



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
Asia Centre



# **“Russia’s War in Ukraine: Perspectives in China, India and Singapore”**

**Report**

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## 1. Introduction

Russia's war in Ukraine has unravelled much of the existing global order, and posed new, serious challenges to the existing modes of international cooperation (Sazonov & Saumets, 2022). One such challenge concerns the perception of the war in Asia and the geopolitical dynamics between Asia and the European Union. If the condemnation of Russia by the EU has been almost unanimous, in Asia, and in two of its major powers China and India specifically, the attitude has been much more ambiguous. The report takes a closer look on the narratives on Russia's war in Ukraine in China, India as well as Singapore and examines the key driving factors behind these narratives. China's and India's response to the war is characterized by neutrality that, however, is viewed to be implicitly embracing the pro-Russian perspective on the war. While China has abstained to explicitly express support to Russia, its critique of the U.S. continues to underline China's response to the Ukraine war. Just as China, India positions itself as a neutral side in the conflict, with a similar potential to use the role of a mediator as a means of advancing its national interests. However, this approach to conflict is more pragmatically driven and based on its perceived national interests rather than strategic competition with the U.S., as demonstrated by China. At the same time, India's position on the conflict also reflects its long-term close relationship with Russia and strained relationship with China. In Singapore, as in China and India, the dominant response to the war is the call for the rule-based international order and the importance of territorial sovereignty. In contrast to the larger Asian powers, Singapore, however, much more explicitly has condemned Russia, and, perhaps in a more surprising turn to its long-term neutrality policy, more openly embraced the U.S. role in the conflict. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the importance of rule of law for small states' survival, Singapore has avoided to frame the war as a 'democracy vs. autocracy' and the fight for politically liberal values that is an important dimension for viewing the war in Europe.

## 2. China and Russia's war in Ukraine

Beijing has sought to remain neutral on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, numerous times calling for a peaceful solution to the war. While in Europe such a position is commonly labelled 'pro-Russian neutrality' or 'so-called neutrality', the perspective of China and many other states in Asia differs, as instead of picking a side in the war, they have prioritized their own national interest. This difference in perception underscores that the Western perspective on the war is not the global one.

### 2.1 How does China practice its neutrality?

While China's behavior in the international arena is to some extent shrouded by a lack of transparency and data contradictions, the available sources confirm that Beijing has not provided Russia with military support in its aggression against Ukraine. Though some sources in Washington have claimed that Vladimir Putin requested such assistance, Beijing has denied this (Wong and Barnes, 2022).

However, China has offered Russia significant diplomatic backing. Beijing has demonstrated such support through its stance in the series of historic UN General Assembly votes related to the war. Notably, China abstained in the UN vote to condemn Russia's aggression in March 2022 and voted



against Moscow's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council in April 2022, which occurred just after the release of pictures of hundreds of civilian bodies in the streets of Bucha. Ahead of the anniversary of the Russian invasion, Beijing confirmed its stance by abstaining on the UN resolution calling for Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine.

This behaviour on the part of Beijing aligns with its rhetorical support for Moscow. Chinese state-owned media tends to parrot the Russian narrative on the war by refusing to use words such as 'war' and 'aggression' to refer to Moscow's behaviour on Ukrainian soil and claiming that the US is the leading actor behind the war. For instance, China's state news agency Xinhua has notoriously labeled the war 'a special military operation', 'the Russia-Ukraine crisis' and 'the conflict'. Moreover, by spreading anti-American propaganda, Xinhua helps publicize the Russian conspiracy theory about US-funded biological laboratories in Ukraine supposedly aimed at developing 'dangerous pathogens, plague, anthrax, cholera and other deadly diseases'<sup>1</sup> and emphasizes Washington's role in 'adding fuel to the fire' in the war<sup>2</sup>.

In the economic domain, Beijing has refused to join in on the Western-led sanctions on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine. The Chinese government has recognized these sanctions as unilateral and illegal since the UN Security Council, where Beijing and Moscow have veto power, has not officially approved them. Indeed, China has even deepened its energy cooperation with Russia by taking advantage of the latter's lower oil and gas prices: in 2022, China spent \$81.3 billion (up from \$52.1 billion the year prior) on Russian oil, coal, LNG, and pipeline gas imports, with 71.8 percent of this spending on oil (Downs and Mitrova, 2023). Capitalizing on Moscow's economic isolation and their consequent ability to secure cheaper contracts, China and India—another "neutral" with respect to the war and a country with a massive thirst for energy—have to a vast extent replaced Western states as destinations for Russian exports of energy resources. In this way, China and India have decreased the efficacy of Western-led sanctions and their potentially harmful impact on the Russian economy and regime.

