

COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Emergence of India as a Global Leader

COMMENTARY

Jyotsna Bapat

Introduction

India's foreign policy has four clearly-stated principles that have been practised over the past seven years, namely, taking care of national trade and security interests (including using aggressive defence if needed), helping its citizens in foreign countries, taking care of partner countries, and continuing to participate in global governance organizations and institutions while maintaining its non-aligned stand. India over the last seven years has initiated various foreign policy strategies: Act East policy, Sagar (trans-ocean) outlook, Gulf engagement and Central Asia strategies that have focussed on resource use, humanitarian aid, and defence. Greater investment in defence strategies can be done through strengthening national defence, providing maritime security with India's neighbours in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, and restructuring the defence organization. As a first responder, India takes on a leadership role for its partner countries that are in need of disaster management. Over the last few years, India has taken on the leadership of the global south and engaged with the United Nations as a temporary member.

India's foreign policy strategy has been to engage in diplomacy while finding solutions to issues. India continues to engage with major powers' economic hubs and influential regional players, while practising the foreign policy maxim of Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, (Everyone Together, Everyone's Development and Everyone's Trust) (Minister of External Affairs, 7 June 2022). A common engagement with major powers has resulted in multiple quadrilateral, trilateral and regional arrangements as well as in 2+2 meetings. As such, India's evolving and ambitious foreign policy, with corresponding actions on ground, has helped send clear messages to other countries over the last eight years. The priorities and strategies of these policies are consistent with India's economic growth and defence (Menon, S., May 2020). While India could take an aggressive stand against its hostile neighbours, it supports its partner countries in their development without reciprocal expectations. For instance, it has contributed to a large extent to the relatively-developed nations in the Middle East and South East Asia to create connectivity in transport and power (Bapat, J., November 2020). The actions taken by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are also examples of how India is practising its policies as per its priorities while interacting with its partner countries.

COVID-19: A Global Event

On March 11, 2020, COVID-19, was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. India took both military and non-military action in order to control population and commodity movements across international and national borders, which were sealed for over a few months and re-opened gradually. More specifically, the Indian government adopted two measures to manage the disease: containment and mitigation. Containment was undertaken in the early stages of the outbreak, including contact tracing and isolating infected individuals to stop the disease from spreading to the rest of the population. This helped decrease the risk of health services being overwhelmed more than they already were and provided more time for vaccines and treatments to be developed. Mitigation measures were medical, paramedical, and

non-paramedical or non-pharmaceutical interventions. Non-pharmaceutical interventions such as wearing masks, social distancing, and avoiding public transport were taken to manage the outbreak. An extreme measure taken to contain the spread of the disease was to completely shutdown global cross-border transactions, both international and intra-national ones. The impact of lockdowns of entire nations on a global scale have been multi-fold. Considering this context, this paper focuses on India's intervention to help its partner nations.

India's international interventions take place through the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and as such, India had engaged with its partner countries in South Asia by sending trained doctors and nurses experienced in managing epidemics. India also exported domestically-developed vaccines to its friendly nations and continues to do so till date. Along with this, India provided safe transport of those Indians and partner country citizens abroad who wished to return. At the national level, India organized a massive vaccination campaign through effective coordination across ministries. India counts 'Vaccine Maitri' (Vaccine Friendship) as one of its key diplomatic achievements of this period, not just for reasons of health but as a statement of solidarity (Minister of External Affairs, 7 June 2022).

Paradigm to Understand COVID-19

How does one understand an event which has the potential to change the global system as we know it? Where do we look for its impact in a global system? A Systems Approach based paradigm by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies CSIS (www.CSIS.org), a policy research organisation is proposed here. It considers seven major global issues called Resolutions. Each Resolution consists of major indicators and for each indicator, the short and long-term trends are documented. Each indicator is represented by experts in making predictions over the next 15 years. The experts are supported by the latest data, research, and technologies. They are encouraged to think outside the box and make possible predictions in each of the seven global trends to understand global events such as COVID-19 (Brannen, S., et al. 2020). This is an ongoing research initiative to identify the most important macro-trends defining our world from now until 2050. This is the paradigm we review now.

