



Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

HOW SOUTH ASIA VIEWS THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Some of India's neighbours voted against Russia at the UN General Assembly, while some abstained. From history to current economics and geopolitics, let's take a look at the rationale behind their respective positions.

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

India's neighbours in South Asia have taken their own positions on the war raging in Ukraine keeping in mind their history, economy, the big power rivalry playing out in their own countries, and their relations with these powers. There was a clear divide among the seven countries between those who maintained a neutral position, and those who were unequivocal in their opposition to Russia.

Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal supported the Resolution against Russia in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka abstained. Nepal, which is a member of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), also voted for the HRC resolution to set up an independent investigation into Russia's alleged violations of human rights in Ukraine.

SRI LANKA: TOURISM AND TEA

Colombo had been hoping its economic meltdown would be arrested this year as tourism picks up again. But the Ukraine conflict has put paid to that ambition. A shortage of foreign exchange has crippled Sri Lanka's import-dependent economy. The surge in oil prices due to sanctions on Russia has made India's US\$ 500 million Line of Credit to Sri Lanka for fuel purchases look inadequate.

Even in the tourism sector, which is still recovering from the double whammy of the 2019 Easter suicide bombings and the Covid pandemic, Sri Lanka might take a hit once again - Russia and Ukraine were a major tourism market. Thousands of Russian and Ukrainian tourists remain stranded in Sri Lanka.

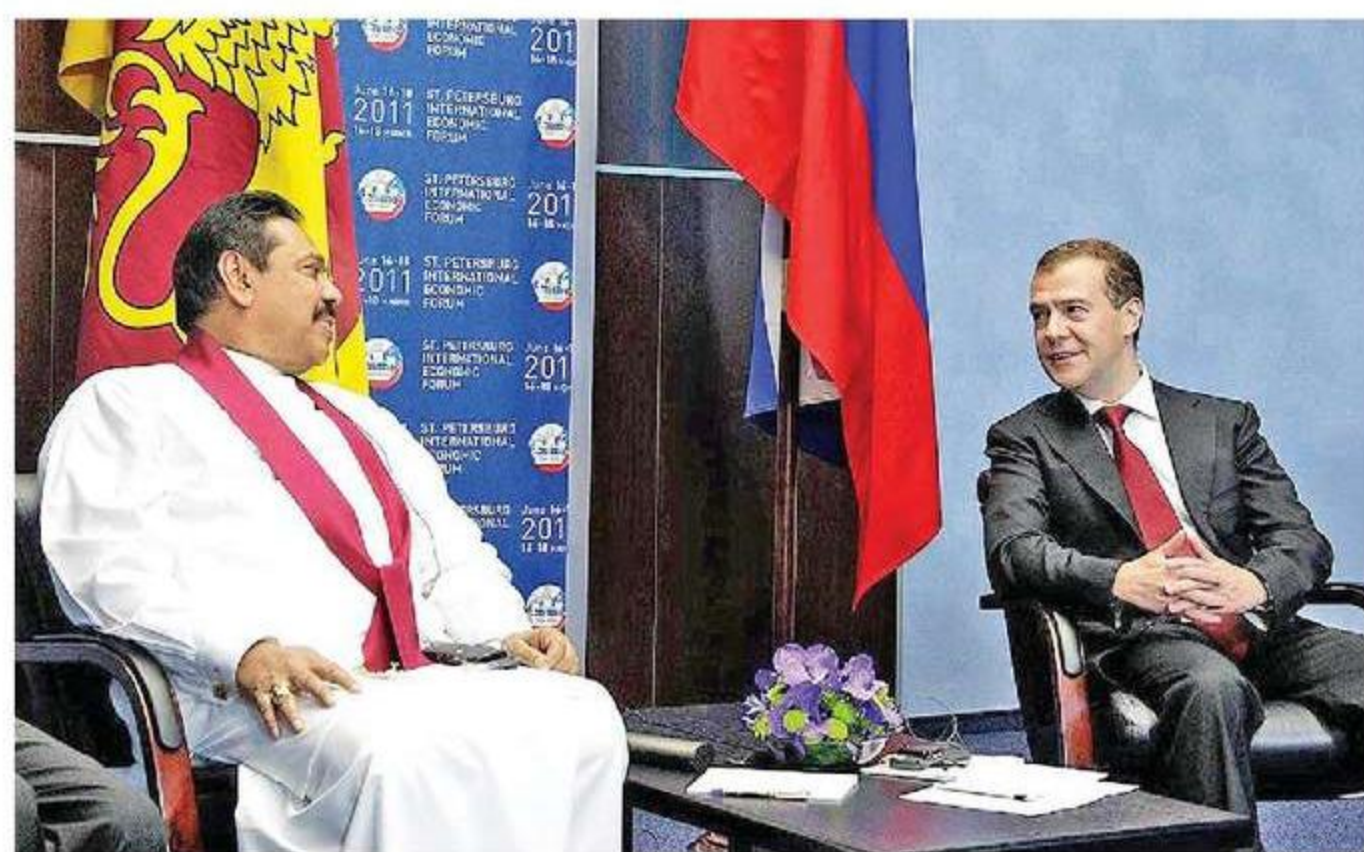
Russia is also a major buyer of Sri Lankan tea (Ceylon Tea), and Colombo can continue selling only if it can find a way around the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia.

