

Putin's visit to India highlights significant strategic shifts

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The visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to India in early October has underscored just how fluid and unstable economic, political and strategic relationships on the Indian subcontinent have become following the end of the Cold War.

In the 1970s and 1980s, alliances were relatively clear cut. The US maintained close ties with Pakistan and its military, exploiting the country as a base for its covert support of Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. China also supported Pakistan. The Soviet Union maintained economic and defence ties with India and supported it in its conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir.

But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the strategic equation has been changing. President Clinton's visit to the Indian subcontinent—the first by a US president in 22 years—revealed a marked shift by the United States towards India. He spent five days there discussing new economic and strategic links and a mere five hours in Pakistan admonishing the military regime of General Musharraf for its failure to rein in Islamic extremists in Kashmir, Afghanistan and his own country.

While Putin's three-day trip did not attract the same international media attention as Clinton's, it was nevertheless highly significant. The first visit by a Russian president in nearly eight years, it resulted in a series of 17 agreements on economic, nuclear energy, defence and strategic arrangements that will serve to upgrade relations between the two countries.

India's keenness for Putin to visit was expressed in the protocol. The Russian president, his wife Ludmila Putina and a 90-member Russian delegation were accommodated at the Maurya Sheraton hotel—where Clinton stayed—and he was accorded the same tight security arrangements as the US president.

Although couched in diplomatic language, the joint statement and comments by Putin and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee indicate that both countries are looking to each other as a counter to aggressive interventions around the world by the US. As Putin noted in an interview in the *India Today* magazine: "It is in our interest to have a strong, developed, independent India that would be a major player on the world scene. We see this as one of the balancing factors in the world."

The joint declaration stated a preference for "a multi-polar global structure" and opposed the "unilateral use or threat to use force in violation of the UN charter, and intervention in the internal affairs of other states..." These phrases reflect the concern in both New Delhi and Moscow over the US-led NATO bombing

of Yugoslavia, which effectively overturned the notion of national sovereignty and opened the door for "human rights" to be used as the pretext for similar actions by the US and other major powers elsewhere.

Both sides stressed, however, that the India-Russia agreements were not a return to the relations or rhetoric of the Cold War but were based on "new global realities".

For its part, Russia is seeking to maintain its domination over key strategic areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus, which have become a new arena for rivalry over control of the region's huge oil and mineral reserves. As well as fending off challenges from the US and other major powers in these areas, Moscow is concerned about the destabilising influence of Islamic fundamentalist groups based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

India, particularly under Vajpayee's Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), shares Russia's hostility to Islamic fundamentalism. It is also seeking international backing for its stance on the conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir: that there be no international intervention and, before negotiations can take place, Pakistan has to end its support for Kashmiri separatists.

Indian-Russian cooperation against Islamic militants and the Taliban regime was central to the discussions held between Putin and Vajpayee. Their joint statement branded Afghanistan as "a breeding ground for religious and international terrorism". Putin told the Indian parliament that the same groups, even the same individuals, were engaged in terrorist acts "from the Philippines to Kosovo, including Kashmir, Afghanistan and Russia's northern Caucasus."

The Taliban regime now controls 95 percent of Afghanistan following recent retreats of the opposing Northern Alliance to the northeast corner of the country, which borders some of the Central Asian republics. About 25,000 Russian troops and border guards are stationed on the Tajik-Afghan frontier guarding Tajikistan. Russia, which has repeatedly accused the Taliban of assisting Islamic rebels in Chechnya, is also known to be covertly assisting the Northern Alliance.

Putin announced that Russia and India "intend to coordinate their military and political line on the situation." Though Indo-Russian military operations were ruled out, National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra said the two countries had agreed to set up "a joint working group" on Afghanistan. Mishra and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov signed a draft security

agreement aimed at facilitating the exchange of intelligence information.

Russia and Pakistan

But just as India is firming its ties with Russia as a counterbalance to the US, so Russia is exploring the options of relations with India's rival Pakistan. On the eve of Putin's visit to India, Russian special envoy Sergei Yastrzhembsky arrived in Islamabad for talks with Pakistani authorities. According to the Indian magazine *Frontline*, the initiative came from the Pakistani junta in an effort to break out of its growing international isolation.

