

## MODI'S UKRAINE VISIT: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OR A THINLY VEILED DIPLOMATIC CHARADE?

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Ukraine in August 2024 has sparked significant debate and analysis, raising crucial questions about India's strategic motivations and the broader implications of its foreign policy. As the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Ukraine, Modi's trip comes at a time of heightened global tension due to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. While the visit was touted as a diplomatic success by Indian officials, a closer examination reveals a complex interplay of strategic balancing, international scepticism, and potential missed opportunities.**

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Ukraine on August 23, 2024, was laden with symbolic gestures and high-stakes diplomacy. During his brief stay in Kyiv, Modi met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the Mariinsky Palace, where discussions centered on India's support for Ukraine's sovereignty, potential areas of bilateral cooperation, and the broader geopolitical implications of the ongoing conflict.<sup>1</sup> Modi also participated in significant symbolic acts, including laying flowers at the Mahatma Gandhi monument and honouring the memory of Ukrainian children killed during the war.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daria Dmytriieva, "Modi's historic visit to Kyiv: Key highlights", RBC-Ukraine, published on August 23, 2024.

<https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/modi-s-historic-visit-to-kyiv-key-highlights-1724416431.html>

<sup>2</sup> Aniruddha Dhar, "How global media covered PM Narendra Modi's historic visit, meeting with President Zelensky", Hindustan Times, published on August 24, 2024.

This visit, strategically timed just weeks after Modi's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow<sup>3</sup>, underscores India's attempt to maintain a delicate balance between its long-standing relationship with Russia and its growing engagement with Ukraine. The visit also followed India's participation in the Ukraine Peace Summit held in Switzerland earlier in the month, where India reiterated its stance on dialogue and diplomacy as the primary means to resolve conflicts. However, India, in a calculated move, chose not to sign the final communiqué of the Summit, which was endorsed by the majority of the delegations present, subtly positioning itself to avoid taking a definitive stance while keeping both sides appeased for its own strategic interests.

Notably, Modi's public emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity during his visit to Ukraine rings hollow in light of India's own actions in occupied Jammu and Kashmir. India's illegal and unilateral actions of 5 August 2019 have been viewed as a violation of international law and relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. The heavy military presence and reports of unabated human rights abuses in Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir stand in stark contrast to the principles of sovereignty and human rights that India claims to support on the international stage.

India's participation in the Ukraine Peace Summit, hosted in Switzerland in early August 2024, was a crucial moment for New Delhi to assert its position on the global stage. At the summit, which was attended by representatives of about 100 delegations<sup>4</sup>, India emphasized the need for dialogue, diplomacy, and a peaceful resolution to the conflict. However, India stopped short of condemning Russia's aggression, instead reiterating its non-aligned stance and calling for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity without naming names.

Critics argue that India's position at the summit was a 'missed opportunity' to take a stronger moral stand against Russia's actions. By refusing to explicitly condemn Russia and abstaining from signing the summit's final communiqué, India's stance appeared ambiguous and somewhat contradictory, especially in light of its subsequent engagement with Ukraine during Modi's visit. This ambiguity has fuelled criticism that India's foreign policy is driven more by opportunism than by a genuine commitment to international norms and peace.

Moreover, India's own disregard for the time-honoured international norms in occupied Jammu and Kashmir seriously undermines its international credibility. The United Nations and various human

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<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/how-global-media-covered-pm-narendra-modis-historic-ukraine-visit-meeting-with-president-zelensky-101724459271811.html>

<sup>3</sup> Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Modi's balancing act as he meets Putin in Moscow", BBC, published on July 9, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpd91pe5r9go>

<sup>4</sup> "Ukraine peace summit: Why some countries refused to sign the plan", Aljazeera, published on June 17, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/17/ukraine-peace-summit-why-some-countries-refused-to-sign-the-plan>

rights organizations have consistently raised concerns about India's actions in Kashmir, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, the suppression of free speech and intimidation of human rights activists and the media. These actions only show India's duplicity and call into question its professed commitment to the principles it emphasized in international forums.

### **'Strategic Autonomy' or 'Strategic Opportunism'?**

India's foreign policy has long been characterized by what it terms as "strategic autonomy," allowing it to navigate complex international relationships without fully aligning with any single power bloc. However, Modi's visit to Ukraine, followed by his earlier meeting with Putin, has exposed the inherent contradictions in this approach.

