

NO TIME TO WASTE

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Cut through the hype about the Russian President Vladimir Putin's day-long visit to Delhi and you will find the enduring essence of the bilateral relationship — inertia. Looking at concrete outcomes, there is not much that is notable beyond the traditional basket of arms sales, civil nuclear cooperation and hydrocarbons. Successive governments in Delhi have revelled in framing the partnership with Russia in grandiose rhetoric — of strategic autonomy and the quest for a multipolar world. But they have done nothing to modernise the partnership in a changing world.

As it quarrels with America, Europe and Japan, Moscow has drawn ever closer to Beijing. If China's rising power provides the biggest challenge to India, how can Moscow, in a tightening embrace with Beijing, strengthen India's "strategic autonomy"? The bonhomie with Beijing has also led Moscow to cosy up to Pakistan. Even more important, Russia's relative weight among the major powers has gone down significantly. Its current GDP at \$1.6 trillion is a little more than half of India's (\$2.8 trillion). Comparison with major powers makes it a lot worse. The US is at \$20 trillion, EU at 19, and China at 11. India's annual trade numbers with the US and EU are above \$100 billion and with China at nearly \$80 billion. India's Russia trade has barely touched \$10 billion last year.

Amidst the current global flux, Delhi must stay engaged with all major powers including Russia and carefully navigate the conflicts among them. The failure to realise the best with Russia rests largely at India's door. While focusing on buying high-profile weapons like [S-400](#) and leasing nuclear-powered submarines, Delhi has done little to leverage the size of its defence market to get Russia to make weapons in India. The one exception is the Brahmos missile. But under the poor terms of that deal, Moscow does not let Delhi sell it to any of its friends in Asia. Russia, like so many other partners, has been willing to invest large amounts in India's commercial sector, but Delhi has failed to get projects going. Russia always had a great S&T base and is now a leader in the research on Artificial Intelligence and quantum computing. Delhi has finally begun to talk about developing collaboration in the areas of digital and space innovation as well as giving a fresh thrust to commerce and connectivity. Inertia and sentiment will certainly help Delhi and Moscow to drift along. The two sides now recognise the need to bridge the gap between political rhetoric and economic reality. If they don't make haste, the unforgiving international context will trip them up sooner than later.

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