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Issue Brief

Navigating the India–Russia Strategic Partnership

Rajorshi Roy

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S*ummary*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Moscow is a statement of intent in strengthening ties with a traditional partner. This is particularly relevant at a time when the historically unmatched vibrancy in their ties appears to face headwinds. The challenge for India and Russia has been to insulate their bilateral relationship from the pulls and pressures of their ongoing friction with others. Adjusting to the new reality of often having diverging priorities, this long-overdue visit is likely to be heavy on both symbolism as well as signalling and highlight the continuing depth of this mutually beneficial partnership.

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be visiting Moscow on 8–9 July 2024.¹ His first trip to Russia in half-a-decade marks the resumption of the India–Russia annual summit after a hiatus of two years. This meeting, the apex coordination mechanism between the two traditional partners, will be an opportunity to not only reassess but also chart the future of ties. This is particularly relevant at a time when the historically unmatched vibrancy in their ties appears to face headwinds.

Notably, much water has flown under the bridge since PM Modi last set foot on Russian shores. Geopolitical developments in the form of Russia’s war in Ukraine and China’s growing assertiveness have upended the global geo-strategic equilibrium. These have given rise to new confrontations and rivalries leading to new alignments. In this, a clear division of camps between the West on one hand and Russia and China on the other is quite evident. Their toolkit in the growing contestation involves weaponisation of trade, technology, territory, energy and systems of governance.

Inevitably, these fissures appear to have cast a shadow on the ‘special and privileged’ India–Russia relationship. Both sides have had to adjust to the new reality of diverging priorities. It includes India charting a qualitative improvement in ties with the West. This is seen as essential not just for India’s economic modernisation but also for dealing with the China challenge on India’s doorstep. Similarly, Russia is building new equations with China to withstand the Western geopolitical pressure. Unsurprisingly, the challenge for India and Russia has been to insulate their bilateral relationship from the pulls and pressures of both the Russia–West and India–China confrontation.

PM Modi’s long overdue visit to Moscow, therefore, is vital on two fronts—symbolism and signalling.

Symbolism and Signalling

By making Russia the destination of his first foreign bilateral visit, a privilege usually accorded to India’s closest neighbours in South Asia, the messaging is likely about Moscow occupying a key pillar in India’s geo-strategic calculus. It would, inevitably, address the perception of a drift in ties. This signalling to Russia is further reinforced by Modi prioritising his visit to Moscow now rather than combining the annual summit with the BRICS summit in Moscow in October. Such a dual-purpose visit was undertaken by Russian President Vladimir Putin during India’s BRICS Presidency in 2016.²

¹ [“Visit of Prime Minister to the Russian Federation and the Republic of Austria \(July 08-10, 2024\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 4 July 2024.

² [“On October 15–16, Vladimir Putin will visit India”](#), President of Russia, 11 October 2016.

In a way, this trip is also about India signalling to the West about its strategic autonomy. This comes amidst continuing Western pressure on India to boycott Russia for invading Ukraine. Notably, India’s neutrality here is anchored to its national interests, evident in its deft balancing act. Modi’s clarion call of ‘this not being an era of war’³—indicating India’s displeasure at Russia’s actions—was followed by India staying neutral on UN resolutions condemning Russia. India continues to acquire Russian weapons despite the overhang of Western sanctions.⁴ Similarly, there has been a quantum jump in the import of Russian oil.⁵ Showing an understanding of the existing fault-lines as well as sensitivity towards Russia, India also dissociated itself from the recent Swiss-led Ukraine peace communique on the grounds of Moscow’s exclusion from negotiations.⁶

Meanwhile, Russia too is likely to leverage this summit to reinforce its messaging that complete decoupling from Moscow is impossible. And that it retains significant equities with the Global South. This sentiment was aptly reflected in the remarks of the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov on the eve of PM Modi’s departure for Moscow.⁷ He stated: “the West is closely and jealously watching Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s upcoming visit to Russia...there is something to attach great importance to”. Russia could also be signalling to China of its own independent course of action. This comes amidst perceptions of it now being a subordinate partner of Beijing.

Salience of Ties

These nuances put the spotlight on the scope and logic of the India–Russia relationship. A deep dive reveals the depth of this mutually beneficial partnership nurtured over half-a-century of collaboration. From this flows the consensus across the political spectrum in both India and Russia that bilateral ties be preserved. This sentiment was aptly reflected in External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr Jaishankar’s statement that “if I look at the history of India post-independence, Russia has never hurt our interests”.⁸ Perhaps, not having a contiguous border facilitates this

³ [“PTI’s Exclusive Interview with Prime Minister Narendra Mod”](#), PMINDIA, 3 September 2023.

⁴ [“India to Receive Remaining S-400 Triumf Missile Regiments from Russia by Next Year”](#), *The Economic Times*, 23 April 2024.

