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India's approach to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: An Example of the BJP's 'India First' Thinking and What it Means for the West

Alessandra Barrow & Paul van Hooft
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Authors: Alessandra Barrow and Paul van Hooft

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The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies
info@hcss.nl
Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA The Hague
The Netherlands

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Key Takeaways

India's "strategic ambivalence" to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has disappointed many in Europe and the US who hoped that India, as a democracy, would join them in criticising Russia's actions.

Indian analysts have long hoped closeness with Russia and the US would help India balance against China. But India now finds itself in a strategic split between the West and Russia.

Some have argued that India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a continuation of anti-colonial non-alignment of the spirit of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, but it is not.

Instead, India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be understood through three key motivators; first is India's longstanding arms dependency on Russia. Second, institutionalized perceptions of Russia as a reliable friend to India and a desire for Russia to balance against China. Third, the reactionary internationalism of the BJP and its India first geopolitical thinking, which has much in common with Putin's geopolitics.

European and American democracies should consider whether a democratic-values discourse on engagement in the Indo-Pacific is sensible given the potential for moral entanglement and the alienation this may engender if these discourses founding wanting.

» There are three explanations for India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (1.) India's arms dependency on Russia. (2.) An institutionalized pro-Russia political culture (3.) The BJP's reactionary internationalism and its 'India first' geopolitical thinking.

1. Setting the scene: the Ukraine war in the Indo-Pacific

1.1. Introduction

India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, described as "strategic ambivalence" has disappointed many in the West who hoped that India, as a democracy, would join them in criticising Russia's actions.¹ India's abstention from a UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the 2nd of March drew the ire of US President Joe Biden who commented that India stood "alone".² Instead, India has chosen to keep public criticism of Russia's invasion to a minimum, stressing dialogue and diplomacy.³

Despite US and European discourses of the free world, made up of democracies, standing opposed to Russian autocratic 'Soviet-style aggression', India's strategic ambivalence remains consistent with their reaction to other recent examples of Russian actions abroad.⁴ This can be explained in part due to India's longstanding arms partnership with Russia and the common perception in India that USSR and

then Russia has been an enduring partner to India in a way US and European states have not. However, India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not a continuation of anti-colonial non-alignment of the spirit of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, as some have argued.⁵ Instead it is better understood as an example of the change in geopolitical thinking of India's government under the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP). Under the BJP, India's democracy has declined, and the Modi government ultimately has much in common with the right-wing reactionary internationalism of Vladimir Putin.⁶

This paper will highlight the multiple motivators and nuances behind India's strategically ambivalent approach to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its strategic split between the West and Russia and then discuss what the BJP's geopolitical thinking means for European relations with India and other players in the Indo-Pacific going forward.

¹ Ashley J. Tellis, "What Is in Our Interest": India and the Ukraine War", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 April 2022, 3, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/25/what-is-in-our-interest-india-and-ukraine-war-pub-86961>.

² Haisten Willis, 'Biden Calls out India and China for Abstaining from UN Resolution Blasting Russia', Washington Examiner, 2 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/white-house/biden-calls-out-india-and-china-for-abstaining-from-un-resolution-blasting-russia>.

³ 'India Abstains from UN Vote Deploring Russia's "aggression" in Ukraine', The Times of India, 26 February 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-abstains-from-un-vote-that-condemns-russias-aggression-against-ukraine/articleshow/89838946.cms>.

⁴ Joe Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine', 26 March

2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>.

⁵ Dhiraj Kumar, 'Ukraine Crisis: Nehru's Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Doctrine Beckons India', The Times of India, accessed 1 July 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/thedhirajkumar-com/ukraine-crisis-nehrus-non-aligned-movement-nam-doctrine-beckons-india/>.

⁶ Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, 'Reactionary Internationalism: The Philosophy of the New Right', *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (December 2019): 762., <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000159>.

