

Putin's interview and the West's extraordinary outrage



Ashfaque Swapan
is a writer and editor based
in Atlanta, US.

ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent interview with Tucker Carlson, rare as it is, is less fascinating than the extraordinarily vitriolic reaction to it in the West.

The interview demonstrated that Putin clearly lacks the ability to pack his responses in brief, pithy sound bites. On the other hand, regardless of what one may think of him, his introductory 30-minute disquisition on Russian history in Ukraine showed an impressive ability to marshal facts. Western leaders pale in comparison. Consider the two contestants of the forthcoming US presidential elections—President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump, whose verbal gaffes seem to get more embarrassing by the day.

Former Fox News broadcaster Tucker Carlson's Putin interview was received with apoplectic outrage by the Western media. Cries echoing "traitor" reverberated as Western commentators demanded Carlson's head on a platter. The president of the European Union, Ursula



Former Fox News host Tucker Carlson interviewed Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Russia on February 6, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

The stark contrast the West has drawn between itself and Putin isn't cutting much ice in most of the world. This doubt is beginning to seep into public opinion in the West as well, hence the vicious attacks on anyone questioning the dominant Western narrative.

Von der Leyen—never one to lose an opportunity to showcase her craven servility to the US—warned of banning Carlson from travelling in the EU.

This faux outrage is quite inexplicable. It is, in fact, the media's job to interview geopolitical adversaries. Whether it's Al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, or Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Western journalists have freely interviewed people vilified in the Western media as the devil

odd. Call me cynical, but I'm increasingly convinced that the real reason behind the outrage is an unspoken, underlying insecurity that the US-led Western neoconservative narrative is standing on an increasingly flimsy ground. The US has always been the 800-pound gorilla in global affairs, but now geopolitical dynamics are changing. The information explosion on social media (some of it admittedly of dubious provenance) has made it impossible

isn't cutting much ice in most of the world. This doubt is beginning to seep into public opinion in the West as well, hence the vicious attacks on anyone questioning the dominant Western narrative. Even a factual critique of the 2014 US-engineered coup in Ukraine and the violent White supremacist Nazi sympathisers under its fold (acknowledged by the US itself earlier) is liable to get you labelled as a "Putin apologist."

Western neoconservatives are

terrified of a real interview with Putin. The neon stock-in-trade is vilifying an adversary into a monster. We saw this in action with Panama's Manuel Noriega and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, which begs the question: how come both were such great chums of the US at one time?

The Western powers fear that their attempts at demonising Putin—already threadbare—will fall apart if folks have a chance to actually see what Putin has to say without Western media's distortion. The hundreds of millions of views on Putin's interview should scare Western media gatekeepers. But we know now, beyond a doubt, that there are millions who smell a rat in the Western media's narrative. They suspect that the West's demonisation of Putin masks its own geopolitical agenda.

The Western narrative is also a victim of bad timing. The West's protestations of a "rules-based-order" ring particularly hollow when it is showering billions of dollars on Ukraine while remaining complicit in Israel's genocide in Gaza—denying national rights of Palestinians since 1948. The sheer scale of Israel's killings—tens of thousands of children dead, snipers picking off churchgoers in Nazareth, and the indiscriminate slaughter of health service providers, journalists, you name it—are palmed off under the rubric of Israel's "right to defend itself." When the International Court of Justice indicts Israel, the West responds by cutting funding to the UNRWA, the UN's Palestinian relief agency. If you dare raise any questions, you are dubbed an anti-Semite.

Whether it is Putin or Palestine, Western neoconservatives have lost in the court of the world's public opinion. No wonder Western media is so vicious in its critiques. They are facing daunting challenges in their own countries. Their conceit has always been that the Western media is uniquely free and fair.

This contention is under increasing scrutiny even in their own countries.

However, it must be mentioned that Tucker Carlson is no knight in shining armour. The rise of his extraordinary popularity stems from his promotion of White-supremacist conspiracy theories, such as the "great replacement" which claims immigrants of colour are being brought in the US to disempower the natives. He has called Iraqis "semiliterate primitive monkeys." His friendly view of Putin contrasts sharply with his view of China, in regard to which he sounds as shrill as Western neoconservatives do in Russia. China, according to Carlson, is a "racist, militarised ethno-state" that "runs along traditional fascist lines."