⁵ [“India’s Russian Oil Imports Rise to Nine-month High in April”](#), *Reuters*, 21 May 2024.

⁶ [“Remarks by Head of the Indian Delegation, Secretary \(West\) Shri Pavan Kapoor, at the ‘Summit on Peace in Ukraine’, Burgenstock, Switzerland \(June 15-16, 2024\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 16 June 2024.

⁷ [“West is Not Wrong Paying Great Attention to Modi’s Upcoming Visit to Russia — Kremlin”](#), TASS, 7 July 2024.

⁸ [“We are Open If Approached: Jaishankar on Possibility of India Mediating to End Russia-Ukraine Conflict”](#), *Deccan Herald*, 20 February 2024.

exploration of greater convergence. This was seemingly referred to by the EAM when he stated:

just as India does not expect Europe to have a view of China that is identical to New Delhi's, Europe should understand that India cannot have a view of Russia that is identical to the European one.⁹

For India, friendly ties with Moscow, a P5 member with significant diplomatic heft, inevitably strengthens its strategic autonomy. Polycentricism espoused by Russia¹⁰ blends in with India's quest for multipolarity. Notably, multipolarity is seen as essential in preventing the rise of a hegemon. In this, both India and Russia have a shared concern about China's rise in their neighbourhood. Crucially, Russia's geographical location overlooking India's extended neighbourhood implies that Moscow's actions have a direct bearing on India's strategic outlook. Similarly, Russia's rich repository of natural resources is vital for India's material resources security. This includes energy and rare earth minerals. Today, Russia meets more than 40 per cent of India's oil requirements. Rosatom is the only foreign entity to have a stake in nuclear power generation in India.¹¹ In the same vein, Russian footprints in India's defence sector run deep. Several of India's frontline military equipment continue to be of Russian origin.¹²

Likewise, robust ties with India helps Russia balance its increasing dependence on China. In a way, this strengthens Russia's own scope for manoeuvre. It also makes its Pivot to Asia more meaningful and inclusive. Arguably, Russia's ability to project itself as a pole is anchored to it taking independent actions rather than riding the coattails of China. In this, India's push for more representation for emerging powers is crucial for preventing the rise of a G2—the worst case scenario for Russia's great power aspirations. Similarly, the size of India's market holds promise amidst Russia's boycott by the West. Also, India's presence in non-Western organisations promoted by Russia—BRICS and SCO—strengthens their credibility as viable alternatives to Western institutions rather than anti-West cliques.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that India and Russia continue to seek mutual congruence. In this, a key pillar of their engagement rests on mutual sensitivity to their core concerns. It includes Jammu and Kashmir and Ukraine as well as non-interference in internal political processes.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ [“Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Address at a Meeting of the United Russia Party General Council Commission on International Cooperation and Support for Compatriots Abroad, Moscow, December 26, 2023”](#), The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26 December 2023.

¹¹ [“India's Russian Oil Imports at 10-month High in May, Supplies from Saudi Arabia Dwindle”](#), *The Indian Express*, 2 June 2024.

¹² [“Bilateral Relations: India-Russia Relations”](#), Embassy of India in Moscow, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

Addressing Wrinkles

PM Modi shares an excellent rapport with President Putin. In their meeting after a gap of three years, the bilateral plate is likely to be full. This includes addressing some dissonance which has crept in. It involves timely delivery of defence equipment, trade imbalance, banking channels, Western sanctions and Indian citizens joining the Russian army. Similarly, diverging approaches to Indo-Pacific, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US and China merit attention. This meeting will, thus, be a true litmus test of their strategic partnership.

Notably, contrary to growing speculation of a weakened Russia giving concessions to China *vis-à-vis* India, it is unlikely that Moscow will allow Beijing to shape its foreign policy towards New Delhi. Russia and China are not natural allies. And Russia leaning on China today is more of a strategic necessity. Amidst increasing apprehensions of being squeezed by Beijing, it is in the Kremlin’s interest to diversify its foreign policy. Russia’s approval for the sale of Brahmos missiles, jointly manufactured by India and Russia, to Philippines appears part of this calculus. The missiles for Manila are meant to deter China in the contested waters of South China Sea.¹³ In the same vein, it is in India’s interests to wean Russia away from China by staying relevant in each other’s foreign policy priorities.

Meanwhile, a recalibration in the defence partnership—long considered the backbone of ties—is par for course. Overdependence on one source is inadvisable. Nevertheless, the long shelf life of military equipment implies that Russia will continue to be a key pillar of India’s defence for the foreseeable future. The recent induction of AK-203 rifles,¹⁴ a joint Indo-Russian venture, is a reflection of Russia’s competitive relevance in new sectors. These guns are expected to be the mainstay of Indian armed forces. Similarly, a reciprocal logistics agreement¹⁵ can add a new dimension to bilateral defence ties. Perhaps, the onus is on Russia to complement the ‘Make in India’ initiative by offering unmatched cutting-edge defence technologies. In this, its track record in co-developing the Brahmos could hold Russia in good stead.

