

Viewpoint: Indian-Russian Relations

By Abdul Majeed Bhatti

Last week, Modi's visit to Moscow, which coincided with a three-day NATO summit in Washington and triggered nervousness in both the U.S. capital and Kyiv. At a press briefing, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller addressed the Modi-Putin meeting, stating, "We've explicitly communicated our concerns to India regarding their ties with Russia." [1] Modi's warm embrace of Putin has raised the specter that perhaps India is slowly drifting away from Washington's geopolitical interests and aligning more closely with Russia and the BRICs.

The proponents of this view often point to India's multifaceted relationship with Russia that spans several key areas of cooperation. Bilateral trade reached nearly \$50 billion in 2022-2023, with Indian exports amounting to \$3.14 billion and imports from Russia totaling \$46.21 billion. [2] The two nations have set ambitious targets to increase bilateral investment to \$50 billion and trade to \$30 billion by 2025. [3]

Despite U.S. sanctions India has increased its dependency on Russian oil. India's crude oil imports from Russia have remained robust, with Indian refineries importing a record 1.96 million barrels per day in April 2024, accounting for 40.3% of total crude imports. [4] This strategic approach has enabled India to fulfill its oil demand at reduced costs, resulting in substantial savings for the world's third-largest oil consumer.

Defense collaboration remains a cornerstone of the relationship, with joint development projects like the BrahMos cruise missile and India's \$5 billion purchase of the S-400 missile defense system in 2018. [5] Russia has been involved in constructing nuclear reactors in India, including the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant. At international forums, Russia eagerly supports India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

A closer examination of India's relationship with Russia reveals several limitations. While bilateral trade has increased, it primarily consists of discounted Russian crude oil, with little growth in other sectors. Notably, India's importation, refinement, and resale of Russian oil to markets like Europe has contributed to economic stability.

In the defense sector, India is pursuing a diversification strategy. This approach involves selectively acquiring advanced Russian weapons while also aligning its defense platforms with Western standards to support military alliances like QUAD and NATO, which are at odds with both Russia and China. Russia's difficulties in fulfilling the S-400 missile defense contract due to the Ukraine conflict have further pushed India towards Western partnerships. Consequently, India is prioritizing defense and technology co-production with advanced nations such as the US, France, EU, 'Israel', and South Korea, focusing on cutting-edge collaborations in defense and semiconductors. This strategy aims to enhance India's role in Indo-Pacific mechanisms and accelerate its transition to high-tech manufacturing, gaining support from partner countries and showing promise for India's technological and strategic advancement.

Russia's backing of India's aspirations for a permanent UN Security Council seat and Nuclear Suppliers Group membership aligns with U.S. interests. However, India's limited engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Prime Minister Modi's push for deeper integration with QUAD are more alarming to both Russia and China. This strategic pivot underscores a significant shift in India's geopolitical alignment, favoring closer ties with Western-aligned powers in the Indo-Pacific region.

A nuanced interpretation of America's apparent frustration with Modi is necessary. U.S. foreign policy aims to maintain global power balances, particularly countering China's rise in the Asia-Pacific by supporting India. The Biden administration's tolerance of India's Russian oil imports serves multiple objectives: boosting India's economic growth to rival China, preventing Russia's collapse and a potential Chinese power grab, and stabilizing European oil supplies. Moreover, India's closer ties with Russia may hinder Russo-Chinese cooperation, aligning with Washington's interests. This multifaceted approach reflects the complex dynamics of U.S. strategic thinking in the region.

It is unfortunate to see India acting as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. In contrast, India under Islam was the dominant power in the region. Mongol hordes that had easily conquered Russia were defeated several times during the Delhi Sultanate and India's vast Hindu population were spared annihilation. This is a far cry from Modi's treatment of Indian Muslims.

At the time of Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, India grew into the world's leading economy. During this period, Mongols and Tibetans (under the auspices of the Qing dynasty) motivated by the control of trade routes between China and Central Asia attacked Ladakh the major conduit of trade. Aurangzeb successfully repulsed the invaders ensuring Mughal dominance in the region. In contrast, today Ladakh continues to be a flashpoint between India and China, as US seeks to control the area to curb China's Westward expansion of OBOR (One Belt One Road). Only under Islam, can India end Western interference and enjoy prosperity and dominance.

References

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