

PUTIN'S VISIT TO INDIA: LAUNCH OF A REVITALISED PARTNERSHIP

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Russian President Vladimir Putin visited India for a few hours on 6 December 2021 for the 21st Annual Summit between India and Russia. Putin decided to go ahead with this visit although the clouds of confrontation over his country's border with Ukraine loomed menacingly. As Covid-19 cases in Russia continue to surge, with about 32,000 cases and 1,200 deaths being reported every day, his visit is therefore, a testimony to the strategic significance Putin attaches to relations with India. Just a little more than two months ago, Putin had declined to travel to Dushanbe, Tajikistan for the SCO Summit at the last minute due to high incidence of Covid-19 cases in that country.

This is Putin's second visit outside Russia since the beginning of the pandemic 21 months ago; the first one was to Geneva in June 2021 for a bilateral Summit with US President Joe Biden. Putin's visit to India has delivered an unambiguous message that notwithstanding the speculation about the health of the India–Russia partnership, it continues to be robust. In addition, the fact that the visit to India has taken place before his trip to China, which in recent years has emerged as a highly consequential partner of Russia, is also a reaffirmation that the India–Russia relationship is pivotal.

The 28 Agreements signed between the two sides, both at the governmental as well as at the private sector level, demonstrate the extensive gamut of the bilateral relationship. The first 2+2 Dialogue between the Defence and Foreign Ministers of the two countries took place, which provided an opportunity to share views about the current security, political and economic situation at the bilateral, regional as well as the global levels. The visit concluded in a Joint Statement titled "India-Russia: Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity", which captures the state and future potential of the bilateral relationship.¹

Considerable attention was paid to trade and investment relations. Putin noted that trade between the two sides had declined by 17 per cent last year but has grown by 38 per cent in the first nine months of this year.² The two countries have fixed a target of bilateral trade of US\$ 30 billion and investment of US\$ 50 billion by 2025.³ While it might be possible to achieve the target of investment which has already reached around US\$ 38 billion, it appears that it would be difficult to meet the bilateral trade target which is languishing around sub-US\$ 10 billion level.

Both sides have agreed to give a strong impetus to ties in the traditional areas of collaboration including defence, nuclear energy, fossil fuels, counter-terrorism, drug trafficking, space, health and others. Defence cooperation continues to be the lynchpin of the time-tested partnership between India and Russia. The two sides agreed to extend the Defence Agreement for a further period of 10 years. An agreement was concluded for the joint production of more than 6,00,000 AK-203 Kalashnikov rifles with Transfer of Technology under the 'Made in India' initiative of the Government of India.⁴ It is a matter of satisfaction that Russia expeditiously supplied essential military equipment as requisitioned by India during Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh's visit to Moscow in September 2020, in the wake of the Galwan attack by China. This was done in spite of the demand by China to delay the supply of crucial items to India.

Both sides agreed to expand cooperation in Central Asia. China's footprint in the Central Asian

states in economic field has grown at an unprecedented pace in recent years. This is a matter of concern for Russia which considers Central Asia as its 'Near Abroad'. All the Central Asian countries are active partners, to varying degrees, in China's Belt and Road Initiative. China had established a small military base in Tajikistan in 2016. This has been considerably expanded in the wake of the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021. Enhanced India–Russia collaboration in Central Asia will be a win-win proposition not only for these two countries but also for the Central Asian States who want to protect their sovereignty from Chinese dominance.

Russia's Far East has the potential to emerge as an important area of bilateral cooperation. This region is extremely well endowed with natural and mineral resources. It covers about 40 per cent of Russia's land area but accounts for only 5 per cent of the Russian population. It urgently needs investment and trained manpower. PM Modi had extended a Line of Credit of US\$ 1 billion during his visit to Vladivostok in 2019 to explore opportunities for greater Indian engagement with that region.⁵ The Chief Ministers of four Indian States, viz., Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Goa and Gujarat, as well as the Indian Commerce and Industry Minister, Piyush Goyal, had travelled to the region before Prime Minister Modi's visit in 2019 to explore possibilities of enhancing co-operation. In the post-pandemic period, this region beckons strongly for greater Indian engagement. This would be particularly welcome for Russia due to the lurking danger of Chinese expansionism which appears to have increased in recent years, going by the sinister comments in some sections of the Chinese social media after the celebration of Vladivostok Day by the Russian Embassy in Beijing last year.

The Arctic is another region where both sides can collaborate for mutual benefits. President Putin had extended an invitation to India to collaborate on Arctic during PM Modi's visit in 2019. The region is extremely rich in mineral resources including hydrocarbons and fossil fuels. It also faces risk of increased Chinese presence which has declared itself as a 'Near Arctic State' although no such concept exists in the Constitution of the Arctic Council. The India–Russia Joint Statement refers to the potential of cooperation between the two countries in this area.⁶

In the face of the huge flux in the global security and economic architecture in recent years, India–Russia ties have demonstrated remarkable resilience. Russia has gone deep into the embrace of China as a result of sanctions imposed by the US and the West in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and accession of Crimea to Russia in 2014. It has also moved closer to Pakistan for establishing a direct connect with the Taliban, and for exploring greater military and economic opportunities in Pakistan. India has moved closer to the US on account of the threat it confronts from China on the northern land frontier as well as in the Indian Ocean. As evidence of the strategic autonomy exercised by India, it has imported five units of the S-400 Triumf ballistic missile defence system, worth more than US\$ 5 billion, notwithstanding the US threat of Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

Afghanistan was a major subject of bilateral deliberations between Modi and Putin, as also during the 2+2 dialogue. There have been differences in the perspectives of the two sides on Afghanistan over the last several years. Russia was actively engaging with the Taliban and had also established some dialogue formats at which it did not invite India. The ground situation changed drastically in mid-August 2021 when the Taliban took over Kabul and gave no indication of abiding by its commitments of forming an inclusive government, respecting the rights of minorities as well as of the women and children, and not allowing its territory to be used for terrorist attacks against neighbours. Currently, there is near-complete convergence on the viewpoints of India and Russia on the way forward in Afghanistan. This is extensively reflected in the Joint Declaration.

The one jarring note was the rather aggressive criticism by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov of the Indo-Pacific (he called it a 'slogan'), non-inclusive alliances, AUKUS, etc. in his

press conference after the meeting. The propriety of such combative statements and also of open criticism of the US on CAATSA from Indian soil is highly questionable. This is in spite of the fact that Putin has shown understanding of India's position on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad.

President Putin's short but highly consequential visit and the launch of the 2+2 format have imbued new dynamism into the bilateral partnership. There might be a few areas of divergence between the two sides but spheres of convergence are much greater. These will continue to navigate the bilateral partnership to make it more robust and vigorous in the coming days.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

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