

Implications of Russia-Ukraine War on South Asia

Rashid Abbasi*



“The people of South Asia have mixed stances about their government position as there is no clarity on how it is going to influence their lives.”

Russia – Ukraine war has completed two months and there seems to be no end in sight. Political and economic implications of war of multiple levels have been observed around the world including South Asia. Diplomatically, the South Asian states were divided in their response to the UN General Assembly resolution to condemn Russian invasion of Ukraine. Less influential states in the region: Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal voted in favour of the resolution. That can be interpreted as the result of their own concern of sharing borders with powerful neighbours. Relatively powerful members: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh choose to abstain and preferred to maintain good relationship with Russia. After the invasion, Pakistan became the first country to sign a trade deal with Russia on wheat and natural gas resources. Few days later, Imran Khan was removed from power. Some concluded it as punishment from the United States. Even if there is no truth to such claims, South Asian states so far are reticent about condemning Russian action. The people of South Asia have mixed stances about their government position as there is no clarity on how it is going to influence their lives.

Impact on Economy

Impact on the South Asian economy is something most of the experts agree upon. According to the World Bank Vice President, “High oil and food prices caused by the war in Ukraine will have a strong negative

*Rashid Abbasi is a Senior Research Fellow at the MMAJ Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, India. He has focused on modern conflicts and peace building in MA, MPhil and PhD. He recently finished writing his PhD thesis on the Russia and Ukraine crisis in the post- Cold War context.

impact on peoples' real incomes.¹ Ukraine and Russia are among the largest producers of Sunflower oil and wheat in the world. Both of the states have trade linkages with the South Asian region and are a major supplier for wheat, fertiliser, sunflower oil, crude petroleum etc. The rise in global crude oil prices have said to be impacted India negatively, but India's wheat exports have also peaked due to lack of supply from Russia.² Afghanistan, the poorest state in South Asia had already been facing structural deficit and the war has made Afghans invisible to humanitarian organization as their focus is shifted on Ukraine. Another South Asian country, Sri Lanka has been going through an unprecedented economic crisis due to economic mismanagement by the successive governments that is also linked to Ukraine. Experts suggests even if there was no war in Ukraine, the crisis in Sri Lanka was inevitable but the Ukraine crisis made it worse. To quote Sri Lankan finance minister, "Our import bill for essential fuel has almost doubled, particularly with the unfortunate situation in Ukraine."³ The longer the war will extend the unstable the supply of necessary goods will become. The volatile market condition and high inflation will hamper growth unless South Asian states find alternatives and develop new trade linkages.

State Security

Modern state primarily has two objectives: to provide welfare and security to its citizens. The failure of states to provide proper healthcare during the pandemic motivated many to redefine the question of security. Questions were raised regarding the failure of the governments to provide security from poverty and disease. But the war between Russia and Ukraine brought back the conventional approach to security and offered advantage to the war profiteers. The American, Russian and Chinese defence contractors have been contesting for full spectrum dominance in global arms trade. As the war goes on American weapon manufacturing giants such as Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin and Russian companies such as Almaz-Antey are quietly making billions. The performance of their weapons on the ground will see more demands from their South Asians clients. On 22nd April, the Defence Minister of India, Rajnath Singh in the context of the Russia – Ukraine war said that, "India has no option but to make itself stronger to ensure its defence, peace and stability as the world order is changing rapidly." Similarly Bangladeshi newspaper Bonik Barta suggested, "Given the geopolitical realities, changing tactics and the continued military build-up of neighbouring countries, the Bangladesh Air Force feels the need to further enhance its overall capabilities."

"...the Russia-Ukraine war is going to be benefit the ruling elites in South Asia at least politically if not financially."

War in Ukraine is also going to inspire South Asian governments in fabricating internal security threats. Putin's idea of waging war for denazification of Ukraine can inspire extremist nationalism groups from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to turn against minorities or generalize cultural, ethnic or religious minorities for political benefits. For example, India under Prime Minister Modi is already riding the wave of right-wing Hindu nationalism that is hell bent upon dehumanising Muslims. It works to distract people from real issues of incompetent governance, crumbling healthcare - education infrastructure, rising inequality and unemployment.

In conclusion, the Russia-Ukraine war is going to be benefit the ruling elites in South Asia at least politically if not financially. The basic security of citizens "freedom from fear and freedom from want" is going to be jeopardized further as the governments will prioritise conventional security (building national power and military defence) over true welfare of the people. Those who speak truth to power can easily be labelled as threat to national security. Be it Russia, Ukraine or South Asia, the ultimate sacrificial goats of the war are going to be the ordinary people in one way or another.



¹ "South Asia Sees Slower Growth," The World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/04/12/south-asia-sees-slower-growth-as-war-in-ukraine-impedes-recovery-worsens-existing-challenges>, April 13, 2022, accessed April 24, 2022.

² "India's Wheat Export Pick up Amid Russia-Ukraine War," Business Standard, March 5, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-s-wheat-exports-pick-up-amid-russia-ukraine-war-says-food-secy-122030500776_1.html.

³ Gerry Shih, "How war in Ukraine turned Sri Lankan Crisis into Calamity", Washington Post, April 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/17/sri-lanka-crisis-default-ukraine/>.