While these were likely reasons for Sri Lanka's abstention, some in Colombo have questioned this neutrality, drawing comparisons with the 1971 India-Pakistan war that led to the liberation of Bangladesh, when Sri Lanka sided with Pakistan and gave its Air Force refuelling facilities.

"India had no right to violate the territorial integrity of Pakistan. Strong self-interest lay behind the position [taken by Sri Lanka in 1971]. The existential threat to Sri Lanka was seen as coming from India. No precedent could be created that could support India's support for Sri Lanka's minorities and infringement of Sri Lanka's territorial integrity," Rohan Samarajiva argued in the *Colombo Telegraph* website.

PAKISTAN'S EMBRACE OF RUSSIA

Pakistan's decision to abstain at the UNGA vote - it also passed up its speaking time before the vote and made no EoV (Explanation of Vote) - was a reflection of the new geopolitical possibilities it sees in the region. Its close ties with Russia were built over the last decade as a response to its tensions with the US during the two-decade-long Afghan war. US-Pakistan relations have



Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa with then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow in 2011.



US President Joe Biden with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva last year.

Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal supported the Resolution against Russia in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka abstained.

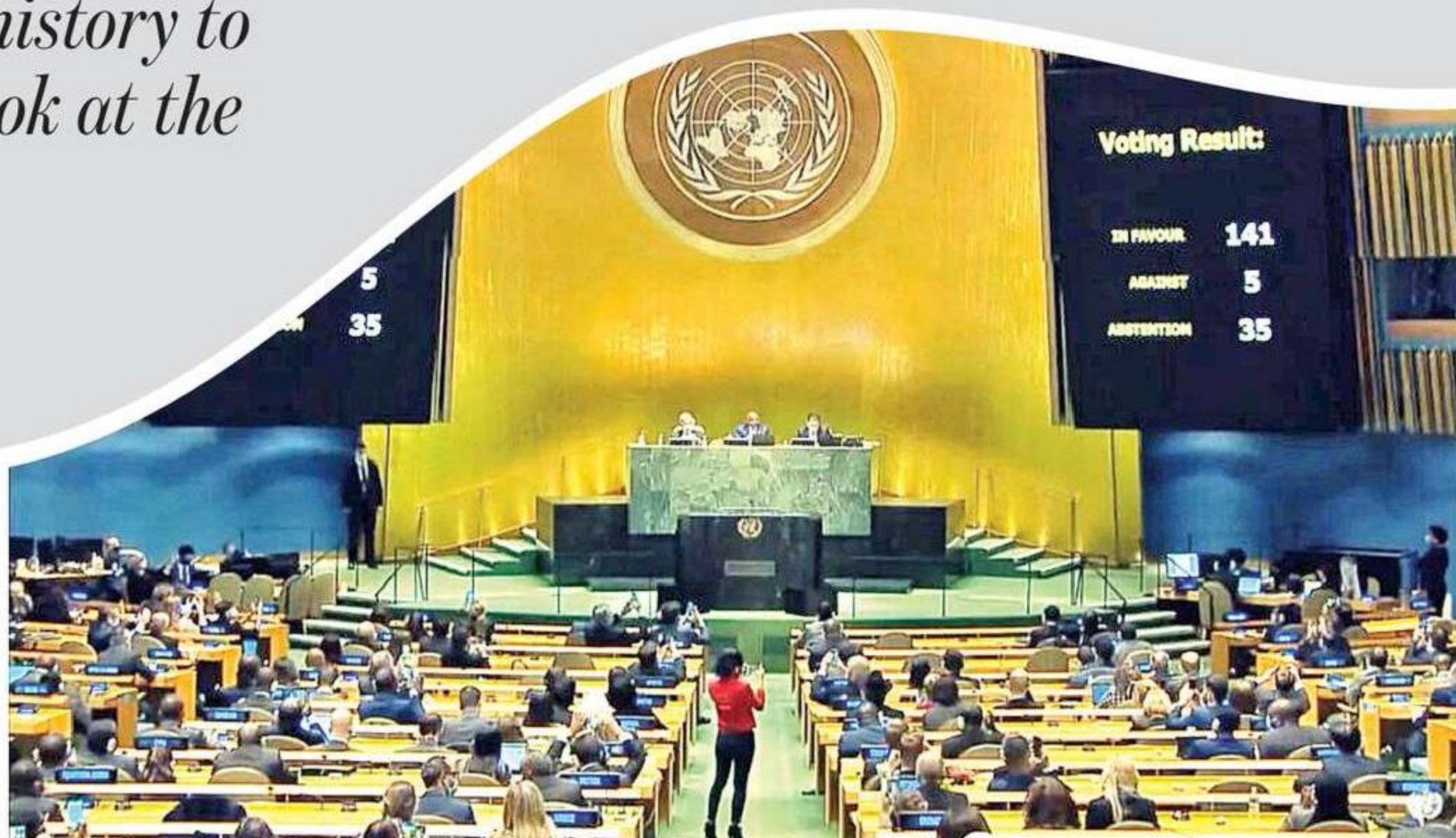
cooled during the Joe Biden presidency, especially after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US President and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan have not spoken [over the phone] even once.

