

India and the Ukraine Peace Conference

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Summary

The official Swiss invitation to India to participate in the Ukraine peace summit in Geneva in June 2024 highlights the West's recognition of the importance of drawing New Delhi into the diplomatic efforts to end the war in the heart of Europe that has entered the third year. It also offers India an opportunity to recalibrate its position on the war and take a fresh look at security engagement with Europe.

In early April 2024, the Swiss government announced its plans to convene an international peace summit on Ukraine near Lake Lucerne on 15 and 16 June 2024. The [objective](#) is to “provide a platform for a high-level dialogue on ways to reach a comprehensive, just and lasting peace for Ukraine based on international law and the UN Charter.”

The Swiss government, which is organising this conference at the request of Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, hopes at least 80 to 100 heads of government or state will join the summit. Both Berne and Kyiv are reported to be eager to have the India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi participate in this summit. The assumption, of course, is that Modi will return to power for a third term when the elections conclude in June 2024. Although India has not made any formal commitment, the pressure from Europe is likely to mount for India to join the peace effort. Modi is expected to attend the G7 summit in Italy from 13 to 15 June 2024 as a special invitee, making it easier for him to schedule a visit to Switzerland.

The European interest in Indian participation comes amid the recognition that the European states [had not done enough](#) to win support among the major developing countries. Expecting automatic support and denouncing those who did not have indeed set back the cause of Ukraine in the developing world. There is a special effort now to woo the Global South to attend the peace conference. In preparation for the Lucerne peace conference, the Swiss [are consulting](#) several key states such as China, India, South Africa, Brazil, Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia, besides the members of the G7, and the European Union (EU).

The special political interest in having Modi's participation at the peace conference comes amidst an important shift in the international perceptions of India's role in Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, India has received [many brickbats](#) in the West for its refusal to criticise the Russian aggression formally. New Delhi's presumed political tilt towards Russia in the Ukraine war was magnified by the surge in India's oil purchases from Moscow. The United States (US) and Europe had sought to inflict economic pain on Moscow by imposing sanctions on its energy trade.

Despite sharp media criticism of India, sensible elements in the West saw New Delhi's close ties with Moscow as a potential political asset in promoting peace. The US government, in particular, has been very restrained in its reactions to Indian policy. Recent [western media reports](#), citing US officials, have lauded Modi's role in 2022 in preventing nuclear escalation in

Ukraine, when Putin threatened to use atomic weapons if the West directly intervened in favour of Kyiv.

Over the last year, New Delhi has stepped up its contact with the Ukrainian leadership and sought to dispel the notion that it was taking Russia's side in the war. Modi, Foreign Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval have been in regular touch with their Ukrainian and Russian counterparts. In a reflection of this balanced approach, India hosted Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in New Delhi at the end of March 2024. During his first visit to India, Kuleba welcomed India's [more balanced approach](#) to the conflict and underlined India's critical contribution to the proposed peace process.

On his part, Modi has been pushing for an early end to the war in Ukraine. In March this year, Modi, in his phone calls to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Zelensky, reiterated the sentiment in favour of dialogue and diplomacy amidst the military stalemate on the ground and a gathering political sentiment in favour of a negotiated settlement. It is perhaps quite premature to talk of a major Indian role in ending the brutal war in the heart of Europe. However, the conditions for productive peace talks might have improved amidst the Republican party's refusal in the US to support new military assistance to Ukraine and the growing prospects for Donald Trump winning the November 2024 presidential elections.

India's successful holding of the G20 summit in September 2023 has raised the Modi's stature on the world stage, both as a leader of the world's largest democracy, as well as the voice of the Global South. Having Modi at the peace conference, the Europeans hope, will lend greater legitimacy to the conference.

India, on its part, will want to know if the conference is about isolating Russia or finding a way to engage its leadership. While Russia will not be at the Lucerne conference, the [Swiss hope](#) that the Lucerne conference will develop a "concrete roadmap for Russia's participation in the peace process" at a later date.

Until now, India has been careful not to offend Russia on Ukraine but has [cautiously moved](#) to explore grounds for effective intervention. While Russia remains an important strategic partner for India, New Delhi is acutely conscious of the benefits of deeper cooperation with Europe. The last few years have seen the [European salience](#) grow in India's international relations. While realistic in recognising the challenges of its balancing act between Russia and Ukraine, New Delhi is ambitious enough to sense the possibilities of presenting India as a positive force in the first major European war since the Second World War.

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