



Original Article

Norms versus National Interest: India’s Diplomatic Neutrality and the Crisis of Liberal International Order after Ukraine

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Manuscript ID:
IBMIRJ -2025-021061

Submitted: 15 Sept. 2025

Revised: 20 Sept. 2025

Accepted: 22 Oct. 2025

Published: 31 Oct. 2025

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-2

Issue-10

Pp. 260-264

October 2025

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://ibrj.us>



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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 undermined the liberal international order based upon sovereignty, territorial integrity, and collective security that has prevailed since 1945. India, as both a rising power and as an advocate for strategic autonomy, was thus faced with a deep moral/ political dilemma, i.e., to honor the normative principles advocated by democratic western states, or to act in accordance with her own national interests which are based upon historical ties to Russia. The purpose of this research is to analyze India's diplomacy during the crisis; specifically, India's "neutrality" through abstention at the United Nations from February 2022 through 2025 (re-framed as being "on the side of peace"), and her continued engagement economically with Russia, against the backdrop of the crisis of the liberal order. Using developments in the crisis up to December 2025 (including Putin's visit to New Delhi while the US imposed tariffs), this analysis shows how India's multi-aligned approach, as a pragmatic strategy, has allowed her to take advantage of "discounts" in energy and defense as a result of the war, while creating inconsistencies between her advocacy of sovereignty and the pragmatic actions she took in response to her national interests. Western states have criticized India for what they perceive as undermining of the sanctions regime and the rule of law, but India's position resonates with other states in the Global South, and is contributing to greater fragmentation in the world toward multiple poles of influence. Ultimately, the war in Ukraine represents a larger crisis—the erosion of the liberal order due to great power revisionism and the emergence of the realist policies of middle powers—with implications for reforms in global governance.

Keywords: Diplomatic Neutrality, Strategic Autonomy, Russia-Ukraine War, Liberal International Order, National Interest, Global South, Multi-Alignment, UN Abstentions, Energy Security, Sovereignty Norms

Introduction

India's neutrality in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia is an example of how a state can use its position in a multipolar world to create new opportunities for itself through its foreign policy; the same time, it challenges the traditional way states interact with each other within the liberal international order (Sorensen & Cappelletti, 2023). The liberal international order (LIO) was established during World War II, and has been supported by the US since then; it emphasizes democratic values, and rules-based systems, and discourages violence or aggression among nations (Sorensen & Cappelletti, 2023). However, Russia's actions in the Ukraine have challenged the principles of the LIO, and have caused divisions between the countries that support these ideals and those that do not. As such, the LIO has entered into crisis (Fagergren, 2022).

In addition to being the largest democracy, India is also the leading country from the Global South. As a result, India is caught between two competing forces; one force wants to protect India's sovereignty and maintain its independence from the influence of any single power or group of powers (norms), while another force seeks to gain advantage through increased cooperation with the West and/or through greater dependence upon China, which could lead to a loss of Indian sovereignty (national interest) (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025).

This study will assess how India's foreign policy prioritizes its national interests over the norms of the LIO, and whether or not India's foreign policy contributes to the ongoing crisis in the LIO.

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How to cite this article:

Rakesh Kumar (2025). Norms versus National Interest: India's Diplomatic Neutrality and the Crisis of Liberal International Order after Ukraine. *InSight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal*, 2(10), 260–264.

In conclusion, this study will argue that although India's neutral position in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia has been stable considering increasing pressure from the United States, India's position reflects the emergence of a multipolar world in which the middle powers are taking advantage of the competition among the great powers in order to diminish the norms that were once considered universal.

India's Diplomatic Posture: From Neutrality to "Side of Peace"

India's position transitioned from cautious abstention in 2022 to explicit peace advocacy in 2025. By consistently voting at the U.N. on resolutions calling for Russia to withdraw its troops, and for the return of children from the conflict zone – India avoided directly condemning Russia. During Vladimir Putin's visit to India in 2025, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "India is not neutral—India is on the side of peace," expressing support for continuing dialogue between Russia and Ukraine while maintaining economic and political relationships with both parties. In framing their stance as principle based non-alignment, India maintained its historic commitment to strategic autonomy (Press, 2022; Forough et al., 2023) that has historically been driven by India's independent focus on specific issues rather than a desire to follow one or another international coalition, and that reflects the shift from bipolar Cold War competition to multipolar relations (Sisodia & Seth, 2025; Forough et al., 2023). This approach also enables India to engage economically and politically with both sides in each of the two major rivalries (US-Russia and US-China) while maximizing potential returns and minimizing risk (Kara, 2025); and, by refusing to impose sanctions against Russia, maintains an important relationship with a key partner despite Western disapproval (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023; Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025). This way of thinking about how to maintain autonomy through non-alignment while still engaging with both sides of ongoing conflicts continues to be consistent with India's non-aligned past.

