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Menu à la Kyiv from Indian PM Modi

Never before was being relevant in a peace process in Europe so important. Modi's Ukraine visit was an arm of cooperation stretched to Eastern Europe

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kyiv on 23 August and the Ukrainian Independence Day on 24 August happened in relative calm in this war-torn land. On 26 August, Russia rained 127 missiles and 107 drones targeting energy infrastructures – the largest number since the beginning of its invasion in 2022. Both this and the missiles fired on Ukraine at the largest children's hospital in Kyiv, when Modi was in Moscow on 8 July, prove Russia has no intent for peace negotiations. On the other hand, with the Kursk operation unfolding, despite holding summits and articulating peace plans, Ukraine's intent for peace is also questioned by many observers. In these circumstances, why was the visit of PM Modi necessary? What was its rationale?

Talking about peace is essential, none but Ukraine feels it the most. Modi's visit was a balancing act after the horrible optics of a bear hug with Putin while missiles killed Ukrainian children. It must also be said that Modi was not a silent observer, he himself emphasised the role of dialogue and diplomacy to end the war, the pain of witnessing the death of innocent civilians and children, in the same way as when he uttered these words in front of Russia's President Vladimir Putin in September 2022 in Samarkand and again on 9 July in Moscow. He said to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, that India was not neutral in the war, it was on the side of peace. But beyond these statements, no peace plan emerged. Like Orbán, Lula or Xing Ping, Modi did not engage in designing a plan to end the Ukraine-Russia war. Here is where he differs from mediators, in fact, confirming the traditional Indian way of passive mediation, because India does not entertain mediators as third parties in its disputes with neighbours. So, it was talking about peace having no peace in sight.

However, it should be mentioned that a joint statement of the leaders at the end of the summit speaks about 'innovative solutions' for 'ensuring a Comprehensive, Just, and Lasting Peace', the three adjectives preceding the word peace weigh more, coupled with the standard support to

territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine by India in adherence to the UN Charter.

India's 'Look East' policy

Experts and media, who were loud about Modi's 'peace mediation' before and during the visit, sobered-up, instead, underscoring its historic nature. It was the first ever visit by any Indian PM to independent Ukraine after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992 with India. Diplomatically, this perhaps is the obvious significance of the visit, raising Ukraine - India relations to the highest political level. This was demonstrated in the Joint Statement of the leaders, consisting of 32 points.

The key takeaways are that the bilateral relations will be elevated from a comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership in the future. Economic, scientific and technical cooperation as well as a defence cooperation demonstrate India's emerging interest in cheaper solutions and newer FPV drone and other technologies, that Ukraine mastered during the war without sufficient and timely support from the West.

Culture and people-to-people ties were not forgotten. The same is true for the UN Security Council reform, a process of widening representation, in which Ukraine supports India's candidature as a permanent member. India added that it supports Ukraine joining the International Solar Alliance. And of course, the joint stand against terrorism stitched it all together.

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Another major significance of this visit is that certain small but steady steps were undertaken, like bricks were laid to a grand edifice. On-going sectoral consultations at the ministerial levels for the past months gave birth to four memoranda signed during the visit. The areas of the memoranda covered pharmaceuticals, of which India is a giant manufacturer today, as well as agricultural products, of which India is a prime buyer from Ukraine.

A key component of public diplomacy – cultural cooperation agreement, under discussion since 2002, was recently finalised. This memorandum is not only about cultural exchanges and delegations, festivals and events, but also issues of preservation of intangible and tangible cultural heritage, libraries, museums and cultural archives. Last but not least was the memorandum on high impact community development, within the

framework of which India will provide a grant for community level reconstruction of social and civil infrastructure, destroyed during the war. India usually offers this grant facility to its neighbours only. Time will tell if these memoranda can pave the way to India's engagement in the various components of the ten-point peace plan of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, such as food security, health, protection of cultural heritage and post-war reconstruction.

The baggage of the visit shows a curious beginning, India's 'Look East' policy is focused on East and Central Europe. After Czechia and Hungary, this twin visit to Poland and Ukraine, happening after 45 and 33 years respectively, is therefore, not only historic, but part of the shift in getting close to the widened European Union. Decoupling from Russia is an issue Indian policy makers avoid, at times decisively negating it, but facts and data show this de-hyphenation started in the defence sector long before. According to SIPRI, in 2009, 76 per cent of defence equipment was from Russia, in 2019, before the pandemic and the war, it came down to 36 per cent.

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The crude oil purchase from Russia is an Achilles heel for India, Modi's target of economic growth is dependent on cheap energy, but not without political compromises, as President Zelenskyy urged him to lessen or stop enabling Russia. The fact that such an enabling act is marginal as the transactions are in Rupees and a large part of the processed oil is sold to the West mattered less.

On the backdrop is the China factor for India, the former being viewed more as an adversary by the West and the latter befriended for strengthening Indo-Pacific security. Russia's growing bonhomie with China is a trigger to activate these processes.

Never before was the factor of being relevant in a peace process in post-World War II Europe so important and urgent for the foreign policy of non-European nations, especially from the countries of the Global South. Modi's Ukraine visit can be viewed in this context as a longer arm of cooperation India has stretched to Central and East Europe.



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