Reflecting on Ukraine's evolving global partnerships

Ukraine and the world: relationships in a fragmenting order

This is a collection of essays by experts who have contributed to CMI's work with actors in support of Ukraine's global outreach, funded by the European Union. The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of CMI–Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation.

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When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, much of the international response was framed in relatively straightforward terms. The war was widely understood as a direct challenge to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the rules-based foundations of international order. Yet as the war has evolved, so too has the international context surrounding it. What initially appeared to many as a defining moment of global unity has instead unfolded during a period characterised by geopolitical fragmentation, erosion of international norms, and the gradual emergence of a more visibly multipolar world.

Viewed from 2026, one of the most significant developments of the past four years is that debates about Ukraine have increasingly become debates about the future of international order itself. They encompass questions about the distribution of power, the legitimacy of international institutions, the meaning of strategic autonomy, and whether existing approaches to peace and security remain fit for purpose. As Finnish President Alexander Stubb has argued, the international system is moving away from a world centred primarily on the West towards one shaped by interactions among multiple centres of influence. In such an environment, states are no longer merely choosing sides; they are increasingly seeking to shape the rules, institutions, and relationships that will define the next phase of international politics.

The shift that Stubb identifies matters because Ukraine's relationship with the rest of the world cannot be understood solely through the dynamics of the war itself. Across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, the war is often interpreted through a broader set of experiences and concerns. For some, it is viewed through the lens of food security, economic resilience, and the costs of geopolitical confrontation. For others, it is inseparable from debates about the uneven application of international law, unequal influence within global institutions, or the legacy of past interventions. Ukraine occupies a distinctive position in contemporary international affairs: it is both a sovereign state defending itself against aggression and a reference point through which many actors assess the credibility and future direction of the international system.

The result is that international engagement on Ukraine has become increasingly complex. Early expressions of solidarity have given way to a more diverse and, at times, more transactional landscape of interests. Global attention is divided among multiple crises, while emerging powers and actors across the world have assumed a more active role in shaping international agendas. This does not necessarily imply declining support for Ukraine. It does, however, mean that support, partnership, and engagement can no longer be assumed to arise from a shared reading of events, and increasingly depend on dialogue, mutual understanding, and an appreciation of differing priorities and perspectives.

This collection of essays is situated within that changing landscape. Bringing together experts from different regions, disciplines, and professional backgrounds, the contributions explore how Ukraine's relationships with the wider world have evolved since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Rather than presenting a single narrative, they reflect the diversity of perspectives that now shape international discussions about Ukraine and, more broadly, about the future of international order.

The articles emerged from a broader process of reflection undertaken within a project implemented by CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, which has sought to support relationships and mutual understanding between Ukrainian actors and those from locations across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East through dialogue, analysis, and sustained engagement on issues connected to the consequences of the war and the requirements for sustainable peace.

Over four years since the start of the full-scale invasion, it is worth asking both how perceptions of Ukraine have changed, and how Ukraine's engagement with the wider world has evolved in return. Which partnerships have deepened? Where have expectations converged or diverged? What shared priorities have emerged, and which assumptions have proven more difficult to sustain? The contributions that follow bring together perspectives from different regional and professional vantage points on how Ukraine, Europe, and global partners have navigated a period marked by war, fragmentation, and profound geopolitical change. They trace the evolution of these relationships and consider the opportunities and constraints that may shape cooperation on peace, recovery, reconstruction, and international security in the years ahead.

Ukraine – by Nataliya Gumenyuk

Nataliya Gumenyuk

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Understanding the logic of Ukraine's engagement with the wider world, particularly across what is often termed the Global South, requires tracing its evolution since the Russian full-scale invasion. Ukrainians did not anticipate either their current global outlook or how the world would perceive them.

In 2022, a central risk was that the Kremlin would replicate its familiar strategy internationally: divide, polarise and obscure the reality of Russia's war against Ukraine. As Moscow became isolated in European capitals, it redirected its diplomatic and political machinery towards Mexico City, Johannesburg, Delhi and elsewhere. Unlike Moscow, Kyiv had inherited no Soviet infrastructure for global influence and started almost from zero. Ukrainian foreign policy had long been criticised for neglecting the non-Western world, but limited resources were the fundamental constraint. Almost all of its diplomatic capacity went into persuading Western partners of basic facts, even in Bratislava and Rome, let alone São Paulo.

Several imperatives showed Kyiv why the wider world mattered. Seeking accountability for international crimes made international institutions, including the UN, critical for preventing impunity. Putin's troops were committing hundreds of thousands of atrocities: executing and torturing people in occupied areas, terrorising civilians with missile strikes, destroying infrastructure, and kidnapping Ukrainian children.

"Grain from Ukraine" was another. Global dependence on Ukrainian grain, rooted in geography and historical trade links, made the war a worldwide concern. The initiative prompted President Zelenskyy to invest greater effort and imagination in global outreach.

The Peace Formula followed. Its political achievements remain debatable, but it created practical infrastructure for engagement: embassies, officials and institutions had to establish contacts with governments worldwide.

Meanwhile, Ukraine grew more pragmatic. Initially, it wanted the world to understand its pain. Officials and civil society later realised that a country's UN vote sometimes mattered less than whether it was hostile. Outreach had to be tailored: South Africa, Brazil and Chile each required a distinct approach. No universal recipe worked.

Ukraine thus learned globally what it knew in the US and Europe: everything is domestic politics. Outreach requires understanding internal dynamics whether that be in Argentina or Indonesia.

Kyiv was advised by its allies not to frame its outreach around democratic values. Even after revising its approach accordingly, Kyiv found it easier to engage democracies than authoritarian regimes. Without resources for transactional leverage with authoritarian governments, Ukraine's strength lay in soft power through civil society, independent media, civic networks and people-to-people ties across Latin America, Asia and Africa. These channels worked better than official engagement with China, India or Brazil. The official engagement has nevertheless been successful in some contexts, and for example, Ukraine developed functional government relations with Saudi Arabia and some other Arab states.

