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# **INDIA AND RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS: NAVIGATING THE CHOPPY WATERS OF A LONG WAR**

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by Priyam Gandhi-Mody

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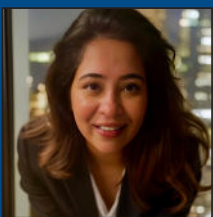
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- As allies on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict got deeply involved, India found itself at a crossroads. While Russia has stood by India firmly in times of crisis and war, India's growing strategic partnerships with Ukraine, the EU and the United States continues to form India's nuanced strategy on the conflict.
- India continues to repeatedly appeal for peace and conflict-resolution off the battlefield. India understands the challenges that the conflict brings to the global economy, trade, markets; and thus, its negative impact on the economies of developing nations. Its stance to press for peace is also driven by interests of the Global South. Thus, a peace proposition offered or supported by India is most likely to bring support from most developing economies across the world.
- India is the only economy in the top 5 economies of the world which has not chosen a side in this conflict. This position of neutrality offers merit and possibly a key to arrive at an agreeable solution towards lasting peace in the region.
- This report provides the history of India's relationships with Ukraine and Russia, India's history of choosing peace over violence in its own conflicts, India's nuanced position as a neutral power capable of not only providing solutions for lasting peace but also playing a part in allying global opinion, particularly that of the Global South towards a solution which is acceptable to both sides involved in the conflict. ■



### THE AUTHOR

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## The conflict

**T**he Russia-Ukraine war remains in a deadlock, with both Russia as well as Ukraine working to gain an upper hand on the battlefield since Moscow's foray in late February 2022. Ever since, Ukrainian forces, militarily backed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have responded decisively with an effective counteroffensive. Ukraine, supported by the West, prepared for this counteroffensive, launched against well-prepared Russian defences. Ambitions of both parties seem to be at odds with deployed capabilities. Western military aid in 2022 as well as 2023 to Ukraine has not been robust enough to help Kyiv make exceptional breakthroughs to fulfil its ambitions. Russia has also not been able to use the full spread of its capabilities to attain territorial gains, despite its declared goals. Tactical and operational blunders also seem to have compounded their failure to secure any consequential operational breakthroughs, let alone a decisive military outcome. As of writing this report, the war is in deadlock.

As world events move on, the cost of war on both parties looms heavily. The inability of the West to sustain a long-drawn expense at the cost of the welfare of their own nations seems to be changing the mood amongst citizens with regards to the extent of financial support which can be lent to Ukraine going forward. For Russia too, being in constant conflict, with sanctions is demotivating for the people of the country – also leading the country towards isolationism. This, compounded with recent or impending elections in many countries which have or seem to be leaning towards electing leaders who are aggressively pitching for peace, seems to have set

### **The inability of the West to sustain the cost of the welfare of their own nations clashes to the extent of financial support which can be lent to Ukraine**

in motion a silent undercurrent on both sides to resolve the conflict at some point in the near future. War fatigue in both countries also seems to have set in to people, who now have begun to long for normalcy.

India is one of the biggest countries with good diplomatic ties with both sides, advocating peace. Its stand is clear – that peace should take priority over war; that human lives must be saved. Not only does India propose this independently, but it also represents and rallies behind it most of the Global South. Several involved countries in the EU have also been indicating the urgent need for peace. However, to further understand India's position on the conflict, its proposed solution and capability to unite forces to mediate if requested to – a historical and contemporary understanding is essential.

## Historical overview of the India-USSR relationship

India and Russia share a long, historical, and close relationship which is aptly defined as “all weather friends” by experts of International Affairs. During the Indian freedom struggle, the Soviet economic model deeply influenced Indian leaders when a free-India’s economic roadmap was being deliberated. It was eventually in April 1947, four months before India’s independence from the British Raj, when India and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) established formal diplomatic relations. India adopted the “five-year plan” model for economic growth, based on USSR’s socialist developmental principles with the Soviets helping India in the early days with large investments in the public sector.