1.2. Expectations vs reality

Many in the US and Europe hoped that, as a democracy that is increasingly close to the US, India would side with them in opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but they have been disappointed. Notably, US disappointment with India's ambivalent response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights how Indo-Pacific competition now increasingly guides geopolitical logic. Russia sought Chinese backing for the invasion of Ukraine, in all likelihood ensuring Russia dependency on China in the future and abandoning the potential for Russia to balance against China the region.⁷ For analysts in the US and Europe, this leaves India with one main player to balance against China in the Indo-Pacific, the US.⁸

Though an order in its infancy, India's turn towards the US has been driven by the rise of China, its assertiveness in the region and along the Sino-Indian border. India has experienced repeated border skirmishes with China from 2020 onwards.⁹ In this context, India has chosen to incorporate itself into the US-led Indo-Pacific framework and is today a key player in the 'Quad' (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) partnership, alongside Australia, Japan and the US.¹⁰ Despite the Quad partnership having been first formulated in the 2000s and then panned, it has grown with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's embrace of

strategic ties with the US and other Indo-Pacific democracies since 2014.¹¹ In 2015, India and the US signed a "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region" stressing their role in the region as "the world's two largest democracies".¹² Then, in 2021, the Quad issued a joint statement stating their vision of a Indo-Pacific "region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values... We support the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity."¹³ The language of India's strategic engagement with the US and its allies is significant; US-India discourses have repeatedly stressed their position as free and open democracies, their belief in the international order and the role of democratic values. This truism is often repeated by foreign policy analysts as an argument for the naturalness of US/Europe-India cooperation.¹⁴ Thus, many, buoyed by India's democratic credentials hoped that India would side with Western partners in their criticism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In light of India's equivocal stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine; hardly an action that can be described as respecting territorial integrity or democracy, it is worth looking deeper into India's strategic split.

⁷ David O Shullman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, 'Best and Bosom Friends: Why China-Russia Ties Will Deepen after Russia's War on Ukraine', Center for Strategic and International Studies, The Marshal Papers, June 2022, 3, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/best-and-bosom-friends-why-china-russia-ties-will-deepen-after-russias-war-ukraine>.

⁸ Tanvi Madan, 'India Is Not Sitting on the Geopolitical Fence', War on the Rocks, 27 October 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/india-is-not-sitting-on-the-geopolitical-fence/>.

⁹ Alyssa Ayres, 'The China-India Border Dispute: What to Know', Council on Foreign Relations, 18 June 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-india-border-dispute-what-know>.

¹⁰ Tanvi Madan, 'India Is Not Sitting on the Geopolitical Fence'.

¹¹ Jeff M. Smith, 'Democracy's Squad: India's Change of Heart and the Future of the Quad', War on the

Rocks, 13 August 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/democracys-squad-indias-change-of-heart-and-the-future-of-the-quad/>.

¹² Office of the Press Secretary, 'U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region', The White House, 25 January 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>.

¹³ 'Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad", The White House, 12 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad>

¹⁴ Tanvi Madan, 'Democracy and the US-India Relationship', Brookings (blog), 22 January 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/democracy-and-the-us-india-relationship/>.

1.3. India's approach to Russian aggression in the past

India's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine could have been predicted as it mirrored its response to other examples of Russian actions in the recent past. India's response to the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 was similarly ambivalent, recognising Russia's legitimate "interests" in the region and calling for a negotiated settlement.¹⁵ The new Modi government then adopted a similar approach towards Russia after its election, hosting the Russian-nationalist head of Russian-occupied Crimea, Sergiy Aksyonov, as part of a Russian delegation to New Delhi in 2015.¹⁶ Likewise, India did not involve itself in Western condemnation of the poisoning of former Russian double-agent Sergei Skripal with a nerve agent in 2018, nor in the poisoning of Russian opposition-leader

Alexei Navalny in 2020, with India's representative at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) simply stating that they had "taken note" of the situation but that events remained unclear.¹⁷ So, India's strategic ambivalence to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is so far so typical.

>> US-India discourses have repeatedly stressed their position as free and open democracies, their belief in the international order and the role of democratic values.<<

¹⁵ Zachary Keck, 'India Backs Russia's "Legitimate Interests" in Ukraine', *The Diplomat*, accessed 17 June 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/03/india-backs-russias-legitimate-interests-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁶ Ankit Panda, 'Testing the "Modi Doctrine": Russia and India in 2015', *The Diplomat*, accessed 17 June 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/testing-the-modi-doctrine-russia-and-india-in-2015/>.

