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End of the Illusion: EU Partnership Holds Firm Despite India's Stance on Russian Aggression

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Different reactions to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the European Union and India have not done immediate harm to their growing strategic partnership. The decisions to launch the EU-India Trade and Technology Council and to restart negotiations of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) point at reinforced political will in both the EU and India to deepen and strengthen cooperation. Yet, India's position on the Russian violation of international law puts into question its commitment to the rules-based order, which can undermine the foundations of EU-India relations in the longer term. It might trigger a shift from a values-based to an interest-driven partnership. This makes the success of the FTA negotiations crucial for smoothing geopolitical differences and binding the two sides closer together.

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India's Balancing Act on the Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

Despite Russia's blatant and unprovoked violation of international law and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, India has taken a nuanced, ambiguous, and generally neutral position on the issue. It has abstained in votes on crucial resolutions on 25 February condemning the Russian aggression at the UN Security Council (UNSC, on which India holds a non-permanent seat for the term 2021-2022), and at a special session of the UN General Assembly on 2 March when India was one of 35 states abstaining, while 141 countries voted against Russia. From January 2022 until the end of April, India has abstained more than a dozen times in different votes on tabled measures that could be viewed as contrary to Russia's interests at international forums, including at the UN Human Rights Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

After Russia's invasion, which started in February, India refrained also from condemning Russia in its bilateral public statements (including in readouts after phone calls with the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, or EU Member States and institutions) and kept referring to the war with terms such as "developments", "situation", "tensions" without explicitly naming the aggressor. As one Indian opposition politician observed, India "merely urged a de-escalation of the conflict by those involved, as if both countries were belligerents, when in fact there is an obvious aggressor and a clear victim".¹ Only one Indian document, a message from the Indian ambassador in Kyiv, issued on the day of the invasion by diplomat who was apparently shocked by the dire situation, admitted that "Ukraine is under attack".²

India's official position has been that only dialogue and diplomacy can lead to de-escalation and has repeatedly called for the "immediate cessation of violence and an end to all hostilities".³ Yet, in its early stances on the situation it underlined "that the legitimate security interests of all parties should

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be fully taken into account", which subscribes to Russia's rhetoric on its justification for the invasion.⁴ In India's explanation of its vote at the UNSC on 25 February, an Indian representative did admit that the country is "deeply disturbed by the recent turn of developments in Ukraine" and urged "that all efforts are made for the immediate cessation of violence and hostilities".⁵ Most importantly, he stressed that "the contemporary global order has been built on the UN Charter, international law, and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states" and that "all member states need to honour these principles in finding a constructive way forward".⁶ Some respected Indian commentators and strategists regarded this as the most open and harsh expression of Indian public "disapproval" of the Russian actions ever.⁷ While this may be true, this "disapproval" has not made any impression on Russia, which has publicly

¹ S. Tharoor, "India's Ukraine Tightrope," *Project Syndicate*, 8 March 2022, www.project-syndicate.org.

² *Message from Ambassador of India to Ukraine on 24 February 2022*, Embassy of India, Kyiv, 24 February 2022, www.eoiukraine.gov.in.

³ See, e.g.: "UNSC Adoption of Resolution on the situation in Ukraine, Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations, Explanation of Vote," Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 27 February 2022.

⁴ "UNSC meeting on Ukraine, Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations," Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 23 February 2022, www.pminewyork.gov.in, as well as "UNSC Meeting on developments in Ukraine, (Monday, 21 February 2022), Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations," Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 21 February 2022, www.pminewyork.gov.in, and "UNSC Briefing Minsk-II Agreements, Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations," Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 17 February 2022, www.pminewyork.gov.in.

⁵ "UNSC Adoption of Resolution on the situation in Ukraine, Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations, Explanation of Vote," Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 25 February 2022, www.pminewyork.gov.in.

⁶ *Ibidem*

⁷ R. Mohan, @MohanCRaja (Twitter), 26 February 2022, <https://twitter.com>.

