

# Russia and India improve relations

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A short visit by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to India on March 12 resulted in a slew of bilateral agreements and improved strategic relations. A major concern of both governments is the intensifying US-led war in Afghanistan and its proxy war in Pakistan, which threaten to undermine both Russian and Indian interests in the region.

The length of the “working visit”—less than 24 hours—was no gauge of its importance. During the trip, the two countries finalised five major deals, most importantly on nuclear energy, defence and space cooperation. Putin met with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, President Pratibha Patil and ruling Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, as well as taking part in a video conference with major Indian business leaders.

Under the nuclear deal worth tens of billions dollars, Russia will construct and provide the fuel for between 12 to 16 nuclear power plants in India, as well as cooperate in disposing of the resulting nuclear waste. Russia is already involved in building two nuclear power stations in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The Russian deal cuts directly across US corporate ambitions to secure the dominant position in constructing power reactors in India. After lengthy negotiations, the previous administration of President George Bush finalised a nuclear accord with New Delhi in 2008 that opened the door for India to purchase nuclear fuel and technology on the international market without having to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, thus allowing India to retain its nuclear arsenal.

US involvement in India’s nuclear power industry has, however, run into obstacles, including a demand

for Indian legislation to be enacted that limits the legal liability of American companies for accidents occurring in nuclear plants built by them. As a result, New Delhi has begun to turn to other suppliers, like Russia, that have less stringent requirements.

Russia and India also signed substantial defence agreements. These include a revised \$2.3 billion deal for India to buy an upgraded aircraft carrier, the Admiral Gorshkov, and a \$1.5 billion deal to supply the naval versions of the MiG-29 fighter aircraft for the warship. A joint venture was also agreed to produce navigation equipment for Indian global positioning systems and its Russian equivalent Glonass. India will adopt the Glonass signal for its military use. A contract for the joint development of a new fifth-generation fighter was also signed.

During the Cold War, India and the former Soviet Union had a close strategic relationship to counter ties between the US, China and Pakistan. The Soviet Union was India’s largest arms supplier. Following the collapse of the Stalinist state, the US and Israel both made inroads into the Indian arms market. US and European corporations are currently competing with Russian companies to supply the Indian Air Force with 126 fighter jets. The deals signed during Putin’s trip go a long way to reestablishing Russia as the dominant military supplier.

Putin’s visit was not just about signing agreements, but signalled moves towards a broader strengthening of the relationship between the two countries. In his joint press conference with Putin, Indian Prime Minister Singh declared India’s relations with Russia to be “a key pillar of our foreign policy”, and hailing Russia “as a trusted and reliable strategic partner”.

In the US, the *Wall Street Journal* was quick to criticise the significance of Putin's trip and to criticise the Obama administration allowing Russia to "step into the Indian breach". A March 15 opinion piece by Sumit Ganguly declared: "There's no stronger signal that the Obama administration's neglect of India is starting to have foreign-policy consequences. If the United States doesn't act quickly, much of the progress in US-India relations over the past decade will be lost."

Under the Bush administration, the US established an economic and strategic partnership with India, in large measure to counter China. The US-India nuclear accord was a key aspect of the new relationship. India also made strategic gains in Afghanistan after the US military toppled the Taliban regime in 2001 and marginalised Pakistan, which had been the Taliban's key backer.

The Obama administration, however, has had to turn to Pakistan for support as it escalates the war in Afghanistan in a bid to stabilise the occupation. The US has also provided military assistance to the Pakistani military to wage offensives in the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan which the Taliban have used as refuges. New Delhi has increasingly expressed concerns at Washington's growing ties with Islamabad and the potential for Pakistan to exert greater influence in Afghanistan at India's expense.

Afghanistan was a focus of discussion between Singh and Putin. As Singh declared in a joint statement, New Delhi and Moscow "have agreed to intensify our consultations on Afghanistan and the challenges posed by terrorism and extremism in our region". Putin declared that he understood Indian concerns about "terror groups" in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and said that Moscow would not enter into any defence deal with Islamabad "because of our Indian friends' concerns".

Behind this talk of "terrorism", the main preoccupations of India and Russia are geo-strategic. India is concerned to prevent a resurgence of Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, while Russia is seeking to prevent the US from turning Afghanistan into a permanent base from which to extend its presence into

Central Asia. Neither India nor Russia wants to undermine relations with the US, but closer ties with each other serve as a useful means to assert their own independent interests.

The Indian press generally welcomed Putin's visit and better relations with Russia. An editorial in the *Times of India* entitled "Old Friends" declared: "During the Cold War era, Soviet Union and India came closer as a counterweight to the Sino-US equation. But in a new world order where China's heft outweighs Russia's, the balance of power globally, and in this region has seen a paradigm shift. Each country in this quartet is now pursuing foreign policies that are informed by self-interest. It is in this context that India and Russia must give their old ties a makeover. While pursuing independent global equations, New Delhi and Moscow must work in concert to further their common interests and concerns in the Asian region."

But Russia and India's tentative embrace takes place in a region increasingly destabilised by Washington's escalating wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan and intensifying rivalry between all the major powers—especially the US and China. As Moscow and New Delhi are well aware, in such a fluid and tense situation the two countries could just as easily become adversaries as firm partners.



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