

*Event Transcript*

**The Ukraine Crisis and India's Russia Conundrum**

March 15, 2022  
The Stimson Center

*Featuring:*

**Dr. Tanvi Madan**, Director, India Project, and Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

**Dr. Aleksei Zakharov**, Research Fellow, School of International Affairs, HSE University

**Chirayu Thakkar**, Joint Doctoral Candidate in International Relations, National University of Singapore & King's College, London, and Former Visiting Fellow, Stimson Center

**Akriti Vasudeva** (moderator), Fellow, South Asia Program, Stimson Center

**Event Description**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses a dilemma not only for European security but also countries like India that seek to balance upholding territorial integrity of all states with their dependence on Russian weapons. How could its response to this crisis impact India's defense and strategic posture and New Delhi's perceptions of its threat environment in light of growing Russia-China bonhomie? Further, what could it mean for the U.S.-India strategic partnership, especially as India faces possible sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for its purchase of Russia's S-400 system, and its engagement with the Quad? This panel discussion examined New Delhi's stakes in the crisis and how those may shape its ties with Moscow and Washington going forward.

More information and event video available at: <https://www.stimson.org/event/the-ukraine-crisis-and-indias-russia-conundrum/>

Akriti Vasudeva: Hello and welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us for this important and timely discussion. My name is Akriti Vasudeva, and I'm a Fellow with the Stimson Center's South Asia program. And today, we will examine the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for India, and how New Delhi's stance may impact its ties with Moscow, Washington, Beijing, and beyond. And before I introduce our excellent panelists, let me just give you some context for our conversation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, beginning February 24<sup>th</sup>, has already devastated many Ukrainian cities,

resulted in thousands of casualties, and caused displacement of millions of people. It has also sharpened not only regional security concerns in Europe, but also exacerbated great power competition, setting off geopolitical dilemmas for many countries around the world. Among them is India, which has a long history of political, strategic, and defense relations with the Soviet Union/(now) Russia, but it is also developing strong ties and robust cooperation with the West.

Akriti Vasudeva: On the one hand, India, which has been a vocal supporter of a rules-based order, seeks to stand with its like-minded partners such as the US and Europe and uphold the principle of territorial integrity for all states, including Ukraine. While on the other hand, India is trying to ensure that it can minimize the disruption to its military supplies from Russia, which according to [research](#) by my Stimson Center colleagues and me, accounts for 85% of India's arsenal. Thus, our event today will discuss: how could India's response to this crisis, including its abstentions at the UN, impact its defense and strategic posture, and New Delhi's perceptions of its threat environment, especially in light of growing Russia-China bonhomie? Further, what could it mean for the US-India strategic partnership, especially as India faces possible sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA, for its purchase of Russia's S-400 system? And what also could be the impact on India's engagement with the Quad?

To discuss all these aspects and more, I'm delighted to be joined by a fantastic panel of scholars who study India, Russia, and the US very closely. We have with us today, Dr. Tanvi Madan: she is a senior fellow in the Project on International Order and Strategy in the Foreign Policy program and Director of The India Project at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. I am sure many of you are familiar with her work on Indian foreign policy, particularly on India's relations with China and the United States, as well as on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad. Dr. Madan is the author of the book "Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped US-India Relations during the Cold War."

Next, we have Dr. Aleksei Zakharov, who is a Research Fellow at the School of International Affairs of the Higher School of Economics National Research University in Moscow, Russia. His research focuses on Indian foreign policy, Russia-India relations, and international affairs in the Indo-Pacific. Previously, he was a Visiting Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi.

Akriti Vasudeva: And last but not least, we have Chirayu Thakkar, who is a joint doctoral candidate in International Relations at the National University of Singapore and King's College, London. His research explores India's relations with the United States and Europe and while he was a visiting

fellow at the Stimson Center, he authored a memo comparing and contrasting India and the United States' voting record at the UN.

Since we only have an hour, we will dispense with opening remarks, and instead what we'll do is that I'll pose some questions of my own to each of our panelists. But I'd also like the audience to engage with our panel and so we are going to collect questions throughout the discussion and intersperse them into our conversation where relevant. So, if you'd like to ask our panelists something, please type your query into the "Q&A" box and please direct them to me. And I'll try to get to as many as I can.

Akriti Vasudeva: So, let's get started, and Aleksei, let me come to you first, just to kind of get some context on what is happening at the moment. Could you explain what are Russia's political goals and motivations with regard to Ukraine, and what is Moscow's calculus on how its actions in Ukraine will impact its ties with the West, but also with India and China? I also wanted to ask you--there's been some debate about whether Moscow informed New Delhi in advance and accurately on what it intended to undertake in Ukraine, if you have a sense of that as well.

Aleksei Zakharov: Thank you, Akriti. Thanks for these set of questions, [this is a] really complicated one. Starting from the political motivations that Moscow seems to pursue in its Ukrainian operation, I think we can refer to some hints from negotiations between the Russian and Ukrainian sides, which are ongoing these days. Because, before that, as per official announcement, there were many different reasons cited. Some of them having to deal with history, some of them with geopolitics, and even with the protection of the Russian-speaking part of the Ukrainian population. But what we hear from the negotiation process, I think, is that the major focus for Russia's agenda is on the neutral status of Ukraine and taking off the table the prospect of Ukraine's membership in NATO. The second possible goal for Russia is to attempt to get official recognition from the Ukrainian side of the independence of the breakaway Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk and also the recognition of Crimea as Russian territory.

