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GEO-LEGAL DIMENSIONS OF CONFLICT: INDIA'S POSITION ON INTERNATIONAL LAW, WAR, AND SOVEREIGNTY AFTER THE UKRAINE INVASION

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Keywords

Geo-Legal Dimensions, Ukraine Invasion, International Law, Sovereignty, India's Position, Strategic Autonomy, UN Charter, Multipolarity, Border Disputes, Legal Realism.

Abstract

This article discusses the intersection of geopolitics with International Law; by doing so the authors will explain how states take positions regarding the legality of war and the right to sovereignty based upon their own geopolitical interests and border disputes. In particular, this paper analyzes India's response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine; the authors seek to determine how India reconciles its geopolitical interests with the UN Charter's prohibition against aggressive acts and affirmation of sovereignty in order to promote its national interest through foreign policy means, particularly through its relationship with Russia. Using the theories of Legal Realism and Geopolitical Theory, the authors analyze India's decision to abstain from voting on UN resolutions condemning Russia's actions, India's promotion of a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and India's use of the term "multipolarity" as a way of promoting an approach that is both normatively compliant and pragmatically beneficial for its geopolitical interests. Overall, the authors' research finds that India's position is reflective of the lessons India has learned in its border disputes with China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and in its dispute over Kashmir with Pakistan; specifically, India is using diplomatic approaches to engage with these countries, in order to avoid creating precedent that would undermine India's sovereign rights to territorial control. Additionally, the authors find that India is criticizing the selective enforcement of international law by developed countries; however, India's criticism of selective enforcement by developed countries has led to



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charges of hypocrisy by those same countries, as evidenced by sanctions imposed upon Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine. The authors conclude that India's approach to resolving multipolar conflict through the lens of international law represents the views of the Global South, and contributes to the ongoing debate about how to reform international law to make it applicable equitably in times of conflict among multiple actors. Furthermore, the authors believe that the implications of this research are that there will be increased calls for reform of the United Nations system, and increased reliance on adaptive diplomacy in the era of hybrid warfare. Overall, this paper provides insight into how middle powers reconcile the laws of international relations with their ability to exercise political power in times of crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Geo-legal aspects of conflict relate to how geopolitical factors impact the application of international law to State actions during wars and when disputing sovereignty. The UN Charter (Articles 2(4) and 51) states that States cannot use force to violate the territorial integrity of other states but can exercise self-defense, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia has caused varying reactions based on geopolitical relationships (Waslekar & Futehally, 2024). India, which advocates for strategic autonomy, has taken a neutral position, abstained from voting on UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion, and advocated for sovereignty in principle. This approach demonstrates an enduring aspect of Indian foreign policy, rooted in Nehruvian philosophy, which values a multipolar world order, and protects its interests through alignment with multiple countries (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025; Forough et al., 2023).

The purpose of this research is to examine India's post-invasion views regarding international law, war, and sovereignty and argue that India's response embodies geo-legal pragmatism derived from domestic weaknesses and a desire for a multipolar world order. The response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine—India calling for dialogue, increased trade with Russia, and utilizing international organizations such as the G20—is reflective of a critique of the West for selective enforcement of international law. India has drawn comparisons between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its own border disputes with China and Pakistan. Theoretically, legal realism holds that law is viewed through the lens of power, whereas geopolitics examines the spatial and strategic context in which law operates. Methodologically, the research utilizes discourse analysis of India's formal public statements, legal texts, and analyses of various geopolitical perspectives. The research contributes to international relations by demonstrating how emerging powers, similar to India, have altered the manner in which international laws are applied during conflicts, with implications for agency and institution reform within the Global South. By analyzing the applicable legal framework, India's responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, comparative dimensions, and implications for international relations, the research highlights the tension between universal principles and their contextual application.



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2. BACKGROUND: INDIA'S GEO-LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON WAR AND SOVEREIGNTY

The geo-legal system that India has created is based upon both its own constitutional provisions and obligations to international law. The Indian geo-legal system supports non-interference and peaceful dispute resolution between nation-states. As one of the original United Nations members, India will abide by the UN Charter's sovereign rights of member nations, but India has been critical of the bias in enforcing the Charter, as demonstrated through past stances on interventionist measures such as those taken in Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003). Within the domestic context, the provision in Article 51 of the Constitution of India supports the promotion of international peace, consistent with Gandhian philosophies of non-violence; however, pragmatic thinking informs India's Reactions To Perceived Threats (Singh, 2021).

