

By Invitation

# 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 big 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 motherland of Mahatma Gandhi: India.

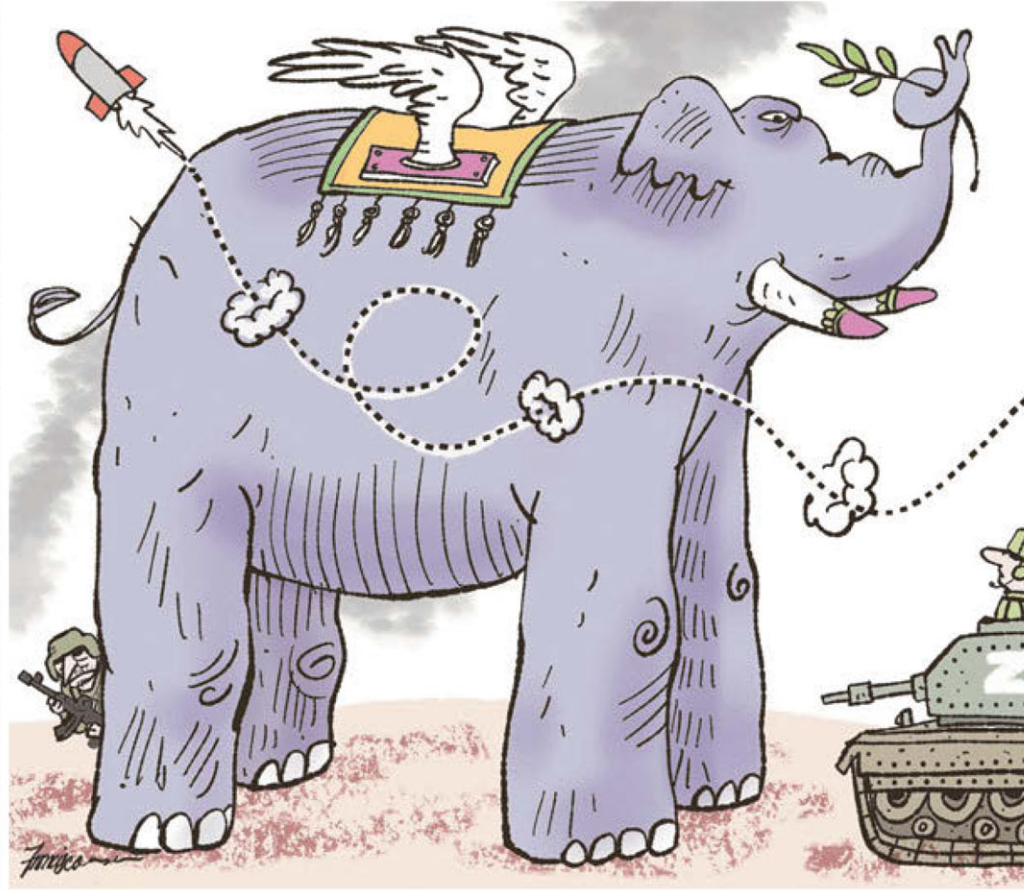
Why India? No other major country enjoys simultaneous trust today in the two key capitals: Washington and Moscow.

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

Peace in Ukraine will not be easy. Russia has been deeply wounded, physically and psychologically, by the failure of its military operations in Ukraine. It will not accept a settlement seen as a defeat for it. Hence, it may need to deliver a counter-punch to demonstrate its continuing military credibility.

As an Asian, I have long believed that the Europeans, representing the more advanced and developed societies, would also be geopolitically wiser. Instead, they are playing with fire. They are beginning to treat Russia as a toothless tiger, imposing sanctions and offering no compromises. This is unwise. 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 Russia 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 2008 to then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that "Ukrainian entry into Nato is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just President Vladimir Putin). In more than 2½ years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in Nato as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests".

More recently, on April 14, he warned that "given the setbacks they've faced so far militarily, none of us can take lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low-yield nuclear weapons."

US President John F. Kennedy famously warned over 60 years ago: "Nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war."

## WHY A COMPROMISE IS NEEDED

This is why some voices in Washington have been advocating

a realistic compromise. In a New York Times essay on April 11, Georgetown University Professor Charles Kupchan argues the following: "What, then, is the path forward? The war in Ukraine now confronts the United States with the need to tilt back toward the practice of realpolitik."

His main message is clear: Yes, condemn Russia. However, he also adds: "A more realist world is back, requiring America's idealist ambitions yield more regularly to inescapable strategic realities." In short, the West should also compromise.

There are other powerful reasons for searching for compromise in Ukraine. Firstly, the great global economic shutdown, 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 1.7 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 astute, 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 freely 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. Wise Ukrainian leaders would then opt for a policy

of reconciliation between the various parts of their country.

Eight 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 isn't the right brew for finding an acceptable compromise.

## WHY INDIA?

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

Yet, if it succeeds in finding a viable compromise (or even a durable ceasefire), the whole world will acclaim India and acknowledge that the world desperately needs a strong new independent pole 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 reform is difficult. I know. I have written a book, *The Great Convergence*, which describes the complex difficulties. Yet, I also know that if two key rival capitals, Washington and Moscow, were to jointly co-sponsor a resolution in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) making India the sixth permanent member of the UNSC, it would receive overwhelming support, especially after Delhi has secured some kind of compromise in Ukraine.

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.

There is one undeniable fact. One of the greatest anomalies about our current world order is that the third most powerful country in the world (after the US and China) doesn't have a permanent seat at the UNSC. Indeed, Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* wrote in 2009 that "within a decade a world in which the UK is on the United Nations Security Council and India is not will seem beyond laughable".

It's true that some permanent members could veto India's application. Yet, both the United Kingdom and France are probably aware that a UNSC with India as a permanent member would be a far more credible council. And China would be better off with a UNSC which is less dominated by the West.

Hence, a resolution co-sponsored by the US and Russia (especially after some kind of settlement in Ukraine) would definitely succeed in making India a permanent member of the UNSC. A new window of opportunity has opened for India. It should seize it.

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