

Johnson's visit to India and the crisis of British imperialism

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29 April 2022

With the dust settled on Prime Minister Boris Johnson's two-day visit to India last week, the picture that emerges is of Britain's greatly diminished stature on the world stage. This was clouded at the time by the "partygate" storm dominating the media coverage centred on Johnson's personal travails.

In the *Guardian's* account, Johnson was feeling "Westminster heat under the Indian sun". According to the *Times*, which reported "frantic calls" between Johnson and the Conservative Party back home, "There was no respite for the PM overseas". Perhaps the most used word to describe his visit was "overshadowed". ITV's deputy political editor Anushka Asthana wrote that "from the perspective of the trip to India" events back home in Westminster were "a disaster".

Comments focussing on Johnson's performance in India were no more flattering. The most publicised event was a photo-op at a JCB plant, "British owned but made in India," touted Johnson (and owned by a Tory donor), where he posed on top of a bulldozer. But in the days before, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi had used JCB machines to flatten Muslim homes and businesses as part of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's communalist campaign. The prime minister was branded "ignorant" and "tone deaf".

His trip was certainly a flop. But the relentless focus on Johnson's personal failings, designed to underscore the argument of a broad section of the ruling class that he is now a liability for British imperialism, hides deeper causes that are as unpalatable to his critics as to Johnson himself. The Tory leader is playing his hand badly, but it was a bad hand to begin with.

When the *Guardian's* editors write, "The UK PM ought to have taken greater note of [Indian Prime Minister] Narendra Modi's... refusal to speak out against the Russian invasion of Ukraine", or Labour's Shadow Trade Secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds argues, "Not even raising the issue of India's neutrality on Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine is a failure of leadership that shows a Prime Minister too distracted by trying to save his own skin to do his job properly," they are tapping into the same fantasy on which Johnson's trip was based—that the UK can unilaterally exercise any such influence on its former colony.

India, closely courted by the imperialist powers as a potential ally against China, was one of the countries to abstain from a United Nations vote censuring Russia over Ukraine. The *Times* explained that Johnson was on a mission "to reduce the amount of arms it [India] buys from Russia" and "wean it off

Russian fuel". He would "offer India alternatives to Russia ties", according to Reuters.

But a joint statement on the Johnson-Prime Minister Narendra Modi talks simply "expressed in strongest terms their concern about the ongoing conflict and humanitarian situation in Ukraine" and "reiterated the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a peaceful resolution of the conflict". The *Independent* reported, "India's foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla said that Mr Johnson did not seek to put pressure on Modi to change his stance." In a press conference on the final day of his trip, the UK prime minister admitted, "The position on Russia that the Indians have historically is well known. They are not going to change that, of course, that's true."

For Johnson to have pushed the issue any further would have exposed the UK's tenuous position. As Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, International Institute for Strategic Studies fellow for South Asia and member of the UK-India Advisory Council, wrote in the *Financial Times* ahead of Johnson's visit, "Rhetoric is far ahead of reality when it comes to UK-India ties".

In terms of defence, Johnson reportedly offered to streamline the UK's licensing rules on military exports and assist India in developing its own fighter jets. But the UK is in no position to transform the current heavy reliance of the Indian military on Russian equipment and arms suppliers. Cooperation with the US and its allies in moves against China—the Indian navy joined NATO's UK-led Carrier Strike Group in the Bay of Bengal last year and the country participates in the anti-China Quad group—does not preclude for India its continued close relations with Russia, a critical security partner.

Retired Lieutenant General Deependra Singh Hooda, former commander of India's northern army, told *Al Jazeera* India's dependence on Russia, despite plans to diversify and bring in-house its sources of military hardware, was "huge," adding, "It's just not possible to suddenly replace 60-70 percent of your equipment." That equipment includes fighter jets, transport aircraft, battle tanks, air defence systems, an aircraft carrier and a leased nuclear submarine, with four warships on order.

The leading Swedish defence think tank SIRPI estimates that India imported 46 percent of its arms from Russia between 2017 and 2021.

By contrast, the UK has over the post-Second World War period fallen from its position as India's largest arms supplier to a market share in the last 10 years of just 3 percent.

At the end of March, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss travelled to Delhi to discuss “closer defence and security partnerships between the UK and India.” But her visit was undermined by the welcome given to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov the same day.

