

3. Locating China in the Russia-Ukraine war

Prelims Syllabus: International Relations

Mains Syllabus: GS-II International Relations | Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries



Why in News?

- This article examines and analyses China's stance and role in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

China's stand on the war:

- China's official stand on the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has been that "all countries deserve respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity" and that "support should be given to all efforts that are conducive to peacefully resolving the crisis".

- China has been reiterating this stance at various global multilateral institutions.
- China with its emphasis on “all countries” seems to be showcasing itself to be equidistant from both the conflicting countries.
- However, despite this demonstration, China’s stance on the conflict has been regarded as “pro-Russian neutrality” by various experts.
- Further, out of the seven resolutions put to vote in global institutions such as the UN General Assembly, UN Security Council, UN Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization (WHO) by the West against Russia, China has voted against in three instances and has abstained from voting in the other four occasions.
- China however voted in favour of a UN Security Council resolution that referred to a proposal raised by Russia on humanitarian aid.
- It is well known that Russia and China are involved in a “Comprehensive Strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” and even during the ongoing war, China has moved forward to strengthen its relations with Russia.
- Furthermore, China on multiple occasions has supported the Russian narrative by accusing the U.S. and NATO of being the prime instigators of the crisis.
- Hence, China’s narrative of being neutral has many discrepancies.

Involvement of China in the war:

- China’s actions to date have not been in a direct form and have been in an indirect manner.
- Ever since the onset of the conflict, China has significantly benefited from the purchase of oil and gas from Russia at cheaper prices.
- China has replaced Germany as the largest buyer of Russian oil and Russia has displaced Saudi Arabia as China’s largest supplier of crude oil.
- Apart from oil, gas and hydrocarbons the cooperation between China and Russia also extended to the exchange of materials and technology.
- As per the Wall Street Journal, China had extended covert support to Russia by accessing Russian customs data compiled by an American think tank named C4ADS.
- Reports also suggest that China’s defence sector state-owned enterprises have dispatched navigation equipment, jamming technology, radar systems and fighter-jet parts to Russia.
- Reports also claim that China had dissipated millions of chips which are a critical component of modern military equipment.

- Further, it is said that thousands of shipments of dual-use goods have been sent by China to Russia which would have otherwise been restricted due to sanctions.
- The U.S. has also imposed sanctions recently on a satellite company of China named “Spacety China” which was indirectly providing satellite imagery of Ukraine to a Russian private military force called “Wagner Group” which is involved in the conflict.
- However, China has dismissed such allegations and has held that the military dimensions of such transactions were just speculations.
- China is extending such assistance to Russia at a time when China itself is demanding that Western countries not send military aid to Ukraine as it intensifies the ongoing conflict.

Change in the stance:

- As the war progressed, there seems to be a change in the Chinese stance.
- The President of China, during his meeting with the German Chancellor in November 2022 had said that the war should not cross the nuclear threshold referring to the Russian President’s nuclear threats to Ukraine.
- Further, the Chinese Foreign Minister in an article said that if China knew about the crisis the war could cause, China would have tried to prevent the war.
- Additionally, there are many leaders within the Chinese governmental hierarchy who have criticised Russia’s actions.
- Even during the G-20 summit held at Bali in November 2022, the leaders’ declaration on the war, which stated that most of the G-20 members strongly condemned the war, was not endorsed by China only because of its objections towards calling the conflict a “war”.
- But China here only opposed the terminology of “war” and did not oppose the condemnation of the conflict itself.

Path ahead:

- China’s direct support to Russia will affect its relations with Ukraine as well as the European Union (EU). China is the largest trading partner for both Russia and Ukraine.
- Ukraine is China’s largest corn supplier.
- Furthermore, Ukraine is the third largest supplier of military equipment to China and Ukraine is the biggest market for defence goods from China.
- China’s first aircraft carrier, Liaoning, is a refurbished aircraft carrier bought from Ukraine after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.
- China at present also has strong economic relations with the EU and cannot risk it.

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- It is also important for China to ensure that Russia continues to be its close aid as Russia is China's premier ally in its larger global ambition to displace the U.S. as the global superpower. Not just this, China could also use the Russian card to gain concessions from the West on the trade and technological fronts.
 - The war has further provided an opportunity for China to compensate for the withdrawal of Western investment and technology in Russia.
 - The prolonged conflict in Ukraine has also distracted the West from the Indo-Pacific theatre which has provided China with a chance to extend its influence in the region.