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Prime Minister Modi's Visit to Ukraine Today: Expectations & Implications

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Shri Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister, is scheduled to visit Ukraine on August 23, 2024.¹ The upcoming visit of the Indian PM to Ukraine will be subsequent to his earlier meeting with the Ukrainian President on the sidelines of G-7 in Italy on June 14, 2024, wherein the two leaders discussed ways to strengthen bilateral ties and the situation of the war in Ukraine.² In fact, this visit would be the first visit by any Indian PM to Ukraine since diplomatic relations were established between India and Ukraine some 30 years ago.³

PM Modi's Recent Russia Visit

Before the forthcoming visit to Ukraine in August 2024, the Indian PM had visited Russia on July 9, 2024, wherein wide-ranging Memorandums of Understanding (MsOU) were inked between the two sides covering Environment & Forest, Polar and Ocean Research, Broadcasting and so on.⁴ Now, the execution of these MsOU is expected to be monitored.

This happened to be Mr Modi's first visit to Russia after being sworn in as the PM for the third consecutive term. The visit had taken place in the face of a long-drawn war between Russia and Ukraine, wherein the so-called efforts of the world community to broker peace between these two warring nations have failed to yield any results.

Prime Minister Modi's visit, first to Russia and now to Ukraine since the commencement of the war, is coupled with the hopes of the USA for India to mediate peace between Russia and Ukraine.⁵ In other words, the above inclination of the USA is indicator of an obvious failure on part of the West to mediate peace between the contending parties—a task in which the US and the West have actually never been interested.

Notwithstanding the initial anguish expressed by the Ukrainian President Zelensky over the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Russia, followed by Modi's grand welcome and embrace with Russian President Putin in Moscow,⁶ the Indian PM expressed satisfaction over the fact that both the Indian and Russian sides heard each other patiently. He also underscored India's stance that war and terror are to be denounced at all costs.⁷

Implications for the West

The visit to Russia and the deliberations between the two leaders can be considered a balancing act on part of India against the USA, besides highlighting the complex position of India in global politics.⁸ The

visit was subjected to criticism by the West but was upheld by India, citing its long time practice of Strategic Autonomy.

The Indian Prime Minister's visit to Russia in July 2024 has shown India's strong belief in sustaining amicable relations with the USA, but at the same time also effectively showcased India's neutral stand in world affairs. The visit has unambiguously brought home a point regarding India's solidarity with the nations of the world on one hand, while nurturing its national interests on the other. India's ties with the USA have significantly progressed, especially in the sectors of defence, technology and trade and commerce over the past few years.

From the viewpoint of Air Power, it would be worth mentioning here that the USA has been instrumental in providing India with modern, all-terrain, all-weather capable transport aircraft such as the C-130J Hercules⁹ and C-17 Globemaster, capable of operating on unpaved surfaces,¹⁰ besides Heavy Lift Helicopters like the CH-47F Chinooks, AH-64E Apaches and MH-60R Sea Hawks. These assets have become significant force multipliers for the Indian Air Force (IAF).¹¹

The defence ties between India and the USA have been progressing well till now, with American war-fighting equipment constituting a sizable chunk of India's defence inventory. Considering this, the ties between India and the USA need to be sustained in good stead in the future also, as far as India's defence interests are concerned.

Implications for the East

While on one hand, India is maintaining stable relations with the West, Russia, on the other hand, has remained a longtime friend of India by virtue of standing steadfastly through thick and thin since the Indian independence in 1947. It is needless to reiterate that the erstwhile USSR had helped India in terms of setting up large industrial plants like Bhilai Steel Plant, Bokaro and Rourkela industrial plants, besides Uralmash, Gazprom, Rosatom, Silovye Mashiny. This collaboration has continued up to the recent support for the BrahMos Missile plant in India.¹²

In addition, the erstwhile USSR had also been supportive of India during the 1971 war. When the USA realised that Pakistan was about to lose the 1971 war and the Bangladesh was about to be created, the USA positioned the 7th Fleet of the US Navy in the Bay of Bengal, obviously in support of Pakistan.¹³ In this hour of need, the erstwhile USSR had stood firmly with India, not only politically and diplomatically but also militarily, duly deploying its cruisers and destroyers as well as a nuclear submarine to counter the presence of the US Navy in the area.¹⁴ So, the warm and strong relations between India and Russia align with a long-standing friendship.

