

Russia in India's Great Power Diplomacy

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Summary

Reassuring Russia has been a major objective of Indian diplomacy in the last few years, even as India built a strong strategic partnership with the United States. Moscow's deteriorating ties with the West, its growing strategic partnership with Beijing and the deterioration of India's relations with China provide the complex background in which Delhi is managing its ties with Moscow.

Exuberant bonhomie marked the Indian external affairs minister S Jaishankar's five-day visit to Moscow in the last week of December 2023. On his part, Jaishankar was effusive about India's enduring partnership with Moscow. At his talks with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, [Jaishankar emphasised](#) that the Indo-Russian relationship has been exceptionally steady amidst the wild oscillations in the relations between other major powers relations. Lavrov, in turn, [highlighted](#) the "trust-based nature of Moscow's relations with New Delhi, which is rooted in mutual respect and immune to momentary fluctuations". He added that continuing contacts between the leaderships "fully reflect the very nature of our cooperation within our special privileged strategic partnership".

During the talks, the two sides [agreed on several areas](#) of intensified engagement, including nuclear energy cooperation, joint production of weapons, trade liberalisation, connectivity, railway development and a bilateral investment treaty.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who rarely meets visiting foreign ministers, made an exception for Jaishankar. In fact, well before Jaishankar arrived in Moscow, Putin praised India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi for standing up to international pressures on India to join the effort to isolate Moscow after it invaded Ukraine in February 2022. "I cannot imagine that Modi could be intimidated, intimidated or forced to take any actions, steps and decisions that are contrary to the national interests of India and the Indian people", [Putin said](#) in early December 2023. Despite widespread criticism in the West about India's decision to purchase Russian oil at discounted prices during 2022-23, Modi refused to back down.

Delhi withstood those pressures because of the conviction that preserving a productive relationship with Moscow was a critical element of India's national security strategy. India and Russia have not had any serious bilateral disputes, and their geopolitical interests have often converged on maintaining a stable balance of power in Asia since the middle of the 20th century.

Jaishankar's visit seeks to maintain the intensity of high-level political engagement with the Russian leadership at a time when the annual summits between Modi and Putin could not be convened in the last two years amidst the war in Ukraine.

The absence of the annual summit did not mean the relationship had withered. In fact, bilateral commercial economic engagement has surged in the last two years. Bilateral trade grew to a [historic high](#) of US\$50 billion (\$66.4 billion) last year, thanks to the massive oil imports from Moscow which could no longer sell oil in its traditional European markets because of sanctions.

India has been roundly criticised for not condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine; less noted is the fact that Delhi has avoided defending Moscow's actions. In fact, the Modi government appears to be positioning itself to play a potential role in promoting a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine. The failure of the [Ukrainian counteroffensive in 2023](#) and the [signals from Putin](#) of interest in talks to resolve the issues have set the stage for some diplomatic manoeuvre.

India appears well-placed to explore new diplomatic possibilities. Soon after he visited Moscow, [Jaishankar talked](#) to the foreign minister of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, to discuss Kyiv's peace proposals. Jaishankar and Kuleba also discussed plans to expand bilateral cooperation.

If some have seen Jaishankar's visit as an effort to shore up India's declining salience of the Russia relationship, others have viewed it as a response to the presumed setbacks to India's relationship with the United States (US). Both these arguments are wrong. Although Jaishankar's warm remarks in Moscow on Russia ties have come under wide scrutiny in the West, the Indian external affairs minister was merely affirming the long-stated positions of the Modi government on the Russian engagement.

Equally irrelevant are arguments that Jaishankar is snubbing the US by undertaking an ostentatious visit to Moscow. The recent controversy over allegations of Indian official involvement in the plot to assassinate a US citizen, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, does not mark a break in the [thriving strategic partnership](#) between India and the US. In fact, Delhi and Washington are carefully managing the consequences of the Pannun case.

The current India-Russia dynamic can only be understood in terms of India's growing salience as a major power and its capacity to navigate the contradictions between Moscow and the West. On its part, India is not trying to put Russia at the centre of its great power politics as it did during the Cold War. India is no longer a deferential junior partner looking up to Russian support. According to [some estimates](#), India's economy in 2023 is nearly twice the size of Russia's (US\$3.7 trillion to US\$1.8 trillion [\$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion]). This gap will continue to grow in Delhi's favour in the coming years.

India is diversifying away from its traditional military dependence on Russia—France and the US have emerged as major arms suppliers to Delhi. India's commercial and technological relationships are deeply tied to the US, Europe and the United Kingdom. Delhi will not abandon these consequential ties with the West to please Moscow. Unlike in the past, India is reconstituting its Russia relationship as more than an equal.

Russia too has other more important partners than India. At a time when India's ties with China are in deep freeze, Moscow's military and economic engagement with Beijing is rapidly expanding. Delhi and Moscow are acutely conscious that they are on the opposite sides of the world's main geopolitical faultline today – between the US and China. Yet, India and Russia

value sustaining a productive bilateral relationship that will help them expand their room for manoeuvre in the increasingly bipolar world.

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