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UKRAINE SA: RAMAPHOSA'S DIPLOMATIC MANOEUVRING

The recent historic visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to South Africa in April has given South Africa a renewed opportunity to reassert itself as a key player in international relations. It also marks a significant milestone, showcasing President Cyril Ramaphosa's renewed commitment to playing a pivotal role on the global stage. This high-profile meeting not only strengthened diplomatic ties between the two countries but also paved the way for enhanced bilateral relations between South Africa and Ukraine.

Late last year, I met the Ukrainian Nobel Laureate Oleksandra Matvichuk in Cape Town. She was a speaker at the annual Desmond Tutu International Peace Lecture. Matvichuk is a human rights lawyer who lives in Kyiv, despite millions of her fellow citizens having fled the capital and the country for a more peaceful home amid the war with Russia. She reflected on the

impact of the war on her community. She said that the conflict in her country, in her view, was not just about territorial disputes, but a larger battle between democratic values and authoritarianism. Matvichuk also told me, in her soft-spoken voice, that if Putin is successful in his efforts, it could embolden other authoritarian leaders to challenge international norms and boundaries.

At the time, she told me that her country was on edge, especially when Russia started using some ballistic missiles. The Russian use of experimental and hypersonic ballistic missiles was a worrying development. Since our





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conversation, there have been ongoing attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure, including those targeting nuclear power facilities and the power grids surrounding the capital. 'My country is tired, we are on edge, and it's impacting morale' she said.

'Putin was not afraid of NATO, but rather, he was afraid of the idea of freedom. Putin wants to tell the world democracy is fake and convince the world that nuclear war can change internationally recognised borders—if he succeeds, he will give other authoritarian leaders confidence that they all can succeed,' Matvichuk added.

I recalled this conversation as I was watching the live visuals of the state visit by President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Cyril Ramaphosa in Pretoria in April (24th). It was the first time a Ukrainian head of state has visited South Africa in the 33 years since the two countries established formal diplomatic relations.

Building alliances

South Africa has often been accused of blind loyalty to Russia at the expense of Ukraine. South Africa, on the other hand, had hit back at the criticism, arguing that it will remain neutral. However, in February, South Africa had for the first time voted for a United Nations resolution calling for an end to the war, signalling a willingness to engage with the international community on this pressing issue.

However, Ramaphosa did speak with Russian President Vladimir Putin ahead of his meeting with Zelenskyy to 'affirm our strong bilateral relations,' according to a government statement.

'South Africa will continue engaging all interested and affected parties, including the government of Ukraine, in finding a path to peace.'

Therefore, Zelensky's trip to Pretoria in April underscored the growing importance of international alliances and highlighted South Africa's strategic position in global politics. However, an unforeseen attack on Kyiv abruptly truncated the visit, highlighting the ongoing volatility and challenges that Ukraine faces. The meeting, however, reflects the evolving geopolitical landscape and signals a potential shift in South Africa's foreign relations as it navigates its role on the world stage. This visit certainly bolstered the country's global standing, but also underscored the importance of principled diplomacy in an increasingly polarised world.

The visit also certainly gave Ramaphosa some muchneeded PR and international spotlight, particularly in the wake of heightened scrutiny from the United States and vocal criticisms from President Donald Trump.

During the engagement with Zelensky, Ramaphosa reinforced his commitment to the country's non-aligned stance, demonstrating that South Africa will not



violations of international law, regardless of external pressures. Ramaphosa has always maintained that the country's non-aligned position does not mean we condone violations of international law.

South Africa has always maintained that, given the country's journey from apartheid to democracy, Ramaphosa values the importance of engaging all parties in conflicts to achieve peaceful, just, and enduring resolutions. 'If there is one thing that our history has taught us, it is that diplomacy and dialogue are more powerful than any weapon that anyone can use', Ramaphosa said.

African Peace Initiative

Ramaphosa visited Zelenskyy in Kyiv in June 2023 as part of the African Peace Initiative, which seeks a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

The African Peace Initiative visit also included the leaders of Zambia, the Comoros, Congo Brazzaville, Egypt, Senegal, and Uganda. At the time, Ramaphosa said that Africa had felt the adverse economic impact of the conflict. During the visit, the African leaders outlined a 10-step peace plan that included the view that the 'ongoing conflict can be settled through dialogue and negotiation; security guarantees are essential; and African states must remain engaged and part of the processes that will lead to an end to the conflict.'

Since the 2023 peace visit, the two presidents have maintained an ongoing dialogue between their countries and diplomats.

Answering a question on whether Ukraine may need to cede part of its territory to Russia, President Ramaphosa said he viewed the possibility as a precondition; however, the focus should be on Ukraine's commitment to an unconditional ceasefire, which he considered a positive step for negotiations.

"I think what we should focus on is that there is a willingness and a commitment from Ukraine for an unconditional ceasefire. An unconditional ceasefire sets an excellent and positive tone for negotiations to commence. It is a confidence-building measure that should be a key ingredient in a negotiation process. So, I see this legislation as great progress," the President said.

Trade deals....

Ramaphosa and some cabinet Ministers also held discussions on strengthening trade and investment opportunities, including in agriculture and agribusiness. The country recognises that it is time to enhance trade and investment opportunities that can reshape

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the economic landscape. Agriculture and agribusiness in particular do hold the promise of unlocking new avenues for economic development.

During 2023, the top exports from South Africa to Ukraine were tanned equine and bovine hides (\$28.6 million), feldspar (\$19.4 million), and cars (\$16.5 million). On the other hand, the top exports from Ukraine to South Africa were dried legumes (\$1.74M), electric heaters (\$1.02M), and Metal Stoppers (\$991k).

The Select Committee on Economic Development and Trade in Parliament indicated that they hope that the visit will prompt a "comprehensive review of bilateral relations with Ukraine, with a focus on expanding trade, investment, and diplomatic cooperation."

With Trump's tariff set to hit the agriculture sector, especially the citrus industry, hard, trade exports are hoping that there will be some opportunity for new markets for South Africa's agricultural produce. The evolving bilateral relations between South Africa and Ukraine present a promising landscape for both nations, marked by a significant trade volume of \$113.9 billion in 2024. The current geopolitical climate, influenced by factors such as Trump's tariffs, opens new avenues for South African agricultural products to penetrate markets that may have previously been inaccessible. This strategic shift not only enhances economic cooperation but also solidifies diplomatic ties.

Ukraine and South Africa are currently working on an agreement on cooperation in the agricultural sector and an agreement to establish a Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation.



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