Year/Period	Key Actions	UN Votes	Trade/Oil Imports Impact
2022-2023	Abstentions; "not era of war" remark	Multiple abstentions	Oil imports surge to 35-40%
2024	Ukraine visits; peace offers	Continued abstentions	Peak trade ~\$69bn
2025	Putin visit; "side of peace"	Abstention on child repatriation	Tariffs pressure; resilience

National Interest over Norms: Pragmatic Drivers

India's position stems from realist calculations:

- **Defense Dependence:** Approximately 60-70 percent of India's military equipment is from Russia, which has caused the country to have problems obtaining supplies after the war, but India continues to purchase parts and produce together because of their continued partnership. The extent to which India relies on Russia for military equipment affects how India makes its foreign policy decisions, as it is forced to walk a fine line between its need for security and the pressure placed upon it from other countries (Verma, 2024). As a result of this strategic hedging, characterized as taking advantage of all options available to you, India can minimize risk and maximize benefits, while operating within a highly competitive great power environment (Kara, 2025). Therefore, India's continued relationship with Russia is more about ensuring that India protects its national security and maintains regional stability than about supporting Russian aggression (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023).
- **Energy Security:** Discounted Russian crude is also generating increasing volumes of imports for India which in turn is generating large cost reductions at a time of high price volatility globally. This economic benefit is a key factor of India's multi-aligned strategy which maximizes Indian interest while it navigates through very complex geo-political rivalries (Park, 2025). The fact that India continues to rely upon Russian energy as part of its pragmatically based foreign policy indicates the importance of short-term economic benefits—especially during times of global inflationary pressures—to India over the need for ideological alignment with other nations (Ogden, 2023). As such, consistent with its larger engagement with Russia, India maintains an increasingly robust relationship economically with Russia, but has not had many changes in terms of energy imports because of the West imposing sanctions on Russia (Unnikrishnan & Kapoor, 2023). Strategically, this discounted oil allows India to be insulated from price shock from global events; therefore, this creates greater economic stability domestically for India and helps further develop the country.
- **Geopolitical Balancing:** In addition to being a counterbalance to China, Russia is also a counterbalance to the rising Sino-Russian axis. The dynamics have become so much more complicated that India finds itself now forced into a delicate balancing act between its historical relationship with Russia versus the growing Sino-Russian axis and the implications this will have on regional security (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023). In this way, India has adopted a balanced approach to maintain strategic autonomy while pursuing national interests in a changing multipolar world (Verma, 2023). Furthermore, India views an independent Russia as a positive force for the maintenance of multipolarity; by having a country like Russia which can offer strategic maneuvering, both India and Russia are able to operate independently within their respective spheres of influence (Kapoor, 2023). While India continues to expand ties with many Western countries – including developing an alliance with the U.S. – India has been very cautious about forming formal alliances, as a result of pressure from globalization and multi-alignment (Kapoor, 2023) and India's desire to form relationships with multiple global powers – including Russia – at all levels of political and economic cooperation. As a result, India can develop relationships with all the major global powers as part of its multi-alignment strategy – although multi-alignment is under extreme pressure today as a result of current international conditions (Kapoor, 2023).
- **Economic Gains:** In addition to the positive elements that exist with respect to an increase in bilateral trade between India and Russia, it was estimated that trade between both countries was approximately at \$69 billion as of 2023; however, trade is weighted very much in favor of importation by India from Russia. As such, India's large increase in the amount of imported

crude oil and fertilizer from Russia at lower prices than would be charged on the world market has greatly contributed to an increase in the total volume of trade between both nations (Kapoor, 2023). Notably, despite the large increase in the volume of trade between India and Russia, there has been no corresponding increase in the volume of exported goods from India to Russia; therefore, this disparity in trade volumes creates a significant trade deficit (Kapoor, 2023). The large trade deficit between India and Russia also illustrates the necessity for India to expand the variety of goods being exported by India so that India can develop alternative markets to create a more stable and equitable trade relationship (Unnikrishnan & Kapoor, 2023). Notwithstanding the aforementioned, India's historically largest-ever imports of crude oil from Russia, especially in 2022, have contributed to providing significant financial support to the Russian government and stabilizing the global energy market (Bhagwat & Rogachev, 2025).

These outweigh normative inconsistencies—India's sovereignty advocacy (e.g., Kashmir) clashes with tolerating Russia's violations.