The seven global macro trends or the seven revolutions according to the paradigm are: population, resources, technology, information, economics, governance, and security. A catastrophic event such as the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to change the current global system. CSIS's directors of the global health policy centre, J. Stephen Morrison and Anna Carroll, observed that 'pandemics change history by transforming populations, states, societies, economies, norms, and governing structures' (Brannen, S. et al, 2020). Four months into the declaration of the pandemic, an analysis was conducted to think systematically about the pandemic and list out potentially fundamental changes in the seven major global trend lines. This research was conducted through the analytic framework of the Seven Revolutions initiative, a macro-trends assessment that is continually updated with a 30-year horizon. The net assessment is that COVID-19 is highly disruptive in the near term and highly unpredictable in the medium to long term across every macro trend line. The study viewed COVID-19 as an accelerant, an irritant, and a stress test (Brannen, S. et al, 2020). Its effects will ebb and flow and hit various nations and populations in different ways and on different timescales. This prediction has proven true two years into the pandemic given the virus mutations and the consequent struggle to control it globally. Here we will review in detail only the dominant trends in each Resolution relevant to India. Brannen's report provides a detailed global analysis of COVID-19 (Brannen, S. et al, 2020). A very brief overview of the other trends are provided here to demonstrate the application of the paradigm to India. The main focus is the Resolution of Security and its trends.

The impact of COVID-19 on the Resolution ‘population’ and the trend from the MEA perspective is the return migration of Indian citizens and their families living abroad. Introducing direct flights across continents was a major short-term impact co-ordinated by the MEA.

The COVID-19 impact on the Resolution ‘resources’ as well as the supply chain trend is also documented and relevant to India in terms of the shutdown of both sea and land transport. Both imports and exports had ceased and have not yet been fully restored, resulting in global inflation of up to 10 percent even in developed countries. The ‘Technology’ Resolution and especially the internet technology trend is also noteworthy. The speed with which the use of internet technology was adopted and implemented is a favourable sign of the impact of COVID-19. Most relevant was the large data generation and the monitoring that was required for the returning migrants. The other Resolutions and their global impacts listed in the report (Brannen, S et al. 2020) are not directly related to India’s foreign policy.

The seventh global trend line is Security, whose immediate and long-term impacts are considered in more detail here. Further, as conflicts between nations escalate, the war between Russia and Ukraine is explored with a focus on India’s actions and gains in this context. The seven Resolutions mentioned above are the first order outcomes of the pandemic and can be easily identified. The second order outcomes are events that are just unfolding, the specifics of which can only begin to be anticipated. For example, while the authors of this report predicted in April 2020 that COVID-19 would likely accelerate the governance impact trend line, and global protest movements as immediate impact was assessed, the specific countries, patterns, and situations were never anticipated. By late May 2020, the United States became the epicentre of a global protest movement against police brutality and systemic racism. In the trend line of economic impact, breakdown in the global supply chain as a secondary outcome could be anticipated, however, the delay in restoring the USA-China supply chain due to the extended COVID-19 impact on China could never have been anticipated.

Revolution	Indicator	Immediate Impacts	Long-term Impacts
 Security	Expanding National Security	Health security elevates as core to national security	Growing debt pressures reduce defense spending
	Fragmentation	U.S. and Chinese Leadership failures deepen global fragmentation	Future organizing principles for the international system unclear
	Gray Zone	Countries intensity gray zone actions as they avoid conventional conflict and seek advantages	Low defense budgets and increased fragmentation drive even more gray zone activities
	Return to Terror	Increased activity by violence extremist organization (VEOs)	VEOs prey on weakened states, economic vulnerability to push ideology and influence

Figure 1: Paradigm to understand the impact of COVID-19 on security
 (Ref: Brannen, Samuel, Ahmed, Habiba, and Newton, Henry. 2020. ‘COVID-19 Reshapes the Future’, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS))

Under the security trend line, the Russia-Ukraine Conflict could have played out as an immediate impact (Matsaberidze, D. 2015) in the 'grey zone' (refer Fig.1) where the land ownership or line of control between the two nations is contested. However, the conflict has now blown up to the level of a global event by way of a prolonged war. It may cause a re-emergence of a bipolar world and all countries currently have national security concerns about future security boundaries and increasing defence budgets.

The pandemic has entered the second phase of low mortality and morbidity heading towards a long tail. A spate of studies emerged anticipating the relationship between COVID-19, conflict and security issues. The policy brief 'Taking Stock' (Cimmino, J. et.al 2020) states that the COVID-19 pandemic shattered global health security, devastated the world economy, and accelerated great-power rivalry between the USA and China. It provides details about the origin of the novel coronavirus and how it spread around the world. It also examines how COVID-19 exacerbated or created pressure points in the global order, highlights uncertainties ahead, and provides recommendations to the USA and its partners for shaping the post-COVID world. The following pressure points are identified: global economic downturn due to shut down to contain the virus; conflict between China and the USA over soft power control; tensions between Russia and NATO; trans-Atlantic tension between the USA and its European allies during COVID-19 due to travel bans; and an Indo-Pacific alliance that excludes the EU and partnership with multilateral institutions and global health.

