

India-Russia Summit: Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region

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Summary

The long overdue meeting between the leaders of India and Russia was badly needed to assuage concerns about the slow progress in bilateral ties, but even more importantly, as a demonstration of both states' commitment to preserving strategic autonomy amid a continuing geopolitical churn in the Indo-Pacific region and their rapprochements with each other's rivals – China and the United States.

The sixth of December 2021 will undoubtedly be highlighted in the historic calendar of India-Russia relationship as a day when, against the backdrop of raging pandemic and a general setback in bilateral cooperation, the two sides managed to hold an annual summit and launch a newly established '2+2' dialogue of defence and foreign ministers. This was just the second foreign trip by Russia's President Vladimir Putin in a span of 22 months and it sent a strong political message to the rest of the world, particularly the two potential hegemonies of this époque – the United States (US) and China.

How the summit goes down in history is quite uncertain. Beyond symbolism of high-level interactions, a careful review of the reached agreements reveals modest deliverables. The fresh attempts to reenergise economic dialogue look promising, but the structural problems coming in the way of enhanced trade and economic ties, to a large extent, remain unresolved. The connectivity between the two countries is still a "work-in-progress" while rapport between business circles has been built at a slow pace. The fulcrum of the relationship – military-technical cooperation – has been going forward, though overshadowed by the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act and other minor issues. Other than bilateral agreements, the summit pulled back the curtain on some shifts in Russia's regional policies that could have positive effect on the ties with India. Putin's visit to New Delhi took place amidst a series of significant developments in the Indo-Pacific that triggered a more proactive approach from Moscow.

Russia's recent outreach to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a good sign for India. The Russia-ASEAN summit in October 2021 was held in the wake of AUKUS military agreement and a new phase of the Quad's evolution. At the meeting, the sides exchanged important diplomatic support: the ASEAN countries reiterated their interest in interacting within Moscow-led "Greater Eurasian Partnership" framework whereas Russia acknowledged the importance of the [ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook](#). This engagement seemingly paves the way for a less hostile view of the Indo-Pacific concept by Moscow. A remarkable follow-up to the Russia-ASEAN meeting was the first-ever joint naval drills, which materialised two years after being floated by then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The naval manoeuvres, albeit limited in scale and military interoperability, were held off North Sumatra, along the Malacca Straits, a strategic shipping lane. This indeed

points to both sides' conviction that vital chokepoints in the region should stay secure and out of any power's grip.

Russia's growing engagement with ASEAN is a testament to Moscow's independent policy in the region, free from blind following of Beijing's playbook. Just in line with India, Russia has pursued its own political and commercial interests in the region. Even in the disputed South China Sea, Russia's public company, Zarubezhneft, after some juridical twists and despite China's displeasure, went ahead with oil and gas exploration off the Vietnamese continental shelf. Apparently, though vocally supporting Beijing's stance on the South China Sea dispute, Moscow will not back off from its agreements with key regional partners like Vietnam.

The [statement](#) following the Modi-Putin summit mentions "export to mutually friendly third countries" of defence equipment and spare parts. In this context, it is interesting if Russia and India would be able to agree on supplies of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia that have been under negotiations for several years now.

The long arc, stretching from Sabetta on Yamal peninsula, emerging as a major dispatching port for energy exports to Asian markets, to the port of Sudan where Moscow has been eyeing to establish a logistics support facility, constitutes the basis for Russia's Indo-Pacific policy. India fits well into this geopolitical space with its investments in upstream projects in the Russian Arctic and Far East, preeminent position in the Indian Ocean and the upcoming operationalisation of Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor.

Even as new avenues have been opening up for interaction with India, Russia definitely will not cut off its strategic bonds with China. Despite some existing loopholes, there is sufficient affinity of Moscow-Beijing regional views as is evident from the first-ever joint naval patrol conducted by their warships in the northwestern part of the Pacific Ocean and a [recent joint air patrol](#) by their strategic missile-carrying bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. In a similar vein, India's defence and security cooperation with the US and their allies have been expanding – both bilaterally and as part of Quad grouping. Given Beijing's military buildup and the widening gap between India and China's economic and military potentials, New Delhi's elevation of ties with Quad, particularly with Washington, is slated to retain its validity.

The India-Russia summit put on display opportunities for cooperation across critical geographies and diluted divergent perceptions. Moscow and New Delhi utilised high-level interactions to demonstrate to each other and the world that they are not drifting apart but seeking to bolster courses on preserving 'strategic autonomy'. With new challenges ahead, the relationship remains relevant for both states confronting geopolitical headwinds.

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