

From Bad to Worse

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and China–India Relations

ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have indirect consequences for relations between India and China. In the near term, those consequences appear to be mixed and limited. Over the long term, however, Moscow's strategic misadventure threatens Russia's position as an independent power, a defense supplier to India, and a champion of non-Western diplomatic initiatives that tend to encourage more stable China–India relations. The war will also produce "systemic" effects, including altered global expectations about the prospects for major-power conflict and a resurgence of US-led treaty alliances. In combination, these war-driven outcomes are likely to accelerate the deterioration of China–India relations that was already underway before February 2022.

KEYWORDS: Ukraine, India, China, Russia, China-India relations

Both China and India have important ties to Russia. In February 2022, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met at the Beijing Olympics and announced a strategic partnership with "no limits," marking a new apex in their bilateral relationship, which has improved ever since the end of the Cold War and now includes massive energy and trade links as well as critical defense and security cooperation. For its part, India has maintained vital defense ties to Russia dating from the Cold War era and relies on Russian suppliers for many of its most sophisticated and sensitive assets, from jet fighters and anti-missile

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defenses to nuclear submarines. China and India also consider Russia a valuable diplomatic partner, whether in defending their interests in multilateral institutions like the United Nations or in exploring new, post–Cold War initiatives like the BRICS forum.

By extension, both Beijing and New Delhi have important stakes in the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine. But the war's implications for the relationship *between* China and India are less straightforward. February 2022 caught the two Asian giants at a time of lingering bilateral tensions owing to their violent clashes along the Line of Actual Control in the summer of 2020, fraught interactions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and a deeper unease rooted in historical disputes and persistent differences (Bajpai 2021). Yet Beijing and New Delhi share numerous interests as well, especially in economic development and trade, and faced similar diplomatic and economic pressures during the early months of the war, whether in contentious UN votes or rising costs for food and energy.

As will be explained in this essay, the consequences of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine for relations between China and India have been indirect and limited. They are likely to remain so for months or even a couple of years, during which time the uncertainties of war present mixed incentives for India and China. However, projecting over a longer time span, the war is likely to accelerate the deterioration of China–India relations that was already underway before February 2022.

The war's longer-term consequences for China–India relations will be felt through three causal pathways, each rooted in the expectation that Russia's strategic misadventure will weaken its position as an independent international power. The first pathway focuses on the implications of the war for the Russia–India defense relationship. A weaker and less reliable Russia will encourage India to pursue defense ties with the United States and its closest allies in ways that China will find threatening. The second pathway focuses on how the war will undermine Russia's diplomatic bridging role between India and China in ways that reduce incentives and opportunities for more peaceful and stable relations between them. The third pathway focuses on the wider systemic consequences of the war, including its implications for international alliances, the prospects for interstate war between major powers, and the emergence of an international order that is more properly conceived as bipolar than multipolar and in which India will feel greater pressure to line up consistently against China.

These tentative conclusions reflect the fact that the Russia–Ukraine war’s consequences are mainly second order, or indirect. They depend on important intervening variables that could be swamped by the effect of other unrelated determinants of China–India relations, such as new border incidents or other diplomatic disputes. They also depend on assumptions—potentially incorrect—about the likely outcome of the war itself, especially the expectation that the war will diminish Russia’s power and independence. Nonetheless, it is more difficult to envision a future in which Russia’s invasion of Ukraine leads to closer or more cooperative China–India ties than one in which it leads their relations to deteriorate further, despite the superficial similarity of New Delhi and Beijing’s initial diplomatic responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

A WEAKER AND MORE CHINA-DEPENDENT RUSSIA

Despite widespread initial expectations that Russia’s superior military would deliver a quick victory in Ukraine, months of war clearly demonstrate the opposite. Moscow is paying a steep military, economic, and political price for its decision to invade. The implications for Russian power are almost certain to prove long-lasting.

Russia’s military losses are already high and will constrain its warfighting potential in other theaters for years to come. British intelligence estimates casualties at roughly 50,000 by the end of June 2022, with 15,000 killed in action (Wolfgang 2022). By the end of May, Russia’s material losses included over 700 tanks, 1,300 armored vehicles, and 27 fixed-wing aircraft (Mitzer 2022). Russia has also run through decades of stockpiled munitions and appears to have depleted its supplies of precision-guided weapons like cruise missiles (Jackson 2022). “Russia’s primary priority would be to replenish its losses, which is expected to take years” (Malhotra 2022).