The Zelensky government couldn't quickly impact the entrenched policies of countries that may see Russia as a useful counterweight to Washington – or at least do not want Moscow to lose. Ukraine must still engage in such cases, but it should recognise the limits honestly.

This pragmatic reality does not diminish the necessity of upholding international law. Restoring the authority of global norms is a universal imperative, making Ukraine a natural ally of states that are reliant on a rules-based order.

Several global turning points significantly altered Ukraine's global engagement: the aftermath of October 7 in Gaza and Donald Trump's election. Atrocities against Palestinians renewed legitimate concerns about double standards in accountability. Ukraine's hesitant response, despite supporting a two-state solution, drew fair criticism, amplified by Russian propaganda, as Kyiv tried to preserve strategic ambiguity.

Discussions of the Russian war in Ukraine were often filtered through pervasive anti-Americanism: meetings often turned into critiques of US foreign policy rather than addressing Moscow's aggression. Although US President Trump himself echoed anti-American tropes by criticising the promotion of democracy and human rights, his overt affinity for Moscow undermined the Kremlin's core narrative that Ukraine is merely a Western or US proxy. As a result, Kyiv could no longer be dismissed as Washington's passive instrument. Recent volatility has delivered a blunt lesson: external dependence creates inherent vulnerability. Long isolated by the Iron Curtain, Ukrainians struggled to grasp the complex twentieth-century experience of the non-Western world. Kyiv moved from dissecting American politics to navigating global dynamics independently. Driven by a domestic drone revolution, Ukraine transformed from a passive aid recipient into an autonomous, capability-driven actor.

For a while Ukraine's international engagement has remained constrained by the illusion of a traditional peace process. The framework is flawed, with Moscow reading compromise as weakness and every Kyiv concession inviting escalation and demands. Ukraine is therefore heading towards a prolonged technological armistice, not conventional peace. Hostility may fluctuate, but vast contested zones will be shaped by technological parity, especially drone warfare. Terms limiting deep strikes or establishing partial aerial ceasefires will likely be negotiated, breached, and recalibrated for decades. This fragile equilibrium rests on capability, not trust. Ultimately, Ukraine's global standing depends on battlefield success more than diplomacy. Rallying support for the Peace Formula or resolutions drew little interest while Ukraine appeared weak.

Once homegrown technology began shifting the balance on the battlefield, Ukraine commanded greater respect. Before, Russian propaganda in Africa, Asia and Latin America insisted that a smaller country could not withstand mighty Russia. The Gulf states illustrate the fact that governments once hesitant can become open to engagement. Despite the rhetoric, global politics remains shaped by the desire to side with winners.

Ukraine is an emerging model for middle powers, showing how decentralised military technology and defence structures safeguard sovereignty against larger adversaries. As the US recalibrates its global role, Ukraine has become a pillar of European security, redefining Kyiv's international posture. No longer a supplicant seeking aid, it is an indispensable security provider and future EU member engaging the world on its own strategic merit. Across Asia, Africa and Latin America, the EU was often dismissed as declining. But Ukrainians have defended Europe, pointing out that Ukraine survived the past year largely through European support.

Yet military success should not replace engagement. No country is homogeneous: governments in electoral democracies change, so Ukraine must communicate across the political spectrum. Some ties will inevitably be pragmatic, provided they do not compromise values. Ukraine used to have fewer structured ties with business, civil society, cultural and intellectual figures, and academia. These groups are more internationally connected than the domestically-focused public, making ties more durable. Multi-stakeholder engagement is essential as politics grows polarised. Russia thrives on internal divisions. Ukraine's future policy lies in navigating domestic political disputes while cultivating constituencies and retaining allies as power changes.

Overall, this juncture presents a vital window of opportunity. Sustained global engagement is essential to Ukraine's economic trajectory, demographic recovery, national security, and modern self-conception within a shifting global hierarchy. Initial diplomatic inroads, built largely from scratch in regions where Kyiv previously lacked presence, must be aggressively consolidated rather than abandoned. As the international order undergoes structural transformation, a broadened Ukrainian worldview holds immense, unrealised potential for enduring global partnerships.

South Africa – by Gilbert M. Khadiagala

Gilbert M. Khadiagala

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Since the start of the Ukraine–Russia war in February 2022, Ukraine has made concerted diplomatic efforts to build global partnerships. South Africa has been a major player in these efforts because of its stature and standing in African affairs. With a limited diplomatic footprint in Africa before the war, Ukraine viewed South Africa as a bridge into the continent, but two main obstacles have stood in the way.

First, South Africa's strong relationships with Russia and the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) initially constrained its partnership with Ukraine. Second, despite its influence in African continental institutions such as the African Union (AU), South Africa's leadership on continental affairs is circumscribed by Africa's political and cultural diversity.

Despite these initial challenges, South Africa has more recently shifted its positioning on the war to gradually align with Ukraine's interests. These changes have coincided with Ukraine's resilience in the war and its attraction of more African partners through proactive diplomacy. This essay builds on these themes in examining the partnership between South Africa and Ukraine.

South Africa and the Ukraine–Russia war, the initial phase

South Africa and Ukraine established diplomatic relations in the early 1990s, with Pretoria establishing an embassy in Kyiv in October 1992 and Ukraine reciprocating with an embassy in Pretoria in 1995. Thereafter, both pursued cordial bilateral relations anchored in diplomatic exchanges, trade, and scientific and technical cooperation.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine tested South Africa's proclaimed position of strategic neutrality and nonalignment in global affairs. Adding to the pressure on South Africa were the adverse effects of the war on African economies, captured in spiralling food, fertiliser, and fuel prices.