¹⁷ Press Trust of India (PTI), 'India Takes Note of Alleged Poisoning of Alexei Navalny, Says Subsequent Events Unclear', *The Print*, 8 October 2020, <https://theprint.in/world/india-takes-note-of-alleged-poisoning-of-alexei-navalny-says-subsequent-events-unclear/519756/>.

2. The Russia-India arms partnership

The first explanation for India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is India's long-standing arms dependency on Russia, which remains considerable. The India-Russia military partnership began during the Cold War. Following independence, India was presented with Pakistan-China and later Pakistan-US strategic cooperation as well as growing border hostilities with China, culminating in the Sino-Indian War in 1962. At this time, India was led by Jawaharlal Nehru, a committed socialist and founding father of the anti-colonial Non-Aligned Movement. Given Nehruvian socialist and anti-colonial inclinations, in such a situation, the Soviet Union seemed an obvious ally.¹⁸

So, following the Sino-Indian war, India began supporting the USSR internationally and developed an arms sales partnership, with Russia becoming India's primary arms supplier from the 1960s onward.¹⁹ In more recent decades, Russia has also been willing, unlike other defence partners, to transfer technology to India for local production and design. A key example of this is the *BrahMos* cruise missile system developed jointly by Russia and India.²⁰ In 2014, Putin promised Russia would base all further defence relations with India on joint ventures in accordance with Modi's Make in India programme.²¹ The *BhaMos* missile system was subsequently launched as the first missile

system of the Make in India programme in 2016.²²

Though India is diversifying its military equipment, this takes time and is a serious investment. In the meantime, India remains reliant on Russia to maintain its military equipment. Estimates of Indian dependency on Russian arms vary, but most estimates put the quantity of Russian equipment in the Indian arsenal at around 60%. However, Sameer Lalwani and Tyler Sagerstrom have estimated that the amount is closer to 85% as of 2020.²³ This means not only does India import most of its arms from Russia but remains reliant on them for equipment servicing and parts, without which India's army and air force (with over 50% of their equipment coming from Russia) could be hampered in a potential fight.²⁴

Arms diversification is one reason that India has sought greater closeness with the US, as well as Israel, France and the UK. All four states have become central to India's arms diversification efforts. However, incorporating US and allied equipment into India's arsenal is no easy effort. For example, Russian origin equipment like the S-400 missile systems, cannot be easily integrated within a broader air-defence architecture which also includes equipment sourced from the US or Israel with

¹⁸ Najimdeen Bakare, 'Contextualizing Russia and South Asia Relations through Putin's Look East Policy', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56, no. 3 (May 2021): 681., <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620939113>.

¹⁹ Sameer Lalwani et al., 'The Influence of Arms: Explaining the Durability of India-Russia Alignment', *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 15 January 2021, 2., <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2473328/the-influence-of-arms-explaining-the-durability-of-indiarussia-alignment/>.

²⁰ Nirmala Joshi and Raj Kumar Sharma, 'India-Russia Relations in a Changing Eurasian Perspective', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 1 (March 2017): 48., <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928416683056>.

²¹ Joshi and Sharma, 49.

²² Pravin Sawhney, 'Missile with Make in India Label', *The Daily Pioneer*, 30 June 2016, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2016/columnists/missile-with-make-in-india-label.html>.

²³ Sameer Lalwani and Tyler Sagerstrom, 'What the India-Russia Defence Partnership Means for US Policy', *Survival* 63, no. 4 (4 July 2021): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956196>.

²⁴ 'India Is Cutting Back Its Reliance on Russian Arms', *The Economist*, 14 April 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/04/14/india-is-cutting-back-its-reliance-on-russian-arms>.

alternate technical systems. For example, the S-400 could fire on India's own Western-origin fighter jets in a friendly-fire scenario.²⁵ India's arms dependency on Russia is thus a military dependency that makes military-strategic cooperation between India and US/Europe more challenging. So, when it comes to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India must to some extent tread carefully while it remains dependent of Russia arms.

>> Estimates vary, but most put the quantity of Russian equipment in the Indian arsenal at around 60% to 85%.<<



Image 1. Supersonic cruise missile BrahMos on display at the Russian international aerospace salon, MAKS-2013. Source: Doomych.

²⁵ Lalwani and Sagerstrom, 'What the India–Russia Defence Partnership Means for US Policy', 161.

