

Ukraine Crisis and India's Strategic Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

The Ukraine crisis has brought to the forefront the vulnerable faultlines of global politics. With the Westphalian order at bay and multilateralism in flux, India in a covey relation with both Russia and the west finds itself placed at a strategically sweet spot in geopolitical dimensions of international politics. India has traditionally pursued an independent foreign policy, guided by its principles of non-alignment. However, the changing global geopolitical landscape, particularly the growing rivalry between major powers such as the United States, China and Russia, has presented new challenges to India's foreign policy. This article explores India's historical relationship with Russia and Ukraine, and the implications of the Ukraine crisis for India's foreign policy. It also examines the theoretical interpretation of issue-based alignment, in light of its national security. Overall, the article argues that India's pursuit of strategic autonomy remains critical in the face of the Ukraine crisis and other global challenges.

Key Words : Westphalian order, Multilateralism, Non-alignment, Geopolitics, National Security

INTRODUCTION

“There are many things happening in the world from year to year and day to day, which we have disliked intensely. We have not condemned them because when one is trying to solve a problem, it doesn't help calling names and condemning” is the axiom used by then PM Jawaharlal Nehru during Hungarian Revolution of 1956¹. This axiom has continued to guide India's approach to conflicts, especially those involving its partners. Be it the Soviet interventions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) or Afghanistan (1979), or the American invasion of Iraq (2003), India has more or less followed this line. This Indian approach to remain neutral and assert its independent policy in the international arena was guided by its policy of NAM. But to be precise NAM, is an international forum of developing countries that believes in non-alignment with the major power bloc in pursuit of an equitable world order and Third world

solidarity².

India has a historical trajectory of maneuvering itself as an independent developing country which did not succumb to pressure from great power rivalry. This exercise of India remaining neutral can be reflected in the different phases of global order. During the years of bipolarity, *i.e.* cold war period, the majority of global economic, military and cultural influence was held between the U.S. and USSR. India adhered to the principle of non-alignment to resist erosion of its sovereignty, rebuild its economy and consolidate its integrity. India's foreign policy during the Cold War period was shaped by its commitment to the principles of non-alignment and neutrality. Non-alignment was a doctrine that emerged from the Bandung Conference of 1955, which was attended by a group of newly independent Asian and African countries, including India. The non-aligned movement sought to maintain neutrality and independence in the context of the Cold War rivalry

1. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a popular uprising against Soviet-backed communist rule in Hungary.
2. Roy, M. (2018). India's strategic autonomy: NAM and beyond. *Journal of Political Studies*, **25**(2) : 25-42.

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between the United States and the Soviet Union³. India's foreign policy during the Cold War was characterized by a focus on developing strong economic and political ties with other non-aligned countries, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. India was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, which played an important role in shaping global political discourse during the Cold War era⁴. India was critical of the superpower rivalry and sought to promote disarmament and peaceful coexistence between the two powers. India also played an important role in mediating conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union, particularly during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. India's foreign policy during the Cold War also reflected its regional interests, particularly in South Asia. Overall, India played an important role in shaping global political discourse during this period and sought to promote peace and stability in a world divided by Cold War rivalries (Ranade, 2022, 87-89)⁵. The ages of unipolarity were marked by an intensive approach to engage with US and its allies particularly at a time of sanctions due to its nuclear ambitions. It is important to note that, even in the geopolitical circumstances that compelled India to enter into alliance-like cooperation with major powers, it did not risk its autonomy. Rather, India secured its freedom, sovereignty and territorial integrity by balancing the great power equations with diplomacy. At the same time, India has maintained its commitment to non-alignment and strategic. In present times of multipolarity, India's foreign policy is focused on promoting a multi-polar world order, where power is more evenly distributed among different regions and nations⁵. India has emphasized the importance of a rules-based global order, which recognizes the diversity of interests and perspectives among different nations and regions⁶. India's foreign policy in the age of multipolarity has been characterized by a continued focus on autonomy and calculated risk, while simultaneously deepening its partnerships with major global powers such as the United

States, Russia, China, and Japan. India has sought to balance its relationships with different powers, while preserving its independence and promoting its strategic interests. In this phase of transitional geopolitics, India's policy of Non-Alignment has turned into Multi Alignment.

