

By Invitation

Ukraine and the big toss-up in South Asia politics

As the war in Ukraine adds to the political churn in South Asia, the US is gaining ground, Russia is losing influence, and China is under pressure to rethink its regional policies



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For *The Straits Times*

It is not often that Pakistan's leaders praise India's foreign policy. But that is precisely what Prime Minister Imran Khan has been doing since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In his rallies mobilising support for his faltering government, he lauded India's ability to align with the United States while maintaining good ties with Russia.

Early last month, after several European envoys wrote a letter to his government urging support for the United Nations resolution condemning Russian aggression, an outraged Mr Khan demanded to know if the West thinks "Pakistan is a slave" to merely follow their orders. That the Pakistani Prime Minister has held up Indian foreign policy as a model of independence is one sign of the profound changes in the subcontinent triggered by the Ukraine crisis.

Another sign of change – the mass protests in Sri Lanka against the misrule of the Rajapaksas, who had swept into power at the end of 2019. Although the Sri Lankan economy had been struggling when the Rajapaksa clan took charge, the Ukraine crisis has pushed it over the precipice.

At another corner of the subcontinent, Nepali Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has done the impossible. He got

Parliament to approve US\$500 million (S\$680 million) in grant assistance for infrastructure development from the US, in the teeth of intense objection from the communists, who have long dominated Nepal's political landscape.

In a subcontinent that has long revelled in knee-jerk anti-Americanism, three countries – Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal – voted with the US early last month at the UN General Assembly in denouncing the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

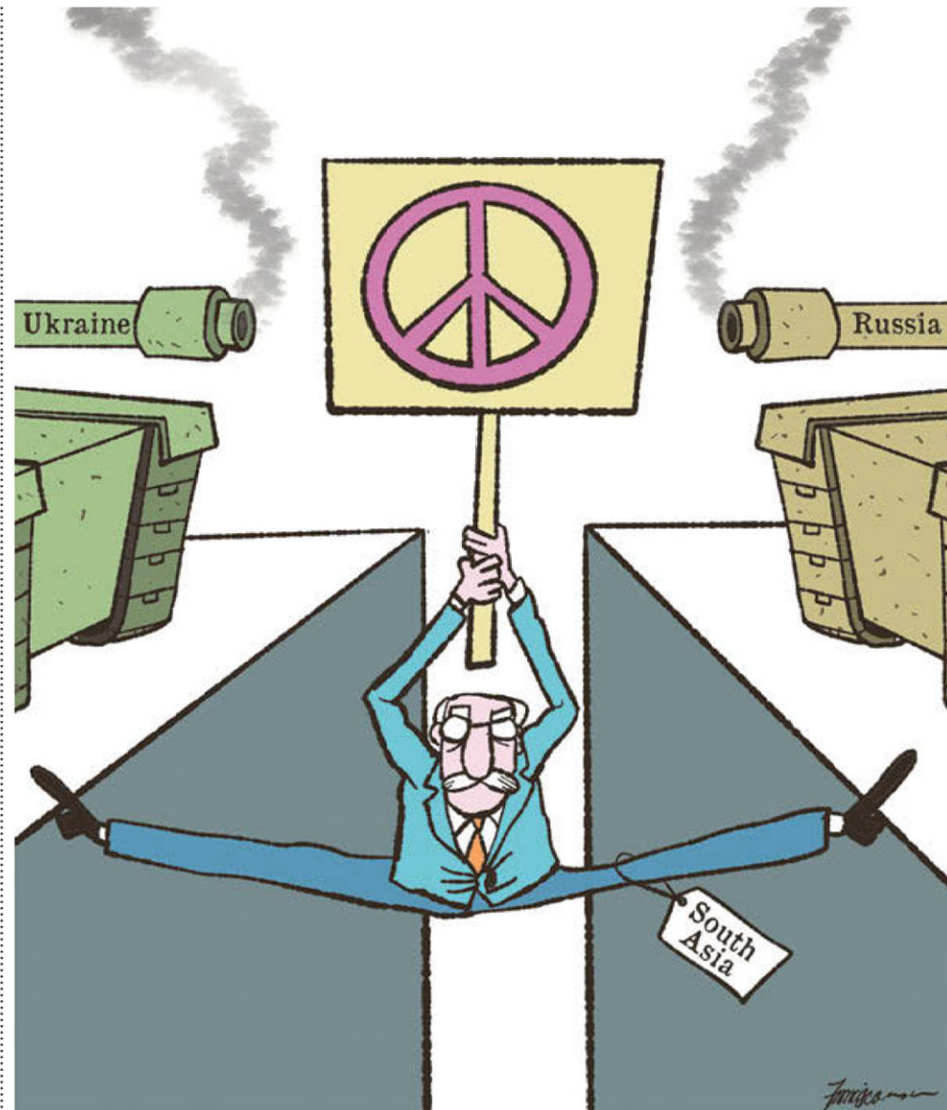
Bangladesh, which abstained along with India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, voted with the US on a second resolution – on humanitarian issues in Ukraine – late last month. In between the two votes, US Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland visited Dhaka to reboot the relationship with Bangladesh.

Undoubtedly, the Ukraine crisis has seen the US gain political ground among the smaller nations of South Asia. But the war in Ukraine has also brought fresh headaches to the US in dealing with Pakistan and India.