3. *Hindi Rusi bhai bhai* - India's Soviet nostalgia

The second explanation for India's particular response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a perception of historical closeness with Russia. This closeness was epitomised in Khrushchev's declaration "*Hindi Rusi bhai bhai*" (Indians and Russians are brothers) a slogan of India-Soviet relations. As Christophe Jaffrelot has highlighted, there is a view among the Indian political elite that Russia has proven itself to be an 'all weather friend' (a phrase commonly applied to Pakistan-China relations).²⁶ The USSR is seen as having backed Indian nuclear tests in international forums. Russia approves of India's accession into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), despite reservations from China and Pakistan. Russia has also been supportive of Indian ambitions for a seat on the UN security council.²⁷ Moreover, Russia is seen as supportive of India's position that 'Kashmir remains a bilateral issue between Pakistan and India' and has vetoed UN actions in the contested region in favour of India in the past.²⁸

The USSR and subsequently the Russian Federation have thus been viewed in India as a reliable long-term partner to India in a way the US or European powers simply are not. This perception of the past does not entirely stand-up scrutiny, as Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan has pointed out the USSR cooperated with the US during the Cold War to push for nuclear non-proliferation, which was directed at India too.



Image 2. US Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith and Prime Minister Nehru conferring at the time of the Sino-Indian border conflict, 1962. Source: The JFK Library.

And whilst the Russia-India arms partnership began in full force as a result of the Sino-Indian war of 1962, the USSR remained neutral in the war,²⁹ whereas the US under JFK provided political and non-combat air support.³⁰

However, the most important source of India's closeness with Russia, and part of the reason for India's stance towards the war in Ukraine, is China. Indian strategists have long believed that close Russia-India ties, including on arms, helps prevent full Russian alignment with China, and to a lesser extent Pakistan, India's primary

²⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Indian Debates on the War in Ukraine: All Roads Lead to a Consensus', *Institut Montaigne*, 7 June 2022, <http://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/indian-debates-war-ukraine-all-roads-lead-consensus>.

²⁷ Bakare, 'Contextualizing Russia and South Asia Relations through Putin's Look East Policy', 681, 682.

²⁸ Lalwani and Sagerstrom, 'What the India-Russia Defence Partnership Means for US Policy', 159.

²⁹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'The Democracy Turning Its Back on Ukraine', *The Atlantic*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/india-military-support-russia-ukraine-war/627035/>.

³⁰ Ashley J. Tellis, "What Is in Our Interest".

competitor in the Indo-Pacific sphere.³¹ But the Russian invasion of Ukraine has left Russia isolated from the US and Europe and, ultimately, Russia sought tacit Chinese backing of the conflict early on, suggesting the likely

deepening of Russia-China security ties in the future. Thus, any argument for Indian closeness with Russia in order to prevent them falling into Chinese arms, may be proven fool hardy.³²

4. From Nehruvian non-alignment to Hindu nationalism's reactionary internationalism

Third, India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and geopolitics today is not an example of Nehruvian non-alignment strategy but an 'India First' strategy underlined by the BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology. Hindu nationalism can be broadly defined a set of primordialist ideologies unified in their belief that India's essential national identity is Hindu.³³ The form of Hindu nationalism that the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and its affiliates assert today is commonly called Hindutva, originating in the 1920s, it is ethno-nationalist, majoritarian and, under Modi, populist.³⁴

The impact of Hindu nationalism on Indian foreign policy has generally been ignored or

assumed inconsequential by geopolitical analysts.³⁵ Yet, the BJP government has altered Indian foreign policy in accordance with its ideology, one example of this is India-Israel relations.³⁶ During the tenure of the Indian National Congress (Congress) from the 1950s to 1990s, the India government did not engage in official diplomatic relations with Israel. This was due to the Nehruvian-influenced perception of Israel as a colonial, western-aligned religious state, akin to Pakistan. Only after Congress moved away from non-alignment positions, did India established diplomatic relations with Israel.³⁷ But, it was the rise of the BJP, from 1998 onwards, that radically shifted India-Israel relations. The BJP

³¹ Lalwani and Sagerstrom, 'What the India-Russia Defence Partnership Means for US Policy', 160.

³² Shullman and Kendall-Taylor, 'Best and Bosom Friends: Why China-Russia Ties Will Deepen after Russia's War on Ukraine', 3.

