

Russia Must Sit Up and Take Notice of India

By [Dmitry Trenin](#)

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Under the present circumstances, one would think that President Vladimir Putin's upcoming visit to India this weekend should lead to a quantum leap in Russian-Indian relations. In Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has a new dynamic leader who is busy reviewing and revising Delhi's economic and foreign policy. This raises challenges for India's traditional partners, but also offers them new opportunities.

Russia, for its part, has entered a long period of adversity and conflict with the United States, and its relations with other Western countries, above all with the European Union member states, have deteriorated to an unexpected degree.

If this opportunity is missed, the drift in the Russian-Indian relationship will continue.

This level of conflict has not been seen since the end of the Cold War and relations with the West show no sign of warming up as long as the situation in Ukraine remains unresolved, so it is imperative that Russia begins to develop previously neglected relationships where it can.

Russia's pivot to Asia, so far, has turned out to be a pivot to just China, on conditions significantly less favorable than what Russia could have hoped to get even a year ago, thanks to the country's increasing international isolation.

Yet it appears that Putin's visit to India this week will not lead to a breakthrough. Friendly words will be exchanged, goodwill demonstrated, and a certain number of agreements signed, but the potentially key relationship will remain adrift.

Essentially, Russia will continue to supply the Indian Armed Forces with various weapons systems and will commit to building nuclear power plants in the country.

No new ground will be broken. The relationship, which was dubbed a strategic partnership many years ago, will continue to be marked by under-achievements.

But things could be very different. India can become a key partner to Russia in a variety of fields. One is science, technology and education. In the run-up to the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok, Russia, built a sprawling new complex on Russky Island that it used to accommodate foreign leaders and their parties and then turned it over to the Far Eastern Federal University.

Two years on, the school — which some hoped would be a hub of international intellectual exchanges — is still what it used to be before APEC. A close partnership with leading Indian universities could give it the requisite lifting power. This is merely an example of what should be possible if the idea is to upgrade Russia's educational and scientific facilities through international collaboration.

The time has also come for India and Russia to expand their cooperation in the field of national defense to cover all stages of weapons research, development, testing and production.

When such cooperation with NATO countries, such as France and Italy, has ground to a halt — and is unlikely to be resumed — and the historically close integration of the Russian and Ukrainian defense industries is a thing of the past, India can become an important outside partner for Russia's defense industrial complex.

The traditional supplier-client relationship that has existed between Moscow and Delhi for about 50 years has been overhauled by India's own development, and Russia should begin to pay attention and draw conclusions from that.

As China begins to implement its twin Silk Road strategies, Russia and India need to come up with their own visions of economic integration across Eurasia writ large, including closer links with China as well as other countries, from Southeast Asia to Central Asia, Iran and Turkey.

India's forthcoming membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an opportunity

that can be used to give a new impetus to this organization and provide a better balance within the SCO.

If, on the other hand, this opportunity is missed, the drift in the relationship will continue, to the din of repeated clichés about traditional Russian-Indian friendship.

To achieve any of this, and much more, Russians need to change their basic attitude toward India. It is no longer the developing country of the 1960s feeling its way around in the world and in need of Moscow's support, but a major emerging economy and a great power in Asia, with increasingly global reach.

The friendly, but somewhat unequal, relationship of the Soviet era needs to be replaced by a more serious, more businesslike and yet very friendly partnership relationship.

Russia has countered its recent political quasi-isolation in the West with scorn, asserting that it has many friends elsewhere.

These friends, however, require a real first-class treatment. Russia has done a great deal to cement and expand its ties with China, to the mutual benefit of both countries, but this is not enough.

A sustained effort is needed elsewhere, if Russia's opening to non-Western countries is not to stay rhetorical. India is the right place to start this new effort.

It is too late for Putin to inaugurate a new approach to India this time, but if nothing is done soon following his visit to materially upgrade the relationship, its stagnation will become qualitative, not just quantitative.

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