So, of course, this list is very tough for any negotiation. That's why I think that at the point where we are now, it's difficult to gauge what are the prospects of these negotiations to move forward. There are also additional items on the agenda, but some Ukrainian representatives claimed that they were slightly put off by these. What I mean is the so-called de-Nazification of Ukraine, which President Putin referred to during his speech. The demand to prohibit the activity of ultranationalist parties in Ukraine, and even revoke some laws that exist in Ukraine, in this regard. And also, an attempt to promote the status of the Russian language and to return it to the status of the second official language in Ukraine. But I

think that these items will remain additional because it could be difficult to start with these questions as of now.

Regarding the impacts of this so-called military operation on Russia's ties with the West and broadly with its partners in Asia, I think that it was difficult for the Russian side to prepare for the reaction. Of course, there were some attempts to increase the independence of the Russian economic system from the West and there were attempts to move from the dollar, which were actually limited in scale. But the Russian Central Bank now has higher reserves of RMB. And I think that there was some limited preparation for some conflict and disruption in its relationship with the West. At the same time, we're still far from the end of this conflict, so it's very difficult to say how profound this crisis will be, and there is still a small window of cooperation between Russia and Europe.

In the energy sector where there is mutual interdependence between the two sides – Russia depends on its exports to Europe, and Europe depends on Russian energy – I think that this will continue for some time, despite the ongoing trajectory of the military situation in Ukraine. When it comes to Asia, Russia will be trying to promote its ties with those countries which have not joined sanctions, and which have remained neutral on the Ukrainian issue, primarily with China and India. But now that Russia has met unprecedented pressure in the financial spheres, it will be easier said than done. That's why we'll have to see how this reconfiguration of economic ties with its Asian partners will be implemented.

Lastly, I am almost confident that the Indian government was in the dark about Russia's military intervention plan, so I think that the Indian government was caught by surprise. If New Delhi had been notified about any kind of military intervention or military operation, I think that the process of evacuation of Indian students would have been conducted in a different manner, because actually it has been surprising, and it has been a very painful experience for the Indian government, both in terms of domestic policy implications, and in terms of the very process of getting the students back to India.

Given the intensity of contact that has been going on between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin, I think that the Indian government was actually unprepared for this kind of scenario.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thank you so much Aleksei. And I'll come back to you, and dig deeper on India-Russia relations and implications of possible arms delays. But let me come to you now, Tanvi, and talk a little bit more about the dilemma that India faces due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A lot of commentary has been generated on this dilemma of balancing between upholding territorial integrity and maintaining its legacy strategic relationship with Russia—

you and others have termed it as a values versus interests debate. Can you explain India's constraints and interests with respect to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, how this crisis is likely to shape Indian thinking about arms dependence on Russia, and broader balancing between Russia and the West?

Tanvi Madan: Thanks Akriti, and thanks to the Stimson Center and also to Isha [Gupta] and Adrienne [Cuffley] for putting together this event and having me participate. It's great to be on a panel with Aleksei and Chirayu as well. I think the way I would put it is slightly differently, because I don't think it's values versus interest. I think it goes back to something the Indian Foreign Minister said in Europe before the invasion, which is that policymakers have to balance interests and beliefs. And it's not just interest versus beliefs, it's even within those two categories that you've seen competing priorities pulling in different directions.

I think on the belief side, for instance, as you mentioned, a core Indian belief has been their respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, partly because of India's concerns as a postcolonial country about others impinging on its sovereignty. Especially two neighbors that are its rivals and have made territorial claims against India. And so, India does not have any interest – zero interest – in endorsing the idea that it is okay for a larger neighbor, or any neighbor, to unilaterally change the territorial status quo using force, and particularly to this degree. Because some of the claims that Russia makes vis-à-vis Ukraine are the claims that China makes versus India and uses to justify its own actions.

Tanvi Madan: But there are other beliefs, including not condemning countries. Because India thinks that doing that actually isolates countries, makes pathways to dialogue less likely. It especially does not condemn its partners publicly. So, whatever the difference India will have on this—and it does not support the Russian invasion or hostilities, which is the word that the Indian government uses—those will be discussed privately, and not publicly. And so, you see those two beliefs are in conflict with each other because one view says that you should be saying things, and Chirayu I'm sure will talk about how you see this in India's UN Security Council approach. But you also see this other view. And then there's a whole set of interests, including the proximate interest, something Aleksei mentioned, which is needing to get more than 20,000 Indian nationals out of Ukraine, for which India needed to maintain a dialogue and preserve its capital with both Ukraine and Russia, and both have provided assistance to India in doing so.

Tanvi Madan: But the other proximate interest for India is ensuring that in the context of tensions at the China-India border, where there's concern that these might be aggravated, or China might take advantage in this springtime season,

that you don't see Russia putting its thumb on the scale, or tilting towards China. And I think when we talk about India preserving its ties with Russia, you also see competing priorities: on the one hand that will mean that India does not want to oppose Russia or condemn it publicly. But I think there's a recognition within the Indian system—which is why they never wanted to see this invasion happen, or had hoped it would not—that over time, whether it's the sanctions, whether what is happening with the Russian defense industry and the supplies, whether it is what's happening with the Ukrainian defense industry and what that will do to supply to India, Delhi will be adversely affected. India's ability to both do defense business with Russia, and also to diversify the relationship, which is what India and Russia have been aiming to do, will be affected.

