

A Bear Hug That Tells

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“They hugged”, thus New York Times started its report of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin during his state visit to Moscow earlier last week, the first since 2015, during which Modi called Putin “my dear friend” and received an order of highest honor from the latter.

The “jovial scenes” between them, the report goes, “illustrated a sobering reality” and Andrew Weiss from the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is quoted as telling why: “we have had two and a half years now of endless Russian atrocities, and most of the world is not daunted or uncomfortable maintaining some kind of business as usual with Moscow. That’s a really sad commentary on Russia’s continued geopolitical weight.”

This indeed was an eyesore to those more than 30 heads of states and governments gathering in Washington almost at the same time to celebrate 75th anniversary of Nato and, more importantly, to re-iterate its support of Ukraine that is increasingly dependent on the organization for its war against Russia.

So much so that US Deputy State Secretary Kurt Campbell had reached out to Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra earlier trying to persuade the Indian side to re-schedule the Modi-Putin summit to avoid embarrassing the Nato summit.

A prevalent usual explanation of this in Washington is that New Delhi has been exploiting the situation in which America allegedly has to focus on its confrontation with China so it just has to bear with an India that behaves opportunistically, if not amorally, by, say, engaging Moscow and profiting from the cordiality of their relations.

In my opinion, however, what is behind New Delhi's behavioural pattern regarding Russia goes much deeper. That Modi goes about it undeterred and not bashful all the way tells a lot about sea changes of international relations.

Late US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski got it when he coined the term of "the global political awakening" towards the twilight of his life as one of the world's precious few top-rated masters of geopolitics. "For the first time in history almost all of humanity is politically activated, politically conscious and politically interactive." So he said in 2008, adding that "global activism is generating a surge in the quest for cultural respect and economic opportunity in a world scarred by memories of colonial or imperial domination."

This is especially apt elucidation in the case of India, when one recalls that no sooner had it gained independence from Britain in 1947 than the country became the standard bearer of the Non-aligned Movement and looked to hold a sway in the US-vs-Soviet Cold War era that ensued.

Fast forward to today, and we see India's simmering discontent with the status quo now flourishing into a full-blown endeavour to make a foray into the big power game globally, taking China of the past half a century as a role model and taking full advantage of China now being deemed as chief global rival by Washington.

Added to its diplomatic autonomy while on the receiving end of Washington's charm offensive, economic investment and technology transfer is New Delhi's new found self-positioning as the leader of the Global South countries.

Therefore, the Indian case of "global political awakening" is way beyond usual nomenclature of opportunism, and here again Brzezinski is worth heeding. He pointed out that "Global political awakening is historically anti-imperial, politically anti-Western, and emotionally increasingly anti-American", amid which "a major shift in the global centre of gravity" takes place that "in turn is altering the global distribution of power, with major implications for America's role in the world".

Coincidentally, as noted in this column a week ago, a New York Times guest essay last month came up to precisely question America's role in today's world. According to Stephen Wertheim, the author of the opinion piece and a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Never in the decades since the Cold War has the United States looked less like a leader of the world and more like the head of a faction — reduced to defending its preferred side against increasingly aligned adversaries, as much of the world looks on and wonders why the Americans think they're in charge."

This, however, is obviously not the way the Washington establishment sees it. When President Biden, at an ABC News interview two weeks ago, burst out “I’m running the world”, there was no reason to doubt the sincerity of his belief.

India enjoys its independence nonetheless, jealously and determinedly.

When Canada accused India of getting involved in the killing of a Canadian Sikh activist late last year in measured way, New Delhi’s response was open and vehement, calling Canada a “safe haven for terrorists”.

Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar, for his part, shrugged off questioning, in a seminar early this year, of India’s position of having “multiple options” regarding Russia and buying Russia’s oil despite Washington’s stance on the issue. “You should be admiring me if I’m smart enough to have multiple options, not criticising”, he replied grinning, and turned to neighbouring State Secretary Anthony Blinken who returned with a grudgingly concurring smile.

To sum up, India, under Modi, has done little to hide its ambition that, like China before it, it will attain its own superpower status before long by behaving strategically autonomous while playing the USA and China off against each other.

Few see much illogicality of that logic, which means that Washington probably is in need of some serious policy examination at a time when it might have found its work cut out for it with regard to China and Russia.

Reflecting on the global political awakening back in 2008, Brzezinski gave “a parochial note” to the American public who, according to him “is woefully undereducated about the wider world”. He emphasized that “only by identifying itself with the idea of universal human dignity — with its basic requirement of respect for culturally diverse political, social and religious emanations — can America overcome the risk that global political awakening will turn against it”.

Today’s Beltway elite in Washington does not seem to have heeded it, however. They’ve demonstrated little Brzezinskean pondering over the Indian phenomenon, other than expediently tolerating and leveraging an allegedly wayward India for the sake of countering China, concomitant with frustrated outbursts, such as by US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, who groaned last week that New Delhi should not take the US friendship “for granted.”

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