

By Invitation

# Russia's war on Ukraine roils South Asian geopolitics

India will find it harder to balance relations between the US and Russia, even as the latter warms up to Pakistan.



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For *The Straits Times*

Fifty years ago this week, US president Richard Nixon's summit with Chinese leader Mao Zedong transformed the geopolitical landscape of Asia. In the subcontinent, the new entente between America and China pushed India closer to the Soviet Union and muddled its longstanding policy of non-alignment.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine this week is bound to have consequences for Asia. Nowhere is the impact more immediate than in South Asia. The acute political discomfort of India – one of Moscow's longstanding Asian partners – at the Russian invasion of Ukraine is evident. It is caught between its old partner Russia and its recently acquired friend, the United States. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin this week underlines the attempt to construct a new regional partnership between Islamabad and Moscow that adds to India's discomfort.

During the Cold War, India's international identity was expressed through the idea of

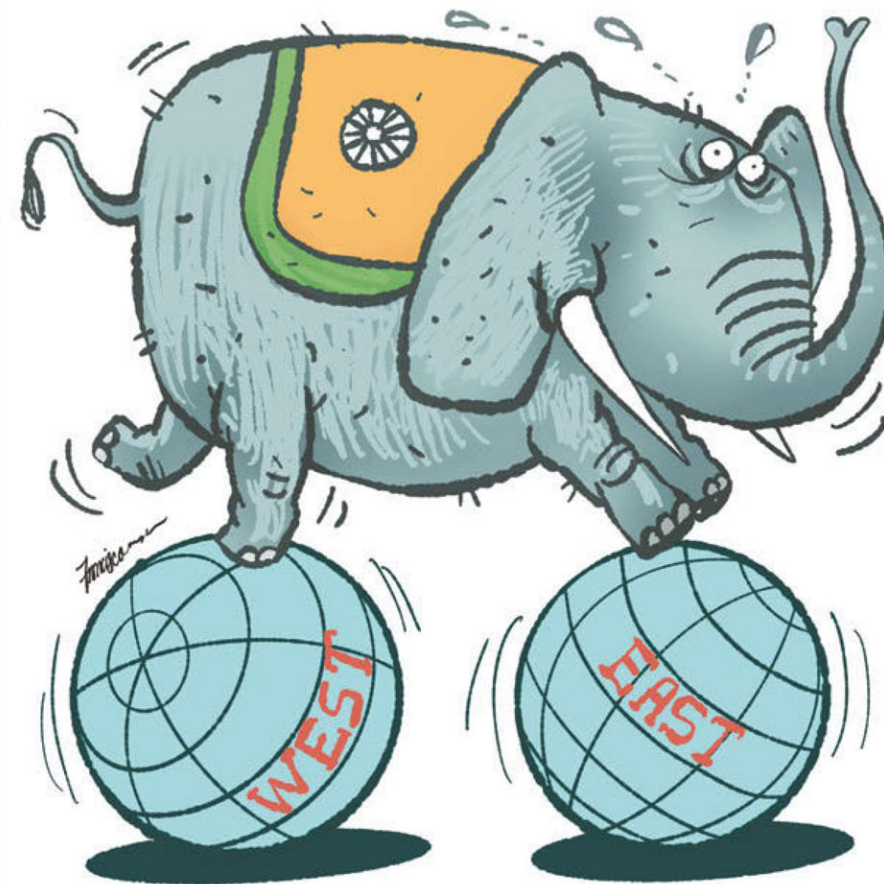
“non-alignment” – that Delhi would stay away from bloc politics of that era. At the turn of the 1990s, however, Delhi found that its relations with the US, Europe, China and Japan were all underdeveloped. On top of that, it had to cope with the collapse of the Soviet Union, with which it had maintained good relations.

This led India to embark on a new policy, expanding the engagement with the US, Europe, China and Japan while at the same time preserving the old ties with post-Soviet Russia. Thanks to the absence of great-power rivalry at the end of the Cold War, it had the freedom to pursue better relations with all the major powers simultaneously.

Russia's assault on Ukraine threatens to change all that as it puts India's strategy of “multi-alignment” under even greater pressure.

India's freedom of action was already being squeezed before the rapid escalation of the Ukraine crisis in recent weeks. Delhi found it increasingly difficult to manage great-power relations as tensions grew between the US and China as well as between the US and Russia.

For example, Delhi's acquisition of the S-400 air defence missile systems from Moscow has attracted sanctions under the US law targeting the export of advanced weapons from Russia. Until now, the Biden administration has held back from imposing those sanctions given the growing partnership with India. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine is hardening political



sentiments in the US and it might no longer view India's enduring Russian connection through indulgent eyes.

