



ISSRA
ISSN-L: 2958-5732

INSIGHT

Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and
Analysis
National Defence University, Islamabad

Number: CEIL-04

November 24, 2022

Pakistan and the Russia-Ukraine War

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This insight seeks to answer two closely related questions: what do developments in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict mean for Pakistan? Following that, and perhaps more importantly, what should Pakistan do to preserve its interests?

In the last month, many significant developments have occurred in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Russia held referendums in four regions it was occupying in Ukraine. Mr Putin then signed treaties with these territories, annexing them to Russia, and in a televised ceremony, he joined hands with the Moscow-installed heads of these regions chanting alongside them, "Russia! Russia!"¹ Meanwhile, Pakistan and India have maintained their neutral stance by abstaining from a General Assembly resolution condemning the annexations. Pakistan's Foreign Minister stressed that Islamabad would stay neutral, and Finance Minister has recently said we may be buying discounted Russian oil claiming that if India is doing it, then "we also have a right."²

Pakistan has to grapple with the pressing issues in its international stance: Kashmir and oil. Pakistan's long-standing and principled stance on Kashmir has been clear – India should end its occupation, and a plebiscite should be held in the territory under UN oversight. In holding referendums, Russia is attempting to claim a veneer of legitimacy for otherwise manifestly illegal acts. China has quite tellingly continued to support Russia but has not condoned any of its actions, not wanting to inspire its secessionist movements in Taiwan or Tibet. Similarly, Pakistan and India refuse to condemn Russia but do not comment on its actions. In doing so, Pakistan is acting appropriately by staying out of great power politics, especially when it may need Russian oil. It must continue to advocate for a plebiscite but one that is not held under military occupation and in which the UN can act as a watchdog. Both criteria are notoriously missing from the referendums held by Russia.



Similarly, when it comes to oil, India has been buying discounted oil from Russia and selling it back to Europe at a markup, making a profit from the war. While India was warned that this move would put it on the wrong side of history, the US also reassured it that it would not be violating sanctions by such a purchase. However, there is mounting pressure on India to change its position on Ukraine. For instance, the German Foreign Minister recently called on her government to help resolve the Kashmir dispute stating that Germany supports UN engagement on the issue.³ These unusual comments were seen as part of a Western effort to push India to change its position on Russia's war. However, Pakistan is also now looking to buy Russian oil due to the economic impact of the floods and the need to raise foreign reserves. It has also agreed to Russia's plans for a Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline that would help alleviate our energy woes.

Pakistan should capitalise on the West's current dissatisfaction with India by amplifying the German Foreign Minister's comments. The time to speak on these issues is now, given that the US is trying to strengthen relations with Pakistan as the US Ambassador to Pakistan recently made a three-day visit to last week to Pakistan-administered Kashmir.⁴ At the same time, Pakistan should stay out of global power politics, especially as it may require Russian oil in the future and risks turning the West's disgruntlement on itself too.

Available at <http://issra.ndu.edu.pk/issra/insight/>.

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