GEOPOLITICS

INDIA'S BLACK SEA IDEAS: A PRACTICAL OFFER IN THE UKRAINE WAR

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 11 November 2026*

On Monday, 9 November, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke on the phone with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Within hours, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar spoke to Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. "Our conversation focused on the Ukraine conflict and ongoing diplomatic initiatives," Jaishankar wrote afterwards.

The next day, at the Ministry of External Affairs briefing in New Delhi, spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal explained what India has been offering. He said India has shared ideas with both Moscow and Kyiv. "These ideas include safety of commercial shipping in the Black Sea region," he said, adding that they also cover the "immediate concerns of both the countries in regard to energy and grain exports" and non-attack arrangements, according to ANI.

The two leaders described the Modi-Zelenskyy call differently. Modi wrote that he "reiterated India's firm commitment to contributing in every possible way towards a peaceful resolution." Zelenskyy went further. He said they had discussed Russia's blocking of grain exports through the Black Sea, and wrote: "India is ready to mediate in establishing food corridors, and we are counting on these efforts to continue." Modi's own post did not mention food corridors or the Black Sea, as Al Jazeera noted.

Why the Black Sea matters to us

The war reaches India in two direct ways. The first is our seafarers. In July, the MEA advised Indian nationals to weigh the risks before taking jobs on ships in or passing through the Black Sea. That advisory followed two attacks. According to Marine Insight's report of the MEA statements, one Indian was killed on the vessel OMORFI around 18 July, and four Indians died when the bulk carrier Golden Leo was hit while leaving Odesa with grain on 19 July. Five Indian families lost someone on a sea route most of us never think about. Al Jazeera reported that India summoned Russia's charge d'affaires over one strike, and Ukraine's ambassador over the other. New Delhi held both sides to the same standard, and I think that was right.

The second is on our kitchen shelves. According to Al Jazeera, India is the world's largest importer of vegetable oil and buys most of its sunflower oil from Russia and Ukraine. Al Jazeera, citing the Solvent Extractors' Association of India, reported that in the 2025-26 marketing year we imported 1.46 million tonnes of sunflower oil from Russia and 443,000 tonnes from Ukraine. It also cited Reuters figures showing that India's sunflower oil imports in September were the lowest since April 2022.

A narrow offer, and why I prefer it

India has not published a formal peace plan, and I think that is wise. What the MEA described is narrower: keep merchant ships safe, let grain and energy move, and agree where not to strike. In my view, these are smaller steps that need neither side to give up its claims on the main questions of the war. The obstacle is that Russia has so far rejected partial ceasefires and wants a comprehensive deal, according to Al Jazeera.

The effort is older than this week's calls. According to Al Jazeera, Jaishankar raised a possible pause in strikes on Black Sea shipping and energy sites during a visit to Kyiv in September, and on 4 October spoke of "non-attack possibilities." Al Jazeera also reported that Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha called India's proposal the broadest of four that Kyiv had received, because it covers both the Black Sea and energy infrastructure.

India can make such an offer because it still speaks to both capitals. That position has drawn criticism from both directions: Al Jazeera noted that President Trump has accused India of funding Russia's war by buying Russian oil, and that Kyiv doubts India's neutrality. I read the last two days differently. When Zelenskyy wanted help on grain ships, he raised it with Modi, and Jaishankar was on the phone to Lavrov the same day. That kind of access comes from steady relations with both sides.

The limits

I would not oversell this. India has not publicly confirmed that it will mediate food corridors; that phrase is Zelenskyy's. Al Jazeera pointed out that the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative depended on Türkiye, which controls the Bosphorus and hosted the inspection centre in Istanbul. India has no ships, insurers or inspectors in that sea. Any corridor would also need Russia and Ukraine to stop attacking ports and vessels, and Russia left the earlier grain deal in 2023.

There are also other offers on the table. Türkiye, Egypt and the United States have made their own proposals, and the Kremlin describes the Abu Dhabi talks as trilateral, with Washington as the only mediator, according to Al Jazeera. Indian ideas will matter only if they help the parties agree on the specific, smaller steps.

What to watch next

Russian, Ukrainian and American representatives were due to meet in Abu Dhabi for trilateral talks starting Tuesday, 10 November, according to Anadolu Agency. Al Jazeera described it as the first round after a pause of nine months. If those talks produce even a limited understanding on shipping or energy sites, India's ideas will have a place in it. The next sign to watch is from the MEA: whether it confirms Zelenskyy's line on food corridors, and whether any safety arrangement for Indian crews in the Black Sea follows.

Sources

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