Against this backdrop, there were widespread expectations that Pretoria would lead African efforts in forging a consensus on the conflict. South Africa, however, abstained from all the resolutions on the war, refusing to condemn Russia's aggression in three UN General Assembly votes in March and April 2022. In defence of its position, South Africa proposed a peaceful, negotiated settlement to the war, invoking its experience of a negotiated transition from apartheid in the early 1990s.

To underscore its preference for negotiations, in June 2023, South Africa put together a delegation of seven African presidents in an unprecedented but unsuccessful diplomatic bid to end the war. The African Peace Initiative (API) presented a ten-point plan to Ukraine and Russia which included the need for respect of the principles of the UN Charter; deescalation of the conflict; and the return of Ukraine's children from Russia.

Despite its failure, South Africa hailed the API as vindication of its belief in diplomacy and dialogue. Subsequently, South Africa became one of the participants in Ukraine's President Zelensky's Peace Formula meetings held in Denmark, Saudi Arabia, and Malta in 2023 and 2024.

Recent trends in the Ukraine–South Africa partnership

President Zelensky's historic visit to South Africa in April 2025 marked a new phase in relations, with implications for Africa. The visit was preceded in February 2025 by South Africa's vote in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution that commemorated the third anniversary of the war and reaffirmed Ukraine's territorial integrity.

This vote was a significant change of course from South Africa's previous votes in the UN General Assembly on the war. South Africa stated that its vote reversal

was consistent with its position on the need for a peaceful and negotiated resolution of the conflict within a rules-based international order.

Although cut short by a massive Russian missile attack on Ukraine, the visit marked a significant diplomatic achievement in Ukraine's bid to counter Russia's influence in Africa. Alongside South Africa supporting Ukraine's call for an unconditional ceasefire in the war, both sides explored expanding bilateral cooperation in nuclear energy, joint fertiliser production, and South African acquisition of Ukrainian defence technologies, including drones.

Building on this momentum, South Africa broke with its BRICS partners and several African countries in an early December 2025 UN General Assembly vote in favour of the repatriation of Ukrainian children from Russia. The vote was a culmination of a 2-year campaign by the South African government and several NGOs to negotiate safe passage of Ukrainian children abducted since Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. During President Zelensky's South Africa visit he presented his host a list of 400 abductees whose return he asked South Africa to help secure. Similarly, Ukraine and South Africa have worked on efforts to stem recruitment of young Africans to the frontlines of the war by Russian networks.

The diplomatic breakthrough with South Africa came alongside Ukraine's political, cultural, and economic inroads in the rest of Africa that have sought to challenge Russia's historical dominance, particularly in disinformation campaigns and military supplies. With the appointment of a special envoy for Africa and the Middle East, Kyiv has nearly doubled its diplomatic missions in Africa; expanded its communication strategy to change the narrative about the war; boosted its grain and food diplomacy to benefit African countries affected by the war; and launched cultural and media exchanges with African countries. These engagements provide a firm foundation for long-term Africa–Ukraine cooperation that aligns with Africa's need to diversify its economic and political alliances.

Conclusion

Initially marked by misunderstandings, the Ukraine–South African partnership has steadily evolved into a relationship that prioritises finding common interests while managing differences. While the partnership faced tremendous obstacles at the outset, South Africa and Ukraine are these days united in the objective of a peaceful settlement that does not compromise international norms and principles.

As a significant actor in previous peace efforts on the war, South Africa's diplomatic energies remain salient in global discussions on ending the war and programmes that address Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Bilaterally, South Africa has increasingly appreciated Ukraine's investment potential in many sectors that will contribute to the revitalisation of its economy and national security. This development may be crucial in South Africa's long-term recalibration of its relations with some of its BRICS partners, particularly Russia.

Middle East – by Dr Yasar Al-Qatarneh

Dr Yasar Al-Qatarneh

Dr Yasar Al-Qatarneh is a senior advisor and independent consultant specialising in conflict diplomacy and dialogue processes, with over 20 years of experience focusing on the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.

This essay reflects on the evolution of Ukraine's relations with Arab Gulf states between 2022 and mid-2026. Over these four years, the relationship did not evolve towards uniform political alignment. Instead, it moved from cautious, autonomy-preserving engagement towards increasingly specialised forms of mediation, humanitarian cooperation, diplomatic convening, and, in some cases, economic institutionalisation. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar developed distinct functional roles. These trends point to a differentiated, issue-based, and incremental strategy rather than an alignment-centred one.

The war in Ukraine is European in its geographic centre but global in its consequences. It has affected food supply, energy markets, maritime trade, humanitarian diplomacy, mediation initiatives, and the calculations of states balancing relations with Russia, Western powers, and emerging coalitions. Ukraine therefore requires an external strategy that complements its Euro–Atlantic orientation with structured partnerships across the wider international system. Its closer political, economic, and security alignment with the European Union, NATO, and the United States should remain the strategic core, but it needs to be reinforced by a broader international engagement strategy.

The Arab world is particularly important in this regard. Arab states include influential energy producers, major food importers, custodians of critical maritime routes, financial centres, diplomatic mediators, and significant constituencies in multilateral institutions. The experience of the past four years also shows, however, that the most productive forms of engagement have not depended on Arab states adopting Ukraine's overall geopolitical position. They have emerged where Ukrainian interests intersected with specific Gulf capacities and priorities.

This is the central stocktaking lesson of the 2022–2026 period. Ukraine–Gulf relations have evolved, but their evolution has been functional rather than alignment-driven.

