

Opinion – Modi’s Strategic Moscow Visit

Written by Radhey Wadhwa

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RADHEY WADHWA, JUL 11 2024

“Hearing the word Russia, the first word that comes to the mind of every Indian is India’s companion in happiness and sorrow” is how Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described India-Russia relations. Modi’s visit to Russia began with his arrival in Moscow on July 8th, 2024, to attend the 22nd India-Russia annual summit. During the visit, Modi aimed to promote peace and strengthen bilateral relations, culminating in the signing of nine agreements. These agreements spanned various sectors, including defence, energy and trade, emphasising the multifaceted cooperation between the two nations.

Modi’s decision to choose Russia for his inaugural bilateral visit over a neighbouring nation marks a departure from the tradition. This signals a shift in India’s diplomatic approach and reflects a change of style and method on India’s part. Regarding messaging and timing, Modi’s visit to Russia holds substantial significance. Notably, the visit comes amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, where India has maintained a neutral stance. India abstained from UN resolutions condemning Russia’s actions but has also called on Russia to end the war. During the meeting with Putin, Modi made it clear that “there is no solution on the battlefield” and called for a diplomatic end to the war.

The timing of the visit follows Modi’s attendance at the G-7 summit in Italy, where he engaged with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy and other leaders. This visit coincides with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) meeting in Washington, D.C., marking the alliance’s 75th anniversary. Modi’s visit has been criticised, particularly by the Ukrainian President, who called it a “huge disappointment”. Indian PM would be aware that the decision to meet Putin now would not have pleased Western leaders, especially given the ongoing NATO summit. The Kremlin has quickly pointed this out and suggested how “West is jealous”. Jealous or not, one can bet Western nations—especially the United States, will be keeping a close eye on the visit.

Modi also made a veiled criticism of the current “influence-oriented world order”, arguing for India’s role in the emerging multipolar world. He asserted that today’s world requires “confluence more than influence”, emphasising the need for collaborative approaches rather than exerting dominance.

The visit underscores Russia’s continuous importance as a key partner and a friend to India. It dispels speculations that relations between India and Russia were waning due to India’s diminishing reliance on Russia and stronger ties with the US and the West. Despite India’s growing closeness with the US in recent years, India-Russia relations remained a ‘special and privileged strategic partnership’. The dynamic reflects India’s adeptness at navigating its relations with both the US and Russia, reflecting India’s strategic autonomy. This sends a signal that India will continue to have deeper ties with the West, but not at the cost of having to choose sides.

Although India-Russia ties are historical, they are not merely sentimental and ceremonial. In the present geopolitical flux, where Russia is increasingly aligning with China, it is critical for India to assess their “no limits” partnership. The recent meetings between President Putin and President Xi characterised their relationship as the “best period in history” and highlighted the significance of the Russia-China bonhomie for India. India seeks to ensure that Beijing does not become a factor that undermines its relations with Russia. India hopes that Russia’s influence can be leveraged in the case of China’s adventurism along with the Indian border, as Russia is an important geopolitical hedge for India in the current global order. Therefore, the ‘China factor’ is a significant driver behind India’s close association and cooperation with Russia. Conversely, relations with India offer Russia strategic manoeuvrability.

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Russia recognises that increased dependence on China may not align with its broader interests, and thus, keeping strong ties with India is a critical component of its foreign policy.

In a rapidly changing global landscape, India’s ability to maintain relationships with the West and Russia while pursuing its own national interests is a testament to its strategic autonomy and multi-alignment approach. By engaging with Putin, Modi clarifies that Russia remains a priority for India and that the partnership will unlikely be altered in the foreseeable future.

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