Post World War II, in the decades of the Cold War, the United States formed several military alliances, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to counter the expanding influence of the Soviet bloc. Some of these military arrangements, especially in India’s hostile neighbourhood, became detrimental to India and threatened India’s continued security and stability. One such alliance was the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) with Pakistan, along with Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. These became pivotal “frontline” states in America’s efforts to restrict Soviet access to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Pakistan, empowered by such alliances, became even more of a unfriendly neighbour to India. These newly forged alliances between the United States and countries hostile to India, further pushed India towards the Soviet Union. India began to seek military assistance from the Soviets to equip and protect itself from inimical powers.

**During the Cold War, the alliance between USA and several countries hostile to India pushed New Delhi towards the USSR, who provided military assistance**

A significant point in the relationship came in 1971 when India was recovering from damage after its war with China in 1962 and a Pakistan empowered by the United States felt confident to launch a strong attack on India. With an unfriendly Beijing on one side and a ready to attack US-backed Pakistan on two sides of its neighbourhood, India was trapped with dark clouds of a triple-front war looming over it. This is when India and the USSR signed the Treaty which essentially provided USSR’s deep support to India in times of war. This firmly established India’s dominance in the region, consecutively with India being able to significant impact South Asia’s politics – most importantly achieve lasting peace and stability for itself and in the South Asian region. It not only altered how India looked at the world but also changed the lens through which the world looked at India. Another step towards was taken in the year 2000, when both signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership with each other. This was a time when Russia was emerging from its post-Soviet self and grappling with its own internal and economic challenges. The fact that the two countries have stood by each other over pass-

ing decades through periods of immense challenges has certainly contributed to building a reliable, time-tested relationship grounded in trust.

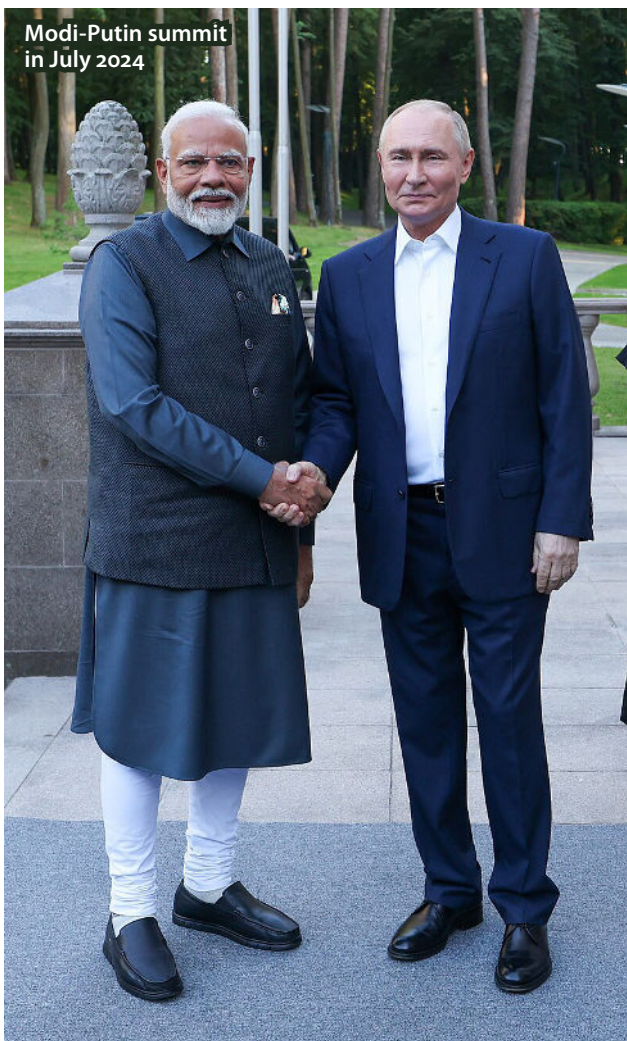
## Evolution of the India-Eussia relationship in pm Narendra Modi's tenure

Following the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russia emerged as a pivotal partner for India, continuing the legacy of cooperation. When Narendra Modi assumed office as Prime Minister in May 2014, his foreign policy emphasis on strengthening strategic partnerships and enhancing India's global influence signalled a new chapter in the India-Russia relationship. Modi's interpersonal relationship with Putin has been instrumental in navigating, expanding and strengthening this partnership in response to contemporary global dynamics.