Four years of evolution: from cautious balancing to functional partnership

The first phase, in 2022, was characterised by caution, humanitarian engagement, and an emphasis on mediation. The Gulf Cooperation Council framed its position around international law, sovereignty, territorial integrity, political dialogue, and humanitarian relief, while also explicitly supporting mediation between Russia and Ukraine. Saudi Arabia's mediation in a September 2022 prisoner release was an early example of the role Gulf actors were prepared to play: not as parties to an anti-Russian alignment, but as states using access to both sides to produce limited practical outcomes. By December 2022, the GCC had formally praised Saudi mediation, Gulf humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, and efforts to sustain grain exports and food security.

The second phase, visible in 2023, involved a substantial increase in political access and diplomatic convening. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's participation in the Arab League Summit in Jeddah in May 2023 created direct political contact with Gulf and wider Arab leaders. Saudi Arabia also moved beyond humanitarian mediation by hosting international consultations in Jeddah in August on the 10-point peace plan proposed by Ukraine. The meeting did not produce geopolitical alignment with Kyiv, but it demonstrated something strategically important: a Gulf state could provide a politically acceptable venue in which Ukraine could engage countries that were reluctant to participate in a Western-framed coalition. Saudi Arabia also formalised a USD 400 million package of humanitarian assistance and oil-product support for Ukraine in 2023.

The third phase, especially visible in 2024, was one of functional specialisation. Different Gulf states increasingly developed roles commensurate with their own diplomatic profiles. The United Arab Emirates became a recurring mediator in prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine. Qatar developed a specialised humanitarian channel focused on the return and reunification of Ukrainian children

and separated families. By September 2024, Qatar reported that its mediation had helped reunite dozens of children with their families, and the effort continued thereafter. The significance of these initiatives was not their scale alone. They established repeated channels of communication and practical cooperation around defined issues, demonstrating that relationships could deepen even without convergence on the broader war.

The fourth phase, during 2025 and the first half of 2026, showed signs of institutionalisation and wider diplomatic utility. In February 2025, Ukraine and the UAE signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement covering goods, services, investment, and digital trade – the first such Ukrainian agreement with a Gulf state. In March 2025, Saudi Arabia hosted the Ukrainian and American delegations in Jeddah for talks that produced a major diplomatic step in the peace process. In January 2026, the UAE hosted trilateral talks involving Russia, Ukraine, and the United States; by then, Abu Dhabi stated that its prisoner-exchange mediation had facilitated the release of more than 4,600 detainees. Qatar's humanitarian mediation also continued: in May 2026, Qatari officials reported that 87 Ukrainian children had been reunited with their families through more than 14 humanitarian operations, alongside continued humanitarian and food-security support.

Taken together, these developments reveal a clear trajectory. Ukraine–Gulf relations have moved from episodic crisis-contact towards a denser pattern of functional interaction. Yet the trajectory has not been linear, uniform, or bloc-based. It has been differentiated by country and by issue. Saudi Arabia has been most relevant as a political convener and high-level mediator; the UAE has combined humanitarian mediation with a growing economic relationship; Qatar has developed a distinctive humanitarian mediation role.

Three lessons from the four-year record

First, strategic value has not required complete political alignment. Gulf states have maintained strategic autonomy and relationships with competing international actors, yet this has not prevented them from contributing to Ukrainian priorities. The practical implication is that Ukraine should evaluate these relationships by the value of specific cooperation rather than by whether a partner reproduces Kyiv's entire geopolitical position.

Second, differentiation is not merely a policy preference; it is already observable in the evolution of the relationships. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have not played interchangeable roles. Their comparative advantages, political styles, and international networks differ. A Ukrainian policy that treats the Gulf as a single diplomatic category would therefore discard information that the past four years have already supplied.

Third, limited cooperation can become cumulative. A prisoner exchange, a humanitarian operation, a peace consultation, or a trade agreement may appear narrow in isolation. Repetition, however, creates access, institutional familiarity, and expectations of continued interaction. The progression from ad hoc contacts to recurring mediation and, in the UAE case, a formal economic agreement is consistent with a building-blocks logic: cooperation does not need to begin with strategic agreement to contribute to a more durable relationship. These lessons reinforce the limits of a strategy that measures Arab engagement mainly through the extent of support for Ukraine against Russia. Many Arab governments pursue strategic diversification rather than exclusive alignment. Their positions reflect defence and economic ties, energy interests, food-security concerns, relations with both Moscow and Washington, domestic and regional priorities, and a strong preference for diplomatic autonomy. Apparent neutrality or selective engagement may therefore represent strategic balancing rather than indifference.

Ukraine should respond by separating meaningful partnership from expectations of complete political convergence. The four-year record shows that Gulf states can contribute to mediation, humanitarian initiatives, grain security, investment, reconstruction, and diplomatic access while continuing to preserve relationships with Russia. This is not a secondary form of partnership; in several cases, the very ability to communicate with both sides is what created the partner's usefulness. The central task is therefore to identify areas in which Ukrainian and Arab interests overlap sufficiently to sustain practical and durable cooperation.

Conclusion

The evolution of Ukraine's relations with Arab Gulf states between 2022 and mid-2026 provides a stronger basis for strategy than either optimism about political alignment or frustration at its absence. The record shows a gradual movement from cautious engagement toward functional specialisation, recurring mediation, diplomatic convening, and early economic institutionalisation. It also shows that these advances occurred precisely because Gulf partners retained strategic autonomy and could engage multiple sides.

Ukraine should institutionalise diplomatic access that has so far been episodic; differentiate its partnerships according to the roles Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have already developed; convert recurring functional cooperation into standing working mechanisms; and build economic engagement before, not only after, the end of the war. The same method can then be extended selectively to the Levant and the Red Sea.

A building-blocks approach thus offers a pathway from stocktaking to strategy. It does not assume that comprehensive political agreement must precede cooperation. It begins from what the past four years have already demonstrated: limited, practical cooperation can create access, habits, institutional links, and political space that are strategically valuable and may support more durable partnerships over time.