In the interest of time, I won't go into the other sets of interests in great detail, but as everybody knows, India also has deep ties, in fact, growing ties and broader ties with the other stakeholders involved, whether that's with the US, whether that's with Ukraine. But also, we forget Europe, and we tend to club them all together as the West; let's remember, Singapore, Japan, Australia, others have also spoken up against Russia. But I would also particularly mention for example, when we talk about Europe, India also has interests with the former Soviet republics, the former Warsaw Pact countries, who had been Soviet allies during the Cold War but have taken a very different stance.

These are the ties that potentially could be affected that India has to keep in mind. Finally, there are the reputational costs of the stance India is taking, which it has to factor in. So, it's a very complicated set of interests, and it's a tightrope balancing act. We can talk more about the defense aspect, and what this means for Indian dependence, but in the interest of time, I will leave that for later.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thank you so much Tanvi. And you're right, we will come back to discuss more on how India's response might affect ties with the US, Europe, and the Quad. Chirayu, let me come to you now, and ask you to talk a little bit about another aspect of this. This got a lot of attention, which is India's voting at the UN where it hasn't called out Russia by name, but has sought to uphold the principles of territorial integrity and call for diplomacy and dialogue between both sides. It has sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine. There was a comment from someone in our chat saying that it seems like India appears to be siding with Russia because Indian domestic polling shows that they're supporting Russia. Can you explain what are the factors behind India's abstentions at the UN, put them in historical context? And Tanvi spoke about this too a little bit, but can these statements be read between the lines as signals to Russia and the global community? What message is India trying to send?

Chirayu Thakkar: Thank you, Akriti, for having me. It's also great to be with Tanvi and Aleksei on this panel. I have identified in my [Stimson Center] [memo](#) when I was a Visiting Fellow that there are seven or eight factors that determine how India votes, especially when it's under the spotlight. At the UN General Assembly, about 193 countries are voting and most of the voting justifications are consumed by domestic audience pressures. But when you are in a high stakes UN Security Council situation, there's a global spotlight on you.

Talking about precedence, a little bit of history is important: like India is a bipartisan success story in the US, Russia is a bipartisan success story in India, if I can use that phrase. In 1956, during the Soviet invasion of Hungary, Jawaharlal Nehru, although a little bit personally disappointed, supported it. Then comes 1979, when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan starts – that was the Janata Party government. And, by 1980, Indira Gandhi [of Congress] has already taken over and she comes and supports the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. In fact, in 1980, she delivers a speech via the Permanent Representative to the General Assembly. In 2008, India was not in the UN Security Council when Georgia happened, so we preferred to keep mum. Again, when the Crimea situation happened in 2014, the issue came to the General Assembly and India abstained.

Chirayu Thakkar: It's this Western interpretation that if you abstain, you're not with us. And also, it is shaped by the fact that particularly in this instance, the Russian Embassy thanked India saying your absentia means you are with us. Abstention technically means that you are neither with us nor with them. There are a ways of interpreting it but that's the literal meaning of it. But, as Tanvi said, even the beliefs, the container of beliefs, is quite complicated. And in 2014, Indian National Security Advisor Shivashankar Menon gave an explanation of the vote: he came out and said that Russia has legitimate security interest in Crimea.

Now, a country like India, which believes in territorial integrity, sovereignty, and sanctity of borders, also has to an extent its own version and view of spheres of influence. So, if India does not allow the Maldives to sign a Status of Forces Agreement with the United States for 10 years and it tries to pull back as long as it can, that means it can understand Russia's sphere of influence and Russian anxiety as well. What I'm trying to say is that [India] is looking to move neutrally. So, a) it has this idea of fence-sitting, and b) there's precedence. Russia has vetoed five times for India, in '57, '62, and thrice in '71. Since then, it has become almost evident that if ever the situation in Kashmir or India-Pakistan goes to the UN Security Council, Russia would veto it. So, there is reciprocal support that both countries have historically extended to each other.

Chirayu Thakkar: But I need to qualify this by saying that: a) abstention doesn't mean unquestioned support, and b) India has issues with Russia's methods. So, even when it understands and abstains and tries to sit on the fence, it does not approve of Russia's methods in its explanations. So, take the case of Sergei Skripal: Russia lost a vote in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) by 17 members. India would have either voted this way or that way, it doesn't matter. But India abstained. India did not stand by it. And India was very explicit that this is a method we do not approve of. Did India say it publicly? No, it did not. But the clear signal is there.

So, even in Ukraine, the way I see it is that there is a message that India wants to send: we are not going to sit with side A, and we are not going to sit with side B. But there are certain limits and these you cannot violate. More broadly, on the interest side of it...[India's] arms dependence [on Russia] is there, and it's going to stay for quite long. There are a lot of commentaries talking about trend lines, and these trend lines are real. For example, just yesterday, SIPRI (the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) [released a new report](#) and it says that India's imports have now dramatically reduced by 21%. In the previous year, the SIPRI report said that [Indian] imports from Russia have gone down by 43%. It means India is diversifying dramatically. One particular platform that I track is artillery guns, and Russia is not at all dominant in that. Drones are another example.