So, the uncomfortable fact is that at least as far as the US goes, a robust alternative to the overwhelming conventional neoconservative wisdom about Putin and Ukraine is widely available, but it is disseminated by a broadcaster whose ideological moorings are repugnant. Worldwide, the reaction to Putin's interview presents an interesting contrast to the West: there is zero hyperventilation or outrage, just as it should be. Many outside the West must be scratching their heads trying to figure out what the fuss is all about. Whether good, bad, or ugly, Putin is a crucial figure in global geopolitics who is engaged in a war that has rocked the world. As such, he is a legitimate subject for an interview.

The greater risk for the West is that it is locked inside its sanctimonious bubble, and is repeatedly failing to realise how suspect its moral claims are in the eyes of the wider world. Perhaps at the end of the day, there is a poetic justice to it all. Overwhelmingly successful propaganda has an Achilles' heel. It can ultimately turn into a Pyrrhic victory as one falls victim to one's own propaganda, fatally impairing one's perception of reality.

Red Sea Geopolitics: The Colour of War



Imtiaz A Hussain
is professor at the Department of
Global Studies and Governance of
Independent University, Bangladesh.

IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

Today's Red Sea skirmishes raise multifaceted concerns, which range from the war in Gaza widening and awakening old wounds, to geopolitical frontlines being rewritten by shifting chokepoints.

Occupying Gaza smuggles with Eretz Israel (Greater Israel), a non-negotiable Zionist goal from 1897. Institutionalised by establishing a "Palestine Office" in 1908, today, Israel is one step away from fulfilling that goal, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu channels a lesson he learned from his mentor, Menachem Begin: inflict a Palestinian nakba.

Netanyahu widened the Gaza war by actually unleashing it. By decapitating Hamas, he mobilised Hezbollah (Iran's Shia militia in Lebanon), while activating two other Iranian militias: Yemen's Houthis (who are attacking ships in the Red Sea) and Iraqi/Syrian Kataib Hezbollah (which killed three Tower 22 US servicemen along Jordan-Syria borders last month and quickly dissolved itself upon Iranian instructions, but were still mercilessly bombed by the US).

Ever since the Shah of Iran was evicted in January 1979 (the Central Intelligence Agency once restored him in 1953), Iran and the United States have been at loggerheads. Iran's 1980s war with another US supporter, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, revived Shia-Sunni tensions and stirred an extant Middle East cauldron. Gaza enters this stew as a "wild-card" component.

The Middle East supplies one-fifth of today's oil flows. Passage through the 21-mile-wide Straits of Hormuz makes it a chokepoint for trade. Red Sea attacks shifted that chokepoint from Iran's frontier to Bab-el-Mandeb, an equally narrow stretch connecting the Gulf of Aden from Africa to the Red Sea. Half of

all Asia-Europe trade passes through the Red Sea, Suez Canal, and the Mediterranean Sea; the Suez Canal alone commands some 12 percent of global trade.

Bringing Africa into the Middle East tinderbox opens four strands of thoughts. The first stems from Israel pushing Gaza residents into Sinai, destabilising the Egyptian, Ethiopian, and Saudi neighbourhoods. Secondly, it restores "Western" controls over Asia-Europe trade—which Great Britain and France had lost when the Suez Canal was nationalised in 1956—by converting South Gaza into a Suez alternative. Third, the G20 last year approved India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) which also eyes a Mediterranean outlet through southern Gaza, after crossing the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Finally, the US' actions speak volumes in this regard: abandoning its democratic values, opposing a ceasefire in Gaza—allowing the brutal killing of children and women, and the bombing of hospitals—and militarily supporting Israel, undergirding their strategic interest.

Invoking the term "red" rattles US hormones, as it conjures hostility and eradication. US settlers built this Manichaean mindset—pitting a self-constructed good against a self-constructed bad—centuries ago: first by dubbing natives of the land they'd usurped as "Red" Indians (painting their faces red was a ritual), then after acquainting them, dehumanising their culture in popular narratives and imprisoning them in settlements, as the early 19th century Trail of Tears grimly reminds us. Socially, this spilled onto African-Americans, who were kept as slaves and even denied the right to vote, despite the US Declaration of Independence that pronounced democracy. The Manichaean mindset also affected Hispanics, from whom much of the

land stretching from west of the Mississippi was first confiscated, and whose language, Spanish, is now the fastest-growing in the United States. The political spillover from US history is best represented in former Senator and Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater's "Better dead than red" theory, referring to the Soviet Red Army, echoing McCarthyism, lambasting the US Department of State for being "infested with communists," and glorifying the nuclear arms race.