Although international financial and economic sanctions have had little apparent effect on Moscow’s wartime decision-making—and by some measures, like the value of the ruble, the economy has fared better than anticipated—the broader consequences are likely to be devastating (Karaian 2022). On June 27, 2022, Russia defaulted on its international bonds for the first time since 1918 (Strohecker, Shalal, and Chan 2022). A mass exodus of Western companies and highly trained Russian employees has wiped out

15 years of economic gains, and the economy will likely shrink by 15% in 2022 (Reuters 2022).

If it persists, the withdrawal of Western companies and access to technologies will cripple Russia's ability to compete in the global economy (De Luce 2022). Russia's energy sales can keep the state afloat, but if European buyers lock in new supply relationships Russia would experience a sustained loss in revenues and could lose its status as an "energy superpower" (Butler 2022).

Politically, Russia's aggression has thus far united its adversaries in NATO and even led Finland and Sweden to seek membership in that alliance after decades of nominal neutrality. The European Union formally accepted Ukraine as a candidate for membership. Moscow finds itself more thoroughly isolated from Europe and many other US-friendly parts of the world than at any time since the end of the Cold War. That political consensus has limits—dozens of states abstained from early UN resolutions condemning Russia—and it could well dissipate over time, but the war has already weakened Moscow's international standing and influence.

Russia's weakness and its hostility toward the United States and US allies have also accelerated a long-standing trend toward deeper China–Russia strategic alignment, if not yet a formal alliance. Well before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, relations between Moscow and Beijing were arguably better than at any other point in modern history and included strong economic, military, technological, and diplomatic ties (Markey 2020, 108). The principal impulses behind these friendly relations were a shared repulsion from the US-led international order and an attraction—also felt by many of the world's other autocracies—to a multipolar world less defined by American or "Western" values and interests, where states would be less vulnerable to US influence (Lukin 2018).

Yet these relations were not without points of friction or disagreement. Until 2019, when prominent Chinese diplomats veered into "wolf warrior" territory, Beijing tended to take a more careful international approach, at least compared to Russia's blatantly aggressive anti-Western stance and active efforts to undermine the US at home and internationally (Martin 2021). Other seams in the China–Russia relationship included their contest for influence in Central Asia, where Moscow had for generations played the dominant role, but where China's growing economic clout was buying greater political leverage as well. Given Putin's aspirations for Russia to reassert itself as a great power, many outside analysts—including some in

India—have assumed that ties between Russia and China would have natural limits, as Moscow would never willingly assume the role of Beijing’s “junior partner” (Saran 2022a).

Yet the February 4, 2022, joint statement released by presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping at the Beijing Olympics marked a new apex for China–Russia partnership. It said that “the new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era,” and added that “friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation” (President of Russia 2022). Predating Russia’s invasion of Ukraine by just weeks, the statement effectively locked China into a supportive role, whether or not Beijing had secretly endorsed (or was even fully aware of) Moscow’s war plans. On multiple occasions, including Xi Jinping’s April 21 speech at the Boao Forum, China’s leaders and spokespeople criticized the Western sanctions against Russia (Hua 2022; Xi 2022; Zhao 2022). In addition, China has taken at least four important votes in the UN that favor Russia’s position, repeatedly shielding Russia from official denunciation and opposing Russia’s removal from the UN Human Rights Council (Feng 2022; Impelli 2022; Magnier 2022; Nichols and Pamuk 2022; *UN News* 2022).

On balance, China’s wartime support for Russia may deliver greater leverage to Beijing in a relationship that was in important ways already tilted in its favor. Before the war, China was already a top buyer of Russian energy, accounting for roughly 20% of Russia’s total oil exports (IEA 2022). By July 2022, this had increased to 25% (Lee and Nightingale 2022), and Russia had become China’s largest supplier of oil (Chen 2022). Similarly, Russia was already heavily dependent on Chinese semiconductors, consumer electronics, and integrated circuits before the war (Willing 2022). However, in this area, as in financial services, Chinese firms have thus far been reluctant to flout Western sanctions, leaving Russia in a bind.

Looking ahead, questions loom about whether and how China might choose to assist Russia in these areas, and if so, at what cost to Moscow. China and Russia have worked together during prior periods of Western sanctions. In the wake of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, for example, the two signed a wide range of energy, banking, and telecommunications deals to help Russia weather Western sanctions (Soldatkin 2014).

