

Modi and Biden: Competing Imperatives in Europe and Asia

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Summary

Contrary to the widespread speculation about the United States (US)-India relations heading for a shipwreck over Ukraine, US President Joe Biden and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi have found a way to minimise differences over Ukraine while maximising the possibilities for deeper strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. While the differences between Washington and Delhi are significant on European security, the convergence of their interests in securing Asia and the Indian Ocean are deep and real.

The announcement of a virtual conversation on 11 April 2022 between United States' (US) President Joe Biden and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a surprise. The conversation was presented as an occasion for the two leaders to guide their defence and foreign ministers who were meeting in the so-called 'two plus two' format. This is the first such conversation between the two sides since the Biden administration took charge in January 2021. However, the real purpose was to address the growing divergence between the two sides on Ukraine.

In the run-up to the meeting, there was a [surprising resurgence of anti-American sentiment](#) in Delhi not witnessed in recent years. The sense that the US is pushing India to fall in line on Ukraine against India's long-standing strategic partner, Russia, dominated the public discourse. Senior US officials spoke about the 'consequences' of the Indian violation of sanctions and made suggestions that India is on the wrong side of history on the Ukraine question, reinforcing the sharpness of Indian debates.

Meanwhile, there is [much disappointment in the US](#) at India's unwillingness to condemn the unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine. Deepening bilateral ties and India's participation of the Quadilateral security forum (along with Australia, Japan and the US) in recent years had given the impression in Washington that Delhi will always be standing with the US on major international issues. But here was India with its repeated abstentions at the United Nations (UN) Security Council and the General Assembly.

As the public discourse began to feed on each other, India's oil purchases from Russia became the lightning rod in highlighting the divergence between Delhi and Washington. The narrative in India was about unacceptable American pressure on Delhi to stop buying Russian oil and its right to pursue its own interests. The narrative in the US and Europe, in contrast, was about India defying the global norms by helping Russia circumvent the sanctions. Given the limited share of Russian oil in Indian imports – barely two per cent – the grandstanding in both the capitals, one flaunting 'defiance' and the other imputing 'deviance' on oil, was unproductive and unnecessary.

At their virtual conversation on 11 April 2022, Modi and Biden succeeded in calming the discourse by clarifying contentious issues and generating a better understanding of each other's concerns on Ukraine. [Senior US officials briefing the press](#) in Washington said there was no demand from Biden on Modi to stop oil purchases or a definitive promise from the latter to do so. The emphasis was on asking India not to accelerate its energy imports from Russia. The US, whose energy trade with India has been rapidly rising in recent years, has offered to address India's energy security concerns amidst the war in Ukraine.

To be sure, there is more than oil to the divergence between India and the US on Ukraine. The talks between the two leaders have helped generate a better understanding of their respective concerns on Ukraine and a commitment to accommodate each other's interests. India had seriously underestimated the intensity of the political backlash against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. East and Central Europe have long been blind spots in India's foreign policy, and Delhi tended to view the region through Russian eyes.

As it came to terms with the depth of the Ukraine crisis and its consequences for India, the Modi government made continuous adjustments to its position by indirectly rejecting the Russian violation of the UN charter, international law and territorial sovereignty of Ukraine and calling for early cessation of hostilities. At the talks with Biden, Modi did not name Russia but raised concerns about the horrible Bucha massacres in Ukraine, allegedly by Russian forces. Biden welcomed India's humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Modi and Biden also explored potential Indian contributions in addressing global food shortages triggered by the war in Ukraine.

The crisis has also provided an opportunity for the US to understand India's constraints on forthright criticism of Russian aggression. The continuous engagement with India at various levels has given Washington a better sense of Delhi's toxic dependence on Moscow for weapons as well as the Indian imperative to prevent Russia from getting too close to China. Officials in the Biden administration have acknowledged the US inability in the past to partner with India on defence and underscored their current readiness to meet India's military needs. That new commitment was underlined in the [expansive agenda of security cooperation](#) unveiled in the talks between the foreign and defence ministers. If the US enthusiasm for security cooperation with India has not been in doubt, Delhi seemed a lot less inhibited than in the past about deeper defence ties with Washington.

Although India-US differences on Ukraine and European security are real, so is the convergence of their interests in the Indo-Pacific. Modi and Biden have signalled their determination to reduce the former and build on the latter. The talks between the two leaders and the outcomes from the 'two plus two' dialogue reveal one enduring trend in the engagement between the two nations. Over the last two decades, Washington and Delhi have always surprised the multitude of sceptics by finding the political will to overcome difficult obstacles and steadily expand their strategic partnership.

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