

Indian perspectives on the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea

By Varun Sahni

■ Executive summary

The statement by India's national security adviser on March 6th 2014 referring to "legitimate" Russian interest in Ukraine was unsurprisingly criticised in the West, but appreciated in Russia. Most observers missed other important elements in the statement: (1) reference to Ukraine's *internal* issues; (2) recognition that both Russian and *other interests* were involved; and (3) emphasis on a peaceful settlement, reconciliation and negotiation. Debate on the Ukrainian crisis has been largely absent in India due to preoccupation with national elections, widespread consensus that Russia is a dependable "friend of India", and sneaking admiration of President Putin for his "decisiveness" in promoting Russia's interests and open defiance of the West. While China and Pakistan have deployed historical/ethno-cultural arguments to dispute Indian sovereignty over territories that India considers its own, India has consistently rejected claims to alter the territorial status quo on grounds of kinship across sovereign borders. India's low-key reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea can perhaps be explained by three factors: (1) Russia's salience in India's military modernisation programme; (2) disquiet about the way in which the West has used democracy as a foreign policy tool; and, more speculatively, (3) a quid pro quo going back to 1975, when only the Soviet Union backed India's annexation of Sikkim after 97.5% of its inhabitants voted to merge with India.

India's official position on the Crimean situation

There have been only two statements, both dating back to March 6th 2014, from which India's official position regarding the takeover of Crimea by Russia and the overall Ukrainian crisis can be discerned. The first statement, and the one that has been the most cited subsequently, was by Shivshankar Menon, India's national security advisor, who in response to a question at a news conference said the following:

As far as we are concerned, we are watching what is happening in the Ukraine with some concern. We would hope that whatever internal issues there are within Ukraine are settled peacefully and that the broader issues of reconciling the various interests involved, and there are after all legitimate Russian and other interests involved, are discussed, negotiated, and that there is a satisfactory resolution to them.

Unsurprisingly, Menon's gesture towards "legitimate" Russian interests in Ukraine was picked up by foreign offices and foreign policy analysts across the world, drawing both criticism in the West and appreciation in Russia. It was probably on the basis of this statement that President Vladimir Putin publicly thanked India for its "restraint and objectivity" regarding the crisis.

However, India's position on the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine was considerably more nuanced than it might have been convenient for Putin to recognise. Most observers and analysts missed other important elements in Menon's statement: (1) the reference to the crisis as Ukraine's *internal* issues; (2) the recognition that not only Russian, but also *other interests* were involved; and (3) the emphasis on a peaceful settlement, reconciliation and negotiation. Thus, even on the basis of the first statement it would not be accurate to say that India had backed Russia on the Ukrainian crisis.

It is also significant that Menon's remarks were probably more off-the-cuff than prepared. Later the same day, India issued an official statement that made no mention of Russia's "legitimate interests":

India welcomes recent efforts at reducing the tension and hopes that a solution to Ukraine's internal differences is found in a manner that meets the aspirations of all sections of Ukraine's population. It would be important, in this context, for a legitimate democratic process to find full expression through free and fair elections that provide for an inclusive society. India calls for sincere and sustained diplomatic efforts to ensure that issues between Ukraine and its neighbours are resolved through constructive dialogue.

The fairly anodyne diplomatic references to democracy, inclusion and dialogue apart, the official Indian statement once again emphasised "Ukraine's internal differences", thereby signalling tacit recognition of Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, critics of Indian policy were correct in pointing out that the second statement did not make an explicit mention of territorial integrity, which is usually a core element in India's foreign policy posture.

Debates in India on the Crimean situation

Apart from the two statements cited above, no other statements of note about the Ukrainian crisis emanated from either Indian official sources or civil society. While the crisis was reported prominently in the print and electronic media, especially in English, and elicited heated comment on television discussion programmes, it did so for only a few days before dying down.

There are three reasons why debate on the Ukrainian crisis has been muted in India. The most important reason is that India has been in election mode since the end of January 2014. Campaigning for the election went on for several months and polling across the country was staggered across six weeks. Thus, domestic political news has obviously been more important – and therefore more prominently covered – in the Indian news media than international news over the last few months.

The second reason for Indian reticence relates more particularly to Indian attitudes towards Russia, which tends to be consistently treated as a "friend of India" in Indian public opinion. There remains a widespread reluctance across the Indian political spectrum to publicly criticise Russia for its actions.

