

India must be clear about Ukraine

by John McCarthy

Link: <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/india-must-be-clear-about-ukraine-20220322-p5a6xg>

New Delhi's reluctance to condemn Russian behaviour puts at risk its best chances of managing the rise of China with like-minded neighbours.

India's stance on the war in Ukraine affects its standing as a major power, and therefore affects others in the Indo-Pacific region too.

For most governments, it has been relatively easy to take a view, even if the politics are less straightforward.

It became clear where Europe would stand once the remnants of [Germany's more flexible policy towards Russia were put on ice](#).

Russia's small band of fellow travellers were only ever going to tip their lids in one direction.

China has become Russia's worried second, embarrassed both by the latter's ferocity and its poor actual performance in the ring. But it is still happier to see the West expend its energy in Europe, not in Asia.

Much of the rest of the world has a policy of saying how shocking it all is, without doing much about it.

India's policy of strategic autonomy gives it latitude from the rigours of alliances and a certain freedom of choice. But it still comes with some encumbrances.

India can with justification claim it has never been anyone's patsy. After independence in 1947 it straddled the Cold War seesaw with some success, arguably tilting slightly towards the Soviet Union. Its true security concerns were with Pakistan and China.

When the Cold War ended, India recognised the authority of the United States in its unipolar moment, and that successful management of the security threat from China depended on its relationship with America. India also understood that to break free of its statist economic system, it needed to embrace the West.

The means of putting the US relationship into positive repair was the India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement concluded in 2008.

The nuclear deal put upon India the de facto rights and obligations of a nuclear power. Although the text focused on nuclear issues, the real importance was to open the door for India's admission to the major powers' prime-time club.

India's relationship with Russia remained stable. Moscow continued to have a balancing role in India's surrounds, particularly in the Middle East and Central Asia. It supplied many of India's arms needs. And even in the self-interested world of international relations, longstanding loyalties are still relevant.

Even when the American-Russian relationship became bad in recent years, some Indian strategic ambivalence was manageable. But with the Ukraine crisis, this no longer works.

India will suffer from the impact of global sanctions on Russia. For example, India relies on imports for 85 per cent of its oil. Imports of oil from Russia are not a significant part of India's total oil needs, but the crisis will boost the cost of oil (as well as of grains and other commodities such as sunflower oil), with implications for Indian inflation and foreign currency reserves.

India also risks penalties for avoiding sanctions on Russia. Over 50 per cent of its weapons purchasing is from Russia.

The United States has not so far penalised India under its Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017 for New Delhi's purchases and maintenance of Russian surface-to-air missile systems. But Washington may not now be so forgiving, particularly if the Indians continue to explore the rouble/rupee exchange mechanisms used in the Cold War, and which would bypass Western sanctions.

But by avoiding direct criticism of Russia over Ukraine, and abstaining on key UN votes, India puts itself at odds with the West and many others. And in declining to take direct issue with Russia's invasion of a neighbouring country, Indian policy is glaringly at odds with its obvious aversion to [Chinese incursions into its territory in the Himalayas](#).

The Quad may still be a ramshackle inhibitor of Chinese influence and adventurism in the region. But it has at least helped shape some common approaches among its members, and is worth retaining in working order.

If one member is at odds with the others on an important issue, even one so far from the Quad's region, the interests of all will suffer. If India continues to

retreat into a swamp of ambiguity, then the respect it has as a positive regional force will be diminished.

Since the turn of this century, a number of regional nations – and not just the US, Japan and Australia – have placed increasing importance on the regional role of India and their relations with it. And major European powers have also seen India as central to their evolving Indo-Pacific strategies.

[But since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister](#), a certain fragility has nonetheless developed in the ideological affinity between the liberal democracies and India. That can only become more acute if India finds itself in a markedly different lane on a European war of enormous strategic importance and emotional intensity for nations with whom India has critical strategic dealings in its region.

It is in India's interest and those of its friends that New Delhi puts its ambiguity on Ukraine behind it. If it does not, it jeopardises some of the better policies of America, Japan and other regional countries to manage the rise of China – to say nothing of India's own efforts to this end.

John McCarthy is a former ambassador to the United States, Indonesia and Japan and a senior advisor to Asialink. He is also an Associate of China Matters.