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Russia-India: From Rethink to Adjust to Upgrade

Russia needs to decide what it wants from the Indian connection and what the opportunities for and obstacles to this desired state of relations are.

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. **kremlin.ru**

When Russian President Vladimir Putin visits India this week, it will be one of just two foreign trips he has made this year, the other one being his June meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden in Geneva. Putin skipped both the G20 and COP26 and an expected trip to China was rescheduled due to Covid, yet the Russian leader has decided to travel to New Delhi. This step is hopefully more than mere symbolism in the traditionally warm Russo-Indian relations and not simply a signal that at a time of increasingly tense relations with the West, Russia has important friends elsewhere in the world. Still, even if Russia's relations with India are good, in order for them to become great, a major effort is needed.

The July 2021 edition of Russia's National Security Strategy describes relations with New Delhi as a "special privileged strategic partnership," and discusses them in the same paragraph as Russo-Chinese ties. The personal chemistry between Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is excellent.

Recently, Modi has demonstrated India's interest in economic projects in Russia's Far East, thus extending New Delhi's Look East policy all the way to Vladivostok. Over Washington's objections, India has gone ahead with the purchase of Russian-made S-400 air defense systems, due to be delivered before the end of the year. Modi is also one of only four foreign leaders to have been awarded Russia's top decoration, the Order of St. Andrew. Ordinary Russians see India as a reliably friendly country with which their own nation has a virtually problem-free relationship. For their part, most Indians regard Russia as a proven friend that in the course of India's seventy-five years of independence has never caused their country strategic harm.

Yet issues are piling up on many fronts, requiring both the Indian and Russian leaderships to rethink, adjust, and upgrade the relationship to make it fit for the twenty-first century environment. In global geopolitical terms, the main issue is that Moscow and New Delhi, traditional friends and longtime allies, now find themselves ever more closely linked to two rival superpowers, China and the United States.

Moreover, India's relations with China following the 2020 border clashes in the Himalayas, and Russia's with the United States since the 2014 Ukraine crisis, can be described as confrontation. Thus, in a situation when their best friends are bonding with their worst enemies, the main task for both New Delhi and Moscow is to shield the Indo-Russian strategic partnership from the wider and increasingly adverse global context, and uphold mutual trust.

In geoeconomic terms, despite ongoing cooperation in areas ranging from nuclear energy to outer space to the Arctic, not to mention armaments development and production, the obvious weakness of the Indo-Russian relationship is its small and stagnant trade volumes. With America and China — despite the bad political relationship with the latter — India, a fast-rising economy, trades to the tune of $100 billion each, while commerce with Russia still languishes around a mere $10 billion.

The reason is again plain to see: While 85% of India's economy is now in private hands, Indo-Russian economic ties still rest on government-to-government agreements. After the old model of Soviet-Indian economic relations collapsed in 1991, trade volumes plummeted. The U.S.S.R. used to be among India's top three economic partners; the Russian Federation's current rank is in the twentieth to twenty-fifth range.

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Still, Russia remains strong in some important niches, above all military-technical cooperation. Since India's first purchase of Mig-21 fighters back in 1962, arms trade has been the cornerstone of bilateral relations. Yet India's growing desire to diversify its arms imports and, recently, its clear intention to develop and produce weapons systems itself, have led to a slump in Russia's share of the Indian arms market. As a result, Russia's share of that market has shrunk to just under 50%. There is ever stronger competition from Europe and even more

so from the United States.

For all their professed pivot to Asia, the current Russian elites remain Eurocentric to the core, and have little time for India. Russia's government-owned corporations and private business actors find it much easier and more profitable to do business with China than with India. Russian media outlets have little presence in India and do a mediocre job of explaining Indian politics and policies to their audiences. The Russian public has very limited knowledge and understanding of what is going on in India. Tourism and cultural contacts have been picking up in recent years, but the pandemic has severely limited them. An effort to revive the practice of inviting Indian students to study at Russian universities, after an initially promising start, has also suffered from Covid-related restrictions.

Ironically, India's elites are also Western-centric, but unlike Russia's, they are also Western-leaning, and particularly focused on the United States. Their ambition is to become part of the global elite. To them, Russia is not a priority, and interest in it is scant. The Indian media has virtually no correspondents based in Russia. To cover Russia-related issues, Indian media editors usually rely on Western — mostly American and British — reporting and analysis, which is highly critical of Russian policies. Tellingly, India's vibrant technology sector has very few contacts with Russia and Russians.

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All these problems are too big to be resolved in a single and short presidential visit. However, they must not be ignored if the Indo-Russian strategic partnership is to live up to its name in the decade ahead.

The Russians need to step back and decide what it is they want from the Indian connection, what the opportunities for and obstacles to this desired state of relations are, and what must be done in order to achieve their objectives. From this perspective, three actions are of central importance for Russia as it proceeds along this path: to rethink, to adjust, and to upgrade.

Rethink means, above all, seeing India for what it is and where it is headed. Far too many in Russian elite circles still regard India as the third world country that it was during the heyday of Soviet-Indian friendship in the 1960s–1980s. Those people have clearly missed India's stunning economic and technological success of the past three decades. As a result, Russia should not expect its large neighbor in Eurasia to act as a non-aligned inward-looking nation, keeping a low profile in international relations and behaving like a middle power.