IMRAN KHAN'S ANTI-AMERICA POLICIES

Pakistan is a "major non-Nato ally" of the US and has been a longstanding strategic partner for Washington since the mid-1950s. Under Mr Khan, though, there has been a steady deterioration in ties.

He has been petulant in public about not receiving a call from Mr Joe Biden since the latter's election as US president at the end of 2020. Mr Khan also angered many in Washington when he hailed the Afghans for "breaking their chains of slavery" (from the US occupation) when the Taliban



made a triumphant return to Kabul in August last year.

The Ukraine crisis saw Mr Khan go full tilt with his anti-Americanism in both foreign and domestic policies. He showed up in Moscow and met Russian President Vladimir Putin on Feb 24, the day the invasion of Ukraine was launched. To be sure, Pakistan and Russia have been warming up to each other as US-India relations became stronger in recent years, but the timing of Mr Khan's visit was utterly unhelpful for Islamabad's engagement with the West.

At home, as the political opposition was galvanising to oust him from power, Mr Khan accused senior US officials of plotting against him in a conspiracy with his opponents.

When the time came for the introduction of a no-confidence motion against his government in the National Assembly, the Deputy Speaker, a member of Mr Khan's party, rejected the motion by claiming a foreign-backed treachery. Mr Khan had the Assembly dissolved and called for fresh elections. The opposition parties turned to the Supreme Court, which has quashed these actions as unconstitutional. As the National Assembly prepares to vote on the no-confidence motion against the government tomorrow, Mr Khan has vowed to fight on.

Pakistan's all-powerful army

chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, sought to limit the damage by underlining at a security forum the "excellent strategic relationship" with the US in the past and the need to restore it while engaging China and other powers. The army also sought to underplay the claims of an American conspiracy to oust Mr Khan. But Russia was quick to step in to defend Mr Khan and accuse Washington of "shameless interference" in Pakistan's internal affairs.

Mr Khan is likely to build on a powerful populist and anti-American platform that he has set up in the last few weeks. At a time when Pakistan badly needs Western help to stabilise its economy, he is determined to drive a deeper wedge with the West.

It remains to be seen if the army can restore Pakistan's pro-Western orientation. Mr Khan's praise of India's independent foreign policy was perhaps less of a compliment to India than a criticism of the Pakistani army's relations with the US. For good or bad, the crisis in Ukraine has opened up Pakistan's domestic debate on foreign policy.

THE COURTSHIP OF INDIA

In India, the idea of neutrality between the great powers has much domestic political support. But as the war drags on, it might

get progressively harder for India to keep both sides happy. A stream of high-level visitors from the West as well as Russia and China are ramping up pressure on India to choose their side. As India adapts to the new dynamic, four new features of its policy stand out.

First, although India continues to avoid direct criticism of Russian aggression, its indirect censure of Moscow by referring to such principles as respect for territorial sovereignty and peaceful resolution of disputes has become sharper in the past few weeks.

The recent visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Delhi drew much international attention, but Delhi has carefully avoided giving any impression of support for Moscow. Although there is much popular Indian goodwill for Russia, official Delhi is not prepared to sacrifice its growing interests in the West – which are threatened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Second, the Modi government was all ears when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was in Delhi to explore potential political cooperation. While Mr Wang sought to co-opt India back into an "anti-Western coalition", Delhi demanded that Beijing first ease the continuing military friction on India's northern border following China's unprovoked aggression in eastern Ladakh in April 2020.

Third, Delhi is conscious of the

widespread disappointment among its friends in the US at India's reluctance to condemn Russian aggression. India will have a chance to address some of those concerns when its External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh travel to Washington for Monday's "two plus two" dialogue with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin.

While the Russian question does cast a shadow over their ties, Delhi and Washington are likely to underline the continuing relevance of the India-US bilateral strategic partnership and their multilateral forum with Australia and Japan (the Quad).

Although Europe is at the top of Washington's concerns, the Indo-Pacific is not about to vanish from the US agenda. A number of new initiatives on defence and security cooperation are likely to emerge from the "two plus two" dialogue. The Indian delegation will also discuss the seriousness of US offers to help reduce Delhi's dependence on Russian weapons.

Fourth, any American support for the modernisation of India's defence industrial base would reinforce India's intensified efforts at the indigenisation of arms production. More broadly, the Modi government believes its recent emphasis on tempering uncritical globalisation has been vindicated by the unprecedented weaponisation of economic interdependence in the aftermath of Russia's war in Ukraine. As a result, the Modi government is doubling down on its agenda for economic self-reliance.

If the Cold War's end produced profound changes in the domestic and external orientation of South Asia, the war in Ukraine is leading to a major reorientation of the economic and foreign policies of the subcontinent.

South Asian elites have to adapt to a number of new international trends. The US has reunited the West and is on the offensive against Russia and China. Badly weakened by the misadventure in Ukraine, Russia will see its regional salience decline. China, which came out to bat for Russia, will have to rethink many of its international and regional policies.

Among the South Asian states, India is best placed to cope with the rapidly shifting global dynamic. India could improve its relative position by focusing on three objectives – expanding cooperation with the US in the Indo-Pacific while limiting tensions with the West on Ukraine; reducing exposure to Russia while holding on to the core of the relationship; and probing for openings with China, which is coming under Western pressure.

That would require much diplomatic skill and political will to transcend the foreign policy framework devised at the end of the Cold War. So far at least, Delhi has shown it is up to the task.

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