

The Significance of Putin's Visit to India Amidst the Straining Ties

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Russian President Vladimir Putin recently touched down the Indian soil for the commencement of the 21st Indo-Russian Annual Summit. The visit of Putin marks an important trajectory in the Indo-Russian bilateral relations and highlights the significance of India in the Russian geostrategic calculus. During the visit, Putin hailed India as a 'great power' while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi glorified Indo-Russian relations as a 'strategic partnership'.

Brief Background

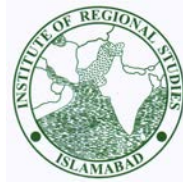
Indo-Russian bilateral relations are the extension of Indian ties with the Soviet Union during the cold war era. Although India had adopted the policy of non-alignment, its inclination towards the Soviet Union was apparent for several reasons. First, the blossoming of Pak-US ties, especially from the mid-1950s to 1960s, was deemed as a security challenge by India. During the same timeframe, Indian military cooperation with the Soviet Union expanded to the extent that nearly all of Indian defence equipment was dependent upon Russian arms export. The bilateral relations further solidified in 1971 through the signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation under which both the countries were to jointly remove the "threat attached to (the security of) either party" as per Article IX of the treaty.¹ This treaty played a crucial role in the Indo-Pak War of 1971 in which India consistently received arms from the Soviet

Union. Until its dissolution, the Soviet Union was also the largest trading partner of India. In the post-Cold War period, the bilateral ties entered into a new phase. Indian defence priorities started to shift away from Russia in the aftermath of the policy of diversification in defence imports. Nevertheless, as Vladimir Putin rose to power, the bilateral relations between the two states witnessed a positive development through the inception of the Indo-Russian Annual Summit in 2000. With this, the strategic relations between the two countries continued to solidify for another decade.

Emerging Differences in Bilateral Relations

The US Global War on Terror and its long-standing implications transformed international politics. In the beginning, it reinstated the US status as the sole super power of the world but in a longer run, the US failure in Afghanistan and the war cost led to the decline of its international supremacy. The vacuum created by the diminishing status of the US provided China the space to assert itself in the international politics. The rise of China was welcomed by Russia (owing to its economic dependence) but was perceived as a threat to its security by India (due to Chinese assertiveness at the border). The divergence in the Indo-Russia relations became inevitable owing to the Chinese factor. For Russia, China is crucial for two main reasons: economic and

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geostrategic. The bilateral trade between the two countries have now exceeded \$100 billion annually while China has emerged as the largest importer of Russian energy resources (oil and gas) for its ever growing industry.² Through the Eastern Serbia-Pacific Ocean Oil Pipeline, Russia is competing with Saudi Arabia to become China's largest oil supplier while throughout the year 2020, Russian gas constituted 8 per cent of Chinese total gas imports.³ Apart from economics, both the countries share a similar worldview and hold convergences in resenting the US role in international politics. For example, Russia has condemned the US attempt of forming the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (referred to in short as Quad) between Australia, India, Japan, and the US aimed at containing Chinese influence in the Asia Pacific while China tacitly aligns itself with Russia over Syrian Crisis through refraining from condemning Bashar al-Assad directly and vetoing any United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution directed against the Syrian regime.

The Indo-China relations, on the other hand, have remained untrustworthy. Although economic relations between the two countries have been consistently improving—as the bilateral trade has witnessed a surge of over 50 percent in 2021 as compared to the previous year—the consolidation of economic ties couldn't overcome the friction in their mutual relations. In this regard, India continues to remain apprehensive about China regarding to the latter's assertion on borders and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India also views China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with suspicion as it could lead to China's permanent presence in the IOR. On the other hand, China's threat perception vis-à-vis the Indo-US partnership becomes more significant with the deepening of their strategic relations. Hence, whereas Russia aspires to craft stronger ties

with China, India finds China's rise as a challenge for itself, thus making the geostrategic policy of both Russia and India opposite to each other.

The second factor, and probably the predominant one, is the Indian inclination towards the US. The Indo-US relations blossomed in the wake of the deterioration in Pak-US ties. Concerns over terrorism and the subsequent expansion in the role of China became the pivotal features in aligning the policies of two countries. India has been able to sell its narrative that insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir is the extension of Islamist (or Taliban) activities inside Afghanistan supported by Pakistan. Furthermore, under the US patronage, India emerged as one of the largest donors in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts focusing on education, health, and infrastructure. The Indian inroads inside Afghanistan with the collaboration of the US strengthened their mutual ties. As the US shifted its focus from countering terrorism to containing China, India once again assumed the central position by virtue of its proximity with China and economic potential. Hence, both states formalised their stance against China by becoming the member states of Quad and holding joint naval exercises in November 2020 and then subsequently in October 2021. India has also periodically minimised its dependence upon Russian arms as previously mentioned and increased its defence cooperation with the US. As the Russian share in Indian defence imports has dropped down from 70 percent to 49 percent, the US has emerged out to be the fourth largest defence exporter to India.⁴ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also condemned Indian strategic association with the US by terming India as an "object of the Western countries," in 2020. As India drew closer to the US, Russia warmed up to Pakistan which became a source of concern for India. Russian inclination towards