Last August Lieutenant General Mahmood Ahmed, head of the military intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), visited Russia for discussions. The ISI is considered to have close connections with the Taliban and Kashmiri separatist guerrillas. The trip was followed up at the United Nations millennium summit session in New York in September with discussions between Putin and Musharraf.

The relations between Russia and Pakistan are still tentative, however. Yastrzhembsky made clear to Pakistan that further steps would be dependent on action being taken against Islamic extremists. According to *Frontline*, he handed over a list of five camps in Afghanistan that train militants to fight in Chechnya and other Central Asian republics.

Arriving in India just after Yastrzhembsky's visit to Pakistan, Putin was at pains to make clear that Russia did not intend to side with Islamabad against New Delhi. On the key issue of Kashmir, Russia accepted India's position. The Putin-Vajpayee joint communiqué noted that bilateral talks between India and Pakistan could resume only after "cross-border terrorism" ended. In his speech to the Indian parliament, Putin specifically said "foreign interference should be stopped" in Kashmir.

Indian security adviser Mishra told the media: "We have been assured there will be no relations with Pakistan that are to the detriment of India. If Russia wants to engage Pakistan on Afghanistan, fine. It's their sovereign decision." As well as supporting India on Kashmir, Putin also reiterated Russia's support for India's long held goal of a permanent seat in an expanded UN Security Council.

Moreover, Putin's visit resulted in a series of substantial arms sales, which will significantly bolster the position of the Indian armed forces against Pakistan and in the region as a whole. The Indian military is still largely armed with weapons and technology purchased from the former Soviet Union and therefore is heavily dependent on Russia for spare parts and technical assistance. India still owes Russia an estimated 200 billion rupees (\$4.5 billion) for its Soviet-era heavy arms purchases.

Four defence deals were signed between the two countries worth between \$US5 billion and \$7 billion to Russia. India bought more than 300 T-90S main battle tanks along with anti-tank guided missiles and was given a license to assemble the advanced Sukhoi Su-30 fighter aircraft and a lease on four Tu-22 Backfire bombers. Other sales reported to be under negotiation include surface-to-air missiles, artillery, special purpose warplanes, sea-launched cruise missiles and Kamov-31 airborne early warning helicopters. Russia will also give India, for the cost of an extensive refit, the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov to replace its existing ageing carrier.

Russia is also providing India with technical expertise for two nuclear reactors in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and has offered bilateral nuclear energy cooperation. In doing so it has ignored the opposition of the US and other major powers to giving such assistance to India and Pakistan following their nuclear tests in 1998. While not dropping Russia's call for India to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, Putin "welcomed India's voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing". Pointedly he visited the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre at Bombay and described it as a "temple of science and technology".

For Russia, the arms sales will provide a much needed boost to foreign exchange earnings, complementing other agreements aimed at boosting trade between the two countries. In 1990, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, bilateral trade stood at \$5.5 billion. By last year the figure had slumped to \$1.6 billion.

Putin addressed over 350 leading Indian businessmen in a meeting organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and invited them to improve economic ties with Russia. "We need to increase our trade turnover and also to improve the commodity structure of our trade... We should not miss this opportunity," he said.

Russia and India are also planning a new transport corridor to avoid the existing lengthy route through the Suez Canal and northern European ports. The proposed route, including both land and sea links and based on arrangements with Iran, will shorten the travelling time by as much as 10 days—again highlighting the strategic significance of the Caspian Sea region through which goods would pass.

The end of the Cold War and the growing rivalry over resources and strategic alignments in Central Asia have focused international attention on the Indian subcontinent. Not only the US and Russia, but also Japan and the major European powers have made their first top level visits to the region in years. As the major regional power, India is being courted as a potential strategic partner, a lucrative market and a profitable area for investment. While the steps taken by the various players are tentative and courteous at this stage, the heightened interest in the subcontinent points to the potential for fierce conflict in the future.

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