

Modi greets Putin with pomp and ceremony as Trump demands New Delhi downgrade its ties with Russia

Rohantha De Silva, Keith Jones
15 December 2025

India rolled out the red carpet for Russian President Vladimir Putin when he visited New Delhi earlier this month. This began with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi breaking with protocol to personally greet Putin as he stepped off the plane at the Palam Air Base, and continued throughout the two-day visit, which concluded with the signing of a slate of new agreements aimed at boosting trade, investment, labour mobility, defence and other ties.

India's demonstrative display of the "warmth" and "strength" of its decades-long strategic partnership with Russia was intended as a message to Washington that New Delhi will not allow the US to define its relationship with Moscow.

The Modi government, building on the Indo-US Global Strategic Partnership its Congress Party predecessor negotiated, has dramatically expanded India's military-security ties with Washington during its eleven years in office, transforming India into a veritable frontline state in US imperialism's strategic confrontation with China.

Yet to the dismay of Modi, his BJP government and the whole Indian ruling class, US President Donald Trump has repeatedly struck at India, demanding that it remove barriers to US exports and investment, cease Russian oil imports and otherwise downgrade its ties with Moscow.

Since late August, most Indian exports to the US have been subject to 50 percent tariffs. This includes an India-specific 25 percent punitive tariff that Washington says will remain in place until India stops importing Russian oil. At 50 percent, India's reciprocal tariff is higher than that the US has imposed on China, also a large importer of Russian oil, or any other country—and in the case of India's arch-rival Pakistan (19 percent), far higher.

Yet for all the pomp and ceremony and affirmations by both Modi and Putin of the strength of Indo-Russian ties, New Delhi and Moscow did not announce any of the rumoured new major military-defence deals.

From the standpoint of the BJP government and the Indian ruling class, Putin's visit for the 23rd India-Russia Annual summit was part of a precarious balancing act. India has long tried to straddle the growing geopolitical divide between Russia and the US and its NATO partners. But this has become ever more difficult, especially since the outbreak of the US-NATO-instigated Ukraine war.

Trump is a further complicating factor. In a desperate bid to arrest the rapid erosion of US imperialism's economic and geopolitical power, he is lashing out against avowed US strategic enemies and ostensible allies alike.

Putin's December 4-5 visit was his first to India since the outbreak of the Ukraine war. Eager to show that the western powers have failed to isolate Russia, Putin, like his Indian hosts, took every opportunity to play up the strength of Russo-Indian ties.

In an *India Today* interview, Putin said he felt "very happy" to meet

"my friend" Modi and praised their two countries' cooperation in ship and aircraft manufacturing, nuclear energy, and space exploration.

He also hit out at the US attempt to bully India to cease its imports of discounted Russian oil, noting, as Indian government officials repeatedly have, that the US and Europe continue to import Russian energy, including uranium and liquefied natural gas. "If the US has the right to buy our fuel," said Putin, "why shouldn't India have the same privilege?"

Putin was accompanied by a high-level delegation, including Defense Minister Andrey Belousov, First Deputy Prime Minister and Industry Minister Denis Manturov, Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullina and prominent business leaders.

The sixteen agreements India and Russia concluded during the summit covered a wide range of sectors, from trade and nuclear energy to health care, culture and counter-terrorism.

Putin and Modi set a target of raising the annual value of Russia-India trade to \$100 billion, an increase of 50 percent, by 2030. They also reported progress on linking RuPay (India's domestic card payment system) with Russia's Mir payment system with the aim of circumventing US sanctions on Russian trade. The establishment of such a rupee-ruble payment and exchange is crucial if India is to continue to benefit from massive purchases of discounted Russian oil in defiance of Washington and the NATO powers.

Modi also highlighted progress toward a possible free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a Russian-led regional bloc of five-post Soviet states.

In respect to defence, India and Russia reaffirmed their longstanding close defence cooperation, and signed new agreements relating to joint weapons production, technology transfer, and expedited delivery of existing orders.

However, New Delhi clearly decided to adopt a wait-and-see stance in regards to major new weapons purchases from Russia, as it gropes to find a means to patch up relations with Washington.

Indian government officials have repeatedly claimed at least an interim trade deal with Trump is imminent. But a further three days of trade talks last week ended without agreement. Meanwhile America's fascist would-be dictator president issued another of his broadsides against India, declaring that he could increase the tariffs on Indian rice, which already range between 50 and 53 percent, still higher.

Despite earlier talk that New Delhi could reach deals with Moscow to acquire cutting-edge Su-57 fifth-generation fighters, advanced helicopters and Russia's newly-deployed S7500 "Prometheus" air defense system, no purchases were announced at the India-Russia summit.

Russian Defence Minister Belousov did hold extensive talks with his Indian counterpart, Rajnath Singh. Belousov pledged that Russia and its defence industries are ready to help India achieve self-reliance in defence

production. India currently accounts for 8.3 percent of world arms imports, second only to Ukraine (8.8 percent), which has been showered with weaponry by the US and NATO powers so as to forestall its military collapse.