Pakistan became evident by the signing of Mi-35M attack helicopters deal between the two countries in 2015. In the subsequent year, both states had conducted joint military exercises, while, in 2018, an agreement was reached under which Pakistan's military officers were to receive trainings in Russian institutions. Furthermore, the collaboration between the two countries enhanced due to the emerging security situation in Afghanistan in which both Russia and Pakistan were the part of the 'extended troika'. Hence, the geopolitical considerations of both India and Russia did not intersect with each other which led to the withering away of warmth in ties between the two states.

A Revival Attempt?

Putin's visit to India while taking into consideration the aforementioned discussion must be analysed as an attempt at reviving the bilateral relations. A few features do hold prominence for both the states to strategically align them despite their divergent foreign policy outlook. For Russia, India holds the key for two main reasons: economic and strategic. Although the bilateral trade between the two has remained far below its true potential at \$10 billion annually, in the recent annual summit, both the countries have pledged to increase their bilateral trade to \$30 billion by 2025. Apart from the conventional economics, India is a huge market for Russian arms exports as already discussed. Strategically, India also holds importance for Russia in Asia. Despite Russian policy of increasing its cooperation with the Asian states, the solidification of Russian ties has largely been limited to China and India. Therefore, the US-led Quad or other regional alliances in which India participates, do not pose any threat to Russia since its stakes in that region are minimum. Furthermore, in Europe,

the US and European states have been trying to exploit Russian militarisation inside Ukraine by reiterating their policy of Ukraine's membership in NATO, as evident from the Brussels Summit 2021.⁵ Hence, Russia cannot neglect the same occurring in Asia in the face of Indian orientation with the US. To counter this, Russia seeks to take advantage of its defence leverage over India as well as the historic ties between the two states to diffuse the challenge of Indo-US partnership.

From Indian point of view, as mentioned on its official external affairs website, Russia is a "time-tested friend that has helped India in developing its security apparatus and economy." Indian ties with Russia can be termed as both 'strategic balancing' vis-à-vis the US and 'strategic autonomy'. In the 2020 border clashes between China and India, instead of allying with India, the then US President Trump offered to mediate between the two sides. The attitude of the US towards the Indo-China standoff spoke volumes of the US strategy in which it is primarily concerned with the West-Pacific region and South China Sea. Had it been a clash between China and Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan, the US response would have been decisive considering the mutual defence treaties between the US and these states. However, this cannot be the case with India. To overcome this, India still depends upon its 1971 treaty with Russia. Quite evidently, S-400 deal between the two states is the testimony of it. Despite the threat of US sanctions, India went on to purchase the defence system from Russia that highlighted the entrenched defence ties between the two states. Linked to this is the security concern of India after the fall of Kabul. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan brought Pakistan to the forefront of international engagement. Russia has already been strengthening its relations with Pakistan since

2017 after the inception of Russian-led intra-Afghan peace talks. The fall of Kabul, in New Delhi's strategic outlook, could pose the threat of replication in Jammu and Kashmir. A similar concern of extremists' spill over effect into Central Asia is shared by Russia. Hence, India also requires Russia to counter the growing Pak-Russian cooperation in Afghanistan and to secure its territorial interests.

Conclusion

Indo-Russian relations have been persistent since 1971. Both the countries understand the strategic needs of each other and their respective security concerns. However, the change in international structure shifted the focus of both states in opposite directions where both the countries find

themselves aligned with the different poles of power. Russian leverage over India and Indian freedom of exercising its strategic autonomy owing to its sheer size, can bridge the diverging interests of both the states. However, in a longer run, Indian attempts of a balancing act between the US and Russia would inevitably be difficult. The diversification in the foreign policies of both the states has already been occurring as India sided with the US over regional issues, while Russia has also enhanced its cooperation with Pakistan since the lifting of its arms embargo in 2014. While Indo-Russian ties have once again emerged from the testing times after Putin's visit, the geostrategic compulsions of both the states will continue to remain a cause of friction between the two states.

Notes and References

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- ³ Global Times, "China-Russia East Route Natural Gas Pipeline Delivers 10 Billion Cubic Meters of Gas", 11 August 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231246.shtml>
- ⁴ Pieter D. Wezeman and et.al, "Trends in International Arms Transfer, 2020", SIPRI Fact Sheet (Stockholm), March 2020. https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020.pdf.
- ⁵ President of Ukraine (Official Website), "Ukraine Continues to move towards NATO Membership – Volodymyr Zelensky", 14 June 2021. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-prodovzhuye-ruh-do-chlenstva-v-nato-volodimir-zelen-69021>.