Pakistan hopes to build a new "axis" with China and Russia that will take charge of Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia. But Imran Khan's awkwardly timed visit to Moscow - he became the first foreign leader to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin right after the invasion of Ukraine - has left the world baffled, with many Pakistani commentators calling it "ill-advised". Earlier this week, Imran Khan kicked off European Union (EU) ambassadors in Islamabad for asking him to support the Western alliance and stand up for the UN Charter, asking them why they had not taken on India for its "annexation" of Kashmir.

BANGLADESH: 1971, 2021 MEMORIES

Bangladesh had its own reasons for abstaining. Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen said Dhaka's position was for "peace and stability throughout the world". "We have spoken about the need for a peaceful resolution through talks. We have said the same thing at the UN. We have said that we are deeply concerned. The Secretary General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres should take an initiative to bring about a peaceful solution," Momen said in Dhaka after the vote in the UNGA.

Bangladesh's abstention can be seen in the light of tensions between the US and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Government, and the Biden Administration's December 2021 decision to sanction the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an elite para-



UN General Assembly Vote on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



US President Joe Biden with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.



UN General Assembly President, Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid.

ilitary deployed against Jihadist groups, for its alleged human rights violations. Bangladesh (as well as Sri Lanka) did not receive an invitation to attend the US President's Democracy Summit in December 2021.

On the other hand, Dhaka remembers with gratitude that Moscow helped India militarily during the 1971 war, while the US sided with Pakistan. Russia is now constructing Dhaka's first nuclear power plant at Rooppur, a US\$ 13 billion facility that will generate 2.4 GW.

NEPAL: PITCH AGAINST RUSSIA

Sandwiched between China and India, both of which abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly Resolution against Russia, and a raging domestic debate in the country on whether to accept a US\$ 500 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) development grant from the US, Nepal's unequivocal stand against Russia seemed to reflect its own geopolitical difficulties. In 2020, Kathmandu's ties with New Delhi

faltered over India's new map which, Nepal claimed, showed its territory as part of India.

Amrit Rai, Nepal's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, said in the UNGA that his country opposed any threat or use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of any sovereign country.

Nepal has just emerged from a huge domestic political standoff that included violent street protests, over the \$500 million US MCC development grant for electricity transmission lines and road construction over the next five years. Sections of the Nepali polity were of the view that accepting the money would be tantamount to joining the US-led camp against China in the Indo-Pacific.

The US had reportedly threatened to review its relations with Nepal if it did not take the money. Just hours before the deadline for the MCC grant was due to expire, the Nepal Parliament voted on its approval with a resounding two-thirds majority. China said the US had used "coercive diplomacy to get its way", and asked if the MCC fund was "a gift or a Pandora's box".

BHUTAN, MALDIVES, AFGHANISTAN

Bhutan, which is usually viewed as an Indian satellite, but which has, in fact, been asserting an independent foreign policy for a few years now, also voted against Russia.

Like Nepal, sandwiched between two regional giants, tiny Bhutan's main concern has been to avoid getting caught in their rivalry. China's claims on Bhutan territory led to the two sides signing a MoU in October 2021 for a three-step border agreement, which is being seen in India as window-dressing for the Chinese fait accompli on the ground.

"If we go by some of the geopolitical logic of Russian insecurity, people can all invade the homes of neighbours they do not like or have disputes with. Russia's logic in invading Ukraine is that if you are a big power and have certain insecurities, real or imagined, then you can ride roughshod over the sovereignty of a smaller country," tweeted Tenzing Lamsang, Chief Editor of *The Bhutanese*.

The Maldives, which signed a defence agreement with the US last year, and which, under President Ibrahim Solih's Government, has shed the previous Abdulla Yameen Government's China tilt in its foreign policy, also voted against Russia. Its Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid is the current President of the UN General Assembly.

"The Russia-Ukraine conflict has the possibility of becoming a much wider conflict with grave consequences. We are reminded of the need for closer cooperation among regional partners to avoid conflict and ensure security and stability both inside and outside our borders," Maldives Defence Minister Mariya Didi said at the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) in Male earlier this week, reflecting a sentiment felt across South Asia.

Afghanistan, which continues to be represented at the UN by its ousted Government, too voted against Russia. The Taliban regime, which is yet to be recognised as the legitimate Government of Afghanistan, has issued a statement declaring neutrality in the Ukraine conflict. Among the people of Afghanistan, there is a concern that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has deflected the world's attention from the humanitarian catastrophe in their own country.

(Indian Express)