

Russian President visits India to reinvigorate Indo-Russian alliance

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Last month's two-day visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to India highlighted the determination of the Russian and Indian elites to significantly reinforce their long-term military, geo-political, and trade relations, while each state pursues its own agenda on the world stage.

Putin was accompanied by a large entourage of businessmen and government officials including the Russian Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov. Putin was the guest of honor at the Republic Day celebration in New Delhi on January 26, flanking Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Abdul Kalaam in a bullet-proof enclosure through which they witnessed the traditional parade.

Security arrangements for the ceremony were unusually heavy, with the government deploying more than 15,000 police and paramilitary forces and creating a siege-like atmosphere in the nation's capital, including numerous checkpoints, road closings and snipers perched on top of buildings.

This was Putin's fourth visit to India in the six years since becoming Russia's president in 2000. There is no doubt that the current ruling elite in Russia places great store in their relations with India. Russia under Putin has made a major effort to rebuild relations with India, which were consciously degraded by Moscow under the chaotic rule of Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin.

Putin held meetings with Manmohan Singh on January 25, and the two penned cooperation agreements in the military, nuclear, space, hydrocarbon, and industrial fields.

In his opening remarks at a joint press conference with Putin, Singh said, "Our discussions today were extremely useful and productive, and confirmed, once again, that our strategic partnership is based on a deep convergence of our vital national interests."

The Indian government, while forging a close partnership with the US, as exemplified by the Indo-US nuclear accord, is at the same time energetically pursuing relations with other major powers including China. Russia, which during the Cold War was a close ally of India, occupies an especially prominent place in the Indian elite's efforts to counterbalance its growing economic and military ties with the US.

This is not simply a matter of the Indian elite not wanting to put all its eggs in one basket. Although it supported the US invasion of Afghanistan and is a prominent patron of the US-installed Afghan government of Hamid Karzai, New Delhi is anxious to limit US power in oil-rich Central Asia and deeply apprehensive over Washington's aggressive stance against Iran.

These concerns are shared by the Russian elite and are an important factor in pushing Russia and India closer together. Both countries calculate that a strengthening of their alliance will work to constrain the US and avert further military adventures.

New Delhi has publicly backed the Bush administration's "war on terror," and sought to make use of it to place pressure on Pakistan and to justify its brutal counter-insurgency campaigns against myriad domestic insurgent groups in Kashmir and India's northeast.

And under heavy US pressure, India has twice voted with the US against Iran in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) deliberations over Teheran's nuclear program. But New Delhi is aghast at the thought the Bush administration may try to extricate itself from its strategic debacle in Iraq by engineering a wider war—that is, by attacking Iran and possibly Syria.

India maintains close relations with Iran, and any military attack by US against Iran threatens to have adverse consequences for its energy supplies. On February 6-7, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited Teheran to speak with Iranian leaders about their nuclear program and the threat of UN sanctions and, just as importantly, about moving forward with the proposal to build a natural gas pipeline to transport Iranian gas to Pakistan and India.

While the US is trying to scuttle this project, Putin has offered to finance and build this pipeline through Russia's energy monopoly GAZPROM.

Meanwhile, Singh and Putin, in remarks aimed at Washington, called for the dispute over Iran's nuclear program to be resolved through "political and diplomatic efforts," not military threats or action.

While the Bush administration is attempting to ensnare India in its geo-political machinations so as to use it as a counterweight to China, the Putin regime hopes to enlist New Delhi's support in countering aggressive moves by Washington and Europe in the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, regions Russia has long considered its own "backyard."

The Indian elite, for its part, is anxious to leverage its status as what a CIA report has called "the most important swing state" in world geopolitics, and sees close relations with Russia as providing it with a means to offset both US and Chinese pressure.

"Though there has been a sea-change in the international situation during the last decade," declared India's prime minister, "Russia remains indispensable to the core of India's foreign policy interests."

The Indian elite likes to refer to Russia as an "all-weather friend," a barb directed at the US, which is seen as having frequently cut off aid to India when New Delhi balked at Washington's demands. While New Delhi is anxious to open a new era in its relations with Washington, it has not forgotten that for decades the US cultivated close ties with archrival Pakistan, dubbing Islamabad a "front-line" state in the war against "international Communism."

Speaking January 25, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh proclaimed "energy security" to be "the most important of the emerging dimensions of" an Indo-Russian strategic partnership," then added, "Russia's position as a global leader on energy issues is widely recognized. We look forward to long-term partnership with Russia in this vital field."

Securing reliable energy supply is a preoccupation of the Indian ruling elite, since imports account for 70 percent of India's oil consumption, and the energy demand of India's fast-growing economy is rising rapidly.

It was in the area of nuclear power that New Delhi was able to secure

new backing from Russia during Putin's visit. Among the agreements signed was a "memorandum of intent" between India's department of atomic energy and Russia's federal atomic energy agency to cooperate on the development of additional nuclear units at Kudankulam in the southern state of Tamilnadu, and the construction of new Russian-designed nuclear power plants. Russia is currently involved in building two units at the Kudankulam site.