As a result of numerous border disputes, sovereignty is essential to India because of disputes concerning the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China, which remain unaddressed and the most recent incident was Galwan (2020) that prompted India to invoke the right to self-defense pursuant to international law. With regard to the Kashmir issue with Pakistan, India invokes UN resolutions calling for plebiscites, although India contends that it is a matter of bi-lateral negotiations between the two parties under the terms of the Simla Agreement (1972). India's experience with border disputes and military action has shaped India's stance toward going to war: rejecting the use of unilateral force while supporting multilateralism, as evidenced by India's decision to abstain from voting in the UN General Assembly when it voted to condemn the annexation of Crimea (2014). Therefore, India's measured response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrates a continued adherence to a pattern of prioritizing strategic autonomy and non-alignment, even in the face of criticism from Western nations (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025). This response also represents a Global South perspective, many countries in the Global South view Western condemnation of Russia as hypocritical, given past precedent of Western-led interventions and violations of international law (Uzunçayır, 2024; Verma, 2024). In the geopolitical sphere, India's multi-alignment policy seeks to balance competing relationships with three key actors: Russia (as a defense supplier); the West (through membership in the Quad); and China (as a major economic competitor). Realism in international law views India's balancing act as a reflection of how law serves the interests of states: India invokes its sovereignty to counter China's "salami-slicing" tactics, similar to those employed by Russia in Ukraine. The background against which India responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine reflects India's ongoing adherence to geo-legal pragmatism, in preference to strict legalism, to prioritize regional stability. Critical perspectives recognize how India's colonial legacy has influenced India's efforts to advocate for reforms in international law to address the inequitable treatment of states in the Global South (Forough et al., 2023). India's position thus allows it to maintain strategic independence while continuing to criticize the inconsistent application of international law by Western powers (Bonikowska, 2025). At the same time, India's stance reflects a commitment to the fundamental principles of



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international law and the UN Charter, particularly as they relate to respect for territorial integrity and national sovereignty (Kanchana, 2023; Leandro & Oberoi, 2023). This commitment to principle is evident in India's repeated calls for an immediate end to hostilities and a negotiated diplomatic solution to the conflict, while urging respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states involved (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023; Suami, 2023). Additionally, this balanced approach is also reflected in India's abstention from UN votes condemning Russia's actions, which reflect a strategic calculation made to preserve India's security interests and to promote India's aspiration to become a leading global power (Leandro & Oberoi, 2023; Verma, 2024).

3. INDIA'S POSITION ON INTERNATIONAL LAW POST-UKRAINE INVASION

After the invasion, India has adopted an approach that upholds fundamental principles of international law, yet criticizes how they have been applied. By abstaining from voting in United Nations General Assembly resolutions that condemn Russia, India has made public declarations that express “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states” in accordance with principles of the UN Charter; however, it has refrained from endorsing sanctions. In articulating India’s position, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar explained this as opposing “might is right,” yet favoring dialogue over coercion (Fomin & Kryuchkova, 2025). Geo-legally, this is reflective of a realist approach: because of dependence on Russian weapons necessary for its Line of Actual Control defense, the pressures exerted by international law are secondary to other considerations. In addition to calling for de-escalation based on Article 2(4), India criticized what it perceived as the hypocrisy of Western countries regarding sovereignty violations in Asia. Regarding humanitarian law aspects of the conflict, India provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine and evacuated civilians, thus complying with Geneva Conventions (Rajagopalan, 2023). Regarding the issue of war, India has framed the invasion as a “crisis” which does not warrant the activation of collective security as set out in Chapter VII of the UN Charter, reflecting its legacy as a Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) country. India has contextualized its support for Ukrainian territorial integrity (in a rhetorical manner) with continued relationships with Russia to avoid creating precedent(s) that would harm its own territorial claims. As a multilateral actor, India’s G20 leadership has allowed for neutral language to be included in communiqués issued during G20 meetings, thereby promoting legal pluralism. This geo-legal approach allows India to navigate geo-legal tensions between adhering to norms and pursuing strategic autonomy (Park, 2025). The approach taken by India has been referred to as ‘varied consequentialism’ or ‘strategic opportunism,’ allowing India to pursue its goals of emerging as one of the world’s leading powers by capitalizing on its diplomatic flexibility (Verma, 2024).

4. GEO-LEGAL DIMENSIONS: WAR, SOVEREIGNTY, AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The geo-legal dimensions emerge in how India has approached war: by opposing escalation, Modi’s statement that “this is not an era of war” to Putin reflects the principles of *jus ad bellum*



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which restricts the use of force. The geo-legal dimensions also reflect the de-escalation of Indian military activities on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), as India establishes buffer zones to avoid full scale conflict and to negotiate for sovereignty.

India's geo-legal construction of sovereignty is evident: India has criticized Russian annexations as violations of international law, but will not impose economic sanctions on Russia to preserve its ability to use economic pressure on China. As a result, China's "no limits" partnership with Russia increases India's fears of encirclement, and thus India's geo-legal construction of sovereignty. Legal realist theories explain these contradictions — law is used as a tool for power — as evidenced by India's decision to import Russian oil while circumventing sanctions imposed by the West due to trade law exceptions (Kapoor, 2023).