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thanked India “for its balanced position demonstrated at the UN”.⁸ The opinions like that of Harsh Pant of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), openly criticising Russia for its aggression, not accusing NATO of provocation, and calling India to rethink its ties with the Russian regime, are in the minority.⁹

In the following weeks, as Russia’s attack on Ukraine was dragging on without it attaining any of its goals and hostilities against the civilian population were on full display, India took some steps to distance itself from Russia. It “unequivocally condemned” the killings in Bucha (although, again without pointing at who was responsible) and supported “the call for an independent investigation” in a discussion in the UNSC in early April.¹⁰ It stepped up humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, sending more than 90 tonnes of aid by the end of May. Indian officials have made numerous remarks signalling that India does not support Russia and that the war will have no winners. As Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, minister of external affairs, summarised on 24 March in the Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament), the Indian position was based on six principles, and included a call for the “immediate cessation of violence, return to dialogue and diplomacy, global order anchored on international law, [the] UN charter, territorial integrity, [and] humanitarian access”.¹¹ In a debate that followed in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament), he rebuked the Western criticism of India, saying that the country had taken a “principled stand” and had chosen a side in this conflict—the “side of peace and it is for an immediate end to violence”.¹² Yet, India still has not condemned the aggressor nor has it joined the sanctions on Russia.

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While India’s ambivalent position disappointed many in the West, it had good reason to pursue this balancing act to not alienate any of its partners. Since the outbreak of the war, India’s top concern and priority was the evacuation of thousands of Indian citizens, mostly students, stuck in Ukraine. As such, it required good relations with both Russia and Ukraine.¹³ Therefore, the subsequent phone conversations between India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Putin and Zelensky focused on creating conditions for the safe evacuation of Indians from besieged cities, including Kharkiv and Sumy. Under *Operation Ganga*, it organised 90 flights from countries neighbouring Ukraine to evacuate more than 18,000 Indian citizens. Yet, even after the mission was completed, India’s position did not change much. In practice, India continued business as usual with Russia, preparing for increased import of discounted oil and putting in place rouble-rupee payment mechanisms that might help Russia circumvent the sanctions.

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India’s benign view of Russia is grounded in their shared history, as well as close defence, strategic and ideological ties. Russia is an old friend and trusted partner since the Cold War when it provided India with diplomatic support, military hardware, and economic aid. More

broadly, India’s refusal to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was explained in terms of “its strategic dependence on Russia, as well as its security priorities in the Indo-Pacific”.¹⁴ Many have pointed to China as a factor, suggesting that “if India is to stand up to China, it needs its defence

⁸ “Russia thanks India for balanced position on Ukraine crisis,” *TAAS Russian News Agency*, 2 March 2022.

⁹ H.V. Pant, “India must think of reconfiguring its ties with Russia,” *Commentaries*, ORF, 26 February 2022.

¹⁰ “At UNSC, India Supports Call for Independent Probe Into Bucha Civilian Killings in Ukraine,” *The Wire*, 05 April 2022.

¹¹ “6 Principles Decided India’s Response To Ukraine War: EAM Jaishankar,” *The Daily Guardian*, 25 March 2022;

“India for Peace between Ukraine and Russia: S. Jaishankar in Parliament,” *The Outlook*, 24 March 2022.

¹² “India has chosen side of peace’: MEA Jaishankar on Russia-Ukraine war, Bucha killings,” *DNA*, 06 April 2022.

¹³ D. Jaishankar, “The Ukraine war could transform India’s military preparedness,” *The Interpreter*, 10 March 2022.

¹⁴ R. Roy-Chaudhury, E. Hokayem, “Understanding India and the UAE’s abstentions over Ukraine,” *Analysis*, IISS- Singapore, 3 March 2022.