South Asia and India – by Dr Swasti Rao

Dr Swasti Rao

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In South Asia, Ukrainian diplomacy has remained narrow, uneven and India-centred. Kyiv has developed an India-policy, even if not a South Asia-policy. There is little peer-reviewed literature on Ukraine's diplomacy towards South Asia specifically; most scholarship examines how regional governments responded to the war. That literature yields two useful conclusions. First, national security, domestic politics and economic exposure explain South Asian positions better than a shared "Southern" identity. Second, India's position is not simplistic ideological support for Russia. It reflects a desire for strategic autonomy, managing the China problem, defence dependence, energy imports, Moscow's residual diplomatic value and India's aspiration to operate as an autonomous pole in a multipolar order.

The region's governments have not behaved identically. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka abstained on the March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion, while Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives voted in favour. Subsequent positions also varied. Yet voting records alone reveal little about diplomatic capacity. Pakistan received a Ukrainian foreign minister in 2023, and Ukraine has had occasional high-level contacts with Bangladesh and other regional governments, but these engagements have largely been episodic. India alone has acquired a sustained sequence of contact: Deputy Foreign Minister Emine Dzhaparova's visit in 2023; Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba's visit in 2024; his successor Andrii Sibyha's in 2025; India's participation in peace consultations; and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's August 2024 visit to Kyiv.[i]

This imbalance is understandable. India is South Asia's largest economy and military power, a major voice in multilateral institutions, and the country with which Ukraine has had its own long-standing relationship. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka may offer openings in food security, shipping, pharmaceuticals and reconstruction; Nepal has experience in UN peacekeeping and humanitarian diplomacy, etc.

The European Union can reinforce this approach. EU accession strengthens Ukraine's security, institutional resilience and economic future, but it also creates a diplomatic paradox: in several other 'Global South' theatres, Ukraine often gains more traction when its engagement is independent. However, a dual-track model, namely direct Ukrainian engagement supported by coordinated Ukraine–EU initiatives could work under certain contexts too. In South Asia, Europe can add economic heft through trade, development finance and Global Gateway projects in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, while individual European partners too could amplify Ukraine's cause.[ii] While this hasn't been very productive in India per se, it remains a potential engagement model.

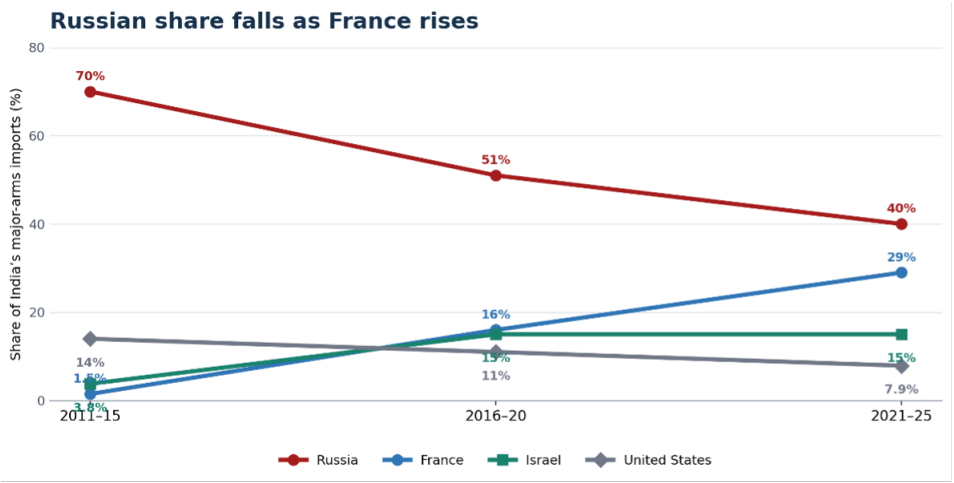
India: policy continuity, changing interests

India illustrates both the limits and the possibilities of the dual-track model. New Delhi's formal position has not fundamentally shifted and is unlikely to do so soon. It remains shaped by 'strategic autonomy', longstanding ties with Russia, energy and defence interests, concern about China, and reluctance to endorse processes that exclude Moscow. India has nevertheless participated in peace-related forums, helped secure the 2023 G20 joint statement, provided humanitarian assistance and opened political space for an independent bilateral relationship through Modi's visit to Kyiv, the first by an Indian prime minister to independent Ukraine.[iii]

The relationship with Russia is durable, but it is declining in the traditional sector of defence, even if it is no longer one-dimensional. Defence dependence is declining in new deliveries, even though Soviet-origin platforms will remain embedded in India's inventory for decades. SIPRI data shows Russia's share of India's major-arms imports falling from 70 per cent in 2011–15 to 51 per cent in 2016–20 and 40 per cent in 2021–25. France's share rose from 1.5 to 29 per cent across the same periods, Israel reached 15 per cent, while the United States fell from 14 to 7.9 per cent. This is diversification rather than complete substitution:

it changes procurement options, but not the large maintenance, ammunition and training burden created by legacy systems.[iv]

Figure 1. India's major-arms imports by supplier, 2011–25

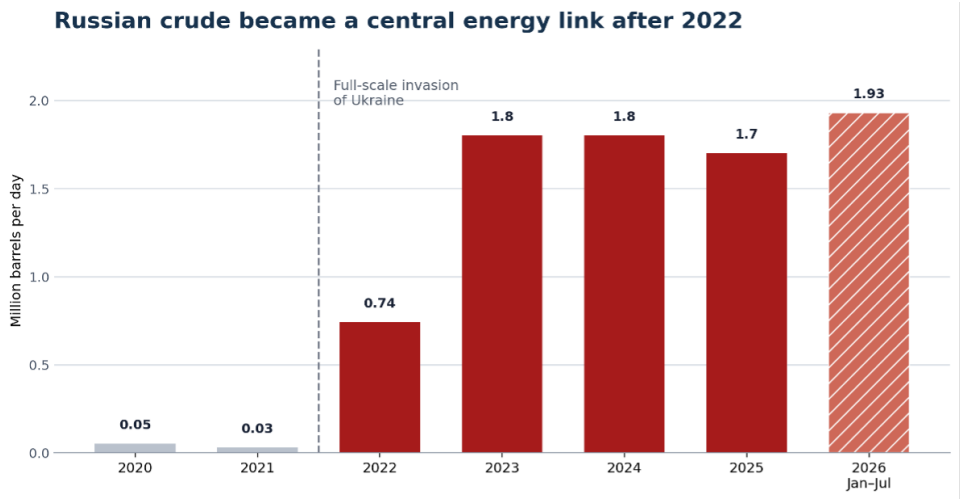


Source: SIPRI; graph made by author

Energy has moved in the opposite direction. India imported very little Russian crude before 2022. The subsequent increase reflected discounts, refining capabilities and New Delhi's insistence that affordable energy is a legitimate national interest. It also transformed a modest trading relationship into one dominated by oil and an acute Indian trade deficit by 2025.[v]

This dependence is more of a transactional relationship than a defence one. Refineries respond to price, shipping, insurance, payment channels and sanctions enforcement. Yet the scale of purchases has made energy the most visible point of friction with Europe and the United States. The result is an unusual asymmetry: Russia matters less as the source of India's new weapons but far more as a long-term supplier of crude.

Figure 2. India's imports of Russian crude, 2020–2026



Source: Kpler; graph made by author

The China-question further explains India's caution towards Moscow. A persistent argument in New Delhi is that continued engagement can prevent Russia from falling completely into Beijing's orbit. But this assumption increasingly lacks the relationship it seeks to manage. Russia–China convergence now extends beyond diplomatic coordination to energy, finance, semiconductors, machine tools and dual-use technology. India may still benefit from access to Russia, but it has limited capacity to reverse a partnership hardened by war and sanctions. BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation offer useful diplomatic platforms, yet their value to India is constrained by China's weight and, in the case of SCO, Pakistan's presence.

Trade and connectivity provide a fourth limit. The post-2022 surge has been driven overwhelmingly by Indian crude imports rather than balanced exchange. Indian exporters remain wary of sanctions exposure, payment difficulties and reputational risk because the United States and Europe are far more important export and remittance markets (especially the US). The International North–South Transport Corridor and the Chennai–Vladivostok maritime corridor remain geopolitically appealing, but commercial progress has been slow.

Together, these four variables – declining dependence on new Russian arms, rising oil purchases, limited influence over Russia–China convergence, and weak non-energy trade – show why the India–Russia relationship abides, but its functions and opportunity costs are changing.

This disaggregation is important for Ukrainian diplomacy. Asking India to abandon Russia treats every component of the relationship as equally entrenched and turns engagement into a loyalty test New Delhi will reject. A more credible strategy identifies where Indian incentives are already changing. Ukraine cannot replace discounted Russian crude, and it cannot quickly service every Soviet-origin platform. It can, however, help India reduce technical vulnerabilities. Most importantly, India must learn from Ukraine's innovative warfare and enter commercially useful partnerships, such as in reconstruction, without renouncing India's version of strategic autonomy.

The war in its fifth year

What has changed most by 2026 is not India's policy but its perception of both sides. Russian military power no longer appears invincible or self-sufficient. Costly gains, exposure to deep strikes, pressure on defence production and growing reliance on Chinese dual-use supplies complicate the image of Moscow as an indispensable strategic balancer. Ukraine, conversely, is increasingly visible not merely as a Western project but as an adaptive actor with agency, indigenous capability and a rapid innovation cycle.

Operation Spider's Web sharpened this perceptual shift in India. By combining inexpensive drones, covert logistics and intelligence preparation to strike high-value aviation deep inside Russia, Ukraine demonstrated how a smaller power can impose disproportionate costs on a larger adversary. Its feedback loop in unmanned systems, maritime drones, electronic warfare and low-cost air defence is directly relevant to India's contested borders and maritime environment. Neutrality can coexist with practical engagement; India remaining excluded from Ukraine's innovation ecosystem is not the preferred outcome.[vi]

The overlooked India–Ukraine defence bridge

This neglect is striking because India and Ukraine are not starting from zero. Ukrainian expertise in shipbuilding, aviation and propulsion remained embedded in Indian platforms after the Soviet Union's collapse, especially through Ukrainian gas turbines that power key Indian warships. India can handle basic maintenance, but deeper overhauls still depend on Ukrainian support.

The Project 1135.6 frigate programme showed this dependence clearly: although the ships were built in Russia and India, all required Ukrainian engines. After 2014, India contracted directly with Ukraine, proving that even a flagship India–Russia naval programme could not proceed without Ukrainian technology. The programme continued through the full-scale war, with new Indian vessels still using Ukrainian power plants.[vii]

This is not just history: gas turbines need long-term maintenance, spares and design-authority support. A resilient arrangement must therefore link Indian localisation to Ukrainian intellectual property and engineering teams, rather than treating localisation as separation from Ukraine.

These cases show what the phrase "Soviet legacy equipment" conceals: India bought many platforms from Russia, but important design authorities, engines, missiles and sustainment capabilities were located in independent Ukraine.[viii]

An institutional framework also exists. The first India–Ukraine Joint Working Group on Military-Technical Cooperation met in Kyiv in 2018. During Modi's August 2024 visit, the two leaders agreed to hold its second meeting in India, promote defence manufacturing partnerships and explore cooperation in new areas. The same joint statement set out movement towards a comprehensive partnership and cooperation across trade, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, digital public infrastructure, reconstruction, science and culture. In effect, the visit produced a roadmap even if it was not labelled as a single document.