³³ Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2001), 3., <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085553>.

³⁴ Chetan Bhatt, 'Democracy and Hindu Nationalism', *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (August 2004): 133, 134., <https://doi.org/10.1080/1351034042000234567>.

³⁵ Ankit Panda, 'Hindu Nationalism and ... Foreign Policy?', *The Diplomat*, April 2014,

<https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/hindu-nationalism-and-foreign-policy/>; Krzysztof Iwanek, 'Under Modi, How Did Hindu Nationalism Affect India's Foreign Relations?', *The Diplomat*, 27 April 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/under-modi-how-did-hindu-nationalism-affect-indias-foreign-relations/>.

³⁶ Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Populism, Hindu Nationalism, and Foreign Policy in India: The Politics of Representing "the People"', *International Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (1 September 2020): 4., <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz007>.

³⁷ Arshid Iqbal Dar, 'Party Politics and India's Relations with Israel', *Israel Affairs* 28, no. 3 (4 May 2022): 346., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2022.2066840>.

government's embrace of Israel stemmed from shared ideological affinities with the Jewish state, with the BJP aspiring to turn India into an ethno-religious state and the identification of a common enemy in 'Islamic terrorism'. This culminated in Modi's visit to Israel in 2017 as the first Indian prime minister to do so.³⁸

Yet today, many commentators continue to push the idea that India's quiet approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is in-keeping with India's historic Nehruvian Non-Alignment.³⁹ But Non-Alignment was not about self-interest or ethno-nationalism but pragmatic idealism, it had an anti-colonial edge and aimed to find a third, more moral, way between warring sides. India's approach to the Russian war in Ukraine is much more about the 'India first' foreign policy that has proliferated under Modi, than it is about idealism or finding a non-combative third way.⁴⁰

4.1. Features of the BJP's reactionary internationalism and its 'India first' geopolitical thinking

The Modi government's approach to the world order shares with Russia a desire to realise a multipolar world in which they can both play intermediary roles, from India's perspective as a middle power or potential great power.⁴¹ This third explanation for India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the BJP's 'India first' vision of world order, deserves closer attention.

4.1.1. Hindu nationalist multipolar geopolitics

The BJP views international relations as transactional and strives to realise a multipolar



Image 3. Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Modi talk at the BRICS Summit in July 2018. Source: Kremlin.ru.

world in which India as civilisational state can play competing civilisations off against each other. The BJP's Hindu nationalism impacts their geopolitical thinking and attitude towards Russia. For example, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the Indian minister for external affairs since 2019, sketched out the increasingly predominant view of the future world order in his book, *The Indian Way*.⁴² Jaishankar envisions a world where nationalism has triumphed to the extent that there is no longer need of an alliance-based order but instead "a more transactional view of international relations."⁴³ In this world of "frenemies," understood as a kind of cynical Realpolitik, India must engage with competing powers "like the US, China, the EU or Russia at the same time," playing powers off against each other.⁴⁴ In the worldview of the Modi government, the India-first agenda is strengthened and legitimised by the ethno-nationalism of Hindutva; a Hindu-India, *Bharat*, is thus a superior civilisational force which, like China, will not only re-assert itself on the world stage but disrupt the Western-built order.⁴⁵

³⁸ Dar, 351, 352.

³⁹ Dhiraj Kumar, 'Ukraine Crisis: Nehru's Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Doctrine Beckons India', *The Times of India*, accessed 1 July 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/thedhirajkumar-com/ukraine-crisis-nehru-non-aligned-movement-nam-doctrine-beckons-india/>

⁴⁰ Wojczewski, 'Populism, Hindu Nationalism, and Foreign Policy in India', 14, 24.

⁴¹ Bakare, 'Contextualizing Russia and South Asia Relations through Putin's Look East Policy', 678.

⁴² Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Indian Debates on the War in Ukraine'.

⁴³ Jaishankar Subrahmanyam, *The Indian Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Noida, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins India, 2020), 20.

⁴⁴ Subrahmanyam, 22, 43.

⁴⁵ Subrahmanyam, 101.