Western Criticism and the Liberal Order's Crisis

Views of the West portray India's neutrality as enabling an aggressive force and sabotaging sanctions. As one example, U.S. 2025 tariffs specifically focused on trade linked to Russia and labeled India as a "profiteer." The fact that India is seen as a profiteer illustrates several weaknesses of the LIO, including the uneven application of norms and the perception of hypocrisy in the Global South. Furthermore, this divergence between India and the west clearly shows a major impediment to the universal applicability of liberal international norms – that developing nations are willing to sacrifice their allegiance with western-based punitive actions in order to protect their own immediate national interests (Kara, 2025). The fact that India and other emerging economies have adopted a divergent approach to the conflict is illustrative of the growing assertiveness of the Global South in international relations. Emerging economies are using multiple alliances to navigate increasingly complex geopolitical environments as opposed to adhering to previously established power structures (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025). Furthermore, this new approach is indicative of the limits of a unipolar or even bipolar world order in establishing a universally accepted set of norms through the use of economic and security incentives as opposed to adherence to ideological commitments (Kapoor, 2023; Leandro & Oberoi, 2023). As such, this practical approach — used by countries such as India, Mexico, Brazil, and South Africa and based on their perceptions of Western double standards towards international law — allows them to continue maintaining their critical economic and strategic relationships with Russia in spite of the presence of Western sanctions (Uzunçayır, 2024).

As a result of the war, globalization has accelerated de-globalization, the utilization of sanctions as weapons, and the trend toward a more multipolar world, thereby weakening universal institutions. The weakening of these institutions has been exacerbated by the growth of populist sovereignty and its challenge to the legitimacy of existing international norms and institutions (Uzunçayır, 2024) as well as the increasing weaponization of interdependence, which turns global economic connections into tools of geopolitical pressure and divides the global system (Forough et al., 2023). In response to the changing nature of globalization, nation-states are evaluating their global supply chain and economic dependence to increase their ability to withstand exogenous shock and political leverage (Professor, 2023). The erosion of faith in multilateral frameworks combined with the erosion of international law, has resulted in a less stable and more fragmented global political environment (Geis & Schröder, 2023). Additionally, the effectiveness of Western sanctions against Russia has been limited by the varied responses of Global South countries who, in large part, have refused to participate in coordinated punitive measures with the west and continue to work closely with Russia (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025; Nadkarni et al., 2024).

Resonance in the Global South and Multipolar Implications

Like other members of the Global South, India has chosen to emphasize the food and energy consequences of the war rather than European security concerns. As one of the leaders of both the G20 and BRICS, India is positioning itself as a bridge between the great powers and advocating for institutional reform but not as part of a Western alliance. Therefore, India's pragmatic position in the current "uneven multipolarity," represents its attempt to navigate its relationships with several major global players while protecting its own interests and promoting a more equitable global order (Kapoor, 2023; Oberoi & Leandro, 2023). Thus, India's position represents a collective — albeit, differentiated and disorganized — rejection of the Western response to the war and a call for a greater understanding of the geopolitics at play (Nadkarni et al., 2024). Furthermore, as many Global South countries have maintained neutrality in the war in order to avoid being drawn into a conflict which does not directly involve them and preserve ties to all parties (Tüfekçi, 2025), there are still substantial risks present such as potentially becoming isolated from Western democratic states and/or altering their dependencies due to Russia increasing its reliance on China. Additionally, many of these same countries see the imposition of Western sanctions as a direct attack on their sovereign authority to make decisions and as a reinforcement of their belief in a unipolar world and therefore they have been strengthening their relationships with each other through South-South cooperation and developing alternative partnerships (Alden, 2023). Therefore, the collective stance taken by the Global South, including India, has unintentionally assisted Russian efforts to counteract Western sanctions by providing it with new economic and diplomatic options by establishing alliances with countries such as China and India and allowing it to pursue its regional political objectives (Silva, 2025; Tüfekçi, 2025). The complex nature of this global environment illustrates a clear divide in how the Global South, including India, views and responds to international crises, motivated by a desire for strategic autonomy and a criticism of what they view as Western hypocrisy (Alden, 2023). Overall, this position indicates a broader resistance among the Global South to either unconditionally condemning Moscow or supporting Western sanctions and therefore pursuing a path of strategic autonomy (Nadkarni et al., 2024; Tüfekçi, 2025).

Conclusion

India's non-alignment in the face of the Ukraine-induced LIO demonstrates its priority to the interests of India while demonstrating how fragile the norms are in a transitional period of multipolarity; continued pragmatic foreign policy provides

benefits for India, however, it also illustrates the fragmentation of international order. The critics contend that this neutral position has enabled Russia to continue its aggressive behavior, as the sanctions imposed on Russia have been diluted due to India's refusal to participate in the sanctions, further undermining the international order based on rules which could isolate India from democratic countries of the West which are critical in countering China, while simultaneously creating an uncomfortable alignment with rival countries such as Pakistan. Therefore, future success depends upon diversifying India's foreign policy partners and consistently advocating for norms in the international community or else multipolarity will degenerate into unimpeded revisionism.

Acknowledgment

I, Rakesh Kumar, Asst. Prof and Head, Dept. of Geography, Murarka College Sultanganj, TMBU, Bhagalpur, Bihar do hereby acknowledge that no financial or any other support was provided to me. Also that I face no conflict of Interest regarding publication of these papers.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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