China played a similar role with Iran when it faced tough international sanctions over its nuclear program, including under the Obama

administration before the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and then during the Trump administration after the US unilaterally withdrew from that accord. China built modest but important workarounds for the sanctions, such as Kunlun Bank, which enabled a steady flow of commercial and financial transactions as well as technology sharing between China and Iran (Markey 2020, 133–35, 148–49).

By maintaining commercial and financial ties with Iran through periods of international sanctions, Beijing enhanced its relative economic influence with Tehran. That translated into access to and influence with top Iranian leaders whose interests are directly served by Chinese business ties. China could take a similar approach with Russia by maintaining trade ties and developing financial instruments that are nominally independent of other Chinese concerns and thus enable other transactions in sectors including energy, technology, and telecommunications.

However, China's ability to turn economic clout into diplomatic influence should not be overstated, for three reasons. First, China's approach to economic statecraft has often been marked by caution. In the Iranian example, China's major enterprises recognized that their most significant commercial relationships remained outside Iran and thus kept their distance from Iranian markets to avoid exposure to international sanctions. This limited China's sanctions-busting potential from Iran's perspective and diminished the power of Beijing's influence. The same could be true for Russia (Sonnenfeld 2022).

Second, Beijing has tended to limit its diplomatic "asks" of economic partners. China has usually prioritized issues of high salience to Beijing but relatively lesser significance to its partners, such as the official status these partners accord to Taiwan or their public statements about China's repression of its Uighur citizens. There is no evidence, for instance, that Beijing has attempted to use its influence with Tehran to alter its hostile policies with respect to Beijing's other trading partners in the Middle East, like Saudi Arabia or Israel. Similarly, China might never attempt to pressure Russia on issues of critical importance to Moscow.

Third, where China has deployed a range of tools of coercive economic statecraft, from "debt-trap diplomacy" to trade restrictions, the political results have been mixed (Kastner and Pearson 2021). Even smaller and weaker powers have shown significant capacity to resist Beijing's pressure. For instance, China's economic pressure on South Korea following the deployment of the American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)

system triggered a potent backlash that ultimately spurred greater Korean cooperation with the US, Japan, and other regional partners (Lee, Harris, and Yu 2022). Putin's Russia, with its ambitions of global importance and regional hegemony, could react even more negatively to Chinese economic coercion.

In sum, even a weaker and more vulnerable Russia will not simply become a Chinese pawn or client. Bearing that in mind, when Beijing's interests are clear and important, Moscow's increasing dependence on China will give it new incentives to pay heed. Expert observers anticipate that China could conceivably use its unique leverage—directly or indirectly—to extract a range of concessions from Russia, including more favorable terms on a new gas pipeline between Siberia and China, access to sophisticated Russian weapons, preferential access to the Russian Arctic, accommodation of Chinese security interests in Central Asia, and support for China's positions in its various territorial disputes (Gaubev 2022).

Moscow could even take preemptive steps to advance China's aims, without an explicit request or coercive moves by Beijing. And Russia could act in ways that harm important aims of its own. The timing of Russia's Ukraine invasion supports that conclusion. Credible accounts from Western intelligence sources suggest that Moscow, cognizant of Beijing's preference for peace until the end of the Olympic games and eager not to risk angering Xi Jinping, delayed its assault on Ukraine by a matter of weeks and may have even risked the effectiveness of its initial strike (Wong and Barnes 2022). As a witness to this episode, New Delhi will have increasing concerns about Beijing's unique sway with Moscow. That in turn will lead India's leaders to ask important questions about the future of their own ties with Russia.

PATHWAY 1: CONSEQUENCES FOR THE RUSSIA–INDIA ARMS TRADE

Russia's war-induced weakness and greater dependence on China have already harmed the defense trade between Russia and India. That trend is likely to have damaging consequences for China–India relations over time.

India's armed services all rely on Russian arms (Lalwani et al. 2021). Roughly 90% of the Army's major platform stock is of Russian origin (Lalwani and Sagerstrom 2021). This includes “low-end” arms like AK-203 assault rifles, for which India recently signed a deal to manufacture 600,000

Russian-designed models in India, and “high-end” systems like the T-72 and T-90 tanks that form the backbone of India’s armored fighting force (Kaushik 2022).

