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Commentary

Putin's India Visit: Strengthening Shared Convergence in a Turbulent World

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Summary

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Strengthening shared convergence in a turbulent world appears to be the central theme of the upcoming 23rd annual India–Russia summit. Amidst the proverbial red-carpet reception of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the signalling and symbolism of the meeting underscore the robust nature of this mutually beneficial partnership. Incidentally, this year marks the 25th anniversary of the signing of the strategic partnership between India and Russia of which the last 15 have been “Special and Privileged”. President Putin, who first assumed Presidency at the beginning of the millennia, unsurprisingly, has been its architect-in-chief.

Notably, much water has flown under the bridge since Putin’s last visit to India in December 2021. The war in Ukraine, China’s growing assertiveness and Trump 2.0 have upended the global strategic landscape. Economic coercion in the form of weaponising trade and technology has emerged as a key toolkit of major powers’ statecraft. The India–Russia strategic partnership has not been immune to these dynamics. This is particularly relevant in the context of the two sides often pursuing diverging strategic priorities. Their multi-vectored foreign policies have even led to the perception of bilateral ties losing their relevance. Similarly, both sides have traditionally found it difficult to diversify their ties beyond defence and energy despite the potential. This is seen as a major stumbling block in creating a truly comprehensive partnership. While some roadblocks predate the Ukraine war, the rest are a direct result of it. The challenge today is to create new templates of collaboration.

Putin’s visit, therefore, assumes much significance. The pertinent question is—what does the future hold for India–Russia partnership?

Relevance of Ties

The India–Russia convergence seemingly stretches across an expansive canvas at both bilateral and multilateral levels.

Strategic

On the strategic front, a robust partnership strengthens the autonomy of both sides. This is vital to prevent dependencies on any one country or be coerced to take actions which undermine national interest. Today, amidst the overhang of Western sanctions for engaging Russia, India hosting Putin highlights the country placing a premium on its strategic autonomy. Implicit is the messaging, to both global and domestic audiences, that New Delhi shall take decisions based on its strategic interests. Here, logic dictates India maintaining robust ties with Russia. Moscow retains significant global heft by virtue of its P5 membership, defence arsenal, major power diplomacy and reservoir of natural resources. Incidentally,

Russia’s geographical location flanking Eurasia—a region which India considers a part of its extended neighbourhood—appears to be a key vector in India’s Russia outreach. The Kremlin’s policies towards China, Central Asia, Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan have a direct bearing on India’s continental geopolitical environment. An unfriendly Russia would inevitably impinge on India’s Eurasian policy. In the same vein, both India and Russia have shared concerns about China’s rise. This is particularly relevant today in the context of Russia growing increasingly dependent on China. So, it is in India’s interest to engage Moscow to prevent it from moving even closer to Beijing.

Meanwhile, India appears to be a vital pillar of Russia’s renewed thrust on its Greater Eurasia and Pivot to Asia policies. A strong relationship with Delhi makes these initiatives more inclusive and meaningful. It also allows Russia to project the image that it cannot be isolated and that decoupling from it is a Herculean task. Similarly, Russia’s espousal of multipolarity and multilateralism complements several aspects of India’s position on these issues. For a weakened Russia today, a potential G2 comprising the US and China as the principal architects of shaping the global order is the worst-case scenario for its major power ambitions. So, India’s membership of Russia promoted BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) add to their credibility as non-Western organisations. But strengthening convergence will require continued meaningful engagement and robust conversations.

Lastly, the size of India’s market continues to hold appeal as it has the potential to alleviate the impact of Western economic boycott of Russia.

Defence

Defence and security continue to be an integral pillar of the India–Russia strategic partnership. This is notwithstanding India’s diversification of its weapons sources apart from an emphasis on indigenous production. The fact that several of India’s frontline platforms, with a significantly long shelf-life, continue to be of Russian origin imply strong Russian presence in India’s defence and deterrence for the foreseeable future. The challenge is to address delays in delivery of both spare parts and new equipment amidst requirements by Russia for its own war. Similarly, the question is whether the successful Brahmos model of joint development and production can be replicated elsewhere. Notably, Russia is still competitive in niche sectors including missile defence, hypersonics and strategic nuclear technology. The war has also compelled it to develop new cutting-edge equipment, highlighting that Russia continues to retain the capability to reinvent itself. Sharing of costs and technology apart from lessons from the Ukraine war would appear to be mutually beneficial. Public statements from Russia committing to India’s *Atmanirbharta* initiative could be further explored.