## 2.2 What drives China's stance on the Russian war in Ukraine?

The pursuit of its own national interest is a motivation behind China's position on the war. In this context, the most potent drivers are grouped and described below:

### 1. Geopolitics

- China-US competition. To an enormous extent, China sees the war through the lens of its geopolitical rivalry with the US. This perspective prevents Beijing from siding with its competitors in Washington and Brussels or their allies.
- Taiwan. Beijing is suspected to be learning from Moscow's experiences in the war with an eye toward invading Taiwan in the future. Such a conflict would profoundly transform the global security architecture and the fragile power balance between the US and China.

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<sup>1</sup> *Russia urges U.S. to explain purpose of biological labs in Ukraine* (2022, March 10), Xinhua, <https://english.news.cn/20220310/cc54ee1b0e654831938a933bf1f621fd/c.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Washington's role in Russia-Ukraine conflict jeopardizes world stability* (2022, April 7), Xinhua, <https://english.news.cn/20220407/2198235e37784589bb7f7bccfb131ae2/c.html>

2. China's energy demand at home. As China is the world's largest energy importer and consumer, its vital energy relationship with Russia is a significant component of the 'no-limits' friendship between the two states announced by Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin ahead of the war.

3. Indirect normative drive. While China and most states in Asia do not see the war in Ukraine through the prism of the democracy–autocracy divide, if Beijing were to side with Washington, it could enforce the Western liberal world order, which would not serve China's national interest. Moreover, Beijing needs Moscow on its side to undermine this order, though it refuses to express such ambitions directly.

## 2.3 Conclusion: Can China win the war for itself?

China's standing and actions can significantly affect the trajectory of Russia's war in Ukraine and the related international dynamics. While Beijing pursues its national interest, voices in the West, including international relations experts and policymakers, expect Beijing to negotiate with Moscow due to Xi's connection with Putin and the states' 'no-limits' friendship, a link that no Western parties have. Beijing waited to release its 12-point peace plan until the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, calling for<sup>3</sup> :

1. Respect for the sovereignty of all countries,
2. Abandonment of the Cold War mentality,
3. The cessation of hostilities,
4. The resumption of peace talks,
5. The resolution of the humanitarian crisis,
6. Protection of civilians and prisoners of war (POWs),
7. The securing of nuclear power plants,
8. A reduction in strategic risks,
9. The facilitation of grain exports,
10. An end to unilateral sanctions,
11. Stabilization of industrial and supply chains, and
12. Promotion of post-conflict reconstruction.

While this plan refers to numerous dimensions of Russia's aggression and encompasses general statements calling for improvements in the humanitarian situation in Ukraine and prevention of nuclear proliferation, it also mirrors China's standing vis-a-vis the war thus far. Paradoxically, while China is not a direct party in the war, it can win it for itself politically, diplomatically and economically by effectively acting as a negotiator focused on brokering a peace defined predominantly by its own national interest.

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<sup>3</sup> *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis (2023, February 24)*, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202302/t20230224\\_11030713.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html).





### 3. India and Russia's war in Ukraine

As one of the world's largest democracies and an important U.S. strategic partner in the region, India has responded unexpectedly to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite its discomfort with Moscow's war, New Delhi has adopted a stance of 'neutrality' (Tellis, 2022) towards Russia. Throughout the UN Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council, it has abstained from voting to condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine. As of yet, it has not openly blamed Russia for the crisis. Even though internationally, India received backlash yet this around multiple other questions such as the western hegemony, imperialism, axis of power etc.

#### 3.1 India's neutrality and the partnership with the West

The West has criticized India's neutral stance. The neutrality of India in the Washington DC and Brussels has been seen as disappointing since it reflects a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the legitimacy of using force in a war of conquest to occupy another nation's territory. Instead, most strategic elites would admit that diplomatic neutrality ultimately signifies a subtle pro-Moscow stance<sup>4</sup>. The incongruity is particularly stark because India opposes Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and seems tolerant of the more egregious Russian aggression in Europe.

#### 3.2 What drives India's stance on the Russian war in Ukraine?

Multiple perspectives should be considered crucial in understanding India's neutral position. Firstly, India's non-aligned foreign policy (Harshe, 1990) contributes to its neutrality. Secondly, India's historical relationship with Russia cannot be ignored, especially in the context of India's strained relationship with China. Throughout history, Russia has used its veto to protect India from international resolutions on Kashmir, India's invasion of Goa, and the 1971 war with Pakistan that led to the birth of Bangladesh. In addition to abstaining from voting against the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, India abstained on several votes condemned by the United Nations.