Although since the Cold War India’s air force and navy have taken steps to diversify their international suppliers, they too have consequential links to Russia. India’s fleet of ground attack fighter aircraft is over 70% Russian-origin, and Russia has been willing to offer its highest-end jets to India in deals that include extensive technology sharing that other defense partners, including the US, have been reluctant to include (Kaushik 2022). Of the navy’s major platforms, over 70% are sourced from Russia (Lalwani et al. 2021). Equally important, India’s nuclear-powered submarines are all based on Russian technologies, including its “indigenous” ballistic missile submarines as well as Akula-class attack submarines leased directly from Russia (Bedi 2021; Simha, 2015).

Russia’s war in Ukraine already appears to have disrupted the Russia–India arms trade. A large AK-203 rifle contract has seen unanticipated delays, and three deals—for MiG-29 jets, helicopters, and anti-tank missiles—have also been put on hold and could be canceled altogether (Peri 2022a, 2022b; Malhotra 2022). In each instance, analysts suggest that Western sanctions on Russia led India to doubt Moscow’s ability to fulfill orders (Curtis 2022). Although Indian officials claim to have stocked up on spare parts and ammunition over the past two years, Russia’s significant and unanticipated losses in Ukraine raise apprehensions in New Delhi that Moscow’s defense requirements could preempt India’s (Malhotra 2022). India also sources arms from Ukraine, including upgrades to the AN-32 military transport aircraft, R-27 air-to-air missiles, and propulsion systems for Indian Navy frigates (Malhotra 2022). These deals have been either delayed or canceled, compounding India’s anxiety.

Other important considerations for India include the poor battlefield performance of Russian weaponry. Although many other factors help explain the remarkable success of Ukraine’s vastly outnumbered forces, the fact remains that Russian systems were vulnerable to relatively low-cost defenses. This is likely to lead India to reconsider the wisdom of future investments in similar Russian-made arms, as compared to next-generation alternatives (Shukla 2022).

However, some Indian analysts doubt that Western sanctions will necessarily diminish Moscow’s export capacity, as Russian arms manufacturers will

continue to see India as a vital market (Menon and Thapar 2022). Indeed, Russian firms are likely to seek ingenious workarounds—including Chinese ones—for their supply chain and other problems. However, US-backed sanctions have placed a stranglehold on Russia's arms industry that will be tough for Moscow to escape entirely, and India's national security planners cannot afford overly rosy assumptions about their ability to source critical defense supplies.

Moreover, Russia's most likely partner for sharing sanctioned technologies is China. That opens the question of whether Beijing would attempt to use its enhanced influence with Moscow to delay or block Russian arms transfers to India. For the reasons already noted, China's leverage over Russia should not be overstated. Yet modern Russia has never experienced such pressures at home and internationally, and has rarely been so beholden to any other power. India's defense planners will, at the very least, factor this risk into their calculations.

Mixed Near-Term Implications

In the near term, uncertainty about the war's implications for the Russia–India defense relationship appears to have had mixed and indeterminate consequences for relations between China and India.

On the one hand, anxiety about the limitations of Russian-made systems, parts, supplies, and ammunition could lead New Delhi to be more cautious and conciliatory in its dealings with Beijing. Given that India's army—the force that would be most immediately engaged in potential conflict with China—is disproportionately dependent on Russia, the risk of testing Russia's reliability as a supplier would be especially high. Simultaneously, China could perceive India's anxiety and openness to greater conciliation as an opportunity to ease off its pressure and reverse several years of disruptive animosity that was driving New Delhi toward a closer embrace of the US.

The months since Russia's invasion of Ukraine show modest evidence in support of these moderating or stabilizing impulses. In late March 2022, India welcomed China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, to New Delhi for the first time since Chinese and Indian forces had clashed along their disputed border in the summer of 2020. India's decision to host Wang marked, in itself, a minor thaw in bilateral tensions. India followed up with PM Modi's attendance (via livestream) at the BRICS summit hosted by China (*Tribune* 2022) and

a meeting between Jaishankar and Wang on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bali, Indonesia (Haidar and Krishnan 2022a).

China, for its part, used Wang's New Delhi meetings to reiterate a long-standing Chinese claim: that the China–Indian relationship should not be defined or hamstrung by their territorial dispute but should focus on the vast array of common and material interests, including a shared position on resisting condemnation of Russian aggression at the UN. Beyond that, Wang contrasted the diplomatic postures of China and India with those of the US and its allies, noting that Beijing and New Delhi should look ahead to an “Asian moment” (quoted in Haidar and Krishnan 2022b) in global governance through their joint participation in non-Western groupings like the BRICS Forum and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); he observed that “the world will listen when China and India speak with one voice” (Karthi 2022). This increase in high-level official engagement between India and China after February 2022 suggests that the Russia–Ukraine war may have created new incentives for stabilizing diplomacy in the near term.