Instead, Russians should acknowledge India's new status and self-image as a great power, its focus on rapid economic development, and its ambition to become a global economic powerhouse and a leader in modern technologies. They need to understand the fundamental reasons behind India's growing closeness with the United States, and its increasing hostility with China.

Thus, a rethink requires a much closer study of modern India, and a deeper understanding of that vast and highly complex nation, which is rising to the level of a world power. This can be achieved by supporting Indian and South Asian studies in Russia; expanding media coverage of Indian political, economic, and diplomatic developments; and promoting scientific,

educational, and cultural ties, as well as tourism and other people-to-people connections.

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Adjust means factoring in all these realities in developing Russia's own strategy toward India: something that does not currently exist. It is clear that cultivating and developing the strategic partnership should remain the overall objective of this yet-to-be-devised strategy. However, the partnership should be structured and styled as one of equals, with Moscow dropping all residual vestiges of its previously sometimes patronizing attitudes to its Indian counterparts.

On the conceptual level, Russia needs to take a second look at New Delhi's Indo-Pacific strategy. An in-depth strategic dialogue with New Delhi on that subject could dispel Moscow's presently negative and suspicious attitude to the strategy.

The Russians need to accept that New Delhi's ideas have different sources and objectives than Washington's similarly titled strategy. Essentially, India's new strategy is a logical continuation of its Look East policy. By the same token, Moscow could increase mutual trust with New Delhi by working through and patiently dispelling Indian concerns regarding Russia's strategic ties with China and its situational cooperation with Pakistan.

These clarifying discussions could pave the way to engaging New Delhi in a strategic dialogue on Greater Eurasia, which is the strategic framework for Moscow's approach. One might consider amplifying Russia's traditionally continental geopolitical concept by adding a maritime element covering the seas and oceans washing Eurasia. For the purposes of a geopolitical dialogue with India, the relevant areas could include the Arctic, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean — all the way from Murmansk to Mumbai.

By the same token, India's strategy, which so far has been couched predominantly in maritime terms, might get a continental dimension, starting with Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran. Creating synergies between Moscow and New Delhi's strategies in both domains could be a tantalizing proposition.

On this basis, Moscow needs to engage more closely with New Delhi as it further fleshes out the idea of a Greater Eurasian partnership. Maintaining strategic partnerships with both India and China at bilateral and trilateral (RIC) levels is crucial for general geopolitical stability in Eurasia. Russia, which has neither the ambition nor the resources to dominate Greater Eurasia, could play a key role in maintaining Eurasian equilibrium, which requires Russo-Indo-Chinese understanding.

While being realistic about its partners and their complicated relations, Russia needs to proactively facilitate efforts at better understanding between New Delhi and Beijing, and promote positive interaction among the three great powers. Such interaction is also needed for engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a key aspect of the Greater Eurasian Partnership. It is even more necessary for building up the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a continent-wide dialogue platform.

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Moreover, close relations with New Delhi would help Moscow in engaging pragmatically on Eurasian/Indo-Pacific issues with Washington and Tokyo, which are linked with New Delhi through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Much as India finds Russia's partnership with China useful for managing its own relations with Beijing, Moscow could use its close relations with New Delhi to weigh in diplomatically on the Indo-Pacific agenda.

India, which is genuinely interested in an improved relationship between Russia and the United States, might be useful here. At the global level, Russia would benefit from closer interaction with India not only within the BRICS, but also at the United Nations.

On a number of regional issues, from Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East, India needs to be treated as Russia's privileged interlocutor and partner. Sidelining New Delhi, as has occasionally happened in discussions on Afghanistan, should never happen again. New global issues, from the spread of pandemics to climate change and energy transition, open up broad new areas for Russia-India cooperation, even as they require the careful management of differences.

Engaging early with each other would favor cooperative elements over competitive ones and make it possible to chart a coordinated approach to what have become vital issues for the world community.

Upgrade means elevating Russia's relations with India to the level of its other strategic partnership: with China. This does not mean that Moscow-New Delhi ties must resemble Moscow-Beijing ones. The two relationships are very different, as is the wider context in which they operate. The idea is above all to explore and exploit economic opportunities, without which relations with India will always lag behind those with China.

There have been many attempts to expand Indo-Russian economic ties, but progress in that direction has been painfully slow.

Most of these efforts have followed the well-trodden path of government-to-government contracts, which is not to be abandoned. One opportunity at hand that is truly unique is deepening military-technical cooperation. For decades, Russia has been the leading provider of weapons systems for the Indian military. For its part, India is serious in pressing ahead with the Make in India model. It also has much more to offer in terms of advanced technology, particularly in the information sphere.

There have been several examples of successful Russo-Indian weapons development and production, like the BrahMos missile. Compared to other weapons producers, Russia is more flexible in engaging collaboratively with others. This is probably the way to go.

One has to be realistic. The Indian and Russian economies remain far less complementary than those of China and Russia. The Russian and Indian business communities are largely disinterested in each other's countries, where they see few opportunities for themselves.

This can only be changed by a joint effort in creative thinking. At their upcoming meeting, President Putin and Prime Minister Modi need to stimulate such an effort by ordering an in-

depth study of potential areas of cooperation to be conducted in time for their next annual get-together.

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