

India's peace efforts: could it help to stop the war in Ukraine?

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Indian diplomacy recently demonstrated a bit new approach, experimenting with a conduct that has gone beyond traditional neutrality to pro-active efforts at peacemaking. The diplomatic posture must be seen in the larger context of N.Modi's June meetings with G7 leaders in Italy, his July summit with Putin, the August visit to Kyiv, the telecons with Putin and Biden to brief them on the outcomes of his trip to Ukraine, as also the conversations in the United States (US) in September and upcoming visit to Russia in October for the BRICS Summit. Many analysts and commentators have spoken about the capacity of India to mediate, as PM Modi is positioning himself as a peacemaker, given India's close relations with both Moscow and the West. But it is unlikely that he will turn up with a peace plan for Ukraine right now.

Conclusions:

1. The international position of the Republic of India has always being independent, a kind of "strategic autonomy". India promoted non-alignment in its foreign relations and gave a lot of "brilliant examples" of neutrality and non-interference, cooperation with different (even opposite) sides. This was exactly the attitude to what is called in India "Russia-Ukraine conflict". India has consistently refrained from condemning Russia's invasion in Ukraine and even did not mention that it is a full-scale war against the independent state, managed to keep beneficial ties with Russia in energy sector. At the same time, New-Delhi has often spoken about the importance of respecting territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations. It has continuously pushed for diplomacy and dialogue to end the war.
2. Still, the last months proved that India has adopted a more proactive and less risk-averse posture of her diplomacy. It is still a strategic autonomy, but it goes beyond classical neutrality, with vividly demonstrating efforts to play a more active role by engaging both sides of the "crises". N. Modi, elected for the third time as the Prime Minister of the Republic of India in July this year, deliberately chose Moscow as his first foreign visit after the inauguration. Moreover, this official visit revived the tradition of summits between the leaders of the two countries that had existed since 2000, interrupted by the war in Ukraine.
3. In August, Narendra Modi's trip to an active war zone in Ukraine was a bold and risky diplomatic mission—the first time an Indian leader had ventured into a warzone with advocacy for peace. The visit was significant because Kyiv and some Western capitals had reacted sharply to PM warm meeting in Moscow with his "old friend" V.Putin. It was a tragic co-existence: Modi's Moscow visit in July came hours after Russian

bombing killed at least 41 people in Ukraine, including at a children's hospital in Kyiv, sparking a global outcry.

4. Analysts in India assessed the country's leader's visits to Moscow and Kyiv, as well as later communications of NSA A. Doval with counterparts in Saint-Petersburg, and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar's meetings in Saudi Arabia, Germany and Switzerland as "another example of a balanced approach." The thesis of broad opportunities for Indian diplomacy in the context of traditional neutrality and strategic autonomy is being advanced again.

The geopolitical balancing is really important, given that India has strong equities in both camps, the US and other partners of Ukraine, and Russia. New-Delhi has good relationship with both Moscow and Kyiv, and here is the "window of possibilities". In June, N. Modi met Ukrainian President V. Zelenskyy at the G-7 meeting, India took part in Swiss Peace conference, but did not signed a Communiqué. The reason was the absence of Russian Federation at the negotiation table. A multi-pronged engagement with all major powers is central to India's foreign policy doctrine, but recent India's approach in the Central Europe outreach clearly went beyond geopolitical balancing, to serve other important objectives. PM N. Modi's visits to Moscow, Vienna, Warsaw and Kyiv as well as last meetings in New-York focused on what became known as India's peace-efforts. Speculation about its determination to help resolve the war has gained traction. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's last visits and a coming meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the BRICS Summit next month, as well as the travels of National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar all point in this direction.

As a further escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict appears likely, India's possible role in peace negotiations have come into sharp focus, in the wake of recent diplomatic activity. The fact that Mr. Modi "briefed" United States President Joseph Biden in a phone call after the Ukraine visit, and Mr. Doval told Mr. Putin on the sidelines of BRICS security advisors' summit in St. Petersburg, that he had been tasked to "brief" him about the visit as well indicate that the Republic of India is engaging with all parties and developing its role as an interlocutor.