In order not to antagonize other nuclear powers from whom New Delhi intends to seek civilian nuclear technology, India and Russia stipulated that their agreement in the nuclear field is subject to the 45-member Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), which regulates world nuclear trade, lifting the current embargo on nuclear trade with India.

However, the Indian elite is gratified by the fact that Moscow has signed a document promising future help in the nuclear field. Russia has also committed to helping India get the NSG's current guidelines changed and suggested that it will be ready to go further than the US in this regard. (Under the Indo-US nuclear accord, Washington committed to helping create a unique status for India with the world nuclear regime—a non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty [NPT] allowed access to the fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology of NPT-member states.)

While the US Congress has attached a long series of conditions to any US civilian nuclear trade with India, including that India side with the US against Iran, and threatened to cut off fuel shipments if India fails to meet annual "non-proliferation" benchmarks, Moscow has indicated it will make no such demands.

Observed an editorial in the *Hindu*, "Moscow can help New Delhi ensure the defeat of any attempt by a nuclear supplier to clutter the changed guidelines with extraneous and objectionable conditions."

For India, international assistance for its civilian nuclear projects is crucial, as India is short of domestic uranium to fuel its reactors and produce nuclear bombs. Through the development of civilian nuclear power, New Delhi hopes to diversify its energy sources. Securing foreign uranium supplies for nuclear-power generation will also enable New Delhi to use its limited domestic uranium reserves for making the nuclear bombs that the Indian elite views as so essential to its claim to world-power status.

In addition to nuclear fuel and technology, the Indian elite covets Russia's vast oil and gas reserves. On January 25, India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) signed a memorandum of understanding to partner with Russia's oil company Rosneft for oil exploration in Russia and other countries. New Delhi already has a 20 percent stake in the Sakhalin-I oil project in Russia, and the first shipment of oil from this project was received by India at the end of last year.

It is in the military arena, however, that the two countries have forged the strongest ties, jointly producing advanced weapons systems that Moscow does not make available to other countries such as China.

India currently depends on Russia for close to 75 percent of its advanced weapons needs

Russia's deputy premier and defence minister, Sergei B. Ivanov, signed four agreements with his Indian counterpart, A.K. Antony, on January 24. These include joint development and production of "fifth-generation" fighter aircraft, licensed production of RD-33 aero engines, production of medium-sized multi-role transport aircraft (MTA), and a protocol on the sixth Indo-Russia Inter-governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation.

As highlighted by Antony, the defense cooperation of the two countries has transcended the buyer-seller relationship to involve joint research and development and production projects. Antony cited the ongoing joint production of the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile as a "successful chapter in our relations."

Ivanov also "clarified" that Russia is not opposed to the sale of Brahmos

cruise missiles to other "friendly" countries. India is keen to undertake such sales. Significantly, neither China nor Pakistan figures on the list of "friendly countries" that Moscow and New Delhi are considering for potential sales. Those on the list are said to include South Africa, Malaysia, Chile, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Russia fears losing its lucrative Indian military market to the US, Israel and EU.

For decades, Moscow has been India's top supplier of weaponry and weapons systems. But in recent years, New Delhi has started to fill a portion of its defense needs with purchases from the US, Israel, France and others, and these countries are now aggressively pressing for Indian arms deals, offering New Delhi the latest military technology including advanced fighters.

Indian military officials, meanwhile, have complained about the quality of Russian weapons and delays in filling supply contracts.

Under such circumstances, Moscow can hardly take its defense market in India for granted and is using every avenue it has at its disposal to preserve if not expand its market share.

New Delhi, which has embarked on a major drive to modernize and expand the striking power of its military, calculates that diversifying its weapons purchases is a good hedge against becoming over-reliant on a single supplier. However, such diversification also increases maintenance costs.

Moscow and New Delhi have also decided to work toward a major expansion in their civilian trade. Bilateral trade amounted to a miniscule US\$1.8 billion in 2004-2005, with exports from India to Russia amounting to US\$597 million and Indian imports from Russia to US\$1.2 billion. The two sides have set a target of US\$10 billion in two-trade by 2010, but even this fivefold expansion were to be attained, it would still represent only a tiny portion of world trade.

In a boost to New Delhi's quest for global power status, Russia also reaffirmed "its support to India as a deserving and strong candidate for permanent membership in an expanded UN Security Council."

India reciprocated by promising to help Russia overcome US opposition to its entry into the World Trade Organization.

In a joint statement clearly directed at the US, Putin and Manmohan Singh declared that their two countries will "work towards the establishment of a multipolar world order based on the principles of the rule of law, sovereign equality, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs of States."

The reference to a "multipolar world order" reflects their mutual concerns over the reckless, aggressive policies Washington has pursued in pursuit of its imperialist interests.

India currently has "observer" status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the regional bloc led by Moscow and Beijing to counter US moves in Central Asia.

Just as Russia aims to utilize its increasing ties with India to counter the US and to hedge its dependence on China, the Indian elite is seeking to reinvigorate its relations with Russia to counterbalance the US and China in a world where this is increasingly geo-politically and economically unstable.



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