India has purchased five units of Russia's earlier S-400 air defence system and is desperate for its current order, which is behind schedule, to be fulfilled. India signed a \$5.43 billion deal for five S-400 squadrons from Russia in October 2018 but has received only three so far. Though the United States threatened sanctions against India under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2018, the Biden administration ultimately decided not to impose sanctions when the first of the S-400s were delivered, so as not to disrupt India's ever-deeper integration into US war preparations against China.

Under Modi, India has forged an expanding web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral alliances with the US and its principal allies in the Asia-Pacific region—Japan and Australia—including the US-led Quad.

The S-400 systems reportedly played a crucial role in India's four-day war with Pakistan last May, enabling it to successfully counter Pakistan drones and missile attacks, after Pakistan had gained early success by downing several Indian jets without crossing into Indian airspace. Though a fragile truce came into effect on May 10, tensions remain high, as the Modi government continues to press to redefine India-Pakistan relations on its own terms, including by withdrawing from the Indus Water Treaty.

Under US pressure, New Delhi has reduced its dependence on Russian weapons purchases in recent years. However, Russia remains a vital defence partner, supplying a large portion of India's existing weapon-systems—including fighter jets, tanks and missiles—through multi-billion-dollar contracts, and the parts needed to keep them operational. The BrahMos missile, a joint venture with Russia, is among India's most advanced and widely exported missile systems.

Following India's recent border war with Pakistan, India went on a crash program of restocking its war material, with Russia in many cases the only or best supplier.

At the same time, New Delhi, already wary of Washington's long record of controlling its allies through arms dependency, has been shaken by Trump's sudden turn on India. This has involved Trump not only making India a special target of his global trade war, and seeking to dictate its relations with Russia, but also a sudden thawing of Washington's relations with Pakistan, which, to India's dismay, has continued apace even in the aftermath of the recent Indo-Pakistani war.

The Indian ruling class is anxious to maintain its so-called "all-weather" alliance with Moscow, and therefore Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, hitherto notorious for their slavish courting of Washington, have been compelled to push back against the Trump administration.

This has included an outreach to Beijing. In late August, Modi traveled to China for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit. This was his first trip there in seven years, and marked a significant de-escalation of the five-year border stand-off between India and China that began in May 2020 and saw both sides forward deploy tens of thousands of troops, tanks and warplanes along their disputed Himalayan border for years.

Nevertheless, the current array of conflicts with the Trump administration notwithstanding, the Indo-US strategic partnership remains the cornerstone of the foreign and geopolitical strategy of Modi, his BJP government and the Indian bourgeoisie.

At the end of October, Rajnath Singh and US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth signed a new 10-year Indo-US defence framework to, in their words, deepen cooperation across the land, air, sea, space and cyber domains, and foster interoperability, co-production and technology transfer, including through joint exercises and the Quad. Following the signing, Singh boasted of the strategic "convergence" of the US and India across the Indo-Pacific—that is the US-China war theatre.

Joint military exercises continue to expand. In 2025, India and the US

conducted five joint drills amid tariff tensions, including Tiger Triumph in April, Bright Star in August-September, and Yudh Abhyas from September 1-14 in Alaska. Yudh Abhyas 2025 involved 450 troops each from India's Madras Regiment and the US 1st Airborne Division. The drills focused on heliborne operations, UAV use, casualty evacuation, electronic warfare—all in mountain terrain and an extreme weather environment akin to the Himalayas—and culminated in live-fire exercises.

India also continues to strengthen its relations with Israel, whose genocide in Gaza it has staunchly backed alongside the US and the other imperialist powers. Israeli Prime Minister and war criminal Benjamin Netanyahu is set to travel to India later this month. While Modi's Hindu supremacist BJP has a close affinity with Netanyahu's fascist wing of the Zionist movement, the Israeli-India alliance is a corollary to New Delhi's pursuit of closer ties with US imperialism. This includes supporting, and hoping to profit from, Washington's drive to carve out through aggression and war a "New Middle East" and an Israeli-anchored India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

In the days prior to Putin's visit to India there was a swirl of diplomatic activity surrounding Trump's attempt to broker a so-called peace deal with Russia, over the heads and at the expense of Washington's NATO allies.

India's ruling class largely views the prospect of such an agreement favorably, believing that an improvement in Russian-US relations would be to its benefit and to the detriment of China, which it considers its principal obstacle to emerging as the regional hegemon of South Asia and a global power. It similarly viewed Trump's return to office last January favourably, calculating he would prioritize American's conflict with Beijing and close relations with India, including supporting India's ambition to emerge an alternative production chain hub to China.

New Delhi is walking a tightrope, aiming to maintain strong relations with both Russia and the US without sacrificing its strategic interests. Nothing can be said with certainty, but even were a deal to freeze the Ukraine war reached, there is nothing to say Trump would back off in his attempts to leverage what he perceives as India's economic and geopolitical weakness to force New Delhi to dramatically downgrade its relations with Moscow.

Putin's visit to India underscores just how fluid, unstable and explosive global economic, diplomatic and strategic relationships are, and how perilous are New Delhi's efforts to chart a "strategical autonomous" course to advance the Indian bourgeoisie's own predatory global interests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact