of India, Japan and Australia against China was hosted by US President Joe Biden. While Japan and Australia had already fully endorsed the US-NATO war drive against Russia, Biden hoped to pressure India into publicly condemning the Russian invasion.

The Modi government is attempting to balance between New Delhi's strategic partnership with Washington and its historic defence ties with Moscow. India's ruling elite regards its strategic partnership with the US that has developed over two decades under Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and Congress governments, as the best means of advancing its regional and global ambitions. India's defence ties with Russia, however, have been a crucial factor in its foreign policy.

In early February, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar avoided making any comment on the looming Ukraine war at a Quad foreign ministers' meeting by insisting that the Quad's geographical area was the Indo-Pacific.

Last Thursday's summit, however, was specifically called by Biden to discuss "the war against Ukraine and its implications for the Indo-Pacific." Prior to the summit Biden insisted that there was "no room for excuses or equivocation" on the issue.

A joint statement issued after the summit declared that Quad leaders "discussed the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and assessed its broader implications" and agreed on "a new humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mechanism which will enable the Quad to meet future humanitarian challenges

in the Indo-Pacific and provide a channel for communication as they each address and respond to the crisis in Ukraine."

A separate press release issued by the India government, which is desperate to avoid taking sides in any direct military conflict between the US and Russia, said that the Quad discussed developments in Ukraine, including their "humanitarian implications," but that Modi had "emphasised the need to return to a path of dialogue and diplomacy." The statement added that the Quad "must remain focused on its core objective of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region."

New Delhi's precarious balancing between the US and Russia, however, is becoming increasingly untenable with the rapid escalation of the conflict in the Ukraine.

Washington is not ready to accept anything short of full support for its the war drive against Russia. This was made clear in remarks last Wednesday to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Donald Lu, the US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia.

At that point India had repeatedly abstained on motions condemning Russia over the Ukraine invasion: twice in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); once at a special emergency session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA); and in a procedural resolution at UNSC for convening the UNGA session.

"All of us have been working to urge India to take a clear position, a position opposed to Russia's actions," Lu told the Senate hearing, and warned that India needed "to further distance itself from Russia."

In another significant move, the US State Department sent a cable to its diplomats advising them to raise the issue of Ukraine with their counterparts from India and

the UAE. The cable reportedly said that the UAE's and India's "position of neutrality" on Ukraine put them "in Russia's camp." At the Wednesday meeting of the UNGA, the UAE voted in favour of the resolution condemning Russia, having previously abstained in two UNSC votes. India, however, continued to abstain.

Although the State Department withdrew the cable later on Wednesday, saying it had included "inaccurate language and was released in error," the fact that Washington sent such a cable further highlights pressure being applied to India by the US.

Even as it continues to maintain its "neutral" position, India has inclined towards the US position.

A US State Department statement issued on Thursday night noted that India has said "all member states of the UN are not only obliged to follow the UN Charter but to respect international law and territorial integrity and sovereignty of states." This phraseology echoes Washington's pretext for preparing war against Russia that it was defending the "territorial integrity and sovereignty" of Ukraine.

The harsh economic sanctions now imposed by the US and EU against Russia have forced India to scale back its dependence on defence equipment and supplies from Russia which comprise significant portion of New Delhi's military hardware.

As Lu told the Senate committee hearing, "It is going to be very hard for any country in the globe to buy major weapon systems from Russia because of the sweeping sanctions now placed on Russian banks." Lu enthusiastically noted a 53 percent decrease in India's purchase of Russian arms, but insisted that further reductions were required.

Sections of the Indian elite, although still a minority, are demanding the Modi government fully embrace the US war drive against Russia. On March 2, senior Congress party leader P. Chidambaram, tweeted: "The Government of India should stop its verbal balancing act and sternly demand that Russia stop immediately the bombing of key cities in Ukraine."

Chidambaram's position is not a surprise. The Congress-led government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, from 2004 to 2014, initiated significant ties with the US that developed into a strategic partnership. The current US-India partnership was further advanced by the Modi government, which has since 2014, transformed the country into a frontline

state in Washington's war drive against Beijing. The US is now demanding that this be extended to include Moscow.

On March 3, *Foreign Policy* published an article entitled "India must take a stand on Russia's war in Ukraine" by Indiana University Political Science Professor Sumit Ganguly. He argued that "New Delhi's fence-sitting no longer serves its diplomatic or security interests" and warned that "there may be limits to the tolerance of the United States and other partners..."

"India's failure to stand with the United States and other democracies on the Ukraine question could lead to some diplomatic isolation," Ganguly said. He called on the Indian government "to muster the fortitude to make costly choices and take a stand."

Notwithstanding Modi's appeals for "dialogue and diplomacy" to avoid taking sides against Russia, the US war drive, driven by the deep economic, social and political crisis at home, will drag in the whole globe, including India and rest of South Asia, and threatens to trigger a nuclear catastrophe.



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