Meanwhile, third party collaboration holds promise. The sale of Brahmos missiles to the Philippines seems to have evinced interest from others. Similarly, the decision of the 2024 annual India–Russia summit to manufacture spare parts in India for countries using Russian equipment has added a new dimension to the defence partnership.

In the same vein, the recent ratification of the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistic Support (RELOS) agreement by the Russian parliament is expected to boost military-to-military cooperation. Perhaps, this is an opportune moment to propose a white shipping agreement with Russia. This could even enable Russian participation in the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) centre based in Gurugram. A key charter of the IFC-IOR is to strengthen maritime security, enhance maritime domain awareness and foster naval cooperation.

Economic

Traditionally, the economic content has been the weak link in bilateral ties. India’s purchase of Russian hydrocarbons in the last three years though had helped boost trade to US\$ 68 billion from the previously stagnant US\$ 10 billion. However, this has fuelled a large trade deficit with India’s exports hovering around US\$ 5 billion. Energy trade may also come down in response to geopolitical pressures. As such, a new trade and technological model needs to be pursued to unlock the economic potential.

This necessitates addressing certain structural issues. It includes greater market access for Indian products, streamlining payments in national currencies, achieving greater banking integration, tapping the potential of private businesses instead of relying on the traditional government-to-government (G2G) interactions and fine-tuning connectivity and infrastructure bottlenecks. Here, the role of the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as well as the Chennai Vladivostok Maritime Corridor (CVMC) which connect the European and Asian parts of Russia respectively are vital. Similarly, finalising a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union is expected to accelerate economic synergies.

In parallel, new areas of collaboration which hold significant promise should be explored. This includes resource diplomacy involving rare earths for building resilient supply chains, quantum computing, artificial intelligence (AI), commercial aviation, miniaturised civil nuclear technology, ship-building, maritime training and scientific maritime exploration. Reports of a mobility agreement for skilled and semi-skilled sectors in Russia would add a new economic dimension. Promoting mutual investments including in the untapped Russian Far East and the Arctic would provide ballast to this ship of bilateral economic ties. This would also provide a fillip to India’s Act Far East policy, first launched by Prime Minister Modi in 2019.

Notably, the binding glue in any partnership is the people-to-people interaction. Promoting tourism, youth, academic and media exchanges would help accurately project each other in their respective national consciousness. Skill and cultural orientation for labour mobility would also help in assimilating the potential Indian workforce into the vastly different cultural milieu of Russia.

Challenges

Insulating this bilateral partnership from engagement with other strategic partners remains a key challenge. This is aptly reflected in the pressure on India from its Western partners to boycott Russia. Similarly, Moscow has had to fend off Beijing’s demand to dilute its military collaboration with New Delhi particularly post the Galwan crisis. Meanwhile, India and Russia’s positions may not always align in multilateral fora like the BRICS and SCO, which involve taking non-Western versus anti-Western stances.

The reality of India and Russia often having diverging priorities is the new normal. This could at times lead to misgivings. The stakeholders would have to come to terms with the fact that the new normal will require frequent adjustments and recalibrations including managing expectations and perceptions.

Crucially, a major stumbling block in broad-basing the India–Russia partnership is the overhang of Western sanctions. India’s economic vision clashes with Western attempts to isolate Russia. Private Indian business may not find their Russia exposure worth the risk. This is already reflected in oil imports being on the wane.

Nevertheless, mutual convergences far outweigh divergences. Notably, Russia appears to appreciate India’s position on the Ukraine war under the rubric of being sensitive to each other’s core concerns. Incidentally, a peace deal in Ukraine is likely to lead to Russia emerging stronger on the international stage by virtue of a major reset in ties between the Moscow and the West. This could present new opportunities for India to engage all key stakeholders—US, Europe, Russia and even Ukraine. It is also hoped that these dynamics would lessen Russian dependence on China. As such, India has a stake in lasting peace in Europe.

Conclusion

In closing, this is a unique relationship which has served both countries well. The cost of drift, however, could have implications for each other’s strategic autonomy as well as balance of power in their neighbourhood. So, beyond optics and pageantry, the litmus test of Putin’s visit would lie in the emergence of a truly enduring and comprehensive partnership beyond the traditional bellwethers of defence and energy.

About the Author



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