

## The problem with India's multi-alignment stand

China's recent mediation efforts to resolve the Ukraine crisis have once again spotlighted India's approach to conflict resolution. By holding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's eastward expansion responsible for instigating the war; by painting America as the biggest obstacle to ceasefire; by exploiting the differences among western countries regarding the extent of support to Ukraine; by further cementing the Beijing-Moscow relationship, and ensuring the survival of the Vladimir Putin regime, China has effectively positioned itself in opposition to the American approach. This is not how India views its role in resolving the conflict.

India has increasingly used varied symbolic instruments of power to enhance its soft power appeal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi now projects India as the "mother of democracies" and as a "moral force" to enforce global peace.

In sharp contrast to the Chinese President Xi Jinping's first outreach last month to the Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, since the Russian invasion, Mr. Modi has spoken to Mr. Zelenskyy many times. In October and December last year, Mr. Modi, in his telephonic conversation with Mr. Zelenskyy, had expressed India's solidarity with Ukraine while extending support for peace efforts. And in September, Mr. Modi had publicly told Mr. Putin that "today's era is not of war" – a remark that seemed to be a reprimand to Moscow. Even the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, felt compelled to describe this widely-reported remark as "significant".

Washington understands the importance of India's continuous engagement with Ukraine because that is an important way of bringing New Delhi's response to the Ukraine war into alignment with its own. The geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and the Ukraine conflict are in many ways inter-connected.

The regular Modi-Zelenskyy interactions may be seen as underscoring India's rising stature and recognition of its unique position in the emerging global order, despite western criticism of India's continued energy imports from Russia and export of excess refined Russian fuel to the European market. During Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister Emine Dzhaparova's recent visit to New Delhi, she remarked (in a widely reported tweet) that "India wants to be the Vishwaguru, the global teacher and arbiter. In our case, we've got a very clear picture: aggressor against innocent victim. Supporting Ukraine is the only right choice for true Vishwaguru." The hint here is that the "Vishwa Guru" image that the government seeks for the country will remain imperfect if



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While it may have given New Delhi some diplomatic space as far as the war in Ukraine and the global stand are concerned, it may not be sufficient for India to try to play the role of a mediator between Russia and Ukraine

India refuses to take a strong moral position on Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty.

Nationalist ideas have always influenced the Indian state, contributing to their further proliferation in society and polity. The choice of the "Vishwaguru" phrase by Ms. Dzhaparova is not accidental as it is at the core of the Modi government's nationalist foreign policy discourse. The contemporary salience of Vishwa Guru image, which builds on historical trends in India's political thought seeking to emphasise the distinctiveness of the country's cultural ethos and civilisational values, also highlights the unique nature of "soft power" in foreign policy debates. Soft power is simultaneously ubiquitous and ambiguous, accepted as significant yet narrow in its policy impact. It should be understood as any other form of "nonmaterial" power which interacts with material resources or hard power, either enlarging their impact or making up for their absence.

### Lack of hard power

That India lacks hard power has been acknowledged by Mohan Bhagwat, chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the "ideological fountainhead" of India's ruling political dispensation. In a recent speech, he had said that if India had been adequately powerful, it would have stopped the Ukraine war. He argued that "Russia attacked Ukraine. It is being opposed. But nobody is ready...to stop Russia because Russia has power and it threatens." Drawing a contrast with supposedly selfish global powers, Mr. Bhagwat asserted that "If India had such [material] power in its hands, then such an incident [Ukraine war] would not have come before the world." This narrative assumes that a powerful Indian civilisational state will stand for global peace and stability.

While New Delhi has expressed its disapproval of the Ukraine war, it has avoided taking a clear position in many UN resolutions on the issue. This may be understandable as India has often taken an evasive position on conflicts that involve its traditional allies. However, critics are not unreasonable in arguing that this ambiguity does not behove a nation aspiring to become a permanent member of the UNSC, which implies a commitment to speak as a global voice against territorial aggression and rights violations similar to what Russia has unleashed on Ukraine. Moreover, the normative pillars of the democratic, self-confident and morally superior Vishwa Guru identity cannot be identical to those underlying the cynical hegemon maximising its power at all costs, bereft of any morality.

While New Delhi's seemingly evasive position in the Ukraine war underlines India's traditional discomfort in viewing its national interests in binary terms as well as Russia's military and geopolitical importance for India's military preparedness, yet Russia's justifications for its military actions in Ukraine do not resonate among most of India's political elite. These justifications are sometimes parroted by China, including the latest unabashedly pro-Russian statement by the Chinese Ambassador in France regarding the legal status of the post-Soviet republics, with a view to reserving the right to use force against Taiwan. India has no such revisionist motives. India's views on sovereignty converges with a universally acceptable Westphalian notion and thus clash fundamentally with the communist China's political philosophy of "might is right".

Democracies enjoy legitimacy globally and this legitimacy can transpire an authoritarian ruler's use of force into violence against the population. Ukraine is seen as a victim which is resisting aggression from an authoritarian neighbour. The Modi-Zelenskyy interactions highlight the fact that such narratives engender Indian sympathies for the victimised target. Nevertheless, the Ukraine war alone is not sufficient to undermine India's historical ties with Russia, which is based as much on New Delhi's military dependence on Moscow as it is on the anti-colonial strand of India's strategic autonomy doctrine.