4.1.2. Freedom from Western international systems and norms

The BJP shares with other right-wing populist governments a desire for national difference and independence from international liberal norms and values, viewed as benefiting the West. Ultimately, while China poses the greatest threat to India, what they both share is a disdain for current international systems thought to embed Western dominance and belief that if such a system is of use, it is only instrumentally.⁴⁶ As Jaishankar puts it, the "Rules are set for the entire world, as well as for the global commons. These are supported by narratives that serve the West well, while diminishing its competitors".⁴⁷ In this regard, much of the Modi government's approach to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has more in common with what Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen have described as "reactionary internationalism," which is the crux of how right-wing populist leaders like Putin, Trump and Erdogan approach international

relations in the 2020s. Reactionary internationalism opposes western universalism and liberal norms in favour of an alternative centred on national difference and resisting the influence of other states.⁴⁸ In this regard, India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is unsurprising; the reality is Modi's government has a great deal in common with Putin's approach to the international order.

>> Reactionary internationalism is the crux of how right-wing populist leaders like Putin, Trump and Erdogan approach international relations in the 2020s <<

⁴⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Christophe Jaffrelot Reviews "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World" by Dr S. Jaishankar', Atlantic Council (blog), 26 May 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/christophe-jaffrelot-reviews-the-india-way-strategies-for-an-uncertain-world-by-dr-s-jaishankar/>.

⁴⁷ Subrahmanyam, *The Indian Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, 108.

⁴⁸ Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, 'Reactionary Internationalism: The Philosophy of the New Right', *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (December 2019): 762.

5. India: A problem for the Western Indo-Pacific strategy and its democratic-values discourse?

Europe and the US have embraced India as democratic partner in the Indo-Pacific with whom they share similar values. Unlike the rise of China, the rise of India (usually pegged from the 1990s onwards) has not been accompanied by a sense of threat or looming existential competition. Rather, it has been largely embraced in the US and Europe as an economically liberal and democratic counterweight to China. Importantly, unlike other US and European partners, India is not seen as a solely military or strategic partner but as a democratic one.⁴⁹ In 2015, President Obama described India and the US as "not just natural partners. I believe America can be India's best partner" due to India's place as a post-colonial democracy with a responsibility to help spread democratic values.⁵⁰ Likewise, in 2021 Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, during a virtual summit with Modi, gave support for an Indian seat at the UN security council, asserting "We both believe in democracy and the rule of law, in strong institutions ... At a time [sic], these values are under increasing pressure. It's

important to form and protect global coalitions".⁵¹

However, Indian democracy has declined under the BJP government and its predominant Hindutva ideology has much in common with the illiberal, authoritarian irredentism of Putin's Russia. The ubiquity with which Western states have embraced the idea of India as a democratic partner and counterweight to growing autocracy around the world has yet to be challenged, despite the success of the BJP nationally in 2014 and the decline of Indian democracy, largely as a result.⁵² For example, the University of Gothenburg's V-Dem institute's 2022 democracy report categorised India as an "electoral autocracy", alongside states like Hungary, Turkey, Iran and Russia.⁵³ This is the elephant in the room when it comes to understanding India's approach to the Russia invasion of Ukraine and importantly, why the current India government may be reticent to back any democratic-values discourse with

⁴⁹ Priya Chacko, 'A New "Special Relationship"? Power Transitions, Ontological Security, and India-US Relations', *International Studies Perspectives* 15, no. 3 (August 2014): 330., <https://doi.org/10.1111/insp.12029>.

⁵⁰ Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Obama in Address to the People of India', <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/27/remarks-president-obama-address-people-india>.

⁵¹ 'India Crucial Partner Both in Indo-Pacific, World at Large: Netherlands PM Mark Rutte', *The Economic Times*, 9 April 2021, [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-crucial-](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-crucial-partner-both-in-indo-pacific-world-at-large-netherlands-pm-mark-rutte/articleshow/81991368.cms)

[partner-both-in-indo-pacific-world-at-large-netherlands-pm-mark-rutte/articleshow/81991368.cms](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-crucial-partner-both-in-indo-pacific-world-at-large-netherlands-pm-mark-rutte/articleshow/81991368.cms).

⁵² Sebastian Hellmeier et al., 'State of the World 2020: Autocratization Turns Viral', *Democratization* 28, no. 6 (18 August 2021): 1062., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1922390>.

