

India-Russia Relations: The Message Behind Putin's Visit

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Summary

Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent visit to India was important for its symbolism and not for concrete outcomes. The visit highlighted the importance of increasing economic engagement, the need to jointly manage China and the United States, the two sides' shared vision of international relations and their increasingly difficult but still strong defence relationship.

Russian President Vladimir Putin made a [state visit to India](#) on 4 and 5 December 2025. The visit – the first since the Russian invasion of Ukraine – symbolised the [“Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership”](#) between India and Russia and clearly signalled that New Delhi will not abandon its relationship with Moscow under pressure from the United States (US) and European Union (EU). For India, the visit also embodied its continued and recently reinforced commitment to strategic autonomy.

The visit itself focused on symbolism over concrete outcomes. While this reflects some of the [limitations of bilateral ties](#), it is likely that the visit was primarily meant to demonstrate the strength of the enduring India-Russia relationship. In terms of specifics, the two sides had discussions about Russian exports of US-sanctioned Russian oil and arms to India, and [agreed to boost trade](#), expand nuclear energy cooperation, enhance connectivity and cooperate in the Arctic.

Beyond symbolism and specifics, the visit is important because it highlights four key points about India-Russia relations and their future.

First, greater economic engagement is crucial for the future of the relationship. While political and strategic relations between the two sides are solid, their economic ties, beyond oil, lag behind those of the Cold War period and fall short of current needs. Bilateral trade stands at about US\$70 billion (S\$94.5 billion), of which US\$50 billion (S\$67.5 billion) comprises Russian crude oil exports to India and a meagre US\$5 billion (S\$6.75 billion) consists of Indian exports to Russia.

For an India that needs investment, trade and growth-generating technologies, this situation raises questions about the extent to which Russia can support India's rise and its value as a partner. Putin and India's Prime Minister Modi recognised this problem and responded by focusing on nuclear energy, joint manufacturing, technology development and connectivity – the latter through initiatives like the [Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor](#). Areas of particular promise include [small modular reactors](#), space technologies and joint production of defence equipment for Indian use or export to third countries, exemplified by the

[BrahMos missiles](#). The ability of the two sides to generate substantial progress in these areas and in economic engagement will be a decisive test for their relationship.

Second, India and Russia need each other to manage the US and China – key partners and rivals. Both sides used Putin’s visit to signal to their most important partners, Washington and Beijing respectively, that they have foreign policy options and should be treated accordingly. For New Delhi, the relationship with Moscow acts as counterweight to China and ensures that India is not forced to lean too heavily toward an increasingly unreliable US to counter Beijing. Similarly, through his visit, Putin signals to Beijing that Russia has major power partners beyond Beijing and is not restricted by China’s sensitivities in its foreign policy. Significantly, India and Russia are also partners in balancing China in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) (SCO), as well as in Asia, as alluded to by their shared pursuit of “[multipolarity in Asia](#)”.

Third, New Delhi and Moscow’s relationship is based on a broadly shared vision of international relations. In their [joint statement](#), India and Russia reiterated that they want to build a “multipolar world” where multilateralism reigns and major powers like them play leading roles and have their “indivisible security” interests respected. Of course, all this represents a veiled criticism of the US’ attempts to restore unipolarity, US President Donald Trump’s unilateral foreign policy and Washington’s alleged disregard for the security interests of the major powers. Both sides also emphasised the importance of transforming the international system by enhancing the role of the Global South and identified the SCO, the BRICS and G20 as key platforms in advancing their shared vision. Interestingly, Moscow and New Delhi pointed to “SCO’s increasing role in the formation of representative, democratic, fair multipolar world order”, highlighting the organisation’s rising profile after its [recent summit in Tianjin](#). While one can dismiss this vision as posturing or signalling to Washington, its consistency [over time](#) and different formats, such as [the BRICS](#) and [the SCO](#), suggests that there is an ideational basis underneath it.

Lastly, the India-Russia defence relationship is increasingly difficult but still strong. Contrary to expectations of agreements on the purchase of S-400 air defence systems or SU-57 fighters, Putin’s visit did not include new arms deals. This situation reflects the constraints that are increasingly facing the relationship. India’s growing concern that Russian equipment might include [Chinese components](#) which could compromise it in case of conflict with Beijing or Islamabad is one problem while India’s push for self-reliance and diversification in defence is another. The delays in the delivery of Russian arms, partly due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, are another complicating factor.

The threat of Western secondary sanctions and Western unwillingness to share sensitive technology as long as New Delhi purchases Russian arms are further hindrances. Nevertheless, the defence relationship remains robust. Not only did Russian arms perform well during the India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025, but Moscow is also willing to share technology with India, in contrast with other suppliers, and jointly produce arms. There have also been reports of [visits of Indian defence executives](#) to Moscow to discuss joint ventures and of [talks to purchase](#) S-400 and eventually S-500 air defence systems.

In conclusion, Putin's visit to India provided a significant window into the political and strategic dynamics that underpin the enduring strength of India-Russia relations, while also highlighting their limitations and future prospects.

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