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partnership with Russia”.¹⁵ Most experts explained India’s vote in the UNSC by referring to India’s overreliance on Russian arms delivery (up to 70%) especially in a time when India is confronted with a resurgent China along its disputed border in the Himalayas. Others have downplayed this argument, pointing at the decreasing share of Russian arms in India’s arsenal,¹⁶ but underline the country’s old worldview of non-alignment, the preference for a multipolar world order, ideological affinities with Russia, and its role in building Indian “strategic autonomy”.¹⁷

European Reactions to India’s Stance

India’s ambivalent position on the war came as an unpleasant surprise to many in the West. As a fellow democracy with increasing ties to the U.S. and the EU and as a country promoting itself as a guardian of international law and the sovereignty of states, India was expected to act differently than it did to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. EU Member State ambassadors in Delhi worked behind the scenes and talked publicly to persuade India to condemn the Russian aggression. The EU framed the UN voting on 2 March as “a test for humanity” where abstention was not an option. Europeans felt, like Americans, that “the Russian invasion is such a flagrant violation of the rules-based order, which India itself cherishes, [that] India should have done a little more than just abstain”.¹⁸

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At the same time, however, many experts warned the West against playing hardball with India as it “risks damaging a relationship that remains critical to balancing China in the Indo-Pacific” and suggested a better approach, which was to “recognise India’s security dilemmas with respect to Russia and China” and to help “New Delhi to reduce its long-term dependence on Russian weaponry”.¹⁹ It was even argued that with Western help, the Russian invasion of Ukraine could be to the Indian defence sector what the 1991 economic crisis was for its economic liberalisation, while admitting that the “process of indigenisation and diversification [of the arms industry] will take a decade, if not longer”.²⁰

While this cautious approach is more understandable from the perspective of the Indo-Pacific states, there were also voices in Europe calling on the West not to “pressure India to condemn Russia” but instead to “make better offers to New Delhi than Moscow does”.²¹ Others went even so far as to suggest that rather than pressuring India to pick sides, it was the EU that should demonstrate “it is a reliable partner” and to weaken India’s “dependency on Russia”, the Union should not only increase defence cooperation and arms exports but also work towards a “stronger Indian economy”.²² In short, this was tantamount to a suggestion that India’s indifference to Russia’s

India’s indifference to Russia’s blatant violation of international law and principles should not be criticised but rewarded.

¹⁵ T. Prakash, “China is key to understanding India’s dilemma over Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, 9 March 2022, www.lowyinstitute.org.

¹⁶ According to the Stockholm based SIPRI, in 2002 India imported 88% of its arms from Russia, but that dropped to 35% in 2020, while arms imports from the U.S. and its allies rose from near zero to 65% in 2020.

¹⁷ R. Mukherjee, “Nonalignment’s long shadow: India and the Ukraine crisis,” *9Dashline*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/nonalignments-long-shadow-india-and-the-ukraine-crisis>.

¹⁸ “Premium Conversations with Ashley Tellis: Decoding India-U.S. ties post-Ukraine,” *Hindustan Times*, 21 March 2022.

¹⁹ James Crabtree, “Western nagging will not ease India’s Russia-China dilemma,” *Nikkei Asia*, 1 March 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com>.

²⁰ D. Jaishankar, “The Ukraine war could transform India’s military preparedness,” *The Interpreter*, 10 March 2022, www.lowyinstitute.org.

²¹ K. Iwanek, “The West Shouldn’t Push India to Condemn Russia,” *The Diplomat*, 2 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com>.

²² M. Reuter, “Why India’s silence on Ukraine is an opportunity for Europe,” *Commentary*, ECFR, 9 March 2022, <https://ecfr.eu>.

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blatant violation of international law and principles should not be criticised but rewarded.

After some initial hesitation on the part of EU institutions and Member States, this accommodative view of India's ambiguity on the war prevailed and was based on the strategic and economic calculations of European stakeholders. Paradoxically, India's stance appears not to have done any damage to official EU-India relations and has even pushed the Union to double down on its effort to strengthen cooperation with India. As the German ambassador to India observed recently, "Putin's war has shown that we need friends, allies and countries that share values like democracy and freedom of movement".²³

As a result, in March 2022, after months of indecision, the EU appointed a negotiator for the FTA negotiations, opening the way for relaunching talks. Moreover, the sides met for the inaugural India-EU Consultations on Africa on 7 March, opening another area for strategic cooperation.²⁴ The EU's special envoy for Indo-Pacific, Gabriele Visentin, made a visit to Delhi at the end of March to reassure his partners that, while the EU was "not pleased" by India's votes of abstention at the UN on the Ukraine resolutions, he believed "that India and the EU continue to share the same values on the global order".²⁵