At the outset, I should perhaps explain the genesis of India's unique approach that enables it to walk on a tightrope in balancing the west on the one hand and the rest on the other. Which emanates out of its geographical position catering to both Mackinder's heartland (here is Asia) and Mahan's concept of Oceanic Strategy (Mahan, 1987, 48)⁷, emphasising the command of the seas (Mackinder, 2020)⁸. The approach is inspired out of India's historical past and to realise its hard earned freedom and sovereignty. The ideas emerged out of national movement for freedom played a crucial role in the formulation of its foreign policy.

Decoding India's approach to Ukraine Crisis:

India has historically had a close relationship with both Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) and Ukraine. The relationship between India and the Soviet Union was particularly strong during the Cold War, as India pursued a policy of non-alignment and sought to maintain its independence and autonomy in the face of superpower competition. During this period, the Soviet Union provided significant economic and military assistance to India, including through the provision of military equipment and technology. This cooperation extended to a range of other areas as well, including space exploration, energy, and scientific research. India and the Soviet Union also collaborated on a range of international issues, including efforts to promote peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region⁹. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, India's relationship with Russia evolved in new ways. While the two countries continued to cooperate on a range of issues, including defense and energy, India began to pursue closer ties with the United States and

3. Menon, S. (2021). *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. Penguin Random House India

4. Pant, V.H. (2021). *Politics and Geopolitics: Decoding India's Neighborhood Challenge*. Rupa Publications India 5 Jha, S. K. (2015). *India and Non-Alignment 2.0*. Cambridge University Press.

5. Ranade, J. (Ed.). (2022). *Strategic Challenges: India in 2030*. HarperCollins India.

6. Bose, S. (2009). *The Non-aligned Movement: A defining moment in history*. Routledge.

7. Mahan, A. T. (1987). *The influence of sea power upon history, 1660-1783*. Dover Publications.

8. Mackinder, H. J. (2020). *The Geographical Pivot of History*. Cosimo Classics.

9. Khiabany, G., & Sreberny, A. (Eds.). (1997). *Iranian media: The paradox of modernity*. Routledge.

other Western powers. At the same time, India has sought to maintain a degree of strategic autonomy and independence in its foreign policy, and its relationship with Russia has remained an important part of this strategy¹⁰.

India's relationship with Ukraine is more recent, but it has been marked by a range of economic and cultural ties. India and Ukraine established diplomatic relations in 1992, and since then, the two countries have sought to deepen their economic cooperation. Ukraine has become an important source of agricultural products for India, while India has provided support to Ukraine in a range of areas, including energy, defense, and space technology¹¹. More recently, the crisis in Ukraine has presented a challenge to India's relationship with both Russia and Ukraine¹². India has sought to maintain a balanced approach to the crisis, calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and emphasizing the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries involved. India has also sought to maintain its economic and strategic ties with both Russia and Ukraine, while also pursuing closer ties with other countries in the region, including China and Japan.

India has maintained a neutral stance on the conflict in Ukraine and has emphasized the importance of resolving the crisis through peaceful and diplomatic means. India has called for an immediate end to the violence and for all parties to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity¹³. India has consistently emphasized the importance of international law and respect for the United Nations Charter in

resolving conflicts¹⁴, including the conflict in Ukraine. India has called for a negotiated solution that takes into account the legitimate concerns of all parties involved. India has also expressed its support for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its efforts to monitor the situation in Ukraine and facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict. India has emphasized the importance of all parties working together to find a peaceful solution that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity¹⁵.