But still, whatever is in service, it's not going to decommission. So, the 1965 main battle tanks that we acquired, the Soviet T55s and the British Vickers, remained in service until 2008 and 2011. So, these platforms that have been introduced in the last 10-15 years, they are here to stay for another 25-30 years. Also, the comfort that we have with Russia in terms of imports, price, transfer of technology...all these things are becoming almost a drug, and India is trying to wean itself away. It's trying to diversify, but things are not going to change dramatically.

Now, Tanvi will speak more about this but in terms of the neutrality that we expect in terms of any conflagration with China. So, these are some of the key variables – strategic, military, our own precedents – that prevent us from taking sides. Also, our own idea of fencing-sitting and multipolarity at a more abstract level. There are some remnants of non-alignment, as some recent commentaries have suggested. Whatever you want to [make of it], but there are some abstract inputs as well. And most importantly, the signal that India is trying to send is, look, we are not comfortable with what you are doing. We'll privately not accept you. And even if we understand political challenges, going and offending this country is something as a method we don't approve of.



Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Chirayu. And I'll just add one quick thing to that: there have been some other public signals of India's disappointment with Russian actions whether you look at either the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) briefings, where they've pushed back on some of Russian propaganda about Ukraine taking hostages or about supplying buses to Indian students for evacuation. Or even the fact that the Modi government has reached out to Ukraine and provided humanitarian aid and had these conversations is a signal to Russia that they're not okay with the current situation. But, Tanvi, I know you wanted to make a couple of points on this as well.

Tanvi Madan: Yeah - building on what you said, I think one thing worth looking at is India's position at the UN Security Council and even beyond it on the situation has evolved. And I think part of the problem is – Chirayu mentioned clear signals – I think unless you speak MEA speak, these signals aren't clear. I think one thing the Indian government should consider doing is what a number of other governments do, which is when you put out these official statements, you background brief others to explain what that actually means that you said that. Those of us who sit and pour over MEA statements, we can see the gradations between it. But this is something that should be coming from Delhi in terms of, look, this is the signal we are trying to send with this. Because otherwise, as Chirayu said, you will have Moscow saying we are pleased with this position, it suggests backing for us, and that is not India's position.

Akriti, you mentioned ways to separate India from the Russian position, and particularly on some kind of communications aspects. You've also seen the [Indian] government drop the “spheres of influence” idea. It's not something this government has said, because this argument was fine for India to make when it was about India's version of the Monroe Doctrine in South Asia, when India was the largest power. The problem for India today is not necessarily that. The bigger problem for India is that if you start saying we're fine with the spheres of influence world, China considers all of Asia, all the Indo-Pacific, as its sphere of influence. Hence why India today has accepted, and even said good things about, a US-Maldives defense agreement. It's because this is changing.

Tanvi Madan: You've also seen India drop language, for instance, on legitimate security interests of all sides, if you look at the explanations of votes, if you look at the recent statements. So, India will still say, as the Foreign Minister did today, that the root causes are different views on security architecture, etc. They're not saying very much on proximate causes, and they are not saying, for example, that any security interest justifies the military actions that have been taken. And I think the second thing you have seen in terms of evolving is this idea, in these conversations that Prime Minister Modi has had with President Putin and in the Indian readout of the first

conversation on February 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup>, that Russia and NATO should dialogue on this.

In the latest, Indian Prime Minister Modi suggested that President Putin should talk to President Zelensky about this. So, it tells you there's been an evolution. But again, those of us who look at this deeply will get that it should be a clearer signal. It's not.

Finally, I'll just make one quick point and a pitch for Aleksei's writing on Russia-India relations. The [Russian] vetoes actually got more complicated. Today, it's France and the US that are the countries – even on India-Pakistan issues – are the ones that India looks to, not Russia, because Russia hasn't taken the forward-leaning stance. Now, India's trying to ensure that Russia doesn't play spoiler, but they have seen a Russian move to voting with China. And the reason I mentioned people should read Aleksei's writings is he talks about how today's India-Russia relationship is not what it was during the Cold War. And it has different elements that have changed over time, and I think at the UN is one place that you are seeing this.

Akriti Vasudeva:

And one quick point to add to that is also the evolution of the Russia-Pakistan relationship and the military exercises. We saw the visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan to Russia as well while the invasion happened. So that's also something that concerns India and has probably changed its calculus and the way India thinks about Russia-China relations or the Russia-China-Pakistan relationship.

Tanvi – staying on you, we're getting a lot of questions as expected on the S-400 deal. We know that India's stance on the war is likely to have some second order effects. And one that's of particular importance, obviously, is the effect on US-India relations. You've tweeted about this as well, and, and I've seen this: there continue to be two schools of thought on what is likely to happen. So, one school says that there will be a negative impact due to India's stance on this crisis because US lawmakers are disappointed that India is not condemning Russia vocally.