Visits to Poland and Ukraine

In August N. Modi visited Warsaw and Kyiv. While Poland is important itself and it is approved to be the face of New Europe; it is also NATO's eastern frontline, a crucial supply link in Ukraine's war effort. It was the first visit of India's leader to Warsaw in last 41 years, with intense agenda and new deals in military cooperation sector, not only business and culture. Poland also served as Modi's staging post for the Kyiv visit, from where he got into a bullet-proof train, 'Rail Force One', to chug for 10 hours each way from the Polish Rzeszow to Kyiv. Modi's visit to Moscow in July also took place amidst active conflict, but this time, India's PM had stepped into a conflict zone, with Ukraine's incursion in Russia's Kursk region and Russia's steady attacks and bombings in Ukraine, and air raid sirens gone off the night before Modi's arrival. Both sides in the 30-month war seemed to be busy creating territorial buffers to strengthen their negotiating positions in any future peace talks. It was a background of Modi's visit to Kyiv on the Flag Day of Ukraine, just one day before Independence celebration.

In the negotiations with President V.Zelenskyy, N.Modi advised, that Kyiv and Moscow would need to sit together and look for ways out of this crisis. He assured Ukraine that he personally ‘as a friend’, and India, would be ready to play an ‘active role in any attempt to move towards peace’. Zelenskyy was briefed privately on Modi’s July conversation on the war with Putin. The two sides even worked out an India-Ukraine joint statement. Zelenskyy may have railed against Putin in private, but he saved his public diatribe against Russia’s leader for a post-visit press conference, where he accused Putin of aggressive conduct. Important fact is that India did underline its commitment to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, important for India given the historical and recent territorial incursions by traditional rivals China and Pakistan.

N.Modi was clear that while Ukraine would need to compromise on some things to end Moscow’s offensive any proposal to tend the war should not include giving up Ukrainian territory to Russia. Underlining these principles and rules under the UN Statute, while at the same time not joining western sanctions or condemning Russia’s war, has been a consistent position for India over the last decade, at least since Russia seized Crimea in 2014¹.

While it was no doubt an objective, Modi’s visit was more than just a geopolitical balancing act to appease Western partners after meeting with Putin. In fact, despite the chasm in their positions, both Russia and Ukraine were willing to discuss the conflict with N.Modi at a time when only few other global leaders may enjoy similar trust on both sides, and the UN Security Council remains paralysed by major power vetoes. Russian President V.Putin openly confirmed that he can only trust 3 nations in the world to be a mediator – China, Brazil and India. ***Ukraine has not accepted China-Brazil proposal and the only option left is India. Also, it is believed, India as a Voice of so-called Global South could play an additional role in convincing other non-Western nations to be clearer on Russia-Ukraine war concerns.*** Without any objection, it was a historical visit of India’s PM to Ukraine in August 23, for various reasons, and peace efforts took a special position in it. PM Modi’s Poland & Ukraine Visits are already approved to be a “Turning Point” for Indian Foreign Policy with new focus on Central and Eastern Europe².

Next steps have been made by National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, while visiting different states and delivering messages from one side of a conflict to another one. Later, being to the US, S.Jaishankar openly said that India is going to play an active role to stop the war. He confirmed that India will take part on the next Peace summit, still, insisted on Russia’s participation as well.

US visit

September 2024 is the 4th time Mr Modi has travelled to UN during what’s called High Level Week – after 2014, 2019 and 2021, his agenda in the US was very intense: 21-st of September is planned for QUAD leaders’ summit and some bilateral meetings, 22nd – Interactions with Indian Diaspora and Roundtable with Technology CEO’s for

¹ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-s-peacemaking-will-it-work>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USJvUd9Gos0>

investment landscape and finally 23-d – for address to UNGA “Summit for the Future” and bilateral meetings with crucial partners. Also, at N.Modi met Ukrainian President V.Zelenskyy³.

In US, Quad meeting was the start of the discussions. President Joe Biden met the leaders of Japan, India and Australia to discuss the challenges a rising China poses to their countries, ahead of a farewell summit in his Delaware hometown on Saturday, September 21. The talks in Wilmington, in the twilight of Biden’s one-term presidency, reflect the importance that J.Biden has placed on “Quad” group as a counterweight to Beijing, first of all. In a personal touch, Biden hosted Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his home in the city for private one-on-one meetings on Saturday.

