

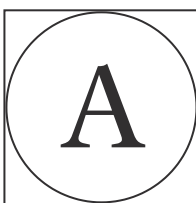


The message from Putin's friends is clear: Get out of Ukraine now

The Russian president might not like what Narendra Modi has to say, but India's PM is trying to keep the global gang together, explains world affairs editor **Sam Kiley**



Modi and Putin with Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Shanghai (AFP/Getty)



uthoritarian populists like Vladimir Putin know that when fellow anti-democrats start calling them “my friend”, the writing may be on the wall.

No wonder the Russian president shifted in his seat and tapped his feet impatiently while his erstwhile buddy, the

OG populist and Hindu nationalist, Narendra Modi, gave him a mini-lecture – in public – on how he’s got to end his war against Ukraine.

Coming a week after a sudden mission to Moscow by CIA director John Ratcliffe, and amid reports that the White House may soon be sending special envoys Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff to Kyiv for their first visit, it looks like Putin’s buddies are ganging up against him.

Based on what has come before, it seems unlikely they’re doing this for Ukraine, democracy, or even “humanity” – but rather to save their little cabal.

Putin is on the back foot. Almost 40 per cent of the economy of the Russian Federation is dedicated to the war effort, but that effort is proving fruitless. Its harvest is only death – more than 30,000 Russian soldiers are being cut down every month for microscopic gains that ebb and flow on a tide of blood.

Russian capital is being yanked out of banks. Ukrainian deep strikes against the fuel infrastructure across Russia are causing long queues at gas stations while white Russians, who rule the federation, are sending the different ethnicities from Russia’s eastern empire into the Donbas meat grinder.

Putin is rattled. That is why he has been threatening Europe and the United Kingdom. But his weakness is covered by the fig leaf of threat. But that fig leaf may not be just show. Ratcliffe is understood to have told his fellow spymasters in Moscow to back off from any plans to nip at Nato, via military incursions and hybrid attacks, as a way of easing the pressure in Ukraine.

“Every day that the war continues, humanity is, in effect, set back a step, whilst every step towards peace gives all of humanity real hope for peace. We need to move from endless war to an end to the war, to a cessation of hostilities,” Modi told Putin.



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(AP)

India's prime minister has maintained a strict "need for peace" agenda when it comes to Russia's war against Ukraine. He has avoided criticising the Kremlin.

And the war in Europe has been great for New Delhi. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, India has imported about a third of its crude oil from Russia. It also refines this oil and sells it to Western markets for a handsome profit.

Russia sold India about \$172bn of crude in 2022-25, compared with only \$2.3bn in 2021. In other words, the post-invasion Indian market has delivered Moscow on the order of \$170bn in crude-oil sales over four years. And Indian refiners generated about \$15-20bn in exported petroleum products from crude bought at a discount from Russia, yielding around \$2-4bn in extra profits a year.

Modi was given Russia's highest honour, the Order of St Andrew, two years ago and his foreign ministry has described the Russian-Indian relationship as a "special and privileged strategic partnership".

So why the shift to publicly admonishing the Russian president?

The populist gang is not internally loyal. Its members – Putin, Xi Jinping in China, Modi, and Donald Trump – have enjoyed a weirdly cosy relationship while also being global rivals.

Trump appears impressed by Modi, who has harnessed atavistic Hindu nationalism and eroded democracy to deliver long-term electoral success.

Modi has been described by Trump as a “great person” and a “great friend of mine over the years” even though he has decried India’s close economic relations with Moscow.



‘Trump has been a useful idiot for Moscow and India’ (AFP/Getty)

These are crocodile tears because, of course. Trump has not, for example, kept his promise of sanctions against New Delhi over Russian crude sales, which hit a record of 50.8 per cent of India’s imports in July.

Trump is also dazzled by Putin. He seemingly behaves as if he’s part of the Kremlin’s own machine.

Trump has backed Putin's demands for a massive chunk of Ukrainian territory, cut military aid to Ukraine, sought to gouge Kyiv over mineral extraction deals like a mafia mobster, and consistently threatened to invade Denmark's Greenland and annex Canada. A Russian spymaster could never have dreamed of so highly placed an asset so absolutely serving Moscow's interests.

So, Trump has been a useful idiot for Moscow and India.

But he is not without his own power and he needs them both to help him out of a fix called the mid-term elections to Congress. In November he could lose control of the House and even the Senate and then spend the dotage of his presidency hamstrung by indictments.

He has got the US stuck in an unpopular and unwinnable illegal war against Iran. Globally, Trump, who promised peace in Ukraine, has shown that he's made America weak, not great.

Wounded and dangerous, Putin is threatening Europe and his flunkies like to hint at the use of nuclear weapons. But his army in Ukraine could collapse and what remains of his economy could be shattered if he took on Nato. Indeed, a sudden implosion of command and control on his western front is not unlikely now anyway. This could be the end of him.

And that would be bad for Trump and bad for Modi, who want, and need, to keep the band together.