

Pakistan likely to skip Ukraine peace summit

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More than two years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Pakistan is now facing yet another diplomatic challenge. Pakistan is among the countries from the so-called Global South invited to the Ukraine Peace Summit to be held in Switzerland on June 15 and 16. Islamabad was extended an invitation for the first time to such an international conference on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Foreign Office Spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch confirmed at the weekly briefing last week that Pakistan was invited to the summit. She said the invitation was under consideration.

However, sources said that Pakistan was likely to skip the peace summit as part of its efforts to maintain “neutrality.” Sources noted that since Russia was not invited to the summit, it might not be useful. However, they said that a final decision had yet to be made. China too was extended an invitation but Beijing has already decided to stay away. Officials in Beijing questioned the

credibility of the process when Russia, a main party to the conflict, was not invited. Sources said that Pakistan usually takes cues from China on such key international and regional issues.

However, observers believe that it wouldn't be a surprise if Western countries were quietly persuading Pakistan to attend the conference. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Pakistan's then-prime minister Imran Khan was in Moscow. His visit, though unrelated to President Vladimir Putin's decision, certainly raised many eyebrows, particularly in the West.

Imran later cited his Moscow trip as one of the main reasons behind his ouster through a vote of no confidence. Basing his claim on that infamous diplomatic cable, the jailed former premier believed that the US was not happy with his move and hence conspired against his government.

The US always denied the allegations while opposition parties, which ousted him from power, dismissed the involvement of any foreign hand. The US might not have played any direct role, but it is no secret that Washington and its Western allies always wanted Pakistan to be on their side in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, Pakistan adopted a carefully crafted policy to maintain a delicate balance. It has never condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and on several occasions abstained from US-backed moves to denounce Moscow at the United Nations. At the same time, it hosted the Ukrainian foreign minister in the middle of the conflict and dispatched humanitarian assistance. There were reports that Pakistan quietly supplied weapons to Ukraine

through a third party. Both Ukraine and Pakistan vehemently denied such reports. It is evident that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has tested Pakistan's diplomatic skills. Meanwhile, the summit in Switzerland, which hopes to pave the way for a peace process in Ukraine, has drawn delegations from more than 50 countries. The neutral Swiss government is seeking a broad-based turnout from different parts of the world, and 160 invitations were sent. Switzerland wants to persuade more countries from the so-called Global South as well as China to sign up. Countries in South America, Africa, and the Middle East were among those that confirmed they would come, according to Amherd, who in January agreed to host the summit at the behest of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Roughly half of the countries that said they would take part were non-European, and the list of attendees was likely to keep changing until the last minute.