India not only strongly believes that bilateral differences can be resolved only through dialogue and not through belligerence, but has also communicated this to the Russian President during their recent meeting in July 2024. Prime Minister Modi and President Putin had a long discussion about Ukraine during the Indian Prime Minister's Russia visit on July 9, 2024, and were almost unanimous about the fact that the war is not a solution to the disputes. Yet, it might be tricky and inevitable for India to strike a balance between its long-standing relations with Russia and its humane gesture to establish peace in Ukraine.

The situation took an unexpected and difficult turn when Ukraine, hitherto maintaining a defensive posture, carried out offensive strikes in Kursk (Russian territory) on August 6, 2024. This has sent shockwaves across Russia, putting the population in fear and posing a serious challenge to the Russian leadership's strong position amidst the ongoing war.¹⁵ The recent Ukrainian attack on Russian territory has put the prospects of any Russo-Ukraine peace talks in a quandary. Considering this, the likely impact of the Indian initiative towards establishing peace between Russia and Ukraine through the upcoming visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Ukraine can only be wished good luck.

Implications for India

A maxim in the discipline of international relations states that there are no permanent friends or foes in international politics, and what is permanent is the national interest of a nation, which needs to be nurtured at all costs. Considering this ideological yet relevant line of thought, India needs to weigh its priorities so as to appropriately address the significant issues that concern us as a nation.

India, in its current realm of diplomacy, professes the tenets of 'Freedom of Choice' and 'Strategic Autonomy'.¹⁶ Following these motivators of Indian diplomacy, India believes that all disputes between the contending nations can be settled only through dialogue and negotiations. Guided by this belief, India might consider it desirable to establish peace between Russia and Ukraine with a view to bringing life in Ukraine back to normalcy. It, therefore, becomes imperative for India, as an emerging world power, to make meaningful efforts to promote international peace and security.

Militarily also, we should not lose sight of the fact that the destruction of the Antonov Plant manufacturing AN-32 medium lift Transport aircraft at Kyiv during the Russian attack on Ukraine has directly hit the supply chain of spares required by the IAF for maintenance of its AN-32 fleet.¹⁷ The efforts to channelise the supply of spares through alternative routes have not yielded the desired results towards resuming supplies, and the ageing fleet still suffers from serviceability issues. However, due to the ingenuity and persistent efforts of its engineers, the IAF has been somehow managing the fleet's serviceability to near-satisfactory levels.

Though the Russo-Ukrainian ties are in a challenging state owing to the recent Ukrainian strike on Russian territory, it would be wishful thinking that the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Ukraine succeeds in showcasing India's strong commitment to world peace and thereby indirectly strengthening India's image as a neutral and responsible player at the epicentre of international politics. Nevertheless, this is expected to provide India with an opportunity to reinforce its respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Also, India's gesture of being with Ukraine, along with an effort towards mediating Ukrainian peace with Russia, is likely to enhance India's diplomatic leverage while counterbalancing its relations with the USA and other European nations which are favoring Ukraine. This might be to India's advantage with respect to its efforts towards countering global terror and addressing the international trade mechanism in India's interest amidst enabling circumstances.

Moreover, India's friendly gesture towards Ukraine at this hour of crisis is likely to help India establish future ties with Ukraine in defence, agriculture, technology and other sectors. It might indirectly facilitate the diversification of India's international partnership options while leading to widening the arena of its strategic alliances.