“While challenges will come, the world will change because the Quad is here to stay,” Biden told the leaders in his public remarks before journalists Modi made a similar pledge — in a commitment that will be welcomed by Washington, Canberra and Tokyo as they court the historically non-aligned New Delhi. “Our message is, the Quad is here to stay,” said Modi, who is due to host next year’s Quad summit in India. In their joint statement after the summit, the four leaders made no direct mention of China, even as they expressed concern over tensions on its borders. The leaders condemned “coercive and intimidating manoeuvres” in the South China Sea but without saying whose manoeuvres. A Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI), to train Quad partners “to monitor and secure their waters, enforce their laws, and deter unlawful behaviour” was also announced. India will host the first MAITRI workshop in 2025⁴.

Definitely, Indo-Pacific safety remains one of the core directions of Indian diplomacy, still, other global and regional issues have been in the focus of the discussions, and possible peace-deal between Ukraine and Russia was one of the points. It was stressed, that India is eager to consolidate all previous steps toward the future of bilateral relations with the US on a strategic high, but also will work on peaceful solutions on any conflicts, including Gaza and Ukraine. Both directions are matching and serve Indian national interests well in this combination.

Also, N.Modi met President V.Zelenskyy at the last day of his visit to the US, September 23, before departing New York for New Delhi, on the request of Ukrainian side. Peace efforts were the core of the conversation, according to Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri. There was no discussion on India’s purchase of Russian oil this time, Mr, Misri pointed out, as he briefed journalists on Monday. (Referring to India’s purchase of oil, Mr. Zelenksyy had told Indian journalists in Kyiv last month, that if Indians “change their attitude” towards Russia, the war would end).⁵

India’s moderation: will it work?

After N.Modi’s mission to Kyiv the speculation on India’s capability to be a real

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Smwz6ocNBfE>

⁴ [https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/quad-launches-maritime-and-health-initiatives-adopts-strong-](https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/quad-launches-maritime-and-health-initiatives-adopts-strong-language-on-)

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⁵ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-meets-ukrainian-president-zelenskyy-reaffirms-indias-support-for-peaceful-resolution-of-conflict/article68676256.ece>

peace-maker have been raised. It is a point of discussions now, both in politicians' offices and analysts' observations. "There is a lot of speculations, but we still have a long way to go", M.Joshi, one of the eminent experts from the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) think-tank noticed. "The present situation in Ukraine does not indicate that any serious mediation could work right now. The only leverage state in that case is the US, and it was really important to share the position of India, which is different from 3 other Quad states and to hear Modi's reflection after meetings from 2 leaders, Putin and Zelenskyy", he said⁶.

There are 3 main options for India's mediation:

1. India is happy to convey messages between Russian and Ukrainian Presidents, as it has done over the Turkish Grain Initiative, and would like to continue this mission.
2. India can play bigger role and have a peace proposal from her own side (different from Russian, Ukrainian and China-Brazil).
3. India will actively mediate and even host the next Peace Summit, where both Russia and Ukraine should be invited.

The last option has this precondition for both sides participation, and there is a constant vision. India has "*a four-point principle*" towards the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, said EAM S. Jaishankar during his recent visit to Germany.

1. This is not the time for war
2. There is no solution on the battle-field – dialogue and diplomacy is a must
3. Russia must be at the negotiation table
4. India is concerned about the consequences of the war and ready to support peace⁷.

The hope is that India is the only one able to credibly portray itself as a neutral party which both Russia and Ukraine can trust, and also is in a good relationship with the West, whose interests should be also taken into consideration. S.Haider, International News editor of The Hindu, argues: "If New-Delhi does decide to mediate it will require heavy lifting by PM Modi and his diplomats. The task is set to get more complex with the US and UK, threatening to support Ukrainian air-strikes on Russia and RF, pushing to NATO countries"⁸.