Modi's visit also had political value beyond the agreements. It demonstrated that India could sustain its relationship with Moscow while engaging Kyiv at the highest level, and that Ukraine could address India directly in line with bilateral convergences. That de-hyphenation remains incomplete, but it is also the most important diplomatic opening since 1991. The test is whether the bilateral relationship develops tangibles – companies, researchers, military technologists, universities and stakeholders – capable of carrying it forward.

The problem is perception and implementation. Two years later, there is little publicly visible progress on the second Working Group meeting or on an operational pipeline of other projects. India's self-defeating sensitivity to Russia, Ukrainian institutional overload and sanctions-compliance concerns discourage forward movement. India has hardly followed up on humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, despite the early success of evacuating 22,000 Indian medical students as the war broke out.

Under these conditions, the state-led roadmap is unlikely to advance. The route to progress must therefore run through commercially anchored cooperation underwritten with transactionalism.

Shared stakes

The wider lesson is that Ukraine should not seek a larger coalition of rhetorical alignment; it should build a denser network of interests. Peace summits remain useful for defending principles and maintaining contact, but attendance lists and communiqué signatures are inadequate measures of real progress.

A just and sustainable peace still requires recognition of Ukraine's sovereignty and agency: nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. But diplomacy will deepen only when interests are served more directly. Ukraine needs finance, visibility and political support; it can offer food security, technical capability, unprecedented battlefield innovation and commercial opportunity. Transactional engagement, properly designed, is not a retreat from values. It is how shared interests give those values endurance in a fragmented international order.

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[i] United Nations General Assembly, Resolution ES-11/1, "Aggression against Ukraine," March 2, 2022, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Official Visit of the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine to India," April 12, 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dtl/36480; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Visit of H.E. Mr. Dmytro Kuleba, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine to India," March 29, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37759; Embassy of Ukraine in Pakistan, "Political Relations between Ukraine and Pakistan," https://pakistan.mfa.gov.ua/en/political-relations-between-ukraine-and-islamic-republic-pakistan.

[ii] Council of the European Union, "EU Opens Accession Negotiations with Ukraine," June 25, 2024, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/25/eu-opens-accession-negotiations-with-ukraine/; European Commission, "EU–Bangladesh Relations," Global Gateway, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/bangladesh_en.

[iii] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India–Ukraine Joint Statement on the Visit of Prime Minister of India to Ukraine," August 23, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38214.

[iv] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "International Arms Transfers in 2025," March 9, 2026, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2026/international-arms-transfers-2025; SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, updated March 9, 2026. Supplier shares are based on SIPRI trend-indicator values for deliveries of major conventional arms; they are not financial values or shares of India's installed inventory.

v Author's calculations from Kpler vessel-tracking data reported by Kpler and contemporary news coverage. Annual daily averages: 2020, 0.05 million barrels per day (mbd); 2021, 0.03 mbd; 2022, 0.74 mbd; 2023, 1.8 mbd; 2024, 1.8 mbd; 2025, 1.7 mbd; January–July 2026, 1.93 mbd. Kpler, "India–US Trade Deal to Reshape Marginal Crude Flows, Not Displace Russian Barrels," February 4, 2026, https://www.kpler.com/blog/india-us-trade-deal-to-reshape-marginal-crude-flows-not-displace-russian-barrels; Times of India, "Russian Share in India's Crude Imports Hits Fresh High in July," August 3, 2026. The 2026 figure is provisional and covers crude oil only.

vi Cynthia Cook, "How Ukraine's 'Spider Web' Operation Redefines Asymmetric Warfare," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-ukraines-spider-web-operation-redefines-asymmetric-warfare; Council on Foreign Relations, "Ukraine's Operation Spider's Web Shows Future of Drone Warfare," June 3, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/articles/ukraines-operation-spiders-web-shows-future-drone-warfare.

vii Ajai Shukla, "BHEL to Partner Zorya of Ukraine in Overhauling Warship Turbines," Business Standard, July 5, 2018, https://www.ajaishukla.com/2018/07/bhel-to-partner-zorya-of-ukraine-in.html; Government of India, Ministry of Defence, "Zorya-Mashproekt to Supply M7N Main Gas Turbine Aggregate for Indian Navy Frigates," September 8, 2021, reported at https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ukraines-zorya-mashproekt-to-supply-m7n-main-gas-turbine-to-indian-navy-2534597; Bharat Forge Limited, Annual Report 2023–24, March 31, 2024, subsidiary disclosures for Zorya Mashproekt India Private Limited, https://www.bseindia.com/xml-data/corpfiling/AttachHis/62cec6c2-4017-448e-b67a-2072cc1c96f6.pdf.

viii Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India–Ukraine Joint Statement on the Visit of Prime Minister of India to Ukraine," August 23, 2024, paras. 4–5, 13–15 and 22, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38214. The assessment of limited implementation is based on the absence, as of August 2026, of publicly announced outcomes from the proposed second meeting of the Joint Working Group on Military-Technical Cooperation or a comparable project pipeline.

Latin America – by Dr Horacio Saavedra

Dr Horacio Saavedra

Dr Horacio Saavedra is a seasoned professional in diplomacy, public affairs, media, and international business, with more than three decades of experience. He has led two of Mexico's key diplomatic and economic representations abroad, serving first as Consul General in Frankfurt (2013–2017) and subsequently in Miami (2017–2018). He has also held two positions within the Office of the President of Mexico, serving as Director of Planning (2012–2013) and earlier as Advisor for International Affairs (1999). His previous experience includes roles as Account Executive at the Mexican Development Bank (Banobras, 2002–2003) and Information Coordinator for Mexico's national highway system. He also served as Coordinator for International Affairs for the Government of the State of Mexico.
Dr Saavedra is currently a member of the Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (COMEXI) and facilitates discussions across Latin America on Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction.

