



## India and the World

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### **Diverging diplomatic messaging on Russia during the Raisina Dialogue 2024**

The Raisina Dialogue 2024 – themed Chaturanga: Conflict| Contest| Cooperate – was held in New Delhi, February 21-23. It was inaugurated by India’s Prime minister Narendra Modi and Greece’s Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. The Raisina Dialogue has established itself as a fixture in the calendars of cabinet ministers, high ranking diplomats, and the think-tank community across the world. Participants from 118 countries attended this year’s iteration.

The conference covered themes of multilateralism, technology, finance and climate through a geopolitical lens. A number of European delegates ensured that the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine was kept on the table across diverse conversations in this year’s iteration. The dates for the event collided with the G20 foreign minister’s meeting in Brasilia, and so high-level attendance from some major Western countries who have been united in their opposition to Russia’s aggression, such as France, Germany, the US and Japan, was limited. While Ukraine’s Deputy Foreign Minister I. Borovets attended and spoke forthrightly in a session dealing with European security, no members of Russia’s executive were present at this year’s Raisina Dialogue.

Representatives from the Nordic-Baltic region and Central Europe were particularly consistent in their messaging on the war in Ukraine. The foreign minister of Latvia K. Kariņš and his counterparts from Lithuania and Estonia, G. Lansbergis and M. Tsahkna, all pointed out Russia’s imperial legacy, arguing that Moscow is now on a quest of bringing back its former colonies. The Swedish foreign minister T. Billström and his Finnish

counterpart E. Valtonen stressed how the severity of the threat posed to Northern Europe by Russia is forcing their respective countries to give up their military non-alignment, a hallmark of much of their modern history.

Delegates from other geographies were, however, less willing to bring up the Ukraine war. When discussed, speakers from outside of Europe seemed much more comfortable discussing the failures of global institutions to handle the fallout from the war, than to assign blame to the Russian Federation in particular. While Indian diplomacy has been willing to stress the possible effects of China's revisionism in Asia, it has made a point of detaching that conversation from any similar ramifications for the rules-based world order from Russia's invasion.

Although the conversations conveyed a consensus on the need for hostilities to end, there are clearly divergent views on how to approach Russia. While Europe currently minimises exchanges with Russia, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar encouraged Asian partners to provide Moscow with multiple options in their engagement. These options are alternatives not only to the West, but increasingly and more importantly for New Delhi – alternatives for Russia to China. "If we railroad Russia to a single option, then you're making it a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy", according to Jaishankar. The challenge for India is to find out whether it alone, or in partnership with others in Asia, has something to offer Russia that China cannot offer -- or, alternatively, whether Russia's reluctance to become a junior partner to China will be enough to temper Moscow's appetite for deepened cooperation with Beijing. Jaishankar alluded to that when mentioning that Russia with its long history of statecraft would not place itself in a "single relationship" of an "overwhelming nature". India's vision of a multipolar world seems to thus include Russia as a pole, and New Delhi has no interest in isolating Russia or assisting in its decline.

New Delhi's willingness to engage with Moscow, partly because of the China factor, poses a challenge for the EU and wider Europe in its diplomatic outreach to India with regards to Russia. European diplomats have made it clear they would like to see a reduced involvement from India with Russia as long as the war continues. However, neither Brussels, London, nor the EU's member states' capitals are prepared to attach a political cost to India's neutral position on the war. Initial criticism of India's accelerated trade with Russia has been toned down. This is partly because Europe has itself benefited from the stability in prices on the crude oil market that is partly a consequence of Russian oil still being on the market thanks to India and China's imports. Partly it is because the EU, just like India, is concerned by the ever-closer cooperation between Russia and China. While New Delhi's answer to this problem is to provide options to Moscow, Europe's response is more difficult to make out. D. B. V. Verma, India's former ambassador to Russia, said that India wants Europe to find a way to work with Russia, but he pointed out that New Delhi is not seeing a coherent or long-term view emerging in the West of how to accomplish this. Verma added that Europe's outrage with regards to the war "is not a policy".

Yet, diplomatic messaging aside, the devil is as always in the details. High-level engagement between India and Russia has been toned down since the war in Ukraine started. The yearly leaders' summit has been postponed two years in a row, and although the programme of EAM Jaishankar's visit to Moscow and St Petersburg in December 2023 was elaborate, it showed less in terms of new areas of cooperation.



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