India's response to Russia's invasion on Ukraine is not fundamentally different from its historically cautious neutrality¹⁶. This includes condemnation of the civilian killings without any name calling in context of Bucha killings and abstention from UN votes especially on a US-sponsored United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that deplores in the strongest terms Russia's aggression against Ukraine. India abstained from a United Nation General Assembly resolution that censured Russia for its military actions in Ukraine. India also abstained from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolution that was related to safety at four nuclear power stations and several nuclear sites including Chernobyl as the Russians seized control of them. India's abstention from the UN vote on the Ukraine crisis reflects its longstanding policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and its emphasis on peaceful resolution of conflicts through dialogue and negotiation. India has emphasized the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine¹⁷, while

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10. Pant, H.V. (2019). *Non-Alignment 2.0 and India's strategic autonomy*. Brookings India. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FINAL-Non-Alignment-2.0-and-Indias-Strategic-Autonomy.pdf>
 11. *ibid.*
 12. Shukla, A. (2021). India renews its commitment to Non-Alignment. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/india-renews-its-commitment-to-non-alignment-121070600037_1.html
 13. No solution can ever arrive at the cost of human lives" Ruchira Kamboj, India 's permanent representative at UN on explanation at vote on the UNGA.
 14. Article 51 of UN Charter mentions that "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security"
 15. Chari, P. R. and Cheema, P. I. (2016). *India's Strategic Autonomy: Revisiting Non-Alignment*. Routledge.
 16. Banerjee, D. (2018). The changing contours of India's non-aligned movement policy. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-changing-contours-of-indias-non-aligned-movement-policy-42224/>
 17. Press Trust of India. (2022, March 19). India urges Russia to engage in constructive dialogue with Ukraine. NDTV. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-urges-russia-to-engage-in-constructive-dialogue-with-ukraine-553998>

also recognizing the need for all parties to work together to find a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the conflict.

However, India is not the only country to follow an abstention policy on Ukraine crisis for that matter South Africa, another major democracy, abstained from the UN votes that sought to condemn Russian assertiveness. The United Arab Emirates, a close USA ally that hosts thousands of U.S. troops, abstained from a vote in the UN Security Council. Israel, the U.S.'s closest ally in West Asia, condemned the Russian attack but refused to send its defence systems to Ukraine and said no to the sanctions imposed by west. Turkey, a NATO ally, does not subscribe to western idea and is strategically maneuvering between the two rivalries. But what becomes more interesting is that none of these countries has come under the kind of public criticism from the West that India has. India has faced criticism for its position on the Ukraine crisis from some quarters, particularly from those who argue that India's neutrality amounts to a lack of support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity¹⁸.

While U.S. President Joe Biden termed India's position as "somewhat shaky"²⁰. His Deputy National Security Adviser for International Economics warned India of "consequences" if it conducts trade with Russia circumventing American sanctions. Critics argue that India's refusal to take a firm position on the conflict undermines Ukraine's efforts to resist Russian aggression and maintain its territorial integrity. Some also argue that India's stance reflects a lack of commitment to international law and human rights.

India's Strategic Autonomy:

This brings India into new light, with the critics implicitly elevating India at a higher pedestal in international affairs due to their harsh criticism for a similar approach. India on the one hand cautiously manages western pressure by avoiding sanctions for its trade with Russia and similarly involves with Russia, the time-tested

ally not only as a gesture of gratitude but also as a partner to help fuel its economy by increasing oil imports to all time high. This calculated risk of maneuvering in international relations may be termed as "strategic autonomy" where India is both on the windward and leeward side at any point in time *i.e.* with neither side but with national interest. This leverage of not choosing any specific side is possibly because of the geopolitical reasons where India is viewed as a long-term solution to Chinese question in the Indo-Pacific region. There is a different angle to it, with China aggressively shaping the rules of engagement the entire strategy is to contain its rise without pushing Russia much closer to China. India, an important US ally in the region, is well equipped to balance Chinese aggression on one hand and check the Sino-Russia axis by acting as a safety valve for Russian frustration in the backdrop of sanctions on the other¹⁹.