More urgently, India's unwillingness to criticise the Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated some disappointment in Washington.

Russia, meanwhile, has been praising India for its “independent” stance on Ukraine. It is not a compliment that Delhi would want to advertise at this stage. After all, Moscow often irritates Delhi with its condescending remarks that India is being “manipulated” by the US to support its Indo-Pacific strategy.

## REASONS FOR INDIA'S MUTED RESPONSE

Critics of India's muted response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine contrast it with Delhi's call on China to respect the “rules-based order” in Asia, especially in regard to Beijing's violation of bilateral border agreements with India in seizing a slice of territory in the Ladakh region of Kashmir in 2020.

India's ambivalence on Ukraine is not hard to fathom. Delhi's reliance on Moscow for military supplies has not diminished since the Cold War ended. Nearly 50 per

cent to 60 per cent of India's military inventory is from Russian suppliers. Delhi does not want to jeopardise this relationship, especially when India is locked in a military stand-off with China.

The series of military crises on India's contested border with China in 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2020 has seen Delhi move closer to the US in the past few years. India is now a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad, along with Australia, the US and Japan.

China has frequently criticised the Quad as an instrument by which the US attempts to block its rise. But things are becoming more complicated and challenging for India with Russia drawing closer to China in opposition to the US.

The summit earlier this month between President Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping marked a definitive moment in the consolidation of Russia-China strategic collaboration. Although it was not labelled as an alliance, the two sides have declared that there are “no limits” to the partnership.

The Sino-Russian bonhomie certainly improves the leverage of Beijing and Moscow in relation to Washington. It also puts India in an unenviable situation – its most important military partner is getting into a deeper alignment

with China, which poses the biggest security threat to India.

This problem is compounded by the breakdown of relations between Russia and the US over Ukraine. In joining the Quad, India had bet that the US and its allies will play a key role in stabilising the Indo-Pacific region. But a crisis in Europe, which is unlikely to be resolved any time soon, would draw US attention away from Asia.

Delhi worries too that the Russian challenge might compel Washington to look for a new accommodation with Beijing. China has in fact been calling for a revival of the spirit of the summit between Nixon and Mao and asking Washington to engage and live with the multiple differences between the US and China.

The Ukrainian crisis sharpens the conflict between Russia and the West and puts Beijing in pole position in the triangular dynamic – a Russia that must rely more deeply on China and a West that must divide its attention between Europe and Asia.

As China's relative position improves, India's room for manoeuvre among the great powers can only shrink in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis. India has no option now but to recalibrate its great-power relations and begin to make strategic choices that it has

long avoided in the name of “multi-alignment”.

## IMRAN KHAN'S VISIT

The Ukraine crisis is expected to rearrange the geopolitics of South Asia in other ways. Russia's decision to host the Pakistan Prime Minister this week points to the shifting tectonic plates in the regional balance of power.

Mr Khan may be entirely right in saying that his visit had nothing to do with the crisis in Ukraine. But the Russian decision to host him amid a massive attack on Ukraine is probably a deliberate one.

Moscow has been aware of Pakistan's deep interest in expanding bilateral ties in recent years. As Delhi moved closer to Washington and the US adopted an “India First” policy in South Asia, Islamabad needed to diversify its great-power relations.

Pakistan's interest dovetailed with Russia's. Disenchanted with India's growing strategic partnership with the US, Russia thought it useful to put some of its South Asian eggs in the Pakistan basket. Nearly a decade ago, Moscow lifted its arms embargo against Islamabad and has been supplying arms to Pakistan. It has elevated the military exchanges with Pakistan and intensified consultations with Pakistan on regional issues.

Pakistan has been eager to have a summit-level meeting with Mr Putin, but Russia had been holding back until now. China, Pakistan's consistent partner for many decades, had apparently encouraged Mr Putin to host Mr Khan.

Many observers in Pakistan believe Mr Khan's Russia visit – the first by a Pakistan prime minister in more than two decades – would be a “game changer” by moving Russia, India's longstanding partner, to a more “even-handed position” in South Asia.

Some analysts in Delhi worry about a potential “axis” between China, Russia and Pakistan that could create serious regional challenges for India. While talk of an axis is far-fetched, there is no question that Indian and Pakistani relations with Russia, China and the US are undergoing major changes that will inevitably lead to a new regional realignment.

Much like the 1972 summit that brought the US, China, and Pakistan together, this week's tumultuous developments are likely to produce a greater convergence of interests between Moscow, Islamabad and Beijing. India will brace itself for more commercial, political, and regional security cooperation between Russia, Pakistan and China.

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