Multipolarism has amplified the geo-legal dimensions of this crisis: India has advocated for United Nations reform in order to promote sovereign equality among states and has sought to challenge Western hegemony through the BRICS forum. This analysis demonstrates India's ability to adapt geo-legal strategies to accommodate the complexities of asymmetric power relations between war and sovereignty. Additionally, India's diplomatic maneuverability during the Russia – Ukraine war, including its engagement with both parties to the conflict, demonstrates a sophisticated approach to international relations designed to protect and defend India's national interests and strategic autonomy (Kumar & Bora, 2024). India's ability to create issue-based coalitions to address specific global challenges or crises without being committed to fixed alliances exemplifies this nuanced foreign policy, enabling India to shape its own role as a major democratic state and emerging economy in multilateral forums such as BRICS, to advocate for equitable global development and a more equitable international order (Bhardwaj, 2024; Kamalakar, 2024). Furthermore, India's peaceful resolution of conflicts combined with its policy of strategic autonomy provides a model for other developing countries to navigate their own geo-political environments and to be independent of traditional alignments (Iqbal & Rahman, 2023).

5. CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S GEO-LEGAL POSITION

The challenges consist of contradictions in terms of norms; a vote of abstention could have an effect on undermining India's sovereignty advocacy, particularly if China were to use India's abstaining votes in other border disputes in the LAC as evidence that India is inconsistent in its application of sovereignty advocacy. Sanctions will also create legal ambiguities as to whether secondary sanctions would undermine India's ability to comply with the requirements of international economic law. The Sino-Russia alliance is creating additional complications for India's position geopolitically, and may be isolating India from western legal forums.

The implications of this decision are enormous: India's position will reinforce the views of the Global South regarding biased international law and foster the development of reforms such as expanding representation in the UN Security Council. This decision will also serve as an example of hybrid diplomacy for middle powers by linking the use of legal principles with the geopolitical needs of states. The future trajectory may see the development of digital geo-legal tools and



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addressing cyber issues related to war under developing norms. Policymakers should increase their involvement in the development of legal diplomacy (e.g., through ICJ engagement) to support their positions.

6. CONCLUSION

In the context of India's position on international law, war and sovereignty after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine we see the complexity of conflict resolution in our current world of international conflict where the intersections of international legal norms with political/geo-strategic imperative determine how states act. The following paper has illustrated that India's strategic neutralism (i.e., abstaining at the U.N., making statements about the UN charter's principles of non-aggression and territorial integrity, pragmatically engaging with Russia) demonstrates a realist view of international law that reflects India's experience with border disputes and its desire to be part of a multipolar world. By advocating for dialogue instead of sanctions and criticizing the selective enforcement of international law, India has positioned itself as a proponent of contextual sovereignty, comparing Western responses to Ukraine and the relatively muted response to Asia's territorial violations including China's along the LAC. India's position does not only protect India's strategic interests (such as defense dependency on Russia), but it also supports a multipolar world that challenges hegemonic interpretations of international norms. The research provides evidence that India's geo-legal framework is adaptable; while India theoretically supports *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* principles, India's practical response is de-escalation to avoid setting precedent that would undermine its claims in Kashmir or against Chinese incursions. In addition, India's experience with gray-zone warfare during the invasion of Ukraine highlights the inconsistency of global legal application and underscores calls for reforms to institutions such as the United Nations Security Council. At the same time, however, India's position creates vulnerabilities; criticism of India's actions from Western countries risks damaging India's credibility as a normative leader, especially as Sino-Russian alliances expand encircling threats and create obstacles for compliance with evolving sanctions regimes. Geo-politically, India's multi-alignment policy evident in G20 consensus building and BRICS initiatives demonstrate how middle-power nations can use the geo-legal dimensions to build solidarity among members of the Global South and promote a more equitable international law regime that addresses power disparities rather than maintains them.

The broader implications of India's position are significant for both international relations and legal scholarship. India's position contributes to a shift in paradigms toward pluralistic international law, where sovereignty is not an absolute right, but a negotiated construct that is shaped by regional context and hybrid threats. This model presents lessons for other emerging powers to integrate legal diplomacy with strategic autonomy to navigate conflict without losing major allies. Future challenges include adapting to digital and cyber dimensions of war, which will likely require new geo-legal tools under frameworks such as the Tallinn Manual. India's policymakers should continue to focus on multilateral reform efforts, such as expanding veto powers within the United Nations Security Council or increasing the role of the International Court of Justice, to ensure that



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international law functions as a unifying force rather than a source of division. Going forward, as fault lines in geopolitics deepen (potentially in the Indo-Pacific or through prolonged stalemates in Ukraine), India's geo-legal framework will face numerous tests of resilience. To achieve success, India will need to find a balance between adhering to international law based on principle and responding to war and sovereignty threats pragmatically. Ultimately, India's position will contribute to protecting Indian national interests and will add to the global discourse by arguing for a more inclusive and balanced international legal system in an increasingly contested multipolar world. Through the synthesis of theory and practice in the realm of geo-legalism, India illustrates how states can convert crisis into opportunity for normative innovation.

7. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

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8. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

9. PLAGIARISM POLICY

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