Ukraine war: Why India makes an ideal peacemaker

Delhi should seize the opportunity to bring an end to the conflict, a move which will burnish its credentials for a permanent place in the UN Security Council.

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For The Straits Times

“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would lead to a world of the blind and toothless.” Mahatma Gandhi may not have said this literally but it is widely attributed to him because in 1947, his biographer Louis Fischer used it to describe his philosophy. Seventy-five years have passed since. Yet, humanity hasn’t become wiser.

A major war has broken out in Ukraine. The question now is who could play an effective role as a peacemaker. The answer is clear. The country with the best opportunity to bring peace to Ukraine is the most powerful of Mahatma Gandhi’s India. Why India? No other major country enjoys simultaneous trust today in the two capitals: Washington and Moscow.

But why should India do it? Could it, as I shall explain further down, fast-track India’s assumption of a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC)?

For one, the answer will not be easy. Russia has been deeply wounded, physically and psychologically, by the failure of its military operation in Ukraine. It will not accept a settlement seen as a defeat. Hence, it may need to deliver a counter-punch to demonstrate its continuing military credibility. Asian Asian Thinkers have long believed that the Europeans, representing the emerging advanced and developed societies, would also be geopolitically weak. Instead, they are playing with fire. They are beginning to treat Russia as a toothless tiger, imposing sanctions and offering no compromises. This, quite simply, Russia is not toothless. It has sharp nuclear teeth. Hence, if pushed into a corner with no escape, Russia’s most logical and natural counterstrike would be to unleash some nuclear weapons.

One man who knows India well is Ambassador Bill Burns, the current director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who also served as the US ambassador to Moscow from 2005 to 2008. Mr Burns said in his 2008 book, “The Perfect Enemy: How the US Confronted Russia from Kennan to Kuchma.”

In short, the West should also compromise.

There are other powerful reasons for searching for a compromise in Ukraine. Firstly, the great global economic slowdown, accompanied by a surge in inflation, has inevitably unleashed populist forces in the West. France’s President Emmanuel Macron is fighting for his political life. Former US President Donald Trump remains alive and well, politically, in the US. It would be hugely ironic if Mr Putin’s invasion of Ukraine catalysed a new surge of populism in the West.

Secondly, in the developing world, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, millions are also suffering from the Ukraine war. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said that “the war has launched a silent assault on the developing world.” This crisis could throw up to 17 billion people – over one-fifth of humanity – into poverty, destitution and hunger on a scale not seen in decades.

The West has so far shown a callous indifference to the fate of these poor people. This is why most developing countries would cheer an effort by India to bring Ukraine to peace. It would bring some badly needed relief if it calmed global economic turbulence.

Similarly, the Europeans, if they were wise, should welcome a serious peace effort. Peace will not be easy. However, the outlines of compromise were offered by Dr Henry Kissinger in a Washington Post article in 2014. Essentially they can be summarised in three points:

1. Ukraine should have the right to choose its economic and political associations, including with Europe.
2. Ukraine should not join NATO.
3. Ukraine should be free to create any government compatible with the expressed will of its people. Were Ukrainian leaders then opt for a policy of reconciliation between the various parts of their country.

Eighty years have passed since Dr Kissinger proposed this formula. A lot has changed. Russia has been humiliated militarily. The Ukrainians are feeling triumphant. So too are many Europeans. This is the right brew for finding an acceptable compromise.

WHY INDIA?

Yet, precisely because it is so difficult, India should make an effort at a compromise. If, in fact, no one will blame it. They will still admire India for trying a mission impossible.

If it succeeds in finding a viable compromise (or even a durable ceasefire), the whole world will acclaim India and acknowledge that this country desperately needs a strong new independent role to balance the three existing powers in Washington, Beijing and Moscow.

They will also recognise that the world would be better off if India is immediately made a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). UNSC reforms are difficult. India has yet to sponsor a resolution in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) making India the sixth permanent member of the UNSC, it would receive overwhelming support. It is a long-lasting fact. One of the greatest anomalies about current world order is that the third most powerful country, if we mean the US and China, doesn’t have a permanent seat in the UNSC. Indeed, Martin Wolf of the Financial Times wrote in 2009 that “within a decade in which the UK is the United Nations Security Council’s longest-serving permanent member, India is not likely to appear on the same page as Germany.”

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Yes, there will be some resistance from some countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Yet, most of them will not vote against India. Indeed, many would be happy to do so if India delivers some kind of peace in Ukraine.

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