The long-standing historical relationship between Moscow and New Delhi has advanced during the past ten years due to goodwill, cooperation, and mutual understanding between the two leaders. India-Russian relations, marked by steadfast assistance, have prospered despite international disputes. Sixteen meetings between Modi and Putin over the last ten years has

demonstrated their strong interpersonal trust and commitment to the bilateral relationship.

After Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, the city of Samarkand became a focal point for global diplomacy when Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in September, for the first time since the crisis erupted. During the meeting, Prime Minister Modi made his famous remark that, "this is not an era of war". This comment was hailed by the international community and it underscored India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and broader global tensions. Modi appealed for dialogue and diplomacy over armed conflict, reflecting India's commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes and its advocacy for a multipolar world order where conflicts are resolved through negotiation rather than military means.



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Since then, Modi has had several telephonic conversations with his Russian counterpart. During the Indian Prime Minister's recent visit to Russia in July 2024, he once again reiterated India's commitment for a peaceful solution. As the world keenly looked towards Modi and his response to the two-year old conflict, Modi walked the "hard diplomatic tightrope" and told Putin that, "peace talks do not succeed amid bombs, guns and bullets", and "a solution (to any conflict) cannot be found on the battlefield".

## The India-Ukraine relationship

The diplomatic relationship between India and Ukraine has seen collaborations spanning trade, education, and technology. Educational exchanges also played a role, with numerous Ukrainian students pursuing higher education in India and vice-versa, further cementing bilateral relations. Among the first nations to acknowledge Ukraine was India. In December 1991, the Indian government formally recognized the Republic of Ukraine as an independent nation. Diplomatic ties were subsequently established in January 1992. May 1992 saw the opening of the Indian Embassy in Kiev. As a matter of fact, in February 1993, Ukraine inaugurated its first mission in Asia in New Delhi.

The onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 marked a turning point in the India-Ukraine relationship. One of the most significant aspects of India's response was the launch of Operation Ganga, a comprehensive evacuation mission aimed at repatriating Indian nationals, including students, from Ukraine, at the onset of the conflict. As the conflict intensified, Operation Ganga mobilized special flights, coordinated with neighbouring countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania to facilitate the evacuation of its nationals. This operation successfully brought back thousands of Indian citizens, reflecting India's commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of its nationals even during an international crisis.

In 2021–2022, bilateral commerce between the two nations reached US \$3.386 billion, a



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significant increase over the previous 25 years. The Russia-Ukraine war led to increased diplomatic interactions between India and Ukraine, particularly between Prime Minister Narendra

**Since the start of the conflict, there have been over 40 diplomatic engagements between Ukraine and India – culminating in the bilateral visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Ukraine on 23 August, 2024**

Modi and President Volodymyr Zelensky. These conversations have been crucial for reinforcing bilateral ties between the two countries and addressing the challenges posed by the conflict. Ever since the start of the conflict, there have been over 40

ministerial level diplomatic engagements between Ukraine and India – eventually culminating in the bilateral visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Ukraine on 23 August, 2024.

While President Zelensky expressed his disappointment criticising Prime Minister Modi for his visit to Russia in July 2024, India has particularly chosen to de-hyphenate its relationship with Russia and its relationship with Ukraine, unwilling to pick sides, despite deep pressures from both sides.

**India’s history of peace over conflict**

India’s foreign policy has always been distinguished by its dedication to a peaceful settlement of disputes, even when there are overt dangers to its sovereignty. India has demonstrated a strong commitment to peace and diplomatic resolutions above ongoing hostilities, particularly in times of military conflict. India has a long history of choosing enduring peace.