Eventually, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen paid a visit to New Delhi on 23-25 April to deepen bilateral cooperation. She met with, among others, Prime Minister Modi, then President Ram Nath Kovind, and the Foreign Minister Jaishankar and was a chief guest of the Raisina Dialogue, the flagship Indian conference on global affairs. In her speech opening the conference, she praised Indian democracy, recalled the atrocities committed by Russia in Bucha, and described the risks for the whole world of the Russian actions, yet refrained from making any direct link to India's position on the war or putting any direct pressure on Delhi.²⁶ A major outcome of the visit was the decision to launch the Trade and Technology Council, only the second of its kind after the one with the U.S. It was announced that negotiations of the FTA would officially resume in June, and indeed they were launched on 16 June.

Modi's subsequent visit to Germany, Denmark, and France in early May demonstrated that the Member States also preferred to focus on the future so as not to irritate India or risk bilateral cooperation over India's stance on the war. When another high-level EU official confirmed after meeting the new Indian foreign secretary on 30 May that the EU-India Strategic Partnership is based

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on "shared values and a commitment to the rules-based global order"²⁷, it was clear that the Union had accepted India's position and their cooperation would continue unaffected. EU-India relations in practice were back to business as usual, as the two sides had agreed to disagree on the war in Ukraine.

While the EU's newfound pragmatism in the approach to India may be understandable, it does not mean the differences over India's attitude towards Russia are irrelevant. They can still bear some costs to the EU's global image, the perception of India in Europe, and the future of the partnership. By accepting India's neutrality on this gross violation of international law, the EU risks its credibility to influence other countries to condemn Russia and undermines its efforts to internationally isolate Putin and his regime. It will make it much harder for the EU to pressure China to distance itself from Russia, for whom China is a critical partner. The EU approach confirms for

²³ R. Laskar, "Differences on Ukraine won't impact India's ties with Europe: German envoy," *Hindustan Times*, 2 June 2022.

²⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, "Inaugural India-European Union Consultations on Africa," Government of India, 8 March 2022.

²⁵ S. Haidar, "Not pleased with India's votes on Ukraine, but confident we share same values: EU envoy," *The Hindu*, 29 March 2022.

²⁶ "Speech by President von der Leyen at the Raisina Dialogue" (New Delhi), European Commission, 25 April 2022.

²⁷ Stefano Sannino, @SanninoEU, 30 May 2022, Twitter, <https://twitter.com>.

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India that it made the correct choice by not condemning Russia. There is a growing perception that this position of ambiguity made India the country that has benefited the most from the war in Ukraine.²⁸ Yet, for the EU, prioritising its economic and strategic interests over principles means that its image as a normative power has been undermined.

Most importantly, India's position calls for a re-evaluation of the basic assumptions of the EU-India partnership and the nature of their relations. Europeans must ask themselves some difficult questions about the partnership, including whether India really is a like-minded partner sharing the same values, whether being democracies is the best guarantee of having the same worldviews and principles in the international arena, if it really is in the EU's interest to support a bid to the UN Security Council of a country that cannot condemn such a blatant violation of the UN Charter, whether it is beneficial to support India's growth and help make it "self-reliant", and what are the lessons the EU can draw from its naivety in policies towards China and Russia in the past two decades.

The End of Illusions

In the post-Cold War period, the EU has grown a liberal and rather naive view of India as a fellow democracy sharing basic principles and norms. References to "shared values" and a commitment to the rules-based international order, with the UN at its core, have been repeatedly included in most joint statements from EU-India summits since 2000. For instance, the declaration from the historic

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meeting at The Hague in 2004 when the proposal of a strategic partnership was first tabled, called the EU and India "natural partners" as the two "largest democracies in the world reiterate that their partnership is based on the sound foundation of shared values and beliefs".²⁹

The EU started looking at India as a fellow democracy and partner in the preservation of the liberal order. Therefore, in 2018 when the EU presented its "Strategy towards India", one of the two main goals was forging a partnership for a "rules-based global order centred on multilateralism".³⁰ Moreover, the Union promised to "engage with India on the reform of the UN system" and stated that it "has an interest in India playing a greater role in a multipolar world, which requires a multipolar Asia".³¹ European officials were convinced by the narrative of Modi's government of India as a "force for good" and a "leading power" protecting the rules-based international order.

