

Indian prime minister visits Russia to consolidate relations

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a two-day visit to Russia on December 23-24 to develop existing strategic and economic ties. While aligning India closely with the US “pivot to Asia” against China, the Modi government still considers New Delhi’s long-standing alliance with Moscow important for its geo-political ambitions. For its part, Moscow is keen to develop strategic ties with India to counter US provocations against Russian interests in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

India, both under the Congress Party-led government that held office as the conflict over Ukraine intensified in the first months of 2014 and the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regime, has refused to line up with the US against Russia. While seeking to avoid any confrontation with Washington, New Delhi distanced itself from the February 2014 US-backed fascist-led coup in the Ukraine, abstained on the March 2014 US-sponsored UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia for incorporating Crimea following a pro-annexation plebiscite, and has repeatedly declared that any solution to the Ukraine crisis requires recognition that Russia has “legitimate” strategic interests in the Ukraine.

New Delhi, like the other BRICS states, has also refused to support the US-led economic sanctions against Russia, as was underlined by the sizeable business delegation that accompanied Modi on his Moscow trip.

India’s attitude has perturbed Washington. While assiduously courting India with offers of arms development-deals and help in developing economic and strategic ties with East Asia, the Obama administration has signaled that it intends to disrupt and eventually break India’s longstanding strategic partnership with Russia.

In Moscow, Modi held a one-on-one meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin before joining other delegates for the annual India-Russia summit. They addressed a joint press conference and also met with the CEOs of Indian and Russian companies.

At the summit Modi referred to Moscow as New Delhi’s “strong and reliable” friend, which “has always been with us in hard times.” During the Cold War, India, a leader of the so-called non-aligned movement, developed close relations with the former Soviet Union. Putin added his own praise, characterizing relations between India and Russia as a “privileged strategic partnership,” which was developing “consistently and confidently.”

Sixteen bilateral agreements were signed during Modi’s visit including on defence and nuclear energy. Among the more important were deals on the production of BrahMos missiles and the Kamov-226 attack helicopter in India. Modi boasted that the latter was “the first project for a major defence platform under the ‘Make in India’ mission”—his government’s bid to transform India into a major cheap labour platform. Indian company Reliance Defense signed a \$US6 billion agreement with Russian state-owned weapon maker, Almaz-Antey, to manufacture and maintain the helicopter.

Russia offered the co-production arms deals in an attempt to regain its status as India’s top arms supplier—now held by the US. A government source told Reuters that Russia was a more reliable seller, saying: “While others are making promises, Russia is moving forward with the Make-in-India program.”

However, an expected agreement for India to buy five S-400 air defence systems for \$4.5 billion from Almaz-Antey failed to materialize. The S-400 would significantly boost India’s military advantage over its

regional rival Pakistan. Reliance Defense hinted in a statement on Thursday that the air defence system could be part of its negotiations with the Russian company.

Moscow's concerns over India's growing strategic ties with the US clearly played a role in its caution in providing hi-tech air defence systems. Russia wants India to at least remain neutral in the rising tensions between Moscow and Washington.

At the same time, as New Delhi has tilted more to Washington, Russia has begun selling arms to Pakistan. Though limited at this stage to attack helicopters, future sales could include fighter aircraft. China is widely believed to have facilitated the recent, virtually unprecedented warming of relations between Russia and Pakistan.

Other agreements included a deal for Russia to build at least six more nuclear power plants in India. Russia's state-owned oil company Rosneft agreed to provide 10 million tons of oil annually to India over the next decade. As a part of developing co-operation in the exploration and production of hydrocarbons, India will increase its stake in the Rosneft-owned Vankor oilfields in Siberia.

Modi appealed for Russian CEOs to invest in India, including in the infrastructure and aerospace sectors. At his joint press conference with Putin, Modi declared: "I see Russia as a prominent partner in India's economic transformation." Modi was accompanied by 19 Indian CEOs while more than 30 leading officials from Russian companies attended the India-Russia CEO meeting addressed by Modi and Putin.

Faced with sanctions from the West, Russia is keen to develop trade and investment ties with India. Bilateral trade is expected to increase from the current \$US10 billion to \$30 billion by 2025.

Acutely aware that Washington is seeking to undermine Russian ties with India, Putin sought to woo Modi by giving "strong support" to New Delhi's ambitions to be a global power with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. India was, he said, a "deserving and strong candidate" which could bring an "independent and responsible approach" to the top UN body.

However, Putin stressed: "It is important Russia and India make similar approaches to key international problems. Our countries are for a political settlement of

the conflict in Syria and promotion of national reconciliation in Afghanistan ... We are certain that it is in the interests of the world community to form a wide anti-terrorist coalition operating on the basis of international law and under the auspices of the United Nations."

In Syria, the US and its allies have intensified their military intervention aimed at ousting President Bashar al-Assad under the pretext of fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Russia, which is providing military support to Assad including carrying out strikes on opposition militia, is seeking to shore up its interests by advocating a "political settlement" that includes sections of the Assad regime alongside opposition groups.

India has signaled its willingness to back Russia on the issue. On the eve of Modi's visit, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar declared that India and Russia shared the same stand of resolving the Syrian issue "through political and diplomatic means and through intra-Syrian dialogue." In response to a question, he said that India backed Russian military intervention in Syria as its forces were acting with the consent of the Assad regime—an implicit criticism of the US and its allies.

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