The concept of strategic autonomy is based on several theoretical underpinnings from the fields of international relations and security studies. These include the following:

1. Realist scholars argue that states are rational actors that seek to maximize their power and security in a competitive international system. From this perspective, strategic autonomy is seen as a way for states to maintain their independence and freedom of action²⁰ in a system where power is often concentrated in the hands of a few major actors.
2. Constructivism: Constructivist scholars emphasize the role of norms, identities, and ideas in shaping state behavior. They argue that states are not only shaped by material interests and power relations, but also by their social and cultural contexts. From this perspective, strategic autonomy is seen as a way for states to assert their own values and norms in the international system, rather than simply adopting those of more powerful actors.

18. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2022, March 4). Spokesperson's response to queries on situation in Ukraine. https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/23049/Spokespersons_response_to_queries_on_situation_in_Ukraine

President Joe Biden speaks at Business Roundtable's CEO quarterly meeting, Monday, March 21, 2022, in Washington.

19. Bento. V. (2022), Strategic Autonomy and Economic Power: The Economy as a Strategic Theater, Routledge.

20. Ganguly A Chauthaiwale V Sinha U K (2016). The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms In India's Foreign Policy, Wisdom Tree New Delhi.

3. Liberalism: Liberal scholars emphasize the role of institutions and international regimes in shaping state behavior. They argue that institutions can help to manage conflicts, promote cooperation, and reduce uncertainty in the international system. From this perspective, strategic autonomy is seen as a way for states to navigate the complexities of international institutions and regimes, while also pursuing their own interests and objectives.
4. Critical security studies: Critical security scholars challenge the traditional realist view that security is primarily a matter of military power and deterrence. They argue that security is also shaped by economic, social, and environmental factors, and that the pursuit of security often involves trade-offs and compromises. From this perspective, strategic autonomy is seen as a way for states to pursue their own security objectives without being constrained by external actors or dominant discourses about security.

Overall, the concept of strategic autonomy is grounded in the idea that states have the capacity to pursue their own interests and objectives, without being overly reliant on any particular external actor or alliance. It reflects a belief that states can maintain their independence, sovereignty, and freedom of action in a complex and rapidly changing global environment²¹.

Strategic autonomy denotes the ability of a state to pursue its national interests and adopt its preferred foreign policy without being constrained in any manner by other states. In its pure form, strategic autonomy presupposes the state in question possessing overwhelmingly superior power. This is what would enable that state to resist the pressures that may be exerted by other states to compel it to change its policy or moderate its interests. Theoretically, therefore, only a lone superpower in a unipolar international order truly possess strategic autonomy since it is the only country that would wield overwhelming economic, industrial, military and technological capabilities and thus the power to resist pressure from all other states. Even superpowers become susceptible to the pressures exerted by their superpower peers in bipolar or multipolar orders, which means that their ability to be strategically autonomous is not absolute

but only relative. The doctrine of strategic autonomy reflects India's commitment to pursuing an independent foreign policy that promotes its national interests and priorities, while also engaging with the international community on issues of mutual concern. It reflects India's desire to maintain its independence, sovereignty, and freedom of action in a complex and rapidly changing global environment. Some of the key elements of the Indian doctrine of strategic autonomy include, India's commitment to non-alignment is a central element of its doctrine of strategic autonomy. India has historically sought to maintain a degree of independence from both the Western and Eastern blocs, and it continues to emphasize the importance of non-alignment in its foreign policy. India places a high value on strategic partnerships with other countries. These partnerships are intended to promote India's national interests and priorities, while also supporting broader regional and global objectives. India's doctrine of strategic autonomy recognizes the importance of economic engagement in promoting the country's growth and development. India has sought to deepen its economic ties with other countries, including through initiatives such as the "Act East" policy, India's extended neighborhood in ASEAN and West Asia have also developed good relations which seeks to promote trade and investment in the Indo-Pacific region. India's strategic autonomy is challenged by a range of global and regional factors, including competition among major powers. To protect its interests and maintain its independence, India has pursued a policy of strategic hedging, balancing its relationships with major powers and diversifying its partnerships. Additionally, the Indian doctrine of strategic autonomy reflects the country's desire to pursue an independent foreign policy that promotes its national interests and priorities, while also engaging with the international community on issues of mutual concern. It reflects India's commitment to maintaining its independence, sovereignty, and freedom of action in a complex and rapidly changing global environment.²²