At the EU-India summit in July 2020, the declared "two largest democracies" vowed again to strengthen their "strategic partnership based on shared principles and values" and reaffirmed "their determination to promote effective multilateralism and a rules-based multilateral order".³² In recent years, their cooperation gained new momentum, fuelled also by shared apprehensions about China's rise and uncertainty about the U.S. in a global role. At the last summit in May 2021, India and the EU decided to restart the FTA negotiations stalled since 2013 and launched the Connectivity Partnership. The EU vowed to play a stronger role in the Indo-Pacific by making India a key "like-minded" partner

²⁸ C. Raja Mohan, "For India, Putin's War Starts to Look Like a Gift," *Foreign Policy*, 30 March 2022; H. Jacob, "Playing the Strategic Autonomy Game," *The Hindu*, 04 April 2022; D. Grossman, "Modi's Multipolar Moment Has Arrived," *Foreign Policy*, 6 June 2022.

²⁹ "Fifth India-EU Summit, The Hague, 8 November 2004 Joint Press Statement," Council of the European Union, 8 November 2004, www.consilium.europa.eu.

³⁰ "Elements for an EU strategy on India. A partnership for sustainable modernisation and the rules-based order. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council," European Commission, 20 November 2018, p. 1.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 9, 11.

³² "European Council, Joint Statement—15th EU-India Summit, 15 July 2020," European Council, www.consilium.europa.eu.

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in its “Indo-Pacific Strategy” of September 2021.³³ The EU is India’s second-largest trade partner—with trade value of \$80 billion, which is 10 times larger than India’s trade with Russia—and a key source of investments.

The newfound enthusiasm for cooperation has made the EU turn a blind eye to India’s democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism during Modi’s reign since 2014, including restrictions on freedom of speech and media, marginalisation of religious minorities, and expulsion of foreign NGOs.³⁴ While the EU has become more vocal in condemning China for its human rights violations in Xinjiang and ending democratic freedoms in Hong Kong, it has refrained from commenting on the abrogation of autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019, the long detention of Kashmiri politicians and activists, and the months-long lockdown and internet shutdown in the region. When Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, was asked at a press conference after the EU-India summit in July 2020 about the detentions in India of human rights activists protesting against the country’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), he diplomatically replied that “we trust the Indian institutions [...] and we took a decision with Indian authorities to continue strong dialogue on the question of human rights”.³⁵

EU leaders have learnt already that India does not like lecturing and preaching from the outside and it is better not to comment on its internal affairs. The resolution prepared by the European Parliament condemning the Indian CAA law was deferred in January 2020 in order not to derail the upcoming EU-India summit, a move seen in Delhi as a “diplomatic victory”.³⁶ The only achievement of the EU in this regard was to persuade India to restart the Human Rights Dialogue in 2021 (frozen since 2013), held behind closed doors and at the low level of ambassadors, which was acceptable to Delhi, and useless.

India’s position on the Russian aggression obviously casts doubt on the assumptions of “shared values” and “like-mindedness” when it comes to protecting the rules-based international order. It rather proves again that India pursues a highly pragmatic and realist foreign policy that is driven

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more by interests than values. The foreign minister admitted as much when explaining his country’s position on the war in Ukraine in the Indian parliament on 24 March: “Indian foreign policy decisions are made in the Indian national interest and we are guided by our thinking, views, and interests”.³⁷ It seems that India attaches high importance to values when it suits its interests and disregards them when its interests are at stake.

Though this is not exceptional among the states, it is imperative that this distinction is built into the EU approach to this country. Observers have been pointing for some time to the growing differences between the EU and India when it comes to “shared values”³⁸ and calling for a more realistic approach that considers the divergences.³⁹

³³ “The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, European Commission, 16 September 2021.

³⁴ A number of international human rights organisations have been critical of the shrinking space for freedom in India in recent years. Freedom House downgraded India’s status from “free” to “partly free” in 2021, the first time in two decades it had slipped in the ranking. See: “Freedom in the World 2021,” Freedom House, 2021.