Way Ahead

A key constant in India’s and Russia’s strategic matrix has been their bilateral ties. Unsurprisingly, this is a relationship which has served both countries well. Nevertheless, today, the context of ties has changed. Perhaps, they are at an inflection point wherein adjusting to the new reality of often having diverging

¹³ [“Philippines Envoy Hails BrahMos Missiles as a ‘Game Changer’](#), *The Hindu*, 24 June 2024.

¹⁴ [“Done & Delivered: Joint Venture Firm Sends 35K AK-203 Rifles to India”](#), *The New Indian Express*, 6 July 2024.

¹⁵ [“Russia Approves Draft Logistics Agreement to be Signed with India”](#), *The Hindu*, 23 June 2024.

priorities is the way forward. In a way, this is par for course given their multi-vectored foreign policies. This calls for focussing on the present and the future rather than resting on the legacy of the past. Nurturing sensitivities and having robust strategic communication can help remove misgivings on engagements with others. This is vital at a time when India needs the West and Russia needs China. Neutrality is a viable tool to possess in navigating some of these tricky situations.

Meanwhile, adding more pillars to the bilateral partnership is crucial. This will help both sides stay relevant in each other’s foreign policy priorities. Areas of collaboration can include strengthening contacts with the new generation as well as academia. This will help overcome the prevailing information gap. In the same vein, stationing Indian correspondents in Russia will provide a more accurate assessment of trends there. At present, information about Russia is largely gleaned through Western media who have often been accused of prejudice. Russia’s shift to a four-day e-visa availing facility¹⁶ from its cumbersome in-person application process is a positive development in promoting people-to-people ties.

Similarly, involvement of the private business sector is vital for making the relationship more broad-based. Mutual investments in each other’s growth story also hold promise. This includes the Arctic and the Far East as well as infrastructure construction in India. Strengthening connectivity nodes like the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chennai–Vladivostok maritime corridor will strengthen economic linkages. So will the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).¹⁷ Other sectors which hold significant potential include pharmaceuticals, IT, agriculture, energy and health. India can fill in the void left behind by the Western boycott of these sectors.

Collaboration in third countries along the lines of the nuclear power plant in Bangladesh¹⁸ as well as developmental partnerships in Central Asia will also add new dimension to ties. However, the key challenge in boosting economic partnerships is the overhang of Western unilateral sanctions. Deftly navigating this roadblock will truly unlock the economic potential.

A drift in ties, on the other hand, can have repercussions across a wide spectrum. None perhaps more significant than on their strategic autonomy as well as strategic balance in their neighbourhoods. A Russia without partners of global and regional heft is likely to lean further on China. This would inevitably strengthen Beijing’s position, both in Asia and the world.

¹⁶ [“Characteristics of the Unified e-Visa and Conditions for its Issuance”](#), The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Consular Department.

¹⁷ [“India and Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union to Start FTA Talks in Coming Months”](#), *Mint*, 18 May 2024.

¹⁸ [“Bangladesh Accepts First Uranium for Russia-backed Nuclear Plant”](#), *The Hindu*, 5 October 2023.

Role in Peace Deal?

Amidst voices in a few quarters calling on India to mediate a peace agreement, it is imperative to highlight the undercurrents. On one hand, India is perhaps one of the few countries which has the credibility to do so, anchored to excellent relations with all stakeholders. This was evident in the adoption of the G20 Declaration by consensus during India’s G20 Presidency last year.¹⁹ India also played a behind-the-scene role in negotiating the Black Sea grain deal.²⁰

On the other hand, a prerequisite for mediation is the need for consensus among warring sides on the choice of the mediator. Similarly, India may have to reconcile the idea of mediation in Ukraine to the official Indian position of bilateral disputes being resolved bilaterally.

Meanwhile, it would appear that differences between the stakeholders appear irreconcilable. At the end of the day, this conflict is not just about territory. Neither is it limited to confrontation between Russia and Ukraine since it involves shadow boxing with the United States. Fears of falling into the trap of appeasing Russia dominates European capitals. Neither side appears willing to blink first. As such, the endgame seems a long way off. Perhaps, low hanging fruits such as food security and return of prisoners of war could offer a chance of success in mediation.

In conclusion, PM Modi’s visit to Moscow is a statement of intent in strengthening ties with a traditional partner. It is expected to add new direction and momentum to the India–Russia bilateral partnership.

¹⁹ [“G20 New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 9 September 2023.

²⁰ [“US, Others in Touch with India to Revive Black Sea Grain Deal”](#), *The Times of India*, 28 August 2023.

About the Author



Dr. Rajorshi Roy is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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