The key aspect of India's foreign policy is maintaining close ties with many countries and with Russia specifically as a state that provides arms and military to both India and China. Furthermore, India's public neutrality towards the Russian invasion is driven by its concerns vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. These two states present immediate and enduring threats to New Delhi. Additionally, the ongoing border clashes have generated further distrust and anger between China and India. China's interference in the border region through infrastructure building and sending forces to create clashes has disturbed people's peace and sanctity (Bhutia, 2023). By preserving its friendship with Moscow, it hopes to prevent Russia from strengthening its ties with China and limit its temptation to build new strategic ties with Pakistan.

As a result, New Delhi strives to minimize Moscow's proximity to both of its rivals. In order to prevent a new dalliance between Moscow and Islamabad, which would undermine India's core interests, it has concluded that studiously avoiding any open criticism of Russia is the best way to

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<sup>4</sup> Suchit Nair Rajesh Sharma 2022, *Times of India*, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-rajeshsharma-479254837>





arrest the tightening Sino-Russian embrace. Thus, today, India's posture is fundamentally consistent with previous forbearance towards Russian aggressions in the past, for example, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979.

### 3.3 Conclusion: Can India solve the contradictions in its stance towards Russia

With all this in mind, Indian policymakers know the risks associated with their current public neutrality toward Russia. India's neutrality positions it as an ally of the despotic Russian state personified by Vladimir Putin rather than Russia, the country itself. When India's most prominent international economic-strategic partners have come together to penalize Russia, India's posture on Ukraine is at odds with its determination to protect the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific over those in Europe. It exposes the inconsistency in India's commitment to preserving the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, it leaves India in the company of strange bedfellows like China and Pakistan, which are India's adversaries and have behaved similarly toward India. Therefore, during the UNSC Resolution on Ukraine (2022), Ambassador Tirumurti, India's Permanent Representative to the UN, called for an immediate cessation of violence. In addition, he regrets "the fact that diplomacy was abandoned" and urges the concerned states to "return to it." He reiterates that "dialogue is the only way to resolve conflicts and differences, no matter how daunting that may seem at the moment." (Economic Times: "India calls for immediate cessation of violence in Ukraine in UN session"; Last Updated 2022). When Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, commented in the parliamentary debate on Ukraine in a coded manner, he reiterated the Indian position that "international law, [the] UN Charter, and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty are the foundations of the global order." (Tellis 2022).

## 4. Singapore and Russia's war in Ukraine

In Southeast Asia, the responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been characterized by the common element of calling for peace but avoiding taking a side in the conflict. This position has been explained by a significant degree of economic and military presence of Russia, the geographical distance from Eastern Europe, and the wish to avoid any direct confrontation between the U.S. and China (Luik, 2023).

### 4.1 Potential shift in Singapore's long-standing neutrality policy

The avoidance of being involved in potential geopolitical conflicts, and diplomatic neutrality has been characteristic of Singapore and its foreign policy, based on its position in the global markets as well as domestic context. In terms of the global economy, Singapore has positioned itself as a middle ground in the U.S. and China trade relations and has even been called a 'China whisperer' (Hutt, 2022). Despite its small size, Singapore has been able to carve itself a substantial economic role, earning high trust from foreign investors. In this way, one of the key threats for Singapore is what its leaders have described as a possibility of a new Cold War in relations between the U.S. and China<sup>5</sup>. Domestically, the majority of Singapore citizens are of Chinese descent, which contributes

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<sup>5</sup> A Conversation With Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. (2022, March 30). <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-singapore-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong>

to closer economic, cultural and also political relationship between the two states. At the same time, Singapore has developed a long-standing, important link with the U.S., which it continues to emphasize (Panda, 2020).

However, despite the tradition of political neutrality in its foreign policy as well as the general non-inference approach in Southeast Asia or the 'ASEAN Way', Singapore has been very direct in its condemnation of Russia's action. Singapore's official foreign policy statements have explicitly underlined the "benign and constructive presence of the U.S." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022a) in the international order, while describing Russia's invasion in Ukraine "as a full-frontal assault on the UN Charter, on a formula which has enabled generally, peace, order, security, and prosperity for decades" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022a). Furthermore, Singapore has been among the most proactive states in imposing sanctions on Russia in the international arena (Kliem & Cheng Wei, 2022). In contrast, China has been quite critical of the U.S. in the context of the war, though the statements have been rather implicit, as has been discussed in this report above. Nevertheless, China's overall position is characterized by the notion that the U.S. uses the war in Ukraine in order to promote its own interests. Thus, Singapore's perspective has been much more positive and engaging vis-à-vis the U.S. and the overall perception of the war in the West.