On the other hand, even if India's uncertainty regarding Russian arms supplies has caused greater anxiety with respect to managing the near-term military threat posed by China, New Delhi would not necessarily have to take a conciliatory approach to Beijing. To the contrary, India could perceive a greater urgency to deterring Chinese aggression through displays of strength, fearing that Beijing could use India's vulnerability to press its advantage through coercive diplomacy or even new military moves along their contested border.

Here, too, the months since February 2022 offer some evidence of tougher stances by both India and China. In March, Indian leaders treated Wang coolly throughout his time in New Delhi and afforded him little of the ceremony and protocols usually associated with such visits. Foreign minister S. Jaishankar publicly rejected Wang's characterization of a fully aligned China–Indian position on Ukraine, noting instead that they held different views with some “common elements,” and made it clear that India's relations with China could not be “normal” without “peace and tranquility” along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that imprecisely marks portions of their international border (Jaishankar 2022). Beyond that, the meetings failed to resolve the active China–Indian border standoff in Ladakh and, worse, highlighted other long-standing disagreements, including on the fraught issue of Kashmir.

In May, PM Modi called the Dalai Lama with well-wishes on his birthday (Yadav 2022) and traveled to Japan for the Quad Leaders' Meeting (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). China responded to both actions with predictable ire (*China Daily* 2022). In July, India's government launched nationwide raids on the Indian offices of Chinese mobile-phone maker Vivo, a move guaranteed to catch Beijing's attention (*Times of India* 2022). In August, India flew the Dalai Lama from Leh to a remote village in Ladakh aboard a military helicopter. Then New Delhi announced plans for joint military exercises with the US to be held 60 miles from the LAC, in October (Dhar 2022).

For its part, China has not relented in its military posture along the contested LAC. Roughly 60,000 Chinese forces remain in forward operational positions, and the 16th round of talks between military commanders in July delivered no serious progress (Press Trust of India 2022). In June, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Chinese defense minister Wei Fenghe assigned India full responsibility for the lingering border dispute, hardly backing away from Beijing's tough line (*Global Times* 2022). In July, China announced it would construct a new highway near the LAC (Suchet Vir Singh 2022) and flew military jets within a previously negotiated 10 km 'Confidence Building Measure' line on either side of the LAC (ANI 2022).

Taken as a whole, the near-term effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on China–India relations appear to be mixed and limited. The picture is further clouded by China's looming, politically sensitive 20th Party Congress, scheduled for Fall 2022, which could color Beijing's decisions on relations with India—and much else—far more than Russia's war in Ukraine. In any case, whatever immediate anxieties, uncertainties, or opportunities the war has presented for Beijing and New Delhi have yet to translate into a significant improvement or deterioration in China–India ties.

Detrimental Long-Term Implications

Over the long run, however, the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the Russia–India arms trade is likely to have more detrimental consequences for China–India relations. Russia's war creates powerful incentives for India to seek indigenous and alternative (non-Russian) foreign sources to meet its defense requirements. That in turn is likely to heighten Chinese strategic anxieties and sharpen Chinese–Indian differences.

The diversification of India's sources of arms and related military technologies was underway before the Russia–Ukraine war. The drive for indigenization is consistent with the ruling Indian government's broader economic agenda of improving national industrial capacity (Rahul Singh 2022). Prime Minister Modi's policy of *atmanirbhar bharat abhiyan* (Self-Reliant India Mission) was announced as part of an initiative to revive India's economy, which was devastated by the COVID-19 crisis, but soon expanded into a whole-of-government push for self-sufficiency, with goals ranging from stemming human capital flight to indigenizing production of military equipment (Invest India 2022).

For weapons systems that India is unable to manufacture indigenously, its most likely suppliers will be the US and its allies, like Israel and France. As India's arms purchases from Russia fell 47% from the four-year period between 2012 and 2016 to that between 2017 and 2021, its purchases from France increased nearly eleven-fold (Wezeman, Kuimova, and Wezeman 2021). In 2020, the US and its allies accounted for 65% of India's arms imports, and Russia only 35%, down from 88% in 2002 (Menon 2022).