⁵³ Nazifa Alizada, Vanessa A. Boese, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Natalia Natsika, Yuko Sato, and Hugo Tai, and Staffan I. Lindberg., 'Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature?', March 2022, 23, 45.

actions.⁵⁴ The authoritarian tendencies of Hindutva have little regard for India's ethnic or religious pluralism beyond seeing this as a threat or source of dissent among the majority, it is unsurprising then that little respect for democratic-values at home translates into little respect of democratic-values internationally.



Image 4. Skyline of Ahmedabad during the Gujarat riots 2002. Source: Aksi great via Wikimedia Commons.

Take sanctions, where both economic and diplomatic measures have been directed at Moscow. India has not been supportive of US or European sanctions against Russia, viewing sanctions imposed by individual countries critically. This is partly a result of India's experience with economic sanctions in the past, for example, the U.S. sanctioning of India following its second nuclear tests (Pokhran II) in 1998, but also speaks to the government's personal experience with sanctioning.⁵⁵ Modi was barred from entering the US, UK and EU until 2014, due to a diplomatic boycott of him following the Gujarat riots/pogrom in 2002 when he was chief-minister.⁵⁶ It is estimated

over 2,000 people were killed during the riots⁵⁷ which Modi was seen as condoning.⁵⁸ Since 2002, Modi's power and limits on democratic freedoms have only increased. For example, in 2022, human rights activists who provided legal assistance to victims of the 2002 riots have been arrested by anti-terror police.⁵⁹ As in Russia, following the Moscow theatre hostage crisis in 2002, human rights abuses of the past can be erased, as journalists and activists are arrested.⁶⁰

The comparison goes further, whilst there are many in India's ruling elite who, from an anti-Western stance sympathise with the argument that Russia is a victim of NATO enlargement in its historic lands (the former Russian empire).⁶¹ There are many others, particularly on the Hindutva extreme who are inspired by Russia's irredentism. Members of the *Hindu Sena* (Hindu army) have held demonstrations showing their support for Russia's invasion and calling for "Akhand Bharat" (a reunited India) an objective of certain Hindu nationalist who want to end the dividing lines of partition and return Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet and Myanmar to the Indian fold.⁶²

5.1. What a more assertive and undemocratic India may mean for the US and Europe

Many in Europe wish to engage more with the Indo-Pacific and forage partnerships with

⁵⁴ Sebastian Hellmeier et al., 'State of the World 2020: Autocratization Turns Viral', *Democratization* 28, no. 6 (18 August 2021): 1062., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1922390>.

⁵⁵ Rishika Chauhan, 'Decoding India's Stand on International Sanctions', Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI), 15 December 2014, <https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/chauhan>.

⁵⁶ Jason Burke, 'UK Government Ends Boycott of Narendra Modi', *The Guardian*, 22 October 2012, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/22/uk-ends-boycott-narendra-modi>.

⁵⁷ There is significant variation between the official death toll (1, 169) and the death toll taken by many academics and NGOs which tends to be in more than 2 thousand, see Christophe Jaffrelot and Cynthia Schoch, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 41.

⁵⁸ Jaffrelot and Schoch, 40, 42, 43.

⁵⁹ 'Gujarat Police, Supreme Court Criticised for Teesta Setalvad's Arrest', *The Wire*, accessed 7 July 2022, <https://thewire.in/government/gujarat-police-supreme-court-criticised-for-teesta-setalvads-arrest>.

⁶⁰ 'Moscow Theatre Siege: Questions Remain Unanswered', *BBC News*, 24 October 2012, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20067384>.

⁶¹ Kanwal Sibal, 'To Be Or NATO Be: Putin's War On Ukraine Is Also A Western Creation', 27 May 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/international/to-be-or-nato-be-putin-s-war-on-ukraine-is-also-a-western-creation-magazine-184864>.

⁶² Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Indian Debates on the War in Ukraine'.

democratically-like minded states, this is where India comes in. But a Hindu nationalist India has proven contentious to other players in the region, particularly with its near neighbours but also with other Muslim-majority states with whom the US and Europe also wish to engage. For example, a more assertive India has proven willing to violate Pakistani airspace to bomb terror-targets in the lead up to the 2019 general election.⁶³ In 2022, the inflammatory comments of one BJP spokesperson on the Prophet Mohammed caused a diplomatic row with gulf states, Qatar and Kuwait.⁶⁴ US and European leaders continued touting of the rise of India as a democratic success and counter to autocratic China is increasingly delusional. Importantly, if Western leaders genuinely intend to further values-based discourses which include India, they risk (im)moral entanglement both at home and abroad.