Lavrov’s main purpose was to discuss the sale of discounted Russian oil, which Truss sought to pressure India into refusing. External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar pointedly answered the British foreign secretary, “I think it’s natural for countries to go out and look for what are good deals... there’s a much broader spread of countries who have views and influence on how the world should be run.”

Since then Indian oil purchases from Russia have more than doubled on last year.

The UK courted embarrassment again with Johnson’s trip, leading to an argument over his helicopter transportation in India. According to the *Times*, the prime minister’s advisors vetoed the use of a Russian-built Mi-17. An American Chinook had to be flown in from a base six hours away.

Nor does Britain have any commanding economic leverage over India. The two countries now vie for the position of the fifth-largest economy in the world, with India set to outstrip the UK in the coming years. Not factoring in the very real threat of global economic and political convulsions, the International Monetary Fund predicts the UK economy will grow by 3.7 percent this year and 1.2 percent the next; India’s is forecast 8.2 percent, then 6.9 percent. While the UK’s share of global exports declined from 5.3 percent in 2000 to 3.3 percent in 2019, India’s increased from 0.8 percent to 2.1 percent.

As for direct ties, the UK fell from India’s second largest trading partner for goods in 1996/7, to its 18th largest in 2019/20. Britain’s trade balance with India for goods and services has been in deficit since 2001, standing at minus £4.3 billion in 2020. Between 2000 and 2019, the UK was the only G7 economy to see a decline (minus 3 percent) in its exports to the country.

It was therefore Johnson trying to push Modi for a deal in India, urging a free trade agreement “we are telling our negotiators, get it done by Diwali in October.” He signalled during the trip that the UK would bring in reduced visa restrictions on Indian citizens, a long-term sticking point in the talks. Modi only went as far as saying India would make “all efforts to conclude the FTA [free trade agreement] by the end of this year.”

The same reasons that made Johnson’s India trip so lacklustre also made it necessary to undertake. With its economic and military weight in steep decline, the UK has sought to base its position on a close alliance with US imperialism. This “special relationship” has increasingly been shown for what it is: a necessarily slavish commitment to Washington.

Brexit has supercharged this process, with the UK forced to make up for its diminished value as an American proxy in the European Union with an even more fervent proselytising of American interests. In recent months, this has meant playing the role of NATO’s drill sergeant, barracking governments to unreservedly fall into line with the US war drive against Russia.

Johnson went to India hoping to provide the same service, but only proved that the UK’s scope for achieving its foreign policy objectives is extremely limited—the prime minister’s hailing of his

“special friend” Modi and the UK and India’s “long-term partnership” notwithstanding.

Away from the political spotlight, the ruling class is more sober. In January 2021, the leading British foreign policy think tank Chatham House issued “A blueprint for the UK’s future international role,” authored by director Robin Niblett, which admitted Britain could not “reincarnate itself as a miniature great power.” It instead advocated Britain serving “as the broker of solutions to global challenges.”

Niblett identified India as one of four “difficult” countries: “It should be obvious by now that the idea of a deeper relationship with India always promises more than it can deliver. The legacy of British colonial rule consistently curdles the relationship. In contrast, the US has become the most important strategic partner for India, as recent US administrations have intensified their bilateral security relations, putting the UK in the shade.”

The report’s less than flattering portrayal of India prompted an even blunter assessment from its former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal: “Britain’s hope after Brexit to be a global broker reflects both its diminished status and its imperial nostalgia.”

These facts do not lessen but increase the danger posed to the UK and international working class by British imperialism. As recent years have proven, its response is to throw around what weight it does have, above all in the military sphere, even more provocatively in the hope of earning a share of the spoils of a world redivided by the US. Lauding a major foreign policy speech delivered by Truss this Wednesday, Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom Nile Gardiner wrote, “As the great Iron Lady used to say, America needs friends and partners in the often lonely task of global leadership. And the US has no more powerful and robust ally than Great Britain.”

Funding such an aggressive foreign policy means squeezing the working class at home ever more tightly. Writing in the *Times* this week, Iain Martin cheered, “Post-Brexit Britain’s back on the global stage,” but wagged his finger, “rhetoric must be matched by increased firepower.” In her Wednesday speech, Truss decried a “generation of underinvestment” in the military and called for the 2 percent of GDP target for NATO members to be made “a floor, not a ceiling.”



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