Finally, it would not be an exaggeration to state that there has also been a fair amount of quiet admiration for Putin and his "decisiveness" in promoting Russia's interests during the Ukrainian crisis. Also, Putin's open defiance of the West has its fans in India. While such admiration has been muted, it does exist in a significant slice of Indian public opinion. It in fact operated as a tacit metric against

which the supposed "weakness" of India's own leadership in protecting its national interests could be unfavourably compared.

Analysing India's dilemma regarding the Crimean situation

There are a couple of reasons why India should be extremely wary of the developments in Crimea, and Ukraine more broadly. Firstly, India, like most other post-colonial states, is acutely sensitive to any deviations from or violations of territorial integrity. Adherence to the principle of territorial integrity is integral to the DNA of such states. As former victims of colonialism, the memory of external powers intervening to enforce arbitrary lines on the map is still fresh in their political cultures. Indeed, most post-colonial states are themselves the outcome of political boundaries drawn to suit the geopolitical needs of colonial powers rather than ethno-cultural realities on the ground. Thus, most post-colonial countries have ethno-culturally diverse populations whose group affiliations frequently transcend sovereign borders. Given their internal diversities, these states have been understandably zealous in maintaining the integrity of their external borders. In the elemental struggle between the principles of territorial integrity and self-determination, it is therefore not surprising that most post-colonial countries, India included, have emphasised the former.

Apart from these abstract considerations, India's own geopolitical circumstances make it extremely wary of any attempt to change the territorial status quo on the grounds of ethno-cultural affinities. Two of India's neighbours, China and Pakistan, occupy and lay claim to territory that India considers to be its own. Furthermore, both these neighbours deploy history and ethno-cultural arguments to dispute Indian sovereignty over these territories. In all, India has fought four wars that stem from these issues. It is therefore not surprising that the country is suspicious and dismissive of arguments that seek to alter the territorial status quo on the grounds of kinship across sovereign borders and considers such arguments to be a threat to international peace and security.

If this is true, why has India not condemned Russian moves in Ukraine? We can discern three explanations for India's low-key reaction to the Ukrainian crisis. The first is not only its longstanding friendship with Russia, already mentioned above, but also its increasing security dependence on that country. In 2009-13 India emerged as the world's largest arms importer, purchasing 14% of the world's total arms exports. Of India's arms imports during this period, over 75% came from Russia. (In 2013, India imported \$4.8 billion worth of Russian weapons.) In other words, Russia is currently fundamental to India's military modernisation programme and the Indian government would therefore be unwilling to alienate Russia, and particularly President Putin, beyond a certain point.

Secondly, there is considerable disquiet in India about the way in which the U.S. and the West have used democracy as a foreign policy tool. In Ukraine, it has been evident that at least some of the perturbation originates from Western interference. In Indian domestic politics, relations with Russia act as a counterbalance to those who oppose India's growing relations with the U.S. (Although it should be noted that, due to gross mismanagement by both sides, U.S.-India relations are currently at their lowest ebb since the Obama administration took office in early 2009.) India is perhaps the least anti-American of the BRICS¹ countries; nevertheless, it would not like to be seen by its BRICS partners as being pro-U.S.

Although none of the current actors has made any mention of it, the Indian attitude toward the Ukrainian crisis also

has an interesting historical resonance with an important event that occurred nearly four decades ago. In 1975 India annexed Sikkim, until then a nominally independent kingdom in the Himalayas, as its 22nd state in the face of severe diplomatic pressure from the West, especially the U.S., and vociferous opposition from China. Sikkim was annexed after 97.5% of its inhabitants voted to bring the monarchy to an end and unite with India. Diplomatic backing from the Soviet Union was extremely important to India at that time. Perhaps, across four decades, there is something of a quid pro quo in India's lack of overt criticism of the Russian annexation of Crimea. Nevertheless, India would be extremely uneasy if Russian moves were to extend beyond Crimea into eastern Ukraine. ■

1 Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

■ THE AUTHOR

Varun Sahni is Professor in International Politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He has a doctorate from Oxford University and researches and writes on nuclear deterrence, regional security, emerging balances in the Asia-Pacific region, evolving security concepts, emerging powers and Latin American issues. He edits *South Asian Survey* and speaks annually at India's National Defence College. He was awarded the prestigious VKRV Rao Prize in Social Sciences for 2006 and served as the 10th Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jammu.

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