However, global events change unpredictably. By February 2022, China was facing a fourth wave of COVID-19 and with its zero-tolerance policy, had implemented a complete lockdown of major cities, reducing and even shutting down industrial production and disrupting the supply chain to the USA. The USA was recovering from the previous Trump government's anti-containment and anti-mitigation policies. This severely impacted the trade between USA and China. Mainly due to China's very stringent measures to eliminate COVID-19 from its country, the pressure on China was to focus internally, rather than on defence and security initiatives externally till recently. The supply-side constraints causing delivery delays in consumer goods and in semiconductor chips that were mainly produced in China, were quoted as high inflation and slow economic recovery. Both these economies, seen as global leaders, had to deploy their armed forces towards COVID-19 containment and mitigation on account of their large populations and geographies. The main focus was to reduce death rates and reduce hospitalization through COVID-19 vaccination.

Opportunity for Russia

In the face of the pandemic, along with the USA and China, Russia remains a key player in the global landscape. It has intervened militarily in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria (Matsaberidze, D., 2014). While Russia is not a rising power and its economy is smaller than those of Brazil, Italy, and India, the disorder caused by a global pandemic served Russia's interest as the impact of the pandemic became manageable⁵¹.

The present Russia-Ukraine conflict is one possible outcome of the waning of the pandemic. It began in the grey area as the paradigm describes (refer Fig.1). It was a result of a necessity for Russia to resolve hostilities with Ukraine and the chance taken by the Russian President Vladimir Putin to send troops into Ukraine territory, along the shared Eastern borders with Ukraine. The pro-West government in Ukraine post their 2019 elections was threatening Russia's power of influence over Ukraine (Allison R., 2014). The chance that Russia took was to send troops into the Eastern border with Ukraine in February 2022 as a special military operation, another grey zone activity, dividing Ukraine along the centre. The stated intention was to control terrorist groups attacking Russians in Ukraine. At the very least, Russia wanted

⁵¹Russia developed its own vaccine and greatly controlled the spread of COVID-19 by late 2021. According to the MNRE-Solar subsidy-scheme, India wants to increase solar power capacity of the country in order to increase the generation capacity of eco-friendly energy resources and reduce the overall GHG emission percentage in the near future.

to capture the city of Mariupol, currently in Ukraine, and complete its land bridge to Crimea. This would give Russia control over more than 80 percent of the Ukrainian Black Sea coastline, and cuts off Ukraine's maritime trade.

When Russian troops finally crossed Ukraine's Northern and Eastern borders, they met with massive resistance. Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, quickly approached the EU and the USA for military help. The strategy that the USA employed was to escalate the Russia-Ukraine conflict into a global issue. It chose to draft a resolution at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on ending the Ukraine crisis. The draft was to hold the Russian Federation accountable for the refugee crisis caused by military operations initiated by Russia. The resolution ordered Russia to withdraw Russian forces immediately from inside Ukraine's boundaries and to allow for humanitarian aid to be made available to people in need. Passing such a resolution would mean that UN peacekeeping forces would have been deployed between the two countries to stop the conflict and UN trade sanctions against Russia would be applied for ensuring its compliance. The draft resolution, submitted by Albania and the United States, was filed in the UNSC, and the Security Council met on 25 February 2022 to pass this resolution. This garnered support from 11 members but was vetoed by the Russian Federation. China, India and the United Arab Emirates all abstained. Amid the unfolding crisis in Ukraine, the Security Council rejected the resolution (UN Press February 25, 2022).

As a result, the USA and the EU countries imposed progressive trade sanctions against Russia in a phased manner. The most important impact is the energy sanctions imposed by Russia in retaliation to European trade sanctions. Natural gas, considered clean from a climate change perspective, is the most important energy export from Russia to the European countries. Russia had established major gas pipelines with European countries including the United Kingdom (UK) and its own neighbourhood of Eastern European countries. In 2021, Russian gas met 40 percent of European energy requirements. European countries then decided to reduce their dependence on Russian gas. In reaction, Russia turned off its pipeline to various gas companies. Besides the UK and Germany, the other large Russian gas importers in the European Union are France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Austria and Slovakia. The largest non-EU importers of Russian natural gas are Turkey and Belarus (Fisher, J., June 22, 2022).