We did have the US State Department send a cable that was later recalled which said that India is in Russia's camp. Obviously, there are concerns about what this means for potential sanctions on India under CAATSA. But then, there's also others who say that there won't be much of a direct impact on the US-India relationship because the US and the administration is sympathetic to India's constraints due to this legacy relationship with Russia. But also that they recognize India's importance in balancing China as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy. So, what is your sense of what the impact of this crisis will be on US-India relations?

Tanvi Madan:

It's too soon to tell, and we don't know yet because it's an evolving situation. I'll just say a little bit more about that so I'm doing my job here. The way I've been describing it is that this is not going to throw the US-India flight off its flight path or have the US-India plane crash. But it has thrown turbulence in front of this flight path. And it is something that the two sides will have to manage to ensure that it doesn't – I'm going to mix my metaphors here – doesn't go off the rails.

But I do think the [US] administration [actually understands] India's operational constraints, not wanting to derail the relationship, and realiz[es] that public pressure on India is largely often ineffective, if not counterproductive. The disappointment and anger at India has been expressed by commentators on the outside. The US government itself has been fairly measured because I think there's a recognition and it also shows that there has been learning in the US-India relationship over these many years. You've also seen this with the Australian government's comments on India's approach.

Having said that, the reality is that it is going to throw some complications in, including potentially on the Hill, where the mood, not necessarily on India, but the mood on Russia has deteriorated. And it's hard to see from the outside what does this do to the view of India that is held by non-Indo-Pacificists. And there are still many people who are Transatlanticists or at senior levels as well. Are they not going to make that extra effort for the India relationship that they were making six to eight months ago? Because there's a sense of, well is this really the India that we signed up for? You saw this in the mid-2000s, during the Bush administration, when there were differences over Iran as well. But I think there's enough momentum, enough strategic convergence, that it's not going to derail it, but we don't know how much it will affect ties.

Within the administration, they've been very focused: there's likely to be a 2+2 dialogue with the Indian foreign and defense ministers coming to Washington in early April, and you will see some of that. But I don't think we can say that it won't matter at all.

Tanvi Madan:

I think there are other effects, that we will only find out over time. And there are things that will affect the US-India relationship, including, for example, what does this mean for the Indo-Pacific, the implications writ large? Whether it's about the US role, whether it's about force posture, whether it's about Russia-China relations, which matter deeply to India. An India that concludes that Russia is becoming a junior partner of China will make different decisions, including about procurement, for instance.

And so, I think there's going to be the second order effects of sanctions. These are not sanctions against India, they're sanctions against Russia. But

they will have impact, and in India, perhaps will be seen as sanctions against India. Then on the US side, there'll be issues like, for example, Indian companies are buying [Russian] oil. And India says, well, for one, we buy very little oil. And second, you know, Europe's still buying a lot of oil and gas from Russia. But regardless, then the question becomes does this expose these companies to sanctions. But then you know, it also could be kind of an opportunity. The [US] Defense Department officials testified on the Hill last week, saying, look, we think that this is an opportunity to encourage *atmanirbhar bharat* or Indian self-reliance, so indigenous production, like American defense companies are already doing, and partnering with the private sector in particular.

But also accepting that, look, as India diversifies with external suppliers, it's not just going to be with the US. It will be with France, it will be with Israel, it will be with other European countries. And that's okay. Because remember, from a commercial perspective and from a strategic perspective, it is an opportunity for the US. I think it's very complex what this is going to do to US-India relations, and this is still an evolving situation. So, we shall see.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Tanvi. And, I'd just like to add one thing: we do have to take into account how staffers on the Hill or those who work in Congress are seeing this issue. Because it does impact the perceptions of India within the US and some of them have raised concerns that whatever be the [Indian] constraints, India is also billed as the supporter of the rules-based order and part of the Quad. And there are expectations within the US strategic community that India would take a more vocal stand. So, we do have to kind of see how that's going to shake out.

But I wanted to pick up on a couple of things that you said, Tanvi, and pose them to Chirayu and Aleksei. Chirayu, we talked about India's diversification away from Russia and other partners that it might consider in its journey towards moving away from Russian arms dependence. We have seen India's ties with Europe, particularly France and Germany, develop over the years. How is that likely to play out in the future? And is there a concern that Russia's actions will make Europe more focused on regional security and thus less able to invest in working with India?

Chirayu Thakkar: I think, again, it's a little too early to stick our neck out and say something on how much Europe will continue investing in Europe and how much it would distract them from working in the Indo-Pacific. Look, at the outset, Tanvi said a very interesting thing and I think there's a point in it and I want to underscore that. So, on the eve of this war, I was in New Delhi, I was talking to a former senior diplomat. And just to play devil's advocate, I was talking to him and asked: would India join the sanctions regime even indirectly? That was me trying to push the envelope. And he did not start

his answer by comparing to the United States. His first gut instinct [was to respond] has Europe ever joined any sanctions on Pakistan? And that tells us that Europe is one of the important actors. It is on the front line in this situation. And this is not merely a triangular situation between India, Russia, and the United States. Europe is also one of the key actors.

Now, Europe has very limited equities with India, barring France. When I say Europe, I mean the EU collectively. Now, it has very limited equities. You might disagree, but I would spell it out in larger detail [later], which I cannot do right now. But the point that I'm trying to make is when the [China-India standoff] happened and Tanvi has a superb [Twitter] thread on this which has like 17 or 18 instances where American officials have come out in support of India. Look at the signals that are coming out from Europe. Do you find an equivalent of it? Very little. And even if you look at it historically, the balancing act that we used to see from the United States as a neutral crisis manager, a large section of Europe is still doing it. And when I say Europe, I don't mean France. So, Europe as a collective, it has very limited equities with India.