This shift in Indian purchasing is likely to accelerate because of Russia's inability to reliably supply India as a consequence of its invasion of Ukraine. That said, important considerations could conceivably keep Russia–India defense ties at the center of New Delhi's strategic calculations. First, India's decades of accumulated Russian weaponry will continue to require spare parts. Second, Russia has demonstrated a unique willingness to sell its most advanced technologies, like fighter aircraft and the S-400 missile defense system, at competitive prices—although their full “lifecycle costs” often tend to be much higher (Wilson and Parachini 2020). Third, Russia is the only partner that has helped India with its nuclear program, including submarine propulsion technology (Episkopos 2021).

The practical, legal, political, and technical challenges to altering India's core defense supply relationships are considerable and will, at the very least, require years to address, but the US will almost certainly seek workarounds to help wean India away from Russia. Speaking to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in June, assistant secretary of state Donald Lu explained:

We're looking now at creating new relationships throughout the region that will help us to get these countries [including India] to diversify away from their dependency on Russian and Chinese military equipment. . . . The Secretary of

State [and] the Secretary of Defense are looking at other ways that we take advantage of this moment in time when Russia's on its back foot. Russia cannot provide military equipment to many of these countries. Can we be one of those providers?" (House Foreign Affairs Committee 2022)

To advance its strategic agenda with India, the Biden administration has taken pains to avoid, mitigate, or downplay disputes over New Delhi's historically close relationship with Moscow. In mid-June, national security advisor Jake Sullivan explained,

We are investing in a relationship that we are not going to judge by one issue. . . . On one of those questions, how to deal with the challenge posed by China, there is much more convergence today, and that is important to US foreign policy. . . . We feel confident that the dialogue we have going with India right now will bear fruit over time. (quoted in Sullivan and Fontaine 2022)

Viewing relations with India through the lens of strategic competition with China, the US is likely to welcome a wide range of creative solutions to alleviate India's reliance on sophisticated Russian arms. For instance, Washington could even encourage collaboration between France and India on nuclear-capable submarine technologies to support India's ambition to build a nuclear triad without direct US assistance (Tellis 2022).

Over time, India's military shift toward supply relationships with the US and its close allies is likely to strain China–India relations because it will play into Chinese suspicions of a US-led strategy of containment. For roughly two decades, China has grown increasingly worried about the strategic implications of US–India partnership, starting with the George W. Bush administration's surprising outreach to New Delhi, which eventually took the form of the US–India Civil Nuclear Agreement (Yang 2016). Since then, US–Indian military and diplomatic ties have continued to tighten through formal defense and intelligence agreements; senior-level bilateral interactions, like the regular “2+2” talks between top diplomats and defense officials; military exercises, including near India's contested border with China (Rej 2021; Sud et al. 2022); and, particularly during the Trump and Biden administrations, an unprecedented focus on the Quad, a grouping of four Indo-Pacific partners: India, the US, Australia, and Japan (Carmack et al. 2022).

Each of these developments was met with suspicion and increasingly vocal criticism from Beijing, especially as US–China relations entered a period of intensified competition. Chinese officials characterized the Quad, for example, as an “exclusive clique” designed to “sow discord between regional countries and China” (Hua 2021) and “provoking confrontation” (Zhang 2022). Wang Yi (2022) suggested that the Quad would become an “Indo-Pacific version of NATO.” Overall, Beijing’s concerns about India as a regional power owe a great deal to New Delhi’s association with Washington (Colley 2020; Lin 2022). Because Russia’s war in Ukraine reinforces China’s perception that India is sliding into a US-led camp that remains in sharp competition with China, it is also likely to multiply the points of friction between Beijing and New Delhi.

PATHWAY 2: CONSEQUENCES FOR RUSSIA’S DIPLOMATIC BRIDGING ROLE

The second way that Russia’s war-induced weakness and greater dependence on China will affect China–India relations is related to the diplomatic bridging role that Moscow assumed between Beijing and New Delhi after the Cold War. This role should not be overstated, as it has not entirely averted the present deterioration in China–India relations. However, on balance, it is reasonable to expect that postwar Russia is likely to have less capacity and desire to lead institutions and activities that have in the past incentivized India and China to put aside their differences and provided convenient opportunities for diplomacy. The net effect would be to weaken a stabilizing influence on China–India relations.

The assumption that Russia would assuage China–India differences has been shared by a range of Indian experts, who believe that Russia’s close ties to both India and China would encourage Moscow to be a champion of restraint in the event of an escalating dispute between India and China (Mashal 2022). Similar perspectives are shared by prominent Russian and Chinese analysts (Trenin 2021; Zhou 2022).