Latin American countries share linguistic and historical roots but are diverse in national interests and political preferences. How civil society has responded to various international issues differs among the countries of Latin America.

In Brazil, governmental, private and other organisations engage with the dialogue on Ukraine at arm's length, treating it as a distant dispute "between brothers" rather than a direct priority. In that Cold War frame, their first concern went to their Russian elder brother. However, Brazilians in general have shown concern for Russian human rights violations in Ukrainian territory and expressed their solidarity with the victims.

Brazilian public actors, think tanks, and NGOs are somewhat politically detached from their Spanish-speaking neighbours. In Chile, the debate is less polarised than in Brazil or Argentina.

A primary challenge in Latin American discussion on Ukraine is both lack of information and cooperation. When local actors were informed about developments in the war their empathy increased and it brought the urgency of peace to the forefront. Even if some Latin American regimes are reluctant to openly criticise Russian interventions, a spirit of solidarity persists within Latin American civil society. Consistently, most of the Latin American population condemns foreign interventions, as the region itself experienced severe territorial incursions during the 19th and 20th centuries.

In contrast to the US, where the debate on Ukraine is associated with "progressive" political wings, ideological sympathy for the Ukrainian cause in Latin America is typically attributed to the conservative right. For some generations of Latin Americans, public education and history books presented the Soviet Union as a model of revolution and anti-imperialism yet offered no coverage of Ukraine's history or contemporary reality. While the broader public has limited awareness of the Ukraine–Russia war, a group of specialists continue to debate the extent of this asymmetric confrontation.

In Mexico, passive actors base their positions on ideas of the past, while vocal speakers are focused on the present and the future. In this context, it has been necessary to refresh Ukrainian history (including the Soviet period) for these passive public agents. Likewise, invitations to discuss the geopolitical relevance of Ukraine have prompted varying reactions and interests depending on the location and audience.

Monterrey and the state of Nuevo León exemplify Mexico's diversity with respect to local interests and perceptions of Ukraine. International firms from northern Mexico and regional authorities have felt the implications of the Ukraine–Russia war for North America and Latin America. Global Mexican corporations have recognised the war's impact on energy, fertilisers, and food security.

Shifts and emerging patterns in Mexico

Discussions around Ukraine in Mexico have been shaped by informational and conceptual factors, as well as by the subnational context. Experts now benefit from greater access to information and sources that support a well-informed debate. Nevertheless, media polarisation has done little to alter the tone or direction of the debate. In contrast, information that clearly demonstrates the geopolitical and economic implications for Mexico, both at the national and local levels, has been far more effective in mobilising a broad range of stakeholders, including government officials, students, and the wider public.

The Mexican stance on the Ukraine–Russia war has undergone notable shifts, driven by a combination of national ideological commitments and evolving perceptions shaped by international news coverage. Non-interventionism is a deeply rooted principle in both Latin American and Mexican political culture,

and successive advances by Russian forces into Ukrainian territory have consistently activated this foundational sentiment. Amid this renewed demand for the enforcement of international law, the discussion surrounding the establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) in Ukraine has gained traction among Mexican diplomats, lawyers, and international relations scholars and practitioners.

In diplomatic settings, Mexico has formally condemned the invasion of Ukrainian territory at the United Nations, yet it has concurrently expressed scepticism toward the democratisation process previously advanced by the United States in Ukraine. Within Mexican cultural frameworks, the use of military force is broadly regarded as undesirable, which may offer one explanation for the country's restrained involvement in global security forums. However, in certain circles of the present administration, Russia is viewed not as a hegemonic actor but as a liberating force. These perspectives find resonance with left-leaning media outlets that characterise US engagement in Ukraine as the primary interventionist dynamic. Over the past year, the presence of US agencies in Mexico has come to be regarded as invasive. Consequently, Ukrainian cooperation with these agencies is widely seen as either naive or detrimental.

In light of this reality, change has become evident across multiple fronts. Specialist groups have convened to discuss Ukraine's future in think tanks across Mexico City and in major universities nationwide, as well as at regional level and within private-sector responses to the conflict's broader implications. Furthermore, Mexican public opinion appears significantly more attuned to the Ukrainian issue when the European Union assumes a prominent role, as opposed to when Ukrainian official representatives issue appeals from a purely national standpoint.

An emerging pattern indicates that segments of the Mexican public are increasingly framing Ukrainians as part of the Western World or Western European sphere. Within expert communities, this shift is seen as heightened demands for transparency and democratic oversight in Ukraine. In the changing Ukrainian society, scrutiny has also extended to the allocation of humanitarian aid and security funding as well as the scheduling of Ukraine's presidential elections. Among the general population, this development is visible in conversations surrounding the social integration of Ukrainian migrants, shared Christian values, and Ukraine's promise as a trade and investment destination. Overall, this evolving perception contributes to a growing sense of solidarity, cultural resemblance, and geo-economic closeness.

The key lesson is that shifts in Mexico's perception of Ukraine are no longer state-centric but now originate from a wide array of actors beyond the federal government. Nevertheless, access to current and reliable information is critical to challenging a persistent view among some Mexican policymakers that Ukraine's trajectory remains fundamentally shaped or determined by its historical ties to the Soviet Union. Local governments, entrepreneurs and Mexican multinationals, Catholic and Orthodox churches, and more traditional stakeholders are emerging as new actors bringing fresh perspectives and helping to redirect the dialogue on Ukraine. The next step is to move beyond media visibility, towards a shared agenda of peace and cooperation.