

A SINCERE PEACE EFFORT OR A BALANCING ACT: DECODING MODI'S UKRAINE VISIT

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



Introduction

On 23 August 2024, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Ukraine for about 8 hours. This visit was followed internationally with an expectation that it may help carve out a move towards peaceful resolution of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The expectation was not unjustified, as Mr. Modi is one of the few international figures who have met both Vladimir Putin of Russia and Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine since the war erupted in February 2022. Modi's visit to Moscow in July 2024 was met with harsh criticism from the Western camp. This Issue Brief attempts to analyze the motivations behind Modi's visit to Kyiv and its outcomes with a particular reference to the question that whether it carried a sincere peace effort between the warring parties or was a mere balancing act to reassure the U.S. and its Western allies of New Delhi's alignment with their overall approach.

A Mediatory Role?

Given India's self-proclaimed leadership role in the Global South, and Mr. Modi's latest visit to Moscow, many were expecting Russia and Ukraine could head toward negotiations with New Delhi's

facilitation.¹ This was evident from the questions raised by reporters in a press meet arranged by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs ahead of Mr. Modi's visit to Poland and Ukraine.² However, the post-visit documents and visual briefings do not indicate any such breakthrough. In his press talk towards the end of Modi's visit, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar repeated the typical mantra that Mr. Modi was always of the view that this was not an era of wars, and that there was a need to seek a resolution through dialogue and peaceful diplomacy.³ On similar lines, the India-Ukraine Joint Statement reiterated the known positions of the two countries on lasting peace and end to the war.⁴ The statement did not indicate any concrete action on India's part to bring Ukraine and Russia to dialogue.

India also agreed to continue its financial support for humanitarian and community development projects in the war-torn Ukraine.⁵ This is at a time when India has surpassed China to become top buyer of Russian oil.⁶ It is indeed a smart strategy to benefit from the ongoing conflict by purchasing oil from Moscow on cheaper rates on the one hand, and asserting soft power through humanitarian assistance to Kyiv on the other. It also implies that New Delhi may not be interested to carve out a peace plan which may constrict its benefits from the conflicting parties.

Additionally, India may well be deficient in terms of grandeur, confidence, credibility and acceptability in order for it to be able to chalk out a peace process between Russia and Ukraine. President Zelenskyy's latest criticism of India's trade ties with Russia and an apparent balancing approach in the conflict shows mistrust on his part. Zelensky complained that billions coming to Russia from India's oil imports were contributing to Moscow's "war economy" and that war could end if India pushed for it. Instead of balancing, "I want your country on our side", Ukrainian

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- 1 "US says India can spur end to Ukraine war as PM Modi, Putin flaunt ties," *India Today*, July 10, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/modi-putin-meet-white-house-says-india-has-ability-end-ukraine-war-russia-ties-criticism-2564623-2024-07-10>.
 - 2 Ministry of External Affairs, "Special Briefing on Prime Minister's visit to Poland and Ukraine (August 19, 2024)", Accessed August 27, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMUZuVlqrDY>
 - 3 Ministry of External Affairs, "Special Briefing on Prime Minister's visit to Ukraine (August 23, 2024)," August 23, 2024, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bM02L5mo7ak>.
 - 4 "India-Ukraine Joint Statement on the Visit of Prime Minister of India to Ukraine," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, n.d., https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38214/IndiaUkraine_Joint_Statement_on_the_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_India_to_Ukraine.
 - 5 "List of documents signed during the visit of Prime Minister to Ukraine (August 23, 2024)," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, n.d., https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38219/List_of_documents_signed_during_the_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Ukraine_August_23_2024.
 - 6 Nidhi Verma, "India Surpasses China to Become Russia's Top Oil Buyer in July," Reuters, August 22, 2024, [https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/india-surpasses-china-become-russias-top-oil-buyer-july-2024-08-22/#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%2C%20Aug%2022%20\(Reuters,comparison%20of%20import%20data%20showed](https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/india-surpasses-china-become-russias-top-oil-buyer-july-2024-08-22/#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%2C%20Aug%2022%20(Reuters,comparison%20of%20import%20data%20showed).

president went on to say.⁷ It entails that Ukraine is well aware of India's policy of milking both cows in the name of maintaining 'balance' and 'neutrality'.

A Mere Balancing Act?

Devoid of any meaningful discussion on the prospects of peace between Russia and Ukraine, the visit may just be seen as a public relations balancing exercise in response to the West's severe criticism of Mr. Modi's earlier visit to Moscow. While no Indian Prime Minister had visited Ukraine in more than 3 decades, paying an official visit just one and a half month after his trip to Moscow lends strong substance to this argument.

While in Moscow, Modi was criticized the most for his gesture of hugging President Putin shortly after an alleged Russian attack on a children's hospital in Ukraine.⁸ Modi tried to neutralize this criticism by paying a visit to Ukraine's memorial for children killed in war.⁹

Moreover, the 4 bilateral documents signed during the visit are yet another manifestation of the fact that, through this visit, New Delhi only wanted to send positive signals to the U.S.-led Western camp, without looking for any tangible achievements in bilateral relations with Kyiv. Amongst the 4 documents, 2 are Memoranda of Understanding on humanitarian assistance as well as cooperation in the production of drug and medicine. Even prior to the MoU on humanitarian assistance, India had been extending support for community development projects in Ukraine.¹⁰ The other 2 documents include an agreement to enhance cooperation in agriculture, and a programme for cultural exchanges.

This means that New Delhi wishes to continue with its policy of appeasing the West, but not at the cost of its profitable ties with Moscow. This can be further deduced from the fact that while Mr. Modi's visit to Russia was spread over 2 days, his stay in Kyiv was a little longer than 8 hours.

⁷ ANI News, "Live: Press Briefing by Ukrainian President Zelenskyy on Indian PM Modi visit to Ukraine," YouTube, August 23, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyn7MI25AV8>.

⁸ Elena Giordano, "Zelenskyy: Modi Is a 'Huge Disappointment' for Hugging Putin," Politico (July 9, 2024), <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskyy-narendra-modi-is-a-huge-disappointment-for-hugging-vladimir-putin-ukraine-russia-india/>.

⁹ Prapti Kumar, "PM Modi's Solemn Visit to Ukraine's Memorial for Children Killed in War," The Times of India (Times Of India, August 23, 2024), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modis-solemn-visit-to-ukraines-memorial-for-children-killed-in-war/photostory/112745604.cms>.

¹⁰ "Special Briefing on Prime Minister's visit to Poland and Ukraine", Accessed August 27, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMUZuVlqrDY>

Conclusion

Mr. Modi's recent visit to Ukraine is yet another indication that, despite professing to follow a 'neutral' approach and 'independent' foreign policy, New Delhi succumbs to the pressure from the Western camp for obvious reasons. While India's tightrope walk to maintain a 'balance' between the warring parties generates diplomatic pressures for New Delhi, it also harms India's trust and credibility among these states, making it even less likely an option to mediate in the conflict. While India will continue to extract benefits from its relations with both Russia and Ukraine, the global geopolitical complexities will keep herding India towards the Western camp.