Chirayu Thakkar:

Now speaking of France and Germany, whatever limited capital they have or the equities they have with New Delhi, they do not want to want to squander on this. Partly because they have resigned to the fact that India is not going to switch sides and express public opprobrium towards Moscow. And that was reflected in the French ambassador's statement when he talked to the Indian press and he said that we would want India on our side, but nobody should tell India, India's a free country, and we understand India's constraints.

So, that is that. But they are going to keep pushing that defense partnership and with Germany now spreading its own wings in defense, with their own re-armament, with their own domestic industries reigniting, I think Germany itself will try to get a share of the [Indian] pie what France is already successfully doing. What is the future of the cooperation? It depends on how much Europe, but particularly France and Germany, remain invested in the Indo-Pacific. If they remain, they would keep an eye on the bigger prize in the Indo-Pacific rather than expecting India to contribute even through signals to the security architecture in Europe. They would keep focusing on the prize in the Indo-Pacific. If they get distracted, we would see it naturally follow in the rhetoric towards India as well.

Akriti Vasudeva:

Thanks, Chirayu. I'm not sure I necessarily agree with your characterization that Europe doesn't have equities with India, but we will hopefully debate that at a later point. But I do want to come to Aleksei and pick up again on what Tanvi was talking about: there's been a lot of interest in the wake of this, actually before and during, on the China

Russia relationship and how that's going to be impacted, and how it's going to look going forward. Because you know, obviously the relationship has been growing closer over the last few years, but the Putin-Xi joint statement in early February was really kind of a marker of sort of a new era in the relationship, and it led some claim that the relationship was almost like a quasi-alliance. In the last few days there have also been reports that U.S. officials are saying that Russia is asking China for military assistance in the Ukraine, although China has denied that. How do you see Russia-China relations evolving and going forward? And, if there is going to be a closer Russia-China relationship, how is that likely to impact Moscow's ties with New Delhi and broadly the West?

Aleksei Zakharov: Well, unlike in the case of the India-US relationship and the India-Europe relationship, I believe it's not too early to discuss and to reflect on the trajectory of Russia-China relationship. And I would even say that maybe we should start a countdown till the formal alliance between the two. Because the current situation in which Russia found itself after the beginning of the military operation, especially the economic part of the situation indicates that the dependence on China will be quite huge. If we take this crisis as the new benchmark for Russia China cooperation, it will be just expansion of the kind of relationship that began in 2014, when Russia expanded its energy and defense supplies to China. But now it will just be more wide-ranging, and it will cover essentially more spheres. Now, I think that China will emerge as a primary destination for Russian exports. It will replace Europe on many accounts. Probably the two countries will try to fast track their energy projects, like the project of Power of Siberia to the second part of it. And I think that they've made some progress in terms of moving their trade away from the dollar to RMB.

But now this process will be accelerated, and I think that in a way Russian readiness to trade in RMB will help China internationalize its currency, so in a way, achieve its policy goals as well. There will also be growing dependence on Chinese supplies, of course. And I think that the trade balance will be in China's favor, so there will be dependence on the Chinese supplies of high technologies, electronics, also in bio sector, spare parts, etc. Regarding the reports about the Chinese military support in Ukraine, I don't know. I'm not as much informed about that. But from what I've heard from the Russian experts in China, they say it's more like a continuation of the discussion of previous contracts. And maybe Russia's just trying to fill in the gaps in its capabilities, both in defense and maybe even in civilian sectors, like in aviation, for instance. So, of course, we have to watch this space.

Aleksei Zakharov: In general, I think that the rise of this economic dependence will lead to some more accommodation in Russia's approaches. And maybe even some

shifts towards Russia's regional approaches. If we take the Indo-Pacific, I think that we will hear more often some of the Chinese talking points about Asian NATO, and the other issues we're well aware of. The change in relationship, for instance, between Russia and Japan, Japanese support of sanctions against Russian and some straightforward statements from the Japanese government, may also lead to some retaliation from the Russian side and maybe a growing coordination between Russia and China on their own territorial disputes with Japan. I think that we are likely to see a rise in joint maneuvers in the region, the continuation of joint air and joint naval patrols between China and Russia.

And here, I can only say that if we discuss the potential impact on Russia's ties with other strategic partners like India and probably Vietnam, I can only hope that Russia will maybe learn how to play strategic autonomy and will try to keep distance from the Chinese approach. I mean, from the Chinese position on South China Sea and from the Chinese position on Eastern Ladakh. Because I think that it would be smart for Russia to still not alter its approach to these regional issues, as both India and Southeast Asian nations will be also valuable partners in these difficult times for Russia. And another argument for this is that China is still playing a very long game. It's not openly supporting Russia or Ukraine. It's being very cautious in terms of its diplomatic approach. It's very cautiously approaching the sanctions issue. That's why I think that as long as China will also depend on Russia support in terms of military and technologies in its competition with the United States, I think that, till then, Russia will also be able to reject Chinese pressure on some of its important regional approaches.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Aleksei. Really interesting points and we'll really have to kind of wait and watch on how many of those play out. But if I can ask all of you to maybe gaze into the future a little bit and give us a sense of... This is a question for all of you, but I'll break it down in parts specific to your expertise. As we see the situation in Ukraine worsen, Russia more globally isolated because of crippling sanctions and losses of its military forces as well as capabilities, what are the implications of that?