Over the past quarter-century, these expectations have been supported by evidence from a variety of Russian diplomatic initiatives, starting with Moscow’s energetic role in founding and expanding alternative “non-Western” multilateral institutions that include both India and China, such as the RIC

(Russia–India–China) summit, the BRICS (Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa) forum, and the SCO.

The idea of a tripartite Russia–India–China grouping was first voiced in 1998 by Russia’s then-prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov (Denisov 2017). From that point on, Moscow has repeatedly facilitated India’s inclusion in multilateral groupings, presumably in part as a means to counterbalance China’s otherwise dominant role (Babones 2017). For instance, Russia supported India’s SCO membership in 2017 (when Pakistan joined at China’s behest). Although the tangible accomplishments of most Russia-backed groups can be questioned, they have enabled top Chinese and Indian officials to meet routinely and to explore areas of common interest, especially on issues where they tend to part company with the US, such as the need for new multilateral economic and financial institutions designed to serve the needs of developing states (Miller 2021; Ministry of External Affairs 2021).

These groups have also shown themselves to be useful forums for China–India crisis diplomacy. For example, the run-up and sidelines of the Russia-chaired 2020 SCO summit offered timely opportunities for senior Indian and Chinese leaders, including foreign ministers S. Jaishankar and Wang Yi, to meet face to face, after which they released a joint statement and the Chinese side made public statements that were somewhat more conciliatory than its previous official line (Lukin 2020). While Russia’s ambassador to India made it clear that Russia had no plans to directly mediate China–India tensions, Russia’s convening role gave a fillip to de-escalation in the early months of the Ladakh standoff (*Sputnik News* 2022). Along similar lines, India’s threat to skip the China-hosted Xiamen BRICS summit is partly credited for forcing an end to the 2017 Doklam standoff between India and China (Rej 2017).

Russia’s efforts to stabilize China–India relations have extended beyond institution-building to include direct crisis diplomacy. In the summer of 2020, Moscow hosted a series of trilateral RIC video conferences with the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers. Russian diplomats were careful not to overstep, take sides, or directly interfere in the bilateral dispute, but privately expressed their alarm over the crisis. In public, they welcomed “all steps aimed at de-escalation at the LAC, including the conversation between the two . . . Foreign Ministers” (Aneja 2020).

In the near term, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has not noticeably diminished Moscow’s capacity for international diplomatic activity. To the contrary, Moscow has energetically courted capitals around the world—

especially in the developing world—to insulate itself against repudiation in the UN and, more broadly, to offer a forceful counter-narrative to Ukraine’s portrayal of their war. Russian diplomacy included foreign minister Sergei Lavrov’s high-profile swing through Beijing and New Delhi in late March and early April 2022 (DeYoung 2022).

However, as war weakens Russia and makes it more dependent on China, Moscow’s leadership role in BRICS, RIC, the SCO, and other multilateral organizations will likely wane as its pariah status discourages other countries from associating with Russia and the Kremlin focuses its diplomatic bandwidth on issues of vital and immediate importance, such as managing the implications of NATO expansion and US-backed sanctions. As Yan Xuetong, dean of Tsinghua University’s Institute of International Relations, observed, “The war makes it almost impossible for Russia to have any global influence” (quoted in *Bloomberg News* 2022).

In multilateral settings where Russia’s international leadership recedes, China is well positioned to assume a dominant leadership role that would sideline or marginalize India. China, for instance, has flexed its diplomatic muscle to exclude India from the UN Security Council (Lok Sabha 2022) and has long opposed India’s bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (Press Trust of India 2018). Other Russian-backed institutions, like the RIC, could simply lie fallow without energetic Russian support (Sibal 2022).

These developments would heighten Indian anxiety, reduce incentives and opportunities for India and China to patch up their relationship, and encourage New Delhi to invest its diplomatic attention elsewhere, including in US-backed initiatives like the Quad. In sum, although it would be too much to claim that Moscow has succeeded in keeping the peace between China and India (especially in recent years), Moscow’s diminished capacity for bridging diplomacy is likely to further weaken one of the guardrails against China–India conflict.

PATHWAY 3: SYSTEMIC EFFECTS

In addition to the Russia–Ukraine war’s likely effects on Russia—and then, by extension, on China–India relations—the conflict has a variety of other consequences best described as “systemic” because they have the potential to alter broad patterns of international relations. Although the immediate consequences of these systemic effects on China–India ties appear mixed, the long-term consequences are likely negative.

