

## The PM's Visit to Ukraine was Well Calibrated and Full of Substance & Symbolism

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### Introduction

On his 80th overseas visit, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi visited Ukraine on 23 Aug, 2024. This visit was 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, S Jaishankar, the NSA, Ajit Doval, and the Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misra.

The reasons for the visit have been debated at length, was it at India's behest in the light of India's ability to engage both with Ukraine and Russia and its growing stature in global affairs or was it due to pressure from the West. The latter being mainly due to PM Modi's visit to Moscow in early July. The answer will be easier to ascertain if dates of the initial proposal for the visit are divulged.

In Russia PM Modi had stated that that a [solution to the Ukraine conflict is not possible on the battlefield](#) and that peace talks do not succeed amidst bombs, guns and bullets. Before arriving in Ukraine, Modi visited Poland, where he urged diplomatic efforts to end the war and pledged India's support, and reiterated that "This is not an era of war" and any conflict should be resolved through diplomacy and dialogue.<sup>[i]</sup>

### The Optics

There were many who said that the visit has been forced upon the PM as it is perceived that India remains close to Russia and particularly after last month's visit by the PM to Russia where he was seen embracing President Putin, while on the same day a Russian missile hit a children's hospital. Six weeks ago, President Zelensky had called that meeting "A huge disappointment" and "A devastating blow to peace efforts."<sup>[ii]</sup>

There were other analysts who said that the visit was due to the fact that India was wanting to play the role of a peacemaker in ending the conflict. Before the visit, Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to President Zelensky, told Reuters it was significant because New Delhi "Really has a certain influence" over Moscow. It is extremely important for us to effectively build relations with such countries, to explain to them what the correct end to the war is - and that it is also in their interests," he said. <sup>[iii]</sup>

However, on 23 August it was President Zelensky who was embraced by the PM though he seemed uncomfortable as he had the sun shining in his eyes.

The Prime Minister also issued renewed condolences over the missile strike on X (Formerly Twitter) in a post written in Ukrainian. "Conflict is particularly devastating for young children. My heart goes out to the families of children who lost their lives, and I pray that they find the strength to endure their grief," the post said.<sup>[iv]</sup>

It was surely no coincidence that the first place Prime Minister Modi went to was Ukraine's history museum where he was invited to watch an exhibition remembering the 570 Ukrainian children reported to have been killed since February 2022. At one point, he even put his arm around the Ukrainian President's shoulders.

## Peace Negotiations

India had sent a representative to [the peace summit](#) in Switzerland in June in which Russia was not invited. But India did not join the nations that signed a communiqué at the end of the summit supporting three points of the Ukrainian plan as India feels that negotiations need to involve both warring parties.[\[v\]](#)

However, the resolution of the conflict is important for India as continued isolation of Russia could push Russia into a tighter embrace with China. India has deep ties with Russia and has engagements at all levels including defence, space and nuclear energy. India has also been an importer of Russian crude oil.

Ukraine needs the support for its negotiating plan from the Global South and has pointed at the war's [risks to grain exports](#) from the Black Sea to prevent a spike in global food prices. Ukraine has also argued that any settlement shifting borders would set a precedent endangering stability in Asia, Africa and South America.

Ukraine's interests lie in winning diplomatic backing for its negotiating positions from as broad an international coalition as possible as Ukrainian officials are preparing to organise a second Peace Summit this year, the reported venue under discussion being Saudi Arabia.

Unfortunately, at this juncture both sides view the pursuit of conflict as beneficial to their interests. Russia despite its losses is unlikely to give up Crimea, Donstok and Luhansk. Ukraine on the other hand feels that with the backing of the West and following its recent incursion in Kursk, negotiations without getting back the territory that has been occupied by Russian forces is not in their interest.

The reality is that deeply entrenched national positions are preventing conflict resolution and the only likely change in positions can come about due to dramatic events on the battlefield or waning of support to Ukraine from their backers whose population are feeling the pinch due to the rising costs of food, fuel and fertilisers alongwith funds being diverted towards security and Ukraine from welfare and development. There is no doubt that there is a sense of fatigue setting in amongst the population who feel they are bearing the financial burden of the conflict.

## The Substance

The PM visited the statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Kyiv underscoring the focus on peace and said that India had never been neutral in the war, he insisted. "Right from the first day our side was peace".