First to you, Tanvi, [implications of this] on India's perceptions of its arms dependence on Russia and its strategic and defense posture. As well as how it approaches the Indo-Pacific and the Quad in terms of filling the gaps in its capabilities.

To you, Aleksei, [implications] for India-Russia relations broadly, especially because many of the India Russia arms sales, production upgrades, etc., are likely to be delayed or canceled. So, how does that impact India's relationship with Russia?

And to you, Chirayu, on how does this impact India's walking a diplomatic tightrope at the UN as the situation worsens? Are we likely to see India's stance shift subtly? What are aspects that it might emphasize? We'll go to you, Tanvi, then Aleksei, then Chirayu.

Tanvi Madan:

Thanks, Akriti. A couple of things. I think one, as India thinks about its arsenal, the question that I don't know the answer to yet is, is this, as our colleague Dhruva Jaishankar pointed out, going to be a 1991 moment? [Are these] the set of circumstances that will get India to move on things it knows that it's had to do and it's been trying to do? 1991 is not when the reforms started. They'd been kind of going along since the '70s and '80s slowly, slowly, slowly. But as we know, sometimes it takes a crisis for India to kind of really get moving. We saw this in '62, we saw it in '91. So do we see India go on the war footing, so to speak? Not literally, but in terms of implementing the two things it has been trying to do. One is considerably accelerating and improving its indigenous defense production. The reason I don't like to use the word "self-reliance," I like to use the word "resilience," is because even that indigenization will require partnerships with various countries abroad, especially if it has to happen at speed. There's no point in reinventing the wheel for everything, especially if they are opportunities for engagements.

And the second thing it started to do along with indigenization is diversification. And that, I think India has made more progress on, we've some latest figures as well. But especially on indigenization and even on the diversification, given other budgetary priorities, given political economy considerations that have been obstacles, and this will require political capital, will the Prime Minister say we need to think about this in a fundamentally different and accelerated way? I don't know the answer to that yet.

The second thing is going to be related to something Aleksei talked about. Which is, the trajectory of the Russia-China relationship. I think India believes that Russia will continue to try to be as strategically autonomous as possible too because it has these long-term concerns about China, because China is not a Russian ally, and it has been partly been an aim of India foreign policy to try to give Russia non-China options to try to keep that relation from deepening further.

As Aleksie pointed out, whatever India wants or has tried to do, this crisis is going to go against that interest. The question will be—and I think this is something Pranab Dal Samantha put well in the Economic Times—what does it mean for India, especially while it is facing a crisis with China, what will a Russia perhaps more beholden to China for its own interests do if China makes asks of it that go against Indian interests? Whether that's in a China-India crisis, or for something like, what if Beijing turns



around and says to Moscow you've signed off on India selling the Brahmos system to the Philippines, we don't want you to do that. What will Russia do then? Again, we don't know the answer yet, and India will hope that Russia's own long-term interest will keep it away from that.

But often countries are looking at the more proximate, near-term interests in the ways they act. And that will have profound implications for India's strategic posture. And then [looking at] the other countries and other partners that we call like-minded in the Indo-Pacific. Those two things [indigenization and Russia-China relations], depending on which the way they go, could actually mean either much closer Indian relationship or tilt [with like-minded partners], or it could mean India continuing to play this kind of hedging game for a while.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Tanvi. Just one point to add to that is that it was interesting to see a discussion of the Ukraine crisis at the recent Quad Summit. And despite not really a mention of Russia, it still showed that there was an attempt by at least some Quad members to link what's happening in Ukraine to the Indo-Pacific. So, it'll be interesting to see how that plays out as well in Indian calculations. But, Aleksei, to you on the question of broader impacts for India-Russia relations.

Aleksei Zakharov: I agree with Tanvi that India's signals and the United Nations and other statements will be mostly, or are already, read in Russia as more of support. That's why I think that the economic sphere will suffer most from this current crisis. Because in war time [everything is] black or white. Either you're with us or you're against us, and India's neutrality is perceived mostly in Russia as you are mostly with us. Those countries that are neutral that are still believed to be more or less supportive.

But when it comes to the economic part, I think this part of the relationship, this sphere, was problematic. And there were many issues. The trade was not moving forward despite announcements and statements to do that. And this shift to national currencies was much easier when the economy was more stable, when the currency was not as volatile. Now, with the changing economic situation, it will be more difficult to do.

Actually, this attempt to utilize national currencies, mostly the Russian ruble, began in 2014. And in the last year, there was some success actually in defense sector. The defense deals were signed in rubles, and we've seen some progress in terms of payments for the S-400. And that's why I think that before this situation, the process was moving quite positively. But now, I think that the major issue will be with the volatility of the exchange rate and there is already some support [for the position] that the two countries need a reference currency and [it is] reported that this reference currency may be RMB, which for India sounds quite ironic.