The most tangible and immediate systemic effects of the war are market-related, especially food scarcity and the disruption of global energy markets. India and China, however, tend to face parallel consequences from these developments: both are paying higher costs, but neither is acutely vulnerable to wheat scarcity, and both have attempted to offset skyrocketing energy prices by purchasing greater amounts of relatively cheap Russian crude (Associated Press 2022; Pathi and Kurtenbach 2022; Wong 2022). Although it is conceivable that a future characterized by scarce energy and food would intensify geopolitical competition between the world's two most populous states, that trend could also be offset by other suppliers over time. In sum, it is difficult to see a necessary connection between the war's market consequences and the character of China–India relations.

Less tangible, but perhaps more meaningful for China–India relations, is how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has altered global expectations about the prospects for major-power conflict even in the face of clear US and Western opposition. Russia's nuclear capabilities and thinly veiled threats have enabled Moscow to deter the US and NATO allies from direct military involvement in the war. This instantiation of the “stability–instability paradox” in the current era is likely to inspire greater insecurity among many lesser powers in the international system and reinforce the expectation that self-help, not a rules-based liberal order (or even an international order defined by American hegemony), is the only way to secure themselves (Krepon 2017). As some Indian analysts have noted, it is difficult not to draw worrisome lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine for an emboldened China and the limits of Washington's ability to deter aggression against non-allies (Bhatt 2022).

At the same time, Russia and China reinforced their own strategic partnership during the Beijing Olympics (President of Russia 2022). And in April 2022, Xi Jinping announced the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at the Boao Forum for Asia. Xi framed the GSI as a response to the Ukraine war. He blamed the US and its allies for “wanton use of unilateral sanctions” against Russia (Xi 2022). Beyond that, the GSI appears to be a grand Chinese bid to build the foundations for a global alternative to US-led security institutions based on some familiar concepts like state sovereignty, and other less familiar ones, like “indivisible security” (Freeman and Stephenson 2022). China is packaging the GSI with economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Development Initiative in ways

intended to appeal to a wide range of developing countries (Deng 2022; Olugbode 2022; Xinhua 2022).

Not surprisingly, India has steered clear of GSI membership, and is likely to perceive the group as one more example of worrisome Chinese meddling in its neighborhood (Arase 2022). At the same time, New Delhi has avoided formal ties to the US-led alliance system, preferring to preserve its range of options, including ties to Moscow (Grossman 2022). Yet the increased unity within US alliances in opposition to both Russia and China, combined with Beijing's own attempt to craft a non-Western security architecture in the GSI, will likely make it more difficult for India to navigate freely, on an issue-by-issue basis, among disparate partners in a multipolar international system. New Delhi might prefer to chart an independent path outside a strengthened US-led alliance system, but to access the greatest benefits of closer partnership with the West—and thereby to improve its own economic, political, and military position with respect to China—New Delhi will face greater pressures to “fall in line” in a more openly bipolar global competition (Saran 2022b). On balance, these developments will likely worsen relations between India and China.

CONCLUSION

Although the Russia–Ukraine war is not the primary determinant of China–India relations, it is likely to shift that relationship from bad to worse over time. The causal pathways are indirect and generally relate to the war's effects on Russia as a consequential defense partner for India and a diplomatic bridge between India and China, as well as on global perceptions of deteriorating security conditions and sharpening alliances.

The war's outcome is uncertain, so its consequences could shift in unforeseen ways. Russia could conceivably claw its way back from the war to emerge stronger and, in time, less internationally isolated. In the process, it could even break some of the unity that currently characterizes US-led alliances and weaken trends that favor the emergence of a bipolar international order. The world, at least from India's perspective, might then look a lot like it did before February 2022.

Other scenarios are also plausible. A comprehensive Russian defeat followed by a normalization of relations between Moscow and Washington could, among many other consequences, open fundamentally different opportunities for defense ties between India and Russia. Or, in a worst-case

development, the war could escalate well beyond Ukraine's borders in disastrous ways. Given the plausibility of such widely divergent futures, it is unsurprising that New Delhi has not jumped to conclusions and is instead hedging its bets on Russia.

Yet as of this writing, a grinding and costly stalemate between Russia and Ukraine seems far more plausible. The indirect consequences of this war will reinforce and accelerate trends that were already underway before February 2022, especially India's intensified strategic partnership with the US and its deteriorating relationship with China.

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