

# OLDEST FRIENDS: INDIA AND RUSSIA

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India-Russia summits have traditionally been short on time and ceremony and big on productivity. Russian President [Vladimir Putin's 22-hour visit to Delhi](#) last week was no exception. On Friday, the two countries announced a number of agreements, [including a \\$5.43 billion S-400 Triumf missile system deal](#), a space cooperation arrangement to put an Indian in space, and an action plan for a new nuclear plant. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Putin also addressed a business summit, in an attempt to diversify ties and increase bilateral trade, currently below \$10 billion. Much of the fresh momentum in bilateral engagement will come from the energy sector. Though the two sides didn't announce an agreement between ONGC Videsh and Gazprom as expected, several billions of dollars worth of investment and energy deals are in the pipeline. Significantly, the agreements discussed during Mr. Putin's visit have geopolitical implications. The signing of the S-400 air defence system deal, for instance, is of far greater consequence than its size. It denotes India's desire to deepen defence cooperation with Russia; also that it is prepared to do this despite U.S. warnings that the deal could attract sanctions. That this deal comes just a month after India signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) for better interoperability with the U.S. military is a sign that India will not be forced or even persuaded into putting all its eggs in one strategic basket.

New Delhi's assertion of "strategic autonomy" and desire for multipolarity will be seriously tested in the coming months. For one, it chose to sign the S-400 deal, but resisted concluding other major defence deals with Russia on helicopters, stealth frigates and assault rifles, which Moscow will no doubt push for. More defence deals with Russia will make it increasingly difficult for the U.S. to give India a waiver from sanctions under CAATSA, its legislation aimed at curtailing defence and energy dealings with Russia, Iran and North Korea. Washington has already reacted to the S-400 deal, making it clear that any waiver will not be on a "country" basis, but on a "transaction-by-transaction" basis. In any case, accepting a waiver will implicitly commit India to reducing its intake of Russian military hardware. Both on CAATSA and on the U.S.'s proposed sanctions on Iran that go into force on November 4, India will need to make some tough decisions. It is one thing to reinforce long-standing and close friendships as Mr. Modi did during his annual summit with the Russian President this month, and with the Iranian President earlier this year, or with the U.S. President last year — the situation can be much more complex when friends expect you to choose between them.

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