When N.Modi visited Ukraine and held talks with Zelensky, analysts said it was in line with India's famed non-alignment approach to geopolitics. India already sent 17 packages of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but could not provide any weapons and ammunition. Accordingly, India has dismissed a news report claiming the government failed to prevent European buyers from transferring Indian-made artillery shells to Ukraine.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Smwz6ocNBfE>

⁷ "<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-view-from-india-newsletter-india-and-the-russia-ukraine-conflict-postbox-or-peace-maker/article68647361.ece>

⁸ https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/watch-russia-ukraine-conflict-can-india-be-a-peace-maker/article68638556.ece?cx_testId=81&cx_testVariant=cx_1&cx_artPos=2&cx_experienceId=EXPO56ZD YSGX&cx_experienceActionId=showRecommendations7EV8PP8TM51R64#cxrecs_s

(In a special story published recently, Reuters alleged that artillery shells sold by Indian arms makers had been diverted by European customers to Ukraine. The report alleged that the transfer of ammunition has been ongoing for more than a year, with Delhi taking no action to stop it despite repeated protests from Moscow. India's foreign ministry has called the report "speculative" and "misleading". Citing unnamed Indian and European government and defence industry officials along with customs data, the Reuters report said that India produced a small amount of the ammunition being used by Ukraine - which is estimated to be under 1% of the total arms imported by Kyiv since the war began in 2021. Italy and the Czech Republic are among the European countries sending Indian ammunitions to Ukraine, it added)⁹.

Future Developments

India's place in Russia-Ukraine peace-making process remains modest, while there are indications that New Delhi is engaging with all parties and developing its role as an interlocutor. India's position could be not only a 'postbox', but it is not clear yet if it can turn into a real peacemaker, there are the 'ifs, ands, or buts'¹⁰. India has already initiated the peace process, apprising both warring parties of each other's concerns, but there are some problems in making her efforts really successful.

1. India is late to be a part of this peace-process, there is already a number of other dialogue tracks at present.
2. India did not sign on to the Burgenstock peace declaration.
3. Many observers believe, that despite always been neutral, India in fact has much closer bilateral ties with Russia.
4. Historically, India has a very modest experience in mediation, what is more India itself rejected any mediation proposal on disputed Kashmir problem.
5. Finally, the current stay of Russia-Ukraine war is far from peace and seems to be escalating (with Ukrainian incursion in Kursk region and changes in Russian Nuclear Doctrine provided by Putin recently).

Still, the discussions and conversations, happened last time, proved that Indian diplomacy took a chance of the next international activity to improve the image of **Vishavamitra** – “global friend”. Dialogue and communication is the best tool, and that is why N.Modi informed V.Zelenskyy in August on what he discussed with V.Putin in July. Equally, the Russians would have got a detailed readout of Modi's exchange with Zelenskyy. In fact, Modi himself spoke to Putin after his visit. He also spoke to the key partner, the US, when he conversed with President Biden on his return. “These conversations together constitute a credible peace-making effort, even if they would have little impact on the current state of play in the escalating war. Sometime in the happier future, India could conceivably provide a neutral platform for a peace dialogue to all stakeholders...The timing would be hard to predict; the endgame of the conflict may have to await the US elections in November”, –A.Bisariya, expert from ORF said¹¹.

The fact that PM Modi and his main advisers, Doval and Jaishankar, are busy with diplomatic efforts mentioned above is a sign of classical balanced position of

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2dpxkkn5o>

¹⁰ https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/indias-place-in-russia-ukraine-peace-making/article68660908.ece?cx_testId=81&cx_testVariant=cx_1&cx_artPos=1&cx_experienceId=EXPO56ZDYS GX&cx_experienceActionId=showRecommendations7EV8PP8TM51R64#cxrecs_s

¹¹ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-s-peacemaking-will-it-work>

India, which is just became more active. No changes in principal could be anticipated.

The Republic of India insisted on her “neutrality” as the most effective tool to protect the national interests. In fact, country’s famed non-alignment approach to geopolitics has served it well for decades, so, no signs it will change it. The question is how it could serve to resolve conflicts and stop the war in Ukraine, in particular. Keeping beneficial collaboration with Russia, India wants to increase its relations with the West, particularly with the US, and wouldn't want to upset the key partner. India also needs the West as China, its Asian rival, and Russia have forged close ties in recent times. The West is interested in supporting Ukraine, so India is here to mediate.