

MODI'S MOSCOW MISSION: BALANCING GLOBAL POWER DYNAMICS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Introduction

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently concluded his 2-day visit to Russia. This was his first bilateral visit abroad after assuming charge for the third consecutive term. While highlighting the significance of the visit for the two countries, this Issue Brief attempts to gauge its implications for regional and global power dynamics. It will delve into the question of how this visit will contribute to the ongoing competition between the U.S. and China and how it may affect the Indian strategy to maintain 'balance' on the foreign policy front.

Key Developments during the Visit

The trip was Modi's first to Russia since 2019. An important part of the official engagements was a traditional bilateral Summit, which was due since 2021. In addition to the Summit, 9 bilateral agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were signed to enhance cooperation in trade, energy, climate change and technological exchange.¹ Besides, Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted the Indian Prime Minister for a private dinner, and conferred the country's highest civilian award upon him. The Russia-Ukraine conflict and the issue of trapped Indians in the fighting from the Russian side came under discussion between the two leaders. Prime Minister Modi's other

¹ "India, Russia sign 9 agreements during PM Narendra Modi's visit," *Hindustan Times*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-russia-sign-9-agreements-during-pm-narendra-modis-visit-101720545042830.html>.

engagements included an address to the Indian diaspora in Russia and visit to an exhibition in Moscow.

Significance of the Visit

As part of an informal tradition, Indian Prime Ministers make any neighboring South Asian country their first official destination after assuming office. In 2014, Prime Minister Modi made his first visit to Bhutan, and in 2019, Maldives was the first country to host him for a bilateral visit.² This time, however, New Delhi chose Russia for the Prime Minister's first bilateral trip. A key reason for that was to re-assure Russia of its significance in the Indian foreign policy on the one hand; and, on the other hand, to brush aside the impression that — exhausted with the balancing feature of its foreign policy — India had now been tilting toward the U.S. and the West. This impression was getting strength because Mr. Modi had not visited Russia since 2019, and the annual bilateral Summit had also not taken place since 2021, first due to Covid-19, and then in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that commenced in February 2022. Had India missed this year's Summit, it could have invited serious questions about India's quest for 'balancing.'³

There was growing speculation in international circles on Russia-India relations as well, because in the intensifying U.S.-China competition, Moscow and New Delhi are perceived to be aligned on the opposite sides. In Modi's era, India has significantly reduced its dependence on Russia for arm supplies. Despite multiple offers by Russia to jointly produce military equipment, India has increasingly been relying on the West for military hardware and defence collaboration. ⁴ This is another factor behind India's prevailing image of a U.S. strategic ally and the visit to Moscow was an attempt to somehow create a semblance of 'balance'.

Ukraine's Reaction

Moscow naturally sees Prime Minister Modi's visit as a shock to the U.S. and a rejection of the Western campaign aimed at isolating Russia.⁵ In contrast to that, India tried to portray a more positive image for the West through this visit. While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky

² "Details of Foreign/Domestic Visits | Prime Minister of India," n.d., <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/details-of-foreigndomestic-visits/>.

³ Suhasini Haidar, "Modi's Moscow visit to stem international perception, allay Russia's worries of 'drift' in ties," *The Hindu*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modis-moscow-visit-to-stem-international-perception-allay-russias-worries-of-drift-in-ties/article68352816.ece%E2%80%8B>.

⁴ Krishn Kaushik, "India pivots away from Russian arms, but will retain strong ties," *Reuters*, January 29, 2024, accessed July 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-pivots-away-russian-arms-will-retain-strong-ties-2024-01-28/>.

⁵ "West 'jealously' watching Modi's Moscow trip – Kremlin — RT India," *RT International*, n.d., <https://www.rt.com/india/600605-west-jealous-modi-moscow-visit/>.

expressed “a huge disappointment” over the visit, calling it “a devastating blow to peace efforts”,⁶ India sought to assure the West that it has the ability to broker peace between Russia and Ukraine.⁷ However, in actual fact, New Delhi made no serious effort to broker peace between the two warring parties.

The Chinese Question

China has evidently become a formidable irritant in the Russia-India relations. While the Western campaign against Moscow in the wake of Ukraine conflict has left Russia with no option but to get closer to China, India's relations with China have significantly deteriorated in recent years. Lately, New Delhi has assumed a tendency to view all its relationships through the prism of its tensions with Beijing. India is cognizant that its strategy to counter China in Asia can never meet the objective if Moscow is in Beijing's camp.⁸ With Mr. Modi's visit to Moscow, India has made an effort to woo Russia and constrain it from getting closer to China. He preferred to skip the annual Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – SCO in Kazakhstan earlier in July. Preferring a bilateral visit to Russia over SCO Summit entails that in the forthcoming years, India would do its maximum to avoid sharing multilateral forums with China and may opt for bilateral engagements instead. This strategy could take further shape in the forthcoming BRICS+ Summit, planned for October 2024 in Kazan, Russia.

Mr. Modi's trip brings some relief to Russia, which can project its ‘ability’ to garner friendships despite Western sanctions. While the U.S. has raised concerns over the visit, Washington would be looking to use this relationship as an opportunity to win a sigh of comfort for Ukraine.⁹ As long as containing China remains a key interest of their partnership, neither India nor the U.S. would think of parting ways with each other.

Conclusion

India has been vying to walk a tightrope on the foreign policy front, which it had been gradually losing for the last few years. Despite pledges to increase bilateral trade volume with Russia to \$100

⁶ “x.com,” X (Formerly Twitter), n.d., <https://x.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1810437647581716707?failedScript=vendor&failedScript=vendor>.

⁷ “US says India can spur end to Ukraine war as PM Modi, Putin flaunt ties,” *India Today*, July 10, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/modi-putin-meet-white-house-says-india-has-ability-end-ukraine-war-russia-ties-criticism-2564623-2024-07-10>.

⁸ Rajesh Roy, M. Simmons, and Tripti Lahiri, “India's Modi Seeks to Shore Up Ties With Russia and Offset China's Sway,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2024, accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/india/indias-modi-seeks-to-shore-up-ties-with-russia-and-offset-chinas-sway-a08992fa>.

⁹ Michael Kugelman, “The Modi-Putin Summit Wasn't All Bad News for Washington,” *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/10/modi-putin-summit-india-russia-us-relations/>.

billion by 2030, and an ambitious strategic plan to enhance bilateral cooperation¹⁰, India does not seem to be making any major shift in its foreign policy. In quest of such a balance, the geopolitical realities would keep pushing New Delhi towards the U.S. and the West, as Washington cannot afford to lose important Western and especially American ally in its competition against China. Besides, Indian aspiration to grab its chunk from the global power politics naturally pushes it to the U.S.-led Western camp. The latter can facilitate New Delhi in the transfer of technology and advanced weapons procurements. Moreover, India can hope to garner support from the Western camp to promote its dream of acquiring a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

¹⁰ "LIVE: Special Briefing by Foreign Secretary on Prime Minister's visit to Russia," July 9, 2024, accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/live/EesDkTbrzD4>.