Aleksei Zakharov: So, from the Russian side, there is readiness to promote RMB and to say let's move from the US dollar to the Chinese government's financial system. But will India be as happy as Russia? I'm not sure. The other thing is the constant exposure to sanctions, which will now be a factor for the Indian government. I think that's very problematic for the Indian private sector, which hasn't shown much interest in interacting with Russia before. Now it will think twice or thrice if it needs to cooperate with Russia in any sphere. And there are early reports that [Indian] private companies are thinking of some kind of substitution of their Russian business to other countries.

So, I think that there will be some unpleasant developments for both countries. When it comes to military cooperation, and I've seen some questions in the chat box, I think that the S-400 deal is quite safe. It's a very important symbol. If the S-400 is put off or canceled, I think it will be a huge blow for the relationship. That's why both the governments will do most to move forward and complete this deal. Also, as I said, this deal was quite insulated from sanctions with the rubles mechanism, even though I think on CAATSA, it's still not clear which way the sanction threat for India goes.

But again, with fluctuation in ruble, I think that there may be some problems with payments. So, this question is quite speculative still. The only deal that has been reported to be delayed is the AK-203 assault rifles deal, which is delayed for some months. But it's still not clear if, maybe after this military operation is over, maybe they will come back to that. But, in general, not to go into specifics, I think that like in the 1990s, now too would be a turbulent time for Russia-India relations. And I think that this interdependence will actually grow because in a way [India] should keep their fingers crossed that the Russian economy will sustain and Russia will be able to complete its obligations in terms of at least defense supplies.

Aleksei Zakharov: And I think that there will be more Russian dependence, especially due to the defense industrial complex, for the contracts from India. And at the same time India will be keenly interested in Russia's ability to provide uninterrupted supplies of equipment and spare parts. That's why we should see how they will manage to do that. But maybe in a way the two will try to stay closer because both know they are very much needed by the other.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Aleksei. We're over time, Chirayu, but I do want you to comment on India's stance at the UN going forward?

Chirayu Thakkar: Yes, quickly, three or four very brief points. First, drawing on Tanvi's point: look, in August [2021], India was the president [of the UNSC] and it tried to pull off one of the signature events [on maritime security] where

it wanted the heads of state or at least the foreign Ministers to attend, and Prime Minister Modi gave the inaugural speech. And it is reported that Beijing tried to lobby with all the governments to make sure that this turns out to be a damp squib or at least not as high profile as it could be. And Putin did attend that event and Indian commentators say that this is Russia's own version of strategic autonomy between China and India.

Now, if the Russian attitude more or less remains of that sort, then India's stance will not change dramatically and it will continue walking the tightrope. But if Chinese influence grows and at some point, Russia stops showing strategic autonomy or doesn't support India the way they've supported in the past, then I think India's position might waiver as well. So, that is one aspect, how Russia continues behaving. The second aspect is how much weight Russia carries internationally going forward, its economy, etc. See, UN is a different sort of a body, it has its own dynamics. Russia would continue to be a permanent member, so that is some permanent gravitas that it is carrying there.

But again, how much Russia matters internationally and what other types of brinkmanship does it develop? As I have differentiated, in terms of understanding Russia and understanding Russia's method, there's a difference that India is making. And if [Russia] continues to be reckless with its methods, then there comes a point that India changes its position. India is also aware of the discourse that is going on in the West and it wants the West' support on its own UN Security Council [seat]. That is a long-term aspiration. And it understands that every time the West has an interest, if India behaves against that interest, it is tagged as not a responsible stakeholder or its responsible stakeholdership is in question.

Chirayu Thakkar: But then, India also feels this challenge that one day when we were buying Iranian oil, we were not a responsible stakeholder. But now we are sitting across the table and negotiating prices with Iran. So, how much can we adjust to your whims and fancies to become a responsible stakeholder? And how India creatively negotiates this diplomacy will also have some reflections on its multilateral behavior as well.

So, I think Russia's methods, its recklessness, and its brinkmanship, if I can use that word, its stature, and its continued support to India... [inaudible]. So far as [Russia's] heavy lifting and [Indian] reliance on its veto is considered, these days it's broadly done by the United States and that support and comfort is already there. So, perhaps that is not the absolute need. But India would at least want Russia's neutrality if Beijing takes a very adversarial position.

Akriti Vasudeva: Thanks, Chirayu. And we are over time so thank you everyone for staying until the end. I think for me this has been an excellent discussion. Some

takeaways are abstention is not support [for Russia]. But also some things that we didn't get to chat about: down the line, how this crisis might impact India's interests in Afghanistan, in terms of what Russia's role and China's role there is going to be, and some questions in the chat about India's dependence on oil and wheat coming out of Ukraine and same for other countries as well and how that will be managed going forward.

But lots of tough choices ahead for India in terms of arms dependence, in terms of what kind of balancing act between US, Europe, and Russia [it would adopt]. But thank you everyone for joining us and especially to this excellent and stellar panel, Tanvi Madan, Aleksie Zakharov, Chirayu Thakkar, for their insights. Please do follow our work on the Stimson Center website at [www.stimson.org](http://www.stimson.org) for more on how South Asia is responding to this crisis, as well as our online magazine South Asian Voices, which is at [www.southasianvoices.org](http://www.southasianvoices.org). Thank you and see you at another Stimson event soon.