Conclusion

It can be safely assumed that given the gradual rise of India as a prominent world power by virtue of its all-inclusive diplomacy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the impending visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Ukraine on August 23, 2024, is expected to give India an opportunity to globally reinforce its belief in strategic autonomy amid the complexities of international diplomacy. The visit is likely to counterbalance India's strategic relations with the West as well as Russia, while at the same time avoiding close alignment with any single international power, resulting in a reinforced Indian diplomatic credibility in the face of a multipolar world order.

Notes:

- ¹ “PM Modi may visit Ukraine in August, First since war started”, *The Times of India*, July 27, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-may-visit-ukraine-in-august-first-since-war-started/articleshow/112056719.cms>. Accessed on August 16, 2024.
- ² Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), “Prime Minister’s meeting with the President of Ukraine on the sidelines of the G7 Summit”, June 14, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37871/Prime+Ministers+meeting+with+the+President+of+Ukraine+on+the+sidelines+of+the+G7+Summit#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Shri%20Narendra%20Modi,office%20for%20the%20third%20term>. Accessed on August 16, 2024.
- ³ “Narendra Modi to visit Ukraine on August 23, first visit by any Indian PM since bilateral ties began”, *The Times of India*, August 19, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-to-visit-ukraine-for-the-first-time-since-war-with-russia/articleshow/112622815.cms>. Accessed on August 21, 2024.
- ⁴ Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), “List of outcomes: Official visit of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Russia”, July 9, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37941/List+of+outcomes+Official+visit+of+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modi+to+Russia>. Accessed on August 16, 2024.
- ⁵ “US Urges India and Allies to Support Efforts in Ukraine Peace”, *DD News*, July 10, 2024, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/us-urges-india-and-allies-to-support-efforts-in-ukraine-peace/>. Accessed on August 16, 2024.
- ⁶ “Ukraine President Zelenskyy slams PM Modi's hug with Putin in Moscow as a 'blow to peace efforts'”, *The Economic Times*, July 11, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/ukraine-president-zelenskyy-slams-pm-modis-hug-with-putin-in-moscow-as-a-blow-to-peace-efforts/articleshow/111602921.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on August 16, 2024.
- ⁷ “Joint Statement following the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit”, *Press Information Bureau*, July 9, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasframePage.aspx?PRID=2031946>. Accessed on August 16, 2024.
- ⁸ “Balancing act: How will Narendra Modi make India look strong globally?”, *Business Standard*, July 9, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/politics/balancing-act-how-will-narendra-modi-make-india-look-strong-globally-124070900099_1.html. Accessed on August 16, 2024.
- ⁹ “India’s C-130J Hercules”, *SP’s Aviation*, Issue 11/2011, <https://www.sps-aviation.com/story/?id=846>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.
- ¹⁰ “C-17 GLOBEMASTER III”, Boeing, <https://www.boeing.com/defense/c-17-globemaster-iii#overview>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.
- ¹¹ “Apache and Chinook – Rotary Wing Capability Boost – IAF”, *Air Power Asia*, <https://airpowerasia.com/2020/04/21/apache-and-chinook-rotary-wing-capability-boost-iaf/>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.
- ¹² “Five Russian Makers in India”, *Make in India*, <https://www.makeinindia.com/5-russian-makers-india>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.
- ¹³ Asif Mahfuz, “US Fleet in Bay of Bengal: A game of deception”, *The Daily Star*, December 16, 2013, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/us-fleet-in-bay-of-bengal-a-game-of-deception>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.
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- ¹⁵ Steve Rosenberg, “Russians tell BBC they are Worried and angry at Ukraine incursion”, *BBC*, July 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/videos/cgedgzx7xqno>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.
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¹⁶ Suhasini Haider and Dinkar Perry, "PM Modi likely to visit Ukraine on August 23", *The Hindu*, July 27, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-ukraine-looking-at-possibility-of-pm-modis-visit-to-kyiv-next-month/article68452995.ece>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.

¹⁷ "World's Greatest Aviation Hub Destroyed, Russia Strikes Antonov Aircraft Plant in Kyiv", YouTube Video, 2:58, *India Today*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypUXmXl6lFI>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.