## 4.2 What drives Singapore's stance on the Russian war in Ukraine?

In the context of its long-standing neutrality, specifically in relation to the U.S. – China axis, the strong position regarding the war in Singapore may appear surprising. Singapore's political leaders have addressed this mismatch between its perceived interests by very markedly emphasizing the scale and severity of Russia's actions for the role of small states in global politics. While similarly to other Asian states, Singapore has invoked the importance of observing territorial sovereignty and international norms, its leaders' rhetoric has been more forceful and concrete in this regard. One of the key messages was that for "small states like Singapore, the principles of the UN Charter and international law are not matters of academic debate; they are a matter of life and death" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022b).

Russia's actions in Ukraine thus are framed as an almost existential threat to the world order in Singapore's perspective, where "a system based on the idea that might is right is simply unacceptable" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022b). The U.S. is characterized as "a benign and constructive presence" that has ensured conditions for the fast and global economic growth of countries such as Singapore. Singapore is the exception among its ASEAN peers in its explicit and repeated condemnation of Russia, and its historical imposition of unilateral sanctions illustrate that such stance extends more than in simply rhetorical level (Tong, 2022). In the official statements, Russia's actions have been described as a "a direct, frontal assault on the rules-based multilateral system which emerged post-Second World War, and has been a recipe for peace, coexistence, and prosperity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022c). In the view of Singapore's past approach to global geopolitics, its strong stance on the Ukraine war indicates new potential shifts in its foreign policy. This change has left some observers to question Singapore's long-held neutrality, especially in relation to the U.S. – China relationship dynamic (Hutt, 2022).

Singapore, like other Southeast Asian states and more forcefully so, opposes the historical revisionism of territorial borders and the use of military force. Significantly, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has warned against isolating China in the context of the war in Ukraine by framing the conflict "as a battle between democracies and autocracies" (Heijmans, 2022).



The characterization of the U.S. and Russia by Singapore illustrates that its position on the Ukraine war is embedded in economic liberalism and the international norms that are perceived to enforce this order.

#### **4.3 Conclusion: Can Singapore be the partner in Asia that West expects?**

A key part in the economic globalization is the avoidance of what Singapore and other states in region describe as a “clash of civilizations”, which would draw new “red lines” in global markets (Stromseth, 2019). Yet this approach of economic liberalism does not equal embrace of the language of democracy and political liberalism. Thus there are important differences between the way the war in Ukraine is understood in the U.S., Baltic states or in the EU, which concerns the notion of the fight in Ukraine as one of freedom and democracy versus autocratic, imperialist-revisionist power. So, on the one hand, Singapore’s position reflects the more general plea of the possibility for smaller states to impact global politics, instead of being at the mercy of realist power politics. On the other hand, this plea is much less based on the defense of certain political values, such as democracy, which appears to be a much more significant context for the war in the Western hemisphere.

## 5. Main Conclusions

- The available sources confirm that Beijing has not provided Russia with military support in its aggression against Ukraine. However, China has offered Russia significant diplomatic backing. Furthermore, Chinese state-owned media tends to parrot the Russian narrative on the war by refusing to use words such as 'war' and 'aggression' to refer to Moscow's behaviour on Ukrainian soil.
- Capitalizing on Moscow's economic isolation and their consequent ability to secure cheaper contracts, China and India have to a vast extent replaced Western states as destinations for Russian exports of energy resources. In this way, China and India have decreased the efficacy of Western-led sanctions and their potentially harmful impact on the Russian economy and regime.
- China sees the war through the lens of its geopolitical rivalry with the US. This perspective prevents Beijing from siding with its competitors in Washington and Brussels or their allies. If Beijing were to side with Washington, it could enforce the Western liberal world order, which would not serve China's national interest. Moreover, Beijing needs Moscow on its side to undermine this order, though it refuses to express such ambitions directly.
- India's public neutrality towards the Russian invasion is driven fundamentally by its concerns vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. By preserving its friendship with Moscow, it hopes to prevent Russia from strengthening its ties with China and limit its temptation to build new strategic ties with Pakistan. India's posture is fundamentally consistent with its previous forbearance towards Russia's aggressions in the past.
- When India's most prominent international economic-strategic partners have come together to penalise Russia, India's position on Ukraine exposes the inconsistency in India's commitment to preserving the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, it leaves India in the company of strange bedfellows like China and Pakistan, which are India's adversaries and have behaved similarly toward India.
- Despite the tradition of political neutrality in Singapore's foreign policy, its close economic relationship with China as well as the general non-inference approach in Southeast Asia or the 'ASEAN Way', Singapore has been very direct in its condemnation of Russia. Thus, Singapore's perspective has been much more positive and engaging vis-à-vis the U.S. and the overall perception of the war in the West, as opposed to the neutrality positions adopted by India and China.
- While Singapore's position reflects commitment to rule-based order and the possibility for smaller states to impact global politics, this plea is much less based on the defense of certain political values, such as democracy, which appears to be a much more significant context for the war in the Western hemisphere.

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