India's position

These sanctions are expected to have an impact on the global economy through the disruption of supply chains. The impact on energy and commodity prices is already visible. The disruption of the global supply chain is expected to significantly impact the movement of goods and the import-export trade, particularly food grains, fertilizers, and petroleum. India has substantial dealings with both Russia and Ukraine; an assessment in this regard by the Indian government is underway (Minister of External Affairs, March 15, 2022). India is in the process of analysing its impact on India-Russia bilateral trade and economic cooperation, in consultation with all stakeholders. India's stance is that its relations with Russia stand on their own merit (Minister of External Affairs, March 15, 2022).

While India abstained from voting in the UNSC meeting, it has not violated any UN charter in maintaining friendships with all nations and with its commitment to peace. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement in different forums since 25 February 2022, is to express deep concern at the worsening situation in Ukraine, to extend humanitarian assistance and to call for the immediate cessation of violence. India has asserted that a path of diplomacy and dialogue be followed to resolve differences internationally. India has emphasised to all member states of the UN that the UN Charter be respected for territorial integrity and the sovereignty of states

For India, the interests of its citizens in foreign countries in situations of crisis is a priority. Indian students studying abroad and Indian businesses expanding into the Balkans and Russia is a new reality that at the height of the crisis, required prompt action. Operation Ganga involved contacting Indian students studying in Ukraine, releasing advisories every day, and organising flights to India by the embassy in Ukraine. The support that India received from Ukraine's neighbours during Operation Ganga was also very valuable. On India's part, it is by now an established tradition that any rescue and relief effort also include citizens of other neighbouring countries. As a result of Indian advisories and Operation Ganga, around 22,500 Indian citizens have returned to India safely since February 24, 2022. India since then has sent and continues to send humanitarian aid (Minister of External Affairs April 01, 2022). It has also offered to help neighbouring and developing countries who may ask for assistance (Minister of External Affairs April 01, 2022).

The impact of EU and USA sanctions on Russia due to the conflict has had a positive impact on India-Russia bilateral trade and economic cooperation on account of India choosing to abstain in the UNSC vote. India's relations with Russia stand on their own merit. India's trade has risen with Russia from 75.8 million USD over the last five years to 6.4 billion USD in April 2022. This is almost twice as much as for the same period last year. If India maintains these volumes throughout the year, it will have a turnover of more than 19 billion USD by the end of 2022 (NDTV India-News, July 6 2022).

Since February 2022, India has taken quick action to protect its interests and the interests of its partner developing countries. India will ensure that the long-term unrest due to shortages is avoided in the partner countries. While being the second largest wheat exporting country, India has banned wheat exports in anticipation of food shortages in the future due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and with the intention of helping neighbourhood partner countries when needed (Chakraborty, D., June 13, 2022). India also focuses on the availability of fertilizers, and has kept the value chains of fertilizers smooth at a global scale. India is trying to increase the production of fertilizers within its borders and seek cooperation from the G7-countries in this regard (Ministry of External Affairs, June 27, 2022).

Conclusion

India's clearly-stated foreign policy asserts its stand in international situations of stress. In the case of COVID-19, as soon as the global shutdown was declared, India mobilized its human resource team from scratch to assist its partner countries who needed help. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India's commitment to peace and non-alignment, while respecting the UN Charter and territorial integrity, was seen in its emphasis on the restoration of peace immediately. India has emphasised that the path of diplomacy and dialogue be followed to resolve differences internationally.

India's interests are put first. India used this opportunity to promote its interest by creating an indigenous vaccine and exporting it to 101 countries (Vaccine Supply, August 25, 2022) India promoted special trade with Russia, because it was in the national interest to do so. India's commitment to the safety of its citizens was also asserted through safe travel during both the COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

India has also offered assistance to its partner countries in need of medical support, and transport for their citizens. Humanitarian assistance is also provided for countries in crisis when needed.

India has respected and participated in global governance institutions and organisations. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the WHO guidelines were followed. In the case of international

security, the set procedures of the UNSC were adhered to and in the case of trade with Russia, international trade rules were followed.

In conclusion, the four principles on which the policies and strategies are based are clear, and the corresponding actions are implemented on ground effectively. This has helped India now emerge as a global leader. This leadership believes in global peace and an independent and autonomous position of leadership that is truly non-aligned, protecting and taking care of India: its economic and defence interest and its citizens' interests first and subsequently taking every partner country along with India, while participating in global governance.

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