

# Decoding Trump-Putin Handshake

*Two views: Kyiv's been dealt a raw deal. New Delhi must continue hedging its bets*

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We live in cynical times. Few images capture this better than the Trump-Putin summit in Anchorage. Putin got his red carpet, but he walked it between four American F-35s and a B-2 bomber, all aimed at him. His plane was "escorted" by American fighter jets, so he looked out at American might. A snapshot of Trump's diplomacy: flattery laced with threat. Anchorage was theatre, but also diplomacy – an emblem of deals struck long before the cameras rolled.

The endgame is near. Zelenskyy will have to bend. Ukraine will lose at least a fifth of its land, having already lost hundreds of thousands of lives. Trump has made clear the onus is now on Zelenskyy, whom he meets in Washington today. Unsurprisingly, Zelenskyy's demands have been stripped to the bone: a place at the table and credible security guarantees.

Putin, too, has shifted, hemmed in by the threat of secondary sanctions. His latest ceasefire terms drop old demands on troop limits, once a red line. He even signals willingness to trade parts of Donbas for slices of Kharkiv and Sumy. Washington's submission of Trump's Nobel nomination ahead of the meeting signals confidence he can clinch the deal, as does Trump's pivot from calling for a "ceasefire" to insisting on "peace".

Ukraine is hemorrhaging. The war has settled into a routine of infinite loss: soldiers bound to trenches like serfs, men in the rear who are hunted, women and children killed nightly by drones.

For Nato, this is a neat, if cynical, solution: grind Russia down at minimal cost, with Ukrainian lives. Secretary-General Mark Rutte put it plainly: it "suits Nato" for Ukrainians to keep fighting to buy Europe time.

But there was a flaw. "Brave Ukrainians" turned out to be humans who wanted to live. Ukraine has worn so thin it could rip at any moment – into an uprising, civil war, coup, or dictatorship run by embittered men armed with Nato kit.

Politically, war only entrenched Putin. With sanctions a veil rather than a wall, Russia's economy survived and shifted to war footing. Europe failed to rearm. China profited, turning Russia

into a handy vassal.

The stars aligned. Trump wants Russian oil back on the market to lower prices, access to Ukrainian rare earths and the Nobel Peace Prize. Europe wants to stop Ukraine's collapse. Most Ukrainians simply want the horror to end.

Preparations for Anchorage began a month ago, with a coordinated media campaign to weaken Zelenskyy. Newspapers in Britain and US lifted their tacit ban on criticising Kyiv, and overnight Western media spotlighted possible corruption in Zelenskyy's administration. "Cardboard Protests" echoed the message, and a Gallup poll soon showed nearly two-thirds of Ukrainians support the end of the war.

The bitter truth is that hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian deaths resulted from Washington's craven strategy "conflict management", adhered to by Obama, Biden, and Trump alike – a paralysis of political will disguised as prudence. This is exactly what Putin counted on: that the West would prove toothless, run by managers rather than leaders. No wonder he looked smug in Anchorage.

The story is harrowing, but it is not over. The real question now is for Europe, now in the back seat. Securing a lasting peace – in Ukraine, but also across its continent – depends on whether Europe grasps that halting Russia's westward march means building a viable new Ukraine: shielded from drones as much as kleptocracy, safe enough for its people to return, and stay.

Europe must act fast, for Putin will not be sleeping. The new Cold War we are sliding into is already smouldering.

**Pankaj Saran**



**Former Indian Envoy To Russia**

Why have Russia-West relations come to this pass, for them to be described by leaders of both sides as the worst since the end of the Cold War? Because 1991's promise began unravelling within a few years, with Nato's expansion on Europe's eastern flank. The Maidan revolution in Ukraine in 2013, leading to Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, heralded the start of a new Cold War.

To his credit, Trump, who held his first summit with Putin in 2018, has been candid enough to say that Ukraine was Biden's war, and should have never happened.

Fingers have recently been pointed at other quarters too, including, incredibly, India. If naming and shaming is the new normal, it is important to say it as it is. It is not India's oil purchases but shortsighted, unprincipled and reckless leadership that triggered the outbreak of full

hostilities between Russia and Ukraine.

For all the hyperbole about India-Pakistan relations, the real thousand-year war is the one between the West and Russia. It is they who need help to prevent cycles of war and destruction that have engulfed the world every few years, and to learn to live with each other.

Trump went to Alaska with a gun aimed sideways at India. Does this mean India has finally emerged as a power of systemic importance on the global stage, one whose actions can influence major power behaviour? Regardless of this broadside, India will still welcome and support what, for lack of a better term, might be called the "Alaska process" – de-escalation of US-Russia tensions, and ending the Ukraine war, plus a peace compact that could go well beyond Ukraine.

US-Russia détente is good for India. It will allow India to pursue its foreign policy choices with greater ease, and leverage bilateral relationships. Historically, India's relations with the US-led West and Russia have prospered when relations among themselves have been more relaxed.

It is undisputed, even by American leaders, that Russia possesses resources that are abundant and valuable, and they have their eyes on them. We should have no illusions that in a post-sanctions world, India's economic and commercial engagement with Russia will find stiff competition from US and European companies. But the free run enjoyed by Chinese companies will come under threat.

The Alaska process will consume Putin's time and energy, and possibly deflect attention away from India. We have experienced this in the heydays of the US-Russia relationship under Yeltsin. Due to this not inconceivable scenario, India can hardly be expected to cut the same very ties that others are looking to encash upon.

A fruition of the Alaska process will be a personal victory for Trump. He will stand vindicated as a man of peace. Success will embolden him to address other intractable conflicts, among which India-Pakistan is already wired in his mind. The really big account however is China. With Russia out of the way, the next big stop for him will be China, and will be the one to watch in Delhi.

Events of the last few months are a reminder of the complexities of dealing with a global superpower, and the ease with which "lesser" nations can be thrown under the bus. For this reason and the still significant difficulties and uncertainties that lie ahead in the Alaska process, India will hedge its foreign policy options. Distrust is an abiding attribute of the West's relations with Russia. There is still time to prevent this from becoming one between America and India.