India's NAM has been the root cause of its strategic autonomy. India never favored wars and partnered with any Superpower (Hegemony). Strategic autonomy for India is non-involvement in any conflict which is on political ground anywhere in the world. Economic crisis in 1991 compelled India to support the Gulf War and bend

21. Mohan, C. R. (2020, August 25). *Reinventing India's Strategic Autonomy*. *Indian Express*.

22. Samaddar R, (2005). *The Politics of Autonomy: Indian Experiences*. Sage India, New Delhi.

its Strategic Autonomy. India has signed Defence and Strategic Agreements with Russia, USA, France, Australia, and other nations. But these agreements don't provide that India will support any war which is not initiated unless resolution by UNSC (example – India supported War against Terrorism in 2001). India has never signed any military alliance treaty with any country whatsoever. But when matter of Pakistan sponsored terrorism or Islamic terrorism in concern India has always favored Hegemonic Powers²³. This brings out the objectivity of India's idea and its submission to the cause of its national interest²⁴.

Challenges to India's Strategic Autonomy:

The growing rivalry between major powers has also led to a new cold war-like situation, with major powers engaging in a range of economic, diplomatic, and military activities to gain influence and dominance over each other. This has created a complex and uncertain global geopolitical landscape, with significant implications for India's pursuit of strategic autonomy. Which has led to increased polarization and competition between major powers, with each power seeking to gain allies and limit the influence of its rivals²⁵. This has created pressure on countries, including India, to take sides and choose between major powers, which limits their ability to pursue an independent foreign policy. It has also led to a range of strategic and security challenges, including the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, increased military competition and tensions, and the potential for conflict and instability in key regions such as the Middle East and East Asia.

This growing rivalry between major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia has presented new challenges to India's pursuit of strategic autonomy in several ways:

1. Pressure to take sides: The increasing tensions between major powers have led to pressure on countries to take sides. The United States and its allies are pushing for a united front against China, while China and Russia are trying to build an anti-U.S. coalition. This puts India in a difficult

position, as it seeks to maintain good relations with all major powers while pursuing its own interests.

2. Economic dependencies: India's growing economic ties with major powers, particularly China, have created dependencies that limit its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy. For example, China is now India's largest trading partner, and Indian companies have invested heavily in China. This economic interdependence limits India's ability to take a strong stance against China²⁶.
3. Security threats: The increasing rivalry between major powers has led to greater military competition and strategic threats. India faces security threats from both China and Pakistan, which are backed by China. This has limited India's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy and has forced it to seek support from other major powers, particularly the United States.
4. Diplomatic pressure: The major powers are increasingly using diplomatic pressure to advance their own interests. For example, the United States has used its influence to pressure India to reduce its dependence on Iranian oil and to align its policies with U.S. interests. This limits India's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy.
5. Strategic competition: China's military modernization and expansion has led to concerns about its strategic intentions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is impacted by this strategic competition, as it seeks to balance its own interests with those of other major powers such as the United States, Japan, and Australia.

Moreover, India has always been wary of losing its strategic autonomy to the United States due to concerns that closer ties with the U.S. may limit its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy. India has traditionally pursued a policy of non-alignment, which seeks to maintain good relations with all major powers while

23. *ibid.*

24. Ogden C. (2023). *Global India: The Pursuit of Influence and status*, Routledge.

25. *ibid.*

26. Bajpai K, (2023). *How Realist is India's National Security Policy?* Routledge.

pursuing its own interests. However, India has also been building closer ties with the United States in recent years, particularly in the areas of defense, security, and economic cooperation. One of the key concerns for India is that closer ties with the United States may lead to a loss of strategic autonomy, as the U.S. may seek to influence Indian foreign policy decisions in line with its own interests²⁷. For example, the U.S. has pressured India to reduce its dependence on Iranian oil, and has sought to limit India's economic ties with China.