³⁵ “EU-India Summit—Press Conference,” European Commission, 15 July 2020, www.youtube.com.

³⁶ “European Parliament Defers Vote on Anti-CAA Resolution, India Calls It ‘Diplomatic Victory’,” *The Wire*, 29 January 2020, <https://thewire.in>.

³⁷ “India for Peace ...”, *op. cit.*

³⁸ C. Wagner, J. Lemke, “India: An Ambivalent Partner for the West. Growing Commonalities, Growing Differences,” *SWP Comment*, 21 April 2021.

³⁹ P. Kugiel, “EU-India Strategic Partnership Needs a Reality Check,” *PISM Policy Paper* No. 35 (137), October 2015.

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Moreover, recent developments show that India does not necessarily share the same worldview as the EU. Its voting patterns in the UN in the post-Cold War period illustrate that India has been more a like-minded partner with Russia or China than with the EU or U.S.⁴⁰ It also showed much sympathy to the Russian claims of a “sphere of influence” in Eastern Europe, since India regards South Asia in a similar way.⁴¹ Some Indian experts have even warned the world not to ignore Hindu nationalist ideologues' delusion-filled ideas of rebuilding the *Akhand Bharat*, or an “unbroken India”, across South Asia, like it mostly ignored Russia’s revisionist ideas.⁴²

The Indian reaction to the Russian aggression cannot be solely viewed in light of its dependence on arms supplies.

In addition, it was rightly argued that it is a mistake to assume that “India feels much ownership over a Western-led order and its principles”, and therefore it feels it is not obliged to defend that order.⁴³ The Indian commitment to the current order dominated by the West is regarded as “both instrumental and partial” and unlikely to change due to a “deep-seated postcolonial identity and near obsession with autonomy”.⁴⁴

Therefore, the Indian reaction to the Russian aggression cannot be solely viewed in light of its dependence on arms supplies. As Rohan Mukherjee put it clearly, “expecting that replacing Russian equipment with American equipment will align India with the liberal international order is likely to result in disappointment”.⁴⁵ India can be seen as a selective defender of the liberal order at best, yet also as an indispensable partner for the EU because, since it is a “a global swing state, it is willing to cooperate and support Brussels on certain issues but will act against EU interests on others”.⁴⁶

India’s current ambivalent position on Ukraine is coherent with its policy of multi-alignment, that is, maintaining good relations with all major powers while extracting concessions from all. Minister Jaishankar foretold it in his book *The India Way*, published in 2020, when he stated that India will improve its position by “advancing [its] national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions”.⁴⁷ The global turmoil created by Russia may be one such moment for India to raise its status and extract strategic benefits. It has been observed that chaos and flux in international affairs in recent years, including the diminishing influence of the West in certain areas, may be seen by India as “an opportunity to play a leading global role”.⁴⁸ Jaishankar also vowed that India “would be more of a shaper or decider rather just an abstainer”⁴⁹, but it has in practice abstained on critical international issues, including Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, when it suited its interests.

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⁴⁰ A. Das, “A Fine Balance: India’s Voting Record at the UNGA,” *ORF Issue Brief* no. 192, July 2017.

⁴¹ C. Raja Mohan, “India Has Its Own Ideas About Russia and Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, 7 February 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com>; J. Crabtree, “Western nagging will not ease India’s Russia-China dilemma,” *Nikkei Asia*, 1 March 2022.

⁴² S. Singh, “The World Ignored Russia’s Delusions. It Shouldn’t Make the Same Mistake With India,” *Foreign Policy*, 8 May 2022.

⁴³ R. Mukherjee, @rohan_mukh (Twitter), 1 March 2022, <https://twitter.com>.

⁴⁴ D. M. Ollapally, “India and the International Order: Accommodation and Adjustment,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 32, no. 1, 2018, p.62.

⁴⁵ R. Mukherjee, “Nonalignment’s long shadow: India and the Ukraine crisis,” *9Dashline*, 14 March 2022, www.9dashline.com.

⁴⁶ P. Kugiel, “India, The European Union and the Post-war Liberal Order,” [in] R.K. Jain, *India and the European Union in a Turbulent World*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 53.