Political scientist Samuel P Huntington's post-Cold War thesis, *Clash of Civilizations*, identified the next Manichaean US target: Muslims (and Hispanics). With Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria spoken for (sometimes falsely, as with Iraq in 2003), the Houthi Red Sea strikes implicate yet another Muslim group target, suggesting the "clash" that Huntington wrote of will continue until Armageddon.

All three remaining strands of thought directly fuel Red Sea confrontation. US-China rivalry dominates them. China's 2013 Belt

Iran has managed the Red Sea and Yemeni civil war against Saudi Arabia and the US since 2015. Though Biden pledged to "prevent [the Gaza war] from spreading," he fomented it with arms and funds. Pundits debate if Houthi attacks or Western interests caused this confrontation. Whichever it is, Gaza seems more like a nail-in-the-coffin development than a catalyst.

and Road Initiative (BRI) sets the tone, brewing initial tensions where the Indian and Pacific oceans meet. Adding to it is Japan's Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Indo-Pacific region" reference of 2018, AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) of 2021, US President Joe Biden's



Half of all Asia-Europe trade passes through the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Suez Canal, which alone commands some 12 percent of global trade.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2021, and the preparation of a Japan-centric "Pacific NATO."

That fulcrum shifted West, tipping China's port-building plans, from Ream (Cambodia), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Sonadia and Payra (Bangladesh), to Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and Gwadar (Pakistan). Japan immediately reacted, making deals and building ports in Yangon (Myanmar) and Matarbari (Bangladesh). India followed suit in Sittwe (Myanmar) and converted its Look East policy approach into "Act East." After targeting the Malacca chokepoint and the Bay of Bengal, the Indo-Pacific rivalry confronted Middle East chokepoints. China's only foreign naval base, in Djibouti—it must be noted that a dozen other African possibilities await formalisation—secured China's Red Sea foothold, to project it as a Persian Gulf, Suez Canal, and Mediterranean power.

Iran has blossomed the most, as the second strand suggests. Against Russia's distractions in Ukraine and BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa grouping) expansion into BRICS+ tilting in

Global South directions (by adding Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates from Asia, Egypt and Ethiopia from Africa, and Argentina from South America), China's ascendancy also featured a 25-year Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Iran in 2021. Worth \$800 billion of Chinese investments, supplies, and workers, it may open up even larger coffers to meet the necessary military spending by both sides competitively.

Politics have resultantly gotten murkier. China's rival, India, built Chabahar Port in Iran, adjacent to China's Gwadar Port, thus opening a direct northern corridor to Afghanistan to further surround Pakistan. China's presence softens Pakistan's concerns, but encourages Iranian machismo, such as bombing Balochistan last month. Similarly, India's Foreign Minister Jaishankar went to Iran to stop Yemeni Houthis from bombing Indian ships.

Iran has managed the Red Sea and Yemeni civil war against Saudi Arabia and the United States since 2015. Though Biden pledged to "prevent [the Gaza war] from spreading," he fomented it with arms and funds.

Pundits debate if Houthi attacks or Western interests caused this confrontation. Whichever it is, Gaza seems more like a nail-in-the-coffin development than a catalyst.

The third strand relates to a restless Africa. Displeased by the West's unconditional support for Ukraine, South Africa led the BRICS expansion, revitalised the Global South, and placated Israel for genocide. In a continent questioning Western relations, China wins even with its rough edges.

Because of petroleum, the Straits of Hormuz became pivotal to global growth and security. US fleets upheld the status quo, against threats such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—as a prelude to Persian Gulf positioning. As Middle East oil-dependence decreases, shifting the chokepoint to the Red Sea widens the conflict playground, hastens casus belli, and deepens Hamas' retaliatory actions. Will a "red-minded" US approach help? It may shake geopolitics for sure, but a stalemate could cripple more, by marooning more states and upholding the status quo which will open an even nastier "can of [proverbial] worms."