Overall, the growing rivalry between major powers has presented new challenges to India's pursuit of strategic autonomy by limiting its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy, creating dependencies on major powers, and exposing it to security threats and diplomatic pressure. India must carefully navigate these challenges while safeguarding its own interests and independence.

Way forward :

In this phase of geopolitical transformation, India needs to follow an approach of working with multiple partners on different agendas. Diversification of partnerships and trade is a key strategy for India to maintain its strategic autonomy in the face of shifting geopolitical dynamics and economic uncertainties. India has traditionally relied on a few major trading partners, such as the United States and China, which has exposed it to economic risks and dependencies. In recent years, India has been actively pursuing a strategy of diversification by expanding its trade relationships with other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This has included signing free trade agreements with countries such as Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN, as well as building stronger economic ties with emerging economies such as Brazil, South Africa, and Nigeria.

India has also sought to diversify its strategic partnerships by building closer ties with other major powers such as Russia, Japan, and France. For example, India has deepened its defense and strategic cooperation with Russia, while also building closer economic ties with Japan and France. Diversification of partnerships helps in several ways. First, it reduces India's reliance on any one major power or trading partner, which can limit its ability to pursue an independent foreign policy. Second, it creates opportunities for India to expand its economic

and strategic influence beyond its traditional sphere of influence. Finally, it helps to mitigate economic risks and uncertainties by spreading India's trade relationships across multiple countries and regions.

Self-reliance can be one of the answers to India's concerns about risking its strategic autonomy. By promoting domestic capabilities and reducing reliance on other countries, India can increase its bargaining power and leverage in its dealings with other countries. Self-reliance can also help India mitigate economic risks and vulnerabilities, which can be exploited by other countries to influence or coerce India's foreign policy decisions. Indigenous defense manufacturing can certainly play a significant role in placing India at a more strategic level. By reducing its reliance on imported defense equipment and developing its own capabilities, India can enhance its strategic autonomy and reduce its vulnerabilities to external pressures. Indigenous defense manufacturing can also lead to a number of other benefits, such as the development of high-tech industries, job creation, and the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship. In addition, it can also help in reducing the cost of defense acquisition, as well as provide greater flexibility in designing and developing defense systems that are tailored to India's unique security requirements. Furthermore, by becoming a major exporter of defense equipment, India can enhance its geopolitical influence and strategic standing in the international community. This can also lead to greater economic opportunities for India, as it can tap into the growing global demand for defense equipment and services. However, achieving self-reliance in defense manufacturing is not an easy task, and requires sustained investment in research and development, as well as the creation of a conducive ecosystem for private sector participation. It also requires the development of a skilled workforce, the establishment of a robust regulatory framework, and the creation of effective partnerships with other countries.

In summary, indigenous defense manufacturing can play a crucial role in enhancing India's strategic autonomy and promoting its geopolitical influence, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is a complex and dynamic process that involves balancing its relationships with major powers, promoting self-reliance, and engaging with the global community. India's historical relationships with Russia and Ukraine, as well as the changing dynamics of global

27. Paranjpe, S. (2013). *India's Strategic Culture: The Making of National security policy*, Routledge.

power competition, have presented new challenges to India's strategic autonomy. To address these challenges, India has sought to diversify its partnerships, increase its defense capabilities through indigenous manufacturing, and promote economic self-reliance. At the same time, India has maintained a strategic distance from military

alliances and has sought to pursue an independent foreign policy that is guided by its national interests. India's strategic autonomy reflects its desire to maintain its sovereignty, protect its national interests, and promote a stable and peaceful global order.