Citing recent examples, India’s Doklam standoff with China began when China made an attempt to build a road in the Doklam plateau, which Bhutan claimed was a part of its jurisdiction. Concerned about the strategic consequences of the road’s construction and the possible danger to its own northeastern borders, India, a close ally of Bhutan—stepped in. Both sides began gathering troops as the situation worsened. India’s stance remained noticeably judicious despite the military tension. To defuse the crisis, the Modi government gave diplomatic channels top priority. India highlighted that communication was necessary, as was following

**Even in the face of strong military pressure, India’s resolve to maintain peace by prioritizing diplomatic solutions were proven by the way the standoff was resolved**

existing agreements which drew the region’s borders. Along with backchannel communications to manage the crisis, India’s diplomatic measures included high-level meetings

between foreign and military ministers of both countries. The Indian leadership also communicated with foreign parties to emphasise the need for a peaceful conclusion and to win support for its stance.



Diplomatic efforts eventually ended the Doklam impasse without allowing it to turn into a full-fledged war. China and India both consented to withdraw their soldiers, maintaining the status-quo. Even in the face of strong military pressure, India's resolve to maintain peace by prioritizing diplomatic solutions were proven by the way the standoff was resolved.

Another recent example is of the Galwan valley confrontation in 2020 which took place in Eastern Ladakh amid a larger military build-up and a deadlock as both India and China fortified their positions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Twenty Indian soldiers lost their lives in the particularly fierce battle in Galwan Valley. While the Chinese haven't disclosed their numbers officially of their fallen soldiers, sources have claimed that approximately forty Chinese soldiers died in the clash. The Modi government responded to the confrontation with a blend of patience and force. India moved swiftly to start talks with China through envoys and military commanders. De-escalation, adherence to current agreements on border management, and the necessity of a restoration to the status-quo ante were all part of India's stance.

## India's stand on the Russia-Ukraine conflict

The Russia-Ukraine war has prompted a multifaceted reaction from the global world. India's position regarding the Russia-Ukraine issue reflects its evolving global role, its strategic interests, and its long-standing foreign policy principles. It is deeply aware of the influence it wields on the Global South and the challenges which developing countries may face in the eventuality of choosing sides in the war.

India first responded to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine with caution and a demand for dialogue. This strategy was consistent with India's long standing non-alignment foreign policy, which placed a strong focus on diplomatic resolutions. India's Ministry of External Affairs – MEA issued a statement shortly after the invasion, calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to dialogue.

As the war further escalated, India faced a serious dilemma because of its strategic interests and its historical ties with Russia. Though India faced criticism from the western countries and think tanks with vested interests, for its stance, India stood firmly by maintaining strategic autonomy. On its abstention from the UN General Assembly resolution on the invasion, which was perceived by many sections as an effort to balance its historical partnership with Russia, India said, "India's abstention from the UN resolution reflects our nuanced stance on the conflict.

**The Global South looks at India as a guiding light. This adds great responsibility on India's shoulders to think of the prosperity of developing nations**

While we recognize the sovereignty of nations, we also seek to avoid actions that may exacerbate the situation further.”

As a country who has had a history of dealing with aggressive neighbours - Pakistan and China, with Pakistan still contentiously occupying a significant portion of Jammu and Kashmir – India is well aware of the nuances of territorial aggression. However, by its own experience, it is also well aware of the ill-effects of war on a country’s people, their morale and the economy. With this sophisticated combination of experience as well as an ideological history of peace, India strongly believes that no matter the extent of pressure, it will simply not choose a side. It is also conscious of the fact that the Global South looks at India as a guiding light, this adds great responsibility on India’s shoulders to think of the prosperity of developing nations versus falling to geopolitical pressures from powerful alliances. Quoting India’s Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar from an interview in March 2022 regarding India’s position in the conflict, he had observed, “We have had a long-standing relationship with Russia, and our strategic partnership is of significant importance. However, this does not preclude us from advocating for a peaceful resolution and respecting international law.” India has, by refusing to choose sides, adhered to the principles of UN Charter.

