

India's Gaffe at Samarkand

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at Samarkand on September 16 after the SCO Summit turned into a media scandal. The Western media zeroed in on six words culled out of context in the PM’s opening remarks — “today’s era is not of war” — to triumphantly proclaim that India is finally distancing itself from Russia on Ukraine issue, as the US and European leaders have been incessantly demanding.

Of course, this motivated interpretation lacks empirical evidence and is, therefore, malicious. Besides, Modi also spoke with a rare interplay of emotions by underscoring the quintessence of the Indian-Russian relationship, as well as his [two decade-long association](#) with Putin.

The steamy part cooked up by the US media shows the desperation on the part of the “Collective West” to isolate Russia at a time when even western leaders have candidly admitted that the bulk of the non-western world does not identify with the western narrative on Ukraine and refuses to roll back their relationship with Russia.

Many countries are, in fact, stepping up their cooperation with Russia —Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, for example. Curiously, even western companies are loathe to leave the highly attractive Russian market where business returns are high. A [report in the Atlantic Council magazine](#) on September 18 highlights that although something like 1,000 multinational corporations had announced that they would be leaving Russia in the wake of the western sanctions, “the unfortunate reality is that... three-quarters of the most profitable foreign multinationals remain in Russia.” Thus, statistically, while 106 western companies exited the Russian market, over 1,149 internationals still remain and simply keep silent about it.

The giant Sakhalin-2 oil-and-natural-gas project in the Russian Far East is a celebrated case where two big Japanese energy investors Mitsui and Mitsubishi, with government support, [simply refused to quit](#), as the Russian project supplies 9 percent of Japan’s energy needs. The G7 has no option but to exempt Japan from the purview of sanctions when it comes to

Sakhalin-2!

Again, the West continues to import fertiliser from Russia and to that end, lifts the restrictions on shipping, insurance, etc. But the restrictions continue against Russia's exports of food grain and fertiliser to the non-Western world. Russia has now offered to distribute the fertiliser held up in European ports free of charge to the poorest countries in Africa if only the restrictions for exports are waived, but Europe would rather use it for own needs.

It has recently been exposed that the brouhaha about a "global food crisis" (which India too mouthed) was basically a cheap hoax perpetrated by the Biden Administration to get Russia to allow the sale of wheat held up in Ukrainian silos to the European market by American companies, who have apparently bought up Ukraine's farm lands and control that country's grain trade! Only a fraction of the grain shipments from Ukraine went to poor countries threatened by famine. Suffice to say, the US and the European Union pressure on India's purchase of Russian oil was nothing but bullying.

That said, India should know that in a situation where Russia faces an existential threat to its security, it will not be deterred while firmly, decisively responding, no matter what anybody says. Will India be deterred if any foreign country gets agitated over state repression in Kashmir? Violence and bloodshed are abhorrent features of the contemporary world situation and is a painful reality all over the world.

That is why, PM Modi's awkward reference to war and peace in his initial remarks to Putin at Samarkand was way out of place in what turned to be a "wonderful" meeting otherwise. There was simply no need to have characterised, at PM's level, the Ukraine conflict as a "war". It betrayed ignorance, since the whole world knows that what is going on is a proxy war between the US and Russia in the Ukrainian arena that had been incubating through the past quarter century ever since NATO began its eastward enlargement with an agenda to encircle Russia. Moscow seriously erred by tolerating the US interference in Ukraine for so very long until NATO appeared on its doorstep. It is doubtful if India would have shown such strategic patience if an adversarial power advances a project to encircle and weaken it.

Against such a complex backdrop, the litmus test of India's "neutrality" will, perhaps, lie in EAM Jaishankar at least speaking up on the NATO's eastward expansion, about the US stoking the fire of conflict by pumping tens of billions of dollars worth weaponry into Ukraine, and with reference to the Biden Administration's diabolical role in undermining nascent peace moves between Moscow and Kiev.

If Turkey's **Recep Erdogan** and Hungary's **Viktor Orban** can speak up, although NATO leaders, why can't India's EAM? But, never mind, there is no question of Jaishankar even remotely embarrassing Biden.

The big question, nonetheless, remains: Why is it that a country like India has lost its voice? Does it prefer the unipolar world order that the West tries to foist on the world community? Has it forgotten the colonial past? Does it accept that the "rules-based order" means acting the John Wayne way — appropriating other countries' financial assets entrusted with the Western banks in trust? Does it condone, for whatever reasons, the US' stated intention to destroy Russia's economy? If Modi Govt has thought through these issues by now, six months after the sanctions from hell against Russia, does it have any views at all? When

India was much weaker, it still had a mind of its own? What happened to India?

From the [Kremlin readout](#), Putin actually acknowledged right at the outset of the conversation with Modi that Russia and India are not on the same page on Ukraine. To be sure, Putin must be knowing that India's behaviour is guided by its narrowly defined self-interests and conditioned by an itch to do cherrypicking. He is immensely experienced in diplomacy to know how countries behave in self-interests and how it is necessary to cooperate with such countries.

But Moscow has never been and will never be a demanding partner. Mutual interest and mutual respect are the hall marks of Russian diplomacy toward India. Despite its own reservations over what India was attempting to do by splitting Pakistan into two halves, an unprecedented act by international law, when the crunch time came in 1971, Moscow not only stood by India but even despatched its warships and submarines to guard Indian waters from a potential US military attack against India — and this, while on the diplomatic front, Moscow bought time for India to conclude its military operations to cut Pakistan down to size. It is, therefore, all the more reason for us to be discreet at the very least.

India must be one of the few countries that benefits out of the Ukraine conflict. Aside oil, coal and what not at low prices from Russia, paradoxically, even the rupee has commenced its indeterminate journey towards becoming a “world currency.” No patriotic Indian will criticise the Modi government for such sophistry. However, confusion arises when morality is needlessly injected into all this with a tedious attitude of preachiness.

The meeting in Samarkand took place in the context of the SCO's annual summit. The summit was not about Ukraine but about the profound issues that have surfaced in its wake that will shape the contours of the world order. This SCO summit was special, as it took place amid large-scale geopolitical changes, triggering a rapid and irrevocable transformation of the entire complex of international ties, relations, policies, economy, when a new model based on the real multi-polarity and dialogue is being built.

Everyone understands that the SCO, which represents half the world's population, will help forge the new world order. Unlike the case with NATO, where all decisions are made in Washington and imposed on America's “allies”, there is no Pied Piper in the SCO tent. Modi could easily have played a meaningful role at the summit instead of meandering his way aimlessly through the pandemic, supply chains, et al, at a juncture when such profound issues were being discussed by his peer group in Samarkand.

The word “multipolarity,” which was on everyone's mind in Samarkand, did not even figure in Modi's speech at Samarkand. Whoever drafted that speech must have done it with an eye on Washington. Therefore, don't blame the US media. They happened to notice all these aberrations and decided to cull out those six sharply-etched words to put India on the mat, mocking it for doublespeak and rank opportunism. All that hand-wringing subsequently by the apologists of our government cannot wash away the stain.

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Featured image: Prime Minister Narendra Modi (L) met with Russian President Vladimir Putin at Samarkand, Uzbekistan, September 16, 2022 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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