⁴⁷ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way. Strategies for an Uncertain World*, Harper Collins Publishers India, 2020, p. 11.

⁴⁸ R. Mukherjee, “Chaos as opportunity: the United States and world order in India’s grand strategy,” *Contemporary Politics* 26:4, 2020, pp. 420-438.

⁴⁹ S. Jaishankar, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

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Moreover, anyone hoping that the nationalistic foreign policy of the current right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is unique and that other parties certainly would act differently, might be disappointed. This was demonstrated during the parliamentary debates on 5 April when most political forces shared the government's pragmatic and non-aligned worldview and supported the official stance.⁵⁰ India's current position on Russia's aggression against Ukraine is just very natural and a logical continuation of Indian foreign policy, and Modi has followed in the footsteps of his predecessors from the Indian National Congress, who took a similar position on the Soviet invasions of other countries—Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979.⁵¹

Conclusions: Towards a New Transactional Partnership

The differences over the Russian aggression against Ukraine have not harmed the EU-India partnership. On the contrary, they have encouraged both sides to step up cooperation in many areas. The future of their relations will to a large extent depend on the progress of the FTA negotiations in the coming months and whether they can be concluded before crucial elections in India and the EU in 2024. If the talks fail, new economic disagreements will widen the expectations gap, leading possibly to a similar “partnership fatigue” in the years after 2012. Therefore, the coming months might be crucial for EU-India relations.

For the EU, it will be more difficult to consider India a like-minded partner and a reliable defender of the rules-based international order. The differences on the Russian aggression offers an opportunity to shed the romanticised and naive view of India and put the relationship on more of a realistic footing.

Having stated this, one cannot exclude a longer-term negative impact from diminished mutual trust. For the EU, it will be more difficult to consider India a like-minded partner and a reliable defender of the rules-based international order. The differences on the Russian aggression offers an opportunity to shed the romanticised and naive view of India and put the relationship on more of a realistic footing. India remains a rising power whose interests will converge with those of the EU on some issues and diverge on

others. Yet, there are still many areas—climate, connectivity, maritime, digital—where close cooperation is not only possible but also inevitable. Therefore, the EU must deal with India as it is, not as it would like it to be.

This means also that for any new EU policy towards India to be effective, it must be assertive and unitary. First, the bottom line in the EU's approach must be that India still needs the West more than the West needs India (for its economic modernisation and strategic interests). And while the U.S. can be more accepting of differences, as it sees India as a critical counterbalance to China in the Indo-Pacific, the EU enjoys more room to manoeuvre in its dealings with its Asian partners. The EU need not worry that more assertive policy will push India to join any anti-Western camp. As Crabtree correctly observed, while “gradual improvements in Sino-India ties are possible in the coming months [...] the prospect of a broader anti-Western civilisational realignment, as touted by Beijing and Moscow, is remote”.⁵²

⁵⁰ M. Kewalramani, “Special Post: Indian Parliament's Discussion on the Ukraine War”, *Tracking People's Daily*, 6 April 2022, <https://trackingpeoplesdaily.substack.com>.

⁵¹ C. Raja Mohan, “India's Ukraine dilemma,” *Indian Express*, 23 February 2022.

⁵² J. Crabtree, “China signals desire to improve ties with India, but is that what New Delhi wants?” *IJSS-Asia Analysis*, 30 March 2022.

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EU institutions must coordinate their policy towards India closely with the Member States and navigate between competing national interests. There is an increasing risk that European states may be more willing to offer extra concessions to India in times of a global rebalancing to secure favour and access to its market while undermining the common EU position. Therefore, more regular and frank discussions in the European Council on relations with India, as prescribed in the “India Strategy 2018”, may be necessary.

While India is too important a partner to allow the relations to be seriously affected by the differing views on Russia, the EU must take the right lessons from this case and shift from a “values-based” partnership to one that is “interests-driven”. This will save both sides from ungrounded expectations and costly disappointment. The EU must learn from the India case that what really matters is not only shared values but also interests, and the Union should make its policy towards this country even more pragmatic, realist, and transactional.

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