THE DEFENCE DIMENSION OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO UKRAINE

Introduction

Prime Minister(PM) Narendra Modi visit to Ukraine on 23 Aug, was his 80th overseas visit and amongst his shortest as he was there for approximately nine hours. He arrived in Kyiv by train from Poland and was accompanied by the External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, the NSA Natinal Security Advisor Ajit Doval and the Foreign Secretary Vikrim Misri.

The first visit by an Indian PM in modern Ukrainian history came at a 'Volatile Juncture', when Russia is making gains in Eastern Ukraine while the Ukrainian Army has carried out an incursion in Kursk which marks the first time since World War II when a foreign army has entered Russia. Incidentally, he is the first international leader to visit Ukraine since the Kursk incursion. First Indian PM to travel into a war zone and more importantly a leader who has excellent relations with both Russia and the West and can talk to both parties.

Before arriving in Ukraine, Modi visited Poland, where he urged diplomatic efforts to end the war and pledged India's support, stating that no conflict can be solved on the battlefield. This article, however, focuses on the defence dimension of the visit.

India's Ties with Ukraine

Before the war in Ukraine, there were Indian students enrolled in Ukrainian universities. Following the Russian invasion, India, Ukraine and Poland worked together to evacuate most of them during "Operation Ganga". The PM no doubt expressed his gratitude towards both the Polish and Ukrainian government for their help in evacuating the students.

Defence and economic cooperation in pharma, agriculture goods such as sunflower oil and fertilizers are areas of convergence. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, has reshaped not only global geopolitics but also posed challenges to India's defence capabilities. The visit, therefore, presents an opportunity to explore strategic partnerships with Ukraine, particularly in the realm of defence manufacturing which will benefit both countries.

India needs marine engines for its warships and to upgrade its large air transport fleet**.** Ukraine knows that cooperation with India will bring in much-needed money for its defence companies, which have been severely impacted by the war with Russia.

The Indian Air Force's (IAF) large fleet of AN-32 aircraft, which was slated for an upgrade under a 2009 contract, has been particularly impacted. The contract involved upgrading 40 aircraft in Ukraine and another 65 in India under Ukrainian supervision. Motor Sich is the Ukrainian aircraft engine manufacturer Headquartered in Zaporizhzhia. The company manufactures engines for airplanes and helicopters, as well as industrial marine gas turbines and installations. According to Air Commodore Ashutosh Lal (Retd) a former Air Attache to Ukraine 'a part from the AN-32 upgrades a large percentage of our helicopters which include Mi-4, Mi-8, Mi-17, Mi -25, Mi -26 and Mi -35 use Ukranian engines. It is only the Mi 17 BV that uses a different engine". In fact, he was posted in Kyiv when the An-32 upgrade was negotiated.

But the factories of key Ukrainian defence companies, Antonov Serial Production Plant in Kyiv and the Zorya-Mashproekt complex in Mykolaiv have been bombed by Russia.

The supply chain has also been disrupted .It is reported that due to this the last five of the 40 aircraft that were to be upgraded in Ukraine are reportedly stuck in Kyiv, and the local upgrade in India was stalled due to the departure of Ukrainian engineers and the shortage of spare parts.

The Zorya-Mashproekt complex in Mykolaiv, is vital for the production of turbines used by navies worldwide, has had its operational capabilities severely crippled. The impact is significant for India, which relies on these turbines for its warships. As per Air Commodore Ashutosh Lal (Retd) there are approximately 130 such engines being used in India. In fact, the Delhi and Kolkata Class ships are powered by Ukrainian gas turbine engines. There is also a vital difference between aircraft and ship engines. In the former the air frame is first built and then the engine is selected to power the aircraft. Whereas, in the latter the engine is first selected followed by the transmission and quietning of the same to avoid sonar detection and the ship is then built around this. Hence, the requirements of the engine need to be forecast keeping a long-term horizon in mind.

Apart from this there are Ukranian Design Houses dealing with aircraft engines and also Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). Kyiv Ukraine inherited significant ICBM design and production capabilities from the Soviet Union. These include the Pivdenne (formerly Yuzhnoye) Design Bureau, responsible for the design of the SS-18 and the SS-24 ICBMs.

Given these bonds and subsequent disruptions, the Prime Minister's visit offers an opportunity to explore new avenues of cooperation with Ukraine. One potential area of collaboration is the establishment of joint ventures in India, where Ukrainian technicians can work alongside Indian counterparts to set up manufacturing units. Bharat Forge's recent acquisition of a 51 per cent stake in Zorya's India arm with an objective to create indigenous capabilities for design, manufacturing, maintenance repair and overhaul including spare support for all types of gas turbines could be the direction.

Apart from this, the war has also showcased the drone capabilities and technologies of Ukraine and their impact during the conflict and this could be a future area for cooperation.

As we focus on Atmanirbharta (Self-reliance), It also needs to be seen how in can benefit from Ukrainian technology, expertise in metallurgy, overhaul, manufacturing and design of complex engines and then work out a system to overhaul own engines and manufacture new engines.

In view of the above it is vital from a defence supply point of view to engage with Ukraine. There is scope for engagement at all levels starting from design with the DRDO, manufacturing with both the private and public sector, engagement at the user level at the Service Headquarters with the backing of the government regarding policies, processes and engagements. New Delhi needs to engage to get technology into India in an incremental manner and it is this pace of engagement that would have got accelerated during the visit. It is these interests with regard to our robust defence relationship that we need to safeguard.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Kyiv has garnered significant attention in international politics. The highest-profile wartime visit of a leader of a nation with a neutral stance on the conflict can be viewed as positive sign for advancing negotiations Though it is difficult to gauge how much traction the visit can generate in the prevailing situation and to what degree he can persuade them to move away from conflict.

However, an aspect which remains crucial from India's standpoint is the standstill situation India is facing for nearly three years now with regards to its defence manufacturing and maintenance of the same. At this juncture the key concern for India should be to somehow navigate the tides of war and ensure that its own defence capabilities are not being impacted by the war.

As per the joint statement on Indian Prime Ministers visit to Kyiv, Ukraine and India are positive on continuing their cooperation as allies in defence Manufacturing and emerging areas and certainly there is no doubt that common national interests will continue to guide geo politics and international relations.

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