India has repeatedly voiced concerns about the conflict’s effects on humanitarian issues. India’s response has included efforts to solve the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine as well as offer support for humanitarian aid. As the crisis erupted, India immediately responded by sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine - medical supplies, medical equipment and other relief materials including blankets, tents, tarpaulin, protective eye gear, water storage tanks, sleeping mats, surgical gloves, etc. In addition to this, Indian Pharmaceutical Companies, have donated USD 6 million worth of medical aid and financial assistance to Ukraine. Other Indian companies and prominent Indians, resident in Ukraine, also remain actively involved in providing food and relief to the people of Ukraine.

## **The impact of the Russia-Ukraine crisis on the world**

The war in Russia-Ukraine is a glaring disaster for peace in Europe and Central Asia. Several adverse global economic trends that already existed before the conflict, such as deglobalization, rising inflation, extreme poverty, growing food insecurity, and deteriorating environmental degradation, have also been made worse by the war. Furthermore, adjusting fiscal priorities—even in advanced economies—may prove difficult given the probable termination of the peace dividend, which has long assisted in funding increased social expenditures.

Devastated by war, the economy of Ukraine is in serious trouble. Millions have left the nation, thousands have lost their lives or suffered severe injuries, and the nation’s physical capital has

also been destroyed. According to the World Bank, Ukraine's economy contracted sharply in 2022, with estimates indicating a decline of around 30% in GDP. The conflict has devastated infrastructure, with significant damage to critical facilities such as power plants, roads, and hospitals. The Ukrainian government has reported that rebuilding efforts will require hundreds of billions of dollars, placing a severe strain on the nation's economic stability.

In quick succession to the COVID-19 pandemic which caused a global setback, the war came as a severe blow to the economic revamp of the world. Nearly 700 million people, a large portion of which reside in conflict areas, are estimated to be living in extreme poverty, a rise of almost 100 million as per the World Bank's estimate.

The conflict has caused major disruptions in the availability and pricing of energy resources, having a severe effect on the global energy markets. Russia, one of the biggest producers of

**In quick succession to the COVID-19 pandemic the war came as a severe blow to the economic revamp of the world, with major disruptions in the availability and pricing of energy having a severe effect on the global energy markets**

natural gas and oil worldwide, has been subject to harsh sanctions, which have thus interfered with Russia's ability to export energy. The world reliance on Russia and Europe's dependence particularly on Russian energy supply, has resulted in skyrocketing energy prices globally.

The world economies have been impacted in a domino fashion by the disruption of energy sources. The disrupted supplies and diversification of resources has resulted in especially devastating the economies of small, middle-income countries - hitting the countries of the Global South especially hard. Inflationary pressures brought about by high energy prices have an impact on consumer goods prices as well as transportation expenses.

The war has also ignited debates on how well the international multi-lateral institutions handle states' aggressive behaviour. In situations where great nations have vested interests in preventing or resolving crises, it has brought attention to the shortcomings of organisations like the UN Security Council. Reforms to fortify international legal framework and improve procedures for preventing and resolving conflicts have been demanded in reaction to these difficulties. Among these are suggestions for tougher international sanctions, more backing for global criminal justice, and a stronger focus on diplomatic outreach.

### **India's mediatory role in several geopolitical challenges**

The Russia-Ukraine war quickly emerged as a critical flashpoint in global geopolitics. As the conflict intensified, world leaders and international institutions turned to India, seeking

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's intervention.

The European Union (EU) was among the first to recognise India's potential influence in mitigating the Russia-Ukraine crisis, under the leadership of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. EU leaders, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel, viewed India's strategic position as pivotal. Given India's historical ties with Russia, the EU hoped that India could leverage its diplomatic relationship to de-escalate the conflict. Von der Leyen and Michel's appeal was based on the expectation that India could act as a conduit for negotiation, potentially influencing Moscow to reconsider its aggressive stance.

The EU's appeal seemed to be motivated by several factors. First, the EU faced severe repercussions from the conflict, including energy disruptions and economic instability. As a result, the EU sought the support of global powers capable of exerting pressure on Russia to end the war. Secondly, India's established relations with Russia placed it in a unique position to engage both sides and promote dialogue.