During the visit, the PM assured Ukraine that India is ready to play an active role in any efforts towards peace. "If I can play any role in this personally, I will do that, I want to assure you as a friend," he said. "The road to resolution can only be found through dialogue and diplomacy. And we should move in that direction without wasting any time. Both sides should sit together to find

a way out of this crisis". [\[vi\]](#) PM Modi also pledged that India would provide humanitarian support for Ukraine's conflict with Russia.

Both leaders also discussed bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and addressed not only the ongoing conflict but also explored ways to deepen industrial and defence ties. The issue of India's energy trade with Russia was also discussed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also invited President Volodymyr Zelensky to visit India and the Ukrainian leader said he would be happy to travel to India. This is a sign of a continued strategic partnership and a commitment to dialogue without a long pause.

In a joint statement, the two leaders indicated they had raised their views on various topics with each other. President Zelensky had broached the issue of India's purchases of Russian oil, which helps fund Moscow's war effort, but reached no immediate agreements. Prime Minister Modi expressed support for a move toward settlement talks that involve Russia.[\[vii\]](#)

"The Indian side reiterated its principled position and focus on peaceful resolution through dialogue and diplomacy," the statement said. It noted that, "Prime Minister Modi reiterated the need for sincere and practical engagement between all stakeholders". So far relations with Ukraine have been overshadowed by Russia, the question remains whether this visit has overcome that. [\[viii\]](#)

## **Conclusion**

Despite pressure from the West, India has refrained from condemning Russia's invasion or voting against it in UN resolutions. It has avoided taking sides and urged Ukraine and Russia to resolve the conflict through dialogue.

As per Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia; "While Russia is a long-term traditional ally of India, Ukraine also has had very friendly relations with India. It is, therefore, a difficult task to balance this, especially since Ukraine has received strong support from the West, with which India also has good relations."

Speaking in the evening after the PM visit during his regular address to the nation, President Zelensky said it is "Important to us that India remains committed to international law and supports our sovereignty and territorial integrity. Today, history was made", as per his post on X.

The White House also welcomed the visit and John F Kirby, a National Security spokesman, said; "If that can be helpful to getting us to an end to the conflict that comports with President Zelensky's vision for a just peace, well then, we think that would be helpful" .

The visit no doubt reinforced India's stature on the global platform and shows it is willing to talk to both sides in the conflict and is strong enough to have its own understanding of issues and voice them with maturity.

Prime Minister Modi's visit clearly demonstrates India's strategic autonomy and countered the perception regarding its relationship with Russia and reveals the balance in its foreign policy.

## Endnotes

[i] “No solution to any conflict is possible on the battlefield, PM Modi tells President Putin.” The Hindu, July 9, 2024.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-solution-to-any-conflict-is-possible-on-the-battlefield-pm-modi-tells-president-putin/article68384993.ece>.

[ii] India Today. “India was never neutral in this war, on side of peace: PM to Ukraine's Zelenskyy,” August 23, 2024.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-zelenskyy-ukraine-war-india-never-neutral-peace-russia-putin-2586955-2024-08-23>.

[iii] Al Mayadeen. “Modi visits Ukraine, India’s first in 30 years.” Al Mayadeen English, August 23, 2024.

<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/modi-visits-ukraine--india-s-first-in-30-years>.

[iv] “Indian PM Modi meets Ukraine’s Zelenskiy for talks in wartime Kyiv,” The Print. August 23, 2024.

<https://theprint.in/india/indian-pm-modi-meets-ukraines-zelenskiy-for-talks-in-wartime-kyiv/2235468/>.

[v] Johnny, Stanly. “The View From India newsletter | Why India refused to back the Ukraine summit statement?” The Hindu, June 18, 2024.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-view-from-india-newsletter-why-india-refused-to-back-the-ukraine-summit-statement/article68299683.ece>.

[vi] Mohan, Hridaya. “Opinion: ‘India Firmly for Peace’ – Modi in Ukraine.” Kyiv Post, September 1, 2024.

<https://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/38251>.

[vii] Andrew E. Kramer, Indian Leader Visits Kyiv as Ukraine Pushes Diplomacy, New York Times, 23 August 2024 ,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/23/world/europe/ukraine-modi-india.html>

[viii] Ibid

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