A pursuit of "multi-alignment" may have given New Delhi some diplomatic space in the ongoing war in Ukraine. However, it may not be sufficient for India to try to play the role of a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. India currently lacks the material resources to match the extent of China's economic and military potential.

Through his charm offensive of a phoney peace diplomacy, Mr. Xi's primary aim is to discourage Mr. Zelenskyy to launch the much-discussed counteroffensive, so that Russia's dependency on China rises further. Driven by the 'sunk cost fallacy', Mr. Putin has unleashed forces that have already done immense damage to Russia's global standing and offended most of the democratic world. Thus the Modi government must ensure that India's refusal to condemn Russian belligerence and continued increase in the import of Russian fuel is not interpreted as a pro-Moscow approach. While India's ties with Russia are likely to be on a downward spiral, the piecemeal distancing from Russia will take a bit longer as New Delhi struggles to find some manoeuvring space in the emerging nexus between Russia and China.

## Marriage for all, even if for a few

In a reality show, "Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives", Sima Taparia of the series, "Indian Matchmaking", was asked about the possibility of matching for queer couples. Her careful reply was: she is not 'doing that' right now because it is not allowed in India and she will not commit to taking on queer clients when it is. Even as season three of her show dropped, the Supreme Court began hearing the case for marriage equality within the ambit of the Special Marriage Act. If the court rules in favour of expanding the definition of marriage beyond that of a union between biological men and women, Ms. Taparia's response leaves enough room for ambiguity - for legal rights do not automatically translate to social sanction, and this is exactly what the arguments in the courtroom and beyond illustrate.

A Bar Council of India resolution recently quoted a dubious survey on 99% of Indians being against marriage equality while more sober commentators argue that the society is not ready for what the petitioners seek. Should laws be a reflection of societal morality? Or should they push the envelope by making certain unions possible irrespective of social approval? This was one of the questions extensively debated in Parliament as part of the Special Marriage Bill itself.

### Common threads

In parliamentary debate minutes, former Member of Parliament, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, features as one of the Bill's proponents. She predicted that the law would not have many immediate takers but that an emancipated next generation would demand the right to choose their partners. She conceived the civil union law as a calculated, rational decision where a freedom wilfully granted is better than a freedom that is 'taken' (LS Debates 1954, September 1,



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812-816). Like other women representatives, she also believed that the proposed law could improve the lives of women.

Despite some powerful backers, there was a perception among at least sections of the two Houses that allowing citizens to marry anyone of their choice could potentially lead to a collapse of society and civilisation. The Bill's divorce provisions, in particular, had raised fears of a proliferation of sexual desires; the question of queer unions was also briefly touched upon, with homophobic remarks. The other common thread that often resurfaces even today is that securing more rights and visibility for a plurality of identities and desires is, in some way, imposing the 'lifestyle' of a few on to a presumed majority that is not represented in these struggles. Former President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, had bitterly opposed the Hindu Code Bill in his private correspondence with Jawaharlal Nehru because he believed that the measure was forcing something on a vast majority, because some people - according to him, a small, likely microscopic minority - considered it a right.

Unlike that far-reaching reform Bill, expanding legal rights to the LGBTQI+ community is not directly relevant to those who do not identify as queer and can, in principle, disengage from the debate. And yet, as the reactions to the Court proceedings have shown, Indian polity and society still struggle with the idea of marriage reform and individual choice. Local and national politics have routinely witnessed campaigns against inter-caste and inter-community couples and the need for social sanction often triumphs the rights afforded under the Act through a bureaucracy that has become a reflection of social morality. However, as with the issue of the so-called love jihad campaigns, conversations emerging from the marriage equality case have spread awareness of the law and its unfortunate

provisions, including the publication of a notice period that violates citizens' right to privacy.

Where the bureaucracy fails, vigilante groups have been empowered to prevent unions using extra-judicial methods and queer couples may, unfortunately, also face a similar predicament in future. The potential for an infringement of rights guaranteed by constitutional principles, the letter of the law and court judgments gets to the heart of how Indians define marriage and, perhaps, Ms. Taparia's show with its inherent casteism and sexism may indeed be representative; marriage is very much a social institution, invested in upholding hierarchies based on gender, caste and community. Apart from violence and intimidation, the control of non-state entities is exercised simply by withholding recognition for heterosexual and queer couples alike and legal sanction, however inadequate, may offer at least some relief.

### Such a step will reaffirm rights as a whole

After almost 70 years, the Special Marriage Act still has fewer takers due to political campaigns, bureaucratic overreach and the general misconception that it only caters to inter-religious couples. And a study of this law's implementation discredits the doomsday predictions of those who continue to oppose marriage reform. Social transformations are not easy and laws, in a vacuum, are unlikely to disrupt the lives of 'vast majorities'. Some citizens may not be prepared for marriage equality, just as some are not open to inter-caste and inter-community marriages but, as Pandit had argued in 1954, the law should hold out more potential than the public imagination allows for and should be aimed at improving the lives of the more marginalised. Affording rights to a sexual minority - even if it is a minority - reaffirms the rights of the citizenry as a whole.