India's historical ties with Russia, particularly in defence and energy, remain strong. Russia is a key supplier of arms to India, and the two countries have cooperated on various military projects, including the S-400 missile defence system and significant oil trade. In July 2024, India became the largest buyer of discounted Russian oil, surpassing China.<sup>5</sup>

Despite general international opprobrium of Russia's actions in Ukraine, India continues to maintain robust economic and defence ties with Moscow. In fact, since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022, Indo-Russia trade has increased significantly.<sup>6</sup> This has led to accusations that India's engagement with Ukraine is more about managing its international image and appeasing the Western powers than making any substantive contribution to Ukraine's cause.

The failure to finalize the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS) during Modi's visit, an agreement that would have strengthened defense cooperation between India and Ukraine, further underscores the narrower parameters of India's current diplomatic strategy.<sup>7</sup> The omission of such a key agreement, especially given India's ongoing collaboration with Russia, raises doubts about India's sincerity in supporting Ukraine's sovereignty.

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<sup>5</sup> Nidhi Verma, "India surpasses China to become Russia's top oil buyer in July", Reuters, published on August 22, 2024.  
<https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/india-surpasses-china-become-russias-top-oil-buyer-july-2024-08-22/>

<sup>6</sup> "India's engineering exports to Russia surge amid Ukraine conflict but sanctions remain a concern", The Economic Times, published on May 27, 2024.  
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/indias-engineering-exports-to-russia-surge-amid-ukraine-conflict-but-sanctions-remain-a-concern/articleshow/110467494.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>7</sup> Samantha Azizi, "Modi's Ukraine Visit: Unveiling India's Strategy – OpEd", Eurasia Review, published on August 23, 2024.  
<https://www.eurasiareview.com/23082024-modis-ukraine-visit-unveiling-indias-strategy-oped/>

## Western Media's Perspective: A Diplomatic Success or a Facade?

Western media coverage of Modi's visit has been mixed, with some outlets praising the visit as a diplomatic success that highlights India's growing role as a global player, while others have expressed scepticism about India's true intentions. Publications like *The Guardian*<sup>8</sup> and *BBC*<sup>9</sup> have pointed out the strategic ambiguity in India's actions, noting that while Modi's visit sends a positive signal to Ukraine and its Western allies, it also reveals India's reluctance to fully break with Russia.

Moreover, the lack of any significant outcomes from the visit—such as major agreements or a shift in India's stance on the conflict—has led to criticism that the trip was more about optics than substance. By maintaining a neutral stance while engaging with both Russia and Ukraine, India risks being perceived as opportunistic, using the conflict to enhance its global influence without taking a definitive stand.

## The Broader Implications: India's Role on the Global Stage

The broader implications of Modi's visit to Ukraine cannot be overstated. As India aspires to play a more prominent role on the global stage, its actions in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict will be closely scrutinized. The visit highlights India's attempt to balance its historical ties with Russia against its desire to engage more actively with the West and emerging global powers. However, this balancing act is fraught with risks.

By not fully committing to Ukraine's cause or condemning Russia's actions, India risks alienating key Western partners and undermining its credibility as a responsible global actor. Furthermore, the perception of India as a nation driven by self-interest rather than by a commitment to international norms and peace could damage its standing in international forums.

## Conclusion: A Strategic Gamble with High Stakes

To conclude, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Ukraine in August 2024 represents a significant but deeply ambivalent moment in India's foreign policy. While the visit has been hailed by some as a diplomatic success, it also exposes the contradictions at the heart of India's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. By attempting to maintain strong ties with both Russia and Ukraine, India risks

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<sup>8</sup> Harding & Sabbagh, "Modi tells Zeleskiy he is ready to work 'as a friend' to bring about peace deal", *The Guardian*, published on August 23, 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/23/modi-to-visit-ukraine-amid-controversy-over-hug-for-putin>

<sup>9</sup> Vikas Pandey, "Diplomatic tightrope for Modi as he visits Kyiv after Moscow", *BBC*, published on August 23, 2024.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2e9zrywq9o>

being seen as opportunistic and insincere—a perception that could undermine its efforts to position itself as a leading power.

As India continues to navigate the complex dynamics of the conflict, it must carefully consider the long-term implications of its actions. The facade of 'strategic autonomy' can only hold for so long before the underlying contradictions—both in its international relations and its domestic policies—begin to unravel, potentially damaging India's credibility on the global stage. Modi's visit to Ukraine, while historic, may ultimately be remembered as a strategic gamble with high stakes and uncertain outcomes. The world will be watching closely to see how India manages this delicate balancing act in the months and years to come, particularly in light of increasing reports of violation of international law and human rights in the context of occupied Jammu and Kashmir as well as against minorities in India.