The United States also sought Prime Minister Modi's involvement in addressing the crisis. U.S. President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged India's significant geopolitical role in resolving the conflict. Early in March 2022, Blinken urged India to use its diplomatic channels to advocate for a ceasefire and support international sanctions against Russia. Though, strategically, the U.S. aimed to mobilise global support to counterbalance Russia's actions and mitigate the conflict's broader geopolitical implications. India's involvement was seen as vital by the United States, in shaping global opinion and rallying a united front against Russia's aggression.

Not exclusively for the Russia-Ukraine crisis, various global leaders and nations have turned to India, seeking Prime Minister Narendra Modi's intervention, and leveraging India's rising

**The war ignited debates on how well the international multi-lateral institutions handle states' aggressive behaviour, bringing attention to the shortcomings of organisations like the UN Security Council**

global stature to help mediate the resolution of the other major ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. The conflict's persistence has spurred several Middle Eastern and European leaders to seek India's influence in mitigating tensions and fostering peace. Leaders from Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey, each with significant stakes in regional stability, reached out to India, hoping Modi could leverage his country's diplomatic weight and his interpersonal relationships with the leadership in the involved countries to advance peace initiatives.

Jordan's King Abdullah II, who shares a warm relationship with PM Modi and has been a

proponent of a two-state solution, actively sought India's assistance recently in pushing for renewed dialogue. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi also turned to Modi for support to stabilize the region. Egypt, a historical mediator in the Israel-Palestine issue, saw value in India's support to bolster peace efforts.

## Can India be the peacemaker?

As the war in Ukraine continues even after more than 900 days, the international community remains deeply divided as the major stakeholders take sides and pursue their own conflicting interests. The US and NATO have supported Ukraine while Russia left isolated moved close to China, forming new geopolitical equations which have led to a changing world order.

Calls for peace and dialogue have arisen from different quarters of the world. Calls have been made by several directly as well as indirectly involved nations for India to play a key role in forging peace in Ukraine. When the world seems divided in camps, India with its long-standing tradition of "positive neutrality" which refers to "an active participation in the discussion of current issues of the international agenda under the conditions of compliance with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign countries", emerges as a potential mediator capable of contributing to the peace process.

Most recently, during PM Modi's visit to Russia and Austria in July 2024, the Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer described India as "an influential and credit-worthy country" and said, "Prime Minister Modi and myself discussed the unique position of India in the so-called Global South. India is an important, influential, and credit-worthy country. India is the biggest democracy in the world. And therefore, India's role, especially for Austria, is more than important when it comes to the peace process and future peace summits".

India's diplomatic legacy provides astute insights into negotiation and dispute settlement. India's ability to mediate in complicated disputes is further demonstrated by its role in the peace efforts in Nepal and Sri Lanka.

India can use these examples to help with negotiations and provide fresh approaches in the Russia-Ukraine dispute. With no baggage from previous battles or conflicting interests, India's diplomatic standing sets it apart as a neutral party ready to engage with both Russia and Ukraine. India possesses the necessary credibility to function as an unbiased mediator because of its reasonably balanced relationships with both countries. It also possesses the clout to ensure that its proposed resolution will find support with the Global

**India's diplomatic legacy in dispute settlement like Nepal and Sri Lanka crisis can use to help with negotiations and provide fresh approaches in the Russia-Ukraine war**

South. In addition, being an active member of important multilateral groups like BRICS, SCO, G20, QUAD and others equips it with the diplomatic tools necessary to mediate between large geopolitical conflicts. Notably, the New Delhi G20 Summit Declaration in 2023, used PM Modi's famous anti-war message that, 'today's era must not be of war'.

There certainly have been efforts towards peace making with recent talks in Copenhagen, Jeddah, Malta, Davos and recently in Switzerland but the outcome has not been significant. It is perhaps prudent that neutral players like India with a rich experience in diplomatic engagement, a reputation of upholding the principles of UN charter, and ability to sway the opinion of the Global South are approached with a renewed fervour to offer mediatory solutions between Russia-Ukraine. ■

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