

TAKING A 'FAR EAST' TURN TO DEEPEN A FRIENDSHIP

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Russia

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi in October 2018.

Some 48 years ago, when the U.S. and British Navies tried to threaten Indian security during the India-Pakistan war in 1971, the Soviet Union dispatched nuclear-armed flotilla from its Pacific Fleet based at Vladivostok in support of India. Ever since then, the city of Vladivostok, located in Russia's Far East, has had a special place in the hearts of Indians. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits the city as the guest of honour at Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in September, he would be announcing India's plans to invest in Russia's Far East, thus, paying back the long-held Indian debt to Vladivostok.

The Far East lies in the Asian part of Russia and is less developed than the country's European areas. As part of his 'Pivot to Asia' strategy, President Vladimir Putin is inviting foreign countries to invest in this region. The country's outreach to Asian nations has especially gained momentum after the 2014 Crimea crisis spoiled its relations with the West.

At the same time, the idea of an 'Indo-Pacific region', which signals India's willingness to work with the U.S. mainly to counter China's assertive maritime rise, has also left Russia concerned. Moscow is apprehensive that the U.S. would exert pressure on India's foreign policy choices and that it could lose a friendly country and one of the biggest buyers of Russian military hardware.

New Delhi, on its part, has maintained that Indo-Pacific is not targeted against any country and stands for inclusiveness and stability. Mr. Modi made this clear to Mr. Putin during their Sochi informal summit in 2018. Later, at the Shangri-La dialogue, he again emphasised that for India, Indo-Pacific is not a club of limited members and that New Delhi wants to have inclusive engagement with all the relevant stakeholders.

This constant engagement has borne fruit and the two countries are now working for a multipolar Indo-Pacific. India has also been able to convince Russia that its engagement with the U.S. is not going to come against Russian interests.

On its part, Russia also wants to make sure that China does not become a hegemon in the Eurasian region and is hence deepening cooperation with countries like India, Vietnam and Indonesia. Here, the Far East has the potential to become an anchor in deepening India-Russia cooperation; more so considering that New Delhi has expanded the scope of its 'Act East policy' to also include Moscow.

At least 17 countries have already invested in the Far East which, with its investment-friendly approach and vast reserves of natural resources, has the potential to strengthen India-Russia economic partnership in areas like energy, tourism, agriculture, diamond mining and alternative energy.

Mr. Modi's visit to Vladivostok would not be an event in isolation as New Delhi and Moscow have been drawing up the plan to cooperate in the region in the last few years. A bilateral business dialogue was included in the business programme of EEF in 2017 and, in 2018, India was one of the 18 countries for which Russia simplified electronic visas to encourage tourism in the Far

East. New Delhi will also provide an annual grant of \$10,000 to fund the study of Indology at the Centre of Regional and International Studies at Far Eastern Federal University. Also, a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed between Amity University and Far Eastern Federal University to intensify cultural and academic exchanges in the areas of research and education.

A lack of manpower is one of the main problems faced by the Far East and Indian professionals like doctors, engineers and teachers can help in the region's development. Presence of Indian manpower will also help in balancing Russian concerns over Chinese migration into the region. Further, India, one of the largest importers of timber, can find ample resources in the region. Japan and South Korea have also been investing and New Delhi may explore areas of joint collaboration.

Mr. Modi has also given due importance to 'paradiplomacy' where Indian States are being encouraged to develop relations with foreign countries. States like Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Haryana and Goa would be collaborating with Russian Provinces to increase trade and investments. Earlier this month, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal led a delegation to Vladivostok that included Chief Ministers of these States and representatives from about 140 companies. For India, there is immense potential for mid-sized and small businesses who should be assisted to overcome language and cultural barriers so that they successfully adopt local business practices. A meeting between the heads of the regions of Russia and various Chief Ministers from Indian States may soon take place and this should become a regular feature.

The two countries are also looking at the feasibility of Chennai-Vladivostok sea route that would allow India access to Russia's Far East in 24 days, compared to the 40 days taken by the current route via Suez Canal and Europe. This route would potentially add the required balance to peace and prosperity in South China Sea and could open new vistas for India, like the India-Russia-Vietnam trilateral cooperation.

Great power rivalry is back in international politics, making it more unpredictable. In times when U.S. President Trump is interested in 'deglobalisation' and China is promoting 'globalisation 2.0 with Chinese characteristics', it makes sense for India and Russia to increase their areas of cooperation and trade in order to hedge against disruptive forces and make their ties sustainable.

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