Hindutva can be extremist and has potential to impact the internal politics of US and European partners. The Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE), an expert body that advises

the British Home Office has recognised Hindutva as a form of religious fundamentalism.⁶⁵ Hindutva's affiliations with the far-right, demonisation of minorities, combined with an US and European rhetoric of India as a leading democracy and natural ally have a potential to backfire at home.⁶⁶ A report on British-Sikh alienation for the CCE highlighted the perception among Sikhs that the British government could be pressured by India into making politically motivated arrests.⁶⁷ Likewise, the Indian government has proven defensive. It is commonplace for Indian embassies to attack parliamentary debates in the US or UK on the state of religious or press freedom in India usually in the language that such debates propagate fake-news or are anti-Indian.⁶⁸ The willingness of the BJP government to denigrate standard democratic practises or misuse intelligence sharing capacities highlights the impact that more assertive Hindu nationalist India could have on the internal politics the US or European partners in the Indo-Pacific.

⁶³ Asad Hashim, 'India Bombs Targets inside Pakistan', 26 February 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/26/india-bombs-targets-inside-pakistan>.

⁶⁴ Reuters, 'India's Ruling Party Suspends Official over Comments about Islam', CNN, 6 June 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/06/asia/india-bjp-suspension-islam-comments-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁶⁵ Commission for Countering Extremism, 'Challenging Hateful Extremism', October 2019, 59., <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/challenging-hateful-extremism>.

⁶⁶ See Sitara Thobani, 'Alt-Right with the Hindu-Right: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Perfection of Hindutva', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 5 (4 April 2019): 745–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1468567>; Eviane Leidig, Bharath Ganesh, and Jonathan Bright, 'New Forms of Cultural Nationalism? American and British Indians in the Trump and Brexit Twittersphere', *Nations and Nationalism* 28, no. 1 (2022): 302–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12781>; Commission for Countering Extremism, 'Challenging Hateful Extremism', 37.

⁶⁷ Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal, 'The Changing Nature of Activism among Sikhs in the UK Today' (Commission for Countering Extremism, 7 October 2019), 19., <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-changing-nature-of-activism-amongst-sikhs-in-the-uk-today>.

⁶⁸ For instance, Geeta Mohan, 'UK Govt Defends India's Religious Diversity as British MPs Debate Minority Persecution', *India Today*, 13 January 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/uk-govt-defends-india-s-religious-diversity-as-british-mps-debate-minority-persecution-1758494-2021-01-13>; Naomi Canton, 'India Protests Farmer Protest Debate in UK House, Summons High Commissioner', *The Times of India*, 10 March 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/uk/india-protests-farmer-protest-debate-in-uk-house-summons-high-commissioner/articleshow/81418534.cms>; 'U.S. Congresswoman Introduces Anti-India Resolution in House', *The Hindu*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-congresswoman-introduces-anti-india-resolution-in-house/article65556044.ece>.

6. Conclusion

In Short, India's approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be understood through three key motivators; first is India's longstanding arms dependency on Russia; second, perceptions of Russia as a reliable friend to India and a desire for Russia to balance against China; third, the reactionary internationalism of the BJP and its India first geopolitical thinking. For those in Europe who are surprised by democratic India's approach to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the third reason should give pause. India's strategic ambivalence to the Russia's invasion is not an example of India's tradition of Nehruvian non-alignment, it is the approach of the Hindu nationalist BJP government. The Modi government, like Putin's Russia, strives to realise a transactional multipolar world in which India, a great

civilisational power, can play competing civilisations off against each other. In this worldview nation-states are defined by their difference which should be respected rather than diminished by universal liberal norms and values, understood to violate a sense of national sovereignty. This view is supported by a Hindutva ideology which is majoritarian rather than democratic and a government who has experienced first-hand international condemnation on human-rights grounds. European powers seeking to engage in the Indo-Pacific should consider how an assertive Hindu nationalist India impacts relations with other players and if a democratic-values discourse is sensible given the potential for moral entanglement and alienation this may engender if founding wanting.