

'Russian military relations with Pakistan very minimal'

Russia's new Ambassador to India Nikolay Kudashev takes over at a tough time for bilateral ties. In his first interview since taking over, Mr. Kudashev said that the priority for New Delhi and Moscow would be sealing several defence agreements this year, but the bigger priority would be reaching out to the next generation of Indians and Russians to broaden cooperation.

Where are India-Russia ties today, given all the changes in the world, and how will both countries address the reports of a "drift" between them?

In 2017, all Ministers on the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) visited Russia. Our leaders met five times in the last three years. So it is fair to say that President Putin and Prime Minister Modi have established a very special relationship. They personally manage our bilateral ties. On the drift, it is not that we are running apart from each other. There are new opportunities coming up our way and sometimes we are lagging behind them. The key to our new successes may lie to the extent of our interest of our young generation in contributing to our joint projects and bilateral relations.

Is India-Russia military cooperation keeping pace, given India's move to diversify its hardware procurement?

This is one of the pillars of our strategic cooperation both sides are deservedly proud of. This year we expect the nodal points of our defence cooperation to be the signing of contractual obligations of anti-aircraft systems S-400, Ka-226T helicopters, and joint manufacture of frigates. The issue of joint development and manufacture of the Sukhoi/HAL Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) is also on the agenda, as is the supply of Mi-17 helicopters and upgrade of Mig-29 fighters. So we have very ambitious plans. If you ask me what defines the quality of our cooperation, it is that the Russian side is a pioneer of 'Make in India.' Almost all new projects envisage a very high level of localisation. To be honest it's hard to tell what is it that we are not making in India and not making with India!

Do you worry about competition from other foreign collaborations in the nuclear sector?

Speaking about U.S. and French companies, we are not afraid of normal, fair competition. Despite all the talk, the Russian side and the Russian company Rosatom is the only enterprise that has been doing business in India for decades, producing energy for India. The only thing which is unacceptable to us is the language of sanctions and discrimination, the language which our partners (U.S.) are increasingly using against us. This is nothing but an attempt to undermine our strategic partnership with India including in such strategically important sectors like military and technical cooperation, energy and nuclear energy.

On Afghanistan, is there any common ground between India and Russia today, given Indian opposition to Taliban talks, and Russia-U.S. differences on the way forward?

Many talk of the contradictions in the Afghanistan policy of India and Russia. To my mind this is artificial. Both India and Russia need a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan free from terrorism, crime and drug trafficking. However, according to the U.S. policy, Russia stands as a revisionist state and a threat for U.S. and its allies. I hope that you won't connect Indian policy with such views of the U.S. leadership.

We now see regular exercises and a growing Russian military cooperation with Pakistan. Why has Russia shifted its stand on not dealing with Pakistan in the past?

Our relations with Pakistan in the military sphere are of a very minimum nature, and are strictly limited to anti-terrorism operations, and are not comparable in any way to the scope of our relations with India. Most importantly, our ties with Pakistan cannot be viewed as an attempt to change the regional strategic balance.

If countering terrorism is the objective, will Russia give India its support at the UN's Financial Action Task Force later this month when India and several other countries are keen to corner Pakistan especially on groups that target India (Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed)?

Eventually our decision will depend on how weighty and substantiated the proof for Pakistan's involvement in financing terrorism will be. To corner Pakistan is not our policy. We believe that the settlement of all issues with Pakistan depends on political dialogue. I will even take the risk to suggest that this comes from the Indian idea of a comprehensive dialogue with Pakistan. But it is not my intention to comment on issues that are of Indian sovereignty.

Are there any talks for an India-Russia logistics support agreement on the lines of the Indo-US LEMOA to enable the use of each other's bases?

I believe for us with a 60-year-old history of military exchanges, the issue of logistical agreement is a long past idea. We have moved beyond that a long time ago. For a very long time we have been training and conducting drills. We have started